Introduction

Due to obvious limitations of space/time, the scope of this lecture is restricted to Western Europe; and the survey of scholarship is restricted to works published in the English language.

First let me explain the origins of the title for this lecture: 'Fascism... but with an open mind.' I recently received this apparent oxymoron in an email from a university student responding to news that Teesside University was establishing a new research centre for the study of past and present forms of fascism. The student (not based at Teesside University) declared himself a ‘fascist but one with an open mind.’ You might well ask: how can fascism, a demonized ideology, a by-word for genocide driven by fanaticism, possess anything approaching an open-mind? When it comes to understanding developments on the contemporary far right in (Western) Europe, have we really witnessed the emergence of a ‘new’ breed of fascists - a ‘neo-fascism’ that has adapted itself to the norms of multi-ethnic, liberal-democratic society? A ‘designer fascism’ that is fit for the twentyfirst century?

Europe’s contemporary far right has attracted a vast scholarly literature; Western Europe, in particular, occupies a central focus. The expansion in this literature reflects the growth in the far-right phenomenon, above all, the growth, since the 1980s, of a thicket of far-right organizations across numerous European party systems. Yet notwithstanding obvious cross-national variations, we should bear in mind that, as a transnational political force, the far right has only averaged around six per cent of the vote in all European parliamentary elections since 1979. So at the outset, to borrow some wise words from the French political scientist Gilles Ivaldi, let us ‘dispel the myth of an ineluctable electoral growth of extreme right forces on the right of the European political spectrum.’

At first, the study of the contemporary far right in its so-called post-1980 ‘third wave’ was largely dominated by the literature of left-wing opponents. This, according to Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, led ‘largely to opinionated, speculative, emotional and highly politicised studies’, that is to say, studies skewed by a ‘fascist’ or ‘neo-fascist’ perspective. The situation today seems...
altogether different. Political scientists would have us believe that since the 1980s something entirely detached from fascism, or neo-fascism has emerged - a populist radicalization of mainstream concerns - a novel form of ‘radical right-wing populism.’ The defining characteristics of this radical right-wing populism would appear to be nativism (i.e. a combination of nationalism with xenophobia), authoritarianism (law and order issues), and populism.

2) The ‘third wave’ is said to have appeared during the 1980s and followed two earlier waves in post-war right-wing extremism: ‘post-war neo-fascism’ (1940s) and Poujadism (1950s). This idea is associated with German academic, Klaus von Beyme. See Klaus von Beyme, ‘Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe,’ in Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe, ed. Klaus von Beyme (London: Frank Cass, 1988), 1-18.
(a populist critique of liberal democracy rather than outright anti-systemic opposition). 4

Instead of viewing radical-right populism as a ‘normal pathology’ of liberal democracies - a pathology that is alien to democratic values and which, under normal conditions, is ever present but struggles to spread throughout the body politic - Cas Mudde contends that radical right-wing populism is best interpreted as pathologically normal, that is to say, both entirely unremarkable and whilst not necessarily part of the mainstream, is connected to it nonetheless. According to Mudde’s thesis, a relatively high level of demand for populist radical-right politics exists across established liberal democracies. Support for radical-right politics is, under normal conditions, surprisingly widespread: populist radical-right parties Mudde maintains, offer simplistic, radical variants of views shared by large pluralities, often majorities of the population. 5

‘With regard to the relationship between the populist radical right and western democracy,’ Mudde has written, ‘the key difference is not to be defined in kind, i.e. by fundamental opposition (i.e. antithesis), but in degree, i.e. by moderate versus radical versions of roughly the same views.’ 6 So what we are talking about here is a right-wing populist radicalization of the mainstream.

The issue, for Mudde, no longer resides in explaining why people vote for the populist radical right but why many who share their values do not. 7 Accordingly, the scholarly focus in recent years has shifted to supply-side factors. Alongside a series of contextual factors, such as institutional structures, the response of the state and established parties, a vital element in this supply-side equation, it seems, is the concept of the ‘reputational shield.’ A term associated with Norwegian scholar Elizabeth Ivarsflaten, the ‘reputational shield’ thesis states that in a context of anti-racist norms, only those radical-right parties that possess strong ‘reputational shields’ can successfully mobilize the anti-immigrant vote. Those without such a shield, that is, those that possess a clear fascist legacy, or a reputation for extreme racism, struggle. 8 Take Britain for example, studies have suggested that potential electoral support for the far right could be 10 or 20 times higher than actual votes achieved by the British National Party (BNP). Where the BNP fails the test is on the supply-side.

