

Europe's Political Turmoil and the Rise of the Far Right

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OVER THE PAST two years, European politics has seemed like an old-fashioned melodrama with a cliffhanger at the end of each episode. Virtually every election has kept observers on the edge of their seats asking, "Will a far right party be the biggest this time? Will it end up in government? Might it even head the government?"

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Often the mainstream media act each time as if this roll of the dice will be decisive. Yet it never is.

Sometimes there's good news, sometimes bad. In June 2016 the British referendum to leave the European Union ("Brexit") produced a thin margin for Leave, after a campaign dominated by immigrant bashing and narrow English nationalism.

Last year the pundits heaved a sigh of relief when the Dutch far right Freedom Party only came in second in parliamentary elections in March and an even greater one when neoliberal centrist Emmanuel Macron defeated far right leader Marine Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential election in May.

Since then though, the rise of the far right has continued. The Austrian Freedom Party made big advances in parliamentary elections in October 2017 and secured key positions in a right-wing coalition government.

In an even bigger blow, the German far right, which hadn't passed the threshold for parliamentary representation since the 1950s, won 12.6% of the vote for its current incarnation, Alternative for Germany (AFD), in the Bundestag elections in September 2017. The ensuing, endless negotiations to form a coalition government produced a resurrection of the same deeply unpopular Christian Democratic-Social Democratic "grand coalition" that had just been soundly punished at the polls.

In Italy, the far right League emerged in the March 2018 elections as the biggest party on the right. In a new coalition government with the neither-left-nor-right populist Five Stars Movement, the League secured a dominant position, with its viciously anti-immigrant leader Matteo Salvini as interior minister.

In the Swedish elections in September, the far right Sweden Democrats again won a record share of

the vote as its media image shifted from a party of neo-Nazi losers to a party of fed-up professionals. Although as of this writing Sweden still has no government, the center right has already allied with the far right to vote out the center left government and elect a center right speaker of parliament.

Meanwhile in Eastern Europe, the far right-controlled governments in Poland and Hungary continue to consolidate their hold on power, purging the courts and civic institutions of their opponents, despite ineffectual attempts by the European Union to rein them in. The far right is expected to emerge with a big bloc in the new European Parliament to be elected next May.

Roots of the Far Right

Mainstream commentators are continually asking, “Has the far right peaked?” Their generally superficial analyses rarely give any reason to suppose it has done so yet.

Analyses usually concede that far right gains reflect suffering by broad swathes of the population, especially after the economic crisis that broke out in 2007-8. The pundits wring their hands a bit about the realities that European societies are steadily growing more unequal and that wages continue to lag behind profits.

Some even admit that the problem didn’t start in 2007. Many regions that were once Europe’s industrial heartlands have been social wastelands for decades. The devastating effects of Margaret Thatcher’s first policies were felt in the 1980s in the North of England — a region where Brexit won a solid majority in 2016.

However, the cracks in the establishment’s neoliberal consensus after 2008 were short-lived. Its offensive soon gathered steam again.

The ideologists turned back to doing what they’re paid to do: justifying the status quo. They resurrected the worn-out mantra that after one or two more unavoidable bouts of pain, the neoliberal medicine would finally lift all boats and dry up the breeding grounds for far right politics.

This is the outlook underlying the fresh wave of anti-social “reforms” by French President Macron. These have already led to a sharp fall in his approval ratings, lending credence to the prediction that a vote for Macron in 2017 was a vote for Le Pen next time around.

Even in parts of Europe where the current recovery seems strongest and unemployment is approaching record lows, wages are still not catching up. [1] Nor have cuts to social programs been significantly undone or major housing shortages eased. On the contrary, skyrocketing rents in a number of metropolitan regions are increasing homelessness.

It becomes all too easy for working people to blame immigrants for undercutting their wages, for squeezed small businesspeople to blame immigrant shopkeepers for stealing their business and for the native-born in general to see immigration as a threat to the welfare state. [2]

In less narrowly economic terms, the crisis has undermined many men’s sense of masculinity, which they blame on women and LGBTIQ people. National cultures were only firmly established in the 19th century, but have since become fundamental to many Europeans’ sense of identity. However they now seem to be under threat from a combination of cosmopolitan neoliberal elites and people from other nations, whether within Europe or beyond.

Muslims, people of color and EU bureaucrats in Brussels make a convenient, composite scapegoat.

The upshot is steady gains across societies for nationalism, racism and reaction, including (invariably male) racist violence on the streets. [3] Politically, this means that in virtually every election where a significant far right party takes part, its share of the vote is a new record high.

