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Populism, Populists, and the Crisis
of Political Parties

A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015

edited by

Günther Pallaver / Michael Gehler / Maurizio Cau



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Preface

Hardly any other subject has had such a comparable meteoric career in political debates and academic discussion in European countries, the American continent, and beyond as the concept of populism. This boom is strongly connected to a deep uncertainty in and shock to the democratic systems, which, after the euphoric invocation of the “end of history” in the 1990s, has been linked to a crisis syndrome of various forms and shapes, spanning from the financial and refugee crisis to the crisis of the European Union as well as the all-encompassing globalization crisis. Within such heated debates, there is a need for cool-headed analysis and diagnosis. It is important to clearly differentiate between the polemic use and the scientific use of the concept, to study the politicians, movements, and practices subsumed under this concept in an interdisciplinary dialogue especially between political science and the humanities, and to create international comparisons. In this way, isolated phenomena can be placed into a comprehensive framework in order to identify typologies and similarities as well as in particular differences in the context and dynamics of development.

An interdisciplinary approach, historical depth, and international comparison—these central postulates of current research on populism formed the starting point for and a major focus of the international conference held at the Austrian Institute in Rome (ÖHI) in the autumn of 2015. Special thanks go to Michael Gehler for initiating this project as well as to Günther Pallaver for planning and organizing the conference together with Michael Gehler, the Istituto Storico Austriaco a Roma, the Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma, and the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, which also accepted publish the proceedings.

Looking at Austria, Italy, and Germany has proven to be a fruitful and stimulating comparison due to their geographical proximity as well as their differences. These are due to the virulence and prominence of the populism phenomenon in the new millennium, which offers abundant material for analysis and raises a series of questions, and to their

different national and regional forms and developments of populism. The focus of the conference, the results of which are presented in this publication, once again confirmed the cooperation between the Istituto Storico Austriaco and the Istituto Storico Germanico, two institutions connected by a long and often interwoven history.

As the conference has furthermore shown, the city of Rome is especially suited as a starting point for interdisciplinary research since it is home to international institutes of the humanities with widely developed networks. We sincerely hope that this extraordinary potential for transnational research in the humanities will continue to be exploited in the future.

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Rome, November 2017

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Introduction

by *Günther Pallaver, Michael Gebler, and Maurizio Cau*

The last decades have witnessed a renaissance and a new boom in the concept of populism. What was decisive for this trend was the electoral success of various populist political parties and leaders. Scholars of history and social sciences have attempted to define, delineate, and categorize populism, which has resulted in different theoretical approaches and explanatory models. One approach understands populism as a “thin centered” ideology, i.e. one that is slim and unfinished. A second approach views populism as a strategic concept for political mobilization primarily concentrated on three strategic aspects: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization. A third approach describes populism as a form of communication based on the dichotomy between the positively perceived collective and the negatively perceived elites.

In public discourse, populism has become a catch-all term often understood as an expression of the uneasiness which a part of society feels toward representative democracy. Whenever a part of the population feels unrepresented or excluded, the various reactions evoked by this are today vaguely called “populism”. There are different types of exclusion, too, such as the exclusion of civil and fundamental rights (e.g. the right for non-citizens to vote) or social exclusion (e.g. unemployment and poverty).

Within these processes of societal “exclusion”, which can be traced back to various causes, political parties play a pivotal role. Yet, as a constitutive element of representative democracy, they have been under pressure for many years. Taken as a whole, we can observe a functional loss of parties due to changing societal, social, political, and economic frameworks, as well as a loss of their political legitimization to some extent. In addition to growing vertical mobility (e.g. social mobility or access to higher education) and horizontal mobility (e.g. regional

Translation by Greta Pallaver

mobility), the socioeconomic foundations are eroding, a fact that is associated with an increasing loss of political loyalties.

