

The ideology of the British National Party

Since the end of the 1990s, Extreme Right Parties (hereafter ERP) have played a direct role in the governments, the parliaments and the local councils of many European countries such as, among others, Greece, Flanders (northern Belgium), Switzerland, France, Austria and Italy. From one case to another, ERP share or have shared political power, directly or indirectly, locally or nationally, alone or in coalitions. In other words, what used to be widely feared and presented as a potential return to the “dark years” of fascism has become reality: ERP are now holding political office. As power went to these new parties first in Austria, then in Italy, France (at local level) and so on, the words used to describe them had to be changed as a way to legitimise their arrival on the mainstream scene, and the “racists” became “populist” or “national-populist”,¹ the Nazis became “parties with extremist trends”; the fascists became the “radical right”.²

If it is understandable in the political arena, such word-changes are not helpful in the field of political science and have made it increasingly difficult to identify the extreme right in contemporary Europe. Can one still apply the term “fascist” to a party like *Aleanza Nazionale* (AN) which has operated a deep change in ten years in terms of programme and speeches and which has shared power with *Forza Italia* (FI) for many years led by Silvio Berlusconi? Should we consider Switzerland to have become a racist state since the *Union Démocratique du Centre* (UDC) is deeply rooted in the local and national political life? Can one view France’s *Front national* (FN) as a mere relic of Pétainism when it made it into the second round of the presidential election (May 2002), when cities such as Toulon, Orange, Marignane and Vitrolles have had mayors from the FN which held power in local councils, or more recently when it got 17.9 per cent of the vote during the first round of the 2012 presidential election, becoming the third political force?

It is very difficult to use the old words to characterize those parties in power today and, to a great extent, it was a lot easier in the past when they were small and noisy racist parties denying the Holocaust and singing Hitlerian chants. The evolution of ERP over the last thirty years has been a challenge for political science and to no surprise, the UK, and more precisely England and its ERP, has not escaped the phenomenon.

This article will explore the ideology of the British National Party (BNP), its recent

¹ Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'Illusion populiste*, Paris: Berg International, 2002.

² Jérôme Jamin, “The Extreme Right in Europe: Fascist or Mainstream?” *The Public Eye*, vol. 19, n° 1, Boston: Political research Associates, 2005, 1.

evolution and its position today regarding the political landscape, mainstream parties and democratic values. It will first come back on the particular history of ERP in England regarding other European countries and second, look at its electoral evolution. It will then take into account the current position of the BNP and assess whether the party still belongs to the ERP's family. The concepts of "extreme right" and "populism" will be detailed and compared so as to argue that if the BNP is still part of the ERP's family on some issues, it also belongs today to the populist family on other points, a family which is more "anti-elite"-oriented than purely racist, anti-Semitic or xenophobic, a family that does not embody the same kind of threat to liberal values and democracy and take advantage of a kind of "democratic legitimization"³. As a consequence, it will be shown that this current hybrid position might partially explain why BNP leaders can more easily participate in mainstream politics and public debates where previously they would have been banned. In conclusion, in a comparative perspective with other ERP, this evolution will let us define the position of the BNP in the political landscape in relation to the democratic values and mainstream politics of the UK.

The British National Party as a failure

The literature says ERP followed the same path as its counterparts in Europe, and at the same time it says it is an exception unable to move away from its marginal status.

The marginal status of ERP in England has been analysed from different perspectives. The first possible explanation lies in the ideological position of other mainstream parties on specific topics understood to represent the ERP. As Bowyer explains, "the decline of the National Front in the late 1970s coincided with the return to government of the Conservative Party, which under Margaret Thatcher's leadership advocated restrictive immigration policies and appeared to capture votes of many of the NF's one-time supporters".⁴ In fact, at the end of the 1970s, Margaret Thatcher, following example of Enoch Powell,⁵ said "Conservatives will put in place a deep and strict control of immigration because 'people in this country are very

³ Andrea Mammone, "The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism across Britain, France and Italy", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2009, 171-192.

⁴ Benjamin Bowyer, "Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections", *Electoral Studies*, n° 27, 2008, 612.

⁵ Former Minister of Health and Conservative Member of Parliament Enoch Powell (1912-1998) is one of the most famous post-war opponents to immigration. He has deeply influenced many politicians on this issue, and the New Right as a whole.

afraid to be invaded by people from another culture’”.⁶

This tough position on immigration helps explain why the ERP have had few successes in the past; it also shows why the Conservative Party is still able today to mobilize support against immigration since this kind of claim has been appropriated by the Conservatives.⁷

Another explanation lies in the British first-past-the-post electoral system that makes it extremely difficult for a small party to win representation. This system helps big parties to gain many seats while ousting from Parliament small political groups who do not already have a large electoral base.⁸ Even if this argument worked convincingly in the past, the success of a third party, such as the Liberal Democrats during the 2010 general election, shows the argument’s limits today.

A third explanation about ERP’s marginal status on the British political scene relies on the so-called schismatic tendency of such parties. According to John and Margetts, “British extreme right parties have often been divided and poorly organized, suffering from splits, competing personalities and antagonistic factions, which does not offer a fertile tradition for these parties to follow.”⁹

Finally, it is also possible to describe the voters’ rejection of ERP in England by focusing on the nature of British culture regarding fascism. On the one hand, fascism is a sort of alien ideology that never took root in England and consequently lacks legitimacy and credibility among the population. On the other hand, a national political culture based on civility, tolerance and accommodation between social groups prevents the British people from being attracted to such a radical position.¹⁰

Those arguments are among the most cited to explain the marginality of ERP, a marginality that let Goodwin to write that, “traditionally, the far right in England has been

⁶ Kristin Couper & Danilo Martucelli, “L’Expérience britannique”, in Michel Wieviorka (ed.), *Racisme et xénophobie en Europe*, Paris: La Découverte, 1994, 84.

