Welcome to the 4th issue of Populism, the electronic newsletter of Populism Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association. We have recently held our 5th annual workshop titled ‘Populism: New Perspectives’ and in page 2 you will get a taste of how it went.

Our second issue released back in July 2020 was dedicated to left-wing populism. This issue shifts focus on the political spectrum and showcases the populist radical right. It overviews the ways the far right interacts with populism, nationalism, mainstream economics, conservatism, but also liberalism. Focusing on both historical and contemporary examples, contributions seek to shed light on where the populist right intersects with and where it diverges from the earlier and continuing iterations of the right – both in its far and more ‘centrist’ orientations.

This issue then, hosts two challenging commentaries which highlight the pivotal role conservative ideologies play in the economic and social politics of the contemporary populist radical right. In page 7, Valentina Ausserladscheider argues that, despite their attempt to appeal to the ‘popular classes’, populists on the right construct both an economically neoliberal and an ethnically exclusionary ‘people’. In page 9, Francesca Feo and Anna Lavizzari discuss the gender politics of the populist radical right in Italy and argue that the conservative values of ‘family’ and ‘tradition’ lie at the core of Lega and Brothers of Italy’s discourse.

We also interviewed Aurelien Mondon who keynoted our recent annual workshop. We talked about the mainstreaming of the radical right, the role experts play in normalising it, populism and of course anti-populism. The interview can be found on page 4 of the newsletter.

This issue also hosts five book reviews themed around right wing populism and nationalism. Salomé Ietter reviews Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter’s Reactionary Democracy; Seongcheol Kim reviews Cas Mudde’s The far right today; Spyros Sofos reviews Luca Manucci’s Populism and Collective Memory Comparing Fascist Legacies in Western Europe; Mikko Salmela reviews Nicolas Demertzis’ The Political Sociology of Emotions: Essays on Trauma and Ressentiment, and Kurt Sengul reviews Ruth Wodak’s second edition of The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse.

We hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to welcoming many of you in our future events. Please do not hesitate to get in touch to connect with us.

The Editor,
Giorgos Venizelos
Many presentations focused on under-researched cases and regions like Africa and India.

We asked Dr. Lone Sorensen, Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leeds, who acted as a discussant in one of the panels to tell us her impressions about the workshop and this is what she said:

‘The many excellent papers by up-and-coming early career scholars confirmed an emerging trend in populism studies of the importance of secondary concepts such as authenticity and political performance. These young scholars thereby promise to develop the conceptual direction of the field in fruitful ways. They also approached new empirical problems and realms, such as populism in less-studied countries and regions of the world, that have too often been confined to area studies. Addressing these different forms of populism will not only counteract the regionalism that can colour our understanding of populism but will also tell us much about the ways in which different political and cultural contexts shape the phenomenon. This was an event that made me feel very positive about our growing and evolving field’.

Moments from the event
Upcoming Events

Populism, Protest, and New Forms of Political Organisation: Ten Years after the Movements of the Squares
September 8-10, 2021, Free University Berlin

Joint conference of the DVPW Populism Group Initiative & the PSA Populism Specialist Group

Confirmed keynote speakers:
Cristina Flesher Fominaya (University of Loughborough); Paolo Gerbaudo (King’s College London)

Organising team:
Andreas Eder-Ramsauer (FU Berlin); Seongcheol Kim (University of Kassel); Andy Knott (University of Brighton); Marina Prentoulis (University of East Anglia)

Click here to see the full programme!

The PSG at the Committee Program

Our convenors Marina Prentoulis and Giorgos Venizelos spoke at The Committee Program and Arun Chaudhary, representing the Populist Specialist Group. They spoke about institutional and social movement politics after the Syriza experience and the transformation of the left populist party. You can watch their discussion by clicking the picture below.
In recent years, we observed the mainstreaming of radical right discourses which were once located on the fringes of party systems. With the rise of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen and others, the politics of ‘whiteness’ and ‘racial superiority’ became more and more normalised. Can you shed some light into the factors explaining the reconstruction of the radical right? How does the contemporary radical right differ from its predecessors?

The process of mainstreaming far-right politics has certainly accelerated in recent years, and in fact, some of its progress has surprised me, but it would be a mistake to think this is a new or recent development. In fact, the situation we are currently facing, and this applies to the US too, despite Trump’s recent defeat, has been a long time coming and has multiple roots. Of course, the reconstruction of the far right itself and its slow counter-hegemonic struggle to escape the margins has been key, but it would be simplistic, and in fact dangerous, to think of the rise of far right politics as simply the result of the far right’s actions. As Katy Brown, Aaron Winter and I argue in a forthcoming article, it is essential to understand that without the mainstream’s failures or even support at times, the far right would not have been able to regain the legitimacy it has acquired. Whether this is through platforming, disproportionate coverage, wilful misreading of electoral results and opinion polls or an attempt to divert attention away from the inability of the current liberal order to address the many crises we are facing, mainstream actors have a lot to answer for in the resurgence of reaction. The populist hype is obviously central to this.

Analysts, academics and journalists often argue that working class values are appropriated by the far right. At the same time, the far right frames itself as the true representative of the marginalised classes. In your latest book, Reactionary Democracy: how populism and the far right became mainstream, co-authored with Aaron Winter, you challenge this perception. Can you expand a bit?

