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Xenophobia

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Xenophobia may be characterized as the belief that it is “natural” for people to live among others of “their own kind,” along with a corresponding hostility toward people of “another” kind. However, this hostility need not necessarily be activated until “strangers” come too close to the ingroup (in geographical or social space) and are believed to threaten the identity (consensual beliefs and practices, mores, and traditional values) or the material interests of the ingroup. Strangers at a distance are not likely to meet with the same hostility or be as feared. A major part of xenophobia in Europe is supposedly directed against immigration and immigrants. However, we should keep in mind that there are important forms of xenophobia that are not necessarily related to immigration and immigrants, such as prejudice against indigenous ethnic minorities.

Previous research has tried to explain xenophobia and related phenomena in several ways, of which most take a bottom-up perspective. This is true for, e.g., realistic group conflict theory (Blalock 1957, 1967; Olzak 1992; Pettigrew 1957), the group position hypothesis (Blumer 1958; Bobo and Tuan 2006; Quillian 1995), and the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; see Fell and Hewstone, this volume). However useful these perspectives and explanations are, I will argue that they need to be complemented by a top-down perspective, which is why this chapter will focus on the role of political articulation for explaining variation in xenophobia. This is a theme that so far has received considerably less attention in the literature.

More specifically, in this chapter I will discuss how an emerging anti-immigrant party, such as a radical right-wing party (Rydgren 2007), under certain conditions may cause an increase in xenophobia. Papers by Semyonov et al. (2006) and Wilkes et al. (2007) strongly indicate that the presence of successful radical right-wing parties affect the level of immigration scepticism, and Rydgren (2003) indicates that the salience of immigration-negative attitudes increases after the emergence of electorally successful radical right-wing parties, so that the relationship between immigration-negative attitudes and radical right-wing parties can be described as a vicious circle. In this chapter, therefore, I will identify and discuss various mechanisms that link the event of an emerging anti-immigrant party to increases in the level of xenophobia. These mechanisms can be divided into two main categories: the first deals with how the emergence of a radical right-wing party, or another anti-immigrant party, changes the structure of the political space and influences other political actors; the other deals with the influence an emerging radical right-wing party has on people’s frames of thought. The former category of mechanisms is of
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Importance because it (1) may influence the way other political actors talk about immigrants (and other ethnic minorities), which in turn may influence people’s frames of thought, and/or (2) because it sometimes results in an increasing legitimization of xenophobic attitudes. As a result of the legitimization effects, xenophobic beliefs may spread to groups of individuals that previously stayed away from them because of the stigma associated with them. The latter category of mechanisms is of importance mainly because they provide a means to reduce negative emotions and affections (e.g. fear, frustration, anxiety, and resentment). Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate how already existing popular xenophobia may be lifted to a manifest level by the intrusion of an anti-immigrant party in the political space. Once at a manifest level, xenophobic attitudes are more likely to spread, because manifest xenophobes are more inclined than latent xenophobes to try to persuade others.

Radical right-wing parties

Radical right-wing parties have emerged in Western and Eastern Europe during the past two and a half decades, and have gained substantial voter support in several countries. These parties share an emphasis on ethno-nationalism rooted in myths about the distant past. Their program is directed toward strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous, and by returning to traditional values. They generally view individual rights as secondary to the goals of the nation. They also tend to be populists in accusing elites of putting internationalism ahead of the nation, and of putting their own narrow self-interests, and various “special interests,” ahead of the interest of the people. Hence, the new radical right-wing parties share a core of ethno-nationalist xenophobia and anti-establishment populism (see Rydgren 2007).

