Is Today's Far Right in Western Europe a Threat to Democracy?

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JAMES BARNES, AUG 9 2013

Introduction

Observing the fifty-nine people who gathered to attend the launch of the newly consecrated far-right British Democratic Party (BDP) outside of Leicester on the 9th February 2013, one could be forgiven for thinking the threat of right wing extremism in Europe is overhyped. Led by former British National Party (BNP) MEP Andrew Brons, the crowd seemed disappointing given that just over a year earlier, nearly 170 people had come to listen to him speak at the same venue (Mount, 2013). This meagre gathering of supporters does not seem as a real threat to western democracy in itself. But further afield, the extreme right and populist parties have become the subject of growing attention across the continent and along with a surge in "counter-jihad" street orientated groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) (Goodwin, 2013, p. 1) and the Hungarian Guard, or Magyar Gárda, the far-right movement has proved to be in some resurgence. Roger Eatwell describes the frail situation of democracy as the "end of [the] history [of] triumphalism of the 1990's; and without the shadow of communism to demonize as the 'other', is it fair to label democracy as [nothing] more than the organization of elite competition, mediated by television?" (Eatwell, 2004, p. 2). If this is the case, then what is this "threat" posed by far right groups?

In this essay, I categorize the threat in two strains: the direct threat that is posed by groups themselves, and the impact they have had directly upon the democratic system, perhaps through them taking part in a coalition government; and indirectly, arguably a far more subversive yet undetected form of influence. Furthermore, I shall examine the defence mechanisms of democracy—the reactions that states have had in order to counter this expanding grey cloud of extremism that seems to have gathered pace during the economic gloom.

A Real and Present Threat?

The resurgence of the far right dates back to the 1980s, up until it was considered a spent force. Throughout the 1990's, the far-right underwent a grand resurgence, and during the current economic climate, successes of far-right parties have been reported across the continent. The Hungarian right-wing party Jobbik took 14.8% of the national vote in the 2009 European elections, growing to 16.7% in the general election of 2010. This translates to 855,000 votes and 47 seats (Kreko, 2012). The Front National in France also had success in gaining 18% of the vote in the 2012 Presidential election. Moreover, the BNP gained enough support to elect their first ever MEP's in the same 2009 elections that Jobbik had prospered in (Evans, 2012). The sudden good fortunes of these parties has been linked to the global financial crisis, but as Mathew Goodwin acknowledges, while the Eurozone crisis may have contributed to a situation where the far-right has been able to flourish, other factors such as the perceived threats of Islam, public anxiety over immigration, and the weakening of bonds between the mainstream parties and the electorate have been conducive to their resurgence; indeed it seems "populist extremists were already operating amid a perfect storm" (Goodwin, 2012).

While it seems that the majority of these contemporary far-right parties lack the overt neo-nazi nature of their pre-WW2 counterparts, the threat posed by them is still regarded as substantial by western democracies today. It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the threat they bring to democracy, but as mentioned above, it can be placed

broadly in two camps: direct and indirect threats. Eatwell notes that while many of the populist groups have now had results that have catapulted them to status's worthy of being "considered as full members of the political arena," (Eatwell, 2004) there has been a distinct lack of direct action taken by these parties in their state or local legislatures.

This is predominantly because few have had the chance to be returned as part of a government. The unusual cases of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) and the party that succeeded it, the National Alliance (AN), and the Lega Nord, and their part in the "House of Freedoms" coalition under Silvio Berlusconi in 1994, stands out as more anomalous than the beginning of any sort of pattern of far-right participation in governance. Cas Mudde notes that the populist far right parties were "lacking with experience and power" during their stint in government (Mudde, 2007, p. 280), and whilst this has failed to provide a precedent, it has demonstrated that coalition governance, though unlikely, is an attainable goal of right-wing extremist parties.

The Danish People's Party (DF) has had, however, an impact on the centre-right party. It was propping up in coalition, "[turning] Denmark's immigration regime into one of Europe's tightest." Coincidently, its leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, has been voted ahead of the country's Queen (Anonymous, 2011). Therefore, I conclude that the "direct" threat posed by the far-right movement is not the most potent of dangers, but with the current climate benefiting right-wing populism as it has, it should be noted that there is potential for further gains on this side of the political spectrum as the financial crisis runs its course.

A Burgeoning Influence

The largest threat the far-right poses to European democracies that I would argue comes from the "indirect" impact that populist movements have on society. The rise of right-wing extremism has often been associated with an increasingly disengaged electorate, and through offering an alternative, these parties have been able to attract swathes of supporters across the continent. Mudde attributes this to the way populist parties have "contaminated" (Mudde, 2007, p. 283) aspects of mainstream parties, varying from their leadership strategies to the way they interact with their followers.

The involvement of smaller far-right parties has influenced electoral contests. Even though on many occasions they may not have won a particular seat, their impact on the outcome of that seat has been substantial. Richard North's analysis of the 2005 UK general election proves that UKIP (and to a lesser extent Veritas) had an influence over 27 seats that would otherwise have gone to the centre-right Conservative Party (North, 2005). Although this has mainly caused to affect centre-right parties, in some cases, the far–right has aided them by offering them an option to form a coalition government, countering the centre-left's prospects of allying with groups such as the Greens. (Mudde, 2007, p. 284)

Nonetheless the centre left have, themselves, had to change policies, especially immigration related ones, to ensure they appeal to people across the whole electoral spectrum. Calls for the UK Labour Party to redouble its efforts to meet voters' concerns over the impact of EU migration on jobs and living standards (Wintour & Morris, 2013) were made after it was beaten into fourth place after resurgent euro-sceptic party UKIP took votes from all mainstream parties. While the far-right has indeed influenced both the outcome of elections and the policies of established parties, what I consider to be increasingly worrying is the unrepresentative proportion of young people who have aligned themselves with these movements.

