Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Redux

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Having your book as the topic of a symposium is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, this is exactly why you write a book, i.e. to engage in a debate with other scholars on your ideas. Moreover, it is customary for reviewers to say at least some nice things about the book under review, and compliments are always welcome. On the other hand, and in the words of one of them, it is the ‘duty’ of reviewers to critique the book and therewith your ideas, which is at least somewhat painful.

In this essay I will respond to the dutiful critiques of my most recent book, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Mudde, 2007); while the emphasis is on the points made by the three reviewers in this symposium, I will use this unique opportunity to respond also to some of the points made by other reviewers.1 I have structured my essay along the lines of my book, which is divided into three parts: concepts, issues and explanations.

**Concepts**

Given the plethora of concepts used to describe the party family of our interest, it comes as little surprise that the introduction of yet another term and definition would lead to critique. Although some reviewers argue that ‘The book is at its strongest in its incisive discussion of concept formation and categorization’ (Hanley, 2008, p. 408), others see its main weakness in the first part. Simplifying somewhat, where Andrej Zaslove mainly critiques my definition, Paul Lucardie primarily takes issue with my terminology.

Zaslove’s main critique is that my use of a minimal and maximum definition has the ‘unintended effect’ of creating ‘a conceptualization of the populist radical right that is frozen within time and space’ (Zaslove, 2009, p. 312–13). In other words, my definition of the populist radical right, which combines nativism, authoritarianism and populism, might be useful to capture the parties of my interest, but will be less useful (if at all) outside the spatial and temporal confinements of my study, i.e. Europe since the 1980s.

To be honest, I did intend to define this specific spatial and temporal phenomenon, but by using concepts that are able to travel beyond these confinements. In other words, while the specific combination of the populist radical right might be limited to contemporary Europe – which, incidentally, still needs to be proven empirically (and a cursory analysis of contemporary parties and politicians in countries like Australia, Israel and the US suggests that the boundaries are at least not strictly European) – the terminology used makes it possible to relate the populist radical right to phenomena in other times and spaces.
My hunch is that the only truly particular feature is populism; however, not for the reason that Christopher Wendt suggests, i.e. that it is ‘extraneous’ to the parties. Unlike Wendt, I do not see populism as ‘a function of their position in the political system’, but rather as a fully fledged ideological feature. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Mudde, 2004), the prominence of the feature is a cause and result of the contemporary Zeitgeist in Europe, and therefore particular to this specific place and time (though it can, and does, exist in other places and times). Still, the combination of nationalism and xenophobia (i.e. nativism) and authoritarianism, which I term ‘radical right’, is more generic and has been found in previous decades and in other geographical areas.

The prime question that Lucardie asks is whether that combination should be termed radical right. Or better, whether the term radical right should be reduced to the combination of nativism and authoritarianism. Although I do not necessarily agree with his definition of radical right, I must concede his key point: the radical right cannot be defined exclusively on the basis of nationalism. If ‘right–wing’ is defined in line with Norberto Bobbio, as is the case in my book, the defining feature is natural inequality or hierarchy, not nationalism.

The reasons I chose the term populist radical right over alternatives like ‘populist nativism’, which Lucardie proposes and was one of several earlier terms I worked with, are twofold. First, populist nativism does not make sense, as it leaves out authoritarianism. In other words, when populist nativism would describe the combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism, the combination of just populism and nativism would not constitute populist nativism. That would be too confusing. Second, I wanted to connect my concept to the bulk of the terms used in the field, which almost all include at least the term ‘right’. The admittedly weak argument to continue using my term would then also be that, although it is far from perfect, it is better than alternative terms and definitions, and links my work explicitly to the mainstream of the literature.

A final point of critique on the conceptualization is Zaslove’s argument that ‘important ideological concepts are excluded’ (Zaslove, 2009, p. 314). While not completely sure that my understanding of his main point of criticism is accurate, I read it as follows: the economic platform of populist radical right parties and the link between economic grievances and support for these parties are important (Zaslove, 2009, p. 314); a point also raised by Herbert Kitschelt (2008, pp. 1181–4), although more restricted to his own theoretical argument. I agree to a large extent, but do not see why this would lead to the conclusion that it is possible ‘to identify a populist radical right ideology as it relates to economic issues’ (Zaslove, 2009, p. 314).