⁷ Peter John & Helen Margetts, “The Latent Support for the Extreme Right in British Politics”, *West European Politics*, vol. 32, n° 3, 2009, 497. See also James Rhodes, “The Political Breakthrough of the BNP: The Case of Burnley”, *British Politics*, vol. 4, n° 1, 2009, 22.

⁸ Benjamin Bowyer, “Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections”, *op. cit.*, 612; Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 78, n° 2, 2007, 245; Roger Eatwell, “The Extreme Right and British Exceptionalism: The Primacy of Politics”, in Paul Hainsworth (ed.), *The Politics of the Extreme Right*, London: A Continuum Imprint, 2000, 188; Pierre-André Taguieff, *L’Illusion populiste*, *op. cit.*, 117; and Jérôme Jamin, “Fédéralisme et extrême droite au Royaume-Uni”, *Fédéralisme et Régionalisme*, Feb. 2004, 69 and 70.

⁹ Peter John & Helen Margetts, “The Latent Support for the Extreme Right in British Politics”, *op. cit.*, 497; Benjamin Bowyer, “Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections”, *op. cit.*, 612.

¹⁰ Benjamin Bowyer, “Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections”, *op. cit.*, 498.

associated with failure”¹¹.

If the French *Front national* (FN) and many other parties such as the *Vlaams Belang* (VB) in northern Belgium or the *Union Démocratique du Centre* (UDC) in Switzerland could enter the political arena after five, ten or more years (the FN was created in 1972 and became electorally powerful only in 1984), England’s ERP did not follow this continental trend. The National Front (NF) which increased its electoral ratings during the 1970s, and the BNP, which is today the most powerful ERP in England, never had any electoral success at the national level. Bowyer yet argues that “the BNP has emerged as an increasingly viable force in local elections in many parts of England since 2002, expanding its slate of candidates contesting these elections and winning a growing number of seats on several local councils”.¹² In fact, it is possible to find arguments talking about a political failure isolated at the margins, it is also possible to claim that these electoral gains surpass all previous electoral battles, making the BNP a national phenomenon, “widespread across several regions”, and not merely a “movement confined to specific regions”.¹³

The electoral ascent of the BNP

During the sixties, negotiations are undertaken between different fascist groups in order to gather and to federate all tendencies, parties and people from the radical right in a sole, unique and unified organization. The aim is to build a political platform able to focus mainly on the struggle against migrations; it will be personified by the birth of the National Front led by Martin Webster and John Tyndall. Among others, in the beginning of the seventies, the NF will denounce political asylum and more specifically the entrance in the United Kingdom of about 30 000 Asians evicted from Uganda by the regime of Amin Dada. At that time, the NF also suggests the UK should stay out of the European Union, the only party stating such a proposal at that time.

During the seventies, the NF will progress thanks to its leaders who appear in the media in numerous debates on issues such as migrations, political asylum and the threat of the “invasion” of the country. In 1977, the NF will become the fourth party in terms of electoral power before its decline two years later when multiple antiracist NGO’s will denounce the

¹¹ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 241.

¹² Benjamin Bowyer, “Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections”, *op. cit.*, 611.

¹³ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 241.

true faith of the party's members – usually linked to Nazi and fascist groups-, and when at the same time Margaret Thatcher will attract many electors back to the conservative wing.

In 1982, John Tyndall, who was still the co-leader of the National Front (NF) along with Martin Webster, started a new party called the British National Party¹⁴. The new organisation managed to gather many militants and senior members from the late NF and other small radical parties. At the general election of 1983, the BNP presented five candidates but had a poor showing, slowly progressing until 1990 when John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher—a change which was to arouse new hopes. At that time, many electors stopped supporting the Conservatives, accusing them of being too soft on issues like Europe, immigration, asylum seekers, etc. At the 1993 local elections, the BNP managed to get one seat (Derek Beackon) in a popular district of London. This new “success” was however not to be followed by further victory. At the general election of 1997, the BNP received only 1.35 per cent of the votes.¹⁵

Nick Griffin, the current leader of the BNP, replaced John Tyndall in October 1999 and substantially reformed the party both in terms of organization as in terms of public image. According to Bowyer, “the BNP was able to capitalize on popular fears over the number of refugees seeking asylum in Britain and it attracted much attention in the summer of 2001 when riots in several northern cities coincided with strong showings by several BNP candidates in the June general election”.¹⁶ At the May 2002 local elections, less than a year after 9/11, the BNP started a campaign against Muslims and presented candidates in more than 60 constituencies; it obtained a relative success in Oldham and three councillors in Burnley. Both cities had been affected by violent riots a year before.¹⁷

According to Renton, the “2003 local elections in the United Kingdom resulted in the British National Party winning levels of support unmatched by any far right party in British history”,¹⁸ the BNP gained new seats in 16 different cities such as Sandwell, Dudley, Stoke-on-Trent, Broxbourne and Burnley where the number of BNP councillors grew from three to eight. In Burnley, the election occurred within a “context of spiralling socioeconomic

¹⁴ Among recent references on the BNP, see Matthew Goodwin, *New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011; and Nigel Copsey and Graham Macklin, *British National Party. Contemporary Perspectives*, New York : Routledge, 2011.

¹⁵ Michael Wine, “Royaume-Uni”, in Jean-Yves Camus (ed.), *Les Extrémismes en Europe*, Paris/Bruxelles: CERA/Editions Luc Pire, 1998, 300.

¹⁶ Benjamin Bowyer, “Local Context and Extreme Right Support in England: The British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 Local Elections”, *op. cit.*, 612.

¹⁷ Jérôme Jamin, “Fédéralisme et extrême droite au Royaume-Uni”, *op. cit.*, 4 and 5.

