

## Muddying the waters. The opacity and appeal of the populist right

The populist spectre keeps on haunting Europe as well as other parts of the world. A dramatic amount of scholarly energy and attention has gone into debating and analysing the populist phenomenon, in particular regarding its currently predominant form, right-wing populism. A core problem remains conceptual clarity in both academic and public language. It is not uncommon to see different terms used interchangeably, such as radical right, extreme right or hard right populism. One major matter of concern is a slippery slope in terms of the possibility of identification of political forces and arguments that are in stark contrast to the representative, liberal democracy that emerged in the wake of the Second World War. In other words, if the *genus* of post-war liberal democracy was its anti-totalitarian character, that is, its strong denial of both fascism and Nazism and also of communism as justifiable political projects, this nucleus seems now evermore questioned.

Part of the problem is the mainstreaming of radical-right, anti-democratic ideas (for instance with regard to the questioning of rights – including the right to life – of migrants), that is, the increased adoption or absorption of such ideas by centrist forces, on both left and right. But the matter is clearly also semantic. By referring to specific parties and movements as ‘populist’ or also ‘hard right’, the suggestion is that fascist or other anti-democratic ideas are not at the centre of such actors’ DNA. Various political parties prominent in the European landscape are identified as more *salonfähig* because of the apparently more mild and centrist ideas they articulate or because of their recently demonstrated ‘mildness’. ‘Geert Milders’ was an often-heard slogan in the run-up to the Dutch elections in 2023, which saw an overwhelming victory of Wilders’ Partij voor de Vrijheid, which, until the summer of 2023, had always been identified as too close to the extreme right and Alt-Right forces. Hence, until that time, Wilders had been seen as a *persona non grata*; until then, a *cordon sanitaire* had been the main approach by mainstream parties in the Netherlands.

Wilders' apparent milder language in the run-up to the 2023 elections and his promise to put more radical demands 'in the refrigerator' (a similar case is the way in which Giorgia Meloni's manifests herself on the European level) made many caves into the idea that right-wing populists might not be so dangerous for democracy after all. In fact, the formation of the government was ultimately accepted by the Volkspartij voor Vrijheid and Democratie (VVD), which had been ruling under the leadership of Mark Rutte for more than a decade as well as two new right-wing parties. In the early formation talks, a case appeared to be made for a 'red line' based on firm commitments to constitutional principles and the rule of law (one Dutch constitutionalist found more than 20 anti-constitutional positions in Wilders' political programme).<sup>1</sup> However, this idea of a red line completely disappeared later on, and the coalition government that was formed is made up of Wilders' PVV and three centre-right parties (the latter two, Nieuw Sociaal Contract<sup>2</sup> and the BoerBurgerBeweging were admitted to the European People's Party in the wake of the June 2024 European elections). The Dutch case of a shift towards the radical right was subsequently replicated in the European elections of June 2024 where we witnessed a shift towards the (radical) right, not least expressed in the voting patterns of groups normally (erroneously?) associated with pro-European and pro-democratic positions, such as young people in some countries, such as France and Germany.

In some ways, Germany is a contrasting case for the success of the radical right as the *cordon sanitaire* against the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was largely maintained by the established parties and mainstream media. Yet, since the Covid-19 pandemic particularly with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of the Ukraine, the AfD has been steadily rising in the polls. In early 2024, information about a secret meeting on the far right (involving AfD members but also members of the centrist Christian Democrats) became public, according to which a plan for 'remigration' of a part of Germany's foreign-born population was discussed, sparking public outrage and leading to demonstrations by civil society organisations in many German cities. In the following months before the European elections, the party was further plagued by scandals of alleged Russian and Chinese espionage surrounding its top candidate Maximilian Krah. But it was only two weeks before the election, after Krah publicly stated that not all German SS-soldiers were criminals, that the AfD was excluded from the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European parliament. This allowed Marine Le Pen,

who was the driving force behind the exclusion, to portray her Rassemblement National as a force of moderation. Despite these scandals and being ostracised by the European radical right, the AfD had a strong showing at the ballots, coming in as second only after the centre-right Christian Democrats. In the immediate aftermath, the AfD has distanced itself from Krah in the hope of rejoining ID in the future. After the dissolution of the ID and its reformation – without the AfD – as Patriots for Europe, the party joined forces with more radical parties in forming the Sovereign Nations group in the European parliament. To what extent Germany and the AfD will follow the broader European trend of the mainstreaming of the radical right, remains to be seen.