That we have got to this situation points to an incredible failure from mainstream actors, whether politicians, the media or even academics. More than the far right appealing to the working class or so-called ‘left-behind’, what we have often witnessed is mainstream actors abandoning the idea of the working class to the far right. This has served to

‘if a third of the working class that vote for the far right, but two thirds abstain (which is common), then you could have a number of headlines: ‘A third of the working class vote for the far right’’
From my point of view, there are three sides to this issue. First, calling far right parties and politics simply ‘populist’ legitimises them by linking them to ‘the people’ and therefore lending them some unwarranted democratic legitimacy. Second, it delegitimises ‘the people’ through the same link, by exaggerating the support given to the far right and its ideas. This people is not all or any people, but usually sections of the population who have little access to public discourse or are constructed to serve particular interest (such as the so-called white working class). These first two aspects I have discussed at length in my research, but this was hardly original as Annie Collovald was already pointing this out straight after Jean-Marie Le Pen’s accession to the second round of the presidential election in 2002. What is frustrating is that these warnings have gone unheeded despite the risks being well documented. The third point is the one developed by colleagues working on anti-populism, which demonstrates how the anti-populist stance parades as apolitical. This in turn delegitimises other alternatives by painting them all with the same populist qua illiberal qua authoritarian brush. This is obviously inaccurate and yet incredibly prevalent as a narrative, even in academia.

As you and Winter argue in Reactionary Democracy, it is not only ‘populism’ to be blamed for the rise of racism and xenophobia. Liberalism also played a critical role. How would you define liberalism and what role does it play legitimising far right discourses?
‘calling far right parties and politics simply ‘populist’ legitimises them by linking them to ‘the people’ and therefore lending them some unwarranted democratic legitimacy’

This is to me one of the most fascinating aspects of our current predicament. Despite so much evidence to the contrary, the idea that liberalism in practice is a bulwark against the far right and reaction seems to prevail, which I think tells us much about how ‘hegemony works. This position is untenable whether you look at it from a historic or a contemporary perspective and yet it holds. Historically, what most will consider as progress has rarely been gained thanks to the liberal elite but rather against it and similarly reaction has often been defended or accepted by the liberal order. Today, whether it is our mainstream media, politicians or even academics, it is hard to see anyone actually standing against this rise of reaction. Instead, all seem to act as if they have no control on the world they live in and simply follow the people for politicians, report facts for the media and scientifically study events for academics. The rejection of any responsibility with regard to the situation we are in is absolutely fascinating and something Aaron and I try to map out and analyse in Reactionary Democracy.

Your native France cannot be absent from this discussion. Marine Le Pen has been defeated in the 2017 elections but President Macron seems not to satisfy or soothe popular discontent. We observed public discontent in many occasions over the past few years. What are the prospects for the populist radical right, but also left, in France now?

It is very hard to predict what the election will look like next year as the landscape remains unclear, particularly on the left, but to some extent on the far right as it is possible someone like the journalist Eric Zemmour could run and split the vote. What is clear is that the situation has deteriorated significantly in France during Macron’s presidency (although the trajectory towards reaction started much earlier). Today, many of the ideas defended by Le Pen are front and centre in the public discourse in France and mainstream politicians have embraced them, sometimes even outflanking Le Pen herself on her pet issues such as Islamophobia. This is the real danger in my mind. Even if Le Pen doesn’t do well in next year’s election, far right ideas have spread so far that it may not be a victory for democracy.

Dr Aurelien Mondon is a Senior Lecturer in politics at the University of Bath. His research focuses predominantly on the impact of racism and populism on liberal democracies and the mainstreaming of far right politics through elite discourse. His first book, The Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia: A Populist Hegemony?, was published in 2013 and he recently co-edited After Charlie Hebdo: Terror, racism and free speech published with Zed. His latest book, Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream, co-written with Aaron Winter, was published by Verso in 2020.
The populist radical right: old wine in new bottles?

The populist radical right has dominated the public news agenda in recent years. Its emergence to prominence has often caught politicians, journalists and academics by surprise. Its qualities are often thought as extraordinary and distinct from other parties. But to what extent is the populist radical right different from the non-populist (radical) right? Where do its core values converge and where do they diverge from the conservative right? We asked Early Career Researchers specialising in this area to offer their views.

The economic nationalism of right-wing populists: constructing a neoliberal exclusionary nation

In the past decade, many countries across the globe witnessed increasing electoral support for right-wing populist parties and politicians, some of which entered government. This was the case in places as diverse as the US, Brazil, India, Austria, and Hungary to name but a few. Scholars and commentators focused their attention on explaining the electoral success and the expected governing outcomes. These accounts highlighted the nationalist core ideology of right-wing populists. This is assumed to lead to more restrictive immigration policies and, more broadly, threaten the foundations of liberal democracy. In contrast, right-wing populists’ economic policies have been argued to be irrelevant to their successful voter mobilisation. Even though their economic policy discourse significantly shifted to include ideas of economic nationalism such as trade tariffs, subsidies for domestic production and pride in the nation’s economy in recent years, scholars treated those ideas to be subordinate to their culturally exclusionary nationalism. Instead, I offer an alternative interpretation of right-wing populists’ economic agenda: i) I will suggest that the economic policy agenda of right-wing populist politicians is deeply intertwined with and thus highly relevant for their nationalist ideology, and ii) that their economic policymaking is best described as neoliberal economic nationalism, which helps construct an exclusionary nation.