Despite its best efforts it has not acquired a ‘reputational shield.’ All too closely associated with fascism, racism, and violent extremism, the BNP’s brand remains toxic.9

So, must historians of fascism, specifically those for whom fascism did not die in 1945 – and I count myself amongst these - concede that fascist or neo-fascist ideology no longer plays a central role in defining the world-view of the contemporary far right; that neo-fascism as a theoretical tool for analyzing the contemporary far right should be abandoned since it rests on all too vague notions of historical continuity; and that lax application of the term ‘neo-fascism’ merely reinforces the view that the contemporary far right is some kind of anomalous domain outside the mainstream, inhabited by the grubby lunatic fringe?

Fascism after 1945

As the opening words to a recent volume on the extreme right in contemporary Europe put it, ‘acres of print’ have been dedicated to the subject of right-wing extremism since the first significant breakthrough of the phenomenon occurred in France during the 1980s.10 The contrast between now and the first few decades after 1945, when scholarly literature on the contemporary extreme right stretched no further than a handful of books, is stark. The standard response in the 1960s and 1970s was to proclaim that the age of fascism came to an end in 1945 - fascism was now dead. Few seemed interested in the possibility that fascism had re-emerged; and those that did often found their audience less than receptive. Dennis Eisenberg had his 1967 volume on the re-emergence of fascism11 panned as a ‘political tract’ by one academic reviewer;12 an equally withering verdict awaited a sprawling volume written by two left-wing Italian journalists. This volume, entitled Fascism Today,13 originally published in Italy in 1965 then translated into English in 1969, was

rubbished by Gerhard Weinberg who described it as being ‘filled with preposterously erroneous pseudo-history.’

While reticent to offer definitive answers to fascism’s present and future trajectory, a further work of that period, Otto-Ernst Schüdderkopf’s Fascism, published in 1973, identified four theoretical possibilities. The first was that the epoch of fascism was definitely over. Where right-extremist sects and organizations remained they were but ‘post-fascist’ historical residues of negligible political significance. More or less the dominant orthodoxy, this position was associated with leading historians Ernst Nolte and Hugh Trevor-Roper. The second, a left-wing (Marxist) position, saw in ‘even the slightest national or conservative tendency the beginning of a “fascistoid” attitude,’ in other words a ‘latent’ fascism embedded within highly developed capitalism. Like flared trousers from that era the term ‘fascistoid’ is (thankfully) no longer in vogue - the term ‘fascistic’ is the present-day equivalent (describing a regime, organization or person that tends towards, or imitates fascism). A third theoretical possibility was that in efficient, modern technocratic society, fascism is no longer necessary because ‘other more harmless means of political repression are available.’ Schüdderkopf might have linked this possibility to the ‘end of ideology’ thesis: the idea - popular in the 1950s and 1960s – that economic growth and full employment had consigned ideological extremism to the twilight world of cranks and deluded zealots. So if fascism continued to exist, it was not in Europe’s advanced managerial democracies but in the Third World where it could, according to some scholars, take the form of ‘developmental dictatorship.’ This notion is associated above all with American historian, A. James Gregor, and acolytes such as Anthony James Joes, author of Fascism in the Contemporary World, published in 1978. Alexander De Grand dismissed Joes’ book as ‘history reduced to anticommunist propaganda.’ The same might be said of Gregor’s more recent volume on ‘neo-fascism’, published in 2006, which concluded that the most likely candidate for the term ‘neo-fascist’ was the post-Maoist People’s Republic of China! A fourth theoretical
possibility, and one that, unfortunately, was dealt with all too briefly by Schüddekopf, was that completely different, new variants of fascism were indeed possible.

