

# EL NATIVISMO Y EL ÉXITO DE LA MOVILIZACIÓN POPULISTA

## NATIVISM AND THE SUCCESS OF POPULIST MOBILIZATION

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**Resumen:** La historia del nativismo ha sido exhaustivamente estudiada y analizada. Uno de sus aspectos más controvertidos se refiere a la relación entre nativismo y populismo. Su naturaleza exacta no está, sin embargo, clara, y requiere más investigación. El principal objetivo de este artículo es arrojar luz sobre una cuestión que se dirige al centro mismo del debate actual sobre el populismo de derechas: cuál es el lugar y el papel del nativismo en la movilización populista.

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**Abstract:** The history of nativism has been exhaustively studied and analyzed. One of the most controversial aspects of this literature pertains to the relationship between nativism and populism. Its exact nature, however, is unclear and calls for investigation. The main objective of this article is to shed light on a question that goes to the very heart of the current debate on radical right-wing populism: namely, what is the place and role of nativism in populist mobilization.

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The narrow victory of the proponents of a British exit from the European Union followed by Donald Trump's equally narrow victory in the presidential election of 2016 have revived interest in a political phenomenon that has its roots in early nineteenth-century American history. As Cas Mudde has argued, both the Brexit and Donald Trump's presidential campaign were informed by a strong dose of nativism, which he broadly defines as "xenophobic nationalism" (Mudde 2016). Nativism originated in the antebellum mass movement of the "Know Nothings" whose programmatic combination of anti-(political) establishment and anti-Catholic mobilization was instrumental in upending the Jacksonian party system (1828-1854). After the Civil War, nativism reemerged with a vengeance, targeting Catholics, Chinese migrant laborers, and Asian immigrants in general, to name but a few.

The history of American nativism has been exhaustively studied and analyzed from a variety of perspectives (for an excellent overview see McNally 2016: 35-60). One of the most controversial aspects of this literature pertains to the relationship between nativism and populism. A number of studies have shown that the electoral success of the antebellum Know Nothings was as much owed to their attacks against the political establishment as to their nativist rhetoric (Holt 1983: 162-170). Against that, the agrarian Populists of the 1890s raised nativist concerns only to a very limited degree, while on the whole remaining remarkably tolerant (Nugent 1963; Postel 2007). Revisionist historians have argued that even the Second Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, at least in some states such as Indiana and California, derived its popularity more from its challenging entrenched economic and political elites and giving voice to popular dissatisfaction with the political establishment that had too long ignored popular interests than its terroristic intimidation and suppression of ethnic minorities (Moore 1990; Neymeyer 1992). Finally, there was Trump's campaign, which bundled anti-establishment *ressentiments* and cultural anxieties into a potent mobilizational force that won the insurgent candidate the nomination and the presidency (Lind 2016; Young and Jackson 2015). Some American pundits have drawn parallels between the ideological mixture of economic populism and ethnocultural nationalism informing "Trumpism" and radical right-wing populism in Europe (McLaughlin 2015; Tharoor 2017).

What this suggests is that there is a certain affinity between populism and nativism. Its exact nature, however, is unclear and calls for investigation. This is particularly urgent, given the continued

electoral success of radical right-wing populist parties and movements in entrenched liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere, which is the focus of the analysis that follows.

The main objective is to shed light on a question that goes to the very heart of the current debate on radical right-wing populism: namely, what is the place and role of nativism in populist mobilization. On the one hand, it has been argued that the notion of radical right-wing populism is highly misleading (Rydgren 2017). As Yannis Stavrakakis has recently put it, in reality, these parties and movements promote an overwhelmingly "nationalist, xenophobic ideology with only peripheral and/or secondary populist elements" (Stavrakakis 2017: 8; for an in-depth discussion, see also Aslanidis 2017). In other words, populism is only incidental to the radical right, which should primarily be defined in terms of nativism. Against that, there is the notion that nativism is an intrinsic feature of populism, derived from the core of its logic. As Benjamin McKean has forcefully argued, populism is all about people using "a grievance to identify themselves as the authentic embodiment of 'the people' – unlike those other people, the group they are blaming for that grievance" (McKean 2016). The populist notion of "the people," in turn, rests on "a sense of internal homogeneity," which as such is necessarily opposed to any notion of heterogeneity and difference, against which the identity of "the people" is formed (Panizza 2005: 17-18; see also McKean 2016a). From this perspective, the contemporary radical right's propagation of a discourse that combines both populist and nativist tropes is not without logical coherence and consistency.

## I. Populism, nativism and the radical right

For the purpose of this paper, populism is defined as a political doctrine that holds that society is divided into two antagonistic groups, the vast mass of ordinary people (the “low”) and a relatively small elite (the “high”) which not only systematically ignores the will and wishes of the former but more often than not has nothing but contempt for them, their values and wants (see Ostiguy and Roberts 2016). Populism seeks to restore to ordinary people the value they deserve and to assure that politics once again expresses the will of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Nativism represents primarily a political doctrine that holds that the interests and the will of the native-born and inhabitants of long standing should reign supreme over those of new arrivers, and that the former should be accorded absolute priority with respect to the benefits and privileges citizenship accords. At the same time, nativism is also a nationalist doctrine based on the assumption that a nation is founded on a particular historical trajectory and grounded in a particular historically evolved culture and system of values that must be preserved and defended. This suggests that there is an implicit notion of cultural superiority inherent in nativism.

