# Radicalization and Far Right: Economic Interests and Identity Needs

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**Abstract**

This theoretical paper will show that contemporary right wing radicalism is characterized by a deep gap between two dimensions: the structural and the cognitive. The structural dimension consists of the global economic processes that have deeply changed national economies, as well as social balances, across the planet. The cognitive dimension consists of "radical" representations of the globalization process that are often quite simplistic and, usually propose unrealistic or infeasible political agendas (complete closure of the borders, disruption of political élites, etc.). The consequence is that radical right-wing governments can rarely meet the promises they have made. The relevant fact is that the failures do not result in major losse of consents and large groups of voters continue to enthusiastically grant support to their leaders. In this framework, economic changes related to globalization seem an inadequate explanation for the electoral success of the ultra-right wing. I will therefore try to show that the main reason for radicalization is that the radical ultra-right wing provides criteria to interpret the world for large social groups who can barely define their position and role in an increasingly complex global society.

*Keywords*: radical right, globalization, complexity

**Riassunto.** *Radicalizzazione e destra radicale: interessi economici e bisogno d'identità*

Questo paper, di carattere teorico, mostrerà che il radicalismo contemporaneo si caratterizza per un profondo divario tra la dimensione strutturale e quella cognitiva: ovviamente, la dimensione strutturale consiste nei processi economici globali che hanno profondamente cambiato le economie nazionali, così come gli equilibri sociali, in tutto il pianeta. L'aspetto cognitivo consiste nelle rappresentazioni "radicali" del processo di globalizzazione, d'altra parte, sono incredibilmente semplicistiche (generalmente sono teorie del complotto) e, principalmente, propongono soluzioni iRadical Rightealistiche o irrealizzabili (chiusura totale dei confini, disgregazione delle élite politiche ecc.). La conseguenza è che i governi radicali di destra radicale raramente possono mantenere le promesse che hanno fatto. Il fatto rilevante è che i loro fallimenti non causano perdite rilevanti di contenuti e grandi gruppi di elettori continuano a concedere consensi entusiastici ai loro leader. In questo quadro, i cambiamenti economici legati alla globalizzazione non sembrano una spiegazione adeguata per il successo elettorale di estrema destra. Quindi, cercherò di dimostrare che la ragione principale della radicalizzazione è che l'estrema destra radicale fornisce criteri per l'interpretazione del mondo, a nome di grandi gruppi sociali che a malapena possono definire la loro posizione e il loro ruolo in una società globale che diventa sempre più complessa.

*Parole chiave:* destra radicale, globalizzazione, complessità

## 1. The problem: What is the radical right?

Since the beginning of this Century, the term "radicalization" has included two different categories of phenomena: the rise and development of radical Islamic groups, especially in disadvantaged areas of European cities, and the electoral success of radical political forces, especially right-wing, in several areas of the world.

This work focuses on the second category: the astonishing and unexpected electoral successes, in very recent years, of Radical Right parties in many so-called mature

democracies.

In the last decade, Radical Right parties have become mainstream political forces (for a reasonably up-to-date list of Radical Right parties, see Rydgren 2018, pp. 614 ff.). Some Radical Right forces have gained the highest political offices in their respective countries; more frequently, they have become mainstream opposition forces (like the Front National-Rassemblement National (FN-RN) in France)[1].

This phenomenon requires some preliminary consideration, as it has taken place in many different social and historical contexts and consists of diverse political forces. Thus, it is necessary to identify the common features of all cases included in this category. With this aim, the rest of this chapter will be devoted to finding an operational definition for Radical Right.

At a first step, the instinct might be to consider Radical Right as a form of new fascism. However, as Rydgren (2018, p. 29) shows, not all Radical Right forces reflect historical experiences of fascism, nor do they aim to bring fascism back. Rather, the parties that used to recall past fascist regimes, like FN-RN in France or Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in Italy, have either disappeared or deeply transformed their programs, ideologies, and identities, dropping any links to fascist past regimes. Other more recent Radical Right forces (such as Vox, Lega Nord, and NL) have no links at all with fascism[2].

