

Opinion | ‘It’s the Identity, Stupid!’: 3 Writers on Europe’s Rising Far Right

David Broder, Caroline de Gruyter, Mattia Ferraresi, Tim Schneider

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Round Table

‘What You See in America Is Exactly What You Saw in Poland and Hungary’

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By David Broder Caroline de Gruyter Mattia Ferraresi and Tim Schneider

Mr. Broder is the author of “Mussolini’s Grandchildren.” Ms. de Gruyter is a columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC. Mr. Ferraresi is a writer for the Italian newspaper QN. Mr. Schneider is an editor in Times Opinion.

The far right has been rising in Europe for a long time — Edward Luttwak called fascism “[the wave of the future](#)” back in 1994 — but last month’s electoral breakthrough in Saxony-Anhalt by the Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, felt seismic. For the first time in Germany’s postwar history, a far-right party stands on the brink of power. The AfD joins a legion of others, not least Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France, either in office or perilously close to it.

In a written online conversation, Tim Schneider, an editor in Times Opinion, hosted David Broder, the author of “Mussolini’s Grandchildren”; Caroline de Gruyter, a columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC; and Mattia Ferraresi, a writer for the Italian newspaper QN, to discuss Europe’s thriving far right, the roots of its success, its plans for power and, of course, what President Trump has to do with it all.

Tim Schneider: An easy one to start: How did we get here?

David Broder: The post-2008 period is often described as a temporary “populist moment.” But nativist parties obsessed with civilizational decline have since established themselves as major forces, even where electoral systems or national histories offered apparent defenses against them. The reasons are many: a drop-off in mainstream parties’ ability to guarantee social progress; the specter of immigrants undermining national identity; and fewer people voting. The financial crisis helped undo the old mainstream. Now, some of these parties are becoming the right-wing establishment and building effective coalitions.

Caroline de Gruyter: The world is changing fast. Governments can’t keep pace, are incompetent or, for various reasons, don’t meet voters’ demands. Far-right parties jump into the void. But they do not win elections by just criticizing governments and uttering extremist views: They need the media to pay attention, and, crucially, they need parties from the political center to start copying them. It is only when other political parties start shifting to the right that the far right can attract a sufficient amount of voters.

Mattia Ferraresi: I guess the short answer, for me, is the crisis of liberalism in the post-Cold War era. Mainstream liberal politics, in both its left- and right-wing versions, failed to deliver on its promises, not only in terms of welfare and economic growth but also in the more complex realm of identity and meaning. The apparent triumph of that worldview paved the way for its own demise. What we’re seeing today, all over the world, are different — sometimes very different — expressions of the same disillusionment with liberalism and its policies.

Schneider: A common perception is that these parties appeal to a particular type of voter, often older workers in left-behind, deindustrializing areas. Is that true? Is there a core far-right constituency in Europe?

Ferraresi: There’s some truth to the far right’s appeal to the post-working class, I guess, but I would tie it to a lack of political and cultural identity. The AfD’s strength in eastern Germany is only partly linked to the region’s dire economy; at a deeper level, the party offers a framework for identity. Voters across Europe who are drawn to the far right are often united by a sense of meaninglessness that was once filled by other structures and parties (mainly Christian Democracy and Communism). James Carville’s line about the economy was an effective campaign message for Bill Clinton, but it was ultimately shallow and wrong. It’s the identity, stupid!

Broder: These parties draw moral force from claiming to represent people the left forgot. Even their more middle-class voters like to think they’re on the side of the underdog. The real picture is more mixed: The

National Rally, for instance, grew earlier in the areas you mention, but now its support is rising faster among white-collar groups. Though lower-educated voters in deindustrialized rural eastern Germany were early backers of the AfD, the party has since captured much broader attention and support. In many countries, these parties harvested former social-democratic voters after 2008. Today, they are cannibalizing the mainstream center right.

