

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Mabel Berezin, *Illiberal Politics in Neoliberal Times: Culture, Security and Populism in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 304 hardback (978-0-521-83913-6) paperback (978-0-521-54784-0).

Despite the abundant literature on right wing parties, Mabel Berezin provides an original and innovative analysis of why, after a long period of obscurity, right wing populism unexpectedly appeared in Western Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and, more specifically, why the French National Front (FN) has enjoyed continued success well into the 21st century. Berezin's method is historical and narrative based, as well as drawing on the growing body of literature that focuses on "events." Events, it is argued, represent social facts and cross-sectional representations of social, cultural, and political reality. Unlike more traditional sociology and political science approaches that focus on party strategy, voting behaviour, and political attitudes, events, the author claims, allow the researcher to delve into the broader "spatial and temporal context."

The analysis begins with a discussion of what Berezin refers to as the transition from the Old to the New Europe. The Old Europe, she argues, was represented by strong attachments to the nation-state and to the politics of the postwar compromise. During this period solidarity and security were embedded within national identities and within the nation-state; national identity gave citizens a sense of security and belonging. In the 1980s, however, the politics of Old Europe were challenged by European integration (especially post Maastricht), globalization, and immigration. As a result, New Europe does not, and cannot, promise the security and the solidarity of the Old Europe, creating a space for parties such as the FN.

Although the focus of the study is the FN, events from France and from Italy are chosen that represent crucial "turning points in collective national perceptions." Conceptually (though not chronologically) the analysis of the ascendancy of right wing populism begins in Italy. Here the author notes the importance of the 1994 Italian centre-right government consisting of Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, and the Lega Nord. It was the first time in the postwar period that a party with a fascist legacy (AN) was in government, and it was indicative of an explicit attempt to search for *new* politics within the context of the New Europe.

The Italian experience is important since, it is argued, it opened up new horizons of possibilities for parties such as the FN by legitimizing the ascendancy of right wing politics. Berezin traces the emergence of the FN from its initial rise (1983–1994), to its insertion into French politics, the public sphere, and the party system (1995–1997), and through what the author identifies as a degree of normalization as the FN expanded and moderated its platform, speaking to broader concerns of French citizens (1998–2007). Each phase in the evolution of the FN is detailed; using party documents and newspaper sources the author provides a thorough analysis of how the party evolved from its origins as a reaction to post-1968 left wing politics into an anti-immigrant movement in the 1980s. The author's most valuable contribution is to show that the initial rise of the FN, and especially its continued success, is indicative of broader social and political developments. Through a combination of political mobilization by gaining political power at the city level, especially in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, and by expanding its political platform to include national identity and security in the face of Europeanization and globalization, the FN has been able to tap into more general concerns of the French voting public.

The author uses a series of events from the late 1990s and the turn of the century to further substantiate her case: the Party Congress in Strasbourg in 1997, the March 1998 regional elections, the World Cup victory in July 1998, the 2002 presidential elections, and the 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution. Through a close examination of each event, the author demonstrates that the FN was able to penetrate and often shape discussions of globalization, Europeanization, European integration, and immigration. In the process, she demonstrates that continued success emanates not from *thick* commitments, such as opposition to immigration, but from *thin* commitments ensuing from the party's ability to address a host of broader concerns. In addition, it underscores the extent to which the ideas of the FN have become normalized, represented in the "No" vote in the 2005 Constitutional referendum and in Sarkozy's 2007 presidential victory.

Although this is a book about the FN (and right wing populism), it is fundamentally about changing identities in Europe; thus, the study ends with a discussion of why the FN has persisted in France while right wing politics have been tamed in Italy. The answer, the author claims, emanates from diverse histories of state formation and national identity. In France the tighter "fit between nation and state" in what she refers to as a *hegemonic consolidation regime* means that tensions from globalization, EU integration, and Europeanization are highly pronounced. In Italy, where we find a *flexible consolidation regime* in which national

identity is weaker, the state is better able to adjust to the politics of the New Europe, mitigating the success of right wing populism.

Berezin should be commended for an original study and for the strength of her rich analysis of French politics, history, and culture. The historical and narrative approach, and the analysis of events allow the author to demonstrate the wider and the broader significance of the FN. However, in my opinion, more attention to the social and political actors, changing ideologies, party systems, and political mobilization would have enhanced the analysis. Incorporating the literature on parties and social movements with an events-based focus would have allowed the author to discuss more fully French party system dynamics, and its effects on the ability of the FN to create its own political niche. In addition, it would have allowed the author to differentiate more clearly between the wide range of populist and right wing parties examined. Alleanza Nazionale has taken a different route than FN (evident from its recent merger with Forza Italia into the People of Freedom), and Forza Italia was always a different party than FN. I am not, however, convinced that these French/ Italian comparisons and the so-called taming of the Italian right can be reduced to questions of national identity. A case in point is the Lega Nord. Its success is due, in part, to weaker links between the nation and the state in Italy than in France; however, it is also necessary to focus on party system dynamics, changing ideologies, and political mobilization. In other words, the themes that Berezin identifies as important for the success of the FN are often expressed by the regionalist populism of the Lega.

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