Ignazi's (2003, p. 33) position on this issue is perhaps the most interesting. He proposes to define as "radical" the more recent type of Radical Right and to use the word "extreme" to refer to forces that claim fascist origins and reject the democratic political system. In other words, it is possible to distinguish between the extreme right, which openly claims its desire for an authoritarian regime, and the Radical Right.

What characterizes Radical Right is the claim that its heir legitimacy is based upon the

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[1]   It also worth noting that RR forces have gained power only in presidential systems (USA and Brazil) through a process of radicalization of pre-existing right-wing parties.

[2]   Some authors acknowledge that most contemporary RR forces do not claim any intention to restore fascist authoritarian régimes (Copsey, 2018, pp. 176 ff.). Typical new-fascist forces still exist, although they gain little electoral success because of the historical circumstances, which differ from those of the 1920s and 1930s. It is also worth noting that Mudde (2007, 244 ff.) links a fascist past and RR electoral success in Western Europe: the RR is more likely to prevail in electoral competitions in countries that had experienced fascist regimes or actively cooperated with fascist occupants during World War II (WWII).

people's support[3], as shown through elections. Thus, the Radical Right is based upon a representation of the world in which democracy consists of the exercise of a free popular vote; within this framework, the governing bodies that have achieved the majority of votes should not meet any limit in the exercise of their power. Constitutional rules, minorities, and supranational institutions become, thus, useless superstructures that hinder the full deployment of the popular will.

In short, (neo)-fascism can be said to be a «reaction against modern democratic society, liberal individualism, constitutionalism and the left» (Wolfreys, 2013, pp. 21 ff.); in contrast, the Radical Right is well rooted in modernity and its contradictions: once more, the Radical Right does not reject democracy—or, at least, it supports a simplified idea of democracy.

## 2. Epistemic considerations and the research question

As shown in the previous section, Radical Right is a complex phenomenon. Its complexity entails two dimensions: spatial and temporal.

The spatial dimension involves many countries, including almost all members of European Union and as well as the USA, Brazil and India. Each of these cases entails relevant differences regarding history, the constitutional system, political-legal rules, and electoral composition (Mudde, 2019, pp. 146 ff.) Furthermore, in each context, Radical Right political forces show deep internal differences in terms of leadership, political

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3   On the similarities and differences between the Radical Right and other political phenomena, see Mudde (2004; 2007**)**. Furthermore, Copsey (2018, p. 183) asserts that «The point that needs to be made is that (neo)fascism shades into radical right populism: they are not identical, but neither are they so "essentially" or "utterly" different that imposing a break on the historical lines of continuity between "classic" fascism and the contemporary radical right is justified». Some of the scholarship disagrees with this assertion. For example, Ignazi (2003, p. 29) argues that the term "populism" has a multifaceted meaning, which does not offer rigorous criteria for classification. Other authors highlight the differences between populism and the extreme right, even though they overlap (Rydgren, 2017). Given this disagreement, it is worth reporting Jamin's position (2013, p. 39): «It can be said that populism refers to a political discourse placing the glory of the people in opposition to the corrupted elite, and that the former must take back control of the democracy that was confiscated by the latter. In the same way, it can be said that the extreme right is an ideological movement based on an extreme nationalism that is anxious to defend a given people in a given territory. A nationalism that justifies xenophobia, anti-Semitism and the development of a strong police state to protect the future of that people from a racial, territorial and cultural point of view».

platforms, or communication styles.

The temporal complexity of the rise of Radical Right emerges when the electoral flows of the last ten years are considered: while the Radical Right has steadily become a mainstream force in some countries, especially those in Eastern Europe, in others, its success has been unexpected and unforeseen, although predictions of Radical Right future trajectory look problematic even in the short term[4]. These differing political situations among countries imply that specific case studies have low levels of generizability and quick rates of obsolescence.

