

Right-Wing Populism: An Answer to the Crisis of Democratic Capitalism

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In broad areas of Europe as well as in North America, right-wing populist movements and parties have a substantial following and have chalked up impressive electoral successes. In Germany too, after some delay, this trend has set in. In Germany and Europe in general, right-wing populist movements are characterised by four central hallmarks:

- They gather together and articulate the fear and resentment present in broad layers of the population that are primarily based on future loss of status but also on feelings of cultural insecurity.¹
- Right-wing populism sees the indigenous population as the victim in relation to foreigners (immigrants, refugees).
- Invoking the people, the modern right radically dissociates itself from the ‘ruling political class’, to which it attributes a policy of a creeping population exchange.
- The right-wing populist movements call for the establishment of an authoritarian charismatically led ‘citizens’-democracy’.

The basis of its political mobilisation are anti-system/anti-establishment feelings. From Copenhagen to Rome, from Paris to Budapest, Europe’s right-wing populism is essentially made up of these constant ingredients: xenophobia in general, Islamophobia in particular, as well as a negative stance towards the EU and Europe as a whole, tied to a deep-seated scepticism or even aggressive rejection of the political class.

Right-wing populist criticism of the establishment and resentment

The present mistrust many voters have of the serve-yourself mentality of the political class is leading to a harsh criticism of this political class. The corruption and self-referentiality of many political protagonists is connected to the disillusion over proclaimed but unfulfilled ideological goals and promises of justice – first of the state, then of the market.

The social base for right-wing populism is a historically specific resentment; that is, a feeling of continued powerlessness in the face of suffered injustice and disadvantage underlies the attitudes and actions. It is literally a ‘re-sentiment’, a simple ‘re-feeling’ of a once suffered injury, a defeat, a structural degradation, etc. With all its destructive consequences – the self-disempowerment of the nation-states through the abandonment of state regulation of the globalised financial markets – neoliberal globalisation of the last decades creates the basis for

¹ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (see Bibliography) have proposed that economic insecurity is less of an explanatory factor than cultural backlash. According to this thesis, the support for populism is a reaction of the once predominant sectors to a value shift that threatens their status. The position they put forward is that antipathy to the elites has its origin primarily in resentments based on anxieties following growing social inequality. However, cultural resentments (such as resistance to gender practices, family values, etc.) play a role here too.

the emergence and spread of social inequality, which is translated into an anti-state, anti-establishment resentment. The resentment is not a spontaneous reflex in reaction to a suffered injustice. The sense of humiliation enables the manifestation and manipulation of ethnocentric-xenophobic, nationalist or anti-Semitic ideological elements and political-psychological needs. These range over issues, which are consciously linked to each other, such as immigration, criminality, globalisation, internal security, and national identity.

According to Bourdieu,² there is no resentment against the lower social class fractions.³ The petit bourgeois, the type that represents the lower middle stratum, exhibits resentment directed exclusively towards the upper strata while towards the lower strata he only displays contempt. Since upward mobility is permanently threatened from all possible sides, the petit bourgeois, always on his/her guard against social abasement and humiliation, cautiously takes cover and from this position ogles those above.

Resentment forges ahead in racist exclusion after the aggravation of social inequality is understood as the consequence of political-social action. Following Bourdieu we can grasp resentment as a reaction to a fundamental violation of social recognition. There is no reason to believe that there is no longer now any resentment on the part of the powerless, downwardly mobile lower middle class and the lower social strata.⁴

The people

A characteristic of right-wing populism is the gesture of a bold ‘breaking of taboos’, that is, dramatising oneself as a political protagonist who is doing away with the moderating language and forms of communication of liberals in parliamentary democracies. This self-staging has a good deal of connection to conspiracy theories. In terms of substance and ideology, right-wing populism exists in a grey area between right-wing extremism and national-conservative tendencies. In the end, racist resentment results in authoritarian aggression against the scapegoats – in the past the Jews, today the refugees from the Islamic cultural areas.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. , Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. For Bourdieu resentment is not exclusively connected to a specific stratum or class – to the middle class here – but designates a specific relation with social space (Bourdieu, *Language*, German edition, p. 47). Bourdieu even interprets student revolts as the resentful grumbling of those who have not been given access to the material honey-pot, as ‘the disingenuousness of an ambiguous revolutionary attitude that in the end is fed by the resentment at the condition that appears as declassing in the face of the imagined expectations’ (Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1984 – quoted from German edition: *Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982, p. 260).