People’s frames of thought

The presence of a radical right-wing party, or another anti-immigrant party, of significant size may influence people’s frames of thought. This point is well acknowledged within social movement theory, where these kinds of processes are discussed in terms of “framing” and “frame struggle” (e.g. Benford and Snow 2000). For Goffman (1986), frames are those basic elements that organize people’s experience and govern their “definition of a situation.” In other words, for Goffman, frames or frameworks are equivalent to schemata and other schemes of interpretation. In this way, what Goffman calls frames and what cognitive psychology calls cognitive schemas (e.g. Augoustinos and Walker 1998) are strongly overlapping concepts, denoting the importance of socially mediated a priori forms for people’s perception and understanding of the surrounding world.

In this chapter it will be argued that the ideology and propaganda of anti-immigrant parties, or similar xenophobic movements, offer a frame in which some people’s more or less unarticulated stock of xenophobic attitudes (which may be no more than gut feelings of attraction or repulsion) can be articulated in a more comprehensive way. Hence, similar to Bourdieu’s (1984) argument on political taste, people’s beliefs and attitudes are not always thoroughly articulated until they are confronted with the “already-made-explicit” line of thought presented by the political supply side or by other elite actors. Put differently, the “ethos of popular xenophobia” may not find its form until an articulated and (sufficiently) comprehensive program of ideas (but also slogans etc.) is offered by the supply side of the social/political production of opinion. In this perspective, the articulation of the demand side is never prior to the offered alternatives of opinion. Yet, at the same time, the ideology and propaganda offered by the supply side have to be sufficiently attuned to people’s preconceptions of reality if it is not to fall flatly. Differently stated,
in order to be successful, offered frames have to be sufficiently culturally resonant. With the emergence of an electorally successful radical right-wing party, or a similar anti-immigrant party, and the attention it attracts, a new alternative frame of thought is offered, which may help people articulate their previously more or less unarticulated xenophobic attitudes, especially if the offered frame is in line with their psychological wants (Merton 1968: 572–3). This, one may argue, can lift the latent popular xenophobia to a manifest level.

More specifically, there are three partly overlapping reasons why people, consciously or not, may find politicized xenophobia an attractive frame of thought.

First, to start with the most general reason, the ideology of a radical right-wing party may offer a theory of guidance in black-box situations, i.e. a way to make the complex social and political reality meaningful. In this way, it may provide a means to reduce fear and anxiety. This is most likely to attract people who have little knowledge of society and politics and/or who have low trust and confidence in political institutions (most notably, political parties) and established information sources. For these people the level of uncertainty is higher, at least in this context. There are also reasons to assume that the need for such a theory of guidance is most acute in periods of rapid social change (e.g. post-industrialization), when established traditions, ideologies, and identities are dissolving. In such “unsettled times” (Swidler 1986) people are more open to alternative belief systems. Moreover, as will be discussed further on p. 313, there are reasons to assume that more people will adopt a xenophobic ideology as a theory of guidance, if it is sufficiently legitimized.

The second reason, which will be discussed further on p. 314, is that the xenophobic political ideology of the radical right-wing parties is a powerful tool in its ability to reframe political problems. In fact, it offers a “cardinal solution” to any conceivable social problem or ill. As Winock (1998) argues, in the case of the French Front National party, for the radical right-wing parties “everything comes from immigration, everything goes back to immigration” (e.g. unemployment, personal insecurity, the financial problems of the welfare state, AIDS, etc.). Such social and political problems, representing issues that affect people in a very direct and fundamental way, lead to negative emotions and affections in two ways. They are not only a cause of frustration for people who are subjected to these problems, and of worry and anxiety for those who are not affected, but they may also lead to distrust in and dissatisfaction with political institutions because of the perceived inability of these institutions to cope with these essential problems. The ideology of the radical right-wing parties may offer a way to reduce – or at least canalize – these kinds of negative emotions and affections. In the case of feelings of increasing personal insecurity (whether caused by criminality or diseases), it may provide a means to reduce the diffuse fear and anxiety arising from not knowing what or who to fear. Since a belief that immigrants are criminal, for instance, may result in a reduced level of self-perceived uncertainty (i.e. “you know who you should look out for”), it may have positive effects for individuals living under this kind of stress. In the case of negative emotions and affections resulting from unemployment, it may reduce the frustrating feeling that you yourself (or your relatives, friends, etc.) lack the qualifications needed to find a job (i.e. “it is the immigrants’ fault, not ours”).