Parties are confronted with the dramatic erosion of traditional bonds caused by changes in the social structures, the electorate, and the value system which, in turn, has intensified competition. Furthermore, parties are increasingly exposed to public criticism, higher political dissatisfaction, and fluctuating protest voters. Although parties are gaining more power in the political system, at the same time they are more and more losing their legitimacy. They are losing their patina, no longer representing dedication, passion for the *iusta causa*, commitment, and principles, but instead displaying the aging signs of a complex and seasoned organization complete with material and personal interests.

Political parties are organizations, which guarantee that the structure of political systems works. However, the organizational models of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which political parties are a part, have undergone deep transformations. The changes are visible in the metamorphosis of companies and their organizational dynamic within standardized mass production based on the logic of “Fordism”. The classic political parties understood as embodiments of traditions and values, identities, class, a sense of belonging, and conflict regarding a social order that corresponded to the “Fordist” organizational model align with each other today more and more in their respective party programs. This is shown by the Manifesto Project Database, which has collected and codified all party programs from the post-war period until today. It can be demonstrated that since the 1960s, the polarization on the left-right axis has decreased by almost 40%. As a consequence of this alignment in contents, parties face the criticism of increasing uniformity and detachment from “the population”. The reproach of the “forgotten person” alleges that parties and their representatives no longer take responsibility either for the institutions’ performance and effectiveness or for the wellbeing of the population, thus accusing the privileged “caste” of neglecting the interests of the “real people”.

With the end of the East-West conflict and of the system competition between capitalism and communism in 1989/90, systems and structures of social security and the welfare state were gradually dismantled. The years that followed saw deregulation, neoliberalism, outsourcing, etc. and led to a shrinking public sector as a source of employment while

simultaneously witnessing a surge in precarious employment conditions. The privatization of education and research, of the health, communication, and administrative sectors—to name a few—, as well as the market logic and profitability dominating these areas led to disorientation, transformations, and insecurities of societies. The established parties and the governments that they formed could not find relevant answers to the various crises and increasingly lost political representation and legitimacy. The consequences were a growing proletariat made up of academics and service workers, an increasing socially endangered middle class, and a disillusioned lower class. New poverty strengthened the perceptions of a society of “downward mobility”.

In some countries this resulted, among other things, in the massive loss of trust by citizens in parties and political institutions. At this interface, we see the appearance of populist parties which, in their own heterogeneity, address the uneasiness of the excluded people, or their perceived exclusion.

Populist parties of different types arose in Europe after 1945 in various waves, but mainly in the 1970s. The beginning was marked by the Swiss People’s Party (1971), followed by Front National (1972), the Danish People’s Party (1972), and the Norwegian Progress Party (1973) as well as Vlaams Bloc (1979) in Belgium. These were citizens’ protest parties, right-wing and anti-taxation parties. A second wave occurred at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. The Swedish Democrats were founded in 1988, the right-wing nationalist “Republicans” (1983) in Germany had some success, the Lega Nord in Italy (1989) became part of the government in the early 1990s.

The Union Treaty of Maastricht (1991/92) sped up the project of the European Single Market, the economic and monetary union, as well as competition, and spurred modernization. The deepening European integration elicited defense mechanisms, caused fears of social decline, and gave rise to national independence movements. The Anti-Federalist League opposing the Maastricht treaty was formed in 1991 in Great Britain and later developed into the United Kingdom Independence Party, the driving force behind the trend to Brexit consolidated with the 2016 referendum. In 1995, the populist party The Finns was founded. The banking, financial, and economic crises (2008/09) as well as the “refugee crisis” (2015/16) spurred a third wave of populist parties. The

movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) was formed in 2014 in Germany and grew rapidly until its decay in 2016/17. Older populist parties that had existed for some time, such as the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, the Front National in France, the Partij voor der Vrijheid in the Netherlands, the Swiss People's Party, or the renamed Vlaamse Belang in Belgium profited from these far-reaching crises. At the same time, more than a dozen different new parties were founded. The Alternative für Deutschland, the Swedish Democrats, the newly named True Finns, or the extreme-right party Dawn of Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic profit from the "refugee crisis", while the Greek anti-EU party Syriza in turn profits from the international banking crisis and the prescribed German, or rather European, austerity policy. Parties that were partly critical of the EU and partly nationalistic were the 5 Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain. These movements-turned-parties were united by an anti-elite stance, anti-establishment resentments, opposition toward the EU, and/or a specific nationalism. Such nationalism can be found mainly in Central and Eastern European countries such as in Hungary with Fidesz-KDNP and the anti-Semitic right-wing nationalist Jobbik, or in Poland with the national-conservative party Law and Justice (PIS).