Radical Right is nevertheless a global phenomenon, the root causes of which necessarily extend beyond peculiarities of specific countries. That is why the theoretical basis of this work is related to systemic and complexity theories, which can provide the epistemic tools to study global phenomena (see Suteanu, 2005; Urry, 2003), especially by assessing their causal relationships in order to provide explanations (Morin, 2005; see also Ruzzeddu, 2012, pp. 72 ff.). More precisely, whereas classical explanation models imply there is one cause for each phenomenon, a complex phenomenon like the Radical Right may be the outcome of many possible causes. For each individual case, multiple simultaneous causes interact, so a specific description of each case is needed.

Furthermore, a case that belongs in the category of the Radical Right might be the outcome of various causes but could also be the outcome of intersecting causes. As a consequence, a study on factors contributing to the rise of the Radical Right could offer only a general idea of causality, which would then require narrower analyses. The explanatory factors I propose in this work are not necessarily exclusive and might coexist with other localized factors.

So that, the Research Question of this work is as follows: what categories of causes underlie the electoral success of the Radical Right?

I aim to assess the global causes related to social, transnational phenomena rather than national political systems' peculiarities.

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[4] From this point of view, Bulli and Tronconi's (2012, p. 89) considerations about Lega Nord's elusive character can easily be applied to other RR forces.

Furthermore, as I will show in paraphgraphs 3 and 4, the complexity of Radical Right entails a double level of analysis: structural data and social representations[5]. This work will therefore focus both on contemporary reality as a social fact and the reduction of contemporary reality's complexity in social representations to enable social actors to provide this reality with meaning. Namely, I will try to understand why the reduction-of-complexity strategies that the Radical Right proposes are so appealing to large groups of voters.

In other words, this work focuses on a global systemic level. At this level, empirical case studies are not very reliable due to their low generalizability. A hermeneutic process of understanding the descriptions of reality highlighted by Radical Right social representations seems to be more suitable for the aims of this research.

## 3. The radical right: Possible explanations

Most studies on the Radical Right have been based upon a theoretical framework that we might call demand/supply approach. As Werkman and Gherghina (2018; see also Eatwell, 2005, p. 46; Mudde, 2007, p. 229; Norris, 2005, chap. III and chap. I) show, it is possible to study Radical Right from two points of view: the demand side and the supply side. While the demand side is concerned with autonomous social phenomena that have changed voters' behaviors, the supply side is concerned with the specific characteristics shown by the Radical Right party and its leaders in a given political context. I will now consider the demand side, which is related to «macro-level developments such as modernization, economic and political crises» (Werkman and Gherghina, 2018, p. 462) before turning to the supply side in the next chapter.

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[5]  The notion of «social representation» deserves further consideration. Many authors have used this notion in the social sciences; in this context, I refer to Orfali's works (2000; 2013), which are based upon Moscovici's theory (1976; 1979) that social representations are epistemic tools for understanding the RR. Namely, Orfali states that «There are two main processes by which social representations are formed, namely, anchoring and objectification. The first process, anchoring, is making the meaningless meaningful. The second process, objectification, is aiming at the integration of the object (be it physical, social, imaginary or real) in the individual's and group's mind» (Orfali, 2013, pp. 168-169). In other words, social representations perform a crucial function: they provide social actors with interpretative frameworks to orientate themselves in the empirical word, the complexity of which needs to be reduced (see Ruzzeddu, 2007).

Regarding the demand side, some authors have attributed the Radical Right's electoral success to economic issues: Cavallaro and Zanetti (2020) for example, state that this success started with the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and is the consequence of the increasing financial difficulties of unskilled workers. Although the authors acknowledge that this is not the only explanation and that the Radical Right electorate is quite disaggregated, according to their analysis, the core of Radical Right voters is among lower social strata.

