

How Did We Get Here?:

An Analysis of The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Western
Europe

“Just watch the interlopers from all over the world come and install themselves in our home,” thundered Marine Le Pen from the podium, “They want to transform France into a giant squat” (Nossiter). Although she faced a decisive beat in the 2017 French presidential race, the head of the far-right National Front Party (now called National Rally), achieved staggering electoral results. Le Pen, Salvini, Farage, Meuthen—the success of these politicians who introduce themselves as the “candidate[s] of the people,” is indicative of the growing support for populism and ethnically-based nationalism. But how did these leaders who explicitly favor anti-immigration and often xenophobic policies come to enjoy such popular support? This paper aims to demonstrate that Western European right-wing populism is the product of a gradual process that can be dated back to post-World War II. In order to understand the rise of national populism, it is necessary to examine the immigration movement¹ related to the post-World War economic boom which led longtime inhabitants to experience a sense of relative deprivation. It is also important to pay attention to the ethnic and cultural shifts due to globalization as well as the concerns they raised, and to analyze the instrumentalization of people’s emotions by right-wing politicians through a well-crafted strategy.

Following World War II, the dynamic economic situation of Western European countries like France, Germany, and Switzerland generated an important immigration wave, eventually leading residents to experience a sense of relative deprivation. This process can be dissected into two parts; first, the causes of immigration: the Second World War was followed by “the so-called ‘Golden Age’—a new era of growth, rising wages, and increasing equality of income and wealth” (Eatwell & Goodwin 179). This period of economic expansion combined with labor shortages and strengthened by an “ideological climate that

¹ This paper focuses heavily on immigration given that it is a major feature of national populism and a factor that illustrates the main difference between right-wing and left-wing populism.

wanted women out of the workforce” led governments to negotiate “guest-worker” agreements with Southern European and North African nations (Hunt et al. 762). According to their labor contract, immigrant workers would arrive in Western Europe to work for a set period of time, then return home temporarily to see their families and finally head back to Europe for another period as guest workers. Initially, these workers were seen as a bargain by the host countries because they required almost no social services. Since they were already adults, they did not necessitate an education. As they were still young though, they paid more taxes than they received in allowances. Mostly, they performed thankless jobs that Westerners avoided such as home cleaning and garbage collection. Despite existing racism, immigrants were tolerated as long as they did not threaten the place of the society's ethnic majority. Unlike what governments had planned, many “guest-workers” ultimately decided to settle permanently in Western Europe, a land of opportunity “where they had started to create a future for themselves and where their children felt at home” (Wirtz). This decision of immigrant workers, coupled with the decline of economic prosperity, quickly showed the limits of national tolerance. Soon, longtime inhabitants started to believe “that they [were] losing out *relative to others*” (Eatwell and Goodwin xxii). This feeling of deprivation was followed by resentment. For instance, residents grudged that immigrants benefited so much from social services like housing and social assistance, giving immigrants’ children a chance to achieve better social positions in business or government. Relative deprivation and resentment were powerful feelings that facilitated the rise of nationalist leaders who skillfully exploited these negative emotions in order to fight immigration. Unfortunately, the rise of right-wing populist parties was not just about jobs and economic growth; otherwise, the solution to the problem would be much simpler.

The hyper ethnic and cultural shifts resulting from the permanent move of “guest-workers” into their host countries generated fear among the dominant ethnic group,

constituting more ammunition for national populists' arsenal. By the late 1980s, multiculturalism became even more apparent due to globalization, which is “simply the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness” (Baylis et al. 16). Global cities like Paris or London turned into “the base for diasporas of prosperous migrants, such as the estimated ninety thousand Japanese in England by the mid-1990s” (Hunt et al. 810). Contrary to the post-World War II immigration wave, the economic boom and labor shortages were not the reasons for the arrival of migrants. Beyond searching for opportunities, foreigners were especially looking for safety as they mostly fled poverty, political persecution, and warfare in their home countries. This unprecedented migration flow raised concerns about the future of national and cultural identity. Global cities were said to produce a ‘deterritorialization of identities, ’[lacking] both a national and a local sense of themselves” (Hunt et al. 810). National fears arose due to immigrants' different religions and customs, as well as their inability to speak the language. Immigration, specifically, proved to be more difficult for individuals coming from Asia or the Middle East because they had limited knowledge about Europe and Western culture, thus negatively affecting their capacity for integration. The correlation between migration and “denationalization” generated confusion and fear as older national stabilities seemed to collapse. According to British professors Richard Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, the rise of “national populism partly [reflected] deep-rooted public fears about how a new era of immigration and hyper ethnic change could lead to the destruction of their wider group and way of life” (132). Similarly to the sense of relative deprivation and resentment felt by longtime inhabitants of Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, people's fear of cultural and national disintegration was amplified and instrumentalized by right-wing populists such as Enoch Powell and Jörg Haider through a well-crafted plan.