In short, Zaslove argues that if party X is supported on the basis of issue Y, it should also be defined (at least in part) on the basis of issue Y. But parties are not defined by their supporters, or even by the ideology of their supporters. Moreover, parties are supported on the basis of a broad and often changing combination of issues and sentiments; does this mean that the definitions should change accordingly? Many observers have argued that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder prevented his German Social Democratic party (SPD) from an electoral fiasco in 2002 by opposing the US invasion of Iraq, but does this make anti-Americanism or pacifism a defining feature of the SPD (in 2002)? I think not.
A point that addresses categorization rather than conceptualization, in my opinion, is Antonis Ellinas’ critique that my definition ‘does not take into account changes in party ideology in time’ (2008, p. 561). Actually, it does, and very explicitly, as is particularly clear in the list of populist radical right parties in appendix A, which for various parties includes specific time periods. Moreover, in the discussion of some borderline cases I emphasize the changes in ideology in some parties – notably the Austrian Freedom party (FPÖ), Northern League (LN) and Swiss People’s party (SVP) – and argue that they fall in (and out) of the family of the populist right during (only) certain periods. Incidentally, the fact that I do include the SVP in the populist radical right party family, from 2005 onward (Mudde, 2007, pp. 57–8), was lost on several readers (including Betz and Kitschelt), which may be because I forgot to include them in appendix A.

Somewhat linked to this point is Wendt’s critique that ‘In focusing on a consistent ideology rather than a contextual party strategy ... Mudde’s classifications are insensitive to changes in party profiles across time’ (Wendt, forthcoming, emphases in original). This is true, as my classifications do not intend to capture ‘party profile’, but are developed for and aimed at ‘party ideology’. While I agree that ‘profiles’ and ‘strategies’ are important too, particularly to understand the parties’ reception by its environment, they do not define parties; at least not in the party family tradition (e.g. Mair and Mudde, 1998).

Finally, Kitschelt discusses the issue of classification at some length in his review article. He argues that the ‘qualitative-hermeneutic reading of party programmes’ (Kitschelt, 2008, p. 1180), of scholars like Elisabeth Carter (2005) and myself, should be supplemented by more (scientific) data and methods. Rather than the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which despite overwhelming criticism has become the standard in the comparative study of party ideology, Kitschelt favors two other approaches: expert judgements and media reporting.

Instead of debating the empirical value(s) of these different data sets and methods, which goes beyond the scope of the review response, I will shortly discuss the fundamentals of these two suggested alternatives. Since the publication of the first cross-national expert study over two decades ago (Castles and Mair, 1984), comparative European politics has seen a steady growth of the development and use of expert studies. In recent years I have received at least two requests annually to function as an expert, covering a variety of topics (from cordon sanitaire to Euroscepticism) and countries (mostly Belgium, Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Slovakia).

The problem is that these studies are not really expert studies; they are more like peer surveys. Are there truly ten to fifteen ‘experts’ on Euroscepticism in, say, Malta? And how is it possible to find ten to fifteen ‘experts’ on the position of, say, the Front National Belge on crime and the environment, while it is impossible to find any academic analysis of the party ideology in whatever language? In short, expert surveys provide good ‘face value’ results (see De Lange, 2008) because they reproduce received wisdom. And this is the direct result of the method, which does not select the (one or two) true experts, i.e. scholars who actually study that specific topic, but a significant group of peers, i.e. political scientists who work on some aspect of the political system of that particular country.
Incidentally, this point is implicitly acknowledged in the original study by Francis Castles and Peter Mair, who put the word ‘expert’ in parentheses in the title of their article.

With regard to the second approach, Kitschelt refers to the innovative recent work of Hanspeter Kriesi and his collaborators, who assume that ‘the most appropriate way to analyze the positioning of parties ... is to focus on the political debate during electoral campaigns, as reflected by the mass media’ (Kriesi et al., 2006, p. 930, emphasis added). This approach might make sense for certain research questions, most notably those that emphasize the perception of (populist radical right) political parties, either of the elites (e.g. coalition studies) or of the masses (e.g. election studies). However, it is not well suited to uncover the ideological essence of political parties in general, and populist radical right parties in particular. After all, it measures the reflection by the mass media, which is often limited and heavily influenced by a broad variety of considerations (including commercial and political). This is even more the case with populist radical right parties; various journalists and media in Europe openly state their rejection of these parties and even see it as their mission to fight them.

