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# ON EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Cas Mudde



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**Heather Grabbe, Director, Open Society European Policy Institute, Belgium**

Cas Mudde is one of the leading specialists of the populist radical right. He is also a man with strong moral and civic values. The pathological normalcy theory he exposes in this collection of his articles is a key to understanding the mounting challenge of the extreme right to liberal democracy. It is also well worth reading his criticism of 'undemocratic liberalism', as the reason for the successes of Left-Wing populism.

**Jean-Yves Camus, Directeur de l'Observatoire des radicalités Politiques (ORAP), Paris**

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# On Extremism and Democracy in Europe

*On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* is a collection of short and accessible essays on the far right, populism, Euroscepticism, and liberal democracy by one of the leading academic and public voices today. It includes both sober, fact-based analysis of the often sensationalized ‘rise of the far right’ in Europe as well as passionate defence of the fundamental values of liberal democracy. Sometimes counter-intuitive and always thought-provoking, Mudde argues that the true challenge to liberal democracy comes from the political elites at the centre of the political systems rather than from the political challengers at the political margins. Pushing to go beyond the simplistic opposition of extremism and democracy, which is much clearer in theory than in practice, he accentuates the internal dangers of liberal democracy without ignoring the external threats. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in European politics, extremism and/or current affairs more generally.

**Cas Mudde** is Associate Professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia, USA and Researcher in the Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, Norway.

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# **On Extremism and Democracy in Europe**

**Cas Mudde**

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**To Maryann**

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‘Our role is simply to be dissidents attempting to make up for the absence of any political opposition.’

Dario Fo, 2002, ‘Is this the new fascism?’,  
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# Preface

I don't know exactly when I wrote my first article for a newspaper, but I do know it was when I was getting my PhD in political science at Leiden University. I am sure it was on the radical right in the Netherlands, a topic that was constantly in the Dutch media at that time, but was hardly studied – to be fair, there was not too much to study at that time. The idea that (social) scientists would contribute to the public debate through columns, interviews and op-eds was shared among virtually all of my professors, which included nationally recognized columnists and opinion makers like Koen Koch (*Trouw* and *Volkskrant*), Margo Trappenburg (*NRC Handelsblad*), and Bart Tromp (*Parool*).

So far I have remained a columnist without a column, much less consequential than my Leiden professors, but not less passionate. I guess I write op-eds for a variety of reasons. Having worked primarily at public universities, albeit in many different countries, I strongly believe that academics should make their work available and useful to the broader public, which, in the end, pays their salaries. This can be done in many different forms, but for a political scientist working on contemporary issues, articles and interviews in the media are a very direct and effective form. Obviously, it is not all about the public good. I am a highly opinionated person, even for a Dutchman, and writing op-eds is also a therapeutic activity for me. Even if no one reads my articles, or is swayed by them, they still serve an important purpose to me. Finally, few academics are without a sizeable ego, and I am certainly no exception. Hence, I also write op-eds in the hope to one day become that grand, if increasingly outdated, ideal of the true European academic: the public intellectual.

This book is a collection of my writings on the four key topics of my academic work: the far right, populism, European politics, and liberal democracy. Obviously, the four overlap, and all tie into the key question underlying my academic work, as well as my personal political concerns: *how can a liberal democracy defend itself against political challenge(r)s*

*without undermining its own core values?* Although I have always been concerned about state infringements on liberal protections, notably free speech, the aftermath of 9/11 has made the issue more central to me. What the response to 9/11 showed on a global scale, and the killing of Theo van Gogh did on a national scale, is that when the enemy is constructed as threatening enough, people can be very easily swayed to give up some of their fundamental rights. The key is to sell it as if only ‘their,’ i.e. the ‘extremists’ or ‘terrorists’, rights are affected, not ‘ours,’ i.e. the moderate law-abiding citizen. And so, the left supports infringements upon the (far) right’s rights, and the right supports infringements upon the (far) left’s rights, not understanding that each time the rights of *all*, including themselves, are curtailed.

This is also why I became interested in the far right. I saw that liberal democrats were calling for the restriction of the rights of far right activists and parties, including the right to free speech and to organize, arguing that ‘democracy’ was in danger. But I did not see the far right danger. It would take me many more years to fully comprehend the differences between democracy and liberal democracy, and between radical and extreme challengers. And as the main enemy changed from the ‘extreme right’ to ‘extreme Muslims,’ the pressure on the core values of liberal democracy became more intense and more threatening.