¹⁸ David Renton, “ ‘A Day to Make History’?: The 2004 Elections and the British National Party”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2005, vol. 39, n° 1, 25.

deprivation and political disaffection directed predominantly towards the local Labor council”.¹⁹

Comparing the results of the BNP at the European election with 800,000 votes in 2004 and 100,000 votes in 1999, and comparing the support for the BNP at the general election of 1997 with 35,000 votes against 192,000 votes in 2005, Goodwin says that in electoral terms, the “BNP has unquestionably become the most successful far-right party in British history”.²⁰

If in 2008, at local level, the BNP had 55 councillors across England and a representative in the London Assembly, it was unable to get any Member of Parliament during the 2010 general election despite fielding 339 candidates, a fact that reminds us of the “first-past-the-post electoral system” argument to explain the ups and downs of the BNP.

In parallel with its electoral evolution, the ideology of the BNP has changed from its foundation in 1982 to the current party which participated in the last general election and which has, for a long time, presented many local councillors across England. Before assessing whether the party still belongs to the ERP’s family today, it is necessary to first illustrate different ways of defining the concepts of populism and extreme right.

Defining extreme right

At first glance, defining the extreme right ideology should be easy. As a discourse that opposes democratic values, the extreme right ideology should be against pluralism, human rights, freedom of speech, parliamentarism, etc. In reality, things are much more complicated mainly for four reasons: first, ERP have adapted their speech in the past 30 years; second, ERP use their electoral support to present themselves as democratic; third, ERP see their favourite issues taken over by mainstream parties; and fourth, the concept of extreme right does not mean that the values of the right are “simply understood and applied radically”, there is a gap between the right and the extreme right which does not appear with the concept of “extreme right”.

First reason: the evolution of extremist parties over the past thirty years is crucial to understand the ideology of ERP. In all European countries, there are laws to curb racist,

¹⁹ James Rhodes, “White Backlash, ‘Unfairness’ and Justifications of British National Party (BNP) Support”, *Ethnicities*, vol. 10, n° 1, 2010, 78.

²⁰ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 241.

xenophobic and “negationist” rhetoric that have been enacted in response to the electoral success of extreme right parties. These laws punish incitement to racist behaviour, notably against foreigners and migrants. After many convictions in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and many other countries, most extremist leaders have changed the way they talk about World War II and about migrants in general. Among others, to evade laws against racist discourses, they have replaced their overt xenophobia with a defence of “ethnic homogeneity”; to avoid “radical attacks on foreigners”, they have advocated the “right to cultural expression for their own people”; to avoid showing sympathy for fascism, they have championed a more consensual “European heritage”. Today, most of the parties try to change their discourse in order to avoid legal challenges and to give a better image of themselves to the electorate²¹.

Second, ERP use their electoral support to present themselves as democratic. Extremist leaders from all over Europe have learned over the years how to use democratic rhetoric to legitimate the fact that xenophobic parties may now join government coalitions. Parties like the *British National Party*, the Belgian *Front national*, *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Lega Nord* in Italy, the late *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* and *Partij voor de Vrijheid* in the Netherlands, *Ny Demokrati* in Sweden, the *Republikaner* or the *Deutsche Volksunion* in Germany, the *Dansk Folkeparti* or *Fremskridtspartiet* in Denmark have all received large numbers of votes at several levels of power for many years. On this basis, they claim a “democratic” mandate to defend their own vision against what they labelled as “fake corrupted democrats” from mainstream parties.

Third, defining the extreme right ideology is not easy because ERP see their favourite issues taken over by mainstream parties. The new face of the extreme right leads to some confusion regarding the difference between the democratic and the non-democratic right, the “soft” and the “hard” right. One explanation lies in the reappropriation of political issues such as crime, unemployment and immigration by most of the traditional parties. These issues were the landmark of ERP until mainstream parties decided to introduce them in their own political speeches. As a consequence, the myth of “Europe under siege” and the threat of uncontrolled migration and crime in the streets are no longer signs of rising fascism, or of a return to the “dark years” of the past.

Fourth, the concept of extremism poses a problem raised by Billig in his contribution on the anti-Semitism of the extreme right. One of the difficulties with the “extreme right” label, he said, “is that it gives the impression of saying that these movements are like the non-

²¹ Jérôme Jamin, *Faut-il interdire les partis d'extrême droite ? Démocratie, droit et extrême droite*, Bruxelles et Liège : Les Editions Luc Pire et Les Territoires de la mémoire, collection Voix de la mémoire, 2005.

extreme right, but just a little more to the right”.²²

Beyond these obstacles, the most frequent characteristics used to define the extreme right include extreme nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, anti-communism, law and order, anti-pluralism and hostility to democracy. From one case to another, it is possible to add social Darwinism, xenophobia/heterophobia, authoritarianism, *Führer* worship, militarism, unwillingness to compromise, fanaticism, dogmatism, prone to conspiracy theories, a tendency to violence, etc.²³.

Three common threads appear in the literature analysing the extreme right: first, an acknowledgement of inequality between people; second, nationalism as the proposal in support of acknowledging inequality; and third, extremism or radicalism, which should be understood as synonyms for absolute, violent and extreme positions on certain ideas, policies, parties, groups or people, but also as a means and a mode of action to achieve its objectives.²⁴

Inequality is the first mark of ERP ideology. The existence of races and the inequality and the hierarchy between them are present in both the discourse of openly racist and violent groups in the United States (neo-nazis, KKK, skinheads, etc.), and the discourse of ERP in Europe involved in the electoral process. Studying the French *Front national*, Bihr attempted to erect a permanent structure of extreme right thinking. According to him, it is based on “raising up inequality as a fundamental ontological and axiological category”.²⁵ ERP are profoundly inegalitarian, they see inequality as a value to be promoted and defended, and they consider that it is fair that there should be people who are superior and others who are inferior, because that is quite simply “the natural order”.²⁶

In Flanders, before the *Vlaams Blok* changed its name (becoming the *Vlaams Belang*) and its programme in 2004, inequality between the races used to appear in their discourse as the work of Swyngedouw and Ivaldi have shown. According to the *Vlaams Blok*, egalitarianism is intrinsically false and goes against the law of nature.²⁷ In the party’s ideology, the people are first an “ethnic community with hereditary links” and nationality

²² Michael Billig, “The Extreme Right: Continuities in Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theory in Post-War Europe”, in Roger Eatwell & Noël O’Sullivan, *The Nature of the Right*, London: Pinter Publishers Limited, 1989, 146.