Of course, it would make more sense for voters to blame capitalism for their troubles than Muslims or Eurocrats. But sensible explanations on their own don't convince people. Progressive arguments have to be made and pushed by progressive movements. The weakness of labor and other social movements, and therefore of a left alternative to neoliberalism, is one more central factor behind the rise of the far right.

The causes of this weakness go deeper than this article can account for. Not all European trade unions have been consistent proponents of givebacks and class collaboration over the past four decades (though many have).

The left-led Greek unions, for example, launched one general strike after another over the past ten years in opposition to the assaults that have chopped off a quarter of Greek GDP. The French unions, though seriously divided, have provided some outstanding examples of resistance to austerity, on occasion, notably in 1995, beating back proposed neoliberal "reforms."

Right now, however, social resistance to neoliberalism is at low ebb in Europe. Even the most radical labor movements have not yet hit on the right combination of militancy, creative tactics, organizing of new sectors (which demands far-reaching feminist and anti-racist strategizing) and political breakthroughs to win lasting victories.

New radical left parties have not yet managed to forge strong links with labor, and social democracy's ties to the unions frayed long ago. As a result, the European center left has been collapsing and so far the radical left has not been growing proportionately. Much of the far right's electoral gains come from cannibalizing the left's previous base of voters.

Pasokization

Greece has given a name to the crisis of European social democracy: Pasokization.

PASOK, the Greek social democratic party that ruled the country for much of the 40 years after the fall of the colonels' junta in 1974, was virtually destroyed by its complicity in imposing austerity from 2011 to 2015. From 43.9% of the vote in 2009, it emerged with only 4.7% in 2015. Similar decimation has since occurred in one country after another.

The French Socialist Party, which won the presidency and control of both houses of parliament in 2012, won only 6.4% in the first round of last year's presidential election.

The Dutch Labor Party, in 2012 the country's second-biggest party with 24.8% of the vote, was punished last year for its junior role in a neoliberal austerity government by plummeting to 5.7%. Less dramatically, the German Social Democrats fell last year from 25.7% to 20.5%. The Swedish Social Democrats fell this year from 31.0% to 28.3%, their worst result in a century.

In country after country, the center left has responded by trying to steal the far right's thunder. In Denmark the Social Democrats are now even trying to outdo the far right's anti-immigrant proposals.

For a while, far right gains seemed to be mainly at the expense of the center left, with the center

right holding its own. Following the Brexit referendum, for example, as the Conservative Party did its best to champion Brexit, the far right UK Independence Party saw its standing in the polls fall.

In the Netherlands last year, the traditional right did a credible job of stealing the Islamophobic and Euroskeptical thunder of the far right Freedom Party, thus keeping the far right in second place.

But this year the German Christian Democrats, identified with Chancellor Angela Merkel's perceived welcoming attitude toward refugees, faced their own electoral thrashing, falling from 41.5% to 32.9%. Center right parties have responded by rushing even further right.

In Germany the most right-leaning component of the Christian Democratic family, the Bavarian Christian Social Union, threatened for weeks to torpedo the new grand coalition unless new restrictions were imposed on refugees (a demand that Merkel and the Social Democrats largely acceded to). Increasingly it seems, in the words of the poet Yeats, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." [4]

Rising Dangers

The long-standing taboo on alliances between the center right and the far right now looks increasingly fragile. Austria broke with it as long ago as 2000.

Already it is plausible to ask, "Suppose that in French and Dutch elections due by 2022, the center parties lose big once more, while the far right and perhaps the radical left gain?" If traditional right-wing politicians have to choose between their supposed commitment to human rights and their rock-solid commitment to neoliberal economics, which way will they go?

Alliances with the traditional right could open up the far right's road to power in a number of additional European countries. At least initially, in that scenario the far right would be somewhat constrained by the ground rules of constitutional systems. But even within constitutional limits, the far right in power could do enormous damage, especially in pushing through much of its racist program.

After all, the United States' virtually unbroken record of 230 years of constitutional rule was compatible with 75 years of African-American enslavement, and another century of African-American and Native American disenfranchisement. Western European governments, even those without any far right ministers, have already shown striking ingenuity in finding legal ways to oppress their own racialized populations.

Ways have been found, for example, to strip naturalized European citizens of their European nationality, and in some cases to then expel them from Europe. Hundreds or thousands of non-Europeans, some of them refugees under international law, are drowning in the Mediterranean because European governments refuse to allow them entry by normal means of transport.