Europeans too often prefer to look only to the US as the root of all their, and the world’s, political problems. But while the PATRIOT ACT and ‘War on Terror’ are indeed very striking examples of state overreach, most European democracies responded much the same, but often with fewer and weaker constitutional protections. Because where the US has at least some established and reasonably effective non-governmental organizations to challenge the state, like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), most Europeans are dependent upon (semi-)state institutions like the Ombudsmen.

In essence, this book is about democracy, more specifically liberal democracy in Europe. Whether expressed explicitly or assumed implicitly, the challenge to liberal democracy is the main reason for the long-standing academic and public obsession with the far right and with populism. But my focus is not just on the ways in which far right and populist groups, mostly political parties, challenge European democracies, but on how mainstream parties, (allegedly) responding to far right and populist challenges, threaten core values of liberal democracy. This is also my main interest in the debate on European integration, as far as one can speak of a debate. While I have strong (increasingly negative) opinions about the process of European integration in general, and the institution of the European Union (EU) in particular, my main interest is in how they are affecting liberal democracy in Europe.

Although I feel that my ideals have remained fairly stable since I wrote my first op-eds in graduate school, the political context in Europe has changed significantly since then. Where I was considered a sceptic about immigration and multi-ethnic societies in the politically correct Netherlands of the late 1980s, I would probably be labelled a naive utopian ‘multikulti’ in my home country today. Obviously, the change in the public mood and political debate is not unrelated to actual events, such as the rise of Jihadist terrorism or the Great Recession – even if the political and public discourse around the events were more influential than the actual facts. As 2001 was a year that changed the United States, because of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I feel that 2015 has been a year that has changed Europe forever.

In many ways 2015 is Europe’s *annus horribilis* (horrible year). Many Europeans lost their last shred of belief in, or hope for, an integrated and multicultural Europe that year. The Greek economic crisis led to an outpouring of new anti-EU sentiment among the moderate left, while the refugees crisis has had a similar effect among the moderate right. The frustration and disillusionment of ever-growing groups of the European people is mostly caused by the actions and inactions of the European political elites, who, when their lofty ideals are confronted with concrete problems, quickly abandon their moral high ground and hide behind the alleged preferences of the populations – the same preferences and populations that until that time had been decried as ‘racist’ by those very same political elites.

Most disturbingly, while far too much was decried as ‘racist’ in the 1980s, far too much is embraced as ‘realistic’ today. In 1982 the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) denounced the ‘neo-fascist’ Center Party (CP) of Hans Janmaat – whose most controversial statement was ‘The Netherlands is full. Stop immigration.’ In 2010 the same CDA joined the minority government of conservative Prime Minister Mark Rutte, supported by the Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders – who wants to stop all immigration from Muslim countries. And in October 2015 representatives of the CDA applauded at the Madrid Congress of the European People’s Party (EPP) as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán likened the Syrian refugees to an invading army and accuses the left-wing parties of welcoming immigrants as a plot to increase their electorate – a popular far right conspiracy theory that Janmaat used against both the social democratic Labor Party (PvdA) and the CDA in the 1980s!

In this transformed political context I have found myself increasingly on the side of those I have criticized for decades: the so-called alarmists. While I continue to believe that the success and threat of traditional far right parties like the National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen is exaggerated in the media, and in much of the academic writing, there is no doubt that far right parties



have become a (and perhaps *the*) main political actor in *some* European countries – notably Austria, Denmark, France, Switzerland. Of more importance, however, is the much less noted growing prominence of far right politics, mainly pushed through by actors other than the usual suspects. As I argue in several articles in this book, it is the growing elite support for the far right politics of ‘mainstream’ politicians like Orbán that is much more threatening for European liberal democracy than the growing mass support for far right politicians like Le Pen.

All chapters in this book were originally published in online media. In most cases I made only minor stylistic changes to the original version. In some cases I included a more elaborate version, often the first version, which was cut due to space constraints. I decided not to update the articles, with some notable exceptions in endnotes, as they are to be understood in the political context in which they were written. I want to thank all the editors that I have been working with at the various outlets, most notably Ben Tandler at *Eurozine*, Katherine Butler and Philip Oltermann at *The Guardian*, Nikos Agouros and Nick Miriello at the *Huffington Post*, Stuart Brown at LSE’s *EUROPP* blog, Rosemary Bechler, David Krivanek, and Alex Sakalis at *Open Democracy*, and EJ Graff, John Sides, and Erik Voeten at the Monkey Cage (*Washington Post*). Special thanks to Antonis Galanopoulos for his highly critical but respectful interview.