The strategy of nationalist leaders should be analyzed around two critical lines; first, the demonization of immigrants that exacerbated peoples' anxiety. During the late 1960s, British fear of the wave of immigrants from Pakistan, the West Indies, and India constituted a powerful platform for the ideas of conservative politician Enoch Powell. Willing to stop immigration and advance his national populist agenda, Powell, a gifted orator, delivered an inflammatory speech in Birmingham on April 20, 1968. In what became known as the “rivers of blood” speech, Powell fiercely criticized the Race Relations Act of 1965², referring to it as “the very pabulum [immigrants] need to flourish” (Powell 387). For the conservative politician, the Act was the weapon of “immigrant communities... to overawe and dominate the rest” (Powell 389). Making a powerful analogy, Powell compared immigrants to an army that would conquer the nation. Jörg Haider, the leader of the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party, used a similar approach twenty-five years later in his political manifesto, *The Freedom I Mean*. Eager to ban foreign cultural influence from Austria's future, Haider described immigrants as invaders who refused to “integrate themselves into the society and culture they find themselves in” but instead, “expect from the natives that they should accept their customs” (Haider 378). Similarly, Haider associated immigrants to an army of colonizers with proselytizing and imperial tendencies. Powell and Haider addressed people's concerns directly and used incendiary language to demonstrate that immigration would lead to the destruction of the ethnic majority's much-cherished way of life and ultimately, to immigrants' supremacy. In his 1993 political manifesto, Jörg Haider referred to multiculturalism as an “experiment... [that had] never worked anywhere in practice. Wherever and whenever it was tried, immense social problems, ghettos, slums, crime, and social unrest ensued” (Haider 377). Haider implied that the connection between immigration and multiculturalism was

² The Race Relations Act of 1965 condemned the promotion of racial hatred and banned discrimination in public areas in Great Britain.

incompatible with national order and inevitably engendered chaos. In the words of Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen, “the basic theory [of these leaders rested] in its program of categorizing people of the world according to a unique, allegedly commanding system of classification” (Sen 319). Demonizing immigration and multiculturalism was the first part of the national populists' strategy to gain popular support, a strategy seeking to neatly divide longtime inhabitants and immigrants. However, the mobilization of xenophobia was only the first line of right-wing populists' plan.

To make their strategy complete and be successful at the polls, right-wing leaders proposed solutions to the issues related to immigration and multiculturalism, presenting themselves as messiahs. In his 1968 “Birmingham speech,” Enoch Powell stressed the “urgency of implementing... the second element of the Conservative party's policy: the encouragement of re-emigration” (Powell 388). Powell wanted to reverse the current trend from immigration to emigration by supporting the repatriation of non-white immigrants into their home countries. This solution was meant to prevent “what Powell argued would spiral into violence” (Eatwell & Goodwin 138). For Jörg Haider, putting “an end to immigration,” was not the only way to stop “further social conflicts between the indigenous population and foreigners” (Haider 379). In 1993, Haider advocated for a limited number “of pupils with a foreign mother tongue in elementary and vocational school to a maximum of 30 percent” (Haider 379). Given that language is a significant part of multiculturalism, the Austrian nationalist unsurprisingly wished to suppress any forms of speaking differences. If foreign-speaking children exceeded that number, Haider proposed that “special classes for foreigners should be set up” (Haider 379). Such an idea appeared to be contradictory to Haider's wish of assimilation since it would only contribute to the marginalization of children on the basis of their native language. Isolating young individuals would only result in reinforcing their exclusion from the society they might wish to belong to. Regarding immigration in Austria,

Haider asked the rhetorical question;“ who should decide the path to take?” To that, his answer was clear: “the people” (Haider 379). By invoking the sacrosanct status of the people, the leader of the Freedom Party hid behind democratic principles to voice a nativist message and be perceived as legitimate.

The rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe is the result of a gradual process that started after World War II. The immigration wave related to the post-War economic expansion led native populations to experience a sense of relative deprivation. The ethnic and cultural shifts later due to globalization also raised serious concerns among longtime residents. Nationalist politicians then took advantage of these sentiments, instrumentalizing them through a well-crafted strategy. Consequently, right-wing populist leaders of the late twentieth century, along the lines of Enoch Powell and Jörg Haider, paved the way for today's national populists. After all, who is Marine Le Pen if not the heiress of the right-wing populist dynasty created in the 1980s by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen? These political leaders“ adopt an impoverished vision of humanity as unalterably divided” (Sen 319). Ironically, national populists denounce immigrants 'supposed lack of social integration, but they do not want them to be a part of that society, and as a result, they ostracize them. Rejecting the status quo and the idea of an heterogenous society as anathema, right-wing populism is exclusive as opposed to being inclusive. As Sen pointed out though, “the main hope of harmony lies not in any imagined uniformity, but in the plurality of our identities” (Sen 320).

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