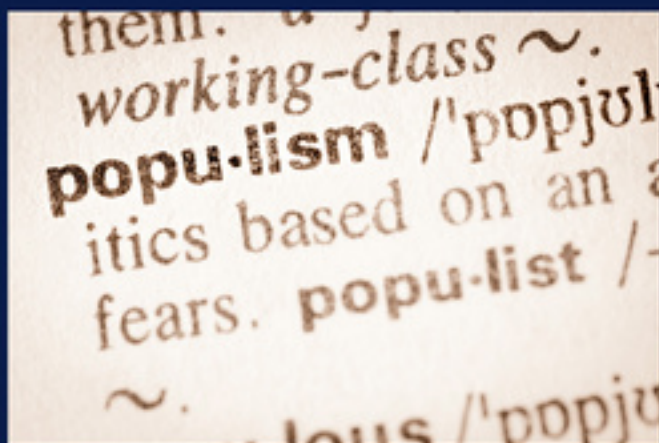


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Populist Parties and the Failure of the Political Elites

The Rise of the
Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)



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EDITION

Author's Preface

What's wrong with the people?

Modern history is constantly unfolding. Since the publication of my Ph.D. in 2010 – *The Spectre of Austria – Reappraising the rise of the Freedom Party between 1986 and 2000*, the European right-wing landscape is no longer the same (Adamson, 2010). Marine Le Pen took over *Front National* from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, trying effortlessly to give the party a more polished look. *The Anti-EU UK Independence Party* (UKIP) made significant breakthroughs – both in local election and in the EU election, raising concern that England might in fact leave the European Union. Under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache, the Austrian Freedom Party has radicalized, while retaining a stable support of around twenty per cent. In the 2010 National election, *the Sweden Democrats* were only supported by 5.7 per cent of votes cast. In a survey on November 13th 2015, it recieved 26.8 per cent – the biggest party with a margin. In mainstream media, few seem interested in the fact that the Swedish political landscape has changed. Outside party politics, things were as dramatic. Only 2015 saw an attack against *Charlie Hebdo* by Islamists, killing 12 people; a terrorist attack in Copenhagen; a terrorist attack against a Russian Airlines over Egypt resulting in 224 lives lost, followed by a terrorist attack in Beirut, killing around forty people – all taking place against the backdrop of a serious European refugee crisis caused by the IS-terror in Syria.

In academia, these events sparked a wide array of responses and analyses. New and important theories emerged. Therefore, the discussion in my Ph.D. below is in need of an update. It will therefore be preceded by an overview of these recents trends in the field of right-wing populism. The question will be asked: “Why do right-wing populist parties prosper?” Then, a common reaction will be dealt with: “What should “be done” about it?” Conclusively, in “*The Austrian Freedom Party* on the far right family picture – left or right?”, its ideological position will be suggested by means of a comparision with four other right-wing parties. The overarching question is: What is wrong with the people in Europe?

Hours before this book is going to the printers, Paris is struck by seven coordinated islamist terror attacks, killing one hundred thirty people. In this volatile political situation, Marine Le Pen may well be the next President of France, followed by further political polarisation throughout Europe. On either side, politicians, academics, journalists and citizens will radicalize. The erosion of political mainstream will continue.

Why do Right-wing populist parties prosper?

In *Post-war – A History of Europe since 1945*, Tony Judt makes the following observation:

Visiting Vienna in October 1999, I found the Westbahnhof covered in posters for the Freedom Party of Jörg Haider, who, despite his open admiration for the ‘honourable men’ of the Nazi armies who ‘did their duty’ on the eastern front, won 27 per cent of the vote that year by mobilizing his fellow Austrians’ anxiety and incomprehension at the changes that had taken place in their world over the past decade. In Greece and in former Eastern Europe, radical right-wing parties keep making increasing inroads, although their impact should not be overestimated.

