Cas Mudde, “The Far Right Today”

Polity, Cambridge, 2019, 18.90 Euros, ISBN: 978-1-5095-3683-2

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Published online: 16 April 2020
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This book, written by arguably the most influential contemporary scholar of the “populist radical right,” offers an overview of the current state of the academic debate. In doing so, the author aims at a broader audience beyond academia. Referring to “far-right” politics, Cas Mudde subsumes both the “radical” and the “extreme” right. In separate chapters, Mudde covers a great variety of topics, which are history, ideology, organization, people (leaders, members and activists, as well as voters), activities, causes, consequences, responses, and gender. He ends his book with twelve hypotheses on the current “fourth wave” of far-right politics. The appendix contains a chronology, starting with the Movimento Sociale Italiano entering the Italian Parliament (1948) and ending with the 2019 European Parliament elections, a useful glossary (from “Alt-right” to “toxic masculinity”), and recommendations for further reading.

The book has many strengths. These include Mudde’s well-known conceptual framework, especially his clear distinction between the “radical” and the “extreme” right, the definition of “nativism” as a xenophobic form of nationalism, and the interpretation of the “populist radical right” as “pathological normalcy,” i.e., as a radicalization of attitudes that are also found in the political mainstream. Equally valuable are Mudde’s corrections of widely held misconceptions about the rise of the “populist radical right,” for example with regard to its supporters (who are more than only parts of the “working class”) and its political impact (which has often remained limited and indirect). Another obvious strength of the book is the comprehensive geographical perspective. Mudde often looks beyond the much-discussed cases of Europe and the Americas—in doing so, he also refers to far-right political players in India and, especially interesting, Japan (p. 58). The large substantive scope of the book is impressive: Beyond political parties, Mudde also deals with

The review was first published in German in *Totalitarismus und Demokratie. Zeitschrift für internationale Diktatur- und Freiheitsforschung* (2020).

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social movements and subcultures. Furthermore, he does not provide a narrow view on the far right, but stresses the “mainstreaming” and normalization of far-right political players and their ideology, which he interprets as threat to the liberal elements of democracy, i.e. minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers. This point is one of the central messages of the book.

Adding to the book’s analytical clarity is also Mudde’s use of the concept of “populism.” Holding on to the concept of the “populist radical right” and regularly referring to the term populism, he does not put the latter in the center of his analysis. Instead, the book convincingly shows that it is nativism and authoritarianism that matter most at the right end of the political spectrum. I welcome such a perspective as I remain doubtful about the added value of the concept of populism, even if clearly defined, as it is the case with Mudde’s work. Should populism as an ideology really exist it is, at most, of secondary importance for understanding far-right political players.

For scholars of the field, reading Mudde’s book offers the opportunity to reflect on the academic debate on the issue. Which questions remain open, despite the tremendous amount of research in the field? And which further questions does thinking about the state of the debate on the “populist radical right” provoke?

Importantly, recent political developments will demand a focus on new research topics in order to understand “the far right today” and tomorrow. Among them are the role of far-right political players in the political conflict over global warming, its economic and social policies when in government, and the consequences of an increase in far-right street mobilization, an empirical pattern observable in some areas.

In the remaining paragraphs, I focus on the question whether the rise of the “populist radical right” is a threat to “liberal democracy.” This is not only a key theme of the present book, it is also a central assumption of the dominant academic and public debate. Indeed, to some extent such a perspective is justified, especially with regard to minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers. Beyond restrictive legislation, the toxic discourse of the “populist radical right” toward minorities may be the most dangerous consequence of its rise—with many, and not only rhetorical, repercussions for those targeted. Concerning the rule of law and the separation of powers, it is the repression of opposition and the attack on the independence of high courts by some governing “populist radical rightists” which serves as an important warning.

Still, the discussion on “liberal democracy” versus the “populist radical right” tends to often fall short—not just in public debate, but also in research on political parties and social movements. Due to its inherent actor-centrism, these literatures often neglect other threats to “liberal democracy”: Such factors are major developments like globalization and the decreasing capacity of democratic states to influence political processes—even more so in the context of the European integration—as well as increasing socio-economic inequality and its impact on political equality. These processes do not only undermine the legitimacy of contemporary political systems, but are also central to the increase in migration, the “core issue” of the “populist radical right.” The party family’s rise can also be understood as a “consequence” of dissatisfaction with the output of “real-existing democracy” (Philippe C.

Schmitter), and not just simply as an important "cause" of the weakening of minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers. Taking such a stance requires a critical view on the quality of contemporary political systems (which Robert Dahl has famously called "polyarchies," with democracy as an unreachable ideal).

It expands the focus beyond the usual suspects toward other processes that are endangering democracy—and the actors which are driving them forward. The reviewer thus connects to some of the points in Mudde's discussion of his concluding twelfth thesis (*"The Emphasis Should Be on Strengthening Liberal Democracy"*): An effective measure against the "populist radical right" may not be an excessive focus on such players, but rather the formulation of "positive political alternatives" (p. 179) on the basis of an analysis of the "inherent tensions" (p. 178) of contemporary political systems.

Mudde's book offers an excellent overview of the key dimensions of "far-right politics" to an interested audience. For scholars of the field, reading the text not only reminds them of the great value of many of Mudde's concepts but also provides a valuable opportunity for reflecting on the current state of the academic debate. The reviewer hopes that Mudde's book will find a wide readership also beyond academia, bringing much needed clarity and perspective to a heated public debate.

Acknowledgements Open access funding provided by Projekt DEAL.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author confirm that there is no conflict of interest.

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