The shift towards the right translates into a certain willingness by the political centre to accommodate radical-right positions (for instance regarding the climate and migration) as well as the readiness of the right-conservative centre to reach out to radical-right parties (as is particularly noticeable in advances towards Giorgia Meloni's post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia). The populist wave is hence to be understood both from the perspective of its impact on centre-right political forces and from the angle of a societal demand for authoritarian approaches to democracy. To be sure, the conservative right has always been a key political force in modern democracies, according to some even a dominant one (see Fawcett, 2022). A key problem throughout modern democratic history has been the construction of a viable balance between left-liberal forces (more explicitly tied to the defence of liberal-democratic values) and right-conservative forces (with historical roots in anti-liberal positions). The modern democratic political landscape has always involved a conservative right, with, at least since the 1950s, radical, anti-liberal forces situated more to the fringes. In specific historical moments, not least the interwar period, the fragile balance between liberal and non-liberal forces however failed to work while more radical forces became evermore central. This is not to say that in the current times of a return of the (radical) right, history is necessarily repeating itself. It is, however, important to keep in mind that everything to the right of the 'classical' conservative right – ranging from hard right to radical and extreme right – tends to hold a very much questionable relationship with core democratic ideas and liberal approaches to modernity. In this, the work of the Argentinian historian Federico Finchelstein on fascism and populism is of great relevance, not least since he indicates a more or less historical constant of a societal demand for a more 'authoritarian form of democracy' (Finchelstein, 2019, p. xiv).

This issue contains a number of articles directly related to the upswing of right-wing populism. In his article, Timo Korstenbroek discusses radical-right anger in the Netherlands, focussing on expressions of anger in virtual communities. Korstenbroek develops a virtual ethnographic approach ‘from within the belly of the radical-right-wing beast’, trying to engage directly with radical-right supporters, in order to understand defences of nativism and attempts to safeguard an alleged Dutch national identity or ‘Dutchness’. His objective is to understand rather than to merely condemn radical-right-wing sentiments. The main difficulty is to cross what Korstenbroek calls the ‘empathy wall’ so as to speak with rather than merely about radical-right supporters. The idea is to get to the ‘private troubles’ of people in order to understand more public forms of position-taking. Korstenbroek finds in particular a perception of a ‘wrongful distribution of power’ among radical-right supporters in what he calls a ‘virtual nativism’.

In ‘Reclaiming Agency Against the New World Order: Beyond the Coping Mechanism Frame in Conspiracy Theory Studies’, Emma van der Tak and Jaron Harambam analyse conspiracy theories with regard to ‘evil globalist elites’ in the Netherlands. The focus is an interesting and original one, that is, one of autonomy or ‘doing things oneself’. Van der Tak and Harambam highlight how conspiracy theories have taken flight since the COVID-19 pandemic and managed to find new, transnational constituencies, creating loose but interactive collectives around conspiracy ideas. The analysis focusses on a social network around Dutch conspiracy theories as a form of ‘social movement’ and uses an ethnographic perspective. An important dimension is a ‘generative’ one, that is, a constructive approach that stresses a high degree of local autonomy and action regarding everyday practices, with regard to information and news consumption (e.g. citizen journalism), gatherings, as well as local initiatives around health care, food production and education.

The advance of the far right in Spain is analysed in Roni Küppers’ article ‘The far right in Spain: An ‘exception’ to what? Challenging conventions in the study of populism through innovative methodologies’. Küppers’ starting point is Spain’s alleged exceptionalism until the surge of VOX in 2018, ending the Spanish lack of far-right political forces. This emergence of far-right politics is now however framed in a new exceptionalism related to Catalanian secessionism. Küppers sets out to criticise dominant ‘snapshot’ or static approaches to public political opinion and calls for an emphasis on the movement of and shifts in

such opinion instead. Küppers wants to illuminate the demand side of populism by means of in-depth qualitative interviews with far-right voters. The analysis of meaning-making by citizens in the demand for far-right populism highlights that beyond cultural factors dimensions of material deprivation play a core role, highlighting factors such as dignity, morality and effort. In Küppers' view, an interpretive approach to radical politics is of great importance in transcending rigid conceptual assumptions.

Anna Mijić and Michael Parzer explore and discuss the case of upwardly mobile migrants or 'advancing strangers' and the way such migrants are perceived in receiving societies, taking as a core case study Alma Zadić, Austria's Minister of Justice since January 2020. Successful migrants often are the target of discrimination, stigmatisation and negative positions of members of national in-groups. Zadić's case is studied by focussing on the heated public debate that surrounded her appointment, by means of a discourse analysis of Austrian newspapers online. Mijić and Parzer further employ the theory of negative classifications to analyse processes of stigmatisation and exclusion. In the case of Zadić, migrant status is combined with stigmatisations on the basis of alleged religious adhesion (Muslim) and her categorisation as woman and mother. Mijić and Parzer conclude that stigmatisation goes much beyond the migrant status of the successful migrant and may include a range of stereotypes and prejudices, linking the argument on stigmatisation to forms of intersectionality.

