



Review

No guts, no glory: How framing the collective past paves the way for anti-immigrant sentiments[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Populist Right-Wing Parties (PRWPs) have made a remarkable comeback since the 1980s, especially in Western Europe. In this paper we argue that in order to explain such successes we need to understand the creative way in which PRWP leaders frame the collective past, present and future. We examined speeches of PRWP leaders in France, The Netherlands, and Belgium and examined in each of these unique contexts how these leaders instill collective nostalgia and perceptions of discontinuity between past and present to justify a tougher stance on immigration, asylum-seeking and multiculturalism. We found that these PRWP leaders use temporal narratives about history and identity to persuade their audience that (a) our past is glorious, our future is bleak, (b) we know who brought the country down, (c) we were once glorious because we were tough, (d) we need to be tough once more, and (e) we are the only party prepared to take on “the enemy”. We conclude that PRWP leaders not only feed collective angst and fear of losing collective roots, they also provide (potential) followers with a historicized justification for harsher treatment of migrants and minorities, arguing that history has shown that the nation’s survival depends on its ability to be unflinching.

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“My dear friend, we, national fighters, who are the enlightened guardians of the national spirit and the interests of our people, we have to decide our choices guided by the imperative of victory. [...] In the history of countries and nations, one encounters moments where a generation has carried the responsibility for the survival of the group, its continuity, as a conscious human entity. It's this responsibility that our generation, and our organization in particular, carries.” (Marine Le Pen, 14 November 2010)

Populist Right-Wing Parties (PRWPs) openly advocating anti-immigrant sentiments have made a remarkable comeback in recent years in many Western countries. This trend can even be witnessed in countries where multiculturalism was once celebrated as a core value defining the national identity. Consider the Netherlands, where the PVV (Freedom Party) led by Geert Wilders increased its number of seats in parliament from 9 in 2006 to 24 in 2010. Another case in point is Sweden, where, for the first time in the country's history, the extreme-right secured a seat in the national parliament in the 2010 elections. Although PRWP leaders typically refrain from inciting violence, their followers may nonetheless conclude it is time to confront immigrants and asylum-seekers. For example, there is growing evidence that *Golden Dawn* supporters in Greece entice others to violence toward minorities (BBC, 2 October 2013).

These may be rather extreme cases, but it is clear that even in countries where PRWPs are not part of the traditional political landscape, the issue of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers and integration in the host-society are high on the political agenda. Moreover, in many Western countries, mainstream party leaders have ‘moved to the right’. For example, it has become commonplace for influential politicians to argue ‘multiculturalism’ has failed, thereby portraying immigrants as a real threat and those promoting multiculturalism as representing the ‘old left’ and out of touch with reality. For instance, in 2010 Germany's Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel described multiculturalism as obsolete, dismissing it as ‘multikulti-nonsense’. These views were echoed by the British Prime-Minister David Cameron in 2011, when he argued that the “hands-off tolerance of those who reject Western values has failed”, calling for “a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism” (BBC News, 5 February, 2011).

PRWP leaders¹ tend to go a step further adopting an alarmist narrative, suggesting that their country is on the brink of collapse, requiring strong leadership and preparedness to take immediate and decisive action. To make this point, nostalgia is typically evoked, whereby the country's distant past is painted in a positive way, the more immediate past and the present as one of dramatic decline, and its future as one marked by imminent loss of national identity. These nostalgic narratives are one-sided representations of the past and involve considerable exaggeration and a longing for a past that never existed (Cheng et al., 2010; Kashima et al., 2009; Liu & Khan, 2014). Even though PRWP leaders do not hold a monopoly on the use of nostalgia, it is fair to say that these leaders have discovered a new master-frame (Rydgren, 2005), one that relies heavily on, among other things, nostalgia as a strategy to increase their appeal among swinging voters. But why are PRWP leaders drawn to nostalgic narratives? We propose that by presenting the past as glorious and positive and the present as in decline, nostalgic reminiscing about a glorious past not only serves to essentialize, antagonize, and mobilize ‘national identity’ (Liu & Khan, 2014), it also serves to convey a sense of urgency, and need for immediate drastic measures to avoid a break between past and present. More specifically, we propose that PRWP leaders do not ‘lie in waiting’ until a critical juncture (i.e., ‘exogenous shock’) occurs, but that they actively promote the idea of the country facing an as yet *unrecognized* critical juncture, one that has to be addressed urgently to ensure historical continuity. In other words, by promoting identity threat and fear about the future vitality of the nation (discontinuity), these leaders not only challenge the dominant West European ‘state symbology’ (Liu, Onar, & Woodward, 2014), they also create what can be considered an ‘*induced* critical juncture’, which is subsequently used to justify calls for drastic policies to protect the nation (Mols, 2010).

In order to illustrate these processes, we unpack speeches of PRWP leaders in France (Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen), The Netherlands (Geert Wilders), and Belgium (Filip Dewinter) and explore how PRWP leaders portray the collective past, present and future, highlighting specific identity threat themes: identity loss, status loss, and loss of identity continuity.

1. National identity and time

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), part of people's sense of self is derived from their membership in social groups. Akin to personal history being an anchor for knowledge about the personal self, a group or nation's history is essential to develop, establish and shape the collective self (Hilton, Erb, McDermott, & Molian, 1996; Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999; Sani et al., 2007). Indeed, a shared collective history enhances ingroup cohesion, promotes a sense of common fate, and helps establish the content of group identity (e.g., group values, beliefs, and norms; e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005; Moscovici, 1988). This is because in reflecting on group history, the unique heritage of one's group becomes salient, which underscores how the ingroup is different and distinct from other groups. A group's collective history thus provides

¹ There is considerable disagreement among social scientists about the exact definition of ‘Multiculturalism’, and the question of which countries and societies can be regarded as truly Multicultural (Berry, 2006; Kymlicka, 2007). We will refrain from entering into this discussion here, and instead focus on the way in which PRWP leaders seek to persuade people that multiculturalism (conceived in rather general terms as the host society having to accommodate for immigrants and cultural minorities) is dangerous, and that those promoting multiculturalism are naïve, blind, and unable/unwilling to recognize the dangers facing the host society.

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