

## Book Review

Wodak, Ruth. 2021. *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington: Sage

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**Ruth** Wodak's second edition of *The Politics of Fear* could not have come at a better time. As Wodak notes in the preface referencing Bob Dylan's famous song "The Times They Are A-Changin'," politics have shifted greatly since the time she submitted the first edition of *The Politics of Fear* to the publisher when the 2014 European Parliament elections were about to be held (her discussion in the book goes from those elections to the 2019 European Parliament elections). In the context of her book, these political shifts are the mainstreaming of far-right populist parties, their policies, and their rhetoric. When the first edition,

*The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, came out in 2015, Donald Trump was rising to power in the US. In a virtual presentation given at the *Centre of Discourse Studies*, Wodak (2020, slide 5) noted that the new version of the book is "quite different from the first one" because in the six years in between the two editions our world has changed "in many, many ways." In fact, this version has a new subtitle: *The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse* (with an important change from "right-wing" to "far-right"). By "Shameless Normalization" she means how it has become the norm to no longer need to apologize for blatant lies or neglecting rules and norms of polite behavior and how this has come to be perceived as authentic and "an attractive tool

against so-called elites" (p. xii). This new subtitle aims to highlight the shift of populist parties to the extreme or radical right. It also marks the shift in her stance from explaining the "meaning" of populist discourses to a "micro-analysis" of the history in 2014-2019 of the "shameless normalization" of far-right discourse through tracing "small and gradual transformations and recontextualizations" (p. xiii) of every instance of text and talk and highlighting the dialectic interdependence "between discourse and society, media, communication, policies and their implementation" (p. xiii-xiv). In addition, there are three new case studies (vignettes), a few new sections on far-right populist rhetoric, an updated overview of theoretical approaches, and a new glossary of far-right populist parties or movements. She has also added sections on "anti-genderism," defying political correctness, the impact of social media on the rise of the far-right, and anti-Sorosism. There is also a completely new chapter on Hungary's "illiberal democracy" and new vignettes that analyze "the language of walls" and victim-perpetrator reversal in regards to anti-refugee policies. Having taken a glance at the main differences between the first and second edition, we will now provide some highlights of each of the nine chapters in the book and a brief synthesis of what we think the most important points are.

The first chapter begins by discussing recent changes which have led to the "shameless" normalization of far-right politics, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015/2016, and so on. The chapter then goes on to explain the theory behind the study of right-wing populism, its relation to the media (including provocation and scandalization), and then provides vignettes from Austria's HC Strache and a scandal over antisemitic content published by

the politician on Facebook. One particularly valuable element of this first chapter is the way she has updated and exemplified her insightful concept of the far-right populist *perpetuum mobile*, which maps out how far-right populists move through certain predictable (but effective) stages and rhetorical strategies. As Wodak explains on page 26, the *perpetuum mobile* begins with a scandal that is first denied, then once evidence is produced, it is re-defined and equated with different phenomena, then the right to freedom of speech is proclaimed. This triggers another debate, victimhood is claimed by the original provocateur, and the event is dramatized and exaggerated. This all leads to the construction of a conspiracy and the creation of scapegoats who then provide counterevidence and rebuke the provocateur's claims. At this point, a "quasi-apology" follows (in other cases, no apology), and then a new scandal is provoked, and the entire process starts all over again. The description of the *perpetuum mobile* is followed by characteristics of far-right populist parties such as the way they claim to represent "*the people*" (p. 26), the attributes of leaders of these parties, and the way far-right populism correlates with anti-intellectualism. This first chapter is fundamental knowledge for anyone studying right-wing/far-right populism or anyone who just wants to understand it.

Chapter 2 provides a more theoretical basis to the study of far-right populism (and populism in general, including left-wing populism) and its link to identity politics, and Chapter 3 provides a detailed outline of Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, which she utilizes to de-construct and analyze far-right discourse, which she then models in vignettes. Particularly effective in getting her point across in Chapter 3 is Vignette #5, which shows how Austria's government used the *victim-perpetrator reversal* strat-

egy to label refugee children as “notorious troublemakers” (p. 89) to trigger fear in constituents.

Chapter 4 connects nationalism to far-right populism and demonstrates how it is functionalized by populists to show who are “Us” and who are “Them” and how mainstream political parties have increasingly adopted nativist and national body politics like those of far-right groups in to obtain/maintain votes, which results in the normalizing of far-right ideologies or practices (p. 101). This chapter also includes some excellent multimodal examples of how far-right ideologies manifest themselves visually across countries and parties. Another noteworthy section of this chapter is Vignette 8, “The Language of Walls,” in which she masterfully connects Trump’s “build a wall” discourse and resulting anti-refugee/asylum seeker discourse and policies to those of the US in the 1930s and 1940s in which Jewish children were essentially sentenced to death by not being allowed to enter the US for safety during Nazi times. She then carefully analyzes how Trump’s arguments for building a wall follow the classic argumentation scheme of “If the US is in danger, a wall will provide security” (p. 122).

Chapter 5, which concentrates on antisemitism, has become even more important since the first edition was written due to a worldwide rise in antisemitism and the need for people to recognize how verbal and visual discourse from the past is recycled to regain support for antisemitic discourses. This is because many symbols used during Nazi times are now being used by White supremacist groups today, but they have more power because social media helps them reach larger audiences. For example, there were many antisemitic symbols (e.g., Swastikas, Rune symbol representing Aryan heritage and cultural pride) circulating on online communities

such as Gab and 8chan before the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 (Gab and 8chan: Home to Terrorist Plots Hiding in Plain Sight 2021). Her section on anti-Sorosism is especially enlightening given how many White nationalist groups in the US have risen in power in the last few years and become dangerous threats to US democracy (e.g., the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in congress), and to Jewish people and other minoritized populations in the US and elsewhere. Wodak explains how neo-Nazis on social media and elsewhere support the demonization of Jewish American philanthropist George Soros who is depicted as a villain with “nefarious plans to reshape the planet” (p. 139) and the construction of a “Soros-Feindbild” (i.e., the concept of a person as a hostile and threatening enemy).

