



# Why Do Right-Wing Populist Parties Prosper? Twenty-One Suggestions to the Anti-Racist

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## Abstract

In this piece, Göran Adamson argues that the anti-racist rhetoric is naïve and dangerously counter-productive. In theory, they refer to populist parties fueling on the anti-racist elite's outcries. In practise, however, the anti-racists have forgotten all about it, and seem to believe that right-wing populism will vanish if only it is told off. Shocked, anti-racists say populist parties gain voters despite having certain views. But nobody votes on a party despite its view. True to leftist sensationalism, anti-racists always talk about fascism within right-wing populist parties, thereby overlooking a wide array of other causes for voter appeal. Prone to instant aggression, anti-racists react with fury to any populist provocation, thereby contributing to the meteoric rise of contemporary populism in the West. Instead of conducting a proper analysis, anti-racists say how can people vote on these parties and so on - much like an anti-racist bourgeoisie. Anti-racists, Göran Adamson claims, seem to think knowledge of right-wing populism is compromising, as if you would be tainted by it. In fact, it is the other way around. Criticism requires knowledge - and an ignorant anti-racist might, in the long run, have no power to resist the allure of right-wing populism. People vote on right-wing populist parties, anti-racists maintain, because these people fail to understand. But they claim they do, even though they have reached other conclusions. The responsibility of the financial and political classes for provoking popular reactions is minimized, while the distress among ordinary people is belittled or moralized. The political class ignores a central leftist principle: social behavior has often political/economic explanations. As a direct result of multiculturalism, the pet theory among anti-racists, society's underprivileged groups - domestic workers and migrants - are in constant conflict instead of uniting against globalization and neoliberal deregulation. This is called divide and rule. In their quest for ideological purity, any anti-EU sentiment, anti-racists claim, is right-wing extreme, hence driving scores of voters into the arms of right-wing populism. These parties are further boosted by the fact that anti-racists sneer at family values and cultural traditionalism. Vocal victims of EU's austerity measures are dismissed as right-wingers, further fueling political polarization. Popular and populist, anti-racists maintain, is basically the same thing. As a result, democracy becomes politically tainted, and the anti-racist elites are the only safe-guard against unaccountable elites. Right-wing populists never cease to talk about our roots, while multiculturalists never stop talking about roots overseas. Save for that geographic detail, they are two branches of the politicalromantic tree. Right-wing populist parties prosper, but not despite anti-racist efforts, Göran Adamson argues, but as a result of them.

**Keywords** Anti-racism · Right-wing populism · Right-wing extremism · Fascism · National socialism · Nazism · Multiculturalism · Socialism · EU · Johann Herder · Elitism · Austrian Freedom Party · The establishment

In *Post-war – A History of Europe since 1945*, Tony Judt makes the following observation:

Visiting Vienna in October 1999, I found the Westbahnhof covered in posters for the Freedom Party

of Jörg Haider, who, despite his open admiration for the 'honourable men' of the Nazi armies who 'did their duty' on the eastern front, won 27 per cent of the vote that year by mobilizing his fellow Austrians' anxiety and incomprehension at the changes that had taken place in their world over the past decade. (2007:3)

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Throughout the West, support for right-wing populist parties is increasing. The political map of yesterday is gone. Why is this happening? There are generally two explanations. Some say it is because of actions taken by the right-wing populists.

They do things, and voters are attracted by it, despite the fact that critics (below referred to as “the anti-racists”) are doing everything in their power to stop it. Others claim, however, that an important reason behind the rise of right-wing populism is constituted by anti-racist efforts to prevent it from happening. We are, they argue, witnessing a significant misreading of political opponents with, potentially, far-reaching consequences. These two suggested explanations behind the rise of right-wing populism are very different. Whether we talk about the root cause of the problem or possible ways to retain an open society, the arrows are pointing in opposite directions.

Of course, right-wing populist parties are not sitting passively, awaiting voter’s appeal. In different ways, they are trying to boost their support at the polls. But their own political maneuvers are not enough, actually far from it, to explain their success. One must also take into account all of those powerful but counter-productive actions and effort by the anti-racist camp.

### What Happened to “Populism”?

By the way, what happened to right-wing “populism”? Everybody makes use of it, and anti-racists more than most. A populist party, as we all know, is feeding on discontent, attacking the “elite” and defending “the people” – assuming that these two entities are homogeneous, cutting the country in two. In order to thrive, populist parties are trying to provoke the establishment and create a manipulative sense of intimacy with the “silent and downtrodden” common population further escalating a divide between “us and them”. According to Max Riedlsperger, it is “important not to yield to simplified allegations and “typical leftist hyperbole”, because a part of right-wing parties’ “intensions are precisely to provoke a moralistic overreaction from the opposite camp”. (Riedlsperger 1996, p. 359.) What happens is this: In a moralistic fashion, right-wingers present sentiments close to the heart of the general public, aimed at splitting the audience in two. Then, as expected, the left responds with moral frenzy, signaling the start of the next phase. This consists of a second, triumphant speech to the public whereby they are told they are labelled “racists” or “fascists” by the left-liberal elites. Only now, right-wing populist tactics will gain momentum by means of a second, decisive increase among votes cast. Right-wingers, Wolfgang Kowalsky claims, simply count on this “anti-fascist reflex”, whereby the leftist critics fight against illusory enemies of the past. (Kowalsky 1992, p. 32). Max Riedlsperger refers to this mechanism as “the back-fire effect of the charges of right-wing extremism”. (Riedlsperger 1996, p. 360).