Veronika Frantová investigates media statements on the restitution of church property in the Czech Republic. The article builds on Boltanski and Thévenot's pragmatic sociology as well as on Alexander and Smith's cultural sociology, exploring different justifications the churches use to endorse property restitution. Using Alexander, Frantová claims that the religious sphere is partially based on different values than those of the civil sphere not least by stressing forms of hierarchy and exclusion (in this regard, it would enter into the non- or uncivil domain). In order to enhance credibility in Czech civil society that is largely non-religious, the churches stressed efficiency, expertise and transparency in being able to manage the restituted property, hence particularly emphasising economic ('market') and efficiency ('industrial') values.

In 'Between *hospitality* and the *inhospitable*: Critical judgments on the professional-beneficiary relationship within assisted reproductive technology', Gouveia, Delaunay and Morais analyse the moral orientation

of hospitality in the Portuguese healthcare sector, in a context in which social movements of patients are increasingly present. The authors study in particular Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), an area in which claims for justice by social actors play a significant role, and in which controversies – around access to ART and the role of commodification – are prominent. The authors use Laurent Thévenot's engagement approach to explore the plural moral grammars that emerge in the professional–patient relationship, not least analysing claims for increased patient empowerment in the face of paternalistic, scientific authority-based healthcare.

The first two out of the four book reviews in this issue discuss the contributions of two giants of social, cultural and political thought, namely Bauman and Castoriadis, while the latter two deal with more cutting-edge cultural sociological research. *Zygmunt Bauman and the Theory of Culture* by Brzeziński (2022) sketches the development of Bauman's thought on culture from his early writings in Polish to his mature writings in English, including posthumously published materials. In his review, Shawn Best disagrees with Brzeziński's observation that Bauman's intellectual development can be characterised by an increasing emphasis on human agency pointing out that his later works compared individuals to 'billiard balls', which 'move where they are pushed'. According to Best, the book is 'of great interest to Bauman scholars' but 'unlikely to appeal to a general audience [...] given that the understanding of culture has moved on significantly since the time of Bauman's early work'.

In contrast, our reviewer Suzi Adams makes a case for the ongoing relevance of Cornelius Castoriadis, discussing a recent translation of a volume of his posthumously published seminars. In *The Greek imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus*, Castoriadis (2023) investigates archaic Greek thought, which, in his opinion, anticipated the later birth of the polis and, ultimately, of democracy in classical Greece. According to Adams, Castoriadis advocates a rather unconventional and original interpretation of Greek thought, highlighting the importance of 'chaos' as 'the underside of human existence' and as a necessary correlate to 'cosmos', which is an always incomplete and rather fragile 'order of meaning'. For her, these seminars are not only valuable for the new perspectives they provide but also as an empirical application of Castoriadis' theory, as a form of 'historical analysis that is centred on understanding the social imaginary significations of a particular society.'

Moving from the archaic to the contemporary, Till Hilmar's *Deserved* (2023) studies the meaning-making of recent history, namely the post-socialist transition in East Germany and the Czech Republic, on the basis of narrative biographical interviews with nurses and engineers. The author investigates how the transition was experienced and remembered, what constituted 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' biographies and which moral criteria separate the 'deserved' from the 'undeserved'. Our reviewer Martin Hájek praises the book for its analytical strength and remarkable accessibility, while also arguing that a more thorough theoretical discussion of the interplay between 'social memory and historiography' might have strengthened its sociological argument.

Finally, Thomas DeGloma's book *Anonymous* (2023), discussed by Jiayi Tian, aims to develop 'a cultural sociology of anonymity' drawing on 'historical and contemporary cases'. The reviewer not only welcomes its performative approach to anonymity and pseudonymity but also highlights its treatment of more 'inconspicuous forms of anonymity', including stereotypes or individuals acting on behalf of their institutions and its discussion of the relevance of anonymity for 'research ethics from a cultural sociology perspective'. According to Tian, the book offers 'ground-breaking research' and should be of interest to scholars and advanced students alike.

Florence/Brno, July 2024


## Notes


1. Wim Voermans, 'Rechtsstatelijke doorrekening PVV-programma', available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/rechtsgeleerdheid/instituut-voor-publiekrecht/staats--enbestuursrecht/rechtsstatelijke-doorrekening-pvv-programma-door-wim-voermans.pdf>.
2. NSC is a new party, formed by a former member of the Christian-Democrats, Pieter Omtzigt. Omtzigt holds a PhD in Economics from the European University Institute but articulates surprisingly Eurosceptic, nationalist and anti-migrant positions.

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