



Conference Report

**Developing
Counter-Narratives**

to the Far-Right

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This is a report of a closed session titled 'Developing Counter-Narratives to the Far-Right', held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. Being an off the record session, it allowed speakers and participants to freely use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was to be revealed. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Summary

This session focused on far-rights movements, parties and their effects on politics and social life. It was emphasised that far-right political parties are increasingly supported more in West, especially in European countries due to fluctuations in the economy and increasing in the unemployment. Another important factor in the rise of the far right is the migration to European countries from MENA countries because people who do not have the opportunity to survive in their own country due to war are migrating to European countries in order to survive. Speakers and participants stated that the characteristic of far-right ideas is the anti-Islamism and xenophobia and these features of far-right parties attract the interest and support of most of people living in the Western countries. Politicians are using immigrants, Muslims and xenophobia as materials in politics in order to gain easily more support. In this session, it has been also emphasised that the far-right is increasingly normalised in Europe and it is not only against Muslims, but also against women. In general, this session attempted to understand the roots and current situation of the far-right and the solution suggestion was discussed.

One of the academic background speakers who have lived and worked in Austria for many years stated that it is very attention grabbing and remarkable that the right-wing party candidate who run for the presidential election in Austria was supported 47% and it demonstrates the rise of far-right parties in Europe. Another speaker expressed that Islamophobia is more dangerous than antisemitism. The speaker

stated that Islamophobia took place in two stages, the first of these phases was conceptual level, and at this stage, the Islamophobia discourse was produced in the field of academia and education and in the second stage, political discourse is produced. Another speaker emphasised that the far right is a response to regression in modernisation theory and a failure of political leadership and parties. He also said that in last 20 years' people have large wealth disparity. This created lots of resentment.

The discourse used against the Muslims and foreigners in the Western media and political populism were the most discussed themes in this session. One of the main discussed Themes in the closed session was that political parties produced populist rhetoric to get more support from voters. It is emphasised that the most concrete example of this is the Burka Ban that started in October in Austria. In Austria, it is forbidden since 1st of October to cover the face and because of that more officials are deployed at Vienna Airport to point out to Burka and Nikab wearers. However, only 250 people were wearing burka in Austria. This means to create a problem by bringing a non-problematic issue to the political scene. Moreover, it was expressed that anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim rhetoric in media is attempted to create a psychology against Islam and Muslims. For instance, in a study conducted in England, it was determined that the news published between 2010 and 2014 had a negative meaning when it was called Islam and Muslim. As a result of this closed session it is stated that doing more research and study in this field could be the most important solution against the far-right rise.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the 'Far-Right' - along with its associated discourses and narratives, is posing serious dangers, not only to the very fabric of European and North American society, but for global peace. It does so by challenging the universal declaration of human rights and celebrated notions of democracy, justice, equality and freedom. Unfortunately, it is odious and divisive agenda - even while rationally incoherent, based on 'fake news', hyperbole or, simply put, outright falsehoods, is garnering more and more adherents. Considering that, the TRT World Forum closed session on 'Developing Counter-Narratives to the Far-Right' aimed to expose the origins, growth and growing phenomenon of the 'far-right' movements in the 'West.' Thereafter, the esteemed panellists contributed thought-provoking and pro-active 'counter-narratives' to respond to this form of 'soft-terror.' Of course, a counter narrative can be used to share different points of views that may not have been otherwise considered. Or, it may assist in helping concerned stakeholders to construct responses to maltreatment, institutional discrimination, or, at worse, demonisation. Hence, this session sought to deconstruct, identify, and respond to key elements of the far-right narrative in order to craft a counter-narrative as a way to provide a voice for those

who are silenced, shunned or marginalised. Moreover, the discussion included exploration of the influence of the Far-right movements to the politics of the states in the contemporary world, their use of anti-immigration sentiment and why and the instrumentalisation of xenophobia/Islamophobia to harness discontent and commandeer peoples towards contentious politics.