This is only a roughly sketched picture of the frameworks within which discussions were held at the 2015 conference in Rome on "Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties: A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015". The selected countries lend themselves to comparison because all of them had populist parties/movements from early on, such as the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (1944) in Italy. A common denominator that is missing in other countries is their Fascist or Nazi past and its connection to populist parties/movements in these countries: Fascism in Italy (1922-1943/45), "Austrofascism" in Austria (1934-1938), and National Socialism in Germany (1933-1945). The populism in the three countries shows an overlap with the Fascist and Nazi past. This applies to the Alternative für Deutschland and the FPÖ in relation to National Socialism (the latter party does not relate to "Austrofascism" with its Catholic character), but less to Italy, where the Fascist past is carried on in neofascist parties (Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale). Nevertheless, new populist parties like the Lega Nord, Forza Italia, or Movimento 5 Stelle also frequently display individual references to Fascist history, which includes downplaying the past.

Through the use of examples from Germany, Italy, and Austria, it is to be shown and discussed within the framework of this book to what extent a comparison of populist parties in Europe can also provide new knowledge in this context for redefining the term “populism”.

– In the first part “Historical Perspectives and Transformation Processes”, the articles analyze the role of populism within the political-historical context starting from the 1990s through 2015. After a general, broadly oriented introduction to the parallels and differences in the situations which have arisen over the course of history in these three countries within the European Union, further chapters are dedicated to the political methodology of populism as well as the question of how populism should be dealt with as a political phenomenon in Europe. Finally, the media landscapes as a very important surfboard for populist movements are analyzed, as are the breaks and continuities in the constitutional cultures.

– The second part of the book, “Political Actors Shaping the Populist Challenge”, is devoted to a comparison of the most important main players of political populism. The main focus here is above all else on Jörg Haider (Austria), Umberto Bossi, Silvio Berlusconi, and Gianfranco Fini (Italy), and Berndt Lucke (Germany), yet the “countermodel” to populism and its concepts are also studied through the example of Angela Merkel and Romano Prodi.

– In the concluding third part, “European Political Parties, Their Response to the Populist Challenge, and Their Treatment of Populism”, there is an analysis of how populism is dealt within each of the three nations by the most important political movements—the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, the Liberals, and the Greens.

From this comparison of the three countries, the book arrives at findings concerning the historical genesis of populist movements and their chances for success, but also concerning how populism in Europe politically compensates, how it can be counteracted, and how and to what extent populist movements can be politically integrated and made “positively” usable.

Some of the contributions in this volume reflect the status of the year 2015, when the conference about populism took place in Rome. Some of the contributions in this volume reflect the status of the year 2015, when the conference about populism took place in Rome. In the

meantime, in all three countries analyzed here, the right-wing populist parties were able to expand their voters and they have in part had a change of leadership. This holds true for the Alternative für Deutschland (German federal election 2017), to the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (legislative election 2017), which forms the government together with the Austrian People's Party since December 2017; it further applies to the center-right coalition in Italy, mainly the parties Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia, but also the 5 Star Movement (parliamentary elections 2018).

We would like to thank the many people who have contributed to this publication: institute director Martin Baumeister of the German Historical Institute in Rome; Andreas Gottsmann, director of the Austrian Historical Institute in Rome; directors Christoph Cornelißen and Paolo Pombeni of the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento; the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Historical Research Vienna; the Institute of History at the University of Hildesheim; and the Department of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck. We would like to thank the translators Philipp Adorf, Philip Isenberg, Greta Pallaver, and Gavin Taylor and last but not least Chiara Zanoni Zorzi, editor-in-chief, and Friederike Oursin, from the editorial office of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler. Finally, we would like to thank our subsidy providers without whom this book could not have been published.

