The mainstreaming of extreme right-wing populism in the Low Countries: what is to be done?

The Mainstreaming of Extreme Rightwing Populism in the Low Countries: What is to be done?

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Abstract:

In this article, I address the way in which extreme right populist actors in Belgium and the Netherlands have managed to mainstream their divisive and racist discourse. Processes of othering, the identification of a set of ideological enemies, fear mongering and a type of populism that articulates 'the people' in a very exclusionary manner characterize this discourse. Even though journalists tend to be critical of the extreme right discourse, they are also to some extent complicit in amplifying the extreme right discourse and providing a platform for populist politicians using a politics of provocation. It is argued that public journalism tradition might be a productive resource to combat this mainstreaming of extreme right discourses and protect democratic values.

Key-Words: Media democracy, Politics, Populism, Extreme Right, Public Journalism

Introduction

In recent decades, the political center has shifted firmly to the right in many countries and as a result of this many issues and solutions that used to be considered extreme right are now seen to be center-right or even common sense. This mainstreaming of an extreme right discourse was mainly achieved through what Gramsci (1971) called a *war of position,* situated at a symbolic/discursive level and geared towards the normalization of xenophobic, nationalistic and exclusionary discourses which were deemed unacceptable and morally repulsive merely a decade (or two) ago.

Extreme rightwing political actors have managed to mainstream their divisive and racist discourses through a type of populism that articulates 'the people' in an exclusionary manner. Key to this is the identification of a set of ideological enemies and fear mongering. The mainstreaming of an extreme rightwing populist discourse occurred in part by the enactment of a politics of provocation, which tends to lead to virulent reactions of moral outrage from the so-called 'liberal elite'. This is then subsequently positioned as a politically correct witch-hunt, amounting to perpetrator-victim reversal. The media and mediation plays a central and in some cases complicit role in this successful war of position. Another way in which extreme rightwing discourse were mainstreamed is through the appropriation of parts of that discourse by traditional rightwing parties.

All this prompts a pressing question for public intellectuals and democratic journalists alike; namely how to 'deal with' and ultimately how to combat this fundamentally anti-democratic discourse and the politics of provocation which accompanies it. I will address this question in more detail in the conclusion. First, however, I will discuss the process by which the extreme right managed to detoxify and ultimately mainstream its ideas and discourse.

The empirical focus will be on Europe, and more specifically on Belgium and the Netherlands or what is commonly called *the Low Countries*. In the Dutch context, I will analyze the discourses and strategies of the Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders, an extreme rightwing populist. For Belgium, I will focus on Dutch-speaking North-Belgium where Flemish nationalism is politically dominant and more specifically, the discourses and strategies of the post-fascist party Flemish Bloc/Flemish Interest (VB)[1] will be analyzed.

The mainstreaming of extreme rightwing discourses through populism

An important tactic to mainstream extreme right discourses and the accompanying value system is a populist politics pitting 'the people' against an out-of-touch elite or 'the establishment'. Populism is not necessarily an exclusively rightwing political strategy as it is also employed by leftwing political forces (see Laclau, 2005). We could refer here to the famous Occupy-slogan '99% vs 1%', juxtaposing the people to the economic and political establishment. What is distinct about the appropriation of populism by the extreme right, however, is that 'the people' are not articulated in a way that builds inclusive equivalences, as we would expect from such an encompassing concept, but rather in an exclusionary and divisive fashion by designating a variety of out-groups in addition to the economic and political elites as enemies of 'the people'. In doing so they adhere to an essentialist nativism or

> an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state. (Mudde, 2007, p. 19)

This nativism is furthermore grounded in an anti-democratic disposition which not only rejects the liberal democratic state, but expresses above all a strong "belief in the necessity of *institutionalised* social *and* political inequality" (Saalfeld, 1993, p. 181) in order to protect the purity of the native group.

