

## INTERVIEW WITH RUTH WODAK ON POLITICS OF FEAR: PRAGMATISM AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

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In recent years' rising political strategy, populism, seems to continue to be discussed for a long time. Populist discourse, which has become the main rhetoric of the left and the right that is able to gather the masses around itself like moths to a flame, puts especially the conservative right-wing parties into power in many countries of the world. Modi in India, Macron in France, Trump in the US are the most well known ones of this political movement. For this issue of Moment, Populism and Media, we discussed the latest book by emeritus professor of Lancaster University, linguist Ruth Wodak, *Politics of Fear*. Wodak's book mainly focuses on the reasons and dynamics of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. We've also talked with Wodak about whether the traditional media is able to maintain its fourth-pillar function and the impact of digital platforms on political participation that is becoming more and more effective. We invite you to read this pleasant and seminal interview.

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We have wondered why you did not cover ever-rising conservative populism in Turkey in your latest analysis on right-wing populism in Europe. Basically, we still consider Turkey as a part of Europe in a way and we have found it interesting that you did not cover Turkey as a case. We wonder why. In the meantime, we are aware that every study has its own limitations, and this might be the reason why you did not include Turkey. However, you must have been thinking about what has been going on in Turkey.

I didn't cover Turkey mostly because I don't understand the Turkish language, and this makes it difficult for a linguist and discourse analyst. I didn't include many far-right parties in any detail because I don't understand the language. For example, the Sweden democrats, Norway's progress party, so on. I'm working on the second edition now. In the second edition, I will include Turkey, at least in the glossary, because I have a colleague who can translate for me. So, some Turkish examples will be there; and I will include Turkey in the glossary.

**What do you think about the limits of pragmatism in the relationship between populists and democracy? We are asking this by considering rerunning of the latest local elections of Istanbul.**

Difficult question. I am not informed enough about the arguments of all sides, for- and against the rerunning of the local election. However, it does come across as the AKP being very angry to have lost; and hoping to win if the elections are repeated. But this is totally speculative!

**We understand that you have been thinking about Turkey.**

Absolutely.

You stated in your latest study that one of the major components of rising right-wing populist discourse in Europe is re-emergence of anti-Semitism. However, having looked at from Turkey, re-emergence of anti-Semitism in Europe is not clearly obvious. Far-right in Europe articulates populism, while producing anti-Semitism. Even though, anti-Semitism has altered to a different path in Turkey, it has similar history both in Turkey and Europe. (*Varlık Tax Law in 1942, Istanbul Pogrom in 1955, Mavi Marmara incidents and following events, etc.*). In this regard, anti-Semitism has been one of the most articulated discourse by Turkish conservative right, despite

**officially ongoing economic and political relations with Israel. Keeping that in mind, how can you compare anti-Semitism in Turkey and Europe?**

I don't know enough about anti-Semitism in Turkey; I mostly analyse traditional forms of anti-Semitism in Europe, less the manifold relationships with Israel and opinions about the Israeli government and its policies. Because in central Europe, for example, Israeli politics are not a salient issue. We are confronted with very traditional forms of anti-Semitism, Christian anti-Semitism, racist anti-Semitism, world conspiracy topics, frequently related metonymically to the Hungarian Jewish philanthropist George Soros. In the second edition, I will have to include more analysis of the relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and anti-Semitism. Because they are frequently connected. So, that is part of the project.

**You stated that Israel is not a big deal in feeding populism in Europe. However, Israel has declared Jerusalem as its capital, even though the UN do not recognize it so. The European Commission also declared first, but later on, withdraw its decision after European Parliament's attempts. In this regard, what do you think of this contradiction between anti-Semitic rhetoric used for internal affairs, and pragmatism in ongoing diplomatic relations?**

The conflicts about Israeli policies are a very complex issue. Debates about Israeli policies can be completely rational and content-related; or they can also be instrumentalised as fallacious arguments against "all Jews", thus antisemitic. The latter presupposes that "all Jews" were the same; also, it is assumed fallaciously that all Israelis would have the same opinion – although, as you know, Israelis are very heterogenous like all people in all countries. Thus, we are dealing with different levels which are frequently mixed. Of course, there is much *Realpolitik* in dealing with the far-right Israeli government because of many different US, EU, UN, and other interests. Not dissimilar, in the way, the Turkish government and other controversial governments and policies are dealt with.