This book also gives me the chance to finally express my immense gratitude to Craig Fowlie, editor extraordinaire at Routledge, and the inspiration of this book. Craig contacted Roger Eatwell and I more than fifteen years ago with the idea to start a book series at Routledge. Today the Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy is the preeminent book series on the topic, capably edited by Roger and, my successor, Matthew Goodwin. Craig has not only been a loyal patron of the book series and of my own work at Routledge, he has also been one of my favorite people in the political science circuit, with whom I always try to have lunch or a drink at conferences, to discuss the finer things of life, i.e. football and punk music.

Finally, I want to thank my colleague and wife, Maryann Gallagher, whose patience and tolerance I have been testing for almost ten years now – a price she pays for having taken me away from my beloved Antwerp. As my life partner she bears the brunt of my obsessive need to share my opinions with the world. How often has she had to hear my rants on yet another article that came to me in the shower? Not only does she tolerate my op-eds, she often edits them, pushing me to clarify and elaborate as I nervously and tensely look over her shoulder. This book is for you, my love!

**Part I**

**The far right**

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# 1 The populist radical right

## A pathological normalcy

Today the politics of the radical right is the politics of frustration – the sour impotence of those who find themselves unable to understand, let alone command, the complex mass society that is the polity today.<sup>1</sup>

The quote above could have been from any recent book on the contemporary radical right, but actually dates from 1962, and summarizes the famed American sociologist Daniel Bell's assessment of the US radical right in the 1950s. It is typical of a variety of dominant positions in the academic debate on the populist radical right, which might be referred to as the 'normal pathology thesis.' This thesis holds that the radical right constitutes a pathology in post-war western society and that its success is to be explained by crisis. Authors working within this paradigm often consider the radical right in psychological terms and regularly use medical and psychological concepts to define and explain it.

However, the normal pathology thesis cannot withstand empirical testing: far from being an aberration, the attitudes and ideological features of the populist radical right are fairly widespread in contemporary European societies. Instead of being understood as a normal pathology, the contemporary populist radical right needs to be seen as a pathological normalcy. This change of perspective has important consequences for how we should study and understand the contemporary populist radical right.

### **The normal pathology thesis explained**

According to most scholarship on the populist radical right, radicalism in general and extremism in particular are based upon values that are fundamentally opposed to those of (western) democracy. In his political-historical study of political extremism, the German political scientist Uwe Backes defines extremism as antithetical to democracy.<sup>2</sup> However, it would

#### 4 *The far right*

be more accurate to describe radicalism as democratic, but anti-liberal-democratic.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, both extremism and radicalism challenge the fundamental values of contemporary western societies.

Much scholarship on the 'far' (i.e. extreme and radical) right goes beyond the ideological opposition between radicalism and democracy and considers the far right (in its various permutations) in psychological terms, mostly as a pathology of modern society. The most influential studies in this tradition are the psychoanalytical analyses of fascism, such as Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) and Theodor W. Adorno and his collaborators' *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Given that research on the post-war radical right was heavily influenced by studies of historical fascism, it comes as no surprise that the pathology approach also dominates that field.

This is particularly the case with early scholarship on the post-war American radical right. Bell's classic article 'The Dispossessed' provides an analysis of the 'psychological stock-in-trade' of the radical right, rather than its ideology, and is filled with references to pathologies such as paranoia and conspiracy thinking.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the progressive US American historian Richard Hofstadter argued that the radical right 'stands psychologically outside the frame of normal democratic politics.'<sup>5</sup>

Many studies of the contemporary radical right in Europe have followed suit. References to paranoia and other psychological disorders abound in politically inspired studies that unfortunately still occupy a prominent position in the field (particularly in Germany and France). Even in serious research populist radical right parties and their supporters are often perceived in terms of a normal pathology.<sup>6</sup>

The German social scientists Erwin Scheuch and Hans Klingemann developed a 'theory of rightwing radicalism in western industrial societies' in the late 1960s, which is still one of the most ambitious and comprehensive attempts at explaining the political success of radical right parties in postwar Europe – notably Germany – to date.<sup>7</sup> In short, they hold that populist radical right values are alien to western democratic values, but that a small potential exists for them in all western societies; hence, they are a 'normal pathology.' Within this paradigm, support for populist radical right parties is based on 'structurally determined pathologies.'