Tony Judt; *A History of Europe since 1945* (Judt, 2007, p. 3)

This book deals with a significant European trend of late: the rise of right-wing populist parties. The case study is *the Austrian Freedom Party* during Jörg Haider’s reign between 1986 and 2000. Two key explanations are suggested: one saying that these parties’ rise in power is chiefly a result of racism and xenophobia, the other one arguing it is mainly caused by a populist critique of the ruling elite. Are right-wing populists arrogant insiders harassing downtrodden outsiders, or rather excluded underdogs shouting against the privileged classes? The question is not trivial. Our perception of these parties and any proposed counter-measure are determined by it.

After 2000 and the end of this study, the debate on these parties has intensified. At the time of writing, Europe is witnessing a refugee-crisis probably unparalleled since WWII, and the *Sweden Democrats* – our version of the *Freedom Party* – is supported by more than 20% of votes cast. The resemblance with Austria in 1999 is striking: a right-wing populist party on par with the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. Recent material will therefore update the present investigation. What happened to BZÖ – Haider new movement – after his sudden demise? Are populist parties different? If so – how? How does the FPÖ compare to other members of this party family?

Initially, however, Tony Judt’s citation above will be returned to. It relates to a critical issue – the very understanding of right-wing populist parties. How do their more prominent critics describe the populists’ successes at the polls? Two aspects will be commented upon.

First, Judt claims that Haider managed to gain 27 per cent of votes cast ‘despite’ paying tribute to the Nazi regime. Judt makes use of the word ‘despite’, because he is opposed to right-wing populism, and most scholars share Judt’s point of view. The study of populist right-wingers ‘has usually been the domain of avowed opponents’

(Mudde, 1996, p. 226). But this approach does not necessarily increase our understanding because voters are attracted by certain views whether 'we' like it or not. Some voters support Haider not despite, but because of his tributes to old Nazis.

If the majority of scholars in the field somehow overlook the fact that voters of the FPÖ are not anti-racists – these scholars also appear oblivious to the fact that their own political-psychological reactions cannot be applied on far rightist voters. To the anti-racist, any reference to 'honourable' Nazis would rule out voting on any one party. But FPÖ sympathizers see it differently. To them, this is only one statement among others and must be put in context – which leads over to another misunderstanding regarding the core of Haider's political program. Although his murky rhetoric was always there, it was never of key importance. Many voters and 'left-wing' members such as Heide Schmidt saw these statements as unpleasant, but still concluded that they were *outweighed* by other, more appealing views. The entire picture of the FPÖ does not only tell the story of saluting Hitler and his followers, but also – more importantly – of successful allegations against the Austrian political elite. Haider's tributes to Fascism are important if the party's extremism is being studied. It is less relevant concerning the FPÖ's general popular appeal.

Judt's comments bring out another line of confusion among the anti-racists, namely a failure to grasp the very nature of a populist party. A populist party – and Haider's party was in this respect emblematic – is fuelled by attacking the elite. They say things in order to incite rebellion among the common electorate in the face of the elite's outcry, without the elite knowing they are dancing to the tune of the populist. Judt's comment is an illustration of this. It is an elite comment out of touch with 'the people' attracted by the populist agenda. Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because the anti-racists have little sense of political tactics.

For all its radical scent, moreover, Judt's normative comment invites bourgeois anti-intellectualism, such as: How can they vote on his party? I cannot believe it! But actually they can, and we should believe it, because they like his views. The fact that research on right-wing populist parties often appears intellectually thin depends, in part, on this inclination towards emotional verdicts. Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because the anti-racists have replaced analysis with emotionalism.

But there is more to it. If we ask: But how can they? – The crucial question *why* never appears. For what reason do anti-racists evade this question? Because they assume that if you truly try to explain and understand something, you also justify it. The context of explanation is inseparable from the context of justification. When Ernst Nolte, in *Three faces of Fascism*, ventures into the mind of Adolf Hitler trying to understand the Nazi atrocities, Nolte was accused of defending them

(Nolte, 1965). In case knowledge drags you into any one topic, a convincing critic must know as little as possible about the Nazi regime.

