

The Radical Right

Klaus Wahl

The Radical Right

Biopsychosocial Roots and
International Variations

palgrave
macmillan

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Psychosocial Analyses and Prevention - Information System (PAPIS)
Munich, Germany

ISBN 978-3-030-25130-7 ISBN 978-3-030-25131-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25131-4>

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Preface

A specter is haunting the world—the specter of the radical right. The surge of social and political phenomena like xenophobia, racism, authoritarianism, nationalism, right-wing populism, radicalism, extremism, and violence against asylum seekers, migrants and politicians in many countries makes citizens, journalists, scientists, and politicians concerned about the stability of democratic societies. Some authors even consider the possibility of the abolition of democracy as a result of democratic elections.

What happened in the last years? In Hungary, the right-wing populist party *Fidesz* of Viktor Orbán ruled from 1998 to 2002 and again since 2010. In Russia, nationalist propaganda played a role beyond the takeover of the Crimea in 2014. During his tenure, President Vladimir Putin has continued to use increasingly populist and nationalistic rhetoric. In Poland, after being part of a coalition government from 2005 to 2007, Jaroslaw Kaczyński's nationalist party *Law and Justice* has led the country since 2015. In 2016, the world—including political scientists—was surprised about the United Kingdom's nationalistic vote for Brexit and right-wing populist Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election, which was accompanied by a wave of racist and anti-Muslim rhetoric, hate, and violence. In Austria, the presidential candidate of the populist right *Freedom Party of Austria*, Norbert Hofer, won nearly half of the votes. Marine Le Pen's *National Front* (since 2018 *National Rally*) has attracted a large part of the French population. In the 2017 German

federal election the nationalist party *Alternative for Germany (AfD)* was the third largest party and the overall winner in parts of East Germany, where there were also movements like the anti-Islamist *PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident)* with aggressive gestures and slogans against parliamentarians and journalists. In 2017, too, a constitutional referendum in Turkey opened the way for an autocratic system under nationalist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In 2018, the right-wing populist Italian party *Leγα* formed a coalition government with the populist *Five Star Movement* in Italy. In 2019, Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro took office and several military officers were appointed to his cabinet. In the same year, a right-wing extremist in New Zealand killed 50 Muslim worshippers. This list could be expanded.

The shadow of the radical right haunting the world feels like *déjà vu*. There have been similar specters—from right wing populism to extremism—as parts of the history of many countries. To name but a few: the nineteenth and twentieth century saw battles of the North American right (Protestant groups, *Ku Klux Klan*, etc.) against racial, ethnic, and cultural pluralism as well as against political, economic, and cultural elites. In the twentieth century, Germany's *National Socialists* left blood, death, and devastation in many countries. Even after the Holocaust, racism and nationalism remained strong ideologies in large parts of the world. In recent decades, somewhat more moderate forms of the radical right have spread throughout both sides of the Atlantic—the populist right. In the twenty-first century, in particular, the terrorist attacks during and after 9/11, the financial and economic crises, and the flows of refugees and immigrants to western countries seem to have been crucial events that continue to shape the socio-political landscape on the right side of the political spectrum with radical right-wing parties and movements and influencing the whole political system.

There is a lot of media coverage of populist and radical right parties, movements, anti-Semitism, anti-Islamism, hate speech, and racially motivated crimes. Many scientists from history, political science, and sociology present empirical studies on these phenomena. However, the question remains—does this amount of research in different countries (e.g., in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe and the United States)

lead to converging theories and empirical results to explain these phenomena? Unfortunately, there are diverging results and contradictory theories. This shortcoming was one of the motives for writing this book.

Another motive was that there seem to be two rather separated types of research. On the one hand, research of academic disciplines like history, economy, sociology, and political science focus on historical, economic, social, and political manifestations of the radical right like political parties, movements, and ideologies. They are also interested in possible causes of these political phenomena like nationalist traditions, economic crises, immigration, or the failure of governments. On the other hand, psychologists, behavior scientists, brain researchers, and so forth study pre-political causes, conditions, catalysts, and triggers of radical right-wing phenomena like xenophobia, prejudices, and authoritarianism as well as their roots in personality development, socialization, and evolution. Would it not be helpful to integrate all these findings into more comprehensive explanations of political phenomena? Such *interdisciplinary (biopsychosociological) models* could also disclose strategic factors that could serve as starting points for preventive measures against xenophobia, racism, and violence to make prevention more effective. There is a need for such interdisciplinary, empirically based prevention programs given that most of the existing measures seem to be primarily inspired by folk psychology and an overly optimistic belief in political education and welfare programs—and they are not very effective.

Therefore, this book offers a summary of up-to-date international and interdisciplinary findings on the different forms of the radical right and their (pre)conditions, causes, catalysts, reinforcers, and triggers.

In hindsight, these ideas would make it appear as if I were planning a big publication. In fact, my initial aim was rather modest: when compiling literature lists for my university students I did not find articles summarizing the international *and* interdisciplinary state-of-the-art research on factors causing radical right phenomena and their psychological correlates, that is, combining findings from social sciences, psychology, and the natural sciences. Therefore, I intended to write a journal article. But, alas, I found more and more interesting results of research and I hoped that my effort to bridge the gap between different sciences could be of interest for more readers. As the radical right is found in many countries,

particularly in Europe and the United States, I was very glad to gain the support of experts on these countries. Actually, Britta Schellenberg with her profound knowledge of the European variations of the radical right gave me so much helpful information for the chapter on Europe and comments on other parts of the book that she should have been a co-author. I was also very glad to gain the support of Heather Painter with her first-hand knowledge of the United States. She contributed to the chapter on the United States and improved my English throughout the book.

During the endless process of writing, authors are isolated at their desk using a stack of books, papers, memos, a notebook, and the memory areas of their brains. However, I also received many suggestions: to explore the causes of political phenomena in a *vertical or interdisciplinary dimension*, that is on the different layers of the psyche and societies, in my research in recent decades I have been working with political scientists, historians, sociologists, statisticians, psychologists, educationalists, behavior scientists, brain researchers, and biologists in studies on xenophobic and right-wing extremist violent offenders and on the development of aggression and prejudice among children and adolescents. In addition, in a *horizontal or international dimension*, lots of ideas, questions, and criticism from conferences and discussions with scientists, politicians, ministry officials, police officers, representatives of NGOs, from university seminars, courses for kindergarten and school teachers, and social workers from Moscow to Washington, DC and from Stockholm to Brasília have left their mark on this text. I am deeply grateful to Lerke Gravenhorst, Uwe Haasen, Melanie Rhea Wahl, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on draft versions of parts of this book. Last but not least, I want to thank Sharla Plant and Poppy Hull at Palgrave Macmillan for supporting this project and for helping me throughout the publishing stages from proposal to final publication.

Munich, Germany
September 2019

Klaus Wahl

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