

RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

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and Brigitte Mral

Politics and Discourse

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Benjamin de Cleen received his doctorate at the Department of Communication Studies of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) in 2012. His doctoral dissertation presents a discourse-theoretical analysis of the rhetoric of the Flemish populist radical-right party Vlaams Blok/Belang. It focuses on a number of key moments of the discursive struggle between Vlaams Blok/Belang and other voices in which cultural performances and artists played a central role. Earlier publications include *Popular Music Against Extreme Right Populism: 'The Vlaams Belang and the 0110 Concerts in Belgium'*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(6); 'Contesting the Populist Claim on "the People" Through Popular Culture: the 0110 Concerts versus the Vlaams Belang', *Social Semiotics* 20(2) (with Nico Carpentier); 'Bringing Discourse Theory into Media Studies', *Journal of Language and Politics* 6(2) (with Nico Carpentier). Benjamin is chair of the Young Scholars' Network of the European Communication Research and Education Association (YECREA).

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Dynamics of Discourse and Politics in Right-wing Populism in Europe and Beyond: An Introduction

Ruth Wodak and Majid KhosraviNik

Much research in the social sciences provides ample evidence for the current rise of right-wing populist movements and related political parties in most European Union (EU) member states and beyond (Wilson & Hainsworth 2012). On the one hand, neo-Nazi movements are to be observed in the form of extreme far-right parties; on the other, a salient shift is occurring in the forms and styles of political rhetoric of right-wing populist parties which could be labelled the *Haiderization* of politics.¹ This volume attempts to explain why this transformation is currently taking place from an interdisciplinary perspective; moreover, various strategies of combating such movements will also be briefly discussed.

Right-wing extremism and right-wing populism are not new phenomena. Ever since the end of the Second World War, revisionist ideologies have circulated and been taken on board by neo-Nazi or right-wing extremist parties such as the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*/ Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the French National Front/ *Le Front National* (FN) and the British National Party (BNP). While resemblances to older, well-known ideologies can be traced in many of the 'new' right-wing discourses (Mammone 2009), it has been argued that right-wing populism differs from those other trends as it does not convey a coherent ideology but rather proposes a mixed bag of beliefs, stereotypes, attitudes and related programmes which aim to address and mobilize a range of equally contradictory segments of the electorate.

Moreover, we are witnessing the development of a 'media-democracy' across Europe and beyond, in which the individual, media-savvy performance of politics seems to become more important than the political process (Grande 2000). Accordingly, politics becomes simplified and dumped down to a few slogans apparently comprehensible to the broad public at large. As argued by Ellinas (2009), the media communication and appropriation employed in the recent success of populist-right parties cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, the disproportionate success of some of these parties, Ellinas claims, could be explained by the excessive exposure that these parties receive in the media, despite their lacking the required organizational and political structures (*ibid.*) (see chapters by Anderssen (Ch. 22), Krzyżanowski (Ch. 9), Nohrstedt (Ch. 21) and Oja and Mral (Ch. 19) in this volume).

¹ See Pelinka and Wodak 2002, Wodak and Pelinka 2002, Rydgren 2005, Gingrich and Banks 2006, Ellinas 2009, Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2009, Bruter and Harrison 2011, Delanty et al. 2011, Steinmetz 2011, Wodak and Richardson 2012 and Wodak forthcoming; see also the chapter by Pelinka (Ch. 1) in this volume for a typology of right-wing populist parties.