The paradox is solved if emotions are added into the equation. If you know very little, you have managed to stay clear of compromising knowledge, and you can safely rely on your moral indignation. Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because anti-racists fail to understand that an ideology cannot be countered unless it is fully *understood* and *explained*. What is more, if our emotions are all we have, it makes sense to keep right-wing populism at bay. Why? Because we have no protection against it.

Second, Haider managed, Judt comments above, to mobilize his fellow Austrians' 'incomprehension.' What does this mean? It means that they chose to vote on Haider because they fail to comprehend the world around them. The first citation is explained by the second. How can they vote on these views? Because they fail to comprehend. But they would insist they do. The reason why some Americans vote on Obama, a conservative would say, is because of 'incomprehension' among liberals. There is no getting around this: the FPÖ makes sense to its supporters. Even an anti-intellectual set of ideas is internally coherent, perhaps even more so than mainstream views, because anti-intellectualism by definition precludes intellectual self-reflection. Populist parties are gaining ground, because anti-racists underestimate the depth of political convictions. Voters deemed right-wing populists are dismissed as if they chose to vote against their own interests, and no one is happier than the populist leader.

When people vote on a party because 'they do not know', it is all about psychology. If they only knew, they would vote differently. Then, there are explanations where political aspects are considered, although psychology prevails. Thirdly, some explanations focus political reasons only. Psychological explanations are common among right-wingers' more undaunted critics, while liberal and conservative commentators more tend towards political explanations.

If the cause behind right-wing support, in Judt's analysis above, is confined to the minds of the party's backers, Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall suggest an explanation where political events are not entirely left out. Although the net effect adheres to the scheme of Judt and others – a 'psychological crisis of the "popular classes"' (Betz and Immerfall, 1998, p. 251), they still recognize the impact by social, economic and cultural 'dislocations' (Betz and Immerfall, 1998, p. 6). Society, in other words, has changed.¹

1 With a leftist pen 40 years ago, the same economic tension would have sparked a determined 'political mobilization' instead of psychological confusion. Within the scope

Ron Formisano takes a further step towards social and political explanations behind right-wing support. Social scientists, Formisano observes, rarely deny that people's voting patterns are influenced by actions taken by 'the political class'. Then again, this 'class' is habitually absolved from all responsibility because recent social changes are all due to 'the EU and globalization'; i.e. forces beyond its control (Formisano, 2005, p. 251). Consequently, the responsibility of the financial, and political elites for 'provoking popular reactions is minimised', while the concern among 'ordinary people' is belittled and moralized 'disguised as psychological analysis' (Formisano, 2005, p. 251). The idea that right-wing populist 'voters may act on the basis of rational choice' is 'only fleetingly' considered (Formisano, 2005, p. 245). Right-wing populist parties flourish because 'the political class' tends to blame the EU and 'forces beyond its control', at the same time as they psychologize the concern among the common electorate. In this respect, the political class ignores a classic leftist principle: social behaviour has political/economic explanations.

Since the turn of the millennium, however, political and social explanations for right-wing voting have gained ground. Swank and Betz maintain that 'foreign immigration bolsters the vote for radical right-wing parties everywhere, although', they add, 'this positive effect is weakest in universal welfare states' (Swank and Betz, 2003, p. 239). This leads over to what seems to be the single most important political explanation for the rise of right-wing populist parties – deregulation and 'the return of insecurity'. According to Windolf, the rise of support for right-wing populist parties depends on 'financial market capitalism' (Windolf, 2005). It has little to do with psychological confusion or 'a failure to grasp complex realities' (supposedly favourable to all of us). Rather, these realities are fully understood. Domestic workers may be unemployed because skilled foreign labour accepts lower wages, and unskilled immigrants weigh heavily on the welfare state. Using Marxist terminology, Castel refers to this process whereby domestic workers witness their wages and work conditions plummet as a 'recommodification of labour' (Castel, 2000, cited in Dörre et al, 2006, p. 99). These explanations stand in stark contrast to the psychological explanations above. As noted by Dörre et al, numerous recent studies claim that 'the political system' – i.e. dominant anti-racism – shows 'ignorance' about the fact that employment – as concrete as it

of a few decades, leftist analysis has made a U-turn from structure to individual, from politics to psychology.

looks – is a crucial factor behind right-wing voting (Dörre et al, 2006, p. 101. See also Flecker/Hentges 2004, p. 119 ff.; Flecker, 2004; Flecker/Krenn, 2004).

