In the most recent local election in Belgium, the Vlaams Blok gained more than 35 per cent of the vote in Antwerp, confirming its position as the largest party in one of Western Europe’s most affluent cities. The result posed a fundamental challenge to the established parties, which for several years had pursued a policy of maintaining a cordon sanitaire with regard to the Vlaams Blok, essentially seeking to marginalize the party by treating it as an outcast. The established parties justified their strategy by arguing that the Vlaams Blok was ‘an intolerant, xenophobic and racist party’, which sought to promote hatred toward foreigners living in Belgium. Given their growing support at the polls, the leaders of the Vlaams Blok grew increasingly frustrated with the strategy of the established parties to keep it out of power and started a campaign designed to counter the charges of racism. This in itself was hardly surprising. What is interesting is how they tried to justify their position. In a brochure entitled ‘Prejudices’ the party rejected the notion that it was racist. Defining racism as ‘hatred of or disdain for another people or the bad treatment of somebody because of his race or ethnic origin’, the party asserted that these feelings were ‘completely alien’ to them. Given the fact that the Vlaams Blok fought for ‘the right of the Flemings to be themselves’ why would the party ‘refuse this right to others?’

Although acknowledging that they were nationalists, the party argued this meant that they regarded the ‘world in its diversity (meervoud)’ and that it regarded diversity as something that enriched the world. Nationalism, and particularly Flemish nationalism, however, should not be confused or equated with racism. Nationalism merely meant preferring one’s own people to others. This
was as natural as ‘the preference for the own family over outsiders, the preference for friends over people who one did not know personally, the preference for one’s own culture over foreign cultures’. Filip Dewinter, the charismatic leader of the Vlaams Blok, summarized his party’s position, maintaining that it only wanted ‘to preserve our identity and our culture. After all, racism means a belief that on the basis of racial features a group of people is superior or inferior to another. This isn’t what we believe; everyone is equal but not the same’.

The Vlaams Blok is one of the most successful examples of a new type of right-wing populist party, which during the 1990s emerged as one of the most significant new political forces in Western Europe and other liberal capitalist democracies. Initially dismissed as a fleeting phenomenon, which would soon fade away, the radical right has managed to establish itself firmly as a serious contender for votes and, increasingly, for political offices (e.g., in Austria and Italy). The growing acceptance of radical right-wing parties as serious and legitimate contenders for political power raises important questions about the nature and objectives of these parties. In recent years, there has been a great deal of scholarship devoted to explaining their rise and electoral success. Much of this scholarship has focused on the search for structural factors and developments that might help explain the remarkable surge in popular support for the radical right in the 1990s. At the same time, there has been relatively little serious comparative analysis of the political doctrines espoused by these parties, their ideological foundations and ideological justification.

There are good reasons for the temptation to ignore or at least neglect the question of ideology and doctrine when analyzing the contemporary radical right. For one, these parties themselves, unlike earlier movements on the far right, have generally made little effort to ground their political propositions and demands in a larger ideological framework. Successful parties pursue a ‘post-modern’ populist strategy that consciously appeals to widespread anxieties, prejudices, and resentments, and exploits them for political gain. Politically, the radical right has generally derived legitimacy for its ideas directly from voter sentiments and public opinion, e.g., on immigrants, foreigners, and refugees, rather than a well-defined body of ideas. Concomitantly, the politics of the contemporary radical right has often been seen as primarily issue-driven and opportunistic. There has been a tendency to define it in terms of the major issue associated with it – i.e. as anti-immigrant and/or anti-immigration parties.

However, a closer look at the programmatic propositions, statements, and utterances of contemporary right-wing radical parties and their leading proponents challenges this view. It suggests, as Roger Eatwell has argued, that the radical right does have a ‘common core doctrine’, a distinct ideological platform, which distinguishes it from other political parties and movements in contemporary liberal capitalist democracies. The core of this ideological platform has variously been described as ‘reactionary tribalism’, ‘ethnocratic liberalism’, ‘holistic nationalism’, ‘exclusionary welfarism’, or ‘exclusionary populism’. Its main characteristic is a restrictive notion of citizenship, which holds that genuine
democracy is based on a culturally, if not ethnically, homogeneous community; that only long-standing citizens count as full members of civil society; and that society’s benefits should be restricted to those members of society who, either as citizens or taxpayers, have made a substantial contribution to society. Radical right-wing political marketing has deftly reduced the spirit of this doctrine to a single slogan – ‘Our own people first’ – and a single demand – ‘national preference’ – which, taken together, have had considerable electoral appeal.

In recent years, the radical right has increasingly gone beyond exclusionary populism to adopt a new form of cultural nativism, which, rather than promoting traditional right-wing extremist notions of ethnic and ethnocultural superiority, aims at the protection of the indigenous culture, customs and way of life. In the process, the radical right has increasingly shifted its focus to questions of national and cultural identity, and as a result their politics has become identity politics. Much of its language and most of its concepts are directly derived from the ethnopluralist conceptions developed by the French nouvelle droite in the late 1970s, which make up what Pierre-André Taguieff has called ‘differentialist racism’ or what might be more appropriately be referred to as differentialist nativism (where nativism stands for ‘the xenophobic shadow of indigeneity’, which ‘values wholeness and separation, pure blood and autochthonous land’). Differentialist nativism is informed by the idea that political struggle in the contemporary world has to aim above all ‘to preserve the diversity of the world’, as Alain de Benoist, the intellectual leader of the nouvelle droite, once put it. His position represented a significant identitarian and communitarian ideological turn on the far right, whose genealogy goes back to the romantic critique of modernity and the associated attempts to defend Gemeinschaft in the face of increasing social differentiation. The central characteristic of the resulting identitarian-communitarian position is an ‘essentialist cultural justification for exclusionary policies’, which the nouvelle droite adopted from Carl Schmitt.