Importantly, the session, also, deeply probed the origins for this disturbing trend, tracing it to a loss of meaning, the failure of liberalism to provide social cohesion, and, specifically, Durkheim's concept of 'anomie' - that is, the weakening of social bonds, social alienation and normlessness. Yet, the anomic condition is not uniform, and a variety of intensities are possible. Consequently, Teymoori et al describe 'high anomie' as containing high levels of deregulation and disintegration. Adding to that, at its most intense manifestation, 'anomie écrasant,' it includes value incoherence and moral ambivalence across social spheres leading to high levels of social frustration. Collectively, that intense anomic condition leads to a uniquely 'conflicted' cultural milieu, which cultivates the far-right phenomenon.

Origins of the Far-Right Phenomenon

The European enlightenment was, in Kuhn's terminology, a 'paradigm shift' of considerable vitality that was displacing values, erasing normative precincts and shattering the tacit moral order (Kuhn, 1996). Uninhibitedly, it portrayed Europe's deliverance from longstanding intolerances, fallacies and folklores. For that reason, it reflected Europe's emancipation from 'self-incurred immaturity' - that had stifled human agency, restricted freedoms and ignored equality (Kant, 2010). Clearly, the imaginative processes that the enlightenment unleashed enabled astonishing achievements. Yet, notwithstanding its inventiveness, it was, also, inescapably thorny. By emancipating people from the erstwhile moral order it was complicit

in abolishing conventional value and meaning, decreasing social connectivity and eradicating deference, thereby complicating critical aspects of personal and public life.

Eventually, responses to the disappearance of meaning led to numerous intellectual trajectories and, among them, secularism is momentous. Originally conceptualised by Holyoake (2015), it was contributory in fostering novelty, encouraging inclusion, delineating confines of power and material well-being (Cox, 2013). It maximised space for individual expression, emphasising freedom, celebrating equality, heightening ingenuity and empowering

people - but, still, observing compromise (Fawcett, 2015). Most importantly, it is widened embrace welcomed pluralism, skyrocketing innovation. Yet, concomitantly, it was amplifying incoherence, social alienation and moral ambivalence. Specifically, it did so by being unable to fill in the 'spaces of meaning' that were hitherto emptied by the Enlightenment's paradigm shift. Actually, replacing meaning was complicated, since unbridled human autonomy and self-determining freedom places, as Al Attas poignantly describes, the 'West' in a 'perpetual state of becoming, while never being' (Al Attas, 1978). This condition of never 'being' or actualising, meant concrete meaning was not being supplanted into social spheres - since there was no clear mechanism for social agreement to materialise, leaving humans unfulfilled. Granted, this is not to say that meaning could not be supplanted, but clear directives in that regard needed to be well thought out and institutionalised. More often than not, that arduous task was poorly assumed. Consequently, the enlightenment's paradigm shift, and secularism's celebration of self-determining freedom, was of such magnitude that neither God, nor a mandated ethical foundation of any sorts, was encountered in day to day life. This leads to a perpetual state of competing norms, without ever acquiescing to the conclusions of social contestation, only recognising its impermanence and fluidity.

Other disconcerting aspects of secular modernity have been described in numerous ways: Tocqueville's (1999) 'soft despotism'; Weber's (1991) 'disenchantment'; Taylor's (2007) 'emptying'; Lukacs's (2017) 'reification' and 'phantom objectivity'; and, most powerfully, as Durkheim's 'anomie' (2014). 'Anomie' describes the upsurge of social alienation that emerges with the collapse of homo duplex - an inherent duality in the human condition that 'corresponds to the double existence that we lead concurrently; the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society' (Durkheim, 2014). With the pervasiveness of secular values, the social regulatory influence of society spoils as a result of diminishing civic