Indeed, this is common knowledge among anti-racists, at least in theory. But when it comes to political practice, they seem to have forgotten all about it. Now, they are no longer confronted with a political opponent determined to open a chasm between high and low, but, as surprising as it may seem,

some unfamiliar political entity that will vanish for good if only it is being raked over the coals.. This anti-racist failure to grasp the essence of right-wing populism has, as we shall see, dramatic repercussions throughout the Western world.

After these opening remarks, twenty-one reasons for the rise of right-wing populism in the West will be suggested. None of these reasons will target right-wing populist actions and policies. Instead, they will address how anti-racists have failed to understand the underlying motives behind right-wing populist parties. The discussion will take as its starting point Tony Judt’s comment above on the recent rise of the Austrian Freedom Party.

### Nobody Votes on a Party despite its Views

According to Judt, the reasons behind the rise of the populist right are all confined to the rightist scene. They lack education. They are “anxious”, “racist”, and “manipulated”. The rise of *Front National*, *the Sweden Democrats*, Trump and Brexit is explained along these lines. The malaise is boxed in. Among anti-racists, these conclusions are very tempting, as they require no knowledge, no further analysis, and above all no self-reflection.

Tony Judt is not entirely mistaken. Some right-wing voters are geared by emotions. Populists always sought to manipulate the audience. Yet, this is not a proper analysis. Haider managed, Judt claims, to gain 27% of votes cast “despite” paying tribute to the Nazi regime. Judt makes use of the word “despite”, because he is opposed to right-wing populism, and most scholars in the field share Judt’s point of view. As noted by Cas Mudde, the study of populist right-wingers” have usually been the domain of avowed opponents” (Mudde 1996, p. 226). But it makes little sense to conduct a political analysis based on your views on parties you disapprove of. A liberal criticizing a leftist party for praising collectivism would not take us far. Some voters support Haider not despite, but because of his tributes to old Nazis. This is a political banality and yet, seemingly, beyond the grasp of the anti-racist left. Why do right-wing parties prosper? Because anti-racists seem to think that everyone is an anti-racist, which, then, would suggest that some anti-racists chose to vote on right-wing parties.

### Leftist Sensationalism

If the majority of scholars in the field somehow overlook the fact that voters of the Freedom Party are not anti-racists – these scholars also appear oblivious to the fact that their own preferences cannot be applied on right-wing voters. To the anti-racist, any party reference to “honorable” Nazis would rule out voting on it. But Freedom Party sympathizers see it differently. To them, this is only one statement among others and must be put in context. Although Haider’s murky rhetoric was always

there, it was never of key importance. Many voters and “left-wing” members such as Heide Schmidt saw these utterances as unpleasant, but still concluded they were outweighed by other, more appealing views. The entire picture of the Freedom Party does not only tell the story of saluting Hitler but also, more importantly, of successful allegations against the Austrian political elite (Adamson 2016, p. 181–197). All anonymous exit-polls available show that the anti-elitist agenda was Nr. 1 reason for voter support, while the allure of racism was further down the line (Adamson 2016, p. 195–195. See also Adamson 2010). Haider’s tributes to Fascism are important if the party’s extremism is being studied. But they are less relevant concerning the party’s general popular appeal. Right-wing parties prosper because anti-racists cherry-pick right-wing populist parties’ most radical views, presenting them as the core of the party’s agenda. This reminds of old-school leftist romanticism – hating the bourgeoisie along with its petty politics and getting high on violence – a kind of boyscout fascination for scary things presented as anti-extremism.

### Like Lions on their Hind Legs

Judt’s comments lead us back to the earlier question: What happened to “populism”? In theory, Judt knew full well what populism was about, but when confronted with a populist party, anti-racists tend to forget that populists thrive by attacking the elite. They say things in order to incite rebellion among the common electorate in the face of the elite’s outcry, without the elite knowing they are dancing to the tune of the populist. When a Freedom Party poster refers to “honorable men” who “did their duty”, the bait is right in front of the anti-racist. My family, Jean Marie Le Pen announces, is closer to my heart than strangers, and the left responds with colossal indignation. Then Le Pen gives another speech, saying that family values are racist, and thousands of voters rush into his arms. This anti-racist “knee-jerk reaction” is disheartening and predictable. Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because anti-racists are in the grip of their opponents, much like lions roaring and yet on their hind legs, clapping their paws to the whip of the right-wing populist.

### The Anti-Racist Bourgeoisie

For all its radical scent, Judt’s moralism amounts to bourgeois non-intellectualism, such as: How can they vote for his party? I cannot believe it! But actually, they can vote on Haider’s party, and we should believe it, because they like his views. You cannot have a political discussion where your key message is that you don’t understand. The fact that research on right-wing populist parties often appears intellectually thin depends, in part, on this inclination towards populist verdicts.

Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because the anti-racists have replaced analysis with bourgeois emotionalism.

### Compromising Knowledge

But there is more to it. If we ask: But how can they? – the crucial question *why* never appears. For what reason do anti-racists evade this question? Because they assume, it seems, that if you try to understand something, you are also defending it. The context of explanation, philosophers say, may fuse with the context of justification. When Ernst Nolte, in *Three faces of Fascism*, ventures into the minds of leading National Socialists trying to understand how this was possible, he is accused of defending them (Nolte 1965). Knowledge is racism. In case expertise drags you into National Socialism, a convincing critic must know as little as possible about it.

The paradox is solved if emotions are added into the equation. If you know very little, you have managed to stay clear of compromising knowledge, and you can safely rely on your moral indignation. Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? Because anti-racists fail to understand that an ideology cannot be countered unless it is fully understood and explained. What is more, if our emotions are all we have, we must keep right-wing populism at bay, because we have no protection against it. The machinery becomes self-perpetuating. Emotionalists were always prone to oscillate between extremes. Why do populist parties prosper? Because anti-racists have become adverse towards knowledge about the right. As a result, moreover, they may fall prey to any rightist demagogue. Scratch an average leftist emotionalist, and you’ll find a right-wing enthusiast.