**Issues**

Although Zaslove’s critique of my handling of the issue of economics spans all three parts of the book, I will discuss it primarily under the heading of issues. He intends to make at least three points:

In this section, I argue that: (1) it is incorrect to assume that supporters of the populist radical right are at odds with the economic policies of the populist radical right; (2) it is necessary to go beyond the belief that economic attitudes of populist radical right supporters can be subsumed under what is often referred to as the ‘modernization losers’ thesis; and (3) it is incorrect to assume that support for the populist radical right can be reduced to a single class or a homogeneous constituency (Zaslove, 2009, p. 315).

Although it is not completely clear from the text whether this is meant as a critique of my book, it seems to fall within his larger argument against my discussion of the importance of economics to the populist radical right. The odd thing is, however, that I make all these points explicitly in my book! In fact, I base most of my argument of point (1) on exactly the same work as Zaslove (even if it is a previous Dutch paper version; Derks, 2005).

Not surprisingly, given his own work on extremism, Lucardie takes issue with my discussion of the tensions between the populist radical right and liberal democracy. To summarize rather rigidly, he argues that populism per se is actually inclusive and egalitarian and that populist radical right parties ‘are usually less radical than they are made out to be’ (Lucardie, 2009, p. 321). While it is true that populism is inclusive in certain terms, notably class (the relevance of which it rejects), it is exclusive in moral terms. Populism is in essence moral politics, which holds a monist view on what are acceptable and unacceptable acts and views. Moreover, populist nativists are clearly exclusive on ethnic, national, religious or
racial grounds. In other words, while it is true that the populist radical right is not wholly exclusivist, a claim that I also do not make, it is essentially exclusivist.

The point that populist radical right parties are not as bad as they seem, to popularize Lucardie’s second point, is also well taken. However, my point was ideological, not practical. I argued that populist radical right ideology includes an inherent tension with liberal democratic ideology. That the two can live together fairly well in practice is a valid point, but does not undermine the ideological analysis; many Communist parties do and did function without many problems within capitalist democracies, despite fundamental ideological oppositions.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Betz’s critique of my too brief discussion of Islamophobia is not surprising, given the emphasis on this issue in his recent work. Indeed I agree with his point and go even further. As noted in my book (Mudde, 2007, p. 296), I believe that a temporal and spatial comparison of the role of religion in the ideology and propaganda of populist radical right parties would make for a highly original and timely (graduate) research project. While writing the book I unexpectedly stumbled upon increasing religious references, particularly though not exclusively in Eastern Europe, but I had too little time and sources to analyze this systematically.

Explanations

In Part III of the book I critically assess the broad variety of more and less developed theories to explain the electoral, and to a lesser extent political, success of populist radical right parties in Europe. I do this by dividing the explanations, somewhat artificially, into three different categories: demand side, external supply side and internal supply side. Virtually all reviewers note, rightly I must admit, my overstatement of the lack of supply-side studies on populist radical right parties. This was one of two points where the long process of writing the book, which I started (half-heartedly) in 2001, led me to be overtaken by the literature by the time of publication (the other was on the role of economics; see footnote 2 on p. 121).

Matthew Goodwin focuses his review largely on this part of the book and suggests various ways to improve the study of populist radical right parties; these are not necessarily voiced as a critique of my own efforts. He suggests some avenues for future studies ‘by looking within and beyond our own disciplinary borders’ (Goodwin, 2009, p. 325). More specifically, he wants the study of the (populist) radical right to be more integrated into research of political parties and social movements. Regarding the latter, Roger Eatwell and I expressed a similar hope in our preface to Bert Klandermans and Nonna Mayer’s important book Extreme Right Activists in Europe: Through the Magnifying Glass (2005), which was published in our ‘Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy’ book series. Similarly, my work on (un)civil society has criticized the normative selection bias of research on civil society and social movements and highlighted some of the theoretical consequences (e.g. Kopecký and Mudde, 2003).3

With regard to the integration into political party research the situation is much more developed. In many ways, my own work follows in the tradition of the true pioneers,
At least since their important work in the first part of the 1990s, many (second-generation) radical right scholars have taken insights and theories from mainstream political parties’ research into account. True, more can be done, including work on internal organization and effects of campaigning on electoral performance (as Goodwin suggests), but these topics are particularly difficult to study for the populist radical right. While it might be ‘quite possible to undertake detailed studies of radical right members and activists’ (Goodwin, 2009, p. 325), the few good studies around do still suffer from problems of access, bias (mostly as an effect of referral and snowballing) and, most importantly, generalization.