To be successful, radical right-wing populist movements and parties, like any other movement or party, have to construct interpretive frames that address unresolved social and political questions and problems; offer remedies to the problems and suggest strategies for how to attain them; and advance “motivational frames that function as prods to action”

(Snow and Benford 1988: 199-202). Successful mobilization depends in part on the skill of these movements to function as “carriers and transmitters of mobilizing beliefs and ideas” and as “signifying agents” that are “actively engaged in the production of meaning for participants, antagonists, and observers” (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). To be sure, radical right-wing populists compete for votes and thus gain access to political power; success at the polls, however, is not necessarily the only or perhaps even most important objective. Instead, contemporary radical right-wing parties see themselves primarily engaged in fundamental ideational battles and classification struggles regarding the interpretation of key developments shaping today’s and tomorrow’s socioeconomic and sociocultural reality. The ultimate goal is to gain cultural hegemony, i.e., to attain definitional power over ideas and terms that are at the very center of public discourse, and thus establish their “specific vision of the social order” as the “natural” vision of the social order (Smith 1994: 37).<sup>1</sup>

It is within this context that both populist appeal and nativist rhetoric play a crucial role. Prominent radical right-wing populist parties, such as the Front national, the FPÖ, or the Lega Nord owed their initial success to a populist discourse that presented them as defenders of ordinary people against “the elite” and as advocates of their “common sense” and “popular instinct.” In the years that followed, they gradually adopted a nativist rhetoric that promoted them as defenders of the common good, as advocates of

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1. Jörg Haider, in his book from 1993, devotes a whole chapter to “the fight for cultural hegemony” (Haider 1993: 73-85).

national sovereignty and a strict policy of “the native-born first,” and as the privileged interpreters and guardians of national identity. The combination of the two has allowed the radical populist right to promote a political project that appeals across a wide range of social categories, while resonating particularly among the lower classes.

## 2. Historical antecedents

Historically, these configurations are hardly new. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, major populist movements, such as the antebellum anti(Irish)Catholic Know Nothings in the United States –a movement that “originated at the grassroots,” not professional politicians– evoked nativist tropes in support of an anti-elite, anti-political-establishment agenda with a relatively progressive slant (Holt 1973: 313). With this program, they managed to appeal to the “producing classes,” such as journeymen, artisans and mechanics, united in their aversion to the competition from cheap immigrant labor. For a few years in the early 1850s, anti-Catholic, anti-Irish nativism became entrenched at the center of American politics, only to be superseded by the question of slavery. The Know Nothings disappeared as quickly as they had emerged; significant numbers joined the newly founded Republican Party, which, in turn, to a certain extent adopted anti-Catholic prejudices.

Unlike their antebellum precursors, the agrarian Populists of the 1880s/1890s largely eschewed resorting to nativism, despite a strong revival of anti-Catholic, and a ground swell of anti-Chinese sentiments pervading parts of the Unites

States at the time. Notable exceptions were the adoption of anti(Chinese)alien labor clauses in state populist platforms out West (largely to accommodate organized labor) and the appeal to anti-British *ressentiments*, directed against English bankers, land speculators, and absentee landlords.<sup>2</sup> The recourse to Anglophobia was guaranteed to resonate among American farmers, suffering from creeping deflation (which they attributed to the country’s adherence to the Gold Standard pushed by London bankers), and the ever-looming threat of foreclosure because of heavy mortgage indebtedness and tight credit. Anti-British nativist agitation, as far as it went, was supplementary to the Populists’ anti-monopoly cause.

Against that, in France, the Boulangist mobilization of the late 1880s –which at one point threatened to topple the Third Republic– engendered a first wave of political nativism, targeting migrant workers from neighbouring countries, such as Italy and Belgium. This was, at least in part, a response to the highly disappointing results of the parliamentary election of 1889, which seemed to have sealed the fate of Boulangism. Particularly Maurice Barrès, a prominent intellectual and writer, who had secured his seat in

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2. On occasion, populists used anti-semitic tropes, such as “Shylock,” in their campaign against bankers and the Gold Standard. In 1896, William Jennings Bryan “felt the need to reassure a group of Jewish Democrats in Chicago” noting that “in denouncing ‘the financial policy advocated by the Rothschilds . . . , we are not attacking a race; we are attacking greed and avarice, which know neither race nor religion’.” Bryan quoted in McSeveney, S. R. (1972) *The Politics of Depression: Political Behavior in the Northeast, 1893-1896*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 186-187.

the industrial city of Nancy with a virulent nativist platform, established himself as the voice of nativist nationalism, which would prove highly influential in the decades that followed.