**One of the most obvious points about European right-wing populism that can be seen from Turkey is the refugees who passed through Turkey to Europe. What is apparent while having looked at from Turkey is, anti-immigration has become the most evident indicator that contributes to conservative populism in Europe. On the other hand, according to opposition in Turkey, one of the most disturbing policies is that Europe tolerating anti-democratic policies in Turkey, in response to the negotiations with**

**Turkish government on refugees. Despite these negotiations, Turkish government has strengthened its own conservative populist discourse and remarked xenophobia that has risen through anti-immigration, islamophobia in particularly, in many countries. In this regard, can we argue that Turkish conservative populism and European right-wing populism feed each other as communication vessels do? Do you think that Turkish populism and European right-wing populism share similar characteristics?**

First: I don't know enough about Turkey. That's what I already stated. But as far as I know from the media, is that Erdogan is implementing more and more illiberal measures, etc. The EU deal with Turkey has to be considered as *Realpolitik*. So, as you rightly say, there is much discourse about human rights, on the one hand; especially Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the only way to deal with the problem of refugees coming to the EU implies negotiating with Turkey. So, it is ambivalent issue. On one hand, you "use" Turkey, you give a lot of money, on the other hand, you mobilize against Turkish politics. I agree, it doesn't make a consistent argument. It is very pragmatic.

#### **Both for Turkey and European countries?**

Exactly.

**We see that some of the leftist groups in Europe are struggling against anti-immigration rhetoric articulated by conservative populist movements. This means that there exists a sort of humanitarian wave and no solid anti-immigration movement. What do you think about why these sort of humanitarian waves have not become a bigger movement? Do these waves have an ability to alter this anti-immigration rhetoric? What is your suggestion on this? This is because, on the other hand, your suggestion can provide an insight on how to overcome anti-immigration rhetoric against Syrian refugees emerged from both Turkish seculars and nationalists.**

Civil society does have a loud voice, but not in all countries. There exists much conflict and thus, also political antagonistic positions. In the EP elections, the far-right won less than predicted. And the Greens and Liberals won more than predicted. I believe there is much polarization – more in the West, and less in the East (although Eastern Europe did not take any refugees). In Eastern Europe, the so-called "demographic panic" is salient – thus, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Romanians, etc. are afraid that their people will die out because of the huge brain drain of their own people into the West. Thus, actually, better

politics would consist of creating better perspectives for your people to remain in their countries, and not to create scape goats.

**You state that populist discourse is male, macho and has a bully manner. What could you say about how this kind of discourse can mobilize the masses? What attracts the masses most, in both historical and political context?**

I cannot answer in all details because it is very context dependent. But if you look at Trump, he is probably the best example for this kind of offensive and macho discourse. And obviously, this discourse attracts many people because they can identify, in the sense: Trump is finally saying what they have always wanted to say to those up there. In that way, I believe that this kind of “shamelessness” can also be attractive and in some ways enabling for some people. So, to speak: you could do things now which you could never do before. You can be impolite, offensive, etc; it doesn’t matter. “Anything goes”! Some people identify with this. There exists a double strategy employed by Donald Trump. He is constantly provoking openly, in the public sphere. Thus, there is a lot of irritation, a lot of anger. These provocations serve to sway the attention away from the measures which he’s implementing. We can see this happening also in the other countries: Berlusconi was already a good example. Salvini is a good example. On the one hand, there are very restrictive political measures implemented, usually not in favour of Trump’s electorate. But at the same time, you also “give” them something with which they can identify. So, it’s a clever double strategy.

**Can we argue that, this strategy that you argue will still be ongoing in the future?**

Yes. I think so. Because it is quite efficient. It works well. Also, in Austria, there it works very well. Because there are many new policies now which are not in favour of the “small man” or “small woman”. For example, the newly established 12 hour-working day, etc. But at the same time, anti-immigration sentiments and policies, and this kind of shameless behaviour allow identification. I call this the strategy of calculated ambivalence.