### Political Views Labelled “Incomprehension”

Haider managed, Judt says, to “mobilize his fellow Austrians” “incomprehension”. They chose Haider because they did not understand what was going on. But they would insist they do. Not many conservatives would claim liberals voted on Obama because of “incomprehension”. This condescending attitude seems particularly common among the anti-racist left. There is no getting around this: the Freedom Party makes sense to its supporters. Even conservative ideas are internally coherent, perhaps even more so than mainstream views, because views with an emotional backbone are less self-reflective. Populist parties are gaining ground, because anti-racists underestimate the depth of political convictions, believing that one’s political opponents are merely misinformed. Voters deemed right-wing populists are dismissed as if they chose to vote against their own interests, and nobody is happier than the populist leader.

When people vote on a party because ‘they do not know’, it is all about psychology. If they only knew, they would vote differently. This approach does not become less condescending

just because those behind it are anti-racists. Then, there are explanations where psychology and politics are combined. Thirdly, there are political explanations. While anti-racists tend towards psychology, liberal and conservative commentators are more inclined towards social and political causes behind right-wing voting.

## From Incomprehension to Understanding

If the causes in Tony Judt's analysis are confined to the minds of the party's backers, Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall suggest an explanation where political factors also enter the picture. Even though they refer to a 'psychological crisis of the "popular classes"' (Betz and Immerfall 1998, p. 251), they also recognize the impact by social, economic and cultural "dislocations" (Betz and Immerfall 1998, p. 6). Society, in other words, has changed. Social trust is going down and unemployment is rising. Gradually, "incomprehension" is replaced by understanding. They are concerned because they understand, not because they don't.

Ron Formisano takes a further step towards social and political factors. Social scientists, he says, rarely deny that people's voting patterns are influenced by actions taken by "the political class". Then again, this "class" is absolved from responsibility because recent social changes are all due to "the EU and globalization"; i.e. forces beyond its control (Formisano 2005, p. 251). The responsibility of the financial and political elites for "provoking popular reactions is minimized", while the distress among "ordinary people" is belittled and moralized "disguised as psychological analysis" (Formisano 2005, p. 251). People are being described as out-of-balance, but in fact, they are not. The idea that right-wing populist voters may act on the basis of rational choice "is" only fleetingly "considered" (Formisano 2005, p. 245). Right-wing populist parties flourish because "the political class" tends to blame the EU and "forces beyond its control", at the same time as they psychologize the concern among the common electorate. In this respect, the political class ignores a classic leftist principle: social behavior has often political/economic explanations.

## Left without Socialism

Since the turn of the millennium, however, political and social explanations for right-wing voting have gained ground. Swank and Betz maintain that "foreign immigration bolsters the vote for radical right-wing parties everywhere, although" the "effect is weakest in universal welfare states" (Swank and Betz 2003, p. 239). This leads over to an important explanation for the rise of right-wing populist parties – deregulation and "return of insecurity". According to Windolf, the rise of support for a right-wing populist party "depends on financial

market capitalism" (Windolf 2005). It has little to do with psychological confusion or "a failure to grasp complex realities" supposedly favorable to us all. Rather, these realities are fully understood. Domestic workers may be unemployed because skilled foreign labor accepts lower wages, and unskilled immigrants weigh heavily on the welfare state. Using Marxist terminology, Castel refers to this process whereby domestic workers witness their wages and work conditions plummet as a "recommodification of labor" (Castel 2000, cited in Dörre et al. 2006, p. 99). Tony Judt is right saying that the Freedom Party voter is "anxious", but the reason is not psychological but political. As noted by Dörre et al., numerous recent studies claim that "the political system" – i.e. dominant anti-racism – shows "ignorance" about the fact that employment – as concrete as it looks – is a crucial factor behind right-wing voting (Dörre et al. 2006, p. 101). See also Flecker and Hentges 2004, p. 119; Flecker, 2004; Flecker and Krenn 2004). Right-wing populism prosper because the anti-racist has abandoned socialist explanations for social unrest. Instead, a conservative card is played out: there're out of their mind.

## Anti-Racist "Divide-And-Rule"

To Robert Castels, the menacing effects of neo-liberal deregulation goes further than merely depriving the working class of work safety. A vital precondition for social change is a united working class. This, then, is precisely what is being undermined by deregulation. Domestic workers find themselves being destitute and "overtaken" as it were by even more marginalized groups of immigrants, and so a disheartening competition among society's outcasts gets under way. Domestic "groups located at the lower end of the social ladder" are searching "for reasons to understand their situation and pretend to be superior with the help of xenophobia and racist discrimination" (Castel 2005, p. 73 f). To an economic elite without scruples, common demands from marginalized groups, writes the liberal philosopher Brian Barry, is "a nightmare". The best bet is to incite them against each other (Barry 2001, p. 11). The Marxist Perry Anderson reaches similar conclusions. What actually has happened, he says, is that "ethno-religious tensions have displaced class antagonisms." Instead of uniting against capital and state, domestic workers attack *other* workers: "the poor revile the poor" (Anderson 2009, p. 537).

