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Memory politics of the far right in Europe

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, we have seen a significant increase of memory politics among far-right political actors. In public spheres across Europe, discursive repertoires and historical tropes that mythologize the past have been (re)articulated by far-right actors who construe themselves as the true heirs and bearers of national historical traditions and values. This special issue, comprising six research articles on French, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Serbian and German cases, adds to new scholarship on memory politics among the far right in Europe: empirically, by presenting a wide range of geographically and culturally distinct case studies, and conceptually, by shedding new light on the role of memory politics and the use of historical legacies as factors and context variables in various far-right mobilizations today. In particular, this new research shows how supply and demand-side dimensions of far-right memory politics are mediated through discursive performance by parties, leaders, protest movements and social media. Methodologically, these studies demonstrate how mixed-methods approaches can yield remarkable and sometimes counterintuitive findings. They point to aggressive new far-right instrumentalizations and weaponizations of the past which ultimately seek to rehabilitate nostalgic ethno-nationalism as part of a politically articulated authoritarian revolt against liberal democracies and cosmopolitan social change in Europe.

KEYWORDS

Collective memory;
nationalism; nostalgia;
populism; radical right

Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed a significant upsurge of the so-called memory politics among far-right political actors, parties and movements. Across the European continent, a broad far-right discursive repertoire of an imagined, mythologized or idealized past has intruded on the public sphere. Particular pre-existing historical tropes have been (re)articulated, (re)interpreted, banalized or manipulated by far-right actors in order to render political legitimacy as the ‘true heirs’ and bearers of allegedly inalienable national historical traditions and values.

In 2017, the leader of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland, suggested that Germans should be allowed to pride themselves on ‘the achievements of German soldiers in two world wars’ similar to the French appreciation of Napoleon and the British admiration for Nelson and Churchill (Reuters, 2017). In France, the far-

right political newcomer Éric Zemmour claims to tell his audiences ‘the true history of France’ in light of today’s ‘Great Replacement’ of the French people (Trippenbach, 2021). The Dutch far-right politician Thierry Baudet has repeatedly alluded to the restoration of Dutch colonial ‘grandeur’, embedding his message in a racialized and nativist discourse (Botje & Cohen, 2020). Similarly, far-right protest groups, such as *Génération Identitaire* in France, PEGIDA in Germany, and the Golden Dawn-related neonazi vigilante movement in Greece, mobilize an imagined past amounting to counter-factual historical revisionism or ‘alt-history’ that ultimately fosters an essentialist, primordialist, racist, anti-semitic, sexist, ethnocentric, nationalist, homophobic and heteronormative ideational outlook (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2021; Valencia-García, 2020). First and foremost, this historical revisionism and the post-factual counter-narratives it employs are intimately – and comprehensively – tied to instantiations of ‘nostalgic nationalism’ (Rensmann, 2021, p. 8). It aims at rehabilitating and glorifying ethno-national community models in opposition to cosmopolitan social change by idealizing, instrumentalizing, and white-washing national histories.

Without exception, far-right actors and movements in Europe have been seasoning their discursive strategies with carefully selected and devised references to (modified) historical tropes and myth-making. Recent scholarship has increasingly taken stock of (populist) far-right memory politics across the European continent, both empirically as well as conceptually (Art, 2012; Audretsch & Gartzka, 2020; Bar-On, 2013; Couperus & Tortola, 2019; De Cesari & Kaya, 2020; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Harper, 2018; Jensen, 2022; Korhonen, 2020; Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Manucci, 2020; Miklóssy & Kangaspuro, 2022; Taş, 2020; Wijermars, 2019). But many questions have remained unanswered and problems unaccounted for – on empirical, theoretical and methodological levels.