To Robert Castels, the menacing effects of neo-liberal deregulation goes further than merely depriving the working class of work safety. A vital precondition for social change is a unified working class. This, then, is precisely what is being undermined by deregulation. Domestic workers find themselves being destitute, ‘surpassed’, as it were, only by even more marginalized groups of immigrants, and so a disheartening competition among society’s deprived members come under sway. Domestic ‘groups located at the lower end of the social ladder’ ‘search for reasons to understand their situation and pretend to be superior with the help of xenophobia and racist discrimination’ (Castel, 2005, p. 73 f). To an economic elite without scruples, common demands from marginalized groups, writes the liberal philosopher Brian Barry, is ‘a nightmare’. The best bet is to incite them against each other (Barry, 2001, p. 11). The Marxist Perry Anderson reaches similar conclusions. What actually has happened, he says, is that ‘ethno-religious tensions have displaced class antagonisms.’ Instead of uniting against capital and state, domestic workers attack *other* workers: ‘the poor revile the poor’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 537).

According to this line of thinking, the root cause of contemporary political polarization is neo-liberalism – far deeper and more ominous than ‘racism’; and the rescue – if any – is constituted not by anti-racist demagoguery, but by the resurrection of the welfare state. The views of Castel, Anderson, and Barry are supported by Mabel Berezin, showing a concomitant rise in the West of neo-liberalism and right-wing populism: ‘By moving the centre of political gravity from the polity to the person, from the state to the market, Europeanization has compromised the bonds of democratic empathy and provided an opportunity for right-wing populists to articulate a discourse of fear and insecurity.’ Synergy exists, Berezin continues, ‘between “new” Europe’s right-wing populist moment and the transformation, if not outright disappearance, of the post-war “world of security”’ (Berezin, 2009, p. 8). If we want social clashes, we should dismantle social safety. This classic leftist insight is not new, but it is off the radar of today’s multicultural neo-leftists. We have come a long way from Tony Judt’s initial one-size-fits-all comment, where voters chose the FPÖ, because they fail to see how wrong they are. Right-wing populist parties gain support because neo-liberalism creates division and animosity among marginalized groups of workers and immigrants. They also soar because the welfare state is being undermined. In dominant anti-racist agenda, classic socialist analysis is conspicuous by its absence.

And what about the EU? Undeniably, radical rightists abound among EU critics. But EU critics need not be radical rightists. What are the consequences when,

for instance, former Prime Minister Tony Blair in mid-April 2015 claimed that the British people can't be trusted with EU vote (Blair's toxic embrace)? Should we allow for EU-sceptical space that is still not right-wing populist? As we shall see, the debate is once again polarized: the anti-racist, who insist that anti-EU sentiments are caused by racism and xenophobia – i.e. psychology – and those to whom hostility towards the EU have other explanations.