In 2016, the world witnessed Donald Trump coming to power and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) playing a significant role in the referendum of the UK leaving the European Union. As a result, a long-standing explanation for the electoral success of right-wing populist parties has been called into question. For decades, scholars argued that socio-economic insecurities such as decreasing wages and living standards, pressure on domestic labour market due to globalisation, and the weakening of trade unions leads to citizens’ resentment that right-wing populists can mobilise in their favour. More recent accounts contend that rather than socio-economic insecurities, citizens’ fear losing their traditional and national identities in the face of rapid change of cultural values: progressive values such cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism have been on the rise since the ‘silent revolution’ from the early 1970s onward. In this context, right-wing populist politicians promised to protect these ‘threatened’ identities in a more exclusionary nation state that would be more restrictive against immigration, strengthen the state’s executive forces, and hinder the equalisation of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples before marriage law. Hence, the conservative and nationalist discourse of right-wing populist politicians is assumed to present the main reason for their electoral success.

Right-wing populists’ conservative and nationalist agenda has been emphasised not only by analysts of electoral dynamics, but also in the assessment of their governing outcomes. Studies have found that such governments introduce restrictive immigration policies and potentially pose a threat to the foundations of liberal democracies. Such studies show that policies that right populist parties in government put in place frequently challenge the idea that the power of the majority must be limited to safeguard individual rights and the division of power. This perspective highlights how populist politicians often equate the majority to ‘the people’, a unified whole with a general (political) will, to whom they would ‘give back the power’ when in office. Cases such as the Austrian Freedom Party, the Northern League in Italy, or the Swiss People’s Party posed as governing parties and exemplify such illiberal
tendencies well. While their policies on immigration, their discourse on democratic rules, and their disregard for individualist liberal values have been thoroughly analysed, little has been said about their economic policymaking.

Recent cases such as Fidesz under Viktor Orbán in Hungary, or the Republican Party under Donald Trump in the US present many, if not all, of the above-named features. Yet, they also significantly shaped the economic trajectory of the respectively governed countries. Often their discourse presents elements of economic nationalism: an advocacy for trade tariffs, fostering domestic production, and a sense of pride in the nation’s economy. Donald Trump signed the ‘Buy American and Hire American Executive Order’ in April 2017 to put ‘American Workers First’. Similarly, Fidesz’s rise to power was accompanied by an economic nationalist agenda. Indeed, one of the few accounts that investigated populist economic policymaking has shown that those parties, which recently experienced electoral success systematically criticized market liberalism. Yet, Trump and Orbán simultaneously entertain supportive links to capital and big corporations and promote policies often associated with economic neoliberalism. Fidesz, for example, strongly deregulated labour markets and weakened trade unions in favour of foreign investment. This suggests that also right-wing populist politicians tend to support neoliberal policymaking despite its economic nationalist veneer.

The concept of the construction of a neoliberal exclusionary nation helps us understand this seemingly contradictory policy program, which holds important lessons to fully comprehend the electoral success and governing strategies of right-wing populist parties:

1. Culturally exclusionary sentiments are not the sole characteristic of right-wing populist parties. Their nationalist ideology is supported and legitimated through economic policies that suggest ‘to give back control’ to ‘the people’. This is well exemplified through right-wing populist discourse conflating anti-immigration sentiments with economic rationales. Where nationalist anti-immigration sentiments are often viewed as culturally rooted, right-wing populist policies advocate nativist welfare state protection against immigrants wrongly claimed as exploiting the social welfare system. Such welfare state policies, however, do not ensure a stronger welfare state.

Instead, welfare state spending is often cut down while becoming more exclusionary under right-wing populist governments. Unlike previous accounts that argued that economic policies in right-wing populist programs are merely adjunct to the culturally nativist core, I believe that this consideration raises the question in reverse: do culturally exclusionary values become a Trojan horse for neoliberal policymaking?

2. Policy outcomes of right-wing populists in government suggest on-going neoliberal policy dominance despite their economic nationalist discourse. This raises questions for both spheres of analysis: the electoral success and governmental participation of right-wing populists. Instead of considering such electoral dynamics as either culturally or economically rooted, the increasing dominance of economic nationalist ideas within right-wing populist discourse is instructive for prospective research to investigate the interlinkage between cultural and economic ideas as well as where and when the demand for economic nationalism arises. Relatedly, while exposing the illiberal and inconsistent policymaking of right-wing populist governments, cases such as Hungary and the US also illustrate the seemingly comfortable companionship of illiberal, nationalist, and authoritarian values with economically neoliberal policies. This begs the question not only of the compatibility between right-wing populism and democracy, but also of neoliberalism and democracy.

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Gender policies and the populist radical right: the cases of the League and Brothers of Italy

International scholarship has always looked at Italian politics as an outlier in the European context. That is due to the striking levels of political volatility the country has experienced since the 1990s, resulting mostly from the national stagnant economy and citizens’ persistent distrust towards political institutions. As such, a variety of populist parties emerged attempting to tap into the mounting popular discontent and distrust against established parties.