²³ Uwe Backes, “L’Extrême droite : les multiples facettes d’une catégorie d’analyse”, in Pascal Perrineau, *Les Croisés de la société fermée : L’Europe des extrêmes droites*, Paris: Editions de l’aube, 2001, 13-29.

²⁴ Jérôme Jamin, *L’Imaginaire du complot : Discours d’extrême droite en France et aux Etats-Unis*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009., 117-147; See also our contribution “Two Different Realities: Notes on Populism and the Extreme Right”, in Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin & Brian Jenkins (eds), *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Contemporary Europe*, London: Routledge, 2012.

²⁵ Alain Bihr, *L’Actualité d’un archaïsme : La pensée d’extrême droite et la crise de la modernité*, Lausanne: Editions Page deux, 1998, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 and 27.

²⁷ Marc Swyngedouw & Gilles Ivaldi, “The Extreme Right Utopia in Belgium and France: The Ideology of the Flemish Vlaams Blok and the French Front National”, *West European Politics*, vol. 24, n° 3, July 2001, 6.

should be based on “biological consanguinity” following the “natural ethnic structure” with an organic and hierarchical meaning. Ethnicity is perceived by the *Vlaams Blok* as a blend of cultural, racial, linguistic and identity traits that point to both biological inequality between ethnic groups and nationalism as a method of protecting the superior ethnic group.

Nationalism is the second tenet of ERP ideology, it is an ultimate political structure to put in place in support of the basic axiom relating to inequality. The extreme right promotes an intensified nationalism based on an ethno-national community, a community that is sometimes mobilised under the term “people” (“the French people”), considered in terms of its ethnic, “racial”, cultural, linguistic or historic unity, sometimes under the term “nation”.

In the ERP ideology, the nation and the people are threatened by internal and external enemies and forces. The internal threat concerns the survival and the “biological” future of the social community. It lies in the falling birth rates in the majority of European countries at a time when the population is growing ever older. In the ERP ideology, a falling birth rate is the first sign of the disappearance of an ethnic group. The internal threat lies also in the legal and medical methods developed in Western countries to interrupt (abortion) or prevent (contraception) birth on demand, which are causing the birth rate to fall even further and therefore increasing the risks which threaten the future of the community. The internal threat lies in the new forms of living together that no longer place procreation at the centre of their interests, thereby aggravating the problems mentioned above: relationships outside marriage, homosexuality, feminism, singleness, etc.

The external threat is perceived to be on three levels. The first danger follows a biological metaphor: immigrants are “foreign bodies” that “infect” a healthy and homogenous social body, and in doing so threaten the health and balance of that body (society). The second danger lies in the mixing of people that is considered by the extreme right to be a factor in the degradation, decline, disease and levelling. Finally, the third danger lies in the emergence of what is known as multicultural societies that, in the eyes of the extreme right, embody the triumph of disease and perversion within the ethnic community. Generally speaking, the external threat comes from international migratory flows and the presence of a growing population that is foreign or of foreign origin on the “national territories”.

In order to deal with the problem of the numerous characteristics involved in defining ERP ideology, Backes proposes to analyse the extreme right as a sub-phenomenon of political extremism, and he therefore deems that a definition of right-wing extremism should have two components: the first should show in what way the phenomenon is extremist, the second

should show in what way the phenomenon is right-wing.²⁸ In fact, the third main idea that supports the ERP ideology is extremism as an attitude that aims to act in a radical way, on the root (*radix*), on the deep cause of the effects or the phenomenon where change is desired. Extremism represents a type of “absolute” action, a “total” way of acting to give shape to the nationalist project in support of the acknowledgement of inequality.

The ideology of the extreme right is often described as an anti-pluralist, anti-universal or anti-parliamentarian doctrine, sometimes as an anti-American, anti-communist or anti-Zionist belief system, and sometimes as an anti-intellectual doctrine. In their pioneering work on the extreme right in the United States, Lipset and Raab systematised the functioning of these oppositions. Right-wing extremism, they explain, is the rejection of pluralism, politics and negotiations, the rejection of difference, divisions and ambivalence. According to the extreme right-wing ideology, difference means dissidence. In other words, they conclude, right-wing extremism is characterised by a sort of “monism” and philosophical, political and ideological simplism.²⁹

Betz bases his definition of the extreme right on the fundamental rejection of the rules of the democratic game, individual freedom, the principle of equality and equal rights for all members of the political community.³⁰ Eatwell talks about hostility to democracy³¹ and Mudde talks about anti-democratism.³² Anti-democratism is also among the traits studied by Billig when he explains that the principles of nationalism blended with the extreme right are formulated in such a way that democratic rights and freedoms are threatened.³³

Ignazi explains that while it is well-known that the majority of the parties at the extreme right of the political spectrum do not openly describe themselves as anti-democratic, it is nevertheless true that they express anti-system views and that the culture that emerges from their internal publications and propaganda, from their leaders’ speeches and their executives’ and activists’ opinions can be considered anti-egalitarian, anti-pluralist and fundamentally

²⁸ Uwe Backes, “L’Extrême droite : les multiples facettes d’une catégorie d’analyse”, in Pascal Perrineau, *op. cit.*, 13-29.