## The Link between Deregulation and Social Unrest

According to this line of thinking, the root cause of contemporary political polarization is neo-liberalism – far deeper and more ominous than "racism"; and the rescue – if any – is constituted not by anti-racist demagoguery, but by the resurrection of the welfare state. The views of Castel, Anderson, and



Barry are supported by Mabel Berezin, showing a concomitant rise in the West of neo-liberalism and right-wing populism.” By moving the center of political gravity from the polity to the person, from the state to the market, Europeanization has compromised the bonds of democratic empathy and provided an opportunity for right-wing populists to articulate a discourse of fear and insecurity.” There are clear links, Berezin continues, “between “new” Europe’s right-wing populist moment and the transformation, if not outright disappearance, of the post-war “world of security”” (Berezin 2009, p. 8). If we want social clashes, we should dismantle social safety. This classic leftist insight is not new, but it is off the radar of today’s multicultural neo-leftists. We have come a long way from Tony Judt’s initial one-size-fits-all comment, where voters chose the Freedom Party because they fail to see how wrong they are. Right-wing populist parties gain support because neo-liberalism creates division and animosity between marginalized groups of workers and immigrants. They also soar because the welfare state is being undermined. Little did Karl Marx know that classic socialist analysis one day would be dismissed as far right-wing.

### EU-Elitism against Populist Elitism?

And what about the EU? Undeniably, radical rightists are EU critics. But EU critics need not be radical rightists. What are the consequences when, for instance, former Prime Minister Tony Blair in mid-April 2015 claimed that the British people can’t be trusted with EU vote (Blair’s toxic embrace)? As we shall see, the debate is once again polarized: the anti-racist, who insist that anti-EU sentiments are caused by racism and xenophobia – i.e. moralism and psychology – and those to whom hostility towards the EU have other explanations.

Starting with the anti-racists, a sense of “heightened existential insecurity” among “large sections of society”, Aristotle Kallis claims, has sparked “anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-establishment, anti-EU critiques”. Politicians, he concludes, capitalize on a “strongly nationalist mood in public opinion.” Common among this line of criticism, no distinction is made between racism and critique of the EU (Kallis 2014, p. 7–8). Along with Anton Pelinka, Ruth Wodak counts as one of the most prominent Austrian critics of the Freedom Party and right-wing populism. Wodak cites Swedish scholar Kristina Boreus who “accounts for the interconnectedness of discourses of nationalism and discrimination and focuses on discursive aspects of discrimination.” In this fashion, Wodak, along with her co-writers KhosraviNik and Mral, conduct a sophisticated but abstract analysis where social factors behind anti-EU sentiments such as unemployment are left out of the picture (Wodak and KhosraviNik 2013, p. XVII). Large sections of the electorate have adopted radical political views because – simply – they are “racists and xenophobes”. As

an emotional statement, it carries considerable weight. As political analysis, it says very little. Peter Hervik, well-known Danish anti-racist, analyses Denmark’s somewhat cool attitude towards the EU. We are, he claims, witnessing ‘a resistance against “the foreign” outside Denmark, which has changed into a resistance against foreigners in Denmark’ (Hervik 1999, p. 123, cited in Bech and Necef 2013, p. 44). Any reasoned critic of the EU must keep his fingers off the anti-racist rat trap. In this way, Hervik, Wodak and others hand over the entire field of EU-skepticism to the far rightists and allow them to multiply their basis for voter support. Also, it suggests a close collaboration between anti-racism and the EU. Right-wing populism is on the rise because any criticism of the EU is deemed racist. The only way to avoid allegations of right-wing populism is to endorse EU elitism, perhaps even elitism with a tendency towards right-wing extremism.

### EUs Austerity Measures and their Victims

A prolific writer in the field of right-wing populism, Paul Hockenos analysis of the EU and right-wing support strikes a different chord. His view is declared in the subtitle of one of his most recent publications: “The EU’s neoliberal economic reforms have undermined public faith in democratic politics”. The responsibility weighs heavily, he maintains, on “the Union’s stark democratic deficiencies and one-size-fits-all economic prescriptions” that “only fan populism’s flames” (Hockenos, May 24, 2010, p. 18). Here, not only nationalists are to blame, but also forces that explicitly seek to *limit* the influence of national independence.” Since faraway Brussels is notoriously hard to strike back at”, he continues, “voters punish the liberal-oriented elites, who championed EU membership as a fast track to prosperity.” Why is this so? Because no “thinking person can fail to grasp the vast discrepancy in wealth between Central and Western Europe, on the one hand, and between the haves and have-nots in every post-communist country, on the other.” These glaring inequalities in combination with “corruption and the blunders of inexperience have seriously diminished the public’s faith in democratic politics.” In the wake of the anti-populists’ retreat into sectarianism, the “populists thus enjoy an open field, posing as elite-slayers and saviors of the nation in the face of Europe’s (and globalization’s) steady assault”, says Hockenos and ends by suggesting that “the key to Fidesz’s and Jobbik’s success was not Jew-, or Roma-baiting but the parties’ relentless attacks on the status quo” (Hockenos, May 24, 2010, p. 21). The gist of the right-wing rhetoric was not hatred and racist scorn by privileged insiders but cries of dissatisfaction by excluded underdogs. Right-wing populism is fueled by the EU elite showing little understanding for the victims of EU’s austerity measures.

## “Popular” Is Not “Populist”

Similarly, Yannis Stavrakakis questions the idea that the root cause of voter radicalization dwells inside of their minds. In the wake of mounting critique against the European project, the European elites have confused democracy with right-wing populism.” The neoliberal policies implemented have become increasingly *unpopular*, triggering *popular* mobilizations that, in turn, are denounced as irresponsibly *populist*” (Stavrakakis, Dec. 2014, p. 505). The demonization of populism conveniently, he continues, ends up by incorporating all references to the people as well.” The” domination of a predominantly anti-populist logic – consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – marginalizes the people and its demands” (Stavrakakis, March 16, 2015). It’s like a dream come true. The elites openly harass the general population and are praised for it. Right-wing populist parties gain support because the elites in politics, academia and the media fail to distinguish between *popular* and *populist*.