De Gruyter: Most voters will go for centrist parties — we are middle-class countries, after all. The problem is that if mainstream parties leave the center and all that is on offer is the far right, part of the electorate will go for that, and some will simply stop voting. People vote for far-right extremist parties because that is what is on offer. I think it is a myth that voters are shifting to the right. Parties are shifting to the right!

Schneider: It's interesting that we've not really mentioned immigration, which most people regard as these parties' signature issue. What about the rest of their platform — what is their offer economically or culturally?

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De Gruyter: What they usually offer is the opposite of what mainstream parties offer. And they flip-flop in order to catch votes. For example, Ms. Le Pen used to protect the working class, with a plan to bring down the retirement age and so on. But now, with France drifting toward huge deficits and financial markets taking note, she suddenly switches tactics and proposes big cuts to welfare. N'importe quoi, really.

Broder: Often these parties are called “welfare-chauvinist,” in that they seek to protect social services by barring new arrivals. I think this is simplistic. Most offer some renewed idea of meritocracy and even retool the Third Way promise to reward “hard-working families,” while also prioritizing the nuclear-family model. They may even speak of integrating some deserving immigrants. But broadly the story is that migrants are unfairly cutting in line or being pushed ahead by elites, at the expense of hard-working nationals.

Ferraresi: Anti-immigration policies are essentially about providing an identity, whether rooted in whiteness, language, Christianity or something else. That, I think, is why they are so effective at energizing voters — far more so than other culturally conservative causes, such as traditional family values or opposition to abortion. In a culturally conservative country like Italy, Ms. Meloni did not win the election, and go on to lead the longest-serving government in the history of the republic, by rallying against abortion or same-sex marriage.

Schneider: What does Ms. Meloni's tenure tell us about the far right in office?

Ferraresi: I think it tells us that going mainstream is the only way to govern. Ms. Meloni's story is that of a shrewd politician who understood right away that her only chance of political survival lay in being legitimized by the European elite. Her success was forged in Brussels, so much so that when she was forced to choose between Mr. Trump and the European Union, she picked the latter. I'm not sure there's a broader lesson here for other far-right parties, but the strategy has certainly worked for her.

Broder: Ms. Meloni has inspired imitators to become pro-NATO, pro-business parties who aim to change the European Union from within. Yet it's also no surprise that a new further-right party, National Future, is quickly rising in Italy and ideas like so-called remigration are spreading. This is in part a critique of Meloni-style mainstreaming — she hasn't delivered on more fiery promises — but also shows how such governments open space for more radical proposals.

De Gruyter: Ms. Meloni's tenure tells us that part of the far right mellows when in power — though not all! The AfD is different, as is the Freedom Party of Austria. Once in power, Ms. Meloni suddenly became pro-NATO, pro-E.U. and pro-Ukraine. The far right in many other countries, including France, has also

made huge U-turns. They do not want to exit the European Union anymore but to change Europe from the inside. This is a completely different strategy than before.

Schneider: The general shift of these parties toward accommodation with the bloc makes me wonder: Is a far-right European Union a contradiction in terms?

Broder: Though Ms. Meloni's party still sometimes paints Brussels as a liberal blob, once-radical ideas like outsourcing border control to non-European states are now the norm — and conservative and far-right forces have repeatedly formed majorities, including in dismantling the bloc's earlier green push. Most of the parties we're talking about trade in vague ideas like a "Europe of nations," emphasizing both civilizational solidarity and the defense of national sovereignty. They have no shared federalist project, obviously, but faced with issues like high energy prices or rearmament, they can agree to some cross-border collaboration. And no one really wants to dynamite the euro.

Ferraresi: The reality is that on some issues, most notably immigration, the Overton window in the European Union has shifted significantly over the past decade. On other subjects, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction: Positions on abortion or same-sex marriage that are now considered fringe were common among conservatives until relatively recently. We could find plenty of shifts in other areas. Remember when the Union was remarkably soft on Vladimir Putin's Russia and eager to do business with it? That was not so long ago.