The neo-fascist ‘thesis’

By the 1980s, at least in the popular imagination, the contemporary extreme right had become synonymous with ‘neo-fascism.’ Yet conceptualization of the term ‘neo-fascism’ remained ‘elusive.’ One scholar who did try pinning it down was the British scholar Christopher T. Husbands who, in a footnote to a paper published in 1981, identified anti-Communism, strong anti-trade union-ism, and stringent anti-libertarianism as the ideological core features of neo-fascism.22

For sure, an important factor behind viewing the contemporary far right as ‘neo-fascist’ had been the political shockwaves generated by the electoral breakthrough of the Front National (FN) in the European elections in 1984 when it had captured close to eleven per cent of the vote and had sent no fewer than ten deputies to the European Parliament. But the intervening years had also seen partial electoral success for Italian and British far-right parties, with both the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI; Italian Social Movement) and the National Front appearing on the verge of major electoral breakthroughs at one stage or another. There had also been a wave of far-right terrorist attacks, symbolized above all by the deadly carnage of the Bologna railway station bombing of August 1980, which had claimed the lives of over eighty people.

A few years prior to the FN’s 1984 breakthrough, and yet already responding to popular concerns that ‘fascism was back,’ Paul Wilkinson penned The New Fascists. This lively, panoramic survey of Western Europe’s ‘ultra-right’ declared it ‘a cardinal error to assume that fascist doctrines and movements are historical phenomena limited to a particular historical period or to specific countries.’23 The political science community remained unconvinced, however. Gordon Smith, Professor of Government at the London School of Economics, was critical of Wilkinson’s blanket labelling of fascism; he called on political scientists to find a new word.24 Meanwhile, Wilkinson himself, while reviewing a 1983 volume on fascism that to his astonishment contained no chapter on contemporary developments, bemoaned that it was ‘[s]mall wonder that some political scientists and more than a few of their students are still under the

impression that fascism is a phenomenon of the past.\textsuperscript{25} Wilkinson's lamentations were not helped by the fact that in the second edition of the \textit{New Fascists} published in 1983, he had still left the finer points of ‘new’ or ‘neo-fascism’ undefined.

In the wake of the FN’s 1984 breakthrough, the European Parliament’s Socialist Group had proposed a European Parliament Committee of Inquiry into the rise of ‘fascism’ and ‘racism.’ The Committee’s report, published in 1985, defined ‘fascism’ loosely as a generic term incorporating ‘interchangeable expressions’ such as ‘neo-Nazism’, ‘neo-fascism’ and ‘the extremism or the nationalism of the Right.’\textsuperscript{26} Behind such a deliberately loose definition lurked a political motive: to deny respectability to the extreme right. The FN was viewed by many, especially on the European left, as resurgent fascism - ‘the fascists in smart suits’, as British Labour MEP Glyn Ford described them.\textsuperscript{27} This ‘neo-fascist thesis’ (if we can call it that) was encouraged further still by subsequent volumes titled the \textit{Dark Side of Europe} (by Geoffrey Harris, 1990); and \textit{Fascist Europe} (edited by Glyn Ford, 1992) – the cover of Ford’s book, which was illustrated with a swastika graphic composed from human bones and barbed-wire, left little to the imagination.\textsuperscript{28} For now, the neo-fascist thesis was winning adherents in academic circles too. The foreword of the volume \textit{Neo-Fascism in Europe}, published in 1991, which included a chapter on \textit{Le Pepénisme}, insisted ‘on the topicality of neo-fascism as an ideology with a considerable – probably a growing – potential.’\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Rejecting neo-fascism: the response from political science}

Much conceptual fuzziness remained - the term ‘neo-fascism’ having entered the fray for political reasons: to warn (or scaremonger) about fascism’s alleged return; to call attention to historical, personal and/or ideological continuities; and to deny far-right parties broader social and political respectability. This literature was, for Cas Mudde, both ‘methodologically and analytically weak.’ Adding little that was new to our understanding, it was far too preoccupied,
Mudde said, with offering ‘emotional and normative viewpoints,’ and so should be ‘considered more as political contributions to the public debate, than serious contributions to the scientific debate.’ Unsurprisingly blanket use of the term ‘neo-fascist’ did not go unchallenged.