### **Normal pathology and academic research**

The normal pathology paradigm has had profound effects on the academic study of the populist radical right. In its most extreme form, scholars study the phenomenon in isolation from mainstream democratic politics, i.e. without using mainstream concepts and theories. According to this approach,

the populist radical right is a pathology and can only be explained outside of the normal. In most cases, this decision is as much political as it is methodological: to use mainstream concepts and theories, the researchers argue, is to legitimize the populist radical right.

This extreme interpretation was particularly prevalent in the study of the populist radical right in France, Germany and the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s. Many authors would focus almost exclusively on the populist radical right's connection to pre-war fascism and Nazism. The assumption was that the post-war populist radical right had to be understood as a remnant of the past, not a consequence of contemporary developments.

The more moderate form has always dominated studies of the electoral success of the populist radical right, and has become popular through the works of scholars who integrated insights from the study of political parties (most notably the Greens). This school of studies employs mainstream concepts and theories, but still perceives the populist radical right as an anomaly of contemporary western democracies.

The key puzzle in the normal pathology paradigm is the question as to why popular demand for populist radical right politics exists. Two general answers are offered – protest and support – though both are based upon a similar assumption: that under ‘normal’ circumstances the demand for populist radical right politics comes from only a tiny part of the population. Hence, the search was on for those abnormal circumstances in which populist radical right attitudes spread. Most scholars find the answer in modern interpretations of the classic modernization thesis.

Almost all major versions of the normal pathology thesis refer to some form of crisis linked to modernization and its consequences: globalization, the post-Fordist economy, postindustrial society. The idea is always the same: society is transforming fundamentally and rapidly, leading to a division between (self-perceived) winners and losers, and the latter will vote for the populist radical right out of protest (anger and frustration) or support (intellectual rigidity). Under conditions of massive societal change, the ‘losers of modernization’ vote for populist radical right parties.

In this approach, populist radical right parties – and political actors in general – hardly play a role. The only internal (f)actor that is sometimes included is charismatic leadership. This derives from the famous German sociologist Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership, although few authors refer explicitly to Weber, and is in full accordance with the pathology thesis. As in ‘normal’ politics, voting should be rational, based on ideology, or at least identity (cleavage), and not on an irrational bond with an individual.

In short, studies applying the normal pathology thesis tend to approach the populist radical right from the perspective of either fascism (extreme)

or crisis (moderate). The prime focus is on explaining demand, which under 'normal' conditions is supposed to be low. The supply-side of politics is almost completely ignored, as is the role of the populist radical right itself. When internal supply does enter the equation, it is in the form of charismatic leadership, again perceived as a pathological remnant of a dark past.

## **The normal pathology thesis assessed**

But is the ideological core of the populist radical right – defined as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism – indeed at odds with the basic values of western societies? And are populist radical right values really shared by only a tiny minority of the European population?

### ***The ideological***

The key feature of the populist radical right ideology is nativism: an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the nation-state's homogeneity. Nativist thinking has a long history in western societies, notably in the US, with movements like the Know Nothings dating back to the early nineteenth century.

Historically and ideologically, nativism is closely linked to the idea of the nation-state, a nationalist construction that has become a cornerstone of European and global politics. The idea of the nation-state holds that each nation should have its own state and, although this is often left implicit, each state should have its own, single nation. Various European constitutions stipulate that their state is linked to one specific nation; for example, the Slovak preamble starts with 'We, the Slovak nation,' while article 4.1 of the Romanian constitution states that 'the foundation of the state is based on the unity of the Romanian people.' The idea of national self-determination is even enshrined in Chapter 1, article 1 of the United Nations Charter, which explicitly calls for respect for the 'self-determination of peoples.'

This is not to claim that all references to national self-determination are necessarily expressions of nativism. For example, article 1 of the Constitution of Ireland states:

The Irish nation hereby affirms its inalienable, indefeasible, and sovereign right to choose its own form of Government, to determine its relations with other nations, and to develop its life, political, economic and cultural, in accordance with its own genius and traditions.

However, further articles express a fairly open attitude to non-natives, including 'the firm will of the Irish Nation, in harmony and friendship, to

unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions' (article 3).