Denmark's right-wing government, with parliamentary support but no governmental participation by the far right, is now among other things requiring children of non-European origin to spend 25 hours a week out of contact with their own families, so that they can be inculcated in "Danish values," and considering doubling the penalties for crimes committed in legally-demarcated "ghettos." [5]

In some countries building minarets has been banned; in others it's halal meat, recalling campaigns against kosher butchers that were a feature of European pre-World War II anti-Semitism.

At this point we can only imagine how far extreme right ministers could or would go in instituting what Le Pen calls “national preferences:” discrimination in housing and social services against people with one or two non-European parents. And while today’s parliamentary far right has not often had its own, open paramilitary branches, fascist and racist thugs already have extraordinary leeway in many parts of Europe to attack and even kill racialized people.

Bourgeois constitutionalism, of course, historically often excluded women and LGBTIQ people. On issues of gender and sexuality, however, the European far right today is sometimes inconsistent, and not always in continuity with earlier fascist traditions. Sara Farris has shown how the French, Italian and Dutch far right sometimes claims to defend European women and LGBTIQ people, even those of immigrant origin, against Muslim men and other men of non-European origin. [6]

At the same time, the far right, in Western as well as Eastern Europe, has taken up the pope’s attack on “gender ideology” and his defense of the traditional bounds of masculine and feminine roles. The Dutch far right Freedom Party is now being challenged from its right by Thierry Baudet’s blatantly misogynist Forum for Democracy.

While the Dutch and Scandinavian far right seem to have reconciled themselves to same-sex marriage, Le Pen’s National Rally has vowed to roll it back if it comes to power in France, and the far right in Eastern and much of Southern Europe fiercely opposes it.

McCarthyism in the U.S. showed how compatible constitutional rule can be with wholesale attacks on the radical left. So far, in recent years the European far right has not focused its fire much on Marxists, often preferring to target people whom right-wing ideologues call (peculiarly) “cultural Marxists” (meaning advocates of “identity politics”). But it would be foolish for the radical left to imagine itself permanently immune.

Curiously, while wiping out the independent labor movement was historically a top priority of fascism, unions have so far not been particular targets of the contemporary European far right.

In Turkey, for example, amidst the sweeping repression that has hit so much of Turkish society, unions have continued to organize, bargain and sometimes even win concessions by threatening strike action.

But the record of the far right in government shows how foolish unionists would be to count on favorable attitudes from that quarter. Far right parties that flirt with economic populism [7] while they are in opposition almost always show their true, pro-business colors once they arrive in power. Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, for example, who declared before the 2012 elections that not raising the retirement age was his one “non-negotiable demand,” dropped it within hours of starting talks on providing parliamentary support for a right-wing coalition government.

The Specter of Fascism?

WE HAVE ALREADY seen examples of the havoc that the far right in power could wreak — against immigrants and refugees, against civil liberties, against vulnerable populations even within the limits of constitutional rule. But given Europe’s history, the question inevitably arises: would the far right in power stay within constitutional limits? Could further advances for the far right ultimately lead once more to the establishment of fascist regimes in Europe?

Answering this question requires clarity about the nature of fascism, and an ability to distinguish between different European political contexts.

Popular accounts of fascism on the left tend to focus on repression of labor and of popular movements. But Marxist theories of exceptional regimes in general, going back to Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire, stress that they are also responses to the bourgeoisie's inability to sustain its direct class rule. In Marx's words, "The bourgeoisie apotheosized the sword; the sword rules it." [8]

In particular, Bonapartism and fascism can be means of resolving tensions among different fractions of capital that the "executive of the modern state[, as] a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie," [9] has proved unable to resolve through the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy.

Nicos Poulantzas' account of the rise of German and Italian fascism, which concluded that the major defeats for the working class had preceded the fascist seizure of power, emphasized such intra-capitalist tensions as crucial explanatory factors. [10]

Events in Europe since the Brexit referendum suggest that capital in many countries is now wrestling with bigger internal contradictions than at any time since the Second World War. The big multinational companies and banks, whose supremacy was virtually uncontested on the right and center left for 70 years, can no longer count on having things their own way: clearly they lost the Brexit referendum.

More nationalistically inclined sections of capital can count on mass support from broad middle-class layers, and from sections of the working class for which nationalism and/or racism trump class interest — as German and Italian fascism could in their time. Theresa May's travails as Britain's prime minister show the increasing difficulty of resolving these contradictions by normal constitutional means.

