The populist radical Right: A pathological normalcy

Cas Mudde
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According to the conventional view, the far-Right in Europe is antithetical to the values of liberal democracy. New research showing that far-Right ideology is a radicalization of mainstream values has a major impact on how populism is understood, writes Cas Mudde.

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. [1]

The quote above could have been from any recent book on the contemporary radical Right, but in fact dates from 1962, and summarizes 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”. [2] 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.

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 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 fundamentally opposed to those of (western) democracy. In his political-historical study of political extremism, Uwe Backes
defines extremism as antithetical to democracy. [3] However it would be more accurate to describe radicalism as democratic but anti-liberal-democratic. [4] 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 analysis of fascism, such as Wilhelm Reich’s The Mass Psychology of Fascism and Theodor W. Adorno and his collaborators’ The Authoritarian Personality. [5] 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. Daniel 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. [6] Similarly, Richard Hofstadter, author of the influential article “The paranoid style in American politics”, [7] argued that the radical Right “stands psychologically outside the frame of normal democratic politics”. [8]

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, notably by Erwin Scheuch and Hans Klingemann, populist radical Right parties and their supporters are often perceived in terms of a normal pathology; [9] prominent authors that also (used to) work within this tradition include Hans-Georg Betz, Frank Decker and Michael Minkenberg. [10]

Scheuch’s and Klingemann’s “theory of rightwing radicalism in western industrial societies” [11] is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive attempts at explaining the political success of radical Right parties in postwar Europe – notably Germany – to date. 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, the support of populist radical Right parties is based on “structurally determined pathologies”. [12] 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. [13]

**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, in other words without using mainstream concepts and theories. According to this approach, the populist radical Right is a pathology and can thus 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 historical background of the populist radical Right, in other words its connection to pre-war fascism and Nazism. [14] The assumption was that the post-war populist radical Right had to be understood as the remnant of the past and not as 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 more broadly popular through the works of scholars who integrate insights gained by the study of political parties (most notably the Greens). [15] This moderate form employs mainstream concepts and theories, yet 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 rightwing attitudes” spread. Most scholars find the answer in modern interpretations of the classic modernization thesis. [16]

Almost all major theories of support for the populist radical Right within the normal pathology thesis refer to some form of crisis linked to modernization and its consequences: globalization, society, the post-Fordist economy, postindustrial society. [17] The idea is always the same: that society is transforming fundamentally and rapidly, leading to a division between (self-perceived) “winners” and “losers”, and that 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” will vote for populist radical Right parties. [18]

In this approach, populist radical Right parties – and political actors in general – hardly play a role. The only internal (f)actor at times included is charismatic leadership. [19] This derives from Max Weber’s theory of charismatic leadership, [20] 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 supposedly is 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 the pathological remnant of a dark past.

The normal pathology thesis assessed

Yet is the ideological core of the populist radical Right – defined as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism [21] – indeed at odds with the basic values of western societies? And are populist radical Right values really shared by only 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. [22] 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. [23]

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 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”. [24] 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 Michael Billig to refer to everyday “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced”. [25] 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. [26]

Authoritarianism, the belief in a strictly ordered society in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely, [27] is a feature not even 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, 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.

As Margaret Canovan has argued, democracy has a redemptive and a pragmatic side: the former emphasizes the idea(l) of vox populi vox dei (or “government of the people, by the people, for the people”), the latter the importance of institutions. “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”. 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 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, surveys such as the Eurobarometer provide ample evidence of extreme nativist attitudes in Europe. For example, in December 1997 Eurobarometer 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’”. [33]

More concretely, 65% of the EU-15 people agree with the statement that “our country has reached its limits; if there were to be more people belonging to these minority groups we would have problems”. [34] Almost two-thirds believe that all illegal immigrants should be sent back, while 80% believe illegal immigrants “convicted of serious offences” should be repatriated. Going beyond (most) populist radical Right parties, some 20% support “wholesale repatriation”, agreeing with the statement that “all immigrants, whether legal or illegal, from outside the European Union and their children, even those born here, should be sent back to their country of origin”. [35]
In terms of authoritarianism, surveys show an even stronger overlap between mass attitudes and populist radical Right positions. According to Eurobarometer in 2006, 78% 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% in Austria to 90% in France. Similarly, 62% of EU-15 citizens believe that young people would commit less crime if prison sentences were tougher, ranging from 37% in Sweden to 75% in Ireland. Although 55% of EU citizens think their local police “are doing a good job”, 74% believe that “better policing” would reduce crime in their area. Finally, a staggering 85% of the EU-25 population agree with the statement that, “Nowadays there is too much tolerance. Criminals should be punished more severely.” This ranges from 70% in Denmark to 97% in 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, in 1999, 40% of EU-15 citizens were “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” with their national democracy, ranging from 70% in Italy to 22% in the Netherlands. Four years later, 46% of EU-15 respondents claimed that they “tend not to trust” their national parliament, 53% claiming the same for the national government, and a staggering 75% for political parties, the main institutions of European democracies.

Regarding corruption, a prominent staple of populist radical right propaganda, Eurobarometer reported in 2006 that 72% of EU-25 citizens believe that corruption is a major problem in their country. 59% believe that giving or receiving bribes is not successfully prosecuted. Of the sectors that are believed to be corrupt, “politicians at national level” top the list, according to 60% of the EU-25 respondents, ranging from 29% in Denmark to 69% in Slovenia. Politicians at the regional level (47%) and at the local level (45%) 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 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 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 the same views. How broadly shared the populist radical Right ideology is, cannot yet be established on the basis of the available datasets. This would require a complex measurement model, encompassing a collection of multiple indictors for all three (multifaceted) ideological features, rather than simplistic indicators like left-right self-placement or support for racist movements.

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 – corruption-immigration-security – are concerns shared to a great extent by a significant part of the population, “their” issues have not on the whole dominated the political struggle 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 the 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 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”. They do not have to sway voters to a new position, they have to shift them to a new issue: away from socio-economic issues, like (un)employment, and towards the socio-cultural issues like immigration. The main struggle of the populist radical Right party family 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 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 1970 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. While the new playing field was level in all countries, the struggle for issue position ownership varied. In
some countries, new or reformed (rightwing) 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 far Right parties, they themselves ensured their electoral persistence through a combination of leadership, organization and propaganda. 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, which 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 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 fallen on fertile ground. 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.

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**Footnotes**


26. Even in clearly multinational states or federations one can find such banal nationalism. The state of Belgium, for example, entails two large cultural-linguistically different groups (Dutch speakers and French speakers; as well as a tiny group of German speakers), which do not even share one (monolingual) public space. At the same time, the Belgian Constitution explicitly states that "(a)ll power emanates from the Nation" (article 33; my italics).


34. Ibid., 7. 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 is currently known as the EU-27.

35. Ibid., 7.


37. Ibid., 10.

38. Ibid., 47.


44. Few attempts at constructing such multidimensional measurement models have been undertaken so far. The few models that exist are heavily influenced by the models, not the theory, of Adorno and his collaborators. Unfortunately, they have been developed for different, if related, concepts (notably the "extreme right" and "far right"), and have been


46. For example, Special Eurobarometer 41 on Racism and Xenophobia (November 1989) asked respondents whether the approved with "movements in favour of racism". Obviously, 'only' 4% of EU-12 citizens approved "completely", and 6% "to some extent" (ibid., 16).


52. 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.

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