Ruth Wodak has been an eminent analyst of the radical right for many years now, as well as an important critical voice in public debate in Austria and internationally. Her latest book brings together and further develops some of the recurring issues in her work on the radical right and also in other publications: racism, anti-Semitism and exclusionary nationalism, gender, the media, and language politics.

After setting the scene in the first introductory chapter and a second definitional chapter, chapters three to five deal with the radical right’s exclusionary politics. Chapter three: ‘Protecting Borders and the People: The Politics of Exclusion’ discusses the discursive strategies and argumentative structures of this exclusionary rhetoric as identified by the discourse-historical approach Wodak and colleagues developed at Vienna University. Chapter four: ‘Language and Identity: The Politics of Nationalism’ zooms in on how migrants and people of foreign descent are constructed as intruders that do not belong to the ethnically and culturally defined nation, and should be kept out or moved out of the borders of the nation-state. Wodak pays particular attention to language policy and to how the ‘mother tongue’ is utilised in a nativist manner to construct this exclusive ethnic-cultural nation. Chapter 5: ‘Antisemitism: The Politics of Denial’ argues that despite the Holocaust and the rise of anti-Islamic rhetoric, antisemitism has not disappeared from radical right politics. Drawing on analysis of media interviews with the BNP’s Nick Griffin and the FPÖ’s Barbara Rosenkranz, Wodak deconstructs the coded nature of antisemitism, the strategies for ‘saying the unsayable’, and the victim-perpetrator reversal that characterise anti-Semitic rhetoric in a post-Holocaust context.

Overall, the book focuses more systematically on the nativism of the populist radical right than on its particular populist people-versus-elite dimension, even though the author does deal with that dimension as well. The emphasis on nativism and exclusion is a legitimate choice, for this forms the very ideological heart of the populist radical right political programme. Populism, by contrast, is a political strategy. But it is a crucial strategy that has been of major importance to radical right electoral success and political impact.
After the three insightful chapters on the exclusionary politics of the radical right the following two chapters move on to aspects of radical right politics that have not been the object of much sustained investigation so far. Chapter 6 ‘Performance and the Media: The Politics of Charisma’ studies the performance strategies of radical right politicians. Based mainly on the example of the FPÖ’s Heinz-Christian Strache, Wodak shows how radical right politicians carefully construct a multi-layered public image to attract different groups of voters. She illustrates how Strache uses different dress styles (fashionably serious, young and casual, folklore, etc.), locations (pubs, discos, etc.), and genres and means of communication (speeches, comic strips, rap songs, billboards, etc.) to appeal to different audiences. Whilst clearly based on insight into the workings of the media, the chapter deals less explicitly with how exactly the performance strategies of the radical right interact with media and journalistic logics. This is logical given the book’s focus on radical right political actors, but does indicate avenues for further research for which the book could provide an impetus.

Whilst the gender dynamics of radical right voting have been studied, the radical right’s stances on gender have been largely ignored so far (but see a recent Patterns of Prejudice special issue 49, 1–2). Chapter 7 ‘Gender and the Body Politics: The Politics of Patriarchy’ reflects on the similarities and differences between how the American and European radical right instrumentalize the female body. In the US, Wodak shows, the radical right defence of the white heteronormative and Christian family is still very much built around a resistance to abortion and a focus on women’s reproductive roles. In Europe, the situation has become more complex, as the traditionally morally conservative radical right now simultaneously presents itself as the defender of the equality and freedom of women against Islam, using the headscarf and the burqa as symbols of the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe and of the suppression of women by Islam. As Wodak notes, especially Western European parties like the French FN, the Flemish VB and Wilders’ PVV have developed in this direction. But the 2015–16 ‘refugee crisis’ has also turned Central and Eastern European in this anti-Islamic direction, and seems to have made radical right parties across Europe more similar (a development that happened after the publication of this book).

The intricacies of this combination of traditional conservative, nativist and anti-feminist views on the family with a more recent defence of women’s rights against Islam would perhaps have deserved a bit more attention. This mix causes obvious contradictions and ambiguities on the level of content as the radical right now presents itself as the defender of the very same values of equality between the sexes and of women’s freedom it used to be (and in many cases still is) opposed to. However, on the level of political rhetoric there is significant continuity across these contradictory positions. The radical right positions itself as the defender of
society against threats to the continuity of the social order, against the loss of identity, and the downfall of Western civilization – in some contexts it is the continuity of Christianity and family values they are defending, in others it is secularism, freedom and equality. This points to the oft-overlooked significance of conservatism to radical right rhetoric. This centrality of conservatism is in fact implied in the excellent and telling title ‘The Politics of Fear, and in the author’s insistence on how the radical right identifies itself as the saviour of society against internal and external threats.

The main strength and relevance of this book lies in its sharp analysis of what Wodak calls the ‘micro-politics’ of the populist radical right. In the abundant literature, close analysis of these parties’ political rhetoric and strategies remains relatively rare. Deploying the discourse-historical approach she has come to be identified with, Wodak connects the sharp microanalysis of texts with reflections on the meso and macro context. In each chapter, she supports her main arguments with a number of vignettes in which she takes a close look at particular discourse moments in Europe and the US. These include Jörg Haider’s calculated ambivalence regarding Nazism during tv interviews, Nick Griffin’s Holocaust denial on the BBC’s Question Time, and the re-use of the Swiss SVP’s infamous ‘black sheep’ poster by several other radical right parties.

This analysis of the ‘micro-politics’ of the radical right also includes much-needed reflections on media strategies and propaganda tactics. For example, The Politics of Fear sheds light on how radical right parties, as part of their ‘continuous campaigning style,’ use strategies of provocation, scandalization, exaggeration, ’calculated ambivalence’ and an ‘overall antagonistic habitus’ to secure a steady stream of media and public attention. She shows how, as political opponents and journalists react to the radical right’s transgressing of norms and taboos, radical right politicians apologise in a calculated and ambivalent manner, or deny the accusations altogether and present themselves as victims of elite media and politicians and as defenders of free speech. This then leads to further political debate and media coverage, keeping in motion what Wodak calls the ‘right-wing perpetuum mobile’.

Stopping this perpetuum mobile, she argues in a final chapter ‘Mainstreaming: The Normalization of Exclusion,’ requires alternative ways of media reporting that ‘do not fall into the trap’ radical right politicians set with their scandalous remarks and provocations. Instead, media should deconstruct their claims and reveal their communication strategies. Opposing the success of radical right parties and their ‘mainstreaming’ – radical right parties take part in governments and mainstream parties take over parts of their rhetoric and implement part of their policies – also means formulating political alternatives. To successfully counter the ‘politics of fear’, Wodak argues, progressive forces should acknowledge the dangers and
threats of the contemporary world and answer them through an alternative politi-
cs of solidarity rather than entering into the logics of the ‘politics of fear’. The
Politics of Fear does not only strengthen our understanding of how radical right
politics work, but also formulates important lessons about how to deal with them.

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