I. Historical Perspectives and Transformation Process

Different Paths toward Europe?

Germany, Italy, and Austria 1945-2009

by *Michael Gebler*

1. *Preliminary remarks*

The political development of Austria, Germany, and Italy after World War II and their relationship to each other is incomprehensible without knowledge of the nineteenth century, particularly if commonalities and differences are to be brought out. Particularly for the years from 1859 to 1938, the “Austria” factor played a role in German-Italian relations¹.

2. *Phases of development*

Six phases before 1945 may be characterized with highlights.

- a. Europe against the background of the principle of the nation-state:
Italy and Prussia as adversaries of the Hapsburg Monarchy (1859-1871)

The year 1866 saw both Italy and Prussia as victors—both found themselves in a state of war with the Hapsburg monarchy. The concept of the enemy coalesced: on one side, the alleged “prison of peoples”; on the other, the less popular “hegemony” in the German Confederation (Deutscher Bund).

Translation by Philip Isenberg

¹ R. LILL, *Geschichte Italiens in der Neuzeit*; J. PETERSEN, *Italien als Republik 1946-1987*, Stuttgart 1989; D. MÜNCH, *Einführung in die politische Geschichte Italiens*; N. TRANFAGLIA, *La Prima Guerra Mondiale e il fascismo*; S. ROMANO, *Guida alla politica estera italiana*; G.E. RUSCONI, *Deutschland – Italien. Italien – Deutschland*; R. CRISTIN (eds), *Vie parallele/ Parallele Wege*; F. HAUSMANN, *Kleine Geschichte Italiens*; A. DI MICHELE, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana*; M. CLARK, *Modern Italy*; H. WOLLER, *Geschichte Italiens*; M. GEHLER, *Deutschland*; R. STEININGER - M. GEHLER, *Österreich im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 2.

- b. Far from a unified central Europe: Divergence in the fragile Triple Alliance (1882-1915) and adversaries in the World War I (1915-1918)

In 1882, the Kingdom of Italy joined with Austria-Hungary and the German Reich to form the Triple Alliance², which was fragile because Italy did not feel itself to be equal. Its change in alliances in 1915 was perceived as a “Latin breach of faith” and a “disgraceful betrayal”³.

- c. The continued disintegration of Europe: Common revisionism in Germany, Italy, and Austria (1919/20-1931/32)

The Treaties of Saint Germain-en-Laye and Versailles in 1919 generated aggressive, antidemocratic revisionism in Austria and in the German Reich. Italy was also dissatisfied with the postwar order: the Italian victory with little territorial growth had allegedly been “mutilated” by the Allies. Austria, on the other hand, had to swallow massive losses of territory.

- d. The weakening of the center of Europe through internal crisis regimes: Italy as the first Fascist dictatorship—Austria and Germany follow later (1922-1933/34)

In all three societies, there was anti-Marxism, civil war, a militarization of the societies through militias, and a strong left-wing opposition. While Fascism achieved power with Benito Mussolini in 1922 in Italy, this was only possible for Adolf Hitler eleven years later. Also in 1933, Austria experienced “parliament shutting itself down” under Engelbert Dollfuß⁴.

² F. FELLNER, *Der Dreibund. Europäische Diplomatie vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*; H. AFFLERBACH, *Der Dreibund*.

³ O. ÜBEREGGER - N. LABANCA (eds), *Krieg in den Alpen*; O. ÜBEREGGER - H.J.W. KUPRIAN (eds), *Der Erste Weltkrieg im Alpenraum*.