In each of these cases, however, the relationship between populism and nativism was at best ambiguous. Even the Know Nothings, who arguably marked the pinnacle of the political exploitation of nativist sentiments in the nineteenth century, combined, as William Gienapp has noted, “bigotry with a sincere desire for reform” (Gienapp 1987: 93). The Know Nothings marketed themselves above all as the defenders of republicanism and its institutions, which they saw threatened by the waves of Catholic immigrants, whose “political souls,” prominent Know Nothing spokesmen such as Samuel Morse charged, had been “captured by despotic powers intent on enslaving the entire world” (Wilentz 1984: 268). Defending republicanism entailed above all asserting the United States as a Protestant nation (Cawardine 1982). For only on the soil of Protestantism could republicanism flourish. As John Pinheiro has succinctly put it, Protestant was “white, civilized (i.e., republican), and American” whereas Catholic was “dangerous, uncivilized (i.e., un-republican), and foreign” (Pinheiro 2014: 9).

In a similar vein, the Populists in the 1880s and 1890s, promoted themselves as the “last significant expression of an old radical tradition” combining Jeffersonian egalitarianism, Jacksonian anti-privilege sentiments, and Lincolnian democracy (Clanton 1991: XVI). Theirs was a vision of a republic composed of independent producers and cultivators – a vision threatened with extinction by the rise of monopoly capitalism, both industrial and

financial, and its collusion with the political establishment to the detriment of ordinary people. The mission of the People’s Party was, as one of its major political leaders put it, to assure that government functioned “to the mutual benefit of all the people” and served “to advance the common weal” (Peffer 1893: 665). It is for this reason that contemporary observers, unlike their detractors a few decades later, characterized the Populist demands as radical and “socialistic” (Walker 1894: 101). There is now broad agreement with Walter Dean Burnham’s assessment of the Populists as “the last significant American challenge to industrial capitalism as a system of social, economic, and political power” (Burnham 1891: 195-196). Too radical for their time, the Populists were swept away following the crucial defeat in the presidential election of 1896. Their ideas, however, proved highly resilient, exerting a major influence on the progressive agenda of the first decades of the twentieth century.

This was also true for Boulangist populism in France – only in a different direction. In the early 1890s, leading Boulangists, such as Maurice Barrès and Paul Déroulède, banked on nativism, directed against foreign workers, in the service of a nationalist ideology that sought to reverse national decline and decadence and create a new sense of identity for a severely unsettled nation. The vast majority of the Boulangist deputies came from the radical left; many of them not only considered themselves socialists, but voted with the Socialists on social issues. At the same time, they were nationalists on political issues, which led Zeev Sternhell and others to characterize them as precursors of “national socialism” and, more contentiously, protofascism (Sternhell

1974; Doty 1970: 269). Ideologically, the influence of Barrès can be traced all the way to the Front national, both under Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter (Fieschi 2004: 139; Kauffman 2016).

### 3. Contemporary radical right-wing populism

Similar to the major populist movements of the nineteenth century, today's successful radical right wing parties in advanced liberal democracies have propagated a discourse designed to mobilize both anti-elite resentment and nativist sentiments. During the past few decades, however, the balance between populism and nativism has increasingly shifted towards the latter. This, however, was not always the case. The initial success of major radical right-wing populist parties in the 1980s and early 1990s was to a large extent the result of their ability to mobilize widespread disenchantment with the political establishment and elites in general. In response, radical right-wing parties such as the Front national (FN), the FPÖ and the Lega Nord (LN) adopted a populist discourse that allowed them to promote themselves as the (sole) advocates of the concerns and interests of ordinary people and the only "true" promoters of "genuine" democracy.

The Front national's programme of 1985 is a case in point. The first chapters abound with populist tropes. Chapter I, tellingly entitled "La démocratie confisquée," starts with the claim that while France is a democracy, the reality looks different. In reality, democracy has been "confiscated" by an oligarchy which could care less about the concerns of "the people." This oligarchy consists of a "small minority of high officials, teachers,

representatives of the media, and union leaders" representing a "new class" without legitimacy derived from the polls" (Front national 1985 17: 20-21). As long as the oligarchy maintains its hold on the levers of power, it will remain in a position to stifle the "profound aspirations" of the French people and ignore their concerns (36-37). In response, the FN markets itself as a political force intent on disempowering the elite (primarily via a market-friendly program designed to reduce the scope of the state and thus deprive the oligarchy of the economic foundation of its power) and "give people back their voice" (*rendre la parole au peuple*) – the title of chapter III of the program (35). Unlike the "political class", characterized as "the new class" (*la nouvelle classe*) and a "closed caste" (*une caste fermée*), the FN, or so the program asserts, has "confidence in the people" (20, 34, 42). This assessment culminates in the FN's call for the introduction of direct democracy as an "indispensable complement to representative democracy" (43). A decade later, the fight against "*l'Établissement*" in the name of "*le peuple*" is central to the FN's populist mobilization (Boily 2005: 42-44). For a brief moment, Jean-Marie Le Pen even toys with the idea of a "populist front" bringing together the main anti-establishment movements (principally Philippe de Villiers on the right and Bernard Tapie on the left), which he quickly discards however (Birnbbaum 2010: 268-269).