This is not to suggest that the radical right’s electoral appeal can be narrowly reduced to its pronounced and vocal stance on immigration, multiculturalism, and other issues associated with the presence of foreigners in Western Europe. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the radical right’s success in the 1990s was to a large extent also the result of widespread popular disaffection and disenchantment with the established political parties and elites, growing alienation from the political process and from the formal workings of liberal democracy in general. Radical right-wing parties have derived much of their electoral appeal from their ability to market themselves as the advocates of the common people, as spokespersons of the unarticulated opinions and sentiments of large parts of the population, who dared to say out loud what the ‘silent majority’ only dared to think, and who, to quote a memorable phrase coined by Jean-Marie Le Pen, in this way managed to ‘return the word to the people’ (rendre la parole au peuple).

Whereas comparative studies of radical right parties have paid considerable attention to these aspects of their appeal, their adoption of a differentialist doctrine has largely gone unnoticed. Yet ideology has become increasingly
important on the populist right. Starting from the claim that Europe’s identity and cultural diversity are fundamentally threatened, the radical right promotes itself as the defender of difference and the fundamental right to cultural identity and Heimat. With this position the contemporary radical right has become a crucial actor in what Slavoj Zizek has identified as a central line of conflict in today’s politics, between ‘liberal democratic universalism’ and a ‘new “organic” populism-communitarianism’. Seen from the perspective of the radical right, this political conflict pits the defenders of difference, diversity, particularity, and identity against the promoters of universalism, multiculturalism, and deracination, identified as an internationalized ‘New Class’ based in the multinational companies, the media, international organizations, and national administrations.

The remainder of this essay explores to what degree differentialist and identitarian positions inform the political discourse of contemporary right-wing radical parties in Western Europe on issues central to the right-wing populist agenda. The analysis starts out with a brief discussion of the adoption and incorporation of differentialist racism in the Front National, for many years Western Europe’s most important and most radical right-wing populist party. The focus of the rest of the analysis, however, is on what Kitschelt and others have defined as the ‘milder’, more moderate, and more pragmatist versions of the contemporary populist right, such as the Danish People’s Party, the Italian Northern League, and the Swiss People’s Party. The point is to demonstrate that even these parties have begun to use differentialist and identitarian images and language to justify their political demands. A related, second point is to explore whether and to what degree differentialist ideology has been modified after getting integrated into populist right-wing discourse.

DEFENDING NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The first party to adopt the doctrine of differentialist racism was Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National. The party was quick to maintain that its French-nationalist position should not be construed as reflecting ‘disdain for other peoples’. On the contrary, the goal was to protect French identity and ‘to defend the fundamental values of our civilization’. For this, the party proposed to accord absolute priority to a ‘cultural politics designed to defend our roots’ and reverse the process of deracination. As early as 1988, Le Pen warned that the peoples of Europe were faced with a real danger of extinction. ‘And we think that everything has to be done to try to save them’. At the same time, the Front National addressed the question of racism, which it defined as a ‘doctrine that denies the right of the peoples to be themselves’, and which it declared to be among the main threats to the survival of the French people and the peoples of Europe in general.

The Front National made it a point to charge the established political parties and the whole political class with having actively promoted the emergence and establishment of a ‘multiracial and multicultural society’ in France. This had been ‘justified in the name of abstract, universal human rights and based on a
formalistic, juridical definition of French nationality in place of the bond of real, living community formed by shared historical legacies and shared memory of cae national past’. Multiculturalism was part of a larger ideology, which the *Front National* called ‘mondialisme’. This was a new utopian ideology, which sought to destroy nations, mix peoples and cultures, do away with borders in an effort to erase all differences and, finally, destroy any sense of identity.

For the *Front National*, multiculturalism was but an admission of the fact that the vast majority of the new immigrants entering France during the past decades could not be integrated into French society. As a major *Front National* exposition on the danger of immigration put it, France was a European nation whose population had been stable for more than two thousand years and whose culture derived ‘from the three great European cultures – Celtic, Germanic, and Greco-Latin – and which was shaped by Roman Christianity’. In the past, immigrants coming to France had been able to assimilate because they had largely come from other European countries. By contrast, most new immigrants came from the Maghreb region, Turkey, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa and tended to form ‘ethnic quarters and ghetto cities’ – symptoms of a fundamental failure of integration, which would bring about disastrous consequences. By allowing entrance to people whose cultural background was completely different from that of the French, France risked importing ‘the ethnic or religious conflicts of the rest of the world’.

In response, the *Front National* advanced a whole catalogue of demands and ‘concrete measures’ designed not only to slow down the inflow of immigrants and eventually stop it altogether, but also to reverse the evolution of a multicultural society by ‘repatriating’ those immigrants the *Front National* deemed unable (or unwilling) to assimilate (*inassimilable*). At the same time, the *Front National* promoted a policy of ‘national preference’. The intent was to protect the ‘fiscal and the national integrity of the welfare state’ through a highly exclusionary immigration