**Is this strategy applicable for Turkey?**

Probably.

**Can we consider populism in the context of neoliberalism? By quoting Wendy Brown, if neoliberalism is political rationality more than economic doctrine, is it applicable to approach populism within this rationality? Is there a reason why you analyze without correlating rising populism and neoliberalism which has become general norm of economy policies over the world for three of four decades?**

I think that neo-liberalism and populism work well together. Especially conservative mainstream parties work well together with far-right populist parties. In Austria, for example, but also, in other countries. So, although, neo-liberal doctrines are, again, not for “small man” or “small woman”. On the one hand, you encounter much discourse against migrants who could take “our” jobs away, and – at the same time – much discourse against those who are presupposed to be “lazy” and “don’t want to work” and so forth. In that way, it works well together. Although, in fact, these policies work against the “small man” and the “small woman”.

**Can we argue that there exists a complicity between neoliberalism and populism in mobilizing “small human” by raising anger. We mean, masses do not criticize the politics as a whole but rather articulate their identities raising anger against the more vulnerable ones or against people suffering because of the same fate that also masses share. Therefore, the conservative populists are exposing this sentiment to take masses’ support?**

Most certainly. By evoking and mobilizing envy, greed, and xenophobia, the vulnerable ones are turned against people who are even more vulnerable.

**Liberal paradigm considers media as fourth-pillar of democracy. The media in Turkey has been completely under control by government for two years which has become an apparatus of rising right-wing populism. Do you think that the media in Europe has played a role in rise of right-wing populism? Is it possible to assert that media in general is still defending fundamental democratic values?**

I think that the freedom of press is salient for democracies. And if the far-right gains power, one of the things that they do first is to cut the freedom of press. You can see this happening in Hungary, and in Poland, and you see the step by step attempt by Donald Trump. He cannot cut freedom of press that easily in the US but he defames and discriminates against the press and the freedom of press. And obviously, as you just said, it is the same in Turkey. In this way, there is again a double strategy employed by the far-

right: On one hand, to cut the press freedom, and the other hand, to provoke scandals all the time to get attention. So, they occupy the agenda, but they also cut press freedom. Unfortunately, this seems to work well.

**Can we argue that there is contradiction among populist politicians for one hand populist leaders need free press to disseminate their rhetoric, but on the other, they always want to cut the press freedom. Do you think that this also means “cutting their own throat”? How can we approach this through populism perspective?**

See above answer!

**In addition to the previous question, -if you have observations on this- do the Internet and the SNS, contribute to the emergence of democratic mass movements as once did in Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring, or rather contribute to the rise of conservative populist movements?**

I think, both. Social media allow for both. On the one hand, they support and mobilize progressive movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, Fridays for Future, etc. On the other hand, they also disseminate far-right propaganda. They allow for parallel worlds. There is almost no communication, no dialogue between the far-right and the progressives. I think that one has to do is go back again to face to face interaction and allow for more participation in different contexts, where people talk to each other again, in person, listen, debate, discuss. We have to learn to use the social media more efficiently [*emphasis is mine*], and only for certain aims.

**Lastly, we would like to know your suggestion on the future of democratic system. How can “parallel worlds” shape or misdirect the future of democratic system? And, how can we learn more efficient ways to use them, let’s say social media. Is it possible to raise a resistance in favor of better democracy incorporating more participation, in the future? We are asking this also by considering rerunning decision for Istanbul local voting and the most recently pro-Salvini, pro-Le Pen and pro-Brexit took at the top of the latest EU elections.**

I believe that one has to create more options for participation, starting locally; thus bottom-up and top-down. The only way forward democratically is to allow for more participation and discussion; and to create spaces where this is possible. This should be accompanied by other events and activities, also on-line; but local, face to face interaction

remains very important. This presupposes a comprehensive and comprehensible program, good arguments, the willingness to listen, asking questions, and not to come across as too moralizing. Good slogans, also irony and humor are important. Context-dependent genres have to be created as some contexts allow for complex debates, others not.