responsibility, weakening social bonds and disregard for authority. In other words, society no longer functions to moderate human behaviour, gravely undermining shared life. Attesting to that, Elwell writes the modern individual is 'insufficiently integrated into society. Because of these weakening bonds, social regulation breaks down and the controlling influence of society on the desires and interests of the individual is rendered ineffective; individuals are left to their own devices. Because of the dual nature of human beings, this breakdown of moral guidance results in rising rates of deviance, social unrest, unhappiness, and stress' - i.e. the anomic condition (Elwell, 2017). Of course, Teymoori, Bastian and Jetten (2016) describe the anomic condition as exhibiting a range of intensities. High anomie contains excessive levels of both disregulation and disintegration, and that 'the cumulative increase in perceived breakdown of both leadership and social fabric is the beginning of the emergence of high anomie in society' (Teymoori et al, 2016). Adding to that, Chak describes a particularly potent anomic condition as 'anomie écrasant' (Chak, 2018 - forthcoming), which includes value incoherence across social spheres leading to moral ambivalence and high levels of social frustration. This coincides with minimal levels of Williams' four-fold needs taxonomy: 1) a meaningful life; 2) self-esteem; 3) belonging and social connectivity; 4) security (Williams, 2009). Together, this intense anomic condition leads to the emergence of religiopolitical fundamentalism and the 'Far-Right' phenomenon (Chak, 2018 - forthcoming).

Features of the 'Far-Right': Populism, Authoritarianism and Nativism

Far-Right movements in the 'West' do not develop out of a vacuum and, in actuality, are responding to a deeper malaise in society. For that reason, they often exhibit three critical features: populism, authoritarianism and nativism - a combination of nationalism and xenophobia. Admittedly, none of these terminologies and their domains are clearly discernible and there is considerable disagreement on what they, in fact, mean. Yet, there are certain distinguishing features, as mentioned, that analysts share when describing them, which allows us to explore the bewildering explosion of far-right grassroots movements across Europe and North America. For instance, the populist tendency of far-right proponents' feed on social discontent and the breakdown of meaning, associating that to grotesque caricatures of both self and 'Other.' In other words, a hyper-inflated sense of superiority, civilisation and progress that has, inexplicably, been subsumed with the influx of others - censuring visible minorities. Secondly, it is authoritarian tendency is, certainly, anti-democratic, but ferociously against celebrated values of proportional representation, consensus and

majority hinting at the hidden rebellion and subversive impulse of the lower classes. Thirdly, its relationship to 'nativism' is revealed through its incoherent hostility to immigration, which has been a cornerstone of the far-right discourse for many years. That, too, relies on inaccurate caricatures of the reality of hard-working, tax-paying and overwhelmingly law-abiding immigrant communities. It sensationalises crimes committing by these marginalised groups, men/women, African, Asian or Muslim to feed their divisive and hateful agenda. But it has not been just an issue of keeping out immigrants, but also to exclude them from taking part in public policy, debates and direction. The most successful parties on the far-right have come to externalise their intrinsic xenophobia. It is not a matter of 'us' being racist, but instead of 'they' - or Muslims or the o'ther', being a source of intolerance. Again, the onus is shifted to the immigrants to prove their worth - to go out of their way to reassure everyone else that they are not in any way affiliated to extremism, terror or violence, even while they are victims of violence.

Populism, Authoritarianism and Nativism

More specifically, the spectacle of populism is, as of yet, and understudied and misrepresented field of inquiry. Typically, it is understood as the quality of appealing to the common person. Yet, in spite of that, it is often seen as myopic, intolerant and hyper-nationalist - when, that definition has no scholarly basis. Admittedly, the term is used in social media and across various mainstream media platforms as hinting at the hidden rebellion and subversive impulse of the lower classes. As such, the term has taken on a negative connotation vis-a-vis established elites. In Europe and North America, growing social dissatisfaction, weak economic indicators, and raising divide between rich and poor - with less social services being provided, has propelled the so-called 'populist' movement. Most perplexing, and contradictorily, is that the richest segment of society - the so-called elites, are championing this widespread discontent - when in fact they are largely responsible for it, or benefit from the increasing class or economic divide. By usurping social agency of the deprived and disaffected segments of society, leaders of various far-right movements - who are often the absurdly wealthy 1% of society, i.e. President Trump in the US, or Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, can deflect their complicity in creating unsavoury social conditions by misleadingly chanting for 'the people.' That is certainly worth highlighting - the most divisive, racist, and populist movements in the world are led by some of its richest people that, fraudulently, claim to work for the everyday man, women and child. Of course, not all countries will exhibit this phenomenon. In Qatar, there is no 'populist' movement as understood as a divisive, disagreeable or combative relations between the government and its people. This is not only because Qatar has among the lowest unemployment rate in the world, and the highest GDP per capita as well, but, specifically, because it provides numerous privileges including free health care, education and housing benefits, not to mention exceptionally

