

‘The boundaries of what can be said have shifted’: An expert interview with Ruth Wodak (questions posed by Andreas Schulz)

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Ruth Wodak

Lancaster University, UK

Andreas Schulz (AS): Ms Wodak, in the introduction to your book *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, (2015a) you wrote that you have been working on the topic of right-wing/far-right populism for many years. Do you recall a particular incident that caused you to work in this research area, and why?

Wodak: I can remember very well the incidents that moved not only me but also my colleagues in the Department of Linguistics at Vienna University to dedicate ourselves to a precise analysis of far-right populism and the corresponding rhetoric: The rise of then leader of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Jörg Haider, in 1986, the so-called ‘Waldheim Affair’ (e.g. Wodak et al., 1990) that year, and the sharp rise of the FPÖ that followed from 1989 onwards were certainly decisive. It was already clear back then that new national identity politics and historical narratives had emerged, accompanied by a political discourse directed at the allegedly homogeneous, ‘true’ (Austrian) people. This discourse was simultaneously launched against the establishment and the elites as well as against foreigners, especially people from Eastern Europe, from the former Communist countries. Naturally, Jörg Haider’s persona played a big role at the time, including his habitus and his rhetoric and/or conversation skills. On one hand, he was – like most FPÖ politicians – trained in NLP (*Neurolinguistic Programming*), while, on the other hand, he was a skillful demagogue who knew how to speak to ‘the man and the woman on the street’.

Corresponding author:

Ruth Wodak, Puchsbaumgasse 1c/6/6.6, 1100 Vienna, Austria.

Email: r.wodak@lancaster.ac.uk

In 1989, after the so-called ‘fall of the Iron Curtain’, there was a massive rise in xenophobia as many people from the former Eastern bloc immigrated to Austria. Incidentally, we conducted a number of research projects and published books in German and English on these developments, such as ‘*Wir sind alle unschuldige Täter*’. *Diskurshistorische Studien zum Nachkriegsantisemitismus in Österreich* (Wodak et al., 1990), *Notwendige Maßnahmen gegen Fremde?* (Matouschek et al., 1995), *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria* (Wodak and Pelinka, 2002), *Dreck am Stecken. Diskurs der Ausgrenzung* (Pelinka and Wodak, 2002), *The Politics of Exclusion: Debating Migration in Austria* (Krzyżanowski and Wodak, 2009), *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (Wodak et al., 2013) and *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Wodak, 2015a), as well as a number of essays (including, inter alia, Forchtner et al., 2013; Rheindorf, 2017; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2019; Wodak, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019).

Many of the issue-related arguments, metaphors and other rhetorical tropes as well as discursive strategies of exclusion from around 1989 can be discerned once more in the discourses surrounding the refugee movement (the so-called ‘refugee crisis’) in 2015 (e.g. Fuchs, 2016; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018; Wodak, 2015a). Of course, such discourses and argumentation schemes are not only evident in Austria but also – always depending on the socio-political and historical contexts – in many other countries, where they are implemented by the respective far-right populist parties and their politicians (see, for example, Matteo Salvini’s LEGA, US President Donald Trump, Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party, as well as Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz).

AS: What kinds of strategies are we dealing with here? Which of them are typical of both the earlier and the current politics of fear?

Wodak: These strategies include, for example, the so-called ‘victim/perpetrator reversal’, whereby migrants are presented as powerful and aggressive, even as ‘invaders’, while the majority population is presented as powerless and weak. The linguistic strategies in discourses about refugees and migrants frequently involve metaphors of floods and other natural catastrophes (‘refugee flows, tsunamis, waves of refugees’) as well as dehumanizing comparisons equating the foreigners with animals, especially vermin, and pathogens (foreigners are described as being like ‘parasites’ or ‘viruses’). This rhetoric, then as well as now, evinces a general frame of ‘war’ and ‘struggle’, thereby referring to a typical *body politic*, an imaginary of a *Volk* (in the sense of *ethnos*) into which foreigners are forcibly inserting themselves. This is a manifestation of nativist ideologies that evokes associations with fascist and national-socialist beliefs and ideologies.