²⁹ Martin Lipset Seymour & Raab Earl, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*, New York: Harper Torchbook, 1973, 6-8.

³⁰ Hans-Georg Betz, *The New Politics of the Right*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998, 3.

³¹ Roger Eatwell, “The Rebirth of the ‘Extreme Right’ in Western Europe?”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, N° 53, 2000, 411.

³² Cas Mudde, “The War of Words: Defining the Extreme Right Party Family”, *West European Politics*, vol. 19, n° 2, April 1996, 229.

³³ Michael Billig, “The Extreme Right: Continuities in Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theory in Post-War Europe”, *op. cit.*, 147.

opposed to the principles of the democratic system.³⁴

Defining the populist rhetoric

The concepts of populism and extreme right play an important part in structuring the political debate in Europe and the United States.³⁵ If sometimes they refer to specific and identifiable cases such as the British National Front (extreme right), the French *Front national* in the 1980s (extreme right), or Geert Wilders and the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands today (populist),³⁶ both concepts can also lead to confusion. This section is grounded in the idea that populism differs from the extreme right and does not embody the same kind of threat that the extreme right does to liberal values and democracy.

Discussions and debates in the media, in politics and in universities have offered an array of meanings for the concept of populism. One should therefore exercise caution when trying to craft a succinct definition of the term. In 1981, years before the concept was used as an anthem to attack adversaries on the political battlefield, Canovan stated that populism referred to a political style, demagoguery or an electoral strategy rather than to a specific political ideology or doctrine,³⁷ a statement that could lead academics to believe that unlike other political families, from liberalism to socialism, from fascism to Marxism, populism does not have any theorists of great stature or any elaborate doctrines.

Nevertheless, if populism is a discourse or style rather than a doctrine or ideology, it is important not to ignore the representation of society and politics involved in populist movements: populism appeals both to the people and the elite, and attributes very specific characteristics to them that are of relevance. The concept of the “people” is an inevitable starting point. “Populist” leaders develop their arguments based on a certain idea of the people which leads to the notions of majority, homogeneity and hard work. Even if the people in populist discourse is portrayed as being excluded from the system, they represent the majority and therefore personify the “man on the street”, the “ordinary people”, they represent a group of individuals in society who share common traits, objectives and aspirations, and they also

³⁴ Piero Ignazi, “Les Partis d’extrême droite : les fruits inachevés de la société postindustrielle”, in Pascal Perrineau, *Les Croisés de la société fermée : L’Europe des extrêmes droites*, op. cit., p.371.

³⁵ See Jérôme Jamin, *L’Imaginaire du complot : Discours d’extrême droite en France et aux Etats-Unis*, op. cit., 2009.

³⁶ Jérôme Jamin, “Vieilles pratiques et nouveaux visages : Geert Wilders et l’extrême droite en Europe”, *Vacarme*, n° 55, Spring 2011, 43-45.

³⁷ Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, London: Junction Books, 1981.

have an easily identifiable characteristic: their hard-working nature.

As for the elite, their characteristics in populist discourse are the exactly opposite of those of the people. The elite are described as being in the minority, as heterogeneous and lazy. The elite never represent more than a handful of individuals. According to Taguieff, whoever the individuals in “power” are, they are systematically described as a secret minority, “professional liars”.³⁸ The majority, homogenous, hard-working people are opposed to the minority, heterogeneous, lazy elite: “It is impossible to honestly earn the fortune of a plutocrat,” the People’s Party was already saying in the late 19th century.³⁹

In the populist rhetoric, economic crises, insecurity, social struggles, inequalities, unemployment and many other major political themes are framed through a simplified prism that places two sole players in opposition to each other in an extremely tense relationship. This prism gives a dual vision of the social and political struggle in which two specific forces alone suffice to explain history and politics.⁴⁰ The “simplifying dualism” of this narrative excludes all other players involved from the analysis and in general excludes all other causes that are usually evoked in this field. In populist thinking, there is a rejection of intermediary institutions in favour of a direct relationship between the people and its leaders,⁴¹ and to some extent, they reject politics.⁴²

Populism can equally be a right-wing or a left-wing phenomenon. Lazar describes left-wing populism as an idealised representation of a people who are exploited but united, hard-working and collectively productive, profoundly fair and good, virtuous and invincible.⁴³ Berlet considers that populist movements may be right-wing, left-wing or in the centre; they can be egalitarian or authoritarian, and rely either on a decentralised network or on a charismatic leader; they may demand new social and political relations or romanticise the past.⁴⁴

To promote such a vision of the world, the populist movement needs a charismatic leader, someone who will be able to benefit from his/her personality to talk about unity and hide the differences among the people he/she wants to unify against the elite⁴⁵.

³⁸ Pierre-André Taguieff (ed.), *Face au racismisme* (2 tomes), Paris: La Découverte, 1991, 43.

³⁹ Quoted in Margaret Canovan, *Populism, op. cit.*, 52 and 54.

⁴⁰ Jean-Pierre Rioux, *Les Populismes*, Paris: Seuil, 2007.

⁴¹ Hans-Georg Betz, “Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Contemporary Democracies”, in Yves Meny & Yves Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, 199.

⁴² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.

⁴³ Marc Lazar, “Populisme et communisme : le cas français”, in Pierre-André Taguieff, *Le Retour du populisme : Un défi pour les démocraties européennes*, Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2004, 84.

⁴⁴ Chip Berlet & Matthew Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America*, New York: Guilford Press, 2000, 4 and 5.