³ Bourdieu, *Language*.

⁴ While the old petite bourgeoisie is the typical carrier of resentment, the situation is far more complicated in the case of the new petite bourgeoisie (and its related professions). As Bourdieu conceded, every individual in this new stratum, ‘who has to invent a new lifestyle, especially for his/her private life, and redefine his/her social location’, is forced to locate him/herself in the social arena anew (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 564 in the German edition).

Right-wing populism's credo is: 'We are the people!' In contrast to will formation in democratic societies with their pluralist consensus methods shaped by conflicting interests, right-wing populists assert a direct access to, or identity with, the community of the people, which does not exist as a collection of individuals but as a mystical construction beyond all traditional forms of the articulation of interest. Against politics and the media, the expectation is formulated of following the will 'of the people'. The stated objective of the right-wing populists is the establishment of forms of direct democracy through which this popular will can be uninterruptedly realised.

Foreigners or scapegoats – Germany

Many studies, especially those by the Heitmeyer group in Bielefeld, have demonstrated in recent decades that there has long been a big potential in Germany for a right-wing populist party. Despite this, and in contrast to other European countries, these attitudes remained for a long time without political form. The change in the structure of everyday consciousness, to which right-wing populists react and which they instrumentalise, is also documented in the new study by Decker, Kiess, and Brähler.⁵ (2016). While anti-Semitism and general xenophobia are on the decline, prejudices against Muslims, Sinti, and Roma, but also against refugees, are increasingly widespread. Thus ca. 50 % of those questioned agreed with the statement: 'Because of the many Muslims here I sometimes feel like a foreigner in my own country.' 80 % even feel: 'In considering asylum requests the state should not be generous.'

Indeed, xenophobia has, 'aside from a slight stagnation at times from 2002 to 2014, continually diminished, but in turn hatred is now particularly concentrated against certain groups. Thus in 2014 we had to confirm that Muslims, asylum-seekers, Sinti, and Roma are much more strongly affected by prejudices against them than the whole group of immigrants had previously experienced'.⁶ At the same time, endorsement of an anti-democratic, authoritarian politics and the acceptance of violence or the readiness to deploy violence oneself – for example in enforcing one's own interests or to assert oneself 'against foreigners' – is on the rise.

This denigration of Muslims, Sinti and Roma, and asylum-seekers, but also of homosexuals became still more intense in 2016. This finding of a declining or stagnating hostility towards immigrants has to do with changes in the structure of everyday consciousness, which were not covered by the Leipzig right-wing-extremism questionnaire. These changes were also acknowledged by the Leipzig researchers. 'The big problem is that the groups of people against which authoritarian aggression is directed are very variable. At the moment we are focusing strongly on Muslims, but a couple of years ago it was Turks

⁵ Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, and Elmar Brähler (eds.), *Die enthemmte Mitte. Autoritäre und rechtsextreme Einstellung in Deutschland, Die Leipziger 'Mitte'-Studie*, 2016, <https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_data/stiftung/Aktuelles/Mitte_Studie/Die_enthemmte_Mitte_Pra__sentation_PK.pdf>.

⁶ Decker et al., *Die enthemmte Mitte*.

which attracted this hatred and, if we go back further in the history of West Germany, Italians.’⁷ Islamophobia is essentially ‘the same racism in new bottles’.

[[Former Graph 2 -> Rename Graph 1: Agreement with the statement ‘Because of the many Muslims I sometimes feel like a foreigner in my own country’ and party preference (in %)

The emergence of factors like xenophobia or Islamophobia in everyday consciousness shows that right-wing extreme attitudes today exhibit a completely specific expression. Xenophobia in the sense of competition is closely related to the migratory movements of recent decades and is particularly dependent, on the one hand, on the economic situation and resulting feelings of insecurity in society and, on the other hand, on the legitimate demands of immigrants. Islamophobia, that is, fear of the large number of immigrant Muslims and/or of their religious practice in general or in the specific social space of one’s own city neighbourhood, is a phenomenon of recent date. It has been decidedly strengthened once again by movements of refugees in recent years.