Nationalism and the articulation of 'the people'

Defining 'the people' in precise and uncertain terms is thus central to a populist politics and especially a rightwing one. Discourse theory is a very useful and relevant resource to explain how this operates. Through the process of articulation, a discourse or a "structured totality" emerges (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). Articulation then is to be understood as the practice which establishes "a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (ibid). A common way through which an identity is being articulated in

political terms is through the logic of equivalence. In this regard, the nation and nationalism or patriotism are easy and well-documented ways to mobilize and construct equivalences and in doing so cancelling out internal differences. Rightwing populists have "a specific understanding of the '*demos*/people', thus denying complexity within society" (Wodak, 2015, p. 21).

Let us now address how this articulation of *the people* as a mythical community plays out in the context of the Low Countries. First, however, it needs to be acknowledged that Belgium and the Netherlands are two very distinct political contexts. When considering the popularization of extreme right political forces, Flanders clearly led the way. In the early 1990s the post-fascist party Flemish Bloc (VB) gained for the first time almost 10% of the popular vote in Flanders and managed to increase their share of the Flemish vote to 24% by 2004. In contrast, the extreme right in the Netherlands was a marginal and insignificant phenomenon in the 1990s. After the emergence of Pim Fortuyn, an extreme rightwing populist who was murdered by an environmental activist in 2002 and the subsequent rise of the Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, however, it would be fair to say that the Netherlands has caught up with Flanders when it comes to the popularization of a populist extreme right ideology and value system. At the same time, the popularity of VB waned in recent years, mainly due to infighting and the appropriation of its discourse and populist rhetoric by a more mainstream nationalist party.

The Dutch national identity is also quite different from the Flemish sub-national identity. Let me first address the former. The Dutch have a confident sense of self and their national identity is national in scope, superseding regional differences (Verkaaik, 2010). *Dutchness* tends to be typified by a type of civic nationalism that presents itself as inherently anti-nationalistic in nature. In this regard, Van Reekum (2012, p. 591) argues that the Netherlands is a rare example of what Calhoun (1997) called ''the constitution of the national through the discourse of a public of highly differentiated members" (p. 94). Besides references to a pious Protestant culture of thrifty hard workers and traders, the Dutch pride themselves on being tolerant towards difference, as well as being egalitarian, internationalist, peaceful and progressive when it comes to gender, sexuality and drugs. This idea of the Dutch being tolerant and egalitarian is echoed in the 2010 election manifesto of the PVV (2010):

> The Dutch are a unique people. We were born out of an uprising, a freedom struggle. Our ancestors have transformed a wet swamp estuary into something the whole world is jealous of. Here, behind the dikes, a unique prosperity and solidarity has been achieved, with freedom for all, and we are traditionally tolerant towards people who are also tolerant. (p. 5) [2]

So, paradoxically, nodal points such as liberalism, tolerance and openness subsequently serve "to differentiate the autochthonous, who belong immediately, and the allochthonous or newcomers, whose belonging needs to be ostentatiously ascertained" (Van Reekum, 2012, p. 591).

Contrary to Dutch nationalism, Flemish nationalism is characterized more by culture and ethnicity rather than by (superior) civic values, although some characteristics of the latter are also present but then in conjunction with the former. The identity of the *Flemings* is often described in essentialist and ethno-cultural terms; it is considered to be objective, inescapable and natural (Maly, 2016, p. 274). Language politics and the emancipation of the Flemish people play a pivotal role in the articulation of the Flemish identity. A deep-seated victimhood steeped in a self-constructed history of oppression and denigration by the French-speaking economic and cultural elites who used to dominate Belgian society and politics is also intrinsically linked to this (Mnookin, 2007). Furthermore, Flemish nationalism is a *blut und boden* ideology which prides itself on a mythical and glorious past; a romanticized 'lieu de mémoire' (Morelli, 1995; Nora, 1989). All these nodal points are perfectly captured by this quote from the 'Manifesto for the Protection of the Flemish Identity', published by the VB:

> [Flemish identity] is formed by people who live in Flanders, speak the same language, have a common history and value system based amongst others on Greek-Roman antiquity, German and Celtic influences, Christianity and humanism. Our identity is in the first instance a cultural fact, but it is also a social fact. A shared identity leads to a sense of community. […] Henceforth, everything has to revolve around *our* identity, and *our* laws, norms and values are paramount. (Vlaams Belang, 2015, p. 7)

National or sub-national identities do not develop in isolation, however. Nor is it sufficient for political actors to assert what the identity of the self is or should be.