By the mid-1990s growing numbers of political scientists were insisting that Western Europe had not experienced any upsurge in ‘neo-fascism’ but the emergence of a new kind of politics entirely. One of the first to challenge the neo-fascist thesis was the Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi who distinguished a ‘new’ extreme right from an ‘old’ extreme right. The old extreme-right parties were comprised of the likes of the MSI, BNP and the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD); the new extreme-right parties – the dominant strain - took in the French National Front, the German Republikaner, and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ; Austrian Freedom Party). The Belgian Vlaams Blok [Flemish Block] fell somewhere in between. These ‘new’ parties were defined by the absence of a fascist legacy and were, for Ignazi, ‘by-products’ or the ‘offspring’ of the conflicts of post-industrial society. They represented the authoritarian counterpart to post-material libertarianism. They were, for Ignazi, new parties of the ‘post-material’ or ‘post-industrial’ extreme right.

The neo-fascist thesis also found itself under attack from a second designation: ‘radical right-wing populism.’ Rather more elegant than Ignazi’s, this particular designation quickly gained traction amongst political scientists. A seminal publication in this regard was Hans-Georg Betz’s 1994 comparative study, Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe. Like Ignazi, Betz located the rise of parties such as the FN and the Austrian Freedom Party in the trans-national phenomenon of post-industrial capitalism and social fragmentation. For Betz, radical right-wing populist parties distanced themselves from the traditional extreme right; proposed a neo-liberal economic programme; were united in their opposition to immigration; did not call for a fundamental transformation of the existing socio-economic and socio-political system; and promoted themselves in true populist style as democratic alternatives to the prevailing system. In 1998 Betz insisted that ‘the notion of right-wing extremism – or worse, neo-fascism – is hardly apt to capture the nature of the contemporary right in established Western democracies.’

proposed that the emergence of exclusionary populist ideology has absolutely nothing to do with a revival of fascism or ‘neo-fascism in postmodern guise’ but represents, instead, a revival of an older strand of virulent nineteenth Century American nativism.34

Often paired with Betz’s 1994 volume, was Herbert Kitschelt’s *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, published in 1995. This hugely influential study (winner of a prestigious American Political Science Association Award) also set the ‘new radical right’ apart from fascism.35 Other political scientists then followed suit although some singled out populism as the defining feature of the ‘new radical right.’ Paul Taggart argued in a frequently cited 1995 article that the sharp-suited parliamentary wing of the extreme right represented a ‘new populism’ or ‘neo-populism’36 – employing communication styles that were clear, simple, and which spoke directly to the concerns of ‘ordinary’ people. But before we are tempted to hitch our wagon to the populist star, we should take heed of Andrea Mammone’s words that, ‘populism represents neither a new historical concept nor a latecomer in the history of political phenomena.’37

Although political scientists went on to criticize both Kitschelt and Betz for overstating the extent to which radical-right populist parties espoused neoliberal economic programmes – in fact one, Cas Mudde, argued that their economic programmes were not neo-liberal at all but *nativist*; and several have raised concerns about whether populism is an appropriate classificatory label since it refers more to a communication style than an ideological trait, many of today’s political scientists remain happy to work within the radical-right populist paradigm. What follows is a widely shared belief that the populist radical right is not neo-fascism, but neither is it simply a moderate form of the extreme right. For Cas Mudde, writing in his much acclaimed 2007 comparative study, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, the differences between the extreme

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35) Herbert Kitschelt (with A. J. McGann), *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Kitschelt argued that ‘New Radical Right’ rhetoric differed from fascist rhetoric in three important respects: first, fascism expressed an anti-capitalist, corporatist thrust whereas the New Radical Right endorsed free market capitalism with a strong but small state; second, the New Radical Right’s authoritarianism derived from a defence of capitalism not the rejection of the free market economy; and third, racism manifested itself as a central component of New Radical Right appeal whereas in some fascist movements, racism had been contingent.


right and radical right are actually profound: ‘Most importantly, Mudde maintains, “the radical right is (nominally) democratic, even if they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy, whereas the extreme right is in essence antidemocratic, opposing the fundamental principle of the sovereignty of the people.”’