This dehumanization and the corresponding metaphors of war at first incite fear; in the next stage, the leaders of such parties stylize themselves as ‘saviors of the nation’ who are able and must protect the arbitrarily defined and allegedly homogeneous ‘true people’. This simultaneously establishes simplistic dichotomies intended to characterize society according to a ‘struggle-frame’: The world is systematically divided into ‘Us’ and the ‘Others’; these Others – so the underlying, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit,

assumption goes – are bad, and the sole cause of all the problems that should be solved. The ‘Others’ can be defined according to any given context. In the third stage, the ‘scape-goat strategy’ allows for these arbitrarily defined ‘Others’ to be blamed for all great challenges and problems. The ‘others’ are subsequently excluded.

In 1989, the ‘Others’ were migrants from the former Eastern bloc countries; in 2015, they were refugees from Syria, Iraq, Iran and other war zones. All foreigners (whose entry one aims to prevent for the above-cited reasons) are moreover subsumed under one category and simultaneously criminalized: They are all labeled as ‘illegal immigrants’. It must be emphasized that the social sciences as well as incidentally the Global Compact for Migration speak of ‘*irregular* migrants’: only those people are described as ‘illegal’ who remain in a country illegally after their application for asylum or for residence has been turned down. At this point, I should also add that there exist welcome migrants as well: for example, tourists or wealthy and qualified/privileged migrants (such as those who work for international organizations, prominent academics or CEOs of big international businesses, etc.).

In summary, I propose defining *far-right populist ideologies*, for that is what they are, according to the following four dimensions: first, *nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism*, meaning that such parties refer to an allegedly *homogeneous ethnos* (community or *Volk*) that is frequently defined according to ethnic – often even nativist (blood-related) – criteria. Another emphasis here is on a so-called *heartland* (or *homeland/Heimat*) that ostensibly needs to be defended from ‘dangerous intruders’. This allows for *threat scenarios* to be developed – the homeland or the ‘Us’ is being threatened by the ‘Others’. Second, an *anti-elitism* is espoused, often in connection with a pronounced EU-skepticism. The quest for a ‘true, direct democracy’ is contrasted with a so-called ‘formalist democracy’ as its antonym. This would allow for the majority to be privileged, whereby minorities would no longer be protected. Third, *authoritarianism* plays a central role: A *savior*, a *charismatic leader*, is venerated whose role switches between that of a Robin Hood (protection of the welfare state and support of the ‘man and woman on the street’) and that of a ‘strict father’ (e.g., Lakoff 2004). This savior would obviously provide security through restrictive *law-and-order* policies. Fourth, the dimension of *conservatism* and *historical revisionism* plays a central role: *Traditional, conservative values* (traditional gender politics and family values) are at stake; either one insists on the status quo or one would like to turn the clock back, i.e. a *retrotopia*. The protection of the homeland also necessitates a belief in a common *narrative of the past* in which the ‘Us’ were either heroes or victims of evil (e.g. victims of a *conspiracy* by the enemies of the *fatherland*). In the framework of *welfare chauvinism*, welfare benefits should only be accorded to ‘real/true’ members of the *ethnos*. Such parties advocate for *change*, turning away from an allegedly highly dangerous path leading to a future described as an apocalyptic inferno (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2019; Wodak, 2017b).

AS: What changes have you been able to discern since then within these discourses and how have the (social) sciences reacted to them?

Wodak: The social sciences have engaged on a number of levels and from different disciplinary perspectives, for example, in the context of supply/demand research in the political sciences, with questions such as what benefits/resources these parties offer, what needs they address and what is expected by particular groups of voters. In historiography, these changes become relevant in the study of historical continuities and ruptures in fascist and right-wing extremist parties and movements. Economics meanwhile focus, inter alia, on the influence of globalization and the financial crisis on such changes.