Similar populist narratives inform the discourse of a number of other major radical right-wing parties in the 1980s and 90s. The FPÖ, for instance, under the new leadership of Jörg Haider (1986), embarks on a protracted campaign against Austria's elite power-sharing

arrangements (*Proporz*), characterized as a closed system promoting clientilism, patronage and corruption. He proclaims as the party's main goal to liberate the Austrians from the shackles of corporatism and consociationalism and restore them to the center of Austrian politics as independent and responsible citizens (Haider 1993: 29; 1994). And he explicitly accepts the charge of populism for his party because, as he puts it, "we think with the head of the citizens, because we fight for their approval, because – unlike the established parties – we don't rely on power and pressure designed to make them compliant" (Haider 1992: 6).

The same logic holds for the beginnings of the LN as a significant actor in Italian politics in the early 1990s. Its leading figure, Umberto Bossi, cultivates an image that appeals to the "low" in northern Italian society, using coarse and vulgare language (*La Lega c'è la duro*) to mark himself off from the "*politichese*" (convoluted language, incomprehensible for ordinary people) characteristic of the Roman political establishment. Like Haider, Bossi envisions nothing short of a fundamental transformation of the post-war Italian socioeconomic and political system to dismantle the Roman partitocracy and put an end to clientilism and corruption (Boss and Vimercati 1993). The enemy is *Roma ladrona* (the big thief), which robs the hard-working and enterprising northern Italians of their just rewards in order to buy support at the polls in the South of the country and thus perpetuate its state of dependency on state assistance (*assistenzialismo*). The LN's assault on *assistenzialismo*, in turn, reflects the movement's strong "producerist" bent, which can also be found in the rhetoric of the FPÖ, the

Front national, and the populist right in Scandinavia. This is a classical populist trope, which divides society into two groups – the productive and the unproductive (particularly the "symbolic specialists in current sociological parlance), with populists defending the interests of the former.<sup>3</sup> As such, it jibes perfectly with the logic of polarization central to populism.

It was the radical right's adoption of populism, which to a large degree explains its initial surge at the polls. The breakthrough of the Danish Fremskridtspartiet in the "landslide election" of 1973, for instance, owed much to Mogens Glistrup's ability to mobilize widespread political disaffection with, and distrust of, the political establishment and resentment against public servants, who he "accused of being unproductive and overpaid papershufflers" (Nielsen 1976: 147). Similarly, the FPÖ's fulminant ascent in the 1980s and 1990s was largely the result of two factors: Haider's charismatic personality and the party's ability to market themselves as dogged political muckrakers and uncompromising fighters against abuses of power and privileges (Plasser and Ulram 2000: 228-230). The same holds true for the upsurge of support for the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in the election of 2002, a few days after Fortuyn's assassination. The flamboyant gay *enfant terrible* of Dutch politics tapped into a "clear reservoir" of "disaffection from politics" and from the political

3. Producerism dates all the way back to the nineteenth century. Gilded-Age skilled workers in the United States, for instance, "believed in the redemptive powers of their own labor" and "took pride in themselves and their participation in the honorable army of producers – people who produced economic value through their own effort, unlike the 'parasites' (lawyers, bankers, brokers) who merely manipulated abstractions or other people's money" (Lears 2009: 74).

establishment among Dutch voters, which the LPF successfully mobilized (Bélanger and Aarts 2006: 16). The adoption of an anti-elite rhetoric allowed even right-wing extremist parties with a neo-Nazi past, such as the Sverigedemokraterna, to (at least partially) overcome stigmatization by promoting themselves as the only “true democrats” (Hellström and Nilsson 2010: 60).

## 4. Contemporary radical right-wing nativism

It was not before long, however, that the question of migrants and immigration moved to the center of radical right-wing populist mobilization. The focus was primarily on the purportedly deleterious impact of migrants on the labor market, on the social welfare state, and on public security. As a flyer of the German Republikaner (who for a short period in the early 1990s posed a serious challenge to the political establishment) put it quite succinctly: “Save the welfare state: Expel bogus refugees! Eliminate unemployment: Stop immigration! Fight against crime: Deport foreign criminals!” (Betz 1996: 367). This was a rudimentary type of socioeconomic nativism, which found its ideal-typical expression in the Vlaams Blok slogans “Eigen volk eerst” (the own people first) and “Uit Zelfverdediging” (out of self-defense). It was reminiscent of the visceral nativist rhetoric of nineteenth-century nativism, which had informed the programs of antebellum Know Nothings and 1890s Boulangists alike (The FN slogan “*La France aux Français*” was first used by Barrès in his campaign for the 1893 parliamentary election (Goodliffe 2012: 31).

