

Review – The Far Right Today

Written by Hüseyin Pusat Kildiş

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The Far Right Today

By Cas Mudde

Polity, 2019

The concept of the far-right has become a buzzword of 21st century politics. While politicians are blaming each other for being “extremist”, it is hard to argue that there is a consensus on what the far-right is. In *Far-right Today*, Cas Mudde offers a timely perspective on the essence of the far-right while clarifying misconceptions about the concept. Mudde is known for his major studies of the far-right and populism such as *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* and *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat Or Corrective for Democracy?* Mudde demonstrates his experience in this short but dense book by exploring the features of far-right politics, focusing on the contemporary. The author has long argued that we are now in a “fourth wave” of far-right politics. In the book, he gets into the details of this new wave through comparisons to those preceding it. He divides far-right politics into two categories, the “extreme right” and the “radical right”. The difference is their stance on democracy. According to Mudde, the extreme right disagrees with the main characteristics of democracy, including political equality and the majority voting system, while the radical right supports democracy but rejects the key values of minority rights and the rule of law (p.7). This categorization helps the reader to better understand what is “normalized” and what is still considered “extreme” in both politics and the mainstream media.

The book begins with a striking quote from President Donald Trump that summarizes the current state of far-right politics and captures the audience from the beginning. It is worrisome to think that even the leader of the world’s most powerful country was using populist rhetoric to attract attention. The book is comprised of ten chapters. In the first two parts, Mudde analyses the history and ideology of the far-right. He explains the first three waves, namely neo-fascism (1945-1955), right-wing populism (1955-1980) and the radical right (1980-2000), as well as the key characteristics of far-right politics such as its stance on immigration, security and foreign policy. According to Mudde, the main distinction of the fourth wave is the “mainstreaming of the far-right” caused by three crises: the September 11 attacks, the Great Recession of 2008, and the ongoing migration crisis that began in 2015 (p.20).

The following six chapters explore the mobility of the far-right, its subcultures including the alt-right and skinheads; and finally, its causes and consequences at the regional and global levels. Considering that “the far-right is plural rather than singular”, these chapters are useful for understanding the diversity of the far-right (p.163). Mudde, rightly points out the role of social media in far-right politics, especially in the fourth wave, which offers “an opportunity to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and push your way into the public debate” unlike mainstream media that still has gatekeepers (pp.110-111). Indeed, extremist ideas can easily gain attention on social media, allowing far-right politicians to spread their message globally. While the author correctly stresses that mainstream media plays a role in promoting the radical right, he omits the fact that this situation also applies to social media (p.109). Sometimes social media platforms like YouTube promote extremist content. Thus, there is also a demand for far-right politics on social media from the the platforms themselves. Most media outlets only care about making a profit, and inter-racial, cultural and inter-religious conflicts attract people’s attention. In short, “the far-right sells” (p.108).

The ninth chapter focuses on the role of gender in the far-right, arguing that it is shaped by nativism both ethnically

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and racially. It is underlined that most far-right groups still hold a traditional view of the role of men and women in society, in which women are seen as mothers who take care of their children instead of working, while men are muscular, heterosexual and aggressive (pp.148-149). However, as Mudde notes, sometimes far-right leaders use feminism and homosexuality for their own interests (pp.151-153). For instance, Alice Weidel, one of the leaders of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), who is herself homosexual, opposes same-sex marriage because the priority of same-sex couples who vote for the party is to get rid of “Muslim gangs”, which are viewed as a threat.

In the last chapter, Mudde presents twelve theses on the fourth wave in order to summarize it, including suggestions to fight it. The last chapter can be read as a general summary of the book, helping the reader’s understanding. The book ends with a detailed chronology of far-right politics between 1948 and 2019, a glossary of terms, as well as further reading on the far-right and populism.

The main contribution of the book is its comprehensiveness. Rather than simply describing how the far-right has increased its votes over the years, the author analyzes the far-right from bottom to top and reveals its transformation over the years. The fact that Mudde draws examples not only from Europe and the United States but also from India, Israel, Japan and Australia, makes his arguments more solid. Moreover, Mudde often looks beyond stereotypes of the far-right. For instance, he highlights the diversity of far-right supporters and challenges the stereotypes of the far-right as “the grumpy”, “old”, “white racist” (p.71).

Nevertheless, the book has its shortcomings. Although Mudde presents populism as a complementary theme of the far-right, this does not fully reflect the importance of populism, which is often used not only on the right but also on the left. In the book, however, the populism of the far-right is not sufficiently differentiated from populism more broadly. Furthermore, according to the author, the best way to deal with the far-right is to strengthen liberal democracy (p.178). However, there are two problems with this argument. First, the author does not explain why liberal democracy has been damaged during the 21st century in the first place. The fact that the Bush administration used liberal values such as “democracy promotion” and was “operating on behalf of all liberal democracies” during the invasion of Iraq have damaged the legitimacy of liberal democracy. The military intervention in Libya is a more recent example of “liberal intervention”. Some scholars have even called such wars “liberal wars”. It is hard to strengthen liberal democracy without facing up to these events. The other problem is the vagueness around the idea of strengthening liberal democracy. It is hard to disagree with the argument, yet the question of how remains. The author states that he does not want to get into much detail on this issue (p.178). However, if the best way to challenge the far-right is to promote liberal democracy then elaborating on possible scenarios rather than mere suggestions would be helpful.

In sum, the book is a valuable contribution to clarifying the misty landscape around the far-right. It presents a detailed account of contemporary far-right politics and reaches beyond academia. It is empirically rich, and the clarifications about the far-right in general are convincing and solid.

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