Similarly, Zagórski, Rama and Cordero (2019) link the Radical Right's success to economic insecurity, while Oesch and Rennwald (2018, p. 800) depict the Radical Right as the natural representative of the contemporary working class: in their vision,

the radical right receives the highest electoral success among production and service workers. In terms of economic attitudes, production and service workers are close to the left and lend significantly stronger support to the left than clerks, technical specialists or managers do. However, their cultural preferences are in closer accordance with the radical right, explaining why the electorate of the radical right has the strongest working-class bias among the three main contemporary political poles,

which are left, center-right, and the Radical Right.

Still from the demand point of view, , explanations based upon migration issues are also relevant. Such issues also imply cultural issues in addition to economic ones.

Betz for example, asserts that nativism is a good cultural ground for radicalization. Nativism refers to an attitude of supposed privilege that, in a given country, those who were born citizens should hold «in preference to the foreign-born». Nativism encapsulates the «identitarian promotion», which places priority on and has a preference for the native-born «exclusively on the grounds of being native». From this, it follows that governments have the duty to promote and protect the well-being and welfare of their own citizens and to show unconditional «partiality towards compatriots» (Betz, 2019, p. 112).

According to Betz  this supposed privilege occurs in three areas: job recruitment, welfare provisions, and local traditions. In other words, nativists believe that citizens should have privileged access to the job market and welfare services. Furthermore, they value the

«defence of the fundamental traditions, values and historically evolved institutional arrangements that define a particular community, its culture and identity» (Betz, 2019, p. 123).

Needless to say, nativism is closely related to the strong migration flows that have been resent almost everywhere in the world in the last 15 years (Brils, Muis and Gaidytė, 2020; Arzheimer, 2018). Migration has changed well-rooted habits of native citizens in terms of job recruitment and welfare provisions, as well as in the domain of cultural structure because of social interactions among people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Such changes, which have been occurring at an unusually quick pace, may have led to the idealization of the recent past when economy was better and migration was a minor social issue. Representations of the past as a golden age are the basis for nativism and the Radical Right's success.

It is important to state that while cultural and economic explanations are conceptually different, it is quite hard, in the social sphere, to find cases in which they do not cross each other. It is hardly possible to attribute the Radical Right's success clearly to either economic or cultural issues (see for example, Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, pp. 1674 ff; Cavallaro and Zanetti, 2020)[6].

The main point, though, is that, according to the literature cited above, the Radical Right's success is simply the reaction to economic or social changes resulting from globalization. In other words, some Radical Right forces have become mainstream political parties because they defend the interests of social layers facing troubles because of delocalized production, migrant labor competition, and lower welfare provisions, among other issues.

However, explaining the Radical Right's success as a function of these issues only would

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[6] Cultural explanation is the most appropriate for he Eastern European Radical Right namely in Hungary and Poland, whose high rate of economic growth cannot be linked to the electoral successes of, respectively, Fidesz-KDNP and «Law and Justice». The more likely explanation is those countries' historical legacies. As Buštíková (2018, p. 799) states, «Since the dawn of East European democracies in the early 1990s, scholars have expressed pessimism about their prospects. The new political and economic regimes, it was argued, were expected to create a large impoverished underclass and a politically unsophisticated electorate, which many believed would block democratic and economic progress. The challenges of nation-building, mixed with Leninist legacies, were primed to create contentious, exclusionary communities that would be incompatible with free markets and liberal democratic institutions».

be a mistake. Some of the literature stresses that there is no adequate empirical correlation between the Radical Right's success and socio-economic unease (Eatwell, 2005, p. 10 [West Europe]; Norris, 2005, pos. 2398; Mudde, 2007, p. 230).

Furthermore, in cases in which the Radical Right has won an electoral competition and achieved political power, very rarely has this resulted in changes made on behalf of native voters. As Mudde (2019, p. 167) states, «Despite the fact that the populist radical right has set the political agenda in many European countries during most of the twenty-first century so far, words have spoken louder than actions for much of the time».