If populism is an old acquaintance of Italian politics, recent developments have inaugurated a new balance of power between different populist actors. This happened mostly in favour of two populist radical right parties, the League – previously known as the Northern League – and the Brothers of Italy. The two parties jointly summon the support of more than 40% of Italian voters according to recent opinion polls, being the first and second most supported parties. Of particular note is the fact that the Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, have slowly eroded the electoral advantage of their friend and foe, the League (after the latter decided to support the ‘technocratic government’ of Mario Draghi in February 2021).

Notwithstanding the different origins and trajectories of the two parties, they share a common ground through their agendas based on anti-immigration policies, law-and-order, and the defence of Italian values and traditions. It is in this latter aspect that gender becomes of paramount importance, as the two parties stand in defence of the ‘natural’ (heteronormative) family as one of their core tenets. In addition, and similarly to other populist radical right parties, the League and the Brothers of Italy display an ‘obsession with gender and sexuality’ (Dietze and Roth 2020: 8) characterised by aversion to sex education, opposition to the so-called ‘gender ideology’, hostility towards same-sex marriage as the ultimate threat to the natural family, and restrictive stance on reproductive rights.

In a recent report for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, we analysed the gender politics of these two parties, and found that, indeed, the two parties have a similar agenda concerning women’s and gender issues as they share substantial framings stemming from their nativist world view (Feo and Lavizzari 2021). The party manifestos drafted for recent national and European elections (2013, 2018 and 2019) however, display some differences in the degree of attention devoted to these issues by each of the two parties. Whereas the League touches upon these themes more extensively, the Brothers of Italy do so less often, all-the-while presenting somewhat more conservative positions, especially for what concerns reproductive rights.

Central to the two parties’ agenda, is the attention devoted to the traditional – heteronormative – family. Family is conceived as the central unit for social reproduction and, as such, the foundation of the Italian nation. People with migration background and poor economic status are identified as responsible for the so-called ‘demographic crisis’, they are also framed as an obstacle to the reproduction of the (white) national body. Instead of concentrating on economic structures to explain current social shortcomings, the League and the Brothers of Italy propose policies and welfare correctives that materially benefit traditional families, with the aim of favouring (and incentivising) higher birth rates. For example, both parties apply demographic criteria to economic decisions, resulting in a vast array of benefits, from tax cuts on childcare products to baby grants for each new-born, to support for young couples in building large families, provided that they are composed of ‘native’ citizens.

In line with this rhetoric and policies, both parties hold ‘modern-traditional’ views on women, in which working women are supported, insofar that their childrearing responsibilities are also performed. The analysis of relevant policies serves to highlight the vision shared among them; a vision that leaves much of the care responsibilities to the private management of the family, thus reinforcing a gendered division of labour, where women are mainly considered in relation to their (unpaid) care work. For instance, the ‘natural’ role of women as caregivers is implied in the pension reform proposed by the League, ‘Woman Option’, the reform allows female employees in the private and public sectors, as well as those self-employed, to retire earlier than the regular pension age. The League’s leader Matteo Salvini welcomed this reform as, among other reasons, it gives back women their ’right to be grandmothers’.

Another interesting point is related to these parties’ position on gender-based violence. Contrary
to other far-right parties in Europe, both parties voted in favour of the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention (better known as the Istanbul Convention) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the European Parliament in 2019, however, brought a series of dynamics to the surface. On that occasion, only the League voted in its favour while the Brothers of Italy voted against its ratification. In explaining why they voted the convention down, the Brothers MEP Nicola Proccacinni declared that the text was ‘imbued with gender ideology that introduces an incredible series of sexual categories and subcategories, a real betrayal of the Istanbul Convention and symbol of the ideological drift of the European Parliament’.

This about-turn in the Brothers of Italy’s support for the Convention from 2013 to 2019 can be attributed to the increased politicisation of ‘gender ideology’ in the European landscape, and the party’s subsequent radicalisation around this issue. What they frame as the ‘fight against gender ideology’ is a new entry in the party’s discourse and is attributable to their strategic alliance with Catholic conservatism. Even though the strategic element should not be underestimated, the attacks on gender ideology find their justification in the party’s nativism and extreme conservatism. For the Brothers of Italy, combating gender ideology is part of the battle to preserve the conservative vision of Italian identity. According to the party, gender-neutral and non-discriminatory language is an attempt to water down some of the central tenets of the Italian value system – such as family and traditional gender roles in the private and public spheres – that most Italians share and identify with, to the sole advantage of a minoritarian community in collaboration with ‘the elites’.

The two parties’ conservative stances also influence their positions on reproductive rights. Worrisome evidence of restrictive policies on reproductive rights has become apparent through their institutional activities at the local level. For instance, both parties have proposed several motions to push forward pro-family policies, to provide financial support to Catholic associations implementing initiatives against abortion, and promoting the establishment of ‘pro-life cities’.

The cases described above serve to show the relevance of gender and sexuality in the emergence, proliferation of and competition between populist radical right parties. Gender and sexuality are crucial markers of our social identities and, as such, play an important role in the construction of ‘the people’. Likewise, the defence of traditional gender norms and relations are key to the politics of these actors, and an increasingly relevant factor in understanding their success. Future research should try to disentangle nativist conceptions of gender from the evocation of ‘the popular’, a goal that is as much of scholarly interest as it is of political importance.