⁴ E. NOLTE, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*; St. BREUER, *Nationalismus und Faschismus*; A. BAUERKÄMPER, *Der Faschismus in Europa*; W. SCHIEDER, *Faschistische Diktaturen*.

e. Active in the self-destruction of Europe: Together into World War II (1935-1943)

Starting from the mid-1930s, Italy pursued a policy of recolonization and imperialism in Ethiopia (1935/36)⁵. Germany and Italy pulled together in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and supported the nationalist military around General Francisco Franco. In 1936, the “Rome-Berlin Axis” was formed, which led to the unleashing of a foreign policy with totalitarian ideology, a dismantling of international solidarity, and the collapse of the European system of states. Just like Hitler (1933-1935), Mussolini (1935-1937) also withdrew from the League of Nations. A “brutal friendship” developed. The Anschluss annexing Austria to the German Reich was tolerated by the Duce who, in so doing, received the assurance from Hitler of the Brenner Pass being an “eternal border” between Austria and Italy⁶. Both began too late to discover the idea of Europe for the attainment of their war goals in order to get the dominated peoples on their side⁷.

f. Italy’s change of alliances, the path of the German Reich, and the “Ostmark” in decline (1943-1945)

After Mussolini fell and was arrested, Hitler had him rescued. From the North as far down as Rome, Italy was occupied by German forces, and a Fascist regime was set up by the grace of Hitler in Salò on Lake Garda⁸. The deployment of partisans against the German occupation regime and their participation in the severing of Italy from the Fascist regime and its German alliance partner are not disputed, particularly since it concerns less a battle for national liberation than a civil war that was ideologically motivated by both sides⁹. Italian society vacillated between

⁵ A. MATTIOLI, *Entgrenzte Kriegsgewalt*; G. BROGINI KÜNZI, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg*; L. KLINKHAMMER - A. OSTI GUERAZZI - T. SCHLEMMER (eds), *Die “Achse” im Krieg*.

⁶ F.W. DEAKIN, *The Brutal Friendship*; M. GEHLER, “... wie äußerst empfindlich die vor den Toren Italiens geschaffene Lage ist”.

⁷ H.W. NEULEN, *Europa und das 3. Reich*.

⁸ L. KLINKHAMMER, *Zwischen Bündnis und Besatzung*.

⁹ J. HOLLAND, *Italy’s Sorrow*.

adaptation, collaboration, and resistance¹⁰. That is why the dismissal of the Duce by the King of Italy and his murder by partisans took place. The assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944 on the part of the resistance in the Wehrmacht leadership failed. Therefore, it was no more a chance of opposition and resistance on a broader basis in the totalitarian Nazi state against its repression apparatus of elimination¹¹. In the wake of the Russian advance, flight and expulsion from the East began. Neither Austria nor Italy experienced comparable quantitative losses of population or forced migration.

3. *Developments after 1945/1949*

- a. Together in the camp of the unsuccessful and the losers: Italy's farewell to the monarchy and its peace treaty—occupation, division, and the founding of two states in Germany and the reestablishment of Austria (1945-1948/49)

The age of European dictatorships turned into a global war and ended with disastrous military defeats for them. Germany and Italy had to follow the path of rehabilitation. A shorter route lay before Italy in any case, since the proportions, losses, and consequences of the German defeat differed substantially from those of Italy. Germany was divided and the Federal Republic paid reparations for decades to, among others, Jewish victim organizations, the State of Israel, and in the end to prisoners of war and forced laborers from Eastern and Central Europe. In contrast to the period of reparations after 1919, these payments took place voluntarily¹². In the peace treaty of February 10, 1947, the victorious powers compelled Italy to give up its colonies in Libya, Ethiopia, and modern-day Eritrea. The Fascist conquests from before and during the war were also lost.

In all three countries, Christian Democratic party leaders (Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, and Leopold Figl)¹³ were at the helm,

¹⁰ L. KLINKHAMMER, *Die italienische Gesellschaft zwischen Widerstand und Kollaboration*.

¹¹ I. KERSHAW, *Das Ende*.

¹² C. GOSCHLER, *Schuld und Schulden*.

¹³ M. GUIOTTO, *Der Europagedanke*.