⁴⁵ Jérôme Jamin, “Image du peuple, image de l’élite” in *Les nouveaux habits du populisme (dossier spécial)*,

The BNP as an extreme right party

Populism is not an ideology but a simplistic rhetoric that positions the people against the elite, a rhetoric that can fit with communism, socialism, conservatism or nationalism. In contrast, ERP express a true ideology with a given number of tenets that influence the way they see the people, the nation and its future: inequality, nationalism and radicalism/extremism. With the evolution of the BNP in the previous years, we must now re-examine its current position assessing whether the party still belongs to the ERP as they are defined in the literature. To that purpose, we shall focus on the British National Party general election manifesto of 2010, *Democracy, Freedom, Culture and Identity*.⁴⁶

In several ways, the BNP manifesto offers more examples of an ERP manifesto than a populist one, even if some of the party's main objectives can be explained through the populist dualism that positions the people against the elite. In several sections of the text, nationalism appears as a tool to protect a superior people against an inferior one. In the chapter on "Immigration", the manifesto explains that current trends in immigration and fertility "will result in the extinction of the British people, culture, heritage and identity" (p. 16), concluding that "Britain's existence is in grave peril". Even if it is not explicit in the text, it is easy to see that, in the BNP's rhetoric, the idea of blood and race are hidden behind that of culture and heritage. Two examples illustrate this, both in the section called "Abolishing Multiculturalism and Preserving Britain" (p. 22):

We believe that the ability to create and sustain social and political structures in which individual freedom, equality before the law, private property and popular participation in decision-making are features, is an expression of blood. [...] To preserve the continued existence of our traditional democracy, we must therefore take the necessary measures to safeguard the existence of the native peoples of these islands and ensure they are the dominant ethnic, cultural and political group.

Knowing how open racism has been counterproductive in both political and legal terms for the BNP, it is not surprising to see the manifesto talking about "blood" in a paragraph addressing democratic values such as "individual freedom, equality before the law, private property and popular participation in decision-making", and to see the manifesto talking about supporting the "dominant group" in another paragraph, this time in ethnic, cultural and

Politique Revue de débats, N°75, 2012,

⁴⁶ This manifesto is available online: <<http://www.bnp.org.uk/>>.

political terms. Brought together, these paragraphs clearly establish links between blood and culture (which is a possible definition of race) as it appears in another section called “Culture, Traditions and Civil Society” (p. 44): “The people of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland are bound together by blood and this close connection ensures an overlap of culture, heritage and tradition.” Examined together, these paragraphs establish a clear hierarchy between cultures, nations and races, between those who need to be dominant and the others (p. 23): “British people may take pride from knowing that the blood of an immense column of nation-building, civilisation-creating heroes and heroines runs through their veins.”

In the ERP ideology, the nation and the people are threatened by internal and external enemies and forces, nationalism in this context is a way to battle against these threats. Among them, we should mention the one which is the landmark of the extreme right: the external threat of immigration. On this topic, in a paragraph entitled “The disastrous Effect of Mass Immigration on British Society”, the BNP is clear (p. 17 and 18):

There is no escaping the fact that the admission into this country of large numbers of foreigners has, inter alia, created a poorer, more violent, uncertain, disorientated, confused, politically correct, ill-educated, dependant, fractured society. [...] the ongoing arrival into the UK of between 300,000-500,000 Third World immigrants each year is an issue that all three of the old gang parties have refused to discuss.

Along with the external threat, there is the internal threat which refers to the two main dangers: the threat of Islam, which is incompatible with democracy, and the changes in mentalities because of “cultural Marxism”.

The threat of Islam is seen in the manifesto as an historical threat deeply rooted in the past, in the chapter entitled “Islam: Incompatible with Western Democracy” (p. 30), the manifesto explains that:

[...] the historical record shows that Islam has, since its formation, been waging an almost constant war against Europe, impelled by its Qur’anic verses to convert all peoples of the earth to its belief system. Created in conflict, every advance that Islam has made in the Middle and Near East, in Africa, and its attempts to invade Europe through Spain, the Balkans, and Italy, has been under the threat of the scimitar, the cannon, and murderous atrocities. Today Europe faces a renewed Muslim invasion. This time the weapons are no longer the steel blade or cannon: they are the passport, the visa stamp, corrupt liberal Western regimes who have allowed mass Third World immigration, and the baby’s crib. These things are the new weapons by which Islam now seeks to conquer Europe and the West, having failed in earlier centuries to conquer Europeans by force.

This “thesis” about a new tacit invasion of Europe is also a landmark of the ideology of the ERP. It comes from the book of Bat Ye’or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, published in 2005; it appears in the manifesto of Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian political

extremist who perpetrated the 2011 attacks in Norway; it is supported by ultra-conservative leaders in the US such as Pat Buchanan; and most ERP in Europe used it in their own justification of their fear of Islam (*Vlaams Belang*, *Front national*, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, etc.). The description of Islam by the BNP leaves no doubt about the deep lack of respect for this population in the vision of the manifesto's writers, and this has also to be analysed in connection with the hierarchy between races, cultures and peoples described above.

In a section called “The Five Characteristics of Islam in European Nations”, the manifesto mentions “the appearance of Islamic extremism amongst many first, second or even third generation Muslim immigrants” and concludes that “this extremism has as its primary root the traditional Islamic call to spread its religious worldview to all people, by force if necessary”. It notes also that the Muslim immigrant populations in European nations refuse:

[...] to take on the native culture, and instead import their originating culture as part of a colonisation process. In this way, the dress (burkas, prayer coats, etc.), social behaviour (ritual animal sacrifice, religious practices which intrude, dominate, and drive away indigenous cultural practices—see mosque prayer calls in the traditionally British Christian city of Oxford as a primary example), arranged marriages, and many other Islamic cultural attributes are maintained, taught, and encouraged, while indigenous culture is deliberately suppressed.

Later, the manifesto associates Muslim populations to “violent street riots, as have happened almost everywhere in Europe, but most noticeably in Paris and other French cities in recent years”. This example is important because it shows that the BNP does not consider the socioeconomic roots of the riots and instead prefers to develop an ethnic and religious explanation of the events in France. The BNP also notes that “Muslim students perform less well than non-Muslim students” and that when “it comes to university education the picture is equally gloomy”. Finally, the manifesto makes a clear connection between Islam and terror, reducing any Muslim to Bin Laden (p. 31 and 32): “The fifth characteristic of immigrant Muslim populations in all nations has been their widespread support for terrorism.”