The third mechanism may be found in these latter kinds of psychological factors. The ideology of the radical right-wing parties may also offer a way to reduce the level of personal frustration, e.g. by offering themes of ressentiment, a theme particularly likely to attract people who feel impotent (i.e. unable to satisfy their wants), who are excluded from society, and/or whose discrepancy between ambition and reality has become acute (i.e. people in situations of relative deprivation). Themes of ressentiment have in common that they aim at a re-valuation, i.e. at a negation, of the established value order (Scheler 1998: 49). If ethno-nationality, for instance, were valued higher than social class and/or education, this would have positive effects for people of
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the lower classes with low education. Similarly, those who do not possess flexibility, knowledge of languages, computer skills, etc., which are depicted as important values and qualities in the post-industrial society, may be attracted by an ideological program that stresses the supreme values of tradition, authority, and, not least, of ethno-national belonging.

Influence on other political actors

We now turn to a discussion on mechanisms that have to do with radical right-wing parties’ influence on other political actors; an influence that may have certain effects on the level of manifest xenophobia in a society. More specifically, in accordance with Bourdieu (2000), I will argue that the supply side of the political space (which Bourdieu calls the political field) is characterized by the symbolic struggle over the legitimate principles of division, and ultimately over the power of categorization (and, hence, over how to perceive and apprehend the socio-political reality). The intrusion of a new political actor into this field may have consequences on the dynamics of the field.

(A) The intrusion of a radical right-wing party may increase the salience of the socio-cultural cleavage dimension. If this dimension is gaining in importance, it will be more important for the other political actors to talk about politics in terms of categories and division lines belonging to the socio-cultural dimension. There are always several cleavage dimensions existing simultaneously (e.g. Rydgren 2012), most of them ultimately based on social identity or interests. Most contemporary West European democracies are dominated by two major cleavage dimensions: the socio-economic cleavage dimension, which puts workers against the capital, and which concerns the degree of state involvement in the economy, and the socio-cultural cleavage dimension, concerning values and identities and containing issues such as immigration, law and order, abortion, etc. (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006). Together, these two cleavage dimensions constitute the basic contours of the political space; and, as Converse (1966) observes, two dimensions represented in a Cartesian space can always be perceived as three different shapes: one where the $x$ and $y$ axes are equal, one where the $x$ axis is seen as more important, and one where the $y$ axis is seen as more important.

Hence, at a voter level, it is not uncommon that people at the same time endorse anti-immigrant and redistributive attitudes. However, the salience of these cleavage dimensions is historically contingent. Although the socio-cultural cleavage dimension has existed throughout the twentieth century, the economic cleavage dimension has structured most of the political behavior in many countries since the Second World War. Yet, by being mainly concerned with the socio-cultural cleavage dimension (most notably about the division between ethnic natives and immigrants, or other ethnic minorities), the intrusion of a radical right-wing party into the political space has challenged this major cleavage dimension. Partly as a result of the emergence of radical right-wing parties, the salience of the socio-economic cleavage dimension has decreased, which means that many who previously defined themselves (as well as their adversaries) in terms of economic position, now instead define themselves and their adversaries in terms of ethnicity and nationality.

There are important differences between the West European countries regarding the dealignment or realignment processes, however. Most importantly, cleavage structures may be of different degrees of complexity. For example, France has a much more complicated cleavage structure than Sweden, dominated by the economic dimension. In France, other cleavage dimensions (e.g. religious, ethnic, regional) have for a long time cut through economic class bonds and loyalties, which has reduced the impact of social class on political behavior (Lipset in Mair et al. 1999: 313). It is probable that stronger bonds of class loyalties evolve in countries that have been
strongly dominated only by the economic cleavage dimension, such as Sweden, which delays the realignment process.