Starting with the anti-racist new leftists, a sense of 'heightened existential insecurity' among 'large sections of society' has, Aristotle Kallis claims, sparked 'anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-establishment, anti-EU critiques.' Politicians, he concludes, capitalizes on a 'strongly nationalist mood in public opinion.' Common among this line of criticism, no distinction is made between racism and critique of the EU (Kallis, 2014, p. 7–8). Along with Anton Pelinka, Ruth Wodak counts as one of the most prominent Austrian critics of the FPÖ and right-wing populism. With appreciation, she cites Kristina Boreus, a Swedish scholar, who 'accounts for the interconnectedness of discourses of nationalism and discrimination and focuses on discursive aspects of discrimination.' In this fashion, Wodak, along with her co-writers KhosraviNik and Mral, conducts a highly sophisticated but abstract analysis where any possible factors behind anti-EU sentiments, mounting nationalism and hostility against immigrants is left out of the picture (Wodak and KhosraviNik, 2013, p. XVII). Large sections of the electorate have adopted radical political views because – simply – they are 'racists and xenophobes.' Peter Hervik, well-known Danish anti-racist, analyses Denmark's somewhat cool attitude towards the EU. We are, he claims, witnessing 'a resistance against "the foreign" outside Denmark, which has changed into a resistance against foreigners in Denmark' (Hervik, 1999, p. 123, cited in Bech & Necef, 2013, p. 44). In this way, Hervik, Wodak and others hand over the entire field of EU-scepticism to the ultra-rightists and allow them to multiply their basis for voter support. Right-wing populism is on the rise because any critique against the EU is deemed racist. The only way to avoid allegations of right-wing extremism is to endorse EU elitism.

A prolific writer in the field of right-wing populism, Paul Hockenos analysis of the EU and right-wing support strikes a different chord. His view is declared in the subtitle of one of his most recent publications: 'The EU's neoliberal economic reforms have undermined public faith in democratic politics.' The responsibility weighs heavily, he maintains, on 'the Union's stark democratic deficiencies and one-size-fits-all economic prescriptions' that 'only fan populism's flames' (Hockenos, May 24, 2010, p. 18). Here, worth noting, not only racists and nationalists are to blame, but also forces that explicitly seek to *limit* the influence of national independence. 'Since faraway Brussels is notoriously hard to strike

back at', he continues, 'voters punish the liberal-oriented elites, who championed EU membership as a fast track to prosperity.' Why is this so? Because no 'thinking person can fail to grasp the vast discrepancy in wealth between Central and Western Europe, on the one hand, and between the haves and have-nots in every post-communist country, on the other.' These glaring inequalities in combination with 'corruption and the blunders of inexperience have seriously diminished the public's faith in democratic politics.' In the wake of the anti-populists' retreat into sectarianism, the 'populists thus enjoy an open field, posing as elite-slayers and saviours of the nation in the face of Europe's (and globalization's) steady assault', says Hockenos and ends by suggesting that 'the key to Fidesz's and Jobbik's success was not Jew-, or Roma-baiting but the parties' relentless attacks on the status quo' (Hockenos, May 24, 2010, p. 21). The gist of the right-wing extremist rhetoric was not hatred and racist scorn by privileged insiders, but, in contrast, cries of dissatisfaction by excluded underdogs.

Similarly, Yannis Stavrakakis questions the idea that the root cause of voter radicalization dwells inside of the minds of these voters. In the wake of mounting critique against the European project, the European elites have confused democracy with right-wing populism. 'The neoliberal policies implemented have become increasingly *unpopular*, triggering *popular* mobilizations that, in turn, are denounced as irresponsibly *populist*' (Stavrakakis, Dec. 2014, p. 505). The demonization of populism conveniently, he continues, 'ends up by incorporating all references to the people as well.' The 'domination of a predominantly anti-populist logic – consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – marginalizes the people and its demands' (Stavrakakis, March 16, 2015). Right-wing populist parties gain voter support because the elites in politics, academia and the media fail to distinguish between *popular* and *populist*.

What this all boils down to is a complex divide in the perception on the nation, the welfare state, and concepts such as nationalism and globalization. While the anti-racists are quick to associate racism with any defence of the nation and EU-scepticism, backers of the welfare state such as Hockenos fail to see the welfare state as in guilt by association with racism. Instead, in its capacity to dampen social unrest, the welfare state is part of the bulwark against political radicalization and rising right-wing extremism. One reason why right-wing populist parties prosper depends not on excessive nationalism, but on questionable allegations against a moderate nationalism based on citizenship, the rule of law, and the welfare state.

It was above claimed that right-wing populism is fuelled by a mounting neo-liberalism. What, then, is the nature of the relation between right-wing populists and multiculturalists? One of antagonism. While right-wingers seek to