Yet I am deeply convinced that such complex phenomena can best be studied in an interdisciplinary fashion and should always be examined in context-dependent ways. The many different far-right populist parties and the reasons for their successes should by no means be tarred with the same brush. For example, such parties have led extremely successful election campaigns and enjoyed great popularity in very rich countries like Norway, Switzerland, Denmark and Austria, although the financial crisis had a far lesser impact there than in Southern Europe. This is due among other things to the enormous fears of deprivation, the fear that something could be taken away from ‘us’, and to a demographic panic (‘We’ might die out). Identity politics and welfare chauvinism were very important in these countries, in the past as well as the present. They argue that social achievements cannot be allowed to disappear and that they are exclusively the preserve of the ‘true’ people, of the ‘real’ Austrians, Finns, Germans, Hungarians, French, and so forth.

The situation is different in, say, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, where the financial crisis had a devastating impact and there still exists (11 years later) a massive unemployment rate among the young. The neoliberal politics of austerity have massively increased the income gap, and many countries have cut important welfare benefits. Many people’s perception was and remains that it was the banks, and not the people, who were saved by the state. Therefore, in Greece for example, an intense polarization has arisen between left-wing populist and far-right populist/right-wing extremist parties such as SYRIZA, on one hand, and Golden Dawn, on the other (Katsambekis and Kioupiolis, 2019). Donald Trump also generated a lot of resonance in deindustrialized areas and impoverished cities, though not exclusively in these areas – Trump’s electoral success was dependent on many different factors, as for example Yascha Mounk (2018) and John Judis (2016) have demonstrated at length.

AS: What implications do these ‘discursive shifts’ have for our understanding of coexistence?

Wodak: First of all, the *boundaries of what can be said* have significantly shifted; this has led to a *normalization* of right-wing extremist, formerly taboo contents and terminology. Despite the appropriate consternation that they cause, the so-called ‘isolated cases’ that occur every week, if not every day, involving international provocations and breaches of taboos by politicians such as hate incitement, antisemitic, misogynist and anti-Muslim statements, allusions to Nazi jargon, and so forth, are having an accustoming effect. The *erosion of democratic institutions* and the creeping yet frequent and systematic

redefinition or even rejection of democratic procedures (such as the refusal to answer parliamentary requests, the failure to have draft bills reviewed, attempts to intimidate, and attacks on the freedom of, the press as well as on the independence of the judiciary) are leading step by step, ~~see~~, for example, in Hungary or Poland, to increasingly and explicitly authoritarian forms of government. Due to the social media, the fourth ~~pillar~~ of pluralistic, liberal democracies, namely ~~j~~ournalism, is beginning to lose its significance for some politicians and parties and might even become obsolete: Politicians now turn directly to ‘the people’ and reach their many ‘friends and followers’ via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

In many places, the *Muslim population* is being increasingly ostracized (see, for example, in the Austrian context the report by SOS Mitmensch, 2019). False generalizations exacerbate prejudices – especially in those regions or countries where few if any Muslims live, such as Poland (Bevelander and Wodak, 2019). The *traditional Feindbild* (i.e., *negative concept of the enemy; bogeyman*), namely the so-called ‘*Jewish world conspiracy*’, is moreover serving again as a global scapegoat: the Hungarian-born American Jewish philanthropist George Soros is ~~thus~~ construed metonymically as the symbol of evil: Orbán, Trump, Babiś, Kaczyński, Salvini, Gudenus and many other far-right populist politicians accuse Soros of pulling the strings that are allegedly bringing all the refugees and migrants to Europe and the United States. Thereby, anti-Muslim, xenophobic and antisemitic stereotypes are combined into one ~~giant~~ and extremely threatening conspiracy theory that is genuinely reminiscent of the 1930s: Previously, ‘Rothschild’ was the symbol of the imagined powerful Jews onto whom all the complex social problems were projected – today it is ‘Soros’.

Another significant shift in discourse relates to a behavior that I term ‘*shameless normalization*’: Many existing conventions (concerning politeness, conversation maxims, conventional norms and rules governing discussions, negotiations, conflict management and so forth) are increasingly being jettisoned in political debates. This includes Donald Trump’s unspeakable, sexist statements towards and attacks on female politicians and journalists as well as the lies and untruths he launches on an almost daily basis, whether via traditional media, or via social media. While these are always quickly debunked as untruths, the crucial point is that this behavior entails hardly any, if any, consequences (Block, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Montgomery, 2017; Wodak, 2019). Apologies no longer seem necessary, insults are left standing. People are obviously moving in different, totally segregated discursive worlds, in which markedly different norms and rules apply.