It all boils down to a complex divide in the perception on the nation, the welfare state, and concepts such as nationalism and globalization. While the anti-racists are quick to associate racism with any defense of the nation and EU-skepticism, backers of the welfare state such as Hockenos fail to see the welfare state as in guilt by association with racism. Instead, in its capacity to dampen social unrest, the welfare state is part of the bulwark against political radicalization and rising right-wing extremism. One reason why right-wing populist parties prosper depends not on excessive nationalism, but on questionable allegations against a moderate nationalism based on citizenship, the rule of law, and the welfare state. The anti-racist is exploited by the neoliberal, who is using the muddled waters of nationalism to crush the welfare state once and for all. We are witnessing an alliance between an absolutely confused left and an absolutely determined right.

## Two Branches on the Political-Romantic Tree

It was above claimed that right-wing populism is fueled by mounting neo-liberalism, even though multiculturalists and anti-racists see it differently. What, then, is the relation between a right-wing populist and a multiculturalist? At first glance, they have little in common. While right-wingers seek to limit immigration, multiculturalists have a sweet spot for distant cultures. But this conflict obscures deeper affinities. In “Johann Herder, early nineteenth Century Counter-Enlightenment, and the Common Roots of Multiculturalism and Right-Wing Populism”, anti-racism and populism, Adamson et al. argues, both emanate from the romantic backlash following upon the French Revolution. The two movements share numerous affinities, such as relativism, obsession with language, and a sentimental perception of roots, identity,

and belonging – whether the country of affection is your own or located overseas (Adamson et al. 2014). In the analysis of Eriksen and Stjernfelt, multiculturalists are” culturalists of the left” and right-wing populists are” culturalists of the right”. Both of them have a romantic approach towards the culture where they have sunk their personality – *here* or *far away*. From a principled view, they are inseparable. The only difference is geographic. These similarities are further examined in Eriksen and Stjernfelt’s *The democratic contradictions of multiculturalism*, as well as in Adamson’s *The Trojan Horse – A leftist Critique of Multiculturalism in the West*, where the author maintains that multiculturalism, behind a veneer of radicalism, is deeply conservative (Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2012; Adamson 2015).

Why do right-wing populist parties prosper? They prosper because multiculturalism and right-wing populism are two branches on the political-romantic tree. When anti-racists talk about the virtues of other’s roots, they also fuel similar pessimistic images of their own country. From a distance, there is no difference between the two. The only way to counter the allure of roots and identity – namely a defense of trans-ethnic solidarity and liberal virtues, is shunned by both. The antagonism between the two is skin-deep.

## What Should “Be Done” about it?

Above, the question was asked: Why do right-wing parties flourish? A number of explanations were suggested, all targeting anti-racist shortcomings. Another question is: What should be done? A wide array of measures is suggested ranging from anti-racist” strategies”, to those who say we should do nothing at all.

## Anti-Racist “Strategies”

Anton Pelinka recommends a policy response. In Germany, he says, voting for an extreme rightist party has become socially, morally and ethically unacceptable.” As a consequence, the German party system only” permits the existence of some rather small far-right parties” (Pelinka 2013, p. 20). If people are prohibited to talk, it is hoped, they will also cease to think. In a similar vein, Aristotle Kallis suggests” outright legal banning of radical right groups”,” denial of state funding”, or denial of” access to the media” (Kallis 2014, p. 23). Sanctions may be implemented, as the ones used by the EU against Austria during the 2000 coalition between the Conservatives and Haider’s *Freedom Party*. (Adamson 2016, p. 160–172.) *Cordon sanitaire*, implying a line of decency that may not be trespassed, has been used, as well as” naming and shaming” (Brett 2013, p. 410–11). Via these forceful measures, right-wing parties will hopefully be drained of support.

Even if these parties are not formally banned, there are still ways to minimize their impact. For instance, we may target “more and more unforgivingly not only action but also language” and, by implication, thought (Kallis 2014, p. 22). This can come in the form of changing curriculums at universities where, for instance, the history of minority groups is being presented in a more positive light, of campaigns to foster “mutual understanding, and tolerance while also targeting different forms of prejudice” (Kallis 2014, p. 23). At this point, it is crucial to be firm and to oppose stereotypes lest the entire project might be jeopardized. Without “sending out a consistent, categorical message that the diagnoses of the radical right, its behavior and programs and even language (the “we” versus “them” discourse), are misleading, unacceptable, and dangerous”, efforts may easily turn counterproductive (Kallis 2014, p. 26). If we silence opinion, anti-racists believe, we will prevent those parties that may wish to silence opinion. Voting on a right-wing populist party, Anton Pelinka says, has become “unacceptable”. But by whom? In 2018, *the Sweden Democrats* is supported by around 20 %. In the opinion of its voters, the party is not unacceptable. If anti-racists won’t change their mind if the Trump administration was being presented in “a more positive light”, why would rightists think otherwise? Why would “categorical messages”, name-calling and the curtailing of language necessarily be the best method by a political establishment in disrepute?

The most far-reaching anti-racist strategy is, however, to condemn this criticism from below on its basic premises. This criticism, it is worth stressing, revolves around notions such as “anti-racism”, “the establishment”, on the one hand and, on the other hand, “the common population” and “the ordinary voter”. In even greater simplicity, the conflict is between “the elite” and “the people”. This basic dichotomy, then, is called into question. At an early 2017 closed-door Stockholm seminar, a political organization had invited a select number of representatives from the media and academia to discuss societal trends. Then, a journalist raised a critical concern regarding the ways in which members of “the elite” were using their influence. This idea, a prominent professor shot back, “is how populists talk”. It is “a conspiracy” and an attempt to cut society in two – a homogeneous and malicious elite versus an equally homogeneous and down-trodden people. Then he made a conciliatory remark. Since this journalist is a good person and not a destructive populist it is unnecessary to adopt their language. The journalist apologized. “Putting the elite against the people”, Amanda Sokolnicki writes in *Dagens Nyheter*, “is a populist’s favorite image. By lumping together all those voices and conflicting interests making up the elite claiming they all have a common agenda, is it possible to portray oneself as the voice of the people.” (Sokolnicki, DN, Jan 22, 2017) The leading media professor Jesper Strömbäck and others express similar views. “The media”, they maintain, “is portrayed as speaking with one voice in the interest of “the

establishment” or having an agenda in conflict with the interests of “the people”. “When public trust in independent media is being undermined by political leaders and debaters”, they conclude, “democracy is also undermined.” (Strömbäck et al., DN.; See also Santesson, Vol. 2, 2017).

