

# THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT: SOCIAL MALAISE AND THE FAILURE OF MAINSTREAM POLITICS

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*The rise of the new radical right partly reflects the insecurity and instability brought about by rapid social and economic changes and a technological revolution that has resulted in the restructuring of the world economy. The end of a bipolar division of the world led by the US and the former USSR and the subsequent collapse of communism has irremediably weakened socialism and trade unions, together with the traditional values underpinning them. Feelings of solidarity and equality have weakened and competition and individualism have gained importance. World trade and labour markets are predominantly guided by capitalist principles resulting, among other things, in the displacement of manufacturing industry away from industrialized Western societies, to Eastern Europe and the developing countries, where production is less expensive, labour regulations less strict, wages lower and workers' rights are weaker and sometimes non-existent.*

While a successful elite benefits from operating in this flexible global market, a growing number of low and medium-skilled workers are joining the ranks of the unemployed. They suffer from an escalating sense of vulnerability and defeat, often accompanied by an increasing lack of self-esteem. In addition, the public's perception that immigrants come to their countries to 'steal' their jobs as well as the view, substantiated or not, that asylum seekers and refugees receive greater social benefits than nationals, is contributing to a process of increasing resentment towards the state and towards society as a whole. Their own personal insecurity leads them to disregard the generally precarious con-

ditions in which immigrants often tend to find themselves and the frequent unwillingness of nationals to take up so called 'immigrants' jobs'.

## Cultural anxiety

As such, social class and education tend to exacerbate a growing divide between those competent to move around and benefit from living in the global age and those on the margins. In a sense, the transition from industrial to post-industrial society requires rapidly adapting individuals capable of surviving within a dislocated society where moral norms, values, ideologies,



traditions and knowledge are constantly challenged and revised. In this context, only a few achieve an elite position while a substantial underclass, having few chances of escaping their situation, grows at the bottom. Inequality is rampant not only between different parts of the world but also within particular societies and this generates resentment and fragmentation.

Furthermore, increasing numbers of immigrants belonging to cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities are settling in the West. The substantial influx of refugees and asylum seekers recorded in the last fifteen years or so is contributing to an enhanced perception of

diversity in Western Europe and North America where, in many instances, indigenous cultures are being challenged, rejected, and confronted by those of the newcomers. Such attitudes are generating heated debates about various models of integration, their success and desirability. They also open up the debate as to the basis of a cohesive society and whether this requires the sharing of some cultural, linguistic, religious and civic values among all citizens. Ultimately, it poses some questions about the conditions for the coexistence of different identities within a single nation, thus directly addressing issues as to the limits of tolerance within liberal democracies.

## Political alienation

In the political arena, far reaching changes at the national, European, and global levels have affected people's views of the stature and role of politics and politicians alike, and have added to their sense of powerlessness. In the 1990s, the United States saw the ascendance of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, which has since spread to Europe and other parts of the world. To some extent as a reaction to this, numerous societies experienced political radicalization, often accompanied by strong anti-system movements beyond the control of traditional conservative parties, a development which, in some instances, has crystallized in the constitution and advancement of radical right-wing populist parties.

At the national level, a lack of trust in politicians and the political system alike has weakened the traditional role of the political party as the representative of the interests and concerns of its supporters. A growing number of people regard the political system as alien to their lives and politicians as being primarily concerned with maintaining their own status and privileges.

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## The ideology and political discourse of the 'new radical right'