Political identities are foremost solidified through antagonisms and thus "by their common reference to something external" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 127). A logic of difference and a process of othering is central here; "to be something is always not to be something else" (ibid, p. 128).

Identifying enemies and the politics of fear

Relying on Derrida's (1978) notion of the 'constitutive outside' (p. 39-44), discourse theory stresses that social formations are the result of "the construction of antagonistic relations between social agents *inside* and *outside*" the formation (Howarth, 2000, p. 106). In order to achieve this, a convincing and imminent threat from a "purely negative identity that cannot be represented positively in a given discursive formation" needs to be construed (ibid). Inherent to this is thus the construction of a set of enemies, who are evil and need to be feared, which in turn justifies resolute and extreme measures and solutions.

The most prominent and explicit enemy today, according to extreme right populism, is Islam and connected to this the multi-cultural society. Both the Netherlands and Belgium have extensive immigrant communities of Turkish and Moroccan descent whose parents or grandparents came to the Low Countries in the 1960s and 70s to work in the coalmines and heavy industry. Despite the fact that third or now even fourth generation descendants of these so-called 'guest workers' [*gastarbeiders*] all hold Dutch or Belgian nationality and all speak the local dialects, they are still commonly called *allochtoon,* literally meaning 'not from here'. So as not to appear overtly racist, however, it is foremost their Islamic religion which is targeted today. By positioning Islam as quintessentially evil and incompatible with 'our' culture, a stark and insurmountable boundary between the self and the other is constructed. The 2010 party manifesto of the PVV (2010) is clear on this:

> Islam is above all a political ideology; a totalitarian faith focused on dominance, violence and oppression. […] The Quran prescribes behaviour that contravenes our laws, such as anti-Semitism, the discrimination of women, the killing of infidels and a holy war until the world domination of Islam is a fact. (p. 13).

What furthermore becomes apparent in these anti-Islamic discourses is what Taguieff (1993) has called a 'differentialist racism' or the view that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between the autochthonous in-group and the allochthonous out-group identity. Integration is thus presented as an ontological impossibility, which in turn is used as an argument to justify radical exclusion. As a member of parliament of the PVV put it starkly, "maybe that some individual Muslims can adapt [to Western culture], but Islam cannot" (Bosman, 2010, p. 304). Several years earlier a very similar position was articulated in Flanders: "Islam is essentially un-European" (Vlaams Blok, 2003, p. 9).

Islam is not only considered to be incommensurable with European values, it is also consistently positioned as a fundamental treat to 'our way of living'. In the wake of the terror attacks on Brussels airport and the metro system in 2016, a leading figure of VB outlined a common position on Islam in extreme rightwing circles:

> Islam is the root of all evil. […] we need to push back Islam, it does not belong here and it is ultimately a religion and an ideology that causes misery and distress. It was an historical mistake of several generations of politicians to welcome Islam here; they let a Trojan Horse in. (Filip Dewinter interviewed by VRT, 29/03/2016[3])

This is also a good illustration of what Furedi (2005) and Wodak (2015) call a "politics of fear" or the mobilization of fear and the creation of an imminent treat to justify a set of draconian policies, in this case the radical de-islamification of Europe. In line with longstanding policies of the Flemish VB, the 2017 election manifesto of the Dutch PVV demanded, amongst others, to:

