

Understanding the success of far-right parties in Europe : Austria, Italy and Switzerland

Knowing that each European country has its own electoral agenda with each time several levels of power, we have seen a new reading of the “problem of far-right parties” appearing approximately every two years, and this for more or less twenty years now. This being so, the latest fashion consists in saying that now, the rich also vote for far-right parties contrary to yesterday, far-right parties which would moreover have changed in nature. That is not false, but it is not new either; that appears to be new if in this interpretation, one selects exclusively the countries that enter without too much difficulty – namely according to their latest electoral results – the very fresh mould of the latest conjecture. Conversely, at the risk of being radical, what is truly new in this theory is on the other hand completely false.

Why nothing new? Because Jörg Haider’s FPÖ, Gianfranco Fini’s National Alliance, Umberto Bossi’s Northern League and Christoph Blocher’s Democratic Union of the Centre¹ have never been regarded as parties having exclusively a popular electoral base, far from it: for years, these parties have been gathering at the same time a large part of the working class (especially the FPÖ) but also and especially a large part of the middle class. This seems true as well for the Vlaams Blok, namely because of the defense of the Flemish identity within the Belgo-Belgian context. What leads us to believe that in the past, only the poor voted for far-right parties while today, the rich would do so, is the decline of the almighty French National Front which we interpret in electoral terms, forgetting a little too quickly that the true causes of its disappearance came above all from a fight between leaders inside the party – the FN has never been as powerful as before its implosion in January 1999. The “temporay²” fall of this model *par excellence* of the “racist” party with a popular base gave a greater visibility to other far-right parties in Europe, resting less exclusively on this type of electorate.

On the other hand, what is new in this theory appears to be completely false as far as a change in form does not imply a basic change in nature. Why the fact of wearing a tie and of using less shocking concepts would give respectability to Umberto Bossi, who regards the Italians of the South as a lower race, to Filip Dewinter, who works daily with his neo-Nazi friends (in particular for the information and security within the party), to Bruno Mégret, who banks the future of its party on the numerous young people of the National Republican Movement (skinheads, pagans and other amateurs of Identity rock’n’roll), or to Jörg Haider, who delivers speeches in praise of the SS?

The true problem today, which is not new either, is the total incorporation of the “problem of the illegal foreigners” and (by extension) of the poor immigrants within a political and

¹ Blocher is today part of the federal government.

² The french presidential election in May 2002 have shown that the Front national was everything but dead.

administrative security framework justified by the thematics of invasion, which is now acknowledged by all political tendencies in Europe. This turning point being passed, the whole of the political hemicycle moves to the right on these questions, and the specificity of far-right parties – xenophobia – disappears in the night and the fog.

Far-right parties today and yesterday

The relationship between the extreme right of today and yesterday looks extremely complex. The only difference that might appear relevant is the following one: while historical Fascism took its roots in a context of general and extreme crisis at all levels (economic, etc.) of the society – with all the consequences that it implies in terms of violence and radicalism –, neo-Fascism (or contemporary “Fascism with a human face”) develops in a softer and more discreet way and rests on the fear of a future collapse or a future destabilization of the countries concerned, of their economy, identity and culture (besides, the cultural element is likely to become increasingly decisive when confronted with the incipient cosmopolitanism).

In this sense today, whether they have a popular or middle-class electoral base or both at the same time, European far-right parties resemble American ones in their “producerist” tendency. The term “producerist” refers to the populist movement, which sees the American people as a middle class that works hard at the side of a working class, while both are crushed by the social parasites coming from the top and the bottom. Those from the top are the major financial actors, the Jews, the mundialists and the bureaucrats of the international organizations, that is those who actively take advantage of the globalisation; those from the bottom are the immigrants, the refugees, the illegal foreigners but also the homosexuals who passively take advantage of the globalisation.

By mixing identity, national preferences and ultra-liberalism, Haider, Bossi and Blocher seem to charm this half working-, half middle-class electorate, which is ready for anything in order to preserve its cultural identity, to support the cost of the globalisation and especially to contain the “danger” of “the invasion” coming from Eastern Europe.

What must consequently be done to fight this phenomenon? Educate – still and always –, to put a definitive end to scapegoating where everything starts ultimately! But is this still possible when all traditional parties in Europe agree on the criminalization of foreigners?

One invariant to define far-right parties today

One of the rare invariants making possible to define contemporary far-right parties resides in their generally common political programme, which asserts that it would be possible to go beyond liberalism and socialism while maintaining the respective advantages of the basic voters. By limiting the number of persons benefiting from social solidarity, it would indeed be possible, according to the far-right propaganda, to maintain a broad personal freedom, in

particular at the economic level. The elected representatives, the real "nationals", the majority and autochthonous group could consequently back both horses, i.e. penetrate wild and international competition within the context of the globalisation while keeping the social advantages ensuing from a local security based on the national preference.

The autochthonous group could enjoy both a strong freedom to set up in business and a national social solidarity tax from which the foreigners, the naturalized immigrants, the refugees, etc. would be excluded. By doing this, far-right parties fight at the same time the forces from left and right on their own field. Yet, this limits the beneficiaries of the social advantages to the sole "nationals" and the beneficiaries of the liberal advantages to the strongest (worship of the head) who will be able to do business and to work in synergy with the political leaders and the large corporations³.

Ultimately, this limitation is perhaps what will enable us to correctly identify the far-right parties of tomorrow as far as xenophobic security programmes are no longer their exclusive privilege. In fact, far-right parties have lost the main part of their monopoly on all the questions directly or indirectly related to insecurity, poverty and immigration. In this sense, the rationing and limiting of the number of persons benefiting from both social solidarity and individualism in the far-right programme confirm at the same time the appropriate use of this concept, which can mean literally and among other things an individualism that is led to the extreme (far right, extreme right) – to the point of excluding part of the group concerned by the political programme –, but also its inappropriate use knowing that European "liberal"⁴ leaders (i.e. the right wing in Europe) absolutely do not intend to practise such an exclusion, due to the huge economic potential linked with immigration.

This point is all the more interesting since the various national constitutions as well as the treaties and International Conventions very clearly specify the illegality of such an exclusion and discrimination of a part of the community from the majority group. Consequently, as far as these fundamental texts are not modified, which is not likely to happen for a while – even if we are not safe from a reinterpretation of the latter –, one can imagine (to hope) that it will be constitutionally impossible for far-right parties in Europe to apply their political programme.

As an example, let's mention the rehabilitation with "the apologies of the jury" of Jörg Haider's FPÖ in September 2000, following the European Union's "positive" report recommending the lifting of the sanctions against Austria. Even if the report by Ecri⁵

³ See Le Pen saying "I am socially on the left and economically on the right" during his speech after the first round of the french presidential election in may 2002.

⁴ "Liberal" needs to be understood here in its french and economical meaning.

⁵ Widespread use of racist and xenophobic phrases in the Austrian political discussion, very strong influence of far-right parties on traditional ones, progressive disappearance of principles such as justice and solidarity – on which our conception of society previously rested –, omnipresence of the "immigrant" problem in the press, etc. ECRI: <http://www.ecri.coe.int/>

(European Commission against Racism and Intolerance), i.e. a European institution specialized in questions of racism and intolerance, offered for its part a very worrying analysis of the situation in Austria, one have to admit that the Austrian government was beyond reproach as regards its way of treating its foreign population, in particular, and this aspect is absolutely fundamental, compared with the attitude of the other European governments with respect to their own immigrant populations.

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