(B) An emerging radical right-wing party may politicize the immigration issue, i.e. “translate” the social phenomenon of immigration into political terms. In order to deem an issue politicized in the full sense of the term, this translation process should embrace the level of political actors as well as the level of the voters, i.e. both voters and political actors should talk about immigration in political terms (Campbell et al. 1960: 29–32). A politicization of the immigration issue permits people to think and talk of immigration as being caused by political processes, as well as being the cause to other political and social phenomenon. In particular, the latter may have an impact on the level of racism and xenophobia in a society.

(C) By being considered as a relevant political actor (by, at least, significantly large groups of the electorate), a successful radical right-wing party is entitled to take part in the frame struggle over how to define social and political issues. Such parties have occasionally been successful in these frame struggles, which is indicated, for instance, by the way many established political actors, in several West European democracies, have accepted the general diagnostic frame that immigration and immigrants (or other ethnic minority groups) are problems. Accordingly, the debate has occasionally been more about the prognostic frame, i.e. how the problem should be solved (on the notions of “diagnostic” and “prognostic” frames, see McCarthy et al. 1996).

(D) We are now turning to mechanisms that do not just involve the supply side of the political space: an emerging radical right-wing party may “force” the established political parties to adjust their position in the political space in a more xenophobic direction. Since one or several of the already established parties within each party system have lost parts of their electorate as a result of the emergence of the radical right-wing parties, they have an incentive to adjust their position in the political space. One way of doing this is to approach, or even adopt, policy propositions from the newly emerged radical right-wing party, especially one or several of the core issues (i.e. anti-immigration and law and order). By aiming at the core issues, they hope to capture dissident issue voters as well as those who based their vote for a radical right-wing party on its party image. This phenomenon, which can be observed in several West European countries, may legitimize xenophobic attitudes. As a consequence, xenophobic attitudes may spread to wider groups of people within a society; groups that had previously stayed away from these attitudes, at least in their more manifest and elaborate forms, because of the stigma associated with them. Of course, this legitimization effect will be stronger in cases where established parties are in a position to legislate on, and implement, policy propositions influenced by, or adopted from, a radical right-wing party.

**Concluding remarks**

To sum up, I have argued that increases in popular xenophobia in a society may (partly) be understood from a top-down perspective, putting focus on political articulation and mobilization. More specifically, the presence of a radical right-wing party, or another anti-immigrant party, may cause an increase in xenophobia because it has an influence on people’s frames of thought, and because it has an influence on other political actors.

In the first case, the emergence of a radical right-wing party offers a frame in which people’s more or less unarticulated stock of xenophobic beliefs and attitudes can be articulated in a more comprehensive way, because it presents a new alternative political ideology, or “line of thought.” The ideology of the radical right-wing parties may also offer a “schema of perception” or a “theory of guidance” which reduces the feeling of uncertainty, as well as other negative emotions and affections (such as fear, anxiety, and resentment). Hence, in this way the emergence of a
radical right-wing party may lift the latent popular xenophobia to a manifest level. Once at a manifest level, the popular xenophobia is more likely to diffuse, because manifest xenophobes (which have gained in number) are more likely than latent xenophobes to propagate and to try to persuade others.

In the second case I have discussed how the emergence of a radical right-wing party may cause increases in the level of xenophobia in a society: because it may increase the salience of the socio-cultural dimension at the expense of the socio-economic cleavage dimension (which makes people more inclined to define themselves, others, and important political problems in terms of ethnicity and nationality, rather than in terms of social class); because it may be successful in the frame struggle over how to define the immigration issue (i.e. it may impose its diagnostic frame that immigrants are “problems” on other political actors); and because it may “force” established parties to adjust their position in the political space in a more xenophobic direction, which leads to a legitimization of xenophobic attitudes. This, in turn, may make these attitudes spread to wider groups of people within a society – groups that had previously stayed away from these attitudes, at least in their more elaborate form, because of the stigma associated with them.

References