Moreover, there ~~exists often~~ *no interest in factual debates*; discussions are led destructively, as fights (i.e., ~~eristic~~ argumentation). Cumulative attacks against arbitrarily defined elites are generating increasingly positive resonances, in the sense of ‘Finally, someone dares to say what everyone is thinking’. In this context, a straw man fallacy becomes relevant: Far-right populist parties claim to be fighting against a ‘language police’, against a ‘political correctness’ perceived as censorship – although freedom of speech reigns everywhere, provided that certain laws are abided by (such as anti-discrimination laws or the *Verbotsgesetz* – the Prohibition Act – in Austria). At the same time,

such politicians themselves reject any criticism and if criticized stylize themselves as victims (e.g. of an antagonistic campaign, a conspiracy). This behavior is often connected to the victim/perpetrator reversal strategy. All of this has a concomitant effect – though of course not viewed causally – on our political and media culture (e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

We can also observe an increasing loss of trust in national and transnational politics, leading to ever more frustration with politics, a depoliticization, a ‘post-democracy’ (see the theories of the British sociologist Colin Crouch (2004)). This may finally be accompanied by the desire for ‘a strong man’, a ‘savior’.

The rejection of academic elites and scholarly expertise moreover leads to a rejection of critical, independent experts; in other words, a rejection of fact-based knowledge. Facts are being degraded to the status of opinions, to so-called ‘alternative facts’. Simple solutions naturally allow for rapid successes, yet they frequently turn out to be shortsighted, ineffectual or even false. It is also noticeable that the *performance* of politics is gaining the upper hand at the expense of differentiated as well as complex content. Slogans have taken over the function of arguments – superficial consensus the function of a plurality of opinions and of discussion.

AS: Intellectuals such as Chantal Mouffe (2018) have proposed a ‘leftist/left-wing populism’ as a reaction to these discursive shifts, and there are prominent politicians who share this view. How sensible do you find such reactions and demands with regard to democratic understandings of discourse?

Wodak: Mouffe’s approach is, of course, very interesting. Left-wing populism, she claims, opposes ‘the people’ to an ‘elite’, whereas the populist far-right adds a third party, typically migrants, whom the ‘elite’ are accused of favouring. Nevertheless, the challenge of how to include strangers and newcomers into our societies is certainly the most important one in the near future, also for left-wing populists. However, the question ‘Yes, but how?’ remains unanswered by Mouffe (see Davies, 2018). I think that different contexts call for different styles of communication, contents and genres. Naturally, slogans are important in the context of electoral campaigns; positive narratives and different framings can also be effective as counter-discourses. In general, stronger initiatives and agenda-setting are called for, not just reactions to provocations. The dynamics that I discussed at length in my book *The Politics of Fear* (‘the right-wing populist perpetuum mobile’) has to be transcended. Ultimately, I think more opportunity to participate in decision-making, especially on the local level, is crucial. More dialogue on an equal footing is called for. The Irish model is an example of how this could be achieved, where 100 randomly chosen individuals work together continuously for a year on extremely complex issues with the support of moderators and experts, their suggestions then being considered in the decision-making process before a parliamentary vote is taken. Their participation is institutionalized and the participants are very satisfied afterwards, feeling that their ‘voice’ has finally been heard.

AS: In your lectures, you emphasize that your book *The Politics of Fear* was published before a Trump presidency, a Brexit or the successful establishment of a far-right populist (leaning towards extreme-right, nationalist) party in Germany were imaginable. Why do you think there are so many reactionary movements and politicians at the moment who are influencing and also determining socio-political discourses to such a degree?

Wodak: That is a difficult question. On one hand, the dissatisfaction and insecurity among much of the general public were underestimated by the mainstream parties, while on the other hand, lies and untruths, even purchased data (as happened with Cambridge Analytica in the case of the Brexit referendum in 2016) were used to decisively influence referenda and elections.