Strömbäck and others believe that the elite, by nature, is fractured and transparent. While the media “is portrayed” as behaving inappropriately, it never does. Members of the elite never use their power other than in the service of the common good. Elite conspiracies are only populist fantasies. Citation marks deny the very existence of “the elite” and “the people”. Moreover, while anti-racists such as Strömbäck are keen to point out that “public trust in independent media” may be “undermined” by “political leaders and debaters”, these leaders and debaters are always populists criticizing responsible elites from the outside. But this is not true. Every day, public trust in the media is being undermined by manipulative politicians and debaters situated within the elite. From the towers of power, Strömbäck and others talk about “independent media” being soaked down from the outside. But why jump to conclusions? Why should we assume it is independent in the first place? One might think these views are merely naïve. But they are rather as good as it gets – precisely the kind of patronizing jargon one is likely to expect from an elite with little credibility among the general population, and where transparency and accountability slowly is being replaced by fear and hollow moralism.

But there is more to it. There is a rich tradition of academic literature scrutinizing the elites. In 1956, for instance, C. Wright Mills published *The Power Elite*, a classic examination of the connections between the military, corporate, and political elites in the US. In the late 1980s, Christopher Lasch’s *The revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy* came out, and “the global elites” have more recently been subject to criticism by names such as Joseph Stiglitz Naomi Klein, and Christopher Hitchens. All of these would, then, be well advised to stop using references to the “elite”, because, as Sokolnicki says, it is “a populist’s favorite image”. With no seeming inner struggle, Strömbäck, Sokolnicki and others are holding up the red flag to any anti-elitist analysis no matter where it comes from. By extension, they are giving green light to any elitist rhetoric whether it is red, mainstream or brown. What is left of the anti-racist agenda if it is embracing right-wing extremism within its own elite?

Right-wing populist parties flourish because anti-racists make use of language control in order to prevent right-wing radicals such as the Greek *Golden Dawn* from imposing it. They also flourish because any critical discussion along the lines of “elite-and-people” is being banned, as a result of which elite critics are being radicalized rightwards while political mainstream is caving in.

Above, Tony Judt claimed that populist voters are characterized by “incomprehension”. If you fail to comprehend, you

cling to” populist simplifications”, “xenophobic rhetoric”, and” prejudices creating scapegoats” (Pelinka 2013, p. 20). If any voice out of the ordinary may be dismissed as a Don Quijote, this offers a troublesome excuse for the elite. But we shall only bring up another strategy linked to the idea that those who disagree with the anti-racist package are simply misinformed. It revolves around the concept of” information”, supposedly useful in eradicating right-wing “prejudices”. When I was working at Malmö University College in southern Sweden, we were being invited to various sessions of “information”. The problem is only that no one has certain views because he is misinformed. This person has only reached other conclusions. It is a bit like a liberal informing a Marxist about the benefits of individualism. In fact, suggesting information against critics is more ominous than it seems. It is a concession in a totalitarian state. In Iran, women who do not observe the Iranian dress code will no longer be taken to detention centers. Instead, “violators will be made to attend classes given by the police.” (The Independent, 29 dec. 2017.) There is a seamless train of ideas between information, thought control and mental correction. Of course, Iranian police force and our university administrators are two different things. Still, when anti-racists in one field after another are replacing open discussion with “information”, they seem to be heading towards a kind of society where actions no longer need to be justified. They have failed to reach out, they admit, but as soon as they do you will change your mind. The reason why voters support a right-wing populist party is because their opinions are not taken seriously. And even if they are not politically trained, their gut feeling might tell them there is something wrong when their views about society – perhaps traded for generations and thought to be humane and considerate – is seen as racist by people they only know from television.

## Oppose Polarization

Leaving the anti-racist camp, we approach other ways to counter right-wing populism. Now, populists appear as political actors with an agenda and plenty of tactics up their sleeve like any party. “Indeed”, Ron Formisano argues, “some of the outrageous comments European right-wing populist leaders make about immigrants or cultural issues are calculated to establish their antiparty, antipolitician, and antiestablishment bona fides as much as a posture on the issue being addressed” (Formisano 2005, p. 248). The strategy, then, is very different from above: Do not let yourself be provoked. Defend the realm of open discussion, and do not underestimate your opponent. Oppose political polarization at all cost, because this terrain is tolerable only for those who talk in clichés – i.e. populists and extremists. Right-wing populists prosper

because the anti-racists are fueling polarization in the media, in politics and in academia.

## A Silver-Plate to Right-Wingers

And what about all those uncontroversial issues so common among the general electorate such as cultural traditionalism? In case Formisano’s word of caution was noted, the critics of right-wing views ought to cater for the majority and create as broad an alliance as possible against right-wing radicalism. But the opposite seems to be the case. At present, mainstream parties go out of their way not to be perceived as populists. Mainstream parties no longer support mainstream views. Flags and crosses are taken down, the family is “an outdated institution” and so on. On a silver plate, right-wing populists are handed one trivial human trait after another: love of your country, cherish your culture and your traditions, sacrifice your life for your children but not for anybody else. Extremism is best fought if it is separated from mainstream values and marginalized. Anti-racists do something approaching the opposite: They are marginalizing themselves while dissolving the border between extremism and mainstream (Adamson 2015, p. 89).