> close the borders; revoke all visas of asylum seekers; forbid the wearing of the hijab in all public functions; […] preventive incarceration of radical Muslims; […] close all mosques and Islamic schools; forbid the Quran (PVV, 2017, p. 1)

In this context, it is quite ironic that this party calls itself the Party for Freedom. Another illustration of ideological contradiction is how the anti-Semitism inherent to many extreme right parties, the Flemish VB being a case in point, suddenly turned into a pro-Zionist stance precisely because it created a strategic equivalence with their Islamophobic discourse (Hafez, 2014). Likewise, many extreme rightwing populist leaders suddenly ventriloquize as proponents of gender and gay rights because it represents an opportunity for them to attack Islam.

In addition to foreigners, so-called allochthones and above all Islam, the other identified enemy of 'the people', according to extreme rightwing populists, is of course 'the elite', which is a fairly broad category as it includes academics, the media, artists, and basically everyone who opposes them. As De Cleen (2016) explains regarding the Flemish context, but this applies equally to the Netherlands:

> By lumping all kinds of opponents together under the label the elite, the VB constructs an antagonism between itself as the representative of the people and all its political opponents […] as an illegitimate elite. (p. 76)

This manifests itself through what Wodak (2015) calls the "arrogance of ignorance" (p. 22) or a deep-seated hatred of intellectuals and all those with progressive values. This quote from the *Manifesto for the protection of the Flemish Identity,* expresses this arrogance in a derisory manner:

> The educated progressive elite, the two earner *bobos* [bourgeois-bohemians] who exchange addresses of new eateries in Barcelona and New York, look down on ordinary Flemish people. They have the means to shield themselves from the negative effects of the over-praised multicultural society. Those who cannot get out of the ghetto neighborhoods and dare to complain are denoted as racists. (Vlaams Belang, 2015, p. 7)

In the Netherlands, we can also observe the arrogance of ignorance, whereby intellectuals and leftwing liberals or "islam cuddlers", dixit Wilders, are articulated as the enemies of the 'true' people. In the closing statement of a trial against Wilders for promoting hate and discrimination[4], he said the following:

> We are witnessing a worldwide movement gaining traction that aims to finish off the politically correct doctrines of the liberal elites and their subservient media […] The citizens do not accept this any longer and I tell you, members of the court, the struggle between the population and the elite will be won by the people […] the Dutch people, who I represent, will win and will remember in no uncertain terms who was on the right side of history. Common sense will defeat the politically correct arrogance. (Wilders, 23/11/2016)

Beside a less than veiled threat towards the judges, this quote also brings to the foreground another common theme amongst extreme rightwing populism, namely that of freedom of speech and common sense being thwarted by political correctness, cultural Marxism and unfounded malicious accusations of racism. As the Flemish VB (2002) put it at some point: "Our party manifesto and our position on immigrants has nothing to do with extremism or racism, but everything with simple common sense" (p. 19).

From counter-hegemony towards the new hegemony

As Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 243) stressed in his *Prison Notebooks* the transformation from counter-hegemony to hegemony needs to occur first and foremost through a cultural 'war of position' at the level of the symbolic. Gramsci mentioned the media as a key site through which the war of position can be waged, but this has arguably become even more salient in our hyper-mediated societies with a multiplicity of channels and communication platforms.

The electoral success of extreme rightwing populist parties can indeed in large part be explained by very media-savvy communication strategies and the exposure these parties and their leaders receive by the mainstream media as a result of that (Mazzoleni, 2008; Ellinas, 2009; Forchtner *et al.*, 2013). Extreme rightwing populists understood, much faster than other politicians, that we live in a media democracy and that playing the media was going to be of crucial importance to punch above their weight and normalize their extreme and exclusionary ideas. They were, however, also acutely aware that 'the media' was generally speaking hostile towards them.