Neo-fascism and historians

So much for political scientists, what about historians? In 1991, in The Nature of Fascism, Roger Griffin offered one of the first schematic accounts of post-war fascism. For Griffin - and on the point of fascism’s conceptualization, I class myself as a ‘Griffinite’ - the fascist ‘minimum’ takes the form of a mobilizing mythic core of revolutionary ultra-nationalist rebirth (palingenesis). The ‘fascist era’ did not ‘conveniently’ end in 1945, Griffin insisted, and he stressed fascism’s ‘almost Darwinian capacity for adaption to its environment.’ Griffin divided post-war fascism into three schematic categories. Space precludes a thorough dissection of each of these categories. The important point to note is that Griffin argued that the category of neo-fascism captured those organizations that have either introduced original themes into major inter-war permutations, or have rejected inter-war permutations altogether. For Griffin, the prefix ‘neo’ meant ‘offering something new with respect to inter-war phenomena’ and he identified four neo-fascist sub-types: revolutionary nationalism; crypto-fascism; Holocaust revisionism; and ‘conservative revolution’ (e.g. the French Nouvelle Droite/European New Right). Griffin was of two minds when it came to contemporary extreme-right political parties. On the one hand he wanted to preclude ‘reformist’ far-right political parties, such as Le Pen’s FN, but on the other hand, he accepted that some far-right political parties had ‘crypto-fascist’, that is to say, ‘hidden’ fascist tendencies (and he included both the Austrian Freedom Party and the German Republikaner in his original list of such parties).

39) For Griffin, this ultra-nationalist myth was also ‘populist’ in the sense that it was directed towards mobilizing all authentic members of the national community. The term ‘populist ultra-nationalism’ is problematic, especially in terms of capturing the meta-politicization of fascism (which comes across as more elitist than populist).
41) These were 1. ‘Nostalgic Fascism/Neo-Nazism’ (basic world-view of inter-war movements with some adaptations) 2. ‘Mimetic Fascism/Neo-Nazism’ (non-cosmetic Nazism) and 3. ‘Neo-Fascism’.
42) Griffin, Nature of Fascism, 167.
After 1945, more fascist and ‘radical right’ groups have appeared than in the so-called ‘era of fascism’ between the wars. This is an important historical anomaly that Stanley Payne identified in his *A History of Fascism, 1914-45*, his tour de force published in 1995. Even so, for Payne, the issue simply came down to this: ‘All the genuine neofascist and neo-Nazi groups remain tiny circles of fringe activists. The right radical parties are stronger … The more broadly they seek to mobilize, the more moderate they are forced to become.’

Neo-fascism and the radical right were different entities: the former – neo-fascism, in its true sense, continued to exist but on the margins and outside the organizational structures of the latter – the radical right. In the absence of some form of systemic crisis, trying to conceptualize neo-fascism had become, for Payne, ‘faintly analogous to the classification of obscure Amazonian languages rapidly undergoing extinction.’

So ‘Why use the term neofascism in the first place if the neofascists observe the democratic rules of the game?’ A question that Walter Laqueur, former director of London’s Institute of Contemporary History and Wiener Library, asked in the introduction to his 1996 volume, *Fascism: Past, Present and Future*. Laqueur persevered with the term ‘neo-fascism’ but he did so only because he was unaware of any better terms and definitions. Such an unconvincing theoretical approach, in which the author actually admits to being ‘not happy with my own choice of terms and definitions’ could only strengthen the claims of his political science colleagues that neo-fascism had become a largely redundant conceptual category, and that between historical fascism and Europe’s contemporary ‘radical right’, there was very little (if any) continuity.

**Neo-fascism in the ‘post-fascist’ era**

The issue, of course, is that there is some very obvious continuity. Why speak of the ‘return of fascism’ when fascism never left us in the first place? This is not to say that radical right-wing populist parties are a repetition of old fascisms – they are clearly not. Like classic fascisms, they may well ‘seek to roll back as far as possible the libertarian spirit of the contemporary democratic order and to replace it with an ethnically homogeneous authoritarian state,’ as

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46) Indeed, one Dutch academic, writing in 1985, argued that such was the extent of continuity with historical fascism that it made sense to dispense with the term ‘neo’ altogether, see Vera Ebels-Dolanová, ed., *The Extreme Right in Europe and the United States* (Amsterdam: Anne Frank Stichting, 1985). 2.
Richard Wolin has observed,47 but this is where the similarity ends. Inter-war fascism had revolutionary totalitarian aspirations and not merely authoritarian aspirations. But of greater significance for me is the fact that the history of this ‘new party family’ is bound up with the history of neo-fascism. Stripping neo-fascism from this history is, I would argue, ahistorical. The issue that I have with political scientists and their concept of ‘radical right-wing populism’ is their (sometimes wilful?) lack of concern for the historical development, traditions, and political cultures of neo-fascism.