The mobilization of socioeconomic *ressentiments* went a long way to entrench radical right-wing populist parties particularly among lower-skilled workers in industry and services who felt threatened by competition from migrants willing to work for less. This was reflected in the progressive “proletarianization” of the electoral base of these parties (Rydgren 2013). They increasingly filled the political space abandoned by the traditional social-democratic and socialist left, epitomized by François Mitterrand’s radical turn to “*rigueur*” and austerity from 1983, which arguably proved a substantial boon for the Front national. With the progressive tightening of the immigration regime in Western Europe, however, socioeconomic nativism quickly lost its traction. In response, radical right-wing populist parties relatively quickly reframed their anti-foreigner discourse in cultural terms. This was reminiscent of American antebellum “symbolic nativism” -- a combination of civic republicanism and ethnoculturalism directed primarily against Irish Catholic immigrants (Schildkraut 2005: 169). It was based on the conviction that “only Anglo-Saxons possessed the moral and intellectual qualities required for democratic citizenship” and that “racial and cultural differences made certain aliens a threat to national cohesion and stability” (Citrin, Reingold and Green 1990: 1129). Politically, it informed the Know Nothings’ attempt at “symbolic exclusion” of Irish and other Catholic immigrants from the right to speedy naturalization.<sup>4</sup> This was intended to prevent them from voting until they had become fully acculturated (the demand was for a twenty-one-

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4. The term “symbolic exclusion” is borrowed from the sociology of taste (see Bryson 1996; Lizardo and Skiles 2016).

year residency requirement before naturalization). A similar demand was made some forty years later in France by the Boulangist deputy Maurice Barrès. He argued that “only the second or third generation immigrant was rooted enough in the French ‘dead’ to be trusted with full citizenship” (Doty 1976: 189).

Symbolic nativism is centered upon the defense of fundamental traditions, values, and institutions that define a community and its identity. On this basis, it justifies exclusion on grounds of cultural incommensurability and what Pierre-André Taguieff has called the “right to difference” (Taguieff 1993-1994). This represents a departure from traditional notions of racial superiority to a new form of “cultural pluralism” based on the notion that all cultures are equally valid but not all compatible with each other. It is this “assertion of difference rather than any claim to superiority that lies at the heart of nativist logic,” which derives its discursive thrust from the simple “distinction between ‘better’ and ‘better for us’” (Michaels 1994: 39; 1992: 683).

In another sense, too, symbolic nativism is “post-racist” because, unlike racism, it allows for acculturation and assimilation, a distinction already stressed by John Higham, the author of a classic study of American nativism (Higham 2000: 329). Thus the Know Nothings demanded that immigrants give up “their peculiarities and become American in feeling, in thought, and in devotion” to their new home before they could “be considered good citizens.” This, however, was a “matter of experience and education, not inheritance” (Knobel 1981: 332). This is why some prominent nativists in the 1840s and 50s made the case for the virtue of extending full citizenship to African Americans. For, as

one writer asked, who would “refuse the right of suffrage to the native-born, and bred, honest and intelligent man of color; while at the same time they actually force it upon the foreign-born and bred, vicious, ignorant, degraded ruffian” (Alfred Ely cited in Knobel 1981: 333). African Americans in the north agreed. In fact, in the 1880s, the anti-Catholic American Protective Association (A.P. A.), which for a time wielded significant influence in parts of the Republican Party, went out of its way to appeal to African Americans – albeit with rather limited success (Hellwig 1982: 92). This does not mean, however, that African Americans were immune to the temptation of nativism. In fact, in the 1850s, African Americans in Boston petitioned “to keep Irish people from moving onto their street” (Rubin 1978: 193). At the same time, however, African Americans were generally sympathetic to the plight of European and, later in the nineteenth century, Asian immigrants (Rubin 1978: 195; Hellwig 1982: 91).

Nativism is a “militantly defensive” political doctrine in the service of protecting a nation’s “cherished heritage” (Higham 2000: 329). As such, nativism is intricately linked to the question of collective identity based on a shared common culture. Nativist parties respond to what has been shown to be a fundamental concern informing people’s negative attitudes toward immigration – the fear of a loss of identity as a result of being “overrun” by culturally alien foreigners (Mayda 2006; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010).<sup>5</sup> This is what accounted to a significant extent for

5. In Germany, for the past several years, about a third of the population have agreed with the statement that the country, because of all those foreigners is “to a dangerous degree” überfremdet («foreignized»). See Decker, Kiess and Brähler, 2016: 31.

the dramatic rise of the Know Nothings in the years preceding the outbreak of the Civil War; and this is what accounts in large measure for the upsurge of support for radical right-wing populist parties and movements in advanced liberal democracies in recent decades.

These parties and movements constitute to an overwhelming extent an expression of identitarian populism. However, whereas in the past, identity was largely conceived within the confines of a particular nation, today identity is construed no longer in “narrow national but in broader civilizational terms” (Brubaker 2017: 1193). This has allowed leading proponents of identitarian populism, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, to establish networks with likeminded movements across and beyond Europe. The emphasis is on defending the “Judeo-Christian civilization” that is deemed to constitute one of the essential bases of Western culture and way of life. Yet, as a recent collected volume on populism and religion has pointed out, contemporary right-wing radical populist movements define Christianity not in terms of a “set of normative social and moral values,” but purely in terms of identity. Overwhelmingly secular, they approach Christianity not as a faith but as “a marker of identity.” Their primary concern is less with Christianity than with “Christendom” (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016: 79; 186). Under this banner, they have successfully merged traditionally liberal and traditionally socialist/social-democratic notions into a programmatic amalgam that has proven to appeal particularly to the popular strata (Akkerman 2005; Halikiopoulou, Mock and Vasilopoulou 2013; Betz and Meret 2012).

