

Right-Wing Populism in Austria and the United States

—A Comparative View

by Eric Frey

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I feel deeply honored by your invitation to give the second annual Botstiber Institute Lecture on Austrian-American Studies, especially to follow in the footsteps of our former chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer. I believe that you may have chosen me because of the central role that transatlantic relations played in my work and in my life. I studied and taught in the United States. I have close family here. I have published extensively on American politics. Sometimes I have been very critical but always with a deep-felt love for this country.

In fact, my emotional ties to the US go deeper than that, and they have to do with my family history. I was born into a Jewish family in Vienna; both of my parents were survivors of the Holocaust in Austria and Hungary. Living as a Jew in central Europe after 1945 was a paradoxical affair. You could not feel at home in countries where such crimes had been committed. Jews in Austria had the urgent need for a second identity that would serve as an emotional anchor for them. For some, like my grandfather, it was religion, for others it was Communism, another group became Zionists. For my parents, the second identity was America.

My father never made it here. As a young man, he emigrated to Australia instead. But the US remained for him in many ways the Promised Land. My mother came to the US as an exchange student in 1953, spending a year with a wonderful doctor's family in a small village in upstate New York. Her foster parents and siblings remained an additional American family for her. Even today, my two brothers and I carried on that tradition.

For me, born in 1963, America was always a second home, not physically, but emotionally and intellectually. It was from that perspective that I wrote "Black Book USA" in 2004. Some critics called it anti-American. It wasn't. It was mostly based on American sources and reflected the candid self-criticism of American scholars and intellectuals.

My focus in that book was what I called the "dark side" of the United States which I described as racist, intolerant, self-righteous, chauvinistic, militaristic, and quite often not open to rational argument. For most Europeans, that dark

side associates with the right wing of the Republican Party and its various aligned movements such as the Christian Right, the NRA, or, today, the Tea Party movement. Most Europeans cannot understand the motives of people who despise the United Nations, reject gun control and oppose providing basic health care. For them, the American right is a major threat to world peace, the principles of human rights and even their personal futures.

I see a similar deep-seated concern among American observers about signs of resurgence of far-right parties in Austria, in Hungary or in Western European countries. Aware of the history of fascism, many Americans, and particularly American Jews, are deeply unsettled by ideologies and political forces that look like a throwback to the 1930s.

As a moderate who is deeply committed to liberal values, I find these developments on both sides of the Atlantic disconcerting. At the same time, I often catch myself playing down the threat they pose to alarmed observers from the other side.

I tell Americans that the success of far-right parties in Austria or Hungary is no proof of a rise in anti-Semitism and xenophobia. And I explain to Austrian readers – even before Barack Obama was elected president – that neither George W. Bush nor Sarah Palin represent all of America, or even the majority.

Obama's triumphant campaign and election made my job easier, but the frightening backlash against his person and his policies seems to confirm the darkest suspicions among Europeans on where the US is heading.

I would like to use this lecture to go beyond these superficial impressions and demonstrate that right-wing populist movements in the US and in Europe, including my home country Austria, share a range of characteristics and are in many ways very much alike. By doing that, I hope I can foster mutual transatlantic understanding in the spirit of Dietrich W. Botstiber.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between US and European right-wing populism is its diversity. Neither in Europe nor in the US, there exists *one* right-wing ideology. There are multiple strands of thinking and divergent, often conflicting agendas that are grounded in differing historical origins, political objectives and social settings.

Let me start with the American experience, which, of course, is familiar to most of you. One can trace the origin of the American right back to a deeply religious, usually protestant and often Manichaeic mindset that developed in the 18th and 19th century. This way of thinking fed what the historian Richard Hofstadter called the "Paranoid Style in American politics", directed against Jews, Catholics, Jesuits, Communists, intellectuals and the government in general. Today, this tradition lives on in the violent militia movement that surged in the 1990s but has declined over the past decade.

A second strand of right-wing thinking is rooted in the American South, derived from slavery and racism. Some people there have still not come to terms with the civil rights movement and with the role that federal law and federal courts played in advancing the equality of African-Americans. Racism often comes in the guise of nostalgia for the old Confederacy and with the invocation of "state rights" against any "meddling" from the federal government. A reincarnation is the "Birther movement", the conspiracy theory that claims that Barack Obama was not born in Hawaii but in Kenya and has therefore no right to be the American president. Racism in the US, just like anti-Semitism in Europe, is the black stain on the American right.

Beyond racism, there exists a long-standing libertarian tradition that opposes taxes, the regulation of financial markets and the environment, and any kind of state interference in people's lives, including their bedrooms. While pure libertarianism may be a minority creed, it is the driving force behind the Tea Party Movement that started as a reaction to the huge increase in public spending that occurred under President Bush and President Obama.

Almost everybody in the American right is opposed to gun control. They read the second amendment as absolute and regard the right to bear arms under virtually any circumstance as an expression of the American way of life.

Then too, there is the Christian right, which is preoccupied with the fight against abortion, gay marriage, feminism and the ban on prayers in public schools.