Migration, for example: no relevant changes in the migration flows have happened where Radical Right has been governing. In the US, the migration trend during Trump's administration has increased (United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019a); the same happened in Hungary under Orban's administration, and in Poland in the last years (United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019b); similarly, no relevant redistribution policies have taken place on behalf of lower strata of population, in terms for example of pay raises or job condition improvement[7].

Generally speaking, it is evident that in countries where the Radical Right has reached positions of power, there have been no relevant consequences for the countries' respective general income distribution or production structure[8]. Radical Right forces have certainly modified their countries' foreign, migration, and environmental policies, but such changes always occurred within the range of political oscillations normal in democratic life; the world society can easily deal with these oscillations. In spite of this lack of major change, electoral trends have not significantly changed: Radical Right forces may certainly have lost support, but they are far from disappearing from the political arenas[9].

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[7]    An example is the controversial job reform in Hungary, called 'Slave law', for it compells workers to provide overtimew with delayed payments. It is impossible at the moment to mention welfare policies; as a matter of fact, they are now strictly related to COVID  politics and policies; the way Radical Right forces have coped with the pandemic is quite complex and far beyond the aim of this work.

[8]    Https://stats.wto.org, 17/12/2021. It emerges clearly that the total merchandise exchange rate changes independently from major political events.

[9]    The main example is COVID-19 pandemic, which was a hard test for worldwide leaders, including the RR. While many RR leaders blatantly denied the virus's existence, they were compelled to adopt universal measures of healthcare and welfare. This showed the unfeasibility of their political promises, which were to be reached through rejecting the principle of universalism, based upon their rationalization of public expenditure.

The ongoing electoral fidelity of many Radical Right voters whose economic conditions have not considerably improved supports the assessment that economic interest is not a reliable, or at least is an insufficient, explanation. To assess the causes of the Radical Right's success, then, I will attempt to follow a strategy proposed by Wrkman and Gherhina: relying on the other category of analysis, the supply side. One of the main defining features of the supply side is «consistency of ideological discourse, functioning party propaganda, the continuity of the leader in office and strong party organization» (Werkman and Gherghina 2018, p. 462). In other words, the supply side concerns the characteristics of political forces that most effectively garner electoral success. These characteristics consist of three main categories: differences from other parties (i.e., which political force appears the most loyal to voters or the least corrupted? Mudde, 2007, 237 ff.), the internal organization (how effective are the leadership and the decision-making process? Mudde, 2007, 259 ff.), and the ideology (how effectively can a party provide reliable representations of reality? Eatwell, 1993, 57; Mudde, 2007, 257; Norris, 2005, position 2413).

The latter characteristic, ideology, is the most relevant because it recalls the assessment that a few authors have made about the Radical Right's success: that, rather than depending on specific structural causes, this success depends on voters' perceptions, especially a very low sense of social trust. Berning and Ziller define this lowering social trust as the progressive weakening of the idea that used to be the basis of the 20th century civil life, that others will not «deliberately harm us».This low social trust implies that social actors represent the world «generally in terms of threat and competition rather than safety and cooperation» (Berning and Ziller 2017, p. 199). This cultural change is crucial, «as earlier research has demonstrated that worldviews centered on the notion of threat and competition promote authoritarian and social dominance beliefs as well as related exclusionary outgroup attitudes» (Berning and Ziller, 2017, p. 199). Similarly, Steenvoorden and Harteveld (2017, p. 29) explain the Radical Right's success through the notion of societal pessimism, meaning a widespread feeling of nostalgia «that the best times are in the past» and that society should «[return] to how it used to be before the social changes that have occurred in recent

decades»[10]. Needless to say, representations of the past as a «golden age» are far from reliable, though they affect future expectations by encouraging solid opposition against progressive policies and politics. What is most significant is that Radical Right social representations are related to a sense of deep mistrust and insecurity rather than to the social interests of well-defined groups within the social fabric. It is impossible to say whether this mistrust is the consequence or the cause of Radical Right social representations: I will try to resolve this uncertainty in the next parapgraph.