This special issue, comprising six research articles on French, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Serbian and German cases, will add to a burgeoning field of study, but also breaks new ground. It will do so empirically by presenting a wide range of geographically and culturally distinct and hitherto under-researched case studies that provide in-depth analyses. Taking stock of particular politico-cultural contexts, these research contributions shed new light on the role of memory politics and the use of historical legacies as significant general factors as well as context variables in various far right mobilizations today. In particular, these studies show how supply and demand side dimensions of far-right political memory politics are mediated through discursive performance by political parties, leaders, protest movements and social media in the public sphere. Methodologically, the articles reflect how mixed-methods approaches yield remarkable and sometimes counterintuitive findings.

Conceptually and theoretically, the collection of papers tie in with ongoing debates on the intersection of far-right politics and memory politics, the political instrumentalization and weaponization of the past. The majority of authors take as a shared starting point an emerging conceptual consensus with regard to the denominations, typologies, and some theoretical assumptions in the relevant and overlapping fields of inquiry.

Conceptualizing far-right memory politics

With the far right, this special issue refers to a term that encapsulates political outlooks and utterances that are, in the words of Mudde, ‘hostile to liberal democracy’ (Mudde,

2019, p. 7), and articulate, in one way or the other, an inevitable or desirable persistence of fundamental cultural and ethnic inequality in society. Within the far right, the 'radical right' denotes the acceptance of some majoritarian democratic features, whilst rejecting its liberal elements (e.g. minority rights, separation of power, rule of law). The subgroup of the 'extreme right', then, frequently violently, rejects the basic tenets of democracy altogether, i.e. popular sovereignty and majority rule. Populism, understood as a thin-centered ideology that essentially revolves around an antagonistic opposition between the virtuous and pure people and the corrupted elite (Mudde, 2004), may be added as an adjective to the radical right, when an actor or group's ideational make-up are preconfigured or shaped by anti-establishment rhetoric in opposition to a glorified conception of a culturally and ethnically homogenous people. Many of the papers in this issue see the conceptual lens of populism as a thin-centered ideology as instrumental to understanding the contemporary far right and its memory politics (see Rueda, Jaskulowski & Majewski, Griffini, Volk in this issue).

A shared key feature of the far right – encompassing extreme, radical, and populist formations – is, however, its departure from shared politico-cultural self-understandings supporting constitutional, liberal democracy. One way this distancing from liberal-democratic norms by far right actors takes shape is by the deliberate attempt at coarsening political discourse and by the 'politics of transgression' (Rensmann, 2017), i.e. by challenging the boundaries of what is considered legitimate public debate and thus ultimately eroding the boundaries of the speakable, thereby normalizing respective transgressions. Substantively, this often includes the positive reframing, glorification, or white-washing of an authoritarian-nationalist past, and, to varying degrees, the rehabilitation of respective 'alternative models' of community-building and political order.

This special issue adopts the notion of memory politics to grasp the specific dynamics of the politicized use of historical memory in the public sphere. There is a rich genealogy in memory studies that seeks to conceptualize and define different public forms and uses of historical memory. A key distinction between collective and institutional memory harks back to the classical work of the pre-World War II philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (Lebow et al., 2006). Collective memory pertains to the intersubjective, socially constructed renderings of the past that are primarily disseminated and inflected through ordinary communication. Institutional memory, in contrast, signifies the more solidified and authorized ways of collective historical remembrance based on hegemonic historical tropes and narratives. Though many have extended the taxonomy of historical memory since (Aksu, 2009), the more societal resonance of collective memory and the hegemony of institutional historical memory prove insightful for studying the politicization of historical memory.

Drawing from Verovšek's suggestion to study the politics of memory as a mediated interaction between 'the informal public sphere of opinion-formation [...] and the formal institutions of legal will-formation' (2016, p. 531), this special issue is attentive to both collective and institutional memory, particularly since the far-right manipulatively engages with non-authorized, colloquial and sometimes marginalized counter-hegemonic renditions of the past, but also actively questions, redresses, rejects and counters institutionalized and mainstream historical references and tropes. Although many of the papers in this issue mainly put (far-right) political parties, elites and leaders (the supply side of politics if you like) at the forefront of analysis, they also operationalize how grassroots activism (Volk), popular culture (Jaskulowski and Majewski) and social media

(Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López) play in the political use and mobilization of historical memory. As such, the mediating conduits between collective and institutional memory feature as essential sites of discursive practice and performance of far-right memory politics.