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References


Feo F and Lavizzari A (2021), Triumph of the women? the female face of right-wing populism and extremism: Case study: Italy. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Forum Politik und Gesellschaft
The relation between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ racisms, and their role in the entanglement of racism and liberal democracies, is precisely what is explored in Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter’s book, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream*, published in April 2020. In distinguishing ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ racisms, they show how, although racism has played an integral part in the historical constitution of liberal orders, the relocation of racism to the far-right has allowed to ‘other’ racism and to assert liberalism as the force of progress in the modern world (Chapter Two). In the 1990s, with the ‘end’ of colonialism, the Civil Rights Act, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Mandela presidency in South Africa, the myth of the ‘end of history’ met that of ‘race’ and made racism ‘a thing’ of the past (p. 9). What Mondon and Winter call ‘illiberal racism’ was then associated, for most of the past thirty years, with pathologic remnants of past movements and ideologies which can be contained through tailored responses to sick individuals (Chapter One). In the authors’ words, illiberal racism is “a contingent and functional” form “that allows liberal societies to represent themselves as post-racist” (p. 49).

Yet today, in a context of deep social, economic and political crises, the rise of far-right parties is shedding light over the intersections of liberal and illiberal racisms. In Chapter Four, Mondon and Winter problematise the uses and abuses of the concept of ‘populism’. The vague and ahistorical accounts of populism circulating in pundit circles – ‘populists’ would be pitting a ‘pure’ people against a corrupt elite – have enabled and contributed to the far-right’s popularity, and to legitimise their diagnosis of the crisis. Rebranded as populists, the far-right raised its profile as representative of the ‘ordinary’ people, a ‘white working class’ left behind by multicultural elites. What the authors importantly demonstrate is that this rebranding of the far-right as the alternative to the status quo is not an isolated move from these parties: ‘the mainstream’ has actively enabled this. The readiness of liberalism’s partisans to embrace explanations of crisis that promote ‘racial concerns’ is telling of the racism grounding our social orders; and of the uses of racism to deflect attention from the failures of capitalism. In all three cases covered in the book, Trump in the US (p. 123), the Front National in France (p. 131), and Brexit in the UK (p. 137), concerns about immigration and the loss of national ‘values’ have been designated as key causes of the crisis, and have been ‘mainstreamed’ as priority policy areas (Chapter Three).

If this critique of the uses of populism is much needed, the equation lacks one element: the actual threat to established liberal orders coming from various emancipatory struggles on the Left. In other words, the mainstreaming of the far-right is not only a coping mechanism to mask the liberal mainstream’s failures to solve the crisis, but is also a response to the presence of counter-hegemonic articulations directed at the contradictions of liberal orders, including their attachments to patriarchy, racism, and to any exploitative and oppressive structures ensuring the smooth operations of capitalism.

Although the conclusion does call to explore...
radical alternatives (p. 207), the argument defended throughout the book would arguably gain in explanatory and normative power by further defining the ‘mainstream’ in its relation with such struggles. This would contribute to an understanding of racism as key to the repression of socialism (see on this Lentin 2020).

The lack of attention to such emancipatory movements can also lead the authors’ definition of democracy as anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist, and their argument that any less than this ‘is cowardly’ and ‘reactionary’ (p. 209), to limit our grasp of and engagement with popular struggles that might not tick all boxes. Yet, the hegemonic and discursive framework Mondon and Winter adopt allows us to understand democracy as engaged in struggle, and that democratic struggles will not be perfect in a context in which ‘the mainstream’ and the far-right partly come together to counter such struggles and rearticulate them in reactionary ways.

To take part in this struggle, the authors outline a series of steps we – those with access to public discourse and to the production of ‘knowledge’ – can take (pp. 199-210). Among them: stop hyping the far-right; understand that racism evolves and adapts; and give more attention to radical alternatives. We can then add to this the importance to explore the various ways in which such alternatives are actively repressed – the ‘mainstreaming of the far-right’ being brilliantly demonstrated in this book as one of them.

References


Studying the far right today: Thinking with and beyond Mudde

Book reviewed:
The Far Right Today
Cas Mudde
2019
160 pp.
Verso

Seongcheol Kim, Postdoctoral Researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kassel

Cas Mudde’s book The Far Right Today is a valuable and accessible guide to the state of far-right politics in a global perspective. Combining elements of a state-of-the-art research overview with an introductory volume for a general audience, the book features a number of strengths that stand out to academic and non-academic readers alike. Firstly, the book is truly global in scope, going beyond the European or North American ‘usual suspects’ and incorporating insights on far-right actors from Brazil and Chile to Israel, India, and Japan. Secondly, and in a related vein, the book draws on an impressive array of both wide-ranging and in-depth case knowledge across countries, something that is unfortunately rare in the field of comparative politics more generally and research on the far right more specifically. The latter has, in recent years in particular, seen a veritable explosion of broad-brush large-N studies on the one hand and qualitative contributions with area-studies foci on the other, pointing to a need for cross-regional perspectives that are sensitive to context-specific analysis as well as wider patterns. Thirdly, the book displays a welcome awareness of the double hermeneutics of how academic and media discourses are intertwined with the far right as a contemporary political phenomenon that lives off its disproportionate, often sensationalised coverage in journalistic reporting and public affairs commentary as a serious (if not the main) challenger to the political establishment. Here, a productive intersection can be seen with recent discursive approaches that have highlighted the problematic construction of categories such as ‘the (white) working class’ as a supposedly core constituency of the far right.