In order to overcome this tension between the need for media resonance and a hostile media environment, leaders of rightwing populist parties enacted a highly

successful media strategy which was aimed first and foremost at increasing their respectability. Gone were the neo-Nazi skinheads at public meetings and the aggressive street-fighter image of the extreme right (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016). Public performances were carefully staged and somewhat likeable leaders in designer suits emerged that had the ability to sound and look more reasonable and had media appeal.

Electoral success was also accompanied by more media attention and ample opportunities to voice 'what the people think', as one of the Flemish VB slogans put it. Together with Nico Carpentier, I critiqued this increased media presence of the VB leaders in the North-Belgian media at the time, which we argued would lead to the normalization of the extreme right. We lamented that journalists

> defined representatives of the VB as equal interlocutors whose opinions are one amongst many. [They] are pictured as experts, as an intelligent and critical opposition that fulfils its role as a thorn in the side of the traditional parties quite well. (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2000, p. 13)

At the same time, the leaders of these extreme rightwing parties cannot be too much like traditional politicians either, and an easy way to differentiate themselves from mainstream politicians is to "intentionally provoke scandals by violating publicly accepted norms" on a regular basis (Wodak, 2015, p. 19). These provocations are made through speeches in parliament, interviews with journalists and more recently through social media platforms like Twitter, which then gets picked-up by mainstream media. A poignant example of this politics through provocation would be Wilders' statement that the Quran is a 'fascist book', 'a book of war', on par with Hitler's Mein Kampf. Provocative statements like this inevitably create a media storm as journalism thrives on drama, scandal and outrage and media eagerly amplifies this; Wilders' successful provocation was even reported in the UK and US media (Hjelmgaard, 2017; van Tets, 2017). There exists in other words a degree of complicity by the media when it comes to the success of this politics through provocation. As Mazzoleni (2008) also argues,

> [populist] leaders and movements often seem to rely on some sort of 'media complicity'. [...] European media appear to have contributed to a legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders. (p. 50)

Politics through provocation inevitably leads to expressions of moral outrage and condemnations by civil society, democratic politicians and public intellectuals, reacting to the provocation through for example opinion pieces and commentaries, creating controversy, content, clicks and shares, which all feed the new business models of mainstream media companies (Tang *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, these strong reactions to the provocation tend to be cunningly denoted by the extreme right as a liberal media witch-hunt impeding their sacrosanct freedom of speech. This amounts to what is commonly called perpetrator/victim reversal.

Besides the politics of provocation, media complicity and the discursive tactic of perpetrator/victim reversal, influencing or pressuring traditional political parties to adopt similar populist discourses and enact exclusionary policies is yet another way in which the war of position has been successfully fought. Here we can observe some marked differences between Flanders and the Netherlands. Whereas in Flanders, all democratic parties signed a formal agreement in 1992 to keep VB out of power (this was called the *Condon Sanitaire*), in the Netherlands such an agreement did not exist, which led to a formal tolerance [*gedoog*] agreement between a minority government led by the liberal party VVD and the PVV in 2011. While this resulted in a partial toning down of the radical rhetoric of the PVV, it also gave Wilders the power to influence government policies without formally being part of the government. He also cunningly explicitly negotiated that he could continue with his strategy of Islam-bashing.

During the most recent election campaign (2017), Mark Rutte – the leader of the VVD and incumbent Prime Minister – explicitly excluded a similar deal, thereby de facto instituting an informal cordon sanitaire. This rejection of Wilders also went hand in hand, however, with a considerable shift to the right when it came to political discourse on immigrants and on immigration. In September 2016, Rutte was shown footage of a few Dutch youth from Turkish descent harassing a camera-team from the public service broadcaster filming a pro-Erdoğan protest in the wake of the failed 2016 Turkish coup. His gut reaction was: "Piss off. Go back to Turkey yourself. Get Lost [*pleur op*]", leading to a diplomatic row with Turkey (Sedee, 2016). This was

subsequently followed up by an open letter prior to the 2017 election which was carefully designed to undermine Wilders' PVV:

> People who do not want to adapt, who critique our ways of doing things and who reject our values, who harass gay people, catcall women in short skirts or insult ordinary Dutch people by calling them racists. I really understand that people think: if you fundamentally reject our country like that, I would rather you leave. I share that feeling. Act normal or go. (Rutte, 2017)

If we compare this with the analysis of the extreme rightwing populist discourse above, we can observe many parallels with what the then incumbent Dutch prime minister writes here.