The Swedish sociologist Jens Rydgren has argued that it is wrong to treat these ‘new’ radical-right parties [Front National; Sverigedemokraterna [Swedish Democrats]; the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid [Party for Freedom]; Austrian Freedom Party, etc.] as discrete entities that emerged independently of one another. Rather, their emergence should be understood in terms of a series of interdependent events. For Rydgren, a critical factor has been the development of a potent new ‘master frame’ that combines ‘cultural racism’ (or ethno-pluralism) with populist (but not anti-democratic), anti-establishment rhetoric. This has meant that the ‘old’ extreme-right has been able to free itself from the stigma of biological racism, and also incorporate populist rhetoric without being stigmatized as anti-democratic. According to Rydgren, the ‘evident success of this master frame came in 1984 when the Front National got its electoral breakthrough.’48

For Rydgren, the FN’s breakthrough set in motion a process of cross-national diffusion whereby other extreme-right parties drew (selectively) from the repertoires and practices of the French National Front. Significantly, this development was, as Rydgren points out, ‘a long process, in many ways going back to the neo-fascist international meeting in Rome in 1950; and ‘it did not reach its refined form until the late 1970s and 1980s under the influence of the French Nouvelle Droite.’49 If Le Pen took his populism from the 1950s Poujadist movement, he adopted the doctrine of ethno-pluralism (that is to say, ethnicities or races are not necessarily superior or inferior but different and incompatible) from the French New Right/Nouvelle Droite - a neo-fascist, meta-political revision of fascism.

It would be remiss of me, at this point, not to acknowledge the on-going debate over whether ‘neo-fascist’ is the most appropriate classification for the Nouvelle Droite (now known as the European New Right on account of its transnational impact). Some have argued that the European New Right

49) Ibid., 416.
constitutes an entirely new political paradigm, but I do find myself in agreement with those scholars that interpret it as a revisionist permutation of neo-fascism. The origins of the Nouvelle Droite go back to the 1960s when a circle of French neo-fascists, in response to their acute marginalization, gradually adopted pan-national Europeanism, ethnic differentialist positions, and a Gramscian-style meta-political struggle aimed at capturing cultural power from the liberal-left. If the Nouvelle Droite’s pan-Europeanist vision did not necessarily chime with insular French ultra-nationalists, what certainly did resonate was its sophisticated inversion of left-wing political vocabulary, and in particular, the ‘right to difference.’ This turned the discourse of the French left on its head by insisting that all people (including indigenous French people) had a right to preserve their own ethno-cultural identity and to deny such a right was ‘racist.’ It delivered, as we have seen, heavy discursive and ideological ammunition to the French National Front, and then through an ongoing process of cross-national diffusion, impacted across the spectrum of the contemporary European far right. So much so that for Jens Rydren, ethno-pluralist doctrine has become ‘the most distinguishing ideological feature of the new radical right party family.’

The French National Front had been originally launched in 1972 as a ‘revolutionary nationalist’ party, albeit one intentionally cloaked in the garb of the double-breasted suit. Determined to mirror the successes of their Italian counterparts, the FN had duly adopted the Italian neo-fascist strategy of the ‘national right.’ This was a parliamentary strategy - one that sought legitimacy as a respectable mass party. If the FN had started out with the intention of making fascism acceptable, when did it morph into something essentially different? Reflect for a moment on the question posed recently by Jim Wolfreys: ‘Having founded the FN with a deliberately strategy of courting respectability in order to build a fascist organisation, did they [i.e. the FN leaders] consciously choose an alternative path?’ When did this happen? Was it when revolutionary nationalists exited the FN in the late 1970s/early 1980s, did it happen only recently when the leadership passed to his daughter, the more ‘moderate’ Marine Le Pen – someone influenced by De Benoist - or has it, in fact, never happened?