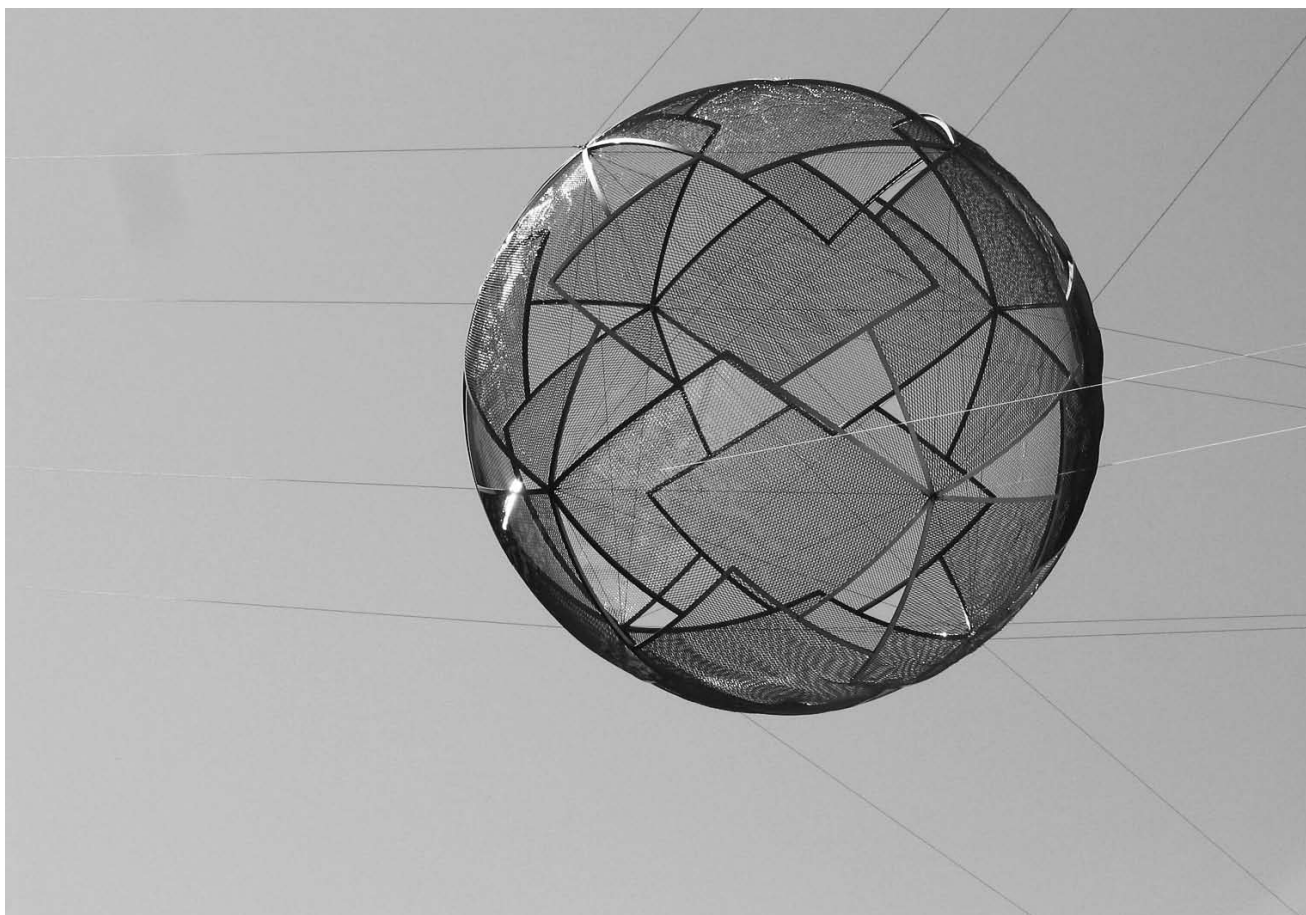
It would be a mistake to consider that the new radical right appeals primarily to those negatively affected by globalization. On the contrary, the new radical right-wing parties have done

particularly well in some of the most affluent countries and regions in Western Europe, for example in countries such as Austria, Norway, Denmark and Switzerland, and regions such as north eastern Italy and Flanders. Although most of their supporters are to be found among the ranks of the working classes, it is quite striking to note that support also originates from some well-educated middle class people. They are not so much driven by economic motivations, but regard the impact of migration as a deadly threat to national identity. Basically, they are concerned about the 'levelling down' of their own cultures as a result of 'hybridization'.

Although considerable variation exists across countries, there are a number of common themes that can be found in the political programmes of virtually all new radical right parties. These include a strong resistance to the existing (political) establishment and a commitment to democratic reform, a dominant anti-immigrant narrative, and flowing from this, a strong emphasis on protecting Western values and the national preference principle.

The new radical right seeks to rob elites of their moral and political legitimacy and denounces the corruption affecting Western style democratic systems. A sharp anti-elite rhetoric that claims to replace dominant values with the 'common sense of the people' occupies a key place within the new radical right's discourse, which often adopts a populist style.