Shutting Down Democracy

Already in some parts of Europe, the far right in power has gone far beyond true bourgeois democracy toward what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán proudly calls "illiberal democracy."

Over the last several years, Turkey and Poland as well as Hungary have all (in different ways) combined superficial adherence to constitutional rule and multi-party elections with increasing subordination of the state and society to the ruling far right party. In all three countries, judges have been purged and replaced with others subservient to the country's rulers.

In Turkey and Hungary, one opposition media outlet after another has been closed down or bought out and university administrations (and in Turkey, massively, faculty) have also been purged. There is no reason to assume that the far right in government in a Western European country would be immune from the temptation of resorting to similar tactics. There is already a scandal in Austria involving political intervention in the security services by far right ministers.

On the other hand, bourgeois ideologues have a point when they argue that constitutional government and the rule of law have advantages from a capitalist point of view.

German and Italian fascism preserved capital's economic power, but at the cost of capitalists' political disenfranchisement. As Putin's rule today in Russia shows, the result can be considerable economic insecurity for those units of capital without solid ties to the regime.

The loss of the ability to make course corrections through periodic elections can also increase the risk of disasters, as German and Italian capital experienced in 1945. The stronger the social roots

and the greater the fund of political experience of a particular capitalist class, therefore, the more likely it is to preserve some elements of a constitutional state — particularly if it has not been shaken to its foundations by a major military defeat or economic crisis.

So circumstances can determine how far and fast a country goes towards establishing an exceptional regime. Even among fascist regimes, Nazi Germany was unusual in the speed with which it moved toward full-fledged totalitarianism in 1933-4. Fascist Italy moved somewhat more slowly and a bit less far in the 1920s.

In Western Europe today, following over 70 years of relative stability and without any huge military or economic crisis at the moment, the danger of moves away from bourgeois democracy, even if and where the far right wins a share of power, is less in some countries than in others.

In countries like France or the Netherlands, if far right parties should enter government in coalition with the traditional right — although sudden, drastic changes in the relationship of forces can never be ruled out — the traditional right today seems unlikely to give up its own interests and positions as quickly and thoroughly as Mussolini's and Hitler's coalition partners did in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although it may strike Against the Current readers as odd, the experience so far of Trump's U.S. presidency suggests likely limits to the imposition of authoritarian rule by the far right in Western Europe. Trump has unfortunately achieved a solid right-wing majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, but that does not necessarily mean that the right-wing justices will be as supine to him as Turkish judges are to Erdogan.

And if there seems to be no short-term prospect of Trump's closing down or buying out the New York Times, the publishers of Le Monde could presumably take comfort from the fact even if Le Pen were to become president.

In short, full-fledged fascism seems relatively unlikely in Western Europe in the near future. Focusing right now on that danger could risk diverting attention from the many, extremely serious dangers that the far right's arrival in power definitely would entail, especially for racialized and sexualized minorities and for labor. The challenges the left faces in its fight against reaction are daunting enough as it is.

Strategic Debates

Given the steady retreat of the traditional right and center left and their capitulations to anti-immigrant demands, the radical left has to play a major role in resistance to the far right, but the radical left is divided. Faced with the rise of racism, the first impulse of many radical left parties is to change the subject to something else.

The leadership of the Dutch Socialist Party, the country's one reasonably consistent anti-neoliberal parliamentary force, exemplifies this attitude. When the far right does something particularly outrageous, the Socialists will issue a dignified, measured condemnation. But its leaders argue openly that it can only lose on both sides by focusing on issues of racism: among voters of immigrant origin, whom they see as increasingly succumbing to religious and ethnic agendas that the SP cannot accept, and among white voters, who may vote far right if their prejudices are openly criticized.

This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the Dutch Labor Party was decimated in the 2017 parliamentary elections, the SP, its traditional rival on the left, lost slightly too, while Greens and

liberals with progressive social rhetoric but right-wing economics gained — as did the far right. In Germany, too, the Greens' gains have recently kept pace with those of Alternative for Germany, despite the Greens' neoliberal economic stances and growing willingness to join center right coalition governments, largely because of their liberal image on immigration. By contrast, the German Social Democrats' continual concessions to right-wing xenophobia have done nothing to shore up their old working class base.

When an election clearly hinges on issues around immigrants, evasions and shilly-shallying on those key issues, even when combined with decent positions on healthcare and housing, only convinces many voters of a party's irrelevance.