Other scholarship mostly tries to theorize the various context-dependent strategies contemporary actors employ for 'mnemonic manipulations' (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 7) or the modes of politicized historical manipulation or adjustment, such as invoking 'fake histories', redressing 'dark history' or invoking historical taboos to attract public attention (Couperus & Tortola, 2019). In addition, scholars refer to historical practices of *damnatio memoriae*, the erasure – in contrast to manipulation – of undesirable history as wielded by dictators and authoritarian regimes, dating back to antiquity (Fuglerud et al., 2021, pp. 2–4). When it comes to the far right specifically, its 'retrospective' nature suggests an intimate relationship with historical memory and its political use. With regard to the (populist) radical right, Betz and Johnson (2004, p. 324) aptly state that '[d]espite its revolutionary pretensions [...] and postmodern aspirations, [it] is a backward-looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days.' This characterization has also consistently applied to the ideology of the extreme right, past and present. What fascism, in the sense of palingenetic ultranationalism (Griffin, 2015), offered its supporters was a promise of national rebirth, i.e. a break with the historically corrupted present and a restoration of the 'golden age' of the mono-ethnic national community. And over the last decades, modernized radical-right formations, movements and parties across the globe have mobilized precisely such nostalgic ethno-nationalist narratives juxtaposed to the reality of a rapidly transforming world shaped by cosmopolitan social (value) change and societal grievances often identified with processes of globalization.

The contemporary far right's ethno-nationalist imaginary, which ultimately relies on historical glorifications of a pre-democratic, authoritarian past associated with ethnic nationalism, can therefore also be situated in context of a cultural backlash against democratic social value change (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Facing a constant seesaw of learning and forgetting in view of past crimes (Friedlander, 1993), institutional democratization and the critical public processing of historical atrocities had helped mainstreaming a culture of contrition, remembrance and reflection on national identity and history in Europe (Judt, 2005). Such political culture is one of the targets of a 'noisy counter-revolution' (Rensmann, 2017) which is driven by far-right agents. It is a backlash or counter-revolution against inclusive, post-ethnic, cosmopolitan social value change in a diversified migration society; the 'silent revolution' towards self-expression values displaying independent support for democratic ideals; and democratization of society at large. Understood in this lens, the far-right reframing of the past by means of nostalgic counter-narratives idealizing national histories is part of a politically articulated authoritarian-nationalist revolt against present-day liberal democracies in Europe, and the politico-cultural public norms supporting them. Such revolt tends to be at odds with historical facts. As it favors unrestrained national pride over historical contrition, it also favors replacing facts with ever new forms of national myth-making because it is in need of downplaying factual historical atrocities, destruction, and war which had long discredited aggressive nationalism, illiberalism, and autocracy (all of which are intimately linked to the history of the far right).