On the whole, a change in the form of racism can be observed, in which ‘biological racism’ is receding but a culturally based racism is taking its place, as in the racism directed at Muslims. However, the discrimination against one particular group, the Roma, has remained unchanged. While traditional prejudices because of the battle that has been waged against discrimination and racism is in part receding, new ones are emerging, especially around the question of the ‘incompatibility’ of western societies with Islam. Several factors converge in the case of Islamophobia, since it involves at once origin, religion, colonial history, and frequently also social discrimination.

Therefore in right-wing populist parties like the AfD, alongside the uncouth criticism of the political class it is above all anti-Islam and the increased refugee flows as well as asylum policy that is at the centre of their political programmes. The modernised new right organisations distance themselves from traditional right-wing extremism and its core elements and in so doing are gaining increasing social acceptance, that is are becoming de-demonised. . The confrontations within the Front National or within the AfD around anti-Semitism are examples.

Modern right-wing populism and the extreme right

Regardless of whether we are speaking of the Front National, the UKIP, the Lega Nord, the FPÖ, or the AfD, the truth is that right-wing populist parties are gaining influence in Europe. The parties of the bourgeois camp and of European social democracy, which have shaped society and its power relations, have been crippled. The symptoms are unequivocal: conceptual weakness, growing helplessness in managing defects within these parties, and a growing amalgam of the drive towards self-enrichment as well as overt corruption. The party

⁷ Decker et al., *Die enthemmte Mitte*.

apparatuses prove to be closed systems with stale leadership figures who are losing contact with the social base in view of the growing social divisions. Neither of the two party families have convincing answers to the weakening economic growth, the growing gap in the distribution of wealth and the decline of public infrastructure.

The club of right-wing parties is throwing democratic parties and governments into a panic, especially as the borderline between right-wing populism and right-wing radicalism is rapidly becoming blurred. However different their programmes may be, the struggle against the opponents is welding the right together; it is fighting against Islam and globalisation, against the lying press, and gender rhetoric; its main enemy is the European Union and the political elites who betray the people.

The supporters of right-wing populist organisations exhibit a tendency to authoritarian attitudes, which result in the vilification of minorities. The perception of the crass social inequality and the collapse of previous concepts against injustice are leading to political demands to defend the national and welfare state against its ‘abuse’ and the political battle against ‘social dumping’.

Right-wing populist parties are markedly critical of or hostile to the EU. They especially criticise the increasing internationalisation and centralisation of political decision-making processes in Europe as well as an excessive bureaucracy. In this they see a decoupling of political processes, the loss of contact with the ‘real world’, the everyday life of the population.

The success of right-wing populist parties stands and falls with a tight political organisation and a charismatic top leadership. The resonance of right-wing populist parties feeds on the sharp distance they maintain from the traditional political class and elite when they assert that ‘the powers that be’ only have their own material-financial interests in mind and therefore incompetence and more or less overt corruption have become everyday phenomena. At least indirectly the battle is for a complete change of political representation.

The social basis of right-wing populism

Since the end of the Cold War the global capitalist economy has fundamentally changed. Since the 1970s the structure of global value creation (the decline of the USA, the rise of the People’s Republic of China) and the post-war class compromise (‘post-war settlement’) have been dissolved. Hundreds of millions of people in Asia have been drawn into the global division of labour; within a single generation China has become the workbench of the world and the world’s leading exporter. The international Bretton Woods system and the mixed economy have been replaced by neoliberalism and deregulation shaped by market forces and by a democracy brought into line with the market. As a result of the crises and the growing world disorder, the hegemonic role of the USA as a world super power has been weakened.

