Radical Right Popularism in Germany: AfD, Pegida and the Identitarian Movement

Ralf Havertz, New York, Routledge, 2021, ISBN: 9780367372026

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The current political climate appears to create accentuated divisions among various incompatible world views. In a globalized world, faster dissemination of information is much faster via social media and other sources which has never been experienced before. A local incident might rapidly turn into an international crisis. For instance, the civil war in Syria has deeply impacted politics and social structures of many countries around the world. In this social environment tackling with various types of violent extremism and radical populism have become increasingly challenging. These radical worldviews may be manifested at an either end of the political spectrum, namely right or left, based on ethnicity or exploitation of religion. Following the terror attacks of 9/11 security services and public have focused on the threat posed by terrorist groups such as DAESH and Al-Qaeda. However, threats of violence also remain significant in the case of violent extreme right as well as leftist group. Challenges in tackling violent right-wing extremism is a complicated matter as they may not be seen as a significant security threat in the West. For example, despite a number of terror attacks carried by right supremacists in the USA, this group has not been listed as a terror group by the state. Also, the terror suspects are more likely to be described as mentally disturbed and disgruntled people should they be white. In other to counter violent extremism, whether based on ideology, ethnicity, or exploitation of religion, we need

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to systematically examine the root cause of such violent tendencies. In this regard, rising radical right popularism in the West calls for a comprehensive examination of this social movement.

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While all neighboring countries had their radical right populist parties, in Germany, AfD (Alternative for Germany) was established as recent as in 2013 (s. 1). Since social movements of 1968, German society has gone through a process of modernization and liberations. Consequently, some even argue that Germany has become more open and accepting social diversity, including the protections of refugees and immigrants (s. 2). However, history appears to have lost its restraining effect on many constituents who sympathize with radical right populist parties. Also, European citizens in general have been disappointed with other established parties as evidenced by a significant disengagement of citizens from politics (s. 3). This lack of interest in politics provides radical right populist movement with a potential area for growth. Therefore, the important question is that what these radical right populist parties have to offer to Europeans that other moderate political parties fail to fulfill. According to Havertz, radical right populist parties utilize a very basic narrative, the elites (Germans who are in power) betray the citizens and favors outsiders such as refugees, immigrants, and Muslims so working class in Germany should support their causes to cleanse the society from foreigners (s. 4). I think this is a very important point within any given radical movements that is categorization of social structure to create perception of *us* versus *them*. The creation of clearly defined enemy facilitates the coherence among radicals as well as a well-defined enemy to target. In the case of right-wing populist movements (AfD, Pegida, and the Identitarian Movement), they are offering to purify Germany by excluding outsiders, most importantly Muslims who pose a significant threat to the vital social pillars of German society (s. 4). This perception is different than racism based on biology; it involves more of a cultural exclusion to protect integrity of German communities. These radical movements also utilize scenarios of extinction of German people in their rhetoric by underlying the impacts of the low birth rate of *real* German and mass immigration and high birth rate among immigrants (s. 73).

Havertz underlines that populism is a contested concept (s. 8). He then notes that populists adore the execution of the popular will and reject pluralism since they are convinced that a pluralist system distort and conceal the will of people by including the diversity of competing interests. Their notion of democracy is strongly connected to the concept of popular sovereignty. This may be attractive to hard-working masses as they may feel being stripped of their freedom by elites who make decisions for their own self-interests or that of foreigners (s. 12). Radical right populist parties often employ the combination of *nativism*, *authoritarianism*, and *populism*. All three ideological characteristics must be present to create radical right populism (s. 6). Based on the radical right populists, people's nationality, race, culture or religion could be the reason to exclude them as others who do not belong to the natives and consequently, they become the sources of fear (s. 14). There is no empirical evidence that prevalence of mental disorder is higher in any radical or extremist movement that normal population. Given that we are social beings and that people generally have internal (self-control) and external (social) inhibitors against committing violence against others, violent radical movements strive to provide moral justification for their exclusionary and or violent acts against perceived threats.

