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The role of the media in the mainstreaming of the far right

Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon

The urgent need for more accountability from agenda-setters

Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister, recently "sparked outrage" for declaring that Hungarians are not "a mixed race" and do not want "to become a mixed race".[1] In a letter of resignation, one of his long-time advisers, Zsuzsa Hegedüs, told him in no uncertain terms that he had crossed a line, saying what was once "anti-migrant and anti-Europeanism" had now turned into "a pure Nazi speech worthy of Goebbels".[2]

At a time when the resurgence of far-right politics has become commonly acknowledged as one of the key challenges facing democracies, it may feel reassuring to see prominent figures taking a stand. Yet often, when reactions to, and discussion of, the far-right take an adversarial approach, they tend to portray the threat as exceptional, as a shocking digression from *our* mainstream norms. Note how Hegedüs appeared comfortable with Orbán's conscious and sustained slide towards far-right politics for years, until the little veneer of respectability was lost and it was no longer possible to deny his far-right status – in this case, comparable to the Nazis no less.

These exclamations of shock come despite the fact that the resurgence of the far-right has been a long and well-documented process.[3] To understand it better, we have recently developed a heuristic framework with Aaron Winter to trace and analyse the mainstreaming of far-right politics more

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1 Noack R (2022) 'Hungary's Viktor Orban faces outrage after saying Europeans shouldn't become "mixed race"', *Washington Post*, 27 July 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/27/viktor-orban-mixed-race-cpac/
2 Hvg.hu (2022) 'Prime minister's agent Zsuzsa Hegedüs resigned due to Orbán's "pure Nazi text"', Hvg.hu. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220726_Orban_Viktor_Hegeds_Zsuzsa_lemondas
3 See as early as 2000: Hainsworth P (ed) (2000) *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the margins to the mainstream*, Pinter Publishers

holistically.[4] Our aim is to ensure that we take our understanding beyond electoral politics, accounting for more subtle, progressive shifts in discourse and thus hegemony. Through this, we highlight that, contrary to what is often believed in the public arena, the mainstream in liberal democracies is not immune to far-right politics, nor will it necessarily act as a bulwark against them. In fact, we argue that the borders between the two are fuzzy and movable. The exceptionalisation of far-right politics, reducing it to mimetic forms of fascism, has therefore led to a denial regarding the scale of both its resurgence and mainstream reach.

"the mainstream in liberal democracies is not immune to far-right politics"

This could not be clearer than in mainstream media discourse around these issues. While generally negative towards such politics, mainstream coverage of the far-right has followed three broad problematic trends.

As already discussed, one has been to exceptionalise the more extreme cases, as if Orbán had somehow only now crossed a line rather than it being the next logical step in his slide to the far-right. Another example is a *Guardian* video explainer of how the UK Independence party (UKIP) had only become far-right after Nigel Farage's departure,[5] thereby minimising the party's already prominent far-right agenda prior to 2016 and instead referring to instances such as the infamous Breaking Point poster as "off-piste moments". Here again, the veneer eventually cracked with Farage becoming increasingly open in his far- and extreme-right views.[6] We can also see such trends in the typical reaction that follows far-right attacks, whereby they tend to be treated as freak and individualised events, often blamed on 'lone wolves' and mental illness, removing any possibility of situating them within the broader context in which they have emerged. Exceptionalising the far-right in this way fails to engage with how such politics have come to be normalised in society.

"Exceptionalising the far-right … fails to engage with how such politics have come to be normalised in society"

4   Brown K, Mondon A and Winter A (2021) 'The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: towards a heuristic framework', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, online first

5   Walker P, Toussaint-Strauss J, Pierce J, Roberts S, Boyd P and Kape B (2019) 'How Ukip normalised far-right politics – video explainer', *Guardian*, 3 March 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2019/mar/03/how-ukip-normalised-far-right-politics-video-explainer

6   Forbes Breaking News (2022) 'Nigel Farage: this is "the biggest threat we face"', YouTube, 9 August 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj1ek1nqpzM&ab_channel=ForbesBreakingNews

The second trend is the euphemisation of reconstructed far-right politics, hidden away under more subtle terms. This trend generally relies on a limited and caricatural understanding of racism in the public arena, where it is reduced to its most extreme and crudest understanding. It has meant that many public actors, in the media and politics, but also academia, have shied away from calling a spade a spade: if it's not open biological racism or Nazism, then it cannot be racism. This is what has allowed actors like Orbán and Farage to slip under the radar in terms of being viewed as far-right in certain circles.