If the English Defence League (EDL⁴⁷) says it has no connection with the BNP and if the later prohibit its members to participate to EDL's rallies and demonstrations, it is clear that the hostility towards Muslim populations makes a solid bridge between both organizations in terms of ideas.

⁴⁷ Created in 2009, the English Defence League is a radical protest movement which opposes what it considers to be an invasion of Islamism in the United Kingdom. See their website : <<http://englishdefenceleague.org/>>.

The internal threat is Islam but also the changes in mentalities because of “cultural Marxism”—a doctrine well-known by ERP intellectuals and used by Anders Breivik to organize its 2011 attack in Norway. Among others, cultural Marxism refers to the tools used by “leftists” and “globalists” to promote a “multicultural society” and legally punish all discourses that oppose such a project: “The BNP will repeal and abolish the following leftist social engineering projects which lie at the heart of the failed multicultural experiment which has brought Britain to the edge of disaster.” As way of example, the BNP will “repeal the Race Relations Act and all other artificial restrictions on free speech or employment”, will abolish “all targets and quotas for ethnic representation in all areas of employment, public and private”, will abolish “politically correct indoctrination of the police, teachers, and employees in the public sector”, will abolish “government-sponsored ethnicity-specific professional bodies, housing associations and other organizations”, will abolish “all departments, agencies or other agencies of government whose sole and specific function is to attend to the interests of ethnic minorities”, will abolish “‘positive discrimination’ schemes that have made native Britons second-class citizens”. The manifesto wants to repeal those laws, norms and requirements and put an end to the politically correct discourse that currently portrays mainstream politics. Following from this, the BNP will then be able to dismantle the European Union, an “Orwellian Super-State” and the engineer of a “multicultural society”:

[The EU] is depriving our people of their inherited right to determine their affairs in their own traditional and democratically elected Parliament. In our Parliament’s stead is an unelected Commission, which initiates new laws behind closed doors and whose long-term ambitions embrace the extirpation of Britain as an identifiable nation. To facilitate the destruction of the nation states of Europe, including Britain, demographic change is being wrought, designed to strip indigenous peoples of their culture, heritage, history and traditions.

The manifesto concludes its analysis with a clear conspiracy theory which is also at the heart of “cultural Marxism” (p. 27): “Multiculturalism is designed to balkanize the population, thereby undermining the integrity of the nation state and facilitating EU governance.”

ERP ideology holds on the inequality between peoples, cultures and races, nationalism as a project, and radicalism or extremism. The latter appears clearly behind recent efforts by the BNP to abolish a long list of laws and decrees which support multiculturalism and tolerance. In addition to these proposals, the manifesto also seeks to “repeal the 1998 Human Rights Act and withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which are exploited to abuse Britain’s hospitality by the world’s scroungers” (p. 6). It also wants to

reintroduce “capital punishment for child murderers, multiple murderers, murderers of policemen on duty and terrorists where guilt is beyond all doubt” (p. 48).

In accordance with previous researches, our findings confirm the belonging of the BNP to the ERP family. Studying the 2004 elections and the BNP, David Renton explains that during the campaign, the party “was subject to a series of negative press stories”.⁴⁸ Journalists from *News of the World* attended BNP rallies in Scotland, and, on one occasion, saw the party spokesman, Scott McLean, giving Nazi salutes, and, on another occasion, gathering around a KKK-style burning cross. The BNP has changed its discourse over the years, but as many authors have shown, it was less a change of vision than a change of language. To some extent, the BNP has followed the strategy of one of the most famous ERPs in Europe: the French *Front national*. As Goodwin put it, during the 1990s, “the BNP has sought to emulate the French Front national’s intensive local campaigns [...], as well as its ideological changes; in particular, the incorporation of ‘differentialist’ racism”, which means stressing cultural differences instead of genetic superiority.⁴⁹

Making the same observation, James Rhodes analyses that the “modernization project undertaken by the BNP has involved the party distancing itself from the ‘older’ fascist tradition in which other far-right political movements, such as the National Front (NF), have remained firmly rooted”. At an ideological level, Rhodes adds, “this has meant the adoption of a form of national-populism pioneered by the Front national in France”.⁵⁰

From extreme right to populism: The BNP today

If the BNP has changed its speech through the years in order to raise its legitimacy and credibility, it remains, as its counterpart in France, a member of the ERP family. Nevertheless as we will now see, it now belongs also to the populist family on some issues. A shift which leads to an “anti-elite”-oriented rhetoric more than a purely racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic one. A shift that might explain the “mainstreamisation” of the party and its partial access to the media.

Historically, the traditional enemy in extreme right discourse is personified by Jews, communists, feminists or freemasons to which we can add the external enemy personified by

⁴⁸ David Renton, “ ‘A Day to Make History’?: The 2004 Elections and the British National Party”, *op. cit.*, 38.

⁴⁹ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 245.

⁵⁰ James Rhodes, “The Banal National Party: The Routine Nature of Legitimacy”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, n° 2, 2009, 145.

foreigners, immigrants, or “false” refugees who try to enter the national territory. Over time, Muslims appeared as a new enemy whom one was to consider, like the Jews before them, both as internal and external to the nation: inside because they settled in our countries, outside because they are members of a vast conspiracy aiming at the “Islamisation of the West”.