## 4. The radical right and the need for recognition

As seen in the previous section, the most frequent explanation for the Radical Right's success is economic–social factors: according to this explanation, Radical Right electoral achievements are the consequence of the economic strain experienced by the low–middle classes in recent years.

We have also seen that once Radical Right parties achieve power, they rarely keep their promises, and their administrations perform at quite a low level. In spite of this performance, many Radical Right forces have maintained large electoral and political support.

Clearly, economic interests cannot be considered the right explanation for the Radical Right's success or, at least, are an insufficient criterion of explanation. Another possible explanation for the Radical Right's success is a sense of general insecurity and uncertainty (see Downs, 1957, pp. 77 ff.) attributed by some social actors to globalization-related phenomena. This attribution is supported (and provoked) by social representations of a golden past during which citizens enjoyed wealth and security.

Beyond the idealization of a recent past, Radical Right social representations have a common feature: their recognition of the economic and cultural problems caused by globalization for large layers the national societies. Even more importantly, Radical Right

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[10]    See the idea of «nostalgic deprivation» (Gest, Reny and Mayer, 2018).

parties conclude that the origin of these problems is not the citizen's responsibility but somebody else's, particularly financial and political élites.

In simple words, the Radical Right's appeal to voters might be based in its open acknowledgment that their problems exist in the face of globalization and the accompanying economic and cultural challenges. Wide groups of voters seem to care less for the resolution than the mere *recognition* of these problems. Simple statements that recognize that the cause of people's problems is external and independent from people's responsibility is a relief from cognitive unease in a complex, globalized world, an unease that is probably the basis for the mistrust and fear described in chapter 3 .

## 5. Conclusions

Within the framework of the epistemic limits described above, the Radical Right's success suggests some social trends that might affect policy-making in the next future. The governing of globalization processes entails coping with significant economic and social processes, such as capital flows, migration, technological innovation, and social changes. However, an effective management of these issues might not be sufficient to obtain citizens' consent, as these processes are incredibly complex, consist of unprecedented loads of information, and change at an incredibly fast pace. The consequence is that many social actors simply have trouble managing these information flows, with heavy consequences for their ability to make sense of things.

Therefore, it is possible to state that political demands in democratic societies have witnessed important transformations in the last decades. More specifically, in the 20th century, the focus of political life was economic interests, which were defined and pursued through rational discourses and actions. In this century, in contrast, traditional rationality is no longer a reliable tool for defining individual and collective goals, so political demands are related to sense-making functions rather than economic interests. Thus, political demands expressing what Taylor (1994) would define as a «recognition» need emerge: large groups

of voters require representations of the world in which they are depicted as occupying a clear and steady position.

This demand implies a clear difference between new-fascist forces and the Radical Right: as we have seen in paragraph 1, the former advocates for authoritarianism, if not actual dictatorship, while the second advocates for respect of the (supposed) popular will beyond any constitutional rule or supranational authority. As Eistenstadt (1999, p. 112) states, fascism and national socialism had fairly clear projects for society that their proponents wanted to build using political power; namely, they «aimed at the construction of new collective identities, new collective boundaries, as well as to implement a new vision via political action».

In other words, a deep change has occurred within the right-wing of most Western states: while fascism and new-fascism aim to establish top-down politics and rebuild ethnically homogenous and traditional societies, Radical Right forces assert that traditional values and identities still lie within common people; global élites and institutions have allegedly betrayed those values and identities. To permit the popular will to prevail, the Radical Right aims to loosen constitutional rules, human rights defences, and adherence to international treaties. This is an overwheling symbolic change, which 21th politics will need to take into consideration.

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