The contradictions and crises have made the promise of a neoliberal revitalisation of capitalism look increasingly ridiculous; falling economic growth, high public and private

debt, low-interest policy, the spread of ‘failed states’, and growing social inequities (wealthy elites versus the endangered status of the majorities of populations) raise questions of the future of ‘democratic capitalism’. The collapse of neoliberalism creates a space for culture wars, for example coping with immigration, sexual preferences, same-sex partnerships, etc., which accompany the loss of control of politics in the face of social development and fill the growing gaps in the political discourse. In the meanwhile, in almost all democratic countries there are right-wing populist parties or movements that can jump over the entrance barriers to the political arenas, even trigger a deformation of democratic institutions, and endanger the governing capacities and future viability of democratic states.

In Germany, the disillusion at the welfare state configuration of the ‘Berlin Republic’ and at political inaction has for a long time now led to a tendency of decoupling from political will formation. Especially within the lower income strata – with low income, greater proportion of social transfers, lack of access to education, etc., precarious work conditions – electoral participation is extremely low.

The mobilisation of previous non-voters in Germany and elsewhere

In the state parliament elections in Germany in 2016 there was a clear rise in electoral participation. It was by far the AfD that was able to win over the most votes of previous non-voters. A central motive for the voting choices of previous non-voters and AfD supporters is refugee and immigration policy. The governing coalitions of the federal states of recent years have seen through a neoliberal consolidation policy – the realisation of budget surpluses was more important to them than an improvement in the working and living conditions of the population. The social democrats and the CDU were hoping there would be recognition of previous progress against underdevelopment and disadvantaging; the forces of opposition – Die LINKE and the Greens – criticised, it is true, the growing disparities but the alternatives they offered were too bland. The conspicuous programmatic weaknesses of the traditional and established parties could not impede the landslide for the right-wing populists – fundamentally because their political communication did not take account of the attitude based on emotions or resentments.

The assumption that prejudices, resentments, and misunderstandings could be countered through information belongs to the realm of myth. What is important to people with prejudices is to have those prejudices confirmed. Prejudices are orientation marks and signposts within a complex world, which is why people are happy to hold on to them, especially when they offer the advantage of explaining the world without contradictions. Finally, it is careless to think that the deep-seated resentment of those who believe that the refugees or Islam is the cause of the miserable distribution ratios and growing world disorder can be countered with mere alternative interpretations and media attention.

Here we see repeated the interesting phenomenon that right-wing populism is basically strong in relatively well-off societies of Europe, for example in Switzerland, in Austria, in Denmark, and in the Netherlands. None of these are crisis or catastrophe areas but countries that (still) function relatively well, but where people have the feeling that they have lost

something through a change of the political order or through the loss of democratic control. What then motivates so many citizens to give their votes and thus political mandates to unknown and inexperienced candidates? The political landslide in the Berlin Republic can be described and summarised as follows:

- The AfD sees and presents itself as a counter-voice to the ‘old parties’. In relation to the radical rejection of the political establishments and the media (the ‘lying press’) the actual programme of the AfD recedes into the background. The party itself is developing and changing its programme; its market-radical, neoliberal demands and rationales are losing importance. For the greater part of voters and AfD supporters its programmatic components are unknown. They are satisfied with the public image that is circulating: being against immigration, against Islam, and against the EU.
- The voters cannot be influenced by the fact that the party leadership is involved in fierce conflicts over its further political course, and the whole leadership is manifestly unwilling or finds it difficult to undertake clear distancing and exclusion vis-à-vis right-wing extreme contents and organisations.
- The unleashing of resentment also means that right-wing populist outlooks and voter results are never been less ostracised than they are now.
- Since the clear expansion of the movement of asylum-seeking citizens towards Germany in late summer of 2015, the AfD has aimed the emphasis of their euro and Europe criticism towards asylum policy and above all towards a line drawn against immigrants from Islamic countries. It is relying on fears and prejudices in large parts of the population that are sceptical of or against immigration. The AfD promotes and reinforces a one-sided and negative image of Islam. In addition, the AfD caters to a clientele that wants to enforce the traditional family model as a societal norm.
- The particular set of issues around asylum-seekers and immigration has diminished in importance in the recent months of this year only in terms of numbers. In comparison to 2015, since spring of 2016 there has been a sharp decline in refugee immigration towards Germany. Accommodating and integrating the refugees in Germany are doubtless a major social challenge, but it is impossible to speak of ‘overburdening’ not to mention ‘loss of control’.