Given that the extreme right in Flanders was electorally successful much earlier, the mainstreaming of extreme right discourses and populist tactics is unsurprisingly also more advanced. Despite the existence of a *cordon sanitaire*, Erk (2005) concluded already over 10 years ago that "Vlaams Blok has […] managed to pull the political centre towards the right in Flanders. Mainstream Flemish parties have felt the necessity to incorporate aspects of the far-right agenda" (p. 499). This is especially the case for immigration policies and debates regarding migration and Islam (see Loobuyck and Jacobs, 2010).

The rightwing Flemish nationalist party New Flemish Alliance (NV-A), which in recent years became the largest party in North-Belgium (in part by taking away votes from VB), is at the forefront of the mainstreaming of an extreme rightwing discourse in Flanders. Here are just two recent examples, but this is just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak:

- Several judges ordered Theo Francken, the NV-A Secretary of State for Asylum Policy and Migration, to grant a Syrian family humanitarian asylum, and after the Court of Appeal issued an injunction and an incremental penalty for refusing to do so, the NV-A put this statement on its official Twitter account, asking people to share it: "Judges have to strictly apply the law and *not* open our borders. *No* incremental penalty, and *No* quixotic judges. *No* Belgian visa for every asylum seeker in the world. #ISupportTheo"

(9/12/2016). This clearly contravenes the democratic separation of judicial and executive power and was widely critiqued by all democratic parties except VB.

- After a complaint of alleged nuisance during a party organized by Muslims at a local community center in Heers, the municipal Councilor for Equal Opportunities Yves Rega (NV-A) said the following: "I have the solution for this problem. Why don't we ask the local butchers to dump some pigs blood in front of the entrance? The party will be over quickly" (quoted in Belang van Limburg, 2017, np). After widespread condemnations, he positioned himself as the victim: "They want to discredit me. I am not a racist, but there have been problems with the center for a long time. My statement was not meant to hurt anyone" (ibid). Here we clearly see the tactic of perpetrator/victim reversal at work, but now used by a party in government that purports to be rightwing rather than extreme rightwing.

This successful mainstreaming of extreme rightwing discourses and tactics through a well-conceived *war of position* makes it on the one hand a more pressing, but on the other hand also a more difficult task to resist and counter these exclusionary and racist discourses.

Conclusion: What is to be done?

We can identify two main counterstrategies used against extreme right discourses and the political actors who espouse them. There are those that argue that we need to accommodate rightwing populism and consider it on par with other ideologies, especially as they are democratically legitimated in many European countries. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, this has led to political deals between mainstream political actors and extreme rightwing populists. But even if there are no coalition agreements, as is the case in Belgium, the very presence of extreme right politicians and their mediated politics of provocation, led to the gradual appropriation by mainstream political actors of extreme right discourses and populist tactics. In both cases, it would be fair to say that this strategy of political and media accommodation has led to the fulfillment of the ultimate end-goal of the populist

extreme right, namely the detoxification and normalization of the extreme right ideology and its authoritarian anti-democratic politics (Berezin, 2013).

Besides this, many have also adopted a strategy of confrontation, ostracization and derision. Unfortunately, this also tends to reinforce extreme rightwing populism rather than fundamentally challenge it. In the worldview of the populist right and their supporters, journalists are the 'dishonest' *lügenpresse* and intellectuals are denoted as politically correct *gutmenschen* – both are seen to be archetypical proponents of the out-of-touch metropolitan elites. This populist, and ultimately fascist, tactic is proving to be quite successful at neutralizing all forms of critique. As Geert Wilders put it in a tweet recently: "Hey leftwing media, elite, intelligence services and justice system: Listen carefully! Whatever you do, it will make me and the PVV only stronger! Bye" (@geertwilderspvv, 3/12/2016).