50) For an overview of these debates, see Tamir Bar-On, Where Have All the Fascists Gone? (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 115-39.
What historians and political scientists might search for is the far-right equivalent of the German Social Democrats’ 1959 Bad Godesberg Congress, when the SPD officially renounced revolutionary Marxism. Yet according to the editors of a recent volume on varieties of right-wing extremism in contemporary Europe, any search will be in vain since the extreme right ‘has never produced any sort of Godesberger Programm, democratizing its beliefs and abandoning neo-fascism.’ The closest a neo-fascist party came to it was the Congress at Fuiggi in January 1995 when the MSI was officially dissolved and replaced by the ‘post-fascist’ but now defunct Alleanza Nazionale. At that moment, Mussolinian fascism might have been consigned to history, but many so-called ‘post-fascist’ Alleanza Nazionale activists still retained an ‘intractable, non-negotiable defence of Italian neo-fascism,’ as Anna Cento Bull has revealed.

I have written extensively on the BNP elsewhere, and I don’t want to repeat myself here. Suffice to say that, if in Italy, it was a case of the spirit of neo-fascism adapting itself to the double-breasted suit, in Britain it was more a case of the BNP simply picking out a new double-breasted suit off a radical right-populist peg (rather than undergoing any genuine or ‘spiritual’ conversion to liberal democracy). Similar questions might be asked of other so-called ‘radical-right’ populist parties with their origins in cultures of extremism (such as Vlaams Belang in Belgium, for instance). Yet at the same time, some so-called ‘radical-right’ populist parties might legitimately claim little if any connection to the traditional extreme right. For Patrick Moreau, these parties comprise a less extreme ‘Nordic model’ sub-group, such as the Dansk Folkeparti [Danish People’s Party], formed in 1995, which had its origins in the Fremskridtspartiet [Progress Party] (an anti-tax protest party); or the Perussuomalaiset [True Finns], also founded in 1995, and successor to the Suomen Maaseudun Puolue [Finnish Rural Party]. Another organization without obvious

55) Yet what emerged from the Fuiggi Congress was a curious political formation that retained elements of an ultra-nationalist, fascist mindset alongside what appeared to be a genuine embrace of liberal constitutionalism. As Roger Griffin has argued, the Fuiggi Congress differed from the SPD’s Bad Godesberg in one important respect: what resulted in Germany was a genuine democratic socialist party; in Italy, what emerged in the Alleanza Nazionale was an unstable and contradictory hybrid of fascism and liberalism, the product of highly particular circumstances in which Italy’s dominant right-wing political party—Christian Democracy—had collapsed in the wake of political scandal.
exceptional roots is, of course, Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom. In 2008, when speaking to the Observer, a British newspaper, Wilders declared that his allies were not Le Pen or Haider. Margaret Thatcher (!) and not Mussolini had won his admiration.59

What further muddies the conceptual waters is that within the cultures of the far right, there is a history of interaction between so-called ‘radical-right’ actors and their more extreme brethren. This can take numerous forms, through such mechanisms as multiple membership and affiliations, joint mobilizations, transnational networks, social media, voicing support for particular election candidates, and so on. There can be personal bonds too. So rather than fundamental ideological differences, should we not focus on the distinction between the radical right and these more ‘extreme’ elements as a distinction based more on a strategic division of labour? As one French far-right activist remarked: if ‘[t]hey [the Nouvelle Droite] explore the desirable’ then ‘we work in the sphere of the possible.’60 For one leading expert on the Nouvelle Droite, it was ‘no accident that some ND [Nouvelle Droite] figures like Pierre Vial moved to the FN in the early 1980s’ because although they differed on tactics and specifics, they shared a fundamental ideological kinship in their ‘antipathy for liberalism, immigration, multiculturalism and the United States, thus making co-operation possible.’61 Even though the FN’s programmes might have lacked some of the ‘theoretical subtlety’ of the Nouvelle Droite, its influence on FN discourses has undoubtedly been ‘palpable.’62