When the left-liberal establishment has given right-wingers every reason to capitalize on everyday emotions, why, then, should they choose not to, just because their critics dislike their values? In case populists are fueled by resentment against the elite, why should they listen to the elite? This is perhaps the deepest riddle of all – the conviction among the anti-racists that their blatant authoritarianism would have any impact whatsoever on their adversaries other than purely negative. In a political situation preceding societal breakdown, values cherished by the common population are being shunned by an influential minority with undigested authoritarian ambitions. Out of fear, there will be widespread compliance, and views and sentiments associated with love, belonging, and trust will be redefined as hate, exclusion, and fascism. In the wake of confusion and dissatisfaction among the general population, however, one party, swiftly branded as “populist”, will choose not to follow the dictates of the minority, realizing that now, for no excuse other than indignation among anti-racists, they are enjoying a spectacular window of opportunity to topple this influential minority, and for a short time enjoy tremendous political influence. Right-wing populists gain support because their political adversaries fail to acknowledge one of the key pillars of democracy: a wide, cross-ideological anti-fascist alliance. Right-wing populism prospers because the anti-racists fail to understand the core of a populist party, namely to embrace values shunned by the elite, in particular when these values are held by a majority of the electorate.



## Why Is Everything the Anti-Racists Say Used against Them?

The populists' critics have problems. When, Ruth Wodak admits, the democratic forces chose not to 'report a scandalous racist remark, such as the Freedom Party's slogan (.): 'More courage for "Viennese Blood". Too much foreignness is not good for anybody! (.) they might be perceived as endorsing it.' Then again, if they do write about this, they explicitly reproduce the xenophobic utterance, thereby further disseminating it." Media and politics, Wodak concludes, 'are forced into a "no-win" situation' (Wodak 2013, p. 32). Moreover, the situation is aggravated by the populist's position of power. Whatever they do, Kallis admits, they operate" in a win-win situation, whether the gain is electoral strength, influence over public debate or both" (Kallis 2014, p. 9). Seemingly, their opponents' strategies and policies have been exhausted.

But why has this happened? Why is everything the anti-racists say used against them? Good politics means all doors are flung open while rivals are forced back to the drawing board. Swedish Social Democracy in the 1960s is a good case in point. Now, the situation is the opposite. Anti-racists have ended up in a political straitjacket. They are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. Still, there is no sign of self-criticism. Instead, the common electorate is portrayed as ungrateful and as having right-wing extreme ideas. Right-wing populists prosper because their critics' lack self-criticism and have little credibility among the general population.

### Self-Reflective Discourse Analysis

William Brett's "What's an Elite to Do? The threat of Populism from Left, Right and Centre" captures a sense of confusion among anti-racists. While discourse analysis of the right-wing populist message is common among its critics (See Wodak et al. above), Brett suggests a self-reflective discourse analysis conducted on the critics' own language." Populism", he claims, "is built on a huge and growing bank of distrust with political elites". Therefore, the elites must try to "address the problem", perhaps by "thinking about the sort of language they themselves use to describe the business of politics." Politicians are encouraged to show "leadership", and "unwavering" firmness. In real life, however, "certainty is rarely, if ever, possible." "Perhaps", he continues, "politicians need to find language which reflects the unpredictable nature of democratic politics" (Brett, Oct. 2013, p. 410–411).

Populist parties prosper because the international elites in politics and finance are all heavily influenced by neoliberal leadership theory that, apart from replacing manipulative intimacy with the common electorate with unabashed aloofness, shares a number of qualities with populism such as being larger than life, infallible, and self-righteous. These

overlooked similarities between populism and classic EU-elitism reminds somewhat of the earlier parallels between old-school nationalism and the anti-racists' chilly stand-in nationalism on behalf of cultures overseas. Perhaps, the elites should acknowledge that one of the chief complaints people make about them – "being abnormal, as if from another planet" – often can be statistically verified. In Sweden, arguably the epicenter of anti-racism and multiculturalism, *the Green Party* was supported by 42% among journalists in 2014, compared to 7% in the national election: i.e. 6 times higher (Journalister gullar med Miljöpartiet). When this lack of political representation is being addressed, the response is often condescending and accompanied by accusations of right-wing extremism.

The cries of defamation have not changed. But while populists attack a political class in shining costumes cut off from the rest of the population, anti-racists attack the populists. The reason why right-wing populist parties grow is because the people is not represented by the elite. A socialist insight has gone missing. Why would an EU-elite always have political principles in mind instead of succumbing to common class interests with leading populists in order to exercise control over the general population?

But, Anthony Painter claims, a more humble attitude is not enough. Politicians must also recognize the derision in which they are held, and "to campaign within communities and seek real, meaningful contact with those susceptible to the populist message" (Painter 2013, in Brett 2013, p. 412). They must treat the electorate with care. In this interpretation, the populists are not seen as ignorant, easily manipulated ultra-rightists, but as a majority population whose views and concerns should be accounted for.

### Populists Cater for their Own Demise

The distance between various responses to these anti-elitist movements is shown by the fact that while Pelinka, Hervik and others would have them excommunicated from political influence altogether, others propose restraint and dialogue. Still, they both believe that something should be done. Finally, then, it will be suggested to do nothing at all. Why is that? Because right-wing populist parties tend to cater for their own demise.