In spite of its extremely critical view of the functioning of liberal democratic systems, the new radical right does not advocate their replacement by some kind of fascist style political system. On the contrary, the new radical right, stands in favour of a radical regeneration of democracy, at least in theory.



Programmatically, the new radical right's doctrine involves a claim for genuinely popular participation and representation. In line with this, it defends the use of referendums and open lists in elections.

The most important item in the new radical right's political agenda concerns its antipathy to immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. In some instances, open hostility towards immigrants describe radical right-wing parties which do not stand against all migration but solely against those immigrants who are deemed to pose a cultural threat to Western values, national identity and culture. At present, and following the wave of Islamophobia generated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Muslims are singled out

as posing the most serious threat to Western civilization and are often portrayed as the most 'alien' and difficult to assimilate. As such, the radical right regards the growing number of Muslims settling in Europe as a severe danger to Western culture and values.

In Europe, the new radical right advocates the preservation of Western values, a principle that is often turned into a call for 'national preferences'; that is, citizens should enjoy priority access to social welfare and to the protection of their own culture and language, ahead of foreigners. Citizenship should delineate a sharp boundary between those who belong and those who do not, and the latter should be excluded from the social, economic and political rights associated with it. This principle is en-



dorsed by, among others, the National Front (France) and the FPÖ (Austria). The platform Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) created by the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn (assassinated during the 2002 Dutch electoral campaign)- also emphasized this particular point.

The new radical right presents itself as the defender of otherwise marginalized groups: as a radicalizing force for democracy and as committed to sustaining social cohesion. It defends the idea of a 'fortress Europe', which they argue is compatible with the protection of national cultures and identities as well as economic prosperity. It exploits the fears and anxieties of citizens who feel threatened by socio-economic changes

and resent a rise in the number of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees entering their countries. For many of these citizens, national identity operates as the last resort, able to sustain an already damaged sense of self-esteem. For them, identification with the nation offers a source of pride, which they do not experience as a result of supporting any of the mainstream parties. Belonging to the nation means participating in all its achievements and replacing the focus on one's own life, and the (at times unfulfilled) expectations and insecurities that go with it, with identification with a larger entity, the nation, offering past and present reasons to feel important, valuable, and a member of a distinctive group. In these circum-

stances, the new radical right skilfully portrays the retreat to a national identity which citizens can feel proud of as a right, almost a duty.

## Conclusion

All things considered, the new radical right offers strong arguments destined to foster a sense of togetherness among citizens. However, the new radical right's offer comes at a price: the exclusion of those considered 'too different' and the request for them to 'stay away' in order to avoid their own cultural and ethnic contamination.

So far, mainstream political parties have not even attempted to understand why the radical right has been able to strike a chord with the electorate. By emphasizing the 'politically incorrect' and 'unpalatable' discourse and ideology of the new radical right, mainstream parties have underestimated the extent to which their arguments resonate with the public and have tended to reject the possibility of these parties becoming real contenders for political power. Of course, such assumptions are beginning to change as new radical right parties have entered into coalition governments in various European countries, have gained a significant number of seats in the European Parliament, and are making progress at a local level in countries where they previously had no support, such as in the UK.

Contrary to what many new radical right parties argue, mainstream parties have in fact taken steps to reduce pub-

lic anxiety over increased immigration. Most governments across Europe have been restricting migration flows, even though for many European citizens these measures may not have gone far enough. What they have not done sufficiently, however, is inform the public about the measures they are implementing and the outcomes they anticipate as a result. The new radical right's fierce attacks on mainstream parties' passive attitudes and so called 'open-door policies', need to be countered much more forcefully by them with arguments proving the contrary.

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This does not mean that mainstream parties should co-opt the new radical right's discourse. Quite the opposite, mainstream political parties should focus on offering an alternative narrative based on policies that strike a balance between respect for human rights on the one hand, and a rational approach to immigration on the other. Similarly, mainstream parties should do more to convey the message that, while certain fundamental human rights are universal, there are other rights exclusively available to citizens. Reassuring citizens that policies are in place which are fair and will not undermine their rights is a key step toward removing the concerns that drives voters to the new radical right.

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