generous salaries. Henceforth, there is no possibility of a populist threat. Yet, in societies that are slowly drawing back on social programs, healthcare, housing benefits and, meanwhile the cost of living continues to rise - then these societies are ripe for the type of racist politics that the far-right uses.

Among the tactics that far-right proponents utilising is that of scapegoating - or misleading the general population to believe a particular individual or group - in this instance Muslims, people of colour or visible minorities, is responsible for social ills, crime or deviant behaviour in society. Statistically, in any given European or North American country, immigrants account to a small fraction of crime and/or breaking the law. Moreover, they contribute wholeheartedly to the societies in which they live through contributing by taxation. Hence, sweeping generalisations about immigrant populations or threatening discourses of being 'free-riders' and using, inappropriately, state-benefits are almost entirely fictitious. Still, they hold sway over millions of people. This phenomenon, of targeting visible minorities, is a simplistic way to detract attention from Europe's economic, socio-cultural and political challenges.

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Conclusion: Countering divisive narratives

Lastly, in order to confront these narratives -that, at worst, are leading to heinous crimes against Muslim populations throughout Europe and North America, it was argued that broadly speaking 4 steps should be taken. Firstly, that includes Mosques - having 'open-houses' - inviting their neighbours or others to share an evening with their co-citizenship. A key part of the Far-right agenda is to ensure that Muslim, Black or other visible minorities do not become mainstream. That would entirely upend their objective. Canada, for instance, has done extremely well in responding to the 'Othering' of visible minority communities and went so far as to support a primetime television show called 'Little Mosque on the Prairie,' that welcome Canadian of Muslim faith to interact with others in a positive, healthy and respectful way. Rest assured, as was elaborated upon, it is essential for Muslim communities to engage with their surroundings, and speak for themselves. If not, the alternative is that far-right bigots will do the speaking for them. Secondly, a variety of different themed 'Awareness Campaigns' throughout society - including city hall, universities, colleges or public places like libraries - essentially, wherever there is high traffic. Specifically, those campaigns should emphasise how Islam is a religion of peace, and the normative traditions and principles which mandate respect and acceptance for diversity. Especially, concerning matters of faith. It is imperative that these traditions are exemplified and, fringe, modernist doctrines that are myopic and that promote us-them binaries are sidelined. Campaigns, also, should highlight Islam's regard for women - in general, and, also, be led by women. Critically important, an awareness campaign that highlights Islam's requirement that believers abide by the laws of place that they are staying and be productive members of society are crucial to reiterate. In fact, one of the comments constantly used by far-right provocateurs is that Muslims are not law-abiding. Hence, the panellists discussed this, and several other

ways - including charitable initiatives like feeding the poor, clothes drive, and Muslim businesses offering discounts to disabled or elderly people go a long way to respond and challenge the contentious accusations made by chauvinists.

Lastly, of fundamental importance, is the political participation of Muslims, Blacks and other visible minorities. Organizing themselves through civil-society organisations, partnerships and political parties is the best way to ensure their voices are not drowned out. Of course, as it was acknowledged, there are those that would tend to use this opportunity to even side with those political parties that are aggressively anti-Muslim or Anti-Black. Here, then, is the importance of rallying political fortunes with other groups and disadvantaged segments of society - including women's groups. Only through this type of activism would the targeted community render untenable the divisive, discriminatory and prejudiced viewpoints that the far-right is asserting.