Related to this point is perhaps the main contribution of Mudde’s latest work: namely, the emphasis on the mainstreaming of the far right as the defining
characteristic of the ‘fourth wave.’ Mudde presents a periodisation of post-World War II far-right politics, drawing on Klaus von Beyme’s earlier work (pp. 11-23): from ‘neo-fascism’ (first wave, 1945-55) to ‘right-wing populism’ (second wave, 1955-80) to ‘radical right’ (third wave, 1980-2000) and, finally, the far right today (fourth wave, 2000-present), which has gained increasing acceptance as coalition partners, confidence-and-supply providers, and/or agenda setters by mainstream political parties. One aspect of this development is the adoption of nativist elements of far-right parties’ agendas in particular by established centre-right parties (e.g. ÖVP, UMP/ Les Républicains), but also the transformation of previously mainstream conservative parties into radical right ones (e.g. Fidesz, PiS), which have in turn pursued a mainstreaming of extreme right-wing forces (e.g. ONR, Jobbik prior to the latter’s strategic de-radicalisation) from an established or dominant position within the party system. Even in countries where such large-scale mutations have not occurred, however, the deeper problem remains that profit-driven mass media tend to ‘inflate the importance of the far right’ and end up ‘push[ing] the agenda’ of, or even endorsing outright in some cases, far-right forces by providing a constant platform for their demands to be heard (pp. 108-109). In the UK context, one need only think of Nick Griffin’s controversial 2009 appearance on Question Time or Nigel Farage’s recognisable status as one of the most frequent guests on the same programme long before the Brexit cause was mainstreamed into the forefront of the political agenda (with the support of major right-wing print media) by a divided Conservative Party in government.

There is further potential here for extending these considerations onto a critical reflection of how academics, too, talk about the far right so as to indirectly legitimise or reproduce its narratives. As Mudde and others have rightly pointed out elsewhere, there is a problematic tendency in social-science research to confute populism with the far right; arguably no less problematic, however, is the notion peddled by a growing number of social scientists that far-right parties fundamentally represent the ‘losers’ of globalisation against ‘progressive’ or ‘cosmopolitan’-minded ‘winners.’ The notion that contemporary societies are defined by a division between ‘cosmopolitan elites’ and ‘communitarian masses’ is not only something that could have come straight from the mouth of a Viktor Orbán or a Tom Van Grieken, but also an argument made in these very terms in a 2019 Cambridge University Press volume on new forms of political conflict in the 21st century. Mudde himself suggests that a more differentiated view is needed in his discussion of the ‘economic anxiety’ and ‘cultural backlash’ explanations for far-right voting: while both explanations locate ‘the root cause’ for far-right support in the same phenomenon – namely ‘neoliberal globalization’ – it is far-right narratives and their transmission belts in the mainstream media that themselves produce a link between the cultural and economic dimensions of neo-liberal globalisation by telling voters that mass immigration is precisely what is causing perceived economic hardships (pp. 100-101). If this is the case, one ought to go further and argue that the communitarianism/cosmopolitanism dichotomy is deeply problematic: not only does it reproduce the far right’s own narratives about cultural and economic underdogs revolting against ‘cosmopolitan elites’ (these being, of course, political constructions that can hardly be taken at face value); it does so on shoddy empirical grounds, overlooking how certain public attitudes might also be an effect of decades of far-right messaging as well as ‘nativist narratives in the political and public debates’ (p. 101). One is reminded here of Sartori’s critique of an ‘objectivist bias’ in the social sciences that always looks for deeper-lying explanations for political phenomena on the level of ‘objective’ societal factors, without considering how the political (far-right messaging in this case) itself directly intervenes into the social (the attitudinal and socio-structural positionings of so-called ‘communitarian masses’).

In sum, this is an important and timely book that is well worth a read not least for the potential that it offers for critical reflection on public discourse and academic research practices alike on the topic.
Fascist legacies and populist presents: interrogating the historicity of populism

Book reviewed:
Populism and Collective Memory: Comparing Fascist Legacies in Western Europe
Luca Mannucci
2020
246 pp.
Routledge
ISBN 9780367225179

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The relationship between populism and a much more virulent politics that marked, especially though not exclusively, European societies almost ninety years ago – fascism – has been a contentious one. Many scholars have rejected possible connections, while others shied away from engaging with comparisons as, despite the compelling parallels and echoes, the idea of comparing ideologies, movements and organizations that gave rise to the horrific atrocities of WWII to the anti-liberal politics of today seemed oversimplifying. Some, such as Finkelstein (2017), stress connections between populism and fascism in terms of aesthetics, discourse and technologies of governing, suggesting that we disregard such aspects of the genealogy of populism at our peril. So, assuming we accept that this is a path worth following, what can the history and theory of fascism offer to the study of populism and what can we make out of their noteworthy divergences?

Luca Mannucci’s Populism and Collective Memory constitutes an attempt to engage with such questions in a systematic and innovative way. Premised on the consideration of fascism and populism as contiguous phenomena, marked and largely defined by their shared aversion to liberal democratic politics, but, for the most part belonging to distinct historical eras, Mannucci’s monograph proposes ways of linking the two and learning more about contemporary populism from their experience of fascism in those societies that either populism becomes rooted within, or fails to do so. Mannucci’s central hypothesis is that contemporary populist surges may be explained to a large extent through an analysis of the fascist past of those societies affected, and the ways in which this has been confronted in societal narratives.