Hence, we argue, far-right extremism is overtly reliant on charismatic personalities and media-savvy populism. This is particularly relevant with respect to the growing apathy of the general public to mainstream politics as populist extremist discourses seem to fill the gap created by the public's disenchantment with (mainstream) politics (Hay 2007, Wodak 2011a, b). In this same vein, Judt (2010) notes that what the 'baby-boomer politicians' have in common is 'the enthusiasm that they fail to inspire in the electors of their respective countries'. He is even more concerned that politicians like Sarah Palin 'can only benefit from rising confusion and anxiety in the face of apparently unmanageable change' (ibid.: 48). If one studies recent opinion polls (such as *Eurobarometer*), it becomes apparent that trust in mainstream politicians and governing parties has dropped significantly across Europe. Indeed only 29 per cent of European citizens trust their national governments as opposed to 34 per cent in 2007; in 2009, the numbers dropped even more: only 13 per cent of British citizens, for example, trusted their politicians, and 82 per cent believed that politicians were not telling the truth.² In 2011, on average, 16 per cent trusted their national political parties, and the level of trust in several major EU countries (including the United Kingdom and France) did not exceed 10 per cent. Researchers point to two parallel phenomena that may help explain this change:

- The so-called *Berlusconisation* of Europe (Ash et al. 2010). The latter is defined as 'a happy-clappy populism mixing feel-good consumerism, ethno-nationalist sentiment and shallow hedonism with lamentable actions against immigrants, minorities, and the vulnerable in general' (ibid.: 1).
- The so-called *Haiderization* of Europe, a label drawing on the name of the former leader of the FPÖ, Jörg Haider, indicates the rise of right-wing populist parties in several EU member states (such as Austria, Belgium, Hungary, etc.) since the end of the twentieth century. These parties, which claim to speak for 'the people' and to oppose those in power, frequently endorse chauvinist and nativist ideologies which may lead to an overall 'politics of fear' (see also Richardson & Wodak 2009a, b, Wodak & Richardson 2012).

Indeed, the results of the most recent elections to the European Parliament, in June 2009, manifest a significant growth in right-wing extremist (and right-wing populist) parties, and thus related MEPs, for example, the British BNP, the Austrian FPÖ, the Dutch Party for Freedom/ Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), the Hungarian Jobbik (The Movement for a Better Hungary/ Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom) and the Danish Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) have all won over 10 per cent of national votes. These election campaigns were accompanied by – sometimes indirect, usually quite explicit – xenophobic, racist and antisemitic propaganda in the respective nation-states. In some countries, like Hungary, violence against Hungarian minorities, such

² See <www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/sep/27/trust-politicians-all-time-low> (accessed 25 April 2012).

as Roma and Jews, has become part of everyday experience (Iordachi 2009, 2010; see chapter by Kovács (Ch. 15) in this volume). In some other cases, such as Estonia and Latvia, extremist parties have not had much success simply because the mainstream parties have to some extent accommodated the radical rhetoric of the extreme-right movements and parties (Auers & Kasekamp 2009; see chapter by Auer and Kasekamp (Ch. 16) in this volume).

Various sociopolitical, socio-economic, ideological and structural factors contribute to such a general swing to, and success of, these extreme/populist right-wing parties, all of which endorse exclusionary chauvinistic and nativist ideologies within national and/or regional domains. There exist some case studies on various countries across Europe: For example, Bakic (2009) argues, on the one hand, that the attractiveness of the Serbian Radical Party to the lower social strata lies within the party's populist appeal and, on the other, attributes the party's appeal to an extreme lack of credibility of the 'Left' in post-communist Serbia. Ellinas (2009) focuses on the FN and investigates the function of media communication in its success (see chapter by Beauzamy (Ch. 12) in this volume). On a wider regional level, Bustikova (2009) studies extreme-right discourses and related parties in Eastern Europe, especially in the new EU member states. She states that contextual sociopolitical features, such as widespread corruption and an absence of political accountability, might play an important role in the popularity of extreme rhetoric, as these parties thrive on the back of a weak (or absent) rule of law (*ibid.*).

Other studies have looked at the canons of inspiration for extreme-right parties. Bar-on (2008), for example, discusses the role of the *Nouvelle Droite* in national and pan-European identity politics since its birth in 1968 (see also Bar-on 2012). Peunova (2008) analyses the ideas of Aleksandre Panarin and his notion of Russian-nationalist Eurasianism, which has fostered several European extreme-right conceptualizations, for example of *Nouvelle Droite* intellectuals. Thus, Panarin should or could be considered a spokesperson for the European new right wing in Russia, along with the transnational nature of the extreme right (*ibid.*).