The history of the contemporary far right is littered with instances where the new radical right and more extremist groups have crossed paths. Within this political firmament, some obviously think of themselves more as partners than as rivals. Switzerland is a good example here: across many decades ‘extreme-right’ activists have participated in ‘radical-right’ populist parties. So even at the more moderate end of the continuum an organization like the Norwegian Progress Party can attract racist and neo-Nazi elements. In 1996, for example, a neo-Nazi group infiltrated the party’s youth movement. The fact that Norwegian terrorist, Anders Breivik, had been a former member of the Progress Party further complicates the ‘scientific’ quest for neat distinctions. In Britain, the BNP claims to be non-violent but some of the most prominent cases of convicted far-right violent extremists have had clear links to it — the

60) Von Beyme, Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe, 11.
London ‘nail bomber’, David Copeland for instance, or more recently, a former BNP election candidate, Robert Cottage, who had stockpiled chemical explosives. If the antagonism of more extreme elements is not always directed back into the liberal-democratic system by radical-right populists, how often do radical-right narratives have the opposite, radicalizing effect?

The 2011 Breivik case brings us to another so-called ‘new’ development on the contemporary far right: the ‘Counter-Jihad’ movement (yet another ‘new far right’?). Radical-right populist parties, especially in the wake of September 11 2001, have made opposition to Islam the focus of their ideological repertoires.63 This has resulted in the adoption of apparently pro-Jewish positions in strategic adaptations that in some cases might be read as purely instrumental (note the overtures to the Jewish community by the FN). If radical right-wing populist parties form one element in this ‘Counter-Jihad’ movement, other elements comprise a loose alliance of internet bloggers, and street-activist organisations, such as the English Defence League (along with similar-minded groups in continental Europe and elsewhere). Researchers should not fixate on the ‘Counter-Jihad’ movement’s apparent novelty (embrace of digital technologies; mobilization across national borders; flexible espousal of identity politics; and so on), they need to ask: is the shedding of anti-Semitism, the turn to ‘cultural racism,’ the appropriation of the language of liberalism, the critique of ‘cultural Marxism,’ and the appeal to unlikely allies (Jews, gays, etc), a further reflection of the legacy of ideological, strategic and discursive shifts cultivated by the neo-fascist European New Right?

Neo-fascism and the ‘radical right’: a figment of my (historical) imagination?

Let me say in conclusion to this lecture: neo-fascism represents a continual evolution of fascism away from its dominant inter-war manifestations. I refer back to Schüddekopf and his fourth theoretical possibility: ‘like any other political phenomenon,’ Schüddekopf wrote, fascism ‘does not consist of consistent and unchanging features, but has its own history of development, and cannot be reduced to a static model.’ In this sense, some neo-fascists do possess ‘open minds’ and this is no ‘lunatic fringe.’ They have adapted as a result of acute marginalization within their own political cultures, they have been receptive to new ideas, and they have altered their tactical and discursive frameworks. ‘The most fecund of these neo-fascist groups’, as Jeffrey Bale has recognized, ‘have often served as incubators of transformative ideas and

64) Schüddekopf, Fascism, 193.
harbingers of developing trends.'65 Moreover, recognition of the need to adapt to external conditions is hardly a ‘new’ development. My colleague John Richardson has recently written about how the 1960s version of the British National Party subsumed anti-Semitic conspiracy theory beneath a veneer of racial populism. In relation to British fascism, Richardson makes the telling observation that ‘by adopting the methods of political science and basing analysis on predominantly contemporaneous accounts of party materials, too many studies of British fascism have stripped discourse from their historic contexts.’66 What is needed is more and not less diachronic analysis.

Radical right-wing populism (if we want to persist with this label) has grown in sophistication largely due to the influence of neo-fascist theorists, particularly with regard to the adoption of ethno-pluralist discourse. Central to this development has been cross-national diffusion of the FN’s ‘master frame’ - an interdependent process that encouraged similar parties elsewhere. If we accept the particular contribution of neo-fascism (the Nouvelle Droite) to this process, it surely is a mistake to argue that neo-fascism has played a minimal role in defining the ideological and discursive practices of the contemporary far right. The fact that right-wing populists feel it necessary to repeatedly draw a clear line (in public) between themselves and the ‘extreme right’ also tells us much about the extent to which both the ‘radical right’ and ‘extreme right’ mingle. Now, if all this blurs boundaries for political scientists, then so be it! As Roger Griffin once remarked, ‘There is nothing cut-and-dried about the Far Right.’67 Truer words were never spoken.

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