The ability of populist parties to make good use of social media sites, along with preying on declining senses of national pride and large-scale youth unemployment, has proved a compelling mixture for attracting disaffected youths. This over-representation is explained to some extent by the theories of social disintegration where youths who have felt "unintegrated" have turned to far-right groups for their "substitute intermediary structures" through their "nationalistic programmes" (Lubbers, et al., 2002, p. 348). The largest threat posed by the far-right comes from their ability to capitalise on the poor state of society and lack of integration of the youth. The task for mainstream parties to bring them back into the fold is indeed looking to be some challenge, but the ramifications for continuing to ignore the youth has potential to be far more damaging over time. While the future fortunes of the far-right are unpredictable,

the prospects of younger members of society harbouring such great feelings of disaffection could prove to be far more of a threat to western democracies.

Democracy's Defences

Giovanni Capoccia highlights the paradox that exists in democratic theory: "to what extent is it conceivable for a democratic polity to grant all its citizens-including those intent on undermining it-full liberty of action?" (Capoccia, 2004). This absurdity of democracy ensures that any response to far-right success is a complex issue that risks contravening the very constitution of western liberal democracies. This said, two main routes of addressing the far-right are distinguished as the militant and immunized routes. Both looking at fascism as an illness, the former route looks at "[getting] rid of the fascist cancer" while the latter aims to take a "more holistic view treating both the symptoms and the illness aetiology" (Pedahzur, 2004, p. 116).

Taking a more militant angle towards dealing with right-wing extremist parties can be a risky manoeuvre, however. As noted by numerous academics, exclusion of parties can indeed lead to radicalising. Goodwin cites a report that looked at ten western European democracies and found that groups that became shut out tended to reorganise swiftly usually not having changed vastly. Conversely, those not excluded from the political process tended to abandon their extreme ideological positions in order to gain public support (Goodwin, 2012).

Germany, for example, has tended to take a more militant approach to dealing with far-right parties. Given the past failure of the Weimar Republic, it is understandable that out of all the western European democracies, it has the most stringent anti-fascist laws. The most extreme response would be to ban an organisation deemed a threat to the state, while only the federal Minster of Interior's blessing is required to ban a non-party organisation—to ban a political party the rules and requirements are more demanding. These laws are in place to ensure the longevity of the democratic process in Germany, and therefore (also due to the failings of the Weimar Republic), it is indeed incredibly difficult to obtain a ruling, which must be from the Federal Constitution Court to ban a political party.

In this case, it is evident that taking a militant approach is difficult due to the constraints that a liberal democracy puts on itself. I would argue that the immunization route would offer a more permanent, lasting solution to the far-right dilemma. Though imperfect, a more direct upstream approach can address vulnerable groups and increase cohesion among communities. From inter-religious and inter-cultural learning; anti-Semitism and Islamaphobia and identity; democracy and tolerance in school education; to community outreach projects that encompass police officers, politicians, lawyers and prison officers, opportunities can be gasped to help to build a strong civil society (Ramalingam, 2012, p. 11).

Engaging with those who seek to further engage with far-right groups and those who have tendencies for violence is integral for tackling these movements. I believe a strong active civil society enables immunization to be a far more fruitful process, and can especially be productive in combatting the rise of radical right-wing street movements such as the EDL that operate outside of the party structure. The so called "uncivil society" that these groups operate in can be seen as presenting a greater challenge than right-wing political parties, due to its "fluid nature" (Pedahuzur & Weinberg, 2001, p. 53) and ability to threaten from a parliamentary platform, but its unique grass-roots appeal.

For one, these movements have offered their participants what no party has recently been able to—some form of connection with the real issues that are important to them. Goodwin's briefing paper on the threat of the EDL and the counter-jihad movement has provided some worrying figures that corroborate fears over the gulf between mainstream parties and the electorate finding that up to 62% of those supporters of the counter-jihad group were disaffected with democracy (Goodwin, 2013, p. 8). Henceforth, it is evident to see that the benefits in taking an immunized approach to addressing the challenges caused by the far-right gives opportunity to address problems across the democratic polity. The high attraction rate of these movements is predominantly due to a high sense of detachment from the democratic system, a void that these far-right groups have filled willingly. To bring them back into the fold is a difficult task, but one that allows for a re-healing of the democratic system in Western Europe, and mainstream political parties should jump it upon.

Conclusion

The ascension of the far-right has indeed given the neo-liberal western democracies of Europe a stark wake-up call, but electorally has failed to grasp the headlines on a regular occasion. However, while there has been a lack of success for these groups electorally, the "new enemies of democracy," or radical street movements, have steadily become more popular. It is hard to prove whether these have replaced the traditional right-wing radical political parties (read "old enemies") but may demonstrate a more unpredictable threat for democratic systems (Pedahuzur & Weinberg, 2001, p. 68). The indirect threats of these groups have potential to be more devastating in the future and there is, as always, the "democratic dilemma" of the balance between liberty and security, which has been all the more heightened after the 9/11 attacks on New York (Mudde, 2004, p. 208). The far-right as an entity is here to stay, and the threat it holds to western European party political states depends on the will of mainstream parties and their actions laterally, as well as with the people they aim to represent.

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Written by: James Barnes
Written at: Queen's University Belfast
Written for: Dr. Lee McGowan
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