It all goes back to the very *raison-d'être* of a populist party – a critique of the elite. If it seizes power, its core political thrust vanishes – much like a bee without a stinger. Consternation follows and the party starts to crumble. History, too, gives ample evidence for this theory: populist parties are notoriously incapable in political office. The fate of *the Austrian Freedom Party* is a good case in point. Once in government in 2000, the party "could not make the transition from a protest party to incumbency". Instead, it "began to implode in spectacular

fashion”, and new leaders and rescue teams surfaced and vanished almost beyond the control of *Kronen Zeitung* (Formisano 2005, p. 247). What happened was a classic case of the impending fate of right-wing populism in office: a “radical” faction standing for its populist roots clashing against one with the ambition to transform the party into an “uncontroversial” government member. Disintegration followed and voter support plummeted at break-necking speed. In the eyes of its critics, this scenario came as a blessing, and it required no strategy, no anti-racist policy, no measures whatsoever.

To sum up, there are three distinct approaches to the rise of right-wing populist parties. In the eyes of the anti-racists, the parties they deem right-wing populist should be silenced and abused. Then, it is hoped, would-be sympathizers would realize the gravity of the situation and turn their backs on these parties. This approach, others maintain, rests on the optimistic assumption that voters with an antipathy towards the elite may be “informed” and “brought to their senses” by the very same elite. The anti-racist approach, then, is likely to prove counter-productive, merely fueling the flames of anti-elitist anguish among large section of the population. Instead, other measures are being suggested, such as approaching the electorate with a less self-righteous attitude, ensuring that their voices are being acknowledged. The third approach suggests we don’t have to do anything. Parties with a rightist inclination are like any other party and should not be singled out for treatment in any direction. They should be put to the hard test of political accountability, and if they fail, they fail because of factors inherent in right-wing populist parties. And if they succeed, it means that the liberal section of the party has come out victorious as a result of inner factionalist struggle. If so, the party should be given the benefit of the doubt.

## What Is Forgotten?

In this paper, a number of causes for the recent rise of right-wing populist movements have been suggested. According to the dominant discourse, they are successful because of their own actions and the fact that the audience is irresponsible or manipulated. These parties are “racist”, and their voters have become “racists”. The anti-racists have no responsibility for the rise of right-wing populist parties. This paper has a different approach. Based on twenty-one distinct themes, it is argued that anti-racists unwittingly contribute to the rise of right-wing populist movements. Anti-racists cannot understand how citizens can vote on parties with such-and-such views. Instead, their reaction is moral: “How can they?” and “I cannot believe it!”, resembling the way early twentieth century bourgeoisie reacted to workers’ demands for justice. The core of progressive analysis – social explanations for political preferences – is forgotten. Once asked about the most important task in the social sciences, the historian Isaiah Berlin said: “To understand”. A negation of classic quest

for knowledge is, as it seems, at the center of anti-racist analysis. Anti-racists tend to stress the most radical corners of right-wing parties at the same time as everyday family values are attacked. As a result, anti-racists are being marginalized, and the borderline between mainstream and right-wing radicalism is eroding. Political mainstream, anti-racists maintain, will start caving in because right-wingers are sectarians alienating everyone but disciples and purists.

Therefore, anti-racists escape into sectarianism, and the borders between political mainstream and right-wing extremism is eroding even further. Due to their anti-intellectualism and lack of interest in other’s political preferences, anti-racists are becoming an easy target for right-wing demagogues. “Scratch an average pacifist”, George Orwell says, “and you’ll find a jingo.” Anti-racists are dancing to the tune of right-wing populists, and hence contribute to a brutalization of the political discussion further fueling right-wing support. In case they seize power, anti-racists say, right-wing radicals will clamp down on left-wing university books and curtail political discussion. In order to prevent this from happening, anti-racists are clamping down on right-wing books, and dissenters are offered ideological re-education. Right-wing populist parties, anti-racists fear, will violate the idea of fair political representation. As a counter measure, anti-racists seek to ensure that public institutions are dominated by anti-racists. Anti-racists have made a U-turn since the 1970s. As obsession with politics and a quest for change has given way for an infatuation with psychology and status quo, at the same time as, perhaps not entirely accidentally, anti-racists have become part of the establishment. Yesterday, conservative elites retained power by means of divide-and-rule – pitting underprivileged groups against each other. Today, anti-racists retain power by unwittingly fueling antagonism between workers and immigrants. A nationalistic elite used to fight against an international riff-raff of workers and farmhands.

Today, an anti-racist, multicultural elite is battling against a working class with increasingly nationalistic tendencies. To anti-racists, the state is in guilt-by association with fascism. To the common population, it provides social security. Popular measures are always populist. Therefore, the majority is dangerous and so is democracy. The EU must be protected, because it is only being criticized by far right-wingers. Anti-racists condemn right-wing populists’ romanticism of their home country. To set an example, anti-racists idealize overseas’ cultures. Right-wing populists, anti-racists say, are obsessed with old time conflicts and pay no attention to social realities. As a remedy, anti-racists fight against illusory enemies of the past while turning a blind eye to unemployment and a decline in organized labor. The old conservative establishment, anti-racists remind us, clamped down on any analysis where the political struggle was seen as a conflict between classes. As a counter measure, anti-racists label journalists who suggest that the current political tensions in the West may be analyzed as one between the elite and the people as

“politically irresponsible”. Whether anti-racists counter rightwing remarks, or chose not to, they come out on the losing end. However, there is no sign of self-reflection as a result of this political defeat. Instead, voters are “racists”.

The populist right was never passive and is trying to attract voters to the best of its capacity. But one should not overlook that we are talking about populists, who feed on political contesters’ scorn and ridicule. The only way to avoid a further escalation of the political landscape is to insist on political principles and the virtues of an open discussion. In these endeavors, the anti-racists have failed.

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