In a current poll 63 per cent of Germans feel that the current refugee policy is responsible for the AfD’s success. However, a glance at the Europe-wide political shift to the right suggests the thesis that the refugee question is only an accompanying symptom, not the fundamental cause of the political landslide in favour of right-wing populism. Throughout Europe and the USA we see the rise of right-wing populist parties. Germany had long remained an exception.

The interconnection between deep-seated disillusionment over social injustice and prejudices towards foreigners, especially towards countries strongly characterised by Islam, is seldom recognised.

The erosion of the lower middle stratum

The often advanced hypothesis that it is above all the lowest social stratum that is responsible for the political system's massive loss of legitimacy is empirically and theoretically dubious. The issue is more complicated; The lower social layer is also disillusioned by the establishment, but it does not expect anything better from elections. What is true throughout Europe is that the more precarious the social conditions of life are the lower electoral participation is. It follows from this that growing regional and social differences lead to political inequality. The more precarious the conditions of life are in a city neighbourhood the few people go to the polls.

The conclusion is that the declining voter participation in Europe is the expression of an increasingly unequal voter participation behind which there is a social division of the electorate. Europe's political system is based on a deep social division, and the democratic formation of will is becoming the ever more exclusive affair of citizens from the middle and upper social milieu of societies, while the socially weaker milieus remain clearly underrepresented. The results of long-term studies in western democracies show on the whole that with social inequality there is a growth of political inequality, first of all in the sense of unequal participation. The result is a 'functional chain made of growing social inequality, unequal political participation, and finally decisions in favour of the political active [...], as a result of which the non-participants are disadvantaged'.⁸

For decades now the social middle stratum has been under pressure from socio-economic tendencies and is complaining about insufficient socio-political cushioning. It is especially the lower middle stratum that translates this frustration into right-wing moods and political protest. However, in the course of its development, the social base of right-wing populism has been changing and expanding; it is becoming a movement bringing together disparate elements, in which parts of the lower stratum and the upper social strata come up against each other. This kind of thing is all the more successful when there can be a 'de-demonisation' of parties or movements, especially through a distancing from right-wing extremism. Then right-wing populist parties or movements can also exercise a power of attraction amongst further social strata, but its central pillar remains the lower middle stratum.

In Germany, for example, that AfD supporters do not overwhelmingly come from precarious situations is corroborated by empirical surveys:⁹ 79 % of AfD supporters saw their economic situation as good to very good – the average of the 1,026 people 18 years old or more questioned was 76 %. The negative attitude towards immigration is clear: 99 % of AfD sympathisers are less or not at all happy with Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel's asylum and refugee policy.

[[Former Graph 7 → Rename to: Graph 2: Structure of AfD's constituency according to social groups (in per cent)

⁸ Arnim Schäfer, *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit. Warum die sinkende Wahlbeteiligung der Demokratie schadet*, Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2015, p. 88.

⁹ See for example the Infratest survey commissioned by the magazine *Der Spiegel*, March 2016; and Renate Köcher, 'Die Volksparteien sind noch nicht am Ende', Allensbach-Analyse, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 April 2016.

Right-wing populism is not a movement of the poor but above all a movement of the lower idle stratum in prosperous capitalist societies. In this respect, right-wing populism attempts a battle for the ‘lost paradise’. People do not vote for populist parties because they are happy. They are unhappy with the way things are going. This has to do with their feeling that they are no longer represented politically, that the established parties do not represent them. However, they also believe that it is possible to keep the system working.