Chapter 6 deals with the way that far-right populists take advantage of the media and includes examples from the 2019 political campaign in Austria. Wodak also explains the concepts of “frontstage” and “backstage” to talk about the right-wing politicians’ relationship with the media by drawing on Goffman’s work (1959), which metaphorically compares politics to the theater. In this metaphor scenario, “backstage” is where the politicians are, but the audience is not, and “frontstage” is where the performance (that all can see) takes place. Wodak describes this concept beautifully through the example of the video of Donald Trump’s bus ride with Billy Bush in which he notoriously says that he can grab women “by the pussy” and how he justifies this talk as “backstage” or “locker-room talk” (p. 167). The chapter also does a great job explaining why repetition is so important and effective in foregrounding ideas and persuading people to believe them even when they lack logical support, and she provides a detailed analysis of Heinz-Christian Strache’s fall in Austria in 2019.

Chapter 7 deals with the “Politics of Patriarchy” discussing the gender gap in far-right populist voters (far-right parties generally have more male than female followers and voters) and the way that successful female far-right politicians have to perform contradictory roles of being feminine while, at the same time, reproducing male domination over women because sexism is so closely tied to nationalism. While reading this chapter, we could not help thinking of Italy’s Georgia Meloni, who frequently references her identity as a mom while endorsing anti-immigration and other policies that infringe on human rights endorsed by nationalist (or sovereignist, as her party, Fratelli d’Italia, refers to themselves) groups. Meloni has gained power during the pandemic due to growing discontent with lockdowns and economic hardships in Italy, and it is likely that she will continue to play an important role in far-right circles in Europe, pushing anti-immigration and anti-globalist agendas (De Maio 2020). Wodak’s book provides the tools to understand politicians like Meloni and why we should be wary of her and others like her.

Chapter 8 takes us to the core of the issue of why and how the normalization of far-right populism occurs. Wodak clarifies that this discourse functions to undermine liberal democratic systems and human rights, dominate the media, and “create separate and parallel discourse worlds” through the spreading of alternative facts and lies (p. 227). It also serves to recognize and legitimize people who feel unfairly treated by elites or not listened to. That is, far-right populist leaders polarize society by being shameless (i.e., saying whatever they think) and, in the process, disgust one side and empower those who have felt ignored. Wodak draws on Fareed Zakaria’s notion of “illiberal democracy” to refer to the way these governments are increasingly limiting

the freedoms of their electorate, and she provides a good illustration of this through a discussion of Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and his understanding of “illiberal democracy” as “supporting pure political majoritarianism” (p. 232). Not only does Wodak deconstruct Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” through examples of his speeches and policies, but she also illustrates this through multimodal data of the way that Orbán has normalized anti-Sorosism on billboards and campaign posters. She also helps readers understand the long-term consequences of “illiberal democracies,” such as the rendering of rational discussion impossible and how this has implications for freedom of the press.

In the final chapter of the book, Wodak summarizes the most important points she had made about the danger of the shameless normalization of far-right populism and then provides some suggestions for how mainstream parties can deal with this normalization. First (as many scholars of right-wing populism have noted in the past), she advises parties to address the problems that underlie why people support populist governments in the first place instead of sweeping them “under the carpet” (p. 262). Second, she suggests more dialog in local settings and to promote more alternative frames which emphasize equality, diversity, and solidarity. She also warns that in order to avoid far-right populist traps, those who believe in democracy have to develop and maintain alternative patterns of media reporting, stop reacting to, imitating, or adapting populist agendas, and “resist the temptation to jump on the far-right populist bandwagon out of fear of losing voters” (p. 265).

In summary, for those readers that study right-wing/far-right populism, or live under it, this book is essential reading. This is because to counter far-right

discourse and policies we must first understand them. *The Politics of Fear* show us how it functions and why. Not only does Wodak explain how far-right populism works, but she also helps us comprehend how it has functioned to influence the politics of mainstream parties by pushing them to the right and, as a consequence, endangering democracy further. Importantly, *The Politics of Fear* encourages what Wodak calls “reflected deceleration,” which involves “critical reflections, challenging strategies, decisions, proposals and policies” and advocates for the prohibition of the “essentialization of beliefs, ideologies and socio-political processes” (p. xiv). Through “reflected deceleration” we can allow for new ways of understanding the global/local challenges that surround us. Besides the points we make above, the book is also worth reading because the topic is current and important, and, like the first edition and Wodak’s other books, it is well-researched

and written, made understandable for the average reader, and it uses a variety of types of data (including, e.g., social media, cartoons) to explain and argue for the main points.

Although Wodak does provide a very enlightening discussion of the need to combat far-right populism, examples or vignettes of actual speeches/videos in which people successfully (verbally and/or visually or multimodally) counter far-right discourses would be useful for readers to see in future editions of the book. These examples could serve as a model for those of us working daily to denormalize far-right ideologies and behaviors which are detrimental to democratic societies and if not countered, will continue to defy human rights and put people (especially vulnerable people) in increasingly hostile, dangerous, and violent situations.

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