Another important point is that radical right popularism can further be refined by including the division between vertical and horizontal oppositions in the definition of populism. Populism is based both on the vertical division between people and the elite (people who are in positions of power) and also on the horizontal opposition between insiders (*us*) and outsiders (*them*) (s. 15). Given the current migration of Muslims, they are perceived to be the major group of outsiders (*threat*) to German society. The author then examines the concept of Islamophobia in relation to hostility toward Muslims. This is a problematic view as the concept of phobia psychologically implies that individual should be vigilant but not too fearful about the subject matter, which should be treated cautiously but not with extreme fear such as height, darkness, or crowd. For instance, acrophobia is a mental condition in which a person experiences an intense fear of heights whereas nyctophobia is an extreme fear of darkness. A psychologically well person should be cautious about height and/ or darkness but not too fearful to function once necessary precautions are in place. The concept of Islamophobia is often used in the literature to describe antagonistic acts or attitudes toward Muslims; however, it has clear negative connotations toward Muslims. The concepts of anti-Islam or anti-Muslim or any other neutral concept would be more appropriate to use instead of Islamophobia.

The radical right movements were historically unwavering supporters of the governments; however, the ideology of populism currently is determined by the hostility between the pure people and the corrupt elite and outsiders (s. 14). Havertz makes an important observation; the categorization of others is adaptable a given social context. For instance, antisemitism has a devastating history in Germany. During the Nazi regime millions of Jews were killed by ordinary Germans in the name of protecting their nations from outsiders (p. 106). Yet, the hostility towards Jews is not a current position of AfD. In fact, the co-chair of AfD affirmed solidarity with Israel and argued a similarity between the refugee crisis of 2015-2016 in Germany. It almost appears that radical right populists focus on outsiders who are easier to deal with, namely Muslims in order to avoid strong opposition from a prominent opponent.

All radical right populist parties in Germany after the WWII can be described as failures until recently. Havertz discusses several possible reasons for these failures in detail. However, Germany had its prominent populist moments in 2010, when Sarrazin, a charismatic leader, painted a dark picture of Germany' future (s. 35). He argued that with growing upward social mobility there is a need for a sophisticated level of negative selection (s. 36). With its charismatic leadership, in 2011, The Schill party became the only radical right populist party that took part in government in Germany (s. 30). Their main policy involves the claim that they are the advocates of the ordinary people who are under threat by criminality, terrorism, and uncontrolled immigration (s 31).

Havertz argues that radical right populists and right-wing extremists are inherently different with the following point;

> Right wing extremists are strictly anti-democratic; right-wing radicals, on the other hand, do not principally oppose democracy, but they may have an understanding of democracy that is very different from liberal democracy and they are typically hostile to the way existing democratic institutions actually work (s. 20).

I believe the difference between them is only a matter of degree in the antagonistic perceptions of the state and the preferred tactics to reach a similar strategic goal, mainly to purify the society. For radical right populists, the other political parties constitute the enemy of the public, (i.e., the elites), which should be stopped to exploit ordinary public, whereas the right-wing extremists have a conviction that the necessary change (change of the government) calls for extreme measures outside of political system. The line between these two camps is rather thin and transient. Radical right populist may resort to violent extreme means should an imminent threat to society is perceived. Also, these two camps may also join the same movements. For

example, a radical Facebook group, Pegida, that has gained publicity via the organizations of regular demonstrations in Dresden (s. 96), attracts both radical right populists and right-wing extremists.

In conclusion, this book systematically examines the concept of radical right populism in Germany, with its main manifestations, including AfD, Pegida, and other formations. Havertz underlined that their main goal is to establish an authoritarian government that focuses on securing purity of Germany as well as law and order (s. 155). The radical right populists of AfD appear to abandon typical racism that entails the nation of a superior race. They rather reject multilateralism and argue that the survival of German culture and social identity is threatened by outsiders, specifically by Muslims. Islam is seen as the main enemy of German society (s. 155). The elites in Germany and other Western countries are allegedly involved in the scheme of a population exchange. As discussed in detail, the existence of both radical right populists and right-wing extremists depend on the creation of a credible outside threat. The current economic and social challenges across Europe specifically in Germany provides a fertile context for the dissemination of such antagonistic perspectives. It needs to be underlined that all radical right populists do not condone violence but their hostility towards perceived outsiders create a credible public safety threat. Also, SS evidenced by the failed coup attempt in Germany, the threat of right-wing extremism is real and should be taken as seriously as the threats posed by DAESH, or Al-Qaeda in Europe and around the world.