Fears of losing out, resentments and envy have in many places been cunningly stoked and manipulated. As a result of the neoliberal politics of austerity, the focus on the individual and on competition as well as achievement has also increased significantly at the expense of a collective feeling of solidarity. Growing inequality and rising poverty have been paid too little attention by the mainstream, which has also led to a justified ‘rage’ among many people (‘the banks were saved, not the people’; e.g., the German term ‘*Wutbürger*’ (angry citizens)). The impact of increased migration to the cities and the consequences emerging as a result have not been accounted for, or have not been accounted for enough, by educational institutions for far too long. As a result, too few steps were taken to finance, support and implement sensible measures for the integration of foreigners. As we already know, in times of great insecurity (see the very important work of Bauman, 1995), authoritarian and simultaneously simplistic solutions that implement ~~targeted~~ strategies of scapegoating are very effective.

AS: We know that new forms of authoritarian politics are in demand not only in countries with authoritarian, Nazi and fascist pasts. Are there sociological determinants through which these present-day societal developments can be approached? How adequate is the explanatory model that many people long for ‘a strong leader’ in this current phase of globalization?

Wodak: We live in times of great acceleration, of huge challenges, and of partially unforeseeable crises. All of this can lead to feelings of collective powerlessness and ~~globalized-media~~ incapacity among individuals; national politics is also determined by and dependent on transnational and global phenomena. Moreover, the economy seems to be driving politics, not vice versa. On one hand, everyone is potentially connected ‘with almost the entire world’ through the globalization of communications ~~s-media~~; yet, on the other hand, the great challenges such as the climate crisis, terror, migration and so on are leading to a retrospective, nostalgic gaze, a *retrotopia*, to a resurgence of nationalism, and to the drawing of new material and symbolic boundaries. The Brexit referendum and Trumpism reflect great urban/rural differences as well as (im)mobility as a distinctive characteristic of voting decisions: Mobile, educated people tend to live, so the assumption, in urban areas and are perceived as more cosmopolitan. Generational differences also play a role (e.g. older people tended to vote in favor of Brexit). Gender politics are

moving more and more into the foreground: Nativist and heteronormative, exclusionary national identities are increasingly being confronted by multicultural and diversified, inclusive national identities. It is a proven fact that more men than women vote for far-right populist parties.

AS: What is needed to bring the different spheres of society and their ‘truths’ (keyword ‘postfactual realities’) back together again and what can scholarship contribute to this end?

Wodak: Scholarship can make a significant contribution to enlightenment, yet ‘scholarship’ needs to take a stance and express itself in comprehensible ways, in many different public spheres and via different genres of text and talk. As long as it is expected of academics (especially younger academics) to publish in as many impact journals as possible (thereby necessarily not enabling them to make their findings accessible to the broader public), they will hardly exert any influence. Of course academics and intellectuals, of all people, belong to ‘the elites’ ~~being rejected on many sides~~. Academia and academics must therefore seek to enter into dialogue with many different people, to answer questions, to listen, without moralizing forefinger while at the same time indicating clear boundaries of the acceptable based on the principles of our pluralistic democracy and constitution.

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Author biography

Ruth Wodak is Emerita Distinguished Professor of Discourse Analysis at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom and of Applied Linguistics at Vienna University. She completed her PhD in 1974 and her habilitation in 1980, both at Vienna University. She has been the recipient of many awards, including the Wittgenstein Award for Elite Scholars (1996), the Grand Decoration of Honor in Silver for Services to the Republic of Austria (2011) and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Austrian Ministry of Women (2018). She is a member of *Academia Europaea* and the *British Academy of Social Sciences*. Her research interests include critical discourse studies, language and politics (populism studies), identity politics and the politics of the past, gender studies, migration studies and the study of racism and antisemitism. Recent book publications include *Europe at the Crossroads* (2019, with P Bevelander); *The Handbook of Language and Politics* (2018, with B Forchtner); and *Politics of Fear. What right-wing populist discourses mean:* (2015).