And too, in the US, there exists an anti-Semitic tradition, which is often linked to xenophobic nativism, isolationism in foreign affairs and economic populism directed against Wall Street and "big business". Pat Buchanan was the best-known representative of that movement.

On foreign policy, the American right today is mostly associated with militaristic interventionism like the efforts that were directed against the Communist threat before

1989 and are aimed against the Islamic threat today.

A major force behind right-wing foreign policy is the idea of American exceptionalism with its disdain for multilateral institutions and its preference for unilateral action. Some of the major advocates of such neoconservative foreign policies are Jews.

Anti-immigration policies are another theme of the right wing. These movements peaked in the 1920s but are currently staging a comeback in the American southwest, notably in Arizona, as a populist backlash against illegal immigrants from Mexico. This resurgence may split the Republican Party, a party that was rather open to immigration, seeing it as a source of cheap labor, and a rich vein of electoral support from Hispanic voters with their strong family values. Few Europeans know that George W. Bush tried, unsuccessfully, to get progressive immigration laws through Congress.

I would like to draw your attention to other contradictions in the thinking of different groupings within the right wing. Small-government and low-tax libertarians have little common ground with religious fundamentalists; isolationists such as the former Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul and his son Rand, now the Tea Party candidate for a Senate seat in Kentucky, are strongly opposed to neo-con foreign policy. And whatever you may think of the populist rhetoric of Sarah Palin, she is certainly not a racist. Some of the strongest opposition to gay marriage can be found among African-Americans, who have little else in common with the right wing.

Let me now turn to Europe. When right-wing parties made headlines over the past decades, they were generally seen as the unrepentant heirs to fascism and National Socialism. There is some truth to that viewpoint. The Austrian Freedom Party, for example, has its roots in the pan-German movement that was neither Catholic nor Socialist and that turned to Hitler as early as the 1920s. After 1945, the party became a haven for former Nazi officials and saw its vote count surge once these people regained their electoral rights. The party's best known leader, the late Jörg Haider, came from a Nazi family and repeatedly expressed his sympathy with former Wehrmacht soldiers and SS officers.

In Hungary, the Jobbik party that only recently gained 13 pc of the votes in the parliamentary elections, is even more blatant in its nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism and its veneration for its Nazi precursor, the Arrow-Cross movement that took power in 1944 and helped the

Germans kill most of the Hungarian Jews. They have a lot in common with Germany's NPD, whose leaders do not even attempt to hide their Neo-Nazi leanings. Fortunately, the NPD is a fringe group with limited appeal. Elsewhere, the British National Party (BNP) is openly racist, moderately anti-Semitic, and strongly anti-European.

But overall, the picture of European right-wing movements is somewhat fragmented. Some specific nationalistic agendas are directed against other ethnic groups or neighboring countries. The Freedom Party in Carinthia, Mr. Haider's adopted home province, draws much of its strength from popular antagonism against the Slovene minority in the south. The Slovak National Party is just like Hungary's Jobbik violently anti-Roma, but also anti-Hungarian. The Flams Belang in Northern Belgium, a Flemish nationalist force, wants to split the country along its language groups and is mostly anti-French.

In Austria, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Nordic countries, right-wing parties are targeting immigrants and Muslims. But they are not all anti-Semitic. To the contrary, the Swiss People's Party led by the entrepreneur Christoph Blocher and the Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders are strongly pro-Israel and find common ground with Jewish community leaders in their fear of radical Islam. Even the Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has made anti-Semitic statements in the past, now appeals to some French Jewish voters who are afraid of Muslim immigrants.

Most of the right-wing parties in Western Europe tend to be pro-free market and pro-business, but in the East, they cling to a form of social populism. In Poland and Slovakia, the parties pursue a Catholic agenda against abortion and homosexuality. In contrast, in the Netherlands, Mr. Wilders, as the heir to the assassinated firebrand Pim Fortuyn, defends women's and gay rights against the onslaught of Muslim fundamentalism.

All these parties, however, are all united in their rejection of European integration and the EU. They also tend to fulminate against some kind of elites in politics, the arts, the media, or the bureaucrats in Brussels.

So what unites and what separates right-wing populism on the two continents? Xenophobia is the tie that binds together all European and most American right-wingers. The social and religious issues that are so important in the US, however, play a very small role in Europe.

But on both sides of the Atlantic, these movements appeal to voters of low or moderate education who face economic and social uncertainties and are looking for easy

answers to their problems. Their leaders therefore play on anti-elitist resentments, focus on the negatives, demonize their enemies and constantly look for scapegoats to put the blame on. They excel in pithy soundbites, not in sound analysis or responsible government.

These leaders receive support from parts of the media. In Austria, it is the Kronen Zeitung, a tabloid paper that is read by more than 40 pc of the adult population every day. In the US, right-wing populism is fed by Fox News and talk radio.