De Gruyter: Short answer: yes. Europe is about living together on a crowded continent. The only way far-right parties can succeed in European politics is by making compromises and seeking alliances. This is exactly what they are doing now in the European Parliament. Have you noticed that these parties all support protecting the single market against China and the United States? And condemn Mr. Trump for intending to snatch Greenland?

Schneider: We clearly need to talk about Mr. Trump. Let's start with his administration's support for these far-right parties, especially the AfD: How significant is that?

Ferraresi: It's hard to prove or measure, but I think the AfD benefited very much from the Trumpian endorsement. Overall, it's still a small party, but the Trump administration, and especially Marco Rubio's State Department, was instrumental in creating a platform where parties like it could thrive. A pretty huge boost, all things considered.

Broder: The Trump administration and figures like Elon Musk undermine any attempt to wall off more radical parties like the AfD or Restore in Britain. So, they definitely give a platform to minoritarian forces. Yet it's also true that the practical consequences of Mr. Trump's conduct can be bad for these parties if they are in or near power. Mr. Trump's Middle East policy, for example, has had direct effects on voters' pockets.

De Gruyter: Well, it doesn't always work: When the United States went all in for Viktor Orban in Hungary, he lost! Mr. Trump is incredibly unpopular in Europe, including with far-right voters. So, far-right parties are keeping their distance. Remember also when Ms. Le Pen was found guilty of embezzlement and Mr. Trump supported her? She hated it and refused to talk about it.

Schneider: If not always a successful booster, is the Trump administration — militantly anti-migrant, economically protectionist, culturally aggressive — a useful template for what far-right governments in Europe could look like?

Broder: Many battle lines are comparable to the United States, on identity and immigration, though some countries (like France) have a far more racialized political conflict than others (like Poland). Still, most European societies are less violent than the United States and I think ICE-style units aren't quite on the agenda, even if Europe's own border agency, Frontex, has also been implicated in the illegal pushback of migrants. Fundamentally, the European Union is not the same kind of power as the United States.

De Gruyter: What you see in America is exactly what you saw in Poland and Hungary during the reign of the far right. Most people did not vote for Law and Justice or Fidesz because they wanted to abolish democracy. They voted for them because of gasoline prices or other dissatisfactions with the performance of the previous government. When the parties started to attack democracy, voters turned away from them. That's why, in the end, they lost.

Ferraresi: I don't think a successful far-right governing party in Europe could realistically look like the Trump administration. One reason is the dense web of E.U. ties; another is that parliamentary systems are mostly designed to balance political forces, at the expense of executive power (and sometimes governability). Ms. Meloni, I think, is once again a case in point. I suspect any far-right party that wants to govern would have to follow a similar path.

Schneider: There are elections in Spain next month, in France and Italy next year, and in Britain and Germany before too long. By the end of these contests, far-right parties could be in power, jointly or alone, in all of them. So the last question is simple: How can they be stopped?

De Gruyter: By other parties. The far right needs other parties to get into government. So if center-right parties stay the course and make clear they will not work with the far right, many unhappy voters will not go for the far right — because that would make their vote pointless. It is only when center-right parties express willingness to cooperate with the far right that those parties can attract great numbers of votes. It's quite simple, really.

Broder: Not just by warning against them but by mobilizing more people for something better. That may sound trite. But Pedro Sánchez did that last time in Spain: Back then, he ran on a record of cost-of-living measures, as well as criticizing the conservative and far-right alliance. Ultimately, angry nativist parties' message takes root when mainstream parties fail to uphold a broadly accepted model of social progress and reward for hard work. Attending to that is the key antidote.

Ferraresi: In a democracy, far-right parties can only be stopped by other parties offering something more appealing to voters who are confused, scared and feel voiceless. Whether we like it or not, unregulated immigration is a source of concern for many in Europe, and mainstream parties need to face that and come up with competitive platforms. The far right thrives on the questions everyone else refuses to answer.

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