Moreover, by ignoring the concerns of racialized voters, the reformist left is dooming itself to slow-motion decline. Especially in the big cities and among young people, immigrant communities are not only a key force to mobilize in order to defeat the far right, but also the future of the working class. Appealing to a shrinking pool of older white voters is a recipe for failure.

Even worse than dodging issues of racism is accommodating to racism. The Dutch SP has done this lately too, notably by going along with the idea that asylum seekers should be processed in centers somewhere in Africa instead of on European soil.

Anyone who has seen the images of slave auctions and atrocities against immigrants in Libya should reject such proposals out of hand. Yet in Germany, Die Linke leader Sahra Wagenknecht has made similar proposals for immigration restrictions in the program of a parallel movement she has just founded, Aufstehen.

In France Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the biggest radical left force Unsubjugated France, continues to flirt with occasional support for French imperial interventions and for measures against public manifestations of Islam, in the name of France's secular, republican tradition. With positions like these, radical left parties risk abdicating any significant role in the fight against the far right.

Another issue that divides the radical left is the question of alliances with other parties against the far right. In many countries, big demonstrations against the far right used to feature speakers from across the political spectrum, including the non-fascist right. Back then, though, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the traditional right liked having an anti-fascist profile. This is much less the case today, when these parties see themselves as the far right's electoral rivals if not its potential partners in government.

In fact social democratic parties too are increasingly competing with the far right for votes, by championing restrictions on immigration and making calls to get tough on crime that target racialized young people. Worse, heading toward the next elections the Danish Social Democrats are hinting that they might prefer to form a government with backing from the far right Danish People's Party rather than allying with other left parties.

In these circumstances, it makes no sense for the radical left to try to work in top-down coalitions against the far right with leaders of right-wing and center-left parties. What makes sense is the century-old Marxist united front tactic: appealing primarily to grassroots supporters of the reformist left who have decent anti-racist reflexes, and working with top reformist leaders only when they can be pressured into joining practical, activist initiatives.

In practice, admittedly, life is complicated. Activists on the British Labour Party left, for example, have to contend with the reality that their only short-term hope of blocking a reactionary Tory Brexit is to secure the election of a Labour government, which would inevitably be stacked with stalwarts

of the pro-neoliberal, pro-EU Labour right.

Some compromises, however, are inadmissible. The Labour Party leadership's recent decision to accept the idea that fundamental criticism of the state of Israel is anti-Semitic is a classic case of a tactic that weakens the radical left, demoralizes solidarity activists, alienates many supporters in immigrant communities, and ultimately plays into the hands of the far right.

The key to defeating the far right is not too-clever institutional maneuvers, but extra-parliamentary mobilization. Only action in the workplaces and on the streets can ensure that, if Europe's center truly cannot hold, it is not the reactionary right but the radical left that emerges triumphant.

Peter Drucker

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P.S.

- Part 1. Against the Current n° 197, November-December 2018:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/197/europes-political-turmoil/>
- Part 2. Against the Current n° 198, January-February 2019:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/198/europes-political-turmoil-part-2/>
- Peter Drucker is an advisory editor of Against the Current and an editor of its Dutch sister website Grenzeloos.

Footnotes

[1] "The Labour Market: All Work and No Pay," The Economist, September 8, 2018.

[2] For a case study of this dynamic in Amsterdam, see Paul Mepschen's PhD dissertation, *Everyday Autochtony: Difference, Discontent and the Politics of Home in Amsterdam*, University of Amsterdam, 2016.

[3] See Ivan du Roy and Rachel Knaebel, "En Allemagne, en Italie ou en France, l'extrême droite tue par dizaines,"
<https://www.bastamag.net/En-Allemagne-en-Italie-ou-en-France-l-extreme-droite-tue-par-dizaines>.

[4] William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1919).

[5] Ellen Barry and Martin Selsoe Sorensen, "In Denmark, Harsh New Laws for Immigrant 'Ghettos,'" New York Times, July 1, 2018.

[6] Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Farris draws on Jasbir K. Puar's earlier work on "homonationalism" (*Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007 & 2017), but Puar focuses mainly on the United States and does not write from a Marxist

perspective.

[7] Farris (op.cit, pp. 57-77) argues that the currently common practice of referring to far right parties as “populist” places undue weight on formal, stylistic features that these parties share with some parties of the left and center, instead of on the class and social content of their programs.

[8] Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852),
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>.

[9] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of The Communist Party (1848),
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>.

[10] Nicos Poulantzas, Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism, translated by Judith White, London: Verso, 1979, 139, 172-3, 199, 71-2.