The result is a combination of symbolic and economic nativism, with a strong preponderance of the former. To be

sure, radical right-wing populist parties continue to appeal to widespread popular sentiments that immigrants represent an additional burden on the welfare state and/or that they are accorded preferential treatment compared to the native born. Today, a number of prominent radical right-wing populist parties, such as the Front national, the Lega Nord, and Wilders’s PVV, promote themselves as staunch defenders of a comprehensive welfare state – as long as its benefits are strictly reserved for natives, in line with the principle of “national preference” (Zaslave 2008; De Koster, Achterberg and Van der Waal 2013). It certainly would be short-sighted to dismiss the radical populist right’s socioeconomic positions as irrelevant, mere electioneering. The evolution of the Front national’s economic program since Marine Le Pen assumed the party’s leadership certainly suggests otherwise (Betz and Meret 2012).

In contemporary radical right-wing populist programmatic discourse, however, welfare-chauvinist positions play only a subordinate role compared to symbolic-nativist positions centered upon the question of Islam. The widespread fears and anxieties engendered by the rise of radical Islamism and Islamist extremism in its different guises in Europe and elsewhere have offered the radical populist right ample opportunities for mobilization, which they have been quick to seize. However, it would be a mistake to assume that it was only in the aftermath of September 11 that the radical populist right adopted the notion that Islam represents a “civilizational threat” to the West (Brubaker 2017: 1193). In fact, as early as 1990, Bruno Mégret, at the time the number two of the FN (*délégué général*), charged that Islam was “the

basis of a civilization that is incompatible with Europe's Christian civilization" since it did not recognize the distinction between "the spiritual and the temporal," i.e., between religion and politics (Mégrez 1990: 58-59). Two years later, the authors of a FN position pamphlet on immigration warned that Islam was "hardly compatible with the secular Western societies" because Islam was not only a religion but also a civilization whose basic rules (for instance with respect to inheritance) were "incompatible with French law" (Le Gallou and Olivier 1992: 23). Similar views were expressed by Filip Dewinter, the strongman of the Vlaams Blok, who charged in the mid-1990s that Islam was an "anti-Western religion" which was out "to conquer Europe;" and who added that Muslim immigrants had no interest in integration because "they despise our world as decadent and corrupt" (Dewinter cited in van den Brink 1996: 120; 203). The German Republikaner, in turn, depicted the influx of Muslim migrant workers as a "conquest" by other means, comparable to the conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Turks (Schönhuber 1992).

Since at the time, all three parties were considered right-wing extremist, their position on Islam were largely dismissed and ignored (Mudde 2000). It was not until Pim Fortuyn made the question of Islam the central issue in his campaign for the 2002 election for the Dutch parliament that symbolic nativism got a powerful boost (Brubaker 2017: 1194-1997). Fortuyn managed to blend anti-Islamism and the assault on "political correctness" with an adamant defense of gender equality, gay and lesbian rights, and fundamental Western values such as freedom of expression and the separation

of church and state (Akkerman 2005). Fortuyn's central charge against Islam was that it represented a "backward culture" that threatened to turn back the clock at a time when Dutch society had finally emancipated itself from the strictures of religious traditionalism (van der Veer 2006: 120). And the Dutch had no desire, as Fortuyn famously put it, "to start all over again with the emancipation of women and gays" (Fortuyn 2002).

Fortuyn's framing of the question of Islam worked because he couched his defense of progressive values (such as gay rights) in nationalist terms – as Dutch values. The same thing has happened in other countries of Western Europe, most notably Denmark, whose disenchantment with multiculturalism closely resembles that which happened in the Netherlands (Hervik 2014: 170). Fortuyn's assassination a few days before the election cut short a promising political career; his "culturalist/civilizationalist" anti-Islamic discourse, however, had an enormous impact on the radical populist right. It allowed even the most extremist ethno-nationalist parties, such as the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang, to promote themselves as uncompromising defenders of Western, Enlightenment-inspired liberal values. Fortuyn's framing of the question of Islam was ingenious because it allowed for a nationalist appropriation of universal values. In Fortuyn's narrative, for instance, lesbian and gay rights were constructed as "exemplary of a Dutch 'tradition of tolerance'" (Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010: 970). In France, after Marine Le Pen assumed the presidency of the Front national, she promoted herself as the champion of *laïcité*, which goes all the way back to the French Revolution. At the same time, she defended the notion

that France was a “secular country with Christian roots” whose culture could only but clash with that of Islam (Kauffman 2016: 83). And in Austria, the FPÖ promoted itself as a party that defended a conception of humanity and society that, as the party’s general secretary put it, was “informed by Christianity and the Enlightenment” (*Der Standard* 2009). As the party leader, Christian Strache, charged during a colloquium on women’s rights in early 2017, the FPÖ was “apparently” the only party in Austria to oppose “burqa, forced veiling and genital mutilation” (FPÖ 2017).