Tropes in far-right memory politics, old and new

Myth-making and nostalgia in far-right memory politics have traditionally included the triptych of culture, ethnicity and nationhood (De Cesari & Kaya, 2020; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). The primordialist image of an ethnically homogeneous, 'civilised', harmonious, cohesive society that supposedly existed in the distant past is conventionally contrasted to the present ills of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, liberal decadence, fragmented communities, moral philistinism and a lack of patriotism. One prominent rhetorical trope is the appeal to a Christian tradition in the defense against the contemporary 'invasion' of Islam (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). Another recurring core trope mobilizing historical cultural myths is a constructed antagonism between an allegedly 'pure', traditional ethno-national community of 'true patriots', on the one hand, and on the other hand a cosmopolitan Jewish 'cabal' allegedly subverting and conspiring against ethnic nations. The currently popular, 'identitarian' far right discourse about a 'Great Replacement' conspiracy – that is: the fantasy that European 'indigenous' populations are deliberately substituted by migrants, especially from Muslim countries, according to a global master plot orchestrated by 'globalist', string-pulling Jews – combines both: antisemitic historical tropes identifying Jews with an imagined world conspiracy against 'organic' national communities, and fears of Muslims, construed as an invasion that allegedly destroys national, civilized ('Christian') traditions, identities and ways of life by means of Muslim mass migration (Betz & Oswald, 2022).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that – in tandem with the partial normalization and mainstreaming of far-right political actors and ideas (Merrill, 2020; Wodak, 2015) – 'new' themes and tropes have emerged in the memory politics of the far right (Mudde, 2019). These relate, among other things, to issues of an economic nature, including the past, present and future of the welfare state (Andersson, 2009; Schreurs, 2021), reflecting the increasingly explicit and strategic engagement of far-right movements with welfare chauvinism and producerism (Ivaldi & Mazzoleni, 2020; Rossetti et al., 2021). In this light, far-right actors reappropriate the memory of the welfare state, which in the European historical context was indeed largely 'ethnic' (tied to ethnic conceptions of citizenship) and 'true' social democracy, which they argue has been distorted and demolished by the aforementioned trends toward 'multiculturalism' and cosmopolitan 'globalism' rather than neoliberal economic policy.

In ideological terms, the far right typically positions itself in outright opposition to communism and other varieties of (putatively) left-wing politics. This positioning also finds expression in revisionist far-right memory politics ('Hitler was a socialist'). We can most evidently see this, unsurprisingly, in the post-communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe, where the memories of the dictatorial past – and the attribution of guilt (by association) to contemporary political actors – are pivotal for domestic political antagonism and cleavages. This emerges clearly from the contributions by Volk, and Jaskulowski and Majewski. However, the use of anti-communist and anti-leftist tropes by far-right actors can also be observed in countries where communist parties and movements have played a less hegemonic (if still notable) role in post-war political history. This tendency can be seen in Italy (Cento Bull, 2016) as well as in Greece, where the neonazi Golden Dawn party has invoked the country's anti-communist historical tradition (dating back to the Civil War) in its fight against 'leftists' and 'liberals' (Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2015).

Analyzing far-right memory politics: six case studies and general observations

Studying the memory politics of the far right should remind us that, as Vulovic (in this issue) aptly notes,

The “past” does not simply wait to be used, but is re-constituted with each re-articulation [...]. This blurs the boundaries between history as fact and myth as fictional retellings of factual events, which prompts us to consider the constitutive nature of discourse, with implications for re-reading [...] national myths.

However, as Wodak and Forchtner (2014; see also Wodak, 2015) point out, the blurring of these boundaries through the fictionalization of politics and history also offers far-right actors with opportunities to blend past and present, and to deploy shared memories to support political claims.

This is particularly salient in Rueda’s article in this special issue. It shows how Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right party Rassemblement National (RN), adopted a decidedly different approach than her father Jean-Marie when it comes to gauging France’s national past. In contrast to her father’s antisemitic utterances about the World War II and his Vichy apologetism, she adopted a more pragmatic approach through the infamous far-right trope of resurgentism, the notion that the corrupted French nation needs to reroute itself towards its ultimate historical destiny. By critically decoding RN’s party literature through the lens of Laclauian discourse theory, the article unfolds how Marine Le Pen has discursively employed particular renderings of the past, and has instantiated the ‘historico-political’ as central to history as a site of struggle between political actors.

Jaskulowski and Majewski take up the political mobilization of collective memory of the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS). Based on the centrality of a specific anti-elite rhetoric, and informed by Mudde’s populism as thin-centered ideology definition, they dub the party populist, yet iterate its substantive indebtedness to an exclusionary, radical mode of nationalism. History, the article argues, or the restoration of the ‘true’ national past, has been at the forefront of the PiS’s ideational discourse. Based on four case studies (including rap music), the authors see the party’s deployment of the past as constitutive to its populist-nationalist ideational make-up. The anti-elitist rhetoric here is the ‘form’ which enables the radical-nationalist discursive substance of memory politics.