Since the late 1980s, and in particular since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the various treaties establishing the European Union, another new enemy has appeared in ERP discourse, an individual who is also at once inside and outside the nation: “the stateless, vagrant bureaucrats who control Brussels and Washington and are seeking to make the world into a vast market with no people and no soul, without a nation and without a culture”.⁵¹ As claimed in the BNP manifesto, these elites work against the people by building an “Orwellian Super-State” (p. 27), the European Union is the first step to a “worldwide government”. According to the BNP, the EU is “an organisation dedicated to usurping British sovereignty and to destroying our nationhood and national identity” (manifesto, p. 5).

In twenty years, “the Brussels elite” have moved into second and sometimes first place surpassing other enemies, which makes the European Union a key issue for ERP today. Portrayed as being both everywhere and nowhere, the elite from Bruxelles have no cultural or national connections and is seeking to establish a multicultural global society that is at the mercy of the markets and finance. To some extent, the “stateless cosmopolitan bureaucrats” are now a greater threat than foreigners in numerous ERP discourses. Again, this needs to be put in connection with the attack from Anders Breivik in Norway, an attack that was not aiming at killing foreigners but “the future political elite” responsible for mass migration and “cultural Marxism”.

The shared rejection of Europe fosters confusion between the populist discourses that are traditionally opposed to the elite (such as, among others, the rhetoric of the United Kingdom Independence Party⁵²) and the extreme right discourses that have been opposed to Brussels since Maastricht.⁵³ With the erosion of national sovereignty, opposition to the European programme has become central for the BNP, the *Front national* in France, the *Vlaams Belang* in Flanders and many other parties. The Brussels elite who now personify the new enemy in extreme right discourse also correspond to the “traditional elite” in the populist discourse.

⁵¹ Jérôme Jamin, *L'Imaginaire du complot : Discours d'extrême droite en France et aux Etats-Unis*, *op. cit.*, 234-242.

⁵² Created in 1993, one year after the signature of the Maastricht Treaty, UKIP is a populist euroseptic party claiming the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. See their website : <<http://www.ukip.org/>>

⁵³ Jérôme Jamin, “Two Different Realities: Notes on Populism and the Extreme Right”, *op. cit.*

Matthew Goodwin located the beginning of this shift a long time ago. Showing that the BNP and the French FN are far from being independent from each other, Goodwin argues that “the development of these parties is, to a certain degree, interlinked”. It “was the successful breakthrough of the French FN in 1984 that both publicised and made available to far-right parties elsewhere a new ‘master frame’; an ideological formula combining ethno-nationalist xenophobia, ethnopluralism and anti-establishment populism”.⁵⁴

The ERP discourse abandons biological racism and hierarchy between peoples in order to oppose the elite in the name of democracy—the elite being accused of orchestrating mass (international) migration. As James Rhodes explained: “Under the leadership of Nick Griffin, the BNP has made attempts to modernize and has tried to conceal its more esoteric ideology, such as holocaust denial and repatriation of non-whites, in favour of a ‘respectable’ political front.”⁵⁵ The (discursive) shift of the BNP and its quest for credibility has led the media to legitimise its main concerns by covering, from now on, acceptable issues such as asylum, migration, Islam, etc. The media inadvertently give legitimacy to the party by opening debates and discussions on these issues.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The hybrid position of the BNP can be explained through different phenomena which lead us to the current relation between the party, the democratic values and mainstream politics of the UK.

To many extents, the BNP has followed its counterparts in Europe in their ability to obtain more legitimacy in the eye of the media, the public opinion and even mainstream parties. As in France with the *Front national* or in the French-speaking part of Belgium with the Belgian *Front national*, the evolution of the legislation helped the BNP adapt its words and offer the same old message but with a new rhetoric. The BNP is condemning “cultural Marxism” which prohibits all anti-immigrants or anti-Islam political positions, but at the same time, and as a consequence, it has adapted its rhetoric to avoid legal condemnations and to obtain thereby some legitimacy. Strangely, the so-called “censorship of cultural Marxism” helped the BNP find its way to gain more credibility.

⁵⁴ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 243.

⁵⁵ James Rhodes, “White Backlash, ‘Unfairness’ and Justifications of British National Party (BNP) Support”, *op. cit.*, 84.

⁵⁶ Matthew Goodwin, “The Extreme Right in Britain: Still an ‘Ugly Duckling’ but for How Long?”, *op. cit.*, 248 and 249.

As in Flanders (in northern Belgium) with the *Vlaams Belang*, the BNP has also evolved in its permanent quest for power. Both parties took a very long time to realise they would not gain legitimacy and become more credible if they were not selecting their militants and executives more strictly, leaving behind controversial profiles linked with violent and racist groups, and looking for new charismatic and more qualified leaders. As the law has pushed the BNP towards a new rhetoric, the will to be one day in office has also changed the kind of individuals supporting and working for the party.

Finally, as its counterpart in the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) led by Geert Wilders,⁵⁷ but also many other ERP in Europe, the BNP has embraced a deep intellectual change. It has put aside old discourses against migrants to champion either a “secular” or a “Christian” position against Islam. On the one hand, the manifesto reminds its electors of their Judaeo-Christian roots and the new threat coming—again—from the Arabs. The manifesto uses a “democratic” rhetoric about what the threat Islam supposedly means for a Christian Europe. On the other hand, as seen before, the party has managed to squeeze all its hatred of Islam in paragraphs devoted to freedom of expression, equal rights between men and women, democracy and so on. As Geert Wilders is sometimes considered in the Netherlands as a democrat denouncing “totalitarian Islam”, the BNP might change its image in a similar fashion in the future.

All in all, if the adoption of new targets such as Islam or the Elite does not represent a fundamental change and to some extent illustrates a case of continuity (“the hunt for enemies” is still central) , the BNP has followed the same path as most ERP in Europe, changing its rhetoric and making the line between democratic and non-democratic parties even harder to establish.

⁵⁷ Jérôme Jamin, “Vieilles pratiques et nouveaux visages : Geert Wilders et l’extrême droite en Europe”, *op. cit.*, 43-45.

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