A final point that Goodwin makes, extends, in a sense, support for my advocacy of meso-level studies. In line with his own work, he calls for more examinations of ‘the local contextual determinants of radical right support’ (Goodwin, 2009, p. 325). Obviously, I concur. One of my PhD students, Lien Warmenbol, is doing (real) ethnographic research in three different areas of the city of Antwerp, to explain the highly diverse levels of success of the Flemish Interest (VB) party, and her preliminary findings already challenge some received wisdoms in the field of the radical right and beyond.

Unfortunately, this work is not very rewarding, or better, not much rewarded, in the current academic market. The economics of publication argue strongly against original in-depth local studies and in favor of rather unimaginative and shallow large-N work. This is a general condition that is not specific to the study of the radical right; in fact, I would argue that because of the continuous disproportionate academic and non-academic interest in the radical right, at least in many countries, scholars in our field actually suffer less from this pressure. Moreover, conceptual and theoretical innovation is fortunately still rewarded in academia, in terms of both status of publication outlet and number of citations (which, obviously, are not unrelated).

One of the most important points of my book is the emphasis on the study of populist radical right parties themselves. Carter argues that I perhaps stretch the point that more research should employ, in her words, ‘a party-driven approach’ (Carter, 2008, p. 393). She argues that the field is ‘overpopulated with accounts of individual parties’ (Carter, 2008, pp. 393–4). However, leaving aside the point that these studies are not truly comparative, which she notes too, the bulk of them are highly descriptive and non-theoretical. In other words, it would be a stretch to label them as employing a party-driven approach. The idea behind this approach is not simply to bring parties back into the study of the populist radical right, although that is important too, but to bring them back into the explanations of their electoral and political fate.

Finally, Seán Hanley would have liked to see ‘Greater sensitivity to Europe’s different configurations of postindustrial capitalism and democracy’ (Hanley, 2008, p. 409), i.e. more attention to the specificities of post-communist politics. I fully agree with him, though I felt that, at this stage, where both parts of Europe are still largely separated into different academic sub-disciplines (i.e. ‘European politics’ and ‘post-communist studies’), it was even more important to point to the inherent similarities. That said, a comparative empirical
study of the populist radical right in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe is long overdue, but will involve a phenomenal amount of fieldwork, given the incredible lack of scholarly work on the topic so far.

**Conclusion**

The reviews in this symposium, as well as those published in other venues, have all been very kind to me. First of all, they did what every scholar hopes for, but not always receives: the reviewers took my book seriously and made themselves open to my arguments. Agreed, many points of critique or suggestions for elaboration and future research are inspired by the reviewer’s own work, which is fair enough. But no reviewer rebuked me for not doing what they do. And all reviewers read the book critically but constructively, working with the arguments, rather than against them. They have pointed out some important limitations and points for improvement. Although I do not intend to take these up myself, at least not in the foreseeable future, I do hope that they will inspire the ever-growing community of radical right scholars to continue to go beyond the trodden paths and look for innovation and originality rather than repetition and safety.

Let me conclude with a last point of critique, namely Zaslove’s argument that I hold populist radical right parties ‘to higher methodological standards than other political parties’ (Zaslove, 2009, p. 317). He comes to this fairly surprising conclusion on the basis of my use of strict minimum and maximum definitions. I actually take this critique as (unintended) praise, as I would like to see other party families being held up to higher standards, rather than see the populist radical right being held to comparable but lower standards.

In fact, I would argue that the study of the populist radical right should be held to even higher standards, as my study still leaves many points to be truly proven. As Hanley rightly points out, one of the key weaknesses of my book is ‘the lack of any real effective comparative (re)analysis of its own’ (Hanley, 2008, p. 408). Most of my arguments are substantiated by what qualitative scholars euphemistically refer to as ‘illustrative evidence’. Given the geographical focus of the book, and the still poor state of secondary sources on most European populist radical right parties, I believe that this was largely inevitable. However, this also means that many qualitative, small-N, cross-national comparative studies can still be written to prove or disprove my arguments empirically. I look forward to reading (and reviewing) them in the years to come; in fact, I do so much more than seeing yet another large-N quantitative study on the electoral success of the usual subsection of populist radical right parties in Western Europe.

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**Notes**

2 For an interesting empirical account of the problems involved in using expert studies and the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) for measuring party positions of populist radical right parties, see De Lange (2008). For a more general discussion of measuring party positions by expert studies, surveys and the CMP see the symposium in Electoral Studies, March 2007.

3 An even more explicit example is the work of my PhD student Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler (2008), who applies mainstream social movements theories to the Israeli settler movement in her PhD thesis.

References