So, if neither accommodation nor ostracizations are effective and even counter-productive, what is to be done? One way in which journalists have tried to fight back is by taking on extreme rightwing populism through so-called fact-checking, a practice that befits the liberal conception of journalists as truth-speakers (Carpentier, 2007, p. 151). However, in the wake of the emergence of a post-truth politics which contests the very notion of facts and appeals to emotions, it seems that fact-checking can only be a partial and ultimately insufficient answer. Furthermore, as Lakoff (2004) also argues, negating a frame, for example through fact-checking, inevitably also activates and potentially strengthens the frame.

Another and possibly more productive direction to which media professionals could turn is the oft critiqued US civic- or public journalism tradition. This tradition explicitly positions journalists as "democracy's cultivators" and advocates a type of journalism that is "tuned more to the needs of an ailing democracy than the rules of a hidebound profession", as Rosen (1999, p. 4) put it. Public journalism encourages journalists to mobilize an ethical agenda and to acknowledge that they are not mere dispassionate observers, but rather active participants in public life with a civic duty to "help public life go well" (Merritt, 1995, p. 113). Establishment journalists in the US criticized this position as "fix-it journalism"; reform should be left to the reformers not to journalists, Frankel (1995) argued. Today it is becoming acutely apparent though that democracy has been in dire need of fixing for a long time and that journalists have an important role to play in this.

From this perspective, notions such as objectivity, detachment, neutrality and balance would need to be revisited in the context of protecting democracy and democratic values against exclusionary rightwing populism and their incitement of racial hatred. The media cannot simply be a neutral 'platform' through which extreme rightwing populists and the mainstream politicians that copy them are able to freely pander their politics of fear. Furthermore, fact-checking is clearly failing as a counter-strategy.

In practical terms this means that rightwing populists need be treated as the anti-democratic political actors they are. Journalists and media organisations need to minimize attention for their politics of provocation and avoid amplifying their false claims, even if this might generate less clicks and shares. *The Guardian* journalist Nick Cohen (2017, np), echoing Lakoff, argues that by playing the rightwing populists' game, journalists "treat their arguments as worthy of debate. However wrong you show them to be, you acknowledge their point of view". Journalists, he argues, "need to go in hard, with studs showing".

Finally, reviving the public journalism tradition in the context of fighting rightwing populism has the additional benefit that it would enable journalists to dislocate the articulation of their identity as a detached elite. In order to be able to do this, journalists have to position themselves as defending the interests of the many by reneging "their own cultural perspective of aloofness" and develop a "journalistic vocabulary or protocol for dealing with [democratic] values" again (Merritt, 1995, p. 100-3). This should also be accompanied by expanding journalism beyond the traditional media to also include citizen media producers, and as Manca (1989) argued many years ago, to position journalism as democratic gate-openers for those contesting racist rightwing populism rather than the gate-keepers of past.

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End Notes:

[1] In 2004, the Belgian Court of Cassation convicted the extreme-right party Vlaams Blok of contravening the Federal law against the incitement of racial hatred. A few days after the conviction, Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest] was launched. The rebranding exercise was also used to drop a few of the more extreme positions in order to make sure that the party could continue to receive state funding. (Erk, 2005)

[2] All quotes from politicians have been translated from Dutch into English by the author.

[3] URL: http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/videozone/nieuws/politiek/1.2614619

[4] During a public meeting after the 2014 local elections in the Netherlands, Wilders rhetorically asked his supporters whether they wanted more or less Moroccans in the Netherlands. After the crowd shouted back 'less, less, less', Wilders said that he was going to take care of that. He was convicted for promoting discrimination, but spared a jail sentence.