To do this, he interestingly distinguishes between the social acceptability of populist discourse from another aspect of populism often used to gauge its success – notably electoral performance. The emphasis on social acceptability provides indeed a better measure of populism’s rootedness in a society as acceptability denotes a more diffuse positive predisposition that may not necessarily translate into a political (in the strict sense) act such as voting, or even activism. In his search for measurable indicators of social acceptability, Mannucci differentiates between ‘the percentage of populist statements in a manifesto’, the ‘degree of radicalism of the party author of the manifesto’ and “the vote share of the party” whose manifesto he examines – what he calls the discursive, political/ideological and electoral dimensions of acceptability. This formula is indeed interesting as it challenges the emphasis on election results and captures the possibility of populist discourse finding its way into other (non-populist) party manifestos, transmuting into votes for other parties that do not overtly espouse populist politics. This methodological innovation allows the author to trace populist themes in political discourse since the 1970s among eight countries and across parties of both the left and the right and thus establish a genealogy of populism that election outcomes would not be able to. Yet, despite the original intention to go beyond readily detectable political action and discourse, methodologically, the research underpinning Mannucci’s research does not go far enough, beyond politics-writ-small, as it cannot detect populist elements in the realm of plebeian discontent and indignation that do not eventually find their way into party politics. A telling example from a country that is not included in the eight-country sample of his study is the Spanish Indignados whose supporters and activists eventually voted for substantially diverse political parties – established and new, and whose anti-elitism might have not translated into political manifestos but were reflected in more localized and immediate communications and exchanges. To make up for this, Mannucci relies on long-term historical analysis that allows him to see the emergence and resilience of populist themes over time and allow time for the more amorphous and pre-political expressions of indignation to find their way to the realm of conventional politics.

Resorting to fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fQCA), the author tests the most common
on ressentiment and its role in cultural traumas

Book reviewed:
The Political Sociology of Emotions: Essays on Trauma and Ressentiment
Nicolas Demertzis
2020
266 pp.
eBook
ISBN: 9781351212472

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Nicolas Demertzis’ new book studies cultural traumas and ressentiment, supplemented with case studies from Greek political culture. Demertzis argues that these topics should be discussed together, because “traumas break and remake social bonds and, in that sense, they evoke, inter alia, hatred, anger, fear, sorrow, resentment or ressentiment, on the one hand, and solidarity, dignity, compassion, and sympathy, on the other” (p. xiii). A challenge is to identify features of cultural traumas whose participants can reach emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution on the one hand, and those traumas whose participants end up in ressentiment on the other.

Demertzis states, following Alexander and others (2004), that “a cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that they have suffered a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, engraved in their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p. 31). A traumatizing event “has to undergo a process of social signification; namely, it has to be publicly signified, to get articulated into the paths of public discourse, and to become socially accepted and defined as ‘trauma’” (p. 32). The discursive negotiation of the meaning of a trauma constitutes a ‘trauma drama’ with “three fundamental elements: retroactively selective memory, largely negative emotion, and identity. The essentials of this process… are, equally: victims, perpetrators, and blame attribution.” (p. 34). Interestingly, ressentiment has the same key elements.

So what are the features of trauma dramas that avoid ressentiment, or result in it? Demertzis offers some
Demertzis defines ressentiment as "repression of certain emotions and affects" (p. 65) and as a "lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic desired but unattainable objects (p. 3) and as a mind" characterizing it both as a psychological "mechanism" relating to the transvaluation of desired but unattainable objects (p. 65) and as a "lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects" (p. 4). Similarly, Demertzis defines ressentiment as "an unpleasant complex moral sentiment with no specific addressees, experienced by inferior individuals including a chronic reliving of repressed and endless vengefulness, hostility, hatred, envy, and resentment due to the powerlessness of the subject in expressing them, and resulting, at the level of moral values, in the disavowal of what is unconsciously desired" (p. 132). Hostility, envy, and indignation are then constituents of ressentiment for Demertzis. Yet ressentiment is something else, for it develops only when "anger, envy, hostility, hatred and/or resentment... are incorporated and mutated into ressentiment insofar as the transvaluation process is put into motion initiated by the subject’s incapacity to act out" (p. 136, my italics). Transvaluation is carried out by defense mechanisms of displacement, projection, and attribution, and it constitutes the core of ressentiment for Demertzis. Even so, this does not turn ressentiment into a mechanism. Instead, Demertzis suggests that ressentiment is a “cluster emotion” or “complex sentiment” (p. 132).

Another difference concerns the forgetting and forgiving of the traumatizing event. Forgetting and non-forgetting are possible responses to trauma, along with revenge and demand for justice. "Like revenge, reparation through restorative justice is underpinned by resentment but not by hatred or wrath; instead, grief, sorrow, and hope play important roles. When traumatized victims are given the chance to narrate their suffering and pain publicly, they are able to regain their lost dignity; in addition, perpetrators are also heard, and through their true remorse and apology... are reconnected with their humanness" (p. 94). Reconciliation paves the way to forgiveness and mourning, the final stage of healing. Non-forgiveness, in contrast, associates with ressentiment when it results from “the victims’ inability to overcome the alluring position of victimization... [which] perpetuates powerlessness, self-pity and moral hypermnesia premised on the victim’s resistance to dealing with the past in a healing way" (p. 104).