But even where European states are not nativist, they will use 'banal nationalism,' a term used by the British sociologist Michael Billig to refer to everyday 'ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced.'<sup>8</sup> Citizens in western countries are daily reminded of their 'national identity' through a plethora of more and less subtle hints, ranging from the celebration of Independence Day, through the name of media outlets (e.g. *Irish Times*, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, *Hrvatska Radio Televizija*), to history education in schools. Although banal reminders, they are based on the constituting idea of the nation-state.

Authoritarianism, the belief in a strictly ordered society in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely, is not exclusive to the core of populist radical right ideology. Most notably, 'love and respect for authority,' a euphemistic description of authoritarianism, is considered to be a core staple of conservatism. Moreover, authoritarianism is a key aspect of both secular and religious thinking, ranging from (proto-)liberals like Thomas Hobbes to socialists like Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and from Roman Catholicism to Orthodox Christianity.

The third and final feature is populism, here defined as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.' It argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale*, i.e. the general will of the people. While the populist ideology has much deeper roots in the US than in (Western) Europe, key elements are clearly linked to fundamental values of western societies in general.

Democracy has a redemptive and a pragmatic side: the former emphasizes the idea (I) of *vox populi vox dei* – or 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' – the latter the importance of institutions. As the British political theorist Margaret Canovan has argued, 'inherent in modern democracy, in tension with its pragmatic face, is faith in secular redemption: the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people.'<sup>9</sup> Populism builds upon this 'democratic promise.' Interpreting 'the people' as a homogenous moral entity, populists argue that *the* common sense of *the* people should always take precedence and cannot be curtailed by 'undemocratic' institutional constraints such as constitutional protection of minorities.

Populism's anti-establishment sentiments are closely connected to broadly shared beliefs in western societies. These range from Lord Acton's famous adagio 'power corrupts' to the negative image of humanity so essential to Christianity (e.g. in the Original Sin). Indeed, the fact that Evangelical Christianity plays a much greater role in US culture and politics than in



Europe might be part of the explanation of the broader and deeper anti-establishment sentiments in that country. Moreover, whereas the process of democratization and state formation in much of Western Europe was more elite-driven, based upon a strong central authority and an elitist distrust of the people, in the US the same processes were driven, at least in the dominant national narrative, by 'We, the People of the United States,' and by a distrust in central government shared by both the masses and the elites, including the Founding Fathers.

## **The attitudinal**

Although nativism is not the same as racism, cross-national surveys such as the Eurobarometer provide ample evidence of extreme nativist attitudes in Europe.<sup>10</sup> For example, Eurobarometer 47.1 (1997) found that 'only one in three of those interviewed said they felt they were 'not at all racist.' One in three declared themselves 'a little racist' and one third openly expressed 'quite or very racist feelings.'

More concretely, 65 per cent of the EU-15 people agree with the statement, 'Our country has reached its limits; if there were to be more people belonging to these minority groups we would have problems.'<sup>11</sup> Almost two-thirds believe that all illegal immigrants should be sent back, while 80 per cent believe illegal immigrants 'convicted of serious offences' should be repatriated. Going beyond what even (most) populist radical right parties demand, some 20 per cent support 'wholesale repatriation,' agreeing with the statement that 'all immigrants, whether legal or illegal, from outside the EU and their children, even those born here, should be sent back to their country of origin.'

In terms of authoritarianism, surveys show an even stronger overlap between mass attitudes and populist radical right positions. According to Eurobarometer 66 (2006), 78 per cent of EU-15 citizens believe that young people would commit less crime if they were better disciplined at home or at school, ranging from 65 per cent in Austria to 90 per cent in France. Similarly, 62 per cent of EU-15 citizens believe that young people would commit less crime if prison sentences were tougher, ranging from 37 per cent in Sweden to 75 per cent in Ireland. Although 55 per cent of EU citizens think their local police 'are doing a good job,' 74 per cent believe that 'better policing' would reduce crime in their area. Finally, a staggering 85 per cent of the EU-25 population agrees with the statement: 'Nowadays there is too much tolerance. Criminals should be punished more severely.' This ranges from 70 per cent in Denmark to 97 per cent to Cyprus.