During the past fifteen years, radical right-wing populist parties in Europe and elsewhere have largely converged around this “notion of a civilizational threat from Islam” (Brubaker 2017: 1193). Its central tropes are that Islam is not a religion but a totalitarian ideology that seeks to subvert liberal democracies on its way to global hegemony; that, as a result, Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Western democracy; and that Islam, therefore, constitutes, as Fortuyn’s heir Geert Wilders has put it, “the greatest political threat facing the West today” (Wilders 2012: 32). The political revival of Pauline Hanson in the 2016 federal election in Australia is perhaps the most striking evidence of the transnational diffusion of anti-Islamic symbolic nativism. Hanson burst on the Australian political scene in 1996 as a newly elected member of the House of Representatives. There, Hanson quickly established herself as a quintessential populist cum nativist, lashing out against Australia’s political establishment, multiculturalism, Aborigines, and Asian immigrants. Failing to secure her reelection in 1998 and haunted by legal problems, she quickly disappeared from

the media limelight. After lingering in oblivion for twenty years, Hanson made a stunning return to the center of Australian politics with an agenda that projected her as the defender of traditional Australian (white) Australian culture, values, and way of life against what she conjured up as a process of silent “Islamization of Australia” which she claimed was well underway (*The Queensland Times* 2016). Maintaining that Australia is a secular society “built on Christian values” Hanson’s party, One Nation, charges that Islam is an ideology which “has no place in Australian society if we are to live in a cohesive society” (One Nation, no date). With her nativist agenda, Hanson’s party won four pivotal seats in the Australian Senate.

The symbolic-nativist agenda has provided contemporary radical right-wing populist parties such as One Nation with a “winning formula” because it resonates with significant segments of the voting public. Take, for instance, Donald Trump’s ban on immigrants from Muslim countries. Universally condemned by progressive media, it nonetheless seems to enjoy significant public support. In Australia, for instance, in 2016, almost half of respondents supported the measure (Lewis 2016). Critics were quick to attack the survey methodology. Yet a cross-national study from Europe for Chatham House largely confirmed the plausibility of the Australian findings. The ten-country survey found more than 50 percent of respondents agreeing with the statement that “All further immigration from Muslim countries should be halted” – about the same number of respondents who thought that “European and Muslim ways of life are not irreconcilable” (Raines, Goodwin and Cutts 2017: 21). Surveys from individual countries come to similar results. In

Germany, for instance, between 2009 and 2016, the number of respondents who thought that immigration from Muslim countries should be completely stopped increased from 21 to 41 percent. The number of ‘Germans who felt that, as a result of the growing Muslim presence, they were “strangers in their own country” increased from 30 to 50 percent (Decker, Kiess and Brähler 2016: 50). Under the circumstances, the dramatic gains of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in a number of regional elections in 2016 should hardly come as a surprise, given its strong nativist positions (Horn 2016). In the United States, in 2015, more than half of the population thought that Islam was «at odds with American values and way of life,» and even more (58 percent) viewed Islam unfavourably (Douthat 2015). Given these sentiments, Trump’s «Muslim ban» initiatives certainly made political sense.

## 5. On the logic of nativist mobilization

In the current debate on populism it is generally assumed that –with the notable exception of Latin America– populism and nativism go hand in hand. For the contemporary radical right, this is certainly the case. Although these parties are generally not opposed to democracy –in fact, more often than not they promote themselves as staunch advocates of “genuine” democracy– what they envision is to replace liberal, multicultural democracy with a form of “ethnocracy.” This is a system that extends “civil and political rights to individuals and some collective rights to minorities,” but which defines the state in terms of a “core ethnic nation” based on “historical claims and

cultural symbols steeped in mythology over the distant and not so distant past” as justification for the pursuit of policies that guarantee ethno-national dominance -- economically, culturally, and politically (Smootha 1997: 199-200; Mostov 1996: 36). The foundation of ethnocracy is intricately intertwined with the question of identity. In its populist nativist guise, most prominently promoted by the Front national, it finds its expression in the appeal to what Zygmunt Bauman has characterized as “‘historical identity’ transmitted through birth” (Bauman 1995: 542). This was already recognized by Maurice Barrès, the celebrated writer, Boulangist deputy and late nineteenth-century *maitre-penseur* of an organicist conception of national identity. For Barrès, being part of a national community (such as *le peuple français*) means “internalizing the legitimacy, over the long haul, of an established order, means accepting to conform to tradition.” Being “a people” means seeing oneself as a community that has already been established” and of which one is part (Krulic 2007: 7). Failing to see or, worse, rejecting this reality means falling victim to “uprooting” (*déracinement*).