But what is ressentiment and how does it develop? Demertzis follows Scheler (1961) who called ressentiment “a self-poisoning of the mind” characterizing it both as a psychological “mechanism” relating to the transvaluation of desired but unattainable objects (p. 65) and as a “lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects” (p. 4). Similarly, Demertzis defines ressentiment as...
Ressentiment, in this view, is driven by envy, shame, and inefficacious anger, with their feelings of inferiority and impotence, while resentment, indignation, and hatred, reinforced and validated by social sharing, are its outcomes (Salmela & von Scheve 2017; Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

But if ressentiment is an attempt to get rid of an old self and its values, how should we understand the ressentimentful person’s inability to forget the original injury or injuries. According to Demertzis, there is an “obsessive repetition of past memories, anxiety, embitterment, and depression” (p. 135) in ressentiment. However, this does not seem plausible, given that ressentiment aims at changing the meaning of a painful situation when other forms of change seem to be blocked. I suggest that a ressentimentful person interprets his or her feelings of inferiority and powerlessness as symptoms of victimhood that allows their transmutation into moral emotions of resentment, indignation, and hatred, reinforced and validated by social sharing, are its outcomes (Salmela & von Scheve 2017; Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

Yet ressentiment is not a stable condition. Demertzis argues that transvaluation and the defence mechanisms implementing it are never complete but “lean towards what Scheler calls value delusions and illusions” (p. 129). The fragility of the transmuted self and its values creates the need for their validation. I have argued that this validation is paradigmatically available from like-minded peers in interaction rituals, demonstrations, rallies etc. in which political actors provide targets for the other-directed negative emotions (Salmela & von Scheve 2017). This tendency of ressentiment to collectivization explains why ressentiment as individually conceived is “not conducive to mobilization and explains political inaction rather than political action”, as Demertzis (p. 158) observes, has been identified to motivate several political orientations or movements, including reactionism both on political right and left (e.g. Capelos and Demertzis, 2018), right-wing populism and extremism (e.g. Latif et al. 2018; Salmela & von Scheve 2017; Mishra 2017), as well as fundamentalism and fanaticism (e.g. Langman & Morris 2003; Poslusznà & Poslusznà 2015). Demertzis acknowledges the importance of collectivization for ressentiment by referencing some of this literature as well as in his discussion on emotions and populism. Yet his most elaborate support to this thesis comes from his detailed analyses of politics of ressentiment in Greece.

References:


While the chapter titles in the updated version remain largely unchanged, they have been significantly updated to reflect the vast literature that has been published on populism and the far-right since 2016. The addition of a new chapter, ‘Illiberal Democracy’ and Neo-Authoritarianism: Shameless Normalisation of Far-right populism critically analyses the illiberal and authoritarian shift in European countries such as Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. International readers will find Wodak’s discussion of Anti-Sorosism, which is prevalent in far-right discourses throughout Europe and North America, particularly timely.

By far the most significant contribution of the second edition is Wodak’s work on the mainstreaming, normalisation and shamelessness of the contemporary far-right. It is widely accepted that a defining feature of the contemporary far-right is the increasing tolerance, mainstreaming, and normalisation of their ideas within society. As Cas Mudde argues in *The Far Right Today*, the 21st century far-right ‘is closely connected to the mainstream; and in more and more countries it is becoming the mainstream’ (2019, p.2). Wodak echoes this in the *Politics of Fear* suggesting that the far-right agenda and rhetoric have already reached the mainstream. Like Mudde and others who have noted the increasing mainstreaming of the far-right, Wodak argues that ‘we are confronted with widespread and growing normalisation of far-right policies, of formerly tabooed topics, wording and impolite or shameless behaviour’ (p.6). Here Wodak’s work perfectly aligns with performative scholars of populism like Ben Moffitt who posits that ‘bad manners’ are a defining feature of populist politics. Wodak advances the concept of shameless normalisation to describe this phenomenon where traditional rules of ‘politeness and respect are deliberately broken without any negative sanctions and consequences’ (2021, p. 91). Wodak explains that far-right populist actors frequently use strategies of continuous provocation whereby ‘provocation is achieved by the violation of conventional rules of politeness as well as by intentionally breaking taboos’ (p. 16). This can be seen across a variety of different contexts and far-right actors from Donald Trump to Jair Bolsonaro.
Wodak's argument has enormous utility in explaining how far-right actors like Donald Trump, Pauline Hanson and Jair Bolsonaro can engage in 'bad behaviour', seemingly without consequence.

*Shamelessness* explains how populist President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte can give the "middle finger" to the European Union, direct curse words at the Pope and make sexist vulgar comments to journalists and get away with it. *Shamelessness* explains why Australian far-right leader Pauline Hanson can go into the Australian senate wearing a burqa without consequence.

Just as the first edition of *Politics of Fear* detailed how far-right populists employed a variety of performative, linguistic, rhetorical and discourse strategies to achieve their political goals, the second edition explains how these once fringe actors have become mainstreamed and normalized in contemporary society. In this context, we should expect to see more overt sexism, racism and homophobia in mainstream politics. The second edition of *Politics of Fear* is highly recommended for scholars and citizens looking to understand the micro-politics of the contemporary far-right and the processes that have brought them to the mainstream.
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