The ideological nature of populism can only be studied through its anti-elitist or anti-establishment aspect. As the booming literature on

*Politikverdrossenheit* (political apathy) has argued, and partly proven, growing groups of EU citizens hold negative attitudes towards the main institutions of their national democratic system, though not towards the democratic system as such. In fact, according to Eurobarometer 52 (2000), 40 per cent of EU-15 citizens were 'not very satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied' with their national democracy, ranging from 70 per cent in Italy to 22 per cent in the Netherlands. Eurobarometer 59 (2003) reported that 46 per cent of EU-15 respondents claimed that they 'tend not to trust' their national parliament, 53 per cent claiming the same for the national government, and a staggering 75 per cent for political parties, the main institutions of European democracies.

Regarding corruption, a prominent staple of populist radical right propaganda, Eurobarometer 245 (2006) found that 72 per cent of EU-25 citizens believe that corruption is a major problem in their country. 59 per cent believe that giving or receiving bribes is not successfully prosecuted. Of the political and societal sectors that are believed to be corrupt, 'politicians at national level' top the list, according to 60 per cent of the EU-25 respondents, ranging from 29 per cent in Denmark to 69 per cent in Slovenia. Politicians at the regional level (47 per cent) and at the local level (45 per cent) are ranked fourth and fifth.

## From normal pathology to pathological normalcy

The preceding analysis has shown that the normal pathology thesis does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Populist radical right ideas are not alien to the mainstream ideologies of western democracy and populist radical right attitudes are not just shared by a tiny minority of the European population. In fact, the populist radical right is better perceived as a *pathological normalcy*, to stay within the terminology of Scheuch and Klingemann. It is well connected to mainstream ideas and much in tune with broadly shared attitudes and policy positions.

The pathological normalcy thesis does not entail that the populist radical right is *part* of the mainstream of contemporary democratic societies. Rather, it holds that, ideologically and attitudinally, the populist radical right constitutes a radicalization of mainstream views. The argument is that *key aspects* of the populist radical right ideology are shared by the mainstream, both at the elite and mass levels, albeit often in a more moderate form. Not surprisingly, this has a profound influence on how we should understand the relationship between the populist radical right and western democracy. The key difference between the populist radical right and western democracy is not to be defined *in kind*, i.e. by antithesis, but *in degree*, i.e. by moderate versus radical versions of roughly the same views.<sup>12</sup>

## Pathological normalcy and academic research

The paradigmatic shift from normal pathology to pathological normalcy has profound consequences for the academic study of the populist radical right. First and foremost, it means that the populist radical right should be studied on the basis of concepts and theories of mainstream political science. Second, the primary focus of the research should not be on explaining demand, since this is generated naturally by the complex multiethnic western democracies, but on explaining supply.

For the populist radical right, the political struggle is not so much about attitudes as about issues. Although the populist radical right trinity of issues – corruption-immigration-security – are shared to a great extent by a significant part of the population, ‘their’ issues have not on the whole dominated the political debate in western democracies. Populist radical right parties do not focus primarily on socio-economic issues, like most traditional parties, but on socio-cultural issues, much like that other new party family, the Greens.

Within the pathological normalcy paradigm, understanding the success and failure of the populist radical right depends on understanding the struggle over issue *saliency* and *positions*. To borrow the terminology of the Dutch political scientist Paul Lucardie, populist radical right parties are ‘purifiers’ that refer to an ideology that has been ‘betrayed or diluted’ by established parties, rather than ‘prophets’ that articulate ‘a new ideology.’<sup>13</sup> They do not have to sway voters to a new position, but shift them to a new issue: away from socio-economic issues, like (un)employment, and towards socio-cultural issues like immigration. The main struggle of populist radical right parties is to increase the saliency of ‘their’ issues, i.e. corruption, immigration, and security.

The increasing electoral success for populist radical right parties since the mid-1980s is to a large extent explained by the broader shift away from classic materialist politics towards some form of so-called post-materialist politics, or at least a combination of the two. Within this process, the populist radical right played only a marginal role. Rather, it was to a large extent an unintended reaction to the success of the New Left in the late 1960s and 1970s, which led to a neoconservative backlash in the late 1970s and 1980s. This development not only created electoral space for the populist radical right, it opened up a new and ‘level’ playing field for competition over socio-cultural issues such as corruption, immigration and security.

The fact that some populist radical right parties have been able to use these opportunities while others have not can be explained by the concept of ‘issue ownership’ or, more accurately, *issue position ownership*.<sup>14</sup> While the new playing field was level in all countries, the struggle for issue

position ownership varied. In some countries, new or reformed (right-wing) parties could capture issue position ownership on corruption, immigration, and security before a populist radical right party was able to establish itself. In most cases, however, a lack of organization and personnel within the populist radical right parties prevented them from achieving issue position ownership. They were haunted by internal strife and public scandal, making them an unattractive political actor despite their advantageous issue position.