It is as if, in much of our public discourse, racism remains 'frozen' in time.[7] Of course, this ignores the incredible wealth of research conducted on the concept, demonstrating that, unsurprisingly, it has evolved with its times and taken new shapes and forms.[8] Yet it is common to see what should be described as racism, based on most serious research on the matter, instead euphemised under other, less precise, but also stigmatising terms such as 'nativism' and 'populism'. This in turn is what allows those responsible for embracing far-right politics for cheap political gain or clickbait to separate themselves from the caricatural understanding of 'racism' when it becomes too obvious, as in the Hungarian case: how can I be racist myself if I denounce racism? This was particularly striking during Euro 2020 when members of the UK government condemned racist abuse directed towards Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka. As England teammate Tyrone Mings rightly pointed out: "You don't get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as 'Gesture Politics' and then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we're campaigning against, happens."[9] That the racism denounced is just the most illiberal articulation of a malleable ideology serves to excuse, conceal or downplay more mundane but also systemic and liberal articulations.[10]

7   Lentin A (2020) *Why Race Still Matters*, Polity Press

8   See among many others and in various contexts: Bonilla-Silva E (2006) *Racism without Racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*, Rowman and Little-field; Eddo-Lodge R (2017) *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Blooms-bury; Goldberg DT (2016) *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, Polity Press; Mills CW (1997) *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press; Ray V (2022) *On Critical Race Theory: Why it matters & why you should care*, Random House; Zuberi T and Bonilla-Silva E (2008) *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and methodology*, Rowman & Littlefield

9   BBC (2021) 'England's Tyrone Mings criticises Patel over racism response', BBC, 13 July 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-57778668

10 Mondon A and Winter A (2020) *Reactionary Democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*, Verso

In our recent case study of the *Guardian*,[11] we explored the way in which the term 'populism' has been used to discuss issues that would be best identified as far-right or racist and the consequences such choices may have.[12] We found that populism has been used widely to describe a range of phenomena, but that it has been most prominently applied to far-right politics, with detrimental effects. Indeed, it is a matter not just of poor terminological accuracy or even euphemisation, but also of the legitimisation of far-right politics. Through its very etymology, the term 'populism' links the far-right, generally based on elitist and anti-democratic precepts, to 'the people', thus providing them with a veneer of democratic assent. The false equivalence created by such mainstream anti-populist approaches also shines a negative light on populist left-wing alternatives by equating them to the far-right.[13] Finally, it diverts the blame onto 'the people' who are held responsible for the rise of the far-right because of their 'grievances'.[14]

> ## "it is a matter not just of poor terminological accuracy or even euphemisation, but also of the legitimisation of far-right politics"

This links to the third trend, agenda-setting and deflection, which we also studied in the case of the *Guardian*, and which Aurelien Mondon has developed with regard to the 'immigration issue' in opinion polls.[15] Using the Eurobarometer survey, Mondon highlights that respondents give widely different answers when asked about the most important issues facing them personally or their country. The issues of immigration, crime and terrorism, generally beneficial to the right and far-right, are more prominent as a concern when respondents think about their country and at times where public discourse emphasises crises, but are insignificant when they think about their

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11 Brown K and Mondon A (2020) 'Populism, the media and the mainstreaming of the far right: the Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study', *Politics*, 41(3): 279–295

12 Similar findings were found within academia by Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton: Hunger S and Paxton F (2021) 'What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science', *Political Science Research and Methods*, online first

13 Stavrakakis Y, Katsambekis G, Nikisianis N, Kioupkiolis A and Siomos T (2018) 'Populism, anti-populism and crisis', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(1): 4–27

14 This is something that has also been done by blaming the 'white working class' and/or 'left behind' for the rise of the far right. See Begum N, Mondon A and Winter A (2021) 'Between the "left behind" and "the people": racism, populism and the construction of the "white working class" in the context of Brexit' in Hunter S and van der Westhuizen C (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Whiteness Studies*, Routledge

15 Mondon A (2022) 'Populism, public opinion, and the mainstreaming of the far right: the "immigration issue" and the construction of a reactionary "people"', *Politics*, online first

own personal circumstances. What this research highlights is the role played by actors with privileged access to public discourse in shaping the agenda and their subsequent impact on the perception of 'the people'. Of course, individuals are not simply passive recipients of elite discourse, but it remains that in societies with deeply unequal access to discursive platforms, certain interests have more power than others. As Mondon writes: "Polls are not only used to legitimise certain reactionary positions such as a focus on immigration and the exaggeration of 'cultural' grievances most propitious to the (far) right over economic concerns, but they can also be used to downplay more progressive ones or the impact of reactionary politics on minorities and democracy more generally."[16] It is therefore imperative that we consider power differentials when accounting for the rise in such politics.

As a result, saying that the far-right is a serious threat is not enough. We must not exceptionalise, euphemise or detract from the agenda-setting capacity that elites hold in society. What we urgently require is more accountability for those with privileged access to shaping public discourse. As Katy Brown shows in her research, talking 'with' and talking 'about' the far-right can mean legitimising, hyping and mainstreaming such politics.[17] As such, we must of course seek to understand the far-right, the roots of its appeal and its trajectory, but this must always be in order to combat it. Understanding should never mean excusing, euphemising or providing exaggerated platforms to ideas that not only threaten already weakened democracies but also put the lives of many at direct risk.

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16 Ibid.
17 Brown K (2022: forthcoming) 'Talking "with" and "about" the far right: putting the mainstream in mainstreaming', PhD thesis, University of Bath

politics through elite discourse. His first book, *The Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia: A populist hegemony?*, was published in 2013 by Routledge and he co-edited *After Charlie Hebdo: Terror, racism and free speech*, published by Zed Books in 2017. His latest book is *Reactionary Democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*, co-written with Aaron Winter and published by Verso in 2020.