While general trends in European politics towards the Right are visible across the continent, the specific characteristics of various European countries, that is, their history, and political and social imaginaries, also play a significant role in each case. Hence, the rightist populist parties in Europe can be classified into some general categories (see chapters by Pelinka (Ch. 1) and Kallis (Ch. 4) in this volume): First, there are the rightist parties within the context of Western and post-communist Europe which, despite other crucial differences, share a clear past history of fascism; next are parties without a history of populist or revisionist roots; and finally come parties which seem to cut across traditional left- and right-wing politics and target a combined electorate (see chapter by Marsdal (Ch. 3) in this volume). Regardless of these differences, issues of race, immigration, national identity, welfare and social inequality are central to most of these parties, to varying degrees (see KhosraviNik 2009, 2010, KhosraviNik et al. 2012).

To understand the nature of right-wing populism from a scholarly point of view requires a critical look at the concepts of 'populism' and 'right-wing politics'. Some studies argue that populism can be viewed as an aspect of the political persuasive

rhetoric and ideology of parties on both the Right and the Left (Azmanova 2012). Nevertheless, right-wing populism is distinguished from other types of populism by its explicit or implicit sharp dichotomization of the social into an 'Us identity' constructed along national, regional, religious and ethnic lines versus 'Them' in various (and sometimes contradictory) ways. Mammone (2009) challenges the appropriateness of labelling the recent rise of a 'new' phenomenon and argues that populism is not the main and foremost feature of certain extremist parties. He maintains that the use of labels like populism should be avoided, as this may serve as an indirect and unintended form of democratic legitimization.

There are also ethical-philosophical/practical issues regarding whether or not such far-right parties should in any way be restricted by law beyond the electoral mechanisms (see chapter by Ruzza and Balbo (Ch. 11) in this volume). The problem with such measures would be that – on the one hand – the outlawing of such parties might be viewed as unfair intervention in the democratic process and – on the other – the efficiency of such measures could be challenged, as banning a party from official participation in the public sphere would not necessarily result in the abolition of its attractiveness, discourse and policies in society. However, there is also a philosophical dilemma, as in whether or not a party with inherently undemocratic, discriminatory and exclusionary policies can/should be seen as a legitimate entity in Western democracies. In other words, should such a party be allowed to assume power through democratic means? This is, we believe, a salient point whereby important aspects of (the efficiency, effectiveness and power of) civil-society movements across European countries should be re-examined.

This volume accounts for the most recent trends in European politics towards right-wing populism. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of modern extremist discourses – rather than relying on the methods of political science (see Mammone 2009) – it investigates the origins and different manifestations of these parties and movements across the EU and beyond from a comparative perspective (see also chapters by Beirich (Ch. 6), Boréus (Ch. 20) and Shekhovtsov (Ch. 17) in this volume). In this way, we bring together insights from political science, rhetoric and discourse-analysis, anthropology and media studies and attempt to explain the emergence and rise of this exceptionally complex phenomenon. Thus, the book adopts both a general European perspective from which the issues and developments are viewed and accounted for across EU member states, as well as providing a set of case studies and accounts of individual political developments by focusing on specific sociopolitical and historical contexts. Furthermore, this book integrates theoretical discussions on politics and European studies, such as the conceptualization of populism, fascism, racism, ethno-nationalism, risk society and neoliberal populism, with empirical in-depth case studies by analysing data from mainstream media, electoral campaigns, party propaganda and structured interviews. The appropriation of pop culture, new hybrid genres and new media in the recent political campaigns of populist parties are also analysed and illustrated in detail (see chapters by Betz (Ch. 5), de Cleen (Ch. 14), Krzyżanowski (Ch. 9) and Wodak (Ch. 2) in this volume).

In addition to the theoretical discussions and conceptualizations, the book analyses the unique nature of these parties in various contexts, apart from their