Since the mid-1990s, ‘the economic basis of the middle strata is crumbling. In the primary distribution, the households with a middle-level market income as a percentage of the total households dropped a good 8 per cent points, from 56.4 % in 1992 to 48 % in 2013. Although the welfare state could still prevent the social descent of many middle-stratum households it could no longer completely compensate the unequal primary distribution. In secondary distribution as well, that is, after taxes, social security contributions, and social transfers, the share of the middle strata shrank from 83 % in 2000 to 78 % in 2013’.¹⁰

Opinion polls and analyses of speeches, flyers, and posters of right-wing populist parties makes it clear that their potential lies in the bourgeois, well-heeled middle strata. Here the propaganda connects with the prejudices of many citizens against immigration and with their alleged prerogatives as natives, but also with authoritarian notions of security in terms of penalties for breaches of norms. [...] A good 30 per cent of Germans whom we questioned exhibit a so-called economistic orientation. They compute groups according to their supposed costs and benefits; they think for example that we cannot afford any more losers. A classic bourgeois understanding of democracy, however, is oriented to the common good and people’s needs and not only to their usefulness. But socially and politically performance justice has prevailed against needs justice.’¹¹

The AfD – like the other right-wing populist parties in Europe – is only the symptom of an underlying problem. This problem is that about 80 per cent of the population are unhappy with the establishment.

Suppressing their strong-willed voices or ridiculing them does not make people change their minds.

All studies point to two essential factors: On the one hand, in recent years we see in all the main capitalist countries a tendency to the erosion of the socio-economic basis of the middle strata,¹² above all of the lower middle stratum. On the other hand, due to the growing fear of loss of status a massive discontent with the political class has emerged.

In order to have sustained success populist parties, starting with their articulation of current protest moods, also have to base themselves on political goals. The most important point of reference of all right-wing populist parties is the deep disillusionment with the

¹⁰ Gerhard Bosch and Thorsten Kalina, ‘Mittelschichten in Deutschland – unter Druck’, *Sozialismus* 2/2016.

¹¹ Andreas Zick, ‘Wir dürfen unsere Toleranz nicht überschätzen’, Interview *Tagesspiegel*, 21 May 2014.

¹² On this see the contributions in the section ‘Wer ist die gesellschaftliche Mitte?’ in *Sozialismus* 2/2016.

current system of political will formation. The most substantial distinction for populists is that of corrupt and incapable elites versus the growing problems of the ‘good-hearted’ majority of the population.

The right-wing populist parties have scored points in their respective countries especially with three political issues:

- A partly deep-seated contempt for the political classes or economic-political elites;
- The rejection of the European Union and the austerity policy implement up to now;
- The demand to seal off national social systems from immigrants, refugees, as well as ‘those who shirk work’.

How can right-wing populism be countered in Europe?

Is it possible to work against a widespread resentment and effect change simply through enlightenment – through reason?

If one wants to reach the voters in their rage and hatred of the political establishment and the refugees, then one must first make clear what the demands are, for example for justice and recognition, that stand behind the opposition to the free-trade agreement and against open doors for refugees. Only knowledge and communication around the socio-economic bases of the loss people feel and their fear of downward mobility can take apart the connection between developmental tendencies of society, failure to address problems politically, and emotional reactions.

In the course of globalisation broad strata of the population feel like losers. The neoliberal political establishment has intensified the social division through deregulation, so that out of resentment rage at both the elite and ‘new’ scapegoats has been triggered. The experience of discrimination and political reinforcement is as a rule not taken seriously. The feeling of non-recognition and discrimination can only be countered by taking up the causes of the injury. The politicians would have first to accept that the social division, and thus social discrimination, exists. To listen to the politicians of the established parties in recent years – nationally and Europe-wide – one would think that globalisation, European unification, the common market, and a society that has become more diverse has only brought advantages to everyone. This history of success disregards many people; it contradicts the life experience of a part of Europe’s populations.

‘Successful’ communication has therefore to take the basis of the resentment seriously; it would have to present a politics of pushing back the social division and injustice and could thus oppose another logic to the racist, nationalist interpretation. This political agenda in connection with a communication strategy to strip the right-wing populists of their uniqueness, could make it hard for them to portray themselves as the only political counterpart of these population groups against the establishment.

Indeed, there is no automatism. Fear of the loss of one’s status does not ‘necessarily’ lead to an attitude full of resentment. But when large parts of the electorate give free rein to

their resentment against foreigners then confronting, distancing, and ostracising these right-wing groups can only be truly and lastingly successful if the causes of the fear of losing status are addressed and changed. Yes, we should give back to the insecure citizens hope for a restoration and further development of the welfare state. This would require self-criticism from the established political parties.

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