Griffini brings into focus how the construction of Italian colonial memory fleshes out among the (populist) far-right parties Lega and Fratelli d’Italia (FdI). The article finds that in selectively constructing colonial memory, these parties obscure and deflect colonial brutalities and recast coloniality in a positive light. Rather than witnessing a modality of colonial nostalgia, as elsewhere in Europe, Griffini articulates a form of colonial romanticism that navigates the complexities of Italy’s episodic and abruptly ending colonial history. Moreover, far right colonial discourse preconfigures persistent anti-immigrant frames, criminalizing and inferiorizing the Other.

Two articles engage with tenacious pre-modern historical tropes that have been part of political mobilizations of historical memory by the far right. First, Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López unpack how the particular Spanish medieval trope of The Reconquest has been strategically employed by the far-right VOX party during the 2019 elections. Critical

to their analysis of the mobilization of The Reconquest trope, is the role of social media in reconfiguring memory politics. Situating their case study within longer traditions of far-right renditions of medieval history, and intersecting it with recent scholarship on memory politics and social media, the authors find a particular rendition of a 'threatened' Spanish Catholic identity that is amplified and dispersed through a complex interplay of far-right political actors and social media users. Saliently, the article suggests that the nature of specific collective memory claims is contingent on the structure of a specific social media platform.

Second, Vulović engages with the rearticulation of the so-called Kosovo myth by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). As is the case with The Reconquest in Spain, the Kosovo myth harks back to a mythological pre-modern past. This past has been instrumental as a sacralized historical reference in Serbian nationalist discourse since the nineteenth century. From 2017 onwards, the Serbian president and SNS leader, Aleksandar Vučić, strategically rearticulated the myth by suggesting an ethnically partitioned Kosovo. In doing so, Vučić actively steered away from mythologized renditions of Kosovo as undisputed and historical Serbian territory, promoting a counter-hegemonic project that, nevertheless, incorporated far-right articulations of ethnic difference and segregation. As such, the article discloses the multifarious discursive uses and counterintuitive mobilizations of a single historical trope in memory politics.

Volk scrutinizes the German far-right protest group PEGIDA at the crossroads of memory politics and movement-memory nexus scholarship. Adopting an actor-centred, ethnographic approach to investigating strategic uses of memory, the article moves away from predominantly institution-centered and party-focused memory politics. By dissecting PEGIDA's historical tropes and references in their collective action frame, Volk points to the movement's layered performative repertoire that eschews traditional far-right or nazist semiotics while, at the time, deploys more recent symbols and references that bear far-right semantics. This repertoire should then be understood, ideationally, as both populist as well as far-right: Populist, because it conveys the antagonistic logic of 'democratic resistance' against 'leftist dictatorship', and far-right as it mobilizes essentialist and illiberal conceptions of fundamental inequality.

All these findings point to generalizable trends and features of far-right mobilizations in relation to memory politics. First, all case studies show that historical myth-making and idealized constructions of the national past play an integral role in the contemporary ideology production, post-factual horizons, and dominant nationalist, antisemitic, and racist discourses advanced by the far right in Europe. Second, these studies illustrate that the far right is a very active agent in broader attempts by a variety of actors who aim at reshaping culturally embedded collective memories in battles over the meaning of the past for present-day Europe. Thus, the far right's aggressive instrumentalization and weaponization of the past, documented and analyzed here across Europe, takes part in and represents the radical edge of new 'culture wars' over national identity, historical legacies, and politico-social values. Third, the European far right's memory politics and the 'alternative' histories it constructs should be viewed, in turn, in the context of a politically articulated authoritarian-nationalist revolt currently challenging European party systems, modes of democratic legitimation, and shared self-understandings. The far right's memory politics are therefore not just directed against historical facts and critical remembrance of European atrocities, from colonialism to the Shoah, which undermine

idealized narratives about imagined ethno-national communities; the far right's memory politics are ultimately also directed against present-day liberal democracies – and their future – in Europe at large.

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