Where will right-wing populism go from here? For the US, I am not sure. The rise of the Tea Party movement has been a surprise to some, and its further future is unpredictable, to say the least. But similar to Europe, I expect the issue of immigration with its anti-Latino bias to dominate the agenda of the American right in the coming years. Racism against blacks might actually decline. For the Republican Party, the anti-immigration backlash is a serious electoral and ethical challenge.

In Europe, I am certain that the new Western-style anti-Islamic movements will gradually drive out neo-fascism and old-fashioned anti-Semitism. That prospect does not make the right-wing phenomenon more appealing, but less frightening.

This transition is under way in France, where Le Pen's daughter Marine is leading the Front National away from her father's anti-Semitism. I see the same happening in Austria, Starting in the late 1980s, Jörg Haider purged his party from its pan-Germanic leanings and tried to shape a new Austrian patriotism. When he could not get his way, he left the party to set up his own, far less successful group. His successor as Freedom Party leader is Heinz-Christian Strache, who comes from the far-right fringe and was close to Neo-Nazi militias in his youth.

But even Mr. Strache is shifting. In the recent election for the federal presidency, a mostly ceremonial position, the party nominated Barbara Rosenkranz, a local politician who has been part of far-right pan-Germanic circles most of her adult life. When Mrs. Rosenkranz failed to distance herself clearly from National Socialism, she lost the support of the Kronen Zeitung. Even though the mainstream conservative People's Party did not field a candidate against Social Democratic incumbent Heinz Fischer, Mrs. Rosenkranz failed to gain more than 15 pc of the votes, which corresponds to the core electorate of the Freedom Party.

So Mr. Strache is now picking up where Jörg Haider left off. He tries to play down signs of Nazi nostalgia and

to present himself as a modern, youthful advocate of the common man. His style, his themes and his rhetoric more and more resemble those of Sarah Palin.

How should we deal with these political movements? How can we weaken or even defeat them? That is the main challenge for liberals and centrists in the US and in Europe, for political leaders, for journalists, for academics and for all engaged citizens. It is more relevant today than ever, because in times of crisis, right-wing candidates and parties could easily attract up to a third of an unsettled electorate. But they will never gain the majority and never gain power if we don't let them. The diversity that I described makes right-wing movements less threatening for the moment, but more persistent over the long term.

I would like to stress two points.

The first has to do with the electoral system. This is perhaps the biggest difference between Europe and the US. Proportional representation, common in most of continental Europe, gives right-wing parties two advantages: First, they can easily assume the role of the king maker and gain significant political power even with voting shares of less than 30 per cent.

And secondly, they also benefit when the mainstream parties band together and form centrist "grand coalitions" to exclude the right. This leaves the role of the only effective opposition to right-wing populists and makes them more attractive to anyone who is unhappy with the government, with the economy or just with his or her daily life.

In Austria, the grand coalitions that governed from 1986 to 2000 and from 2007 to now were major factors in the ascent of the Freedom Party. Because I find this constellation so dangerous, I am still convinced that former People's Party leader Wolfgang Schüssel was right when he formed a government with Mr. Haider ten years ago. The move did not destroy the Freedom Party, as some had hoped, but it reversed its rise. Among my liberal friends, however, I am quite alone with this view.

The best would be for most of Europe to shift to a majority voting system or at least a system that makes it easier for a party to govern alone. In the US, I expect the rise of right-wing populism to damage the prospects of the Republican Party in the coming mid-term elections because it weakens its appeal to independent voters. Under the American electoral system, radicalization becomes self-defeating. This is not the case in Europe.

David Cameron, the new British prime minister, promised his coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg, a referendum on electoral reform. I

find the current first-past-the-post system in Britain deeply unfair. It encourages tactical voting because people don't want to take the risk that their vote for a third candidate will be wasted. But if Britain moves to an alternative voting system, where voters can make first, second and third preferences, that problem will disappear. And in a system where the moderate majority does not tend to split its votes, right-wing populists have the least chance to ever gain real power.

The second point may be even more important: We need to take the right's issues seriously. Right-wing populists strike a chord with people because they address real problems that tend often to be neglected by others, because they are difficult or may be even impossible to solve.

In the US, Democrats and all moderates need to confront the widespread, deeply ingrained scepticism against government spending, without rational regard to whether it is justified or not. If the moderates fail, as they did in the drafting of the health care bill, they give ammunition to their worst foes.

Immigration is another key issue, in Europe and the US. The prevailing acquiescent attitude toward illegal immigration is unsustainable and unacceptable. For several decades, European leaders remained passive as the fabric of their societies changed in ways that were neither planned nor welcomed. Even in Vienna, where tensions between locals and immigrants are far less visible than in Paris or Berlin, immigration is likely to be the paramount issue in the October municipal elections and will probably cost the ruling Social Democratic party its absolute majority.

We should not leave these issues to demagogues, but should address them head on. We need to patiently explain issues and options and convince the public that easy answers are no answers at all. This is exhausting and often frustrating work, but it is still better than keeping silent – and will pay off in the longer run.

Thank you.