Where the populist radical right was able to establish issue position ownership, the key explanation for their success was internal. While it was mostly the established parties, forced by the public and the media, that created the conditions for the electoral breakthrough of populist radical right parties, they themselves ensured their electoral persistence through a combination of leadership, organization, and propaganda. That said, much more empirical study is needed to get a clearer view on what exactly distinguishes successful and unsuccessful party organization, leadership and propaganda.

## **Conclusion**

The study of the populist radical right has been dominated by the normal pathology thesis, i.e. the belief that the populist radical right is a pathology of contemporary western democracies that has only limited support under normal circumstances. Within this paradigm, mass demand for populist radical right parties is the main conundrum and can only be explained by some form of modernization theory-related crisis.

However the normal pathology thesis does not hold up under empirical scrutiny. The key features of the populist radical right ideology – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – are not unrelated to mainstream ideologies and mass attitudes. In fact, they are best seen as a radicalization of mainstream values. Hence, the populist radical right should be considered a pathological normalcy, not a normal pathology.

This paradigmatic shift has profound consequences for the study and understanding of the populist radical right. Widespread demand is a given, rather than the puzzle, in contemporary western democracies. Provocatively stated, the real question is not why populist radical right parties have been so successful since the 1980s, but why so *few* parties have profited from the fertile breeding ground available to them. The answer is to be found in the supply-side of issue politics, most notably in the struggles over the saliency of issues (particularly for the phase of electoral breakthrough) and over issue position ownership (especially for the phase of electoral persistence). This can only be truly understood if the populist radical right itself is brought back into the analysis and explanation.

## Notes

- 1 Daniel Bell, 'The Dispossessed', in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1964, p. 42.
- 2 See Uwe Backes, *Politischer Extremismus in demokratischen Verfassungsstaaten. Elemente einer Rahmentheorie*. Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher, 1989; *Political Extremes: A Conceptual History from Antiquity to the Present*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- 3 If not indicated differently, most of the definitions used in this book are taken from: Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, Chapter 1.
- 4 Bell, 'The Dispossessed'.
- 5 Richard Hofstadter, 'Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript', in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1964, p. 102.
- 6 For contemporary authors working in this tradition, see Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1994; Frank Decker, *Der neue Rechtspopulismus*. Opladen, Germany: Leske + Budrich, 2004; Michael Minkenberg, *Die neue radikale Rechte im Vergleich. USA, Frankreich, Deutschland*. Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1998.
- 7 Erwin K. Scheuch and Hans D. Klingemann, 'Theorie des Rechtsradikalismus in westlichen Industriegesellschaften', *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftspolitik*, Vol. 12, 1967, pp. 11–19. It should be noted that this description of the normal pathology thesis is not to be seen as a summary of their entire theory, but rather of one aspect of it – an aspect that has been much more influential than the rest of the theoretical framework.
- 8 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995, p. 6.
- 9 Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1999, p. 11.
- 10 The Eurobarometer is a series of cross-national surveys of EU member states that has been conducted by the European Commission since 1973. All Eurobarometer studies can be found online at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm).
- 11 EU-12 refers to the EU between 1980 and 1995, when it included the following twelve member states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined, transforming it into the EU-15. In 2004, ten new, mainly East European countries joined (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), making it the EU-25. With the addition of Bulgaria and Romania, in 2007, the European Union became the EU-27. The last country to join was Croatia, in 2013, which made it the EU-28.
- 12 How broadly shared the populist radical right ideology is, cannot yet be established on the basis of the available data. This would require a complex measurement model, encompassing a collection of multiple indicators for all three (multifaceted) ideological features, rather than simplistic indicators like left-right self-placement or support for racist movements.
- 13 Paul Lucardie, 'Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors: Towards a Theory on the Emergence of New Parties', *Party Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2000, p. 175.
- 14 In short, party A *owns* position X (on issue Y) when a large part of the electorate that (1) cares about issue Y and (2) holds position X, trusts party A to be the most competent party to shift policies (directly or indirectly) towards issue position X.

## References

This is a very concise list of articles and books that provide more detailed and general discussions of the four themes addressed in this book. Almost all sources are academic, recent, and in English, and should be accessible to the readers of this book.