This is what lies at the heart of the political cleavage that informs virtually all advanced liberal democracies today: a conflict between an allegedly rootless cosmopolitan liberal elite that promotes cultural choice and variety and resists any homogenizing pressures and the rest of the population, which clings to traditional values and a narrowly-circumscribed notion of national identity (see, for instance, Inglehart and Norris 2016). This cleavage is hardly new. It already informed late nineteenth-century conflicts in France, pitting the defensive promoters

of a “société fermée” (closed society) exemplified by Maurice Barrès against the liberal advocates of an open society, inherited from the French Revolution.

The success of radical right-wing parties and movements derives to a large extent from their ability to mobilize “ordinary people” against –as Alex Frankel has facetiously put it– a big-city “multi-ethnic cabal of feminists, refugee-loving environmentalists, nanny-state lovers, chardonnay socialists, ungodly pro-abortionists, homosexuals, big-city Jewish bankers, and cosmopolitan latte-sipping liberals” who “look down on authentic, hardworking people” (Frankel 2016).<sup>6</sup> Contemporary radical right-wing populist parties score big in elections when they manage to convince ordinary people that it is people like them (i.e., the hardworking people) who ultimately have to foot the bill for the misguided multicultural experiments concocted by an elite completely removed from reality.

The affinity between populism and nativism is obvious. The logic of populism rests on the demarcation between elite and “the people,” hailed as endowed with superior wisdom and virtue. The logic of nativism rests on the demarcation (inherent in any form of nationalism) between those on the inside and those on the outside, between foreigners and the native-born, hailed as bearers of a culturally superior civilization (Anglo-Saxon Protestantism in the case of the Know Nothings, French culture in the case of Maurice Barrès, “Western culture” in the case of Geert Wilders).<sup>7</sup> This is the

6. This is not to say that “the elite” does not look down on ordinary people. See, for instance, Traub 2016.

7. For Barrès see Sourcy 1967: 72; The following excerpt from a Wilders speech held in 2011 in Rome is exemplary of the “civilizationalism”

logic behind slogans such as that promoted by the Vlaams Bloks in 2001, “*aanpassen of terugkeren*” (assimilate or go back), meant to prevent the “loss of identity” of the Flemish people (Vlaams Blok 2001: 6). For assimilation means nothing less than a process of adopting the (superior) culture of the “host.” This was the logic of the twenty-one year waiting period the Know Nothings demanded for Catholic immigrants – time to “allow them” to absorb and imbibe the essence of the American creed. When populist and nativist tropes are brought together, as was paradigmatically the case first with the Know Nothings, then Maurice Barrès (when he was a Boulangist deputy) and, a century later, with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front national, it forms an explosive ideological amalgam with considerable mobilization potential.

Brexit is a case in point. Brexit was to a large extent an expression of intensified, wide-spread “Euroscepticism” triggered by mass immigration from the poorer European Union countries, which was not only perceived as an economic, but also a cultural threat (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015: 6). As Goodwin and Ford have put it, in Britain, “the strongest and most inflexible opposition to migration has

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central to contemporary symbolic nativism on the radical populist right: “Ordinary people are well aware that they are witnessing a population replacement phenomenon. Ordinary people feel attached to the civilization which their ancestors created. They do not want it to be replaced by a multicultural society where the values of the immigrants are considered as good as their own. It is not xenophobia or islamophobia to consider our Western culture as superior to other cultures – it is plain common sense.” Available online at <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2011/03/27/geert-wilders-in-rome-defending-the-west-from-cultural-relativism-and-jihad/> (accessed August 7, 2017).

come from voters who see it as a source or symbol of rapid social change that threatens traditional identities and values.” (Goodwin and Ford 2017: 21). Although far from all of these voters ended up casting their vote for Nigel Farage’s UKIP, the party proved particularly successful in attracting these voters (Dennison and Goodwin 2015: 178). In the referendum, sociocultural polarization largely explains the variance between “remainers” and “leavers”: The local jurisdictions where the remain vote was strongest, were overwhelmingly in London (and Scotland, but for different reasons) or in areas with large universities (Goodwin and Ford 2017: 25). Brexit, as Craig Calhoun has put it, was above all a “mutiny against the cosmopolitan elite” centered in London (Calhoun 2016). This was also true for the Trump election, which was to a large extent a mutiny of the “heartland” against the “coastal elites” (see, for instance, Masciotra 2016; Merry 2016).

The evidence advanced in this article suggests that nativism, both economic and symbolic, plays a significant role in populist mobilization. The success of contemporary radical right-wing populist mobilization in advanced liberal democracies is, to a large extent, a result of these parties’ ability to mobilize widespread anxieties and *ressentiments* associated with the presence and growing visibility of Muslim minorities – sentiments and reactions reminiscent of those against Catholics in the antebellum United States. Like their nineteenth-century antecedents, today’s nativists appeal to a panoply of political alienation and disenchantment, democratic distemper and ethnocultural *ressentiments* that transcend class differences and sustain a populist project centered upon a combination of anti-

establishment rhetoric and identitarian politics. Unlike nineteenth-century populist movements, however, today’s radical right-wing populist parties and movements have shown a remarkable political resilience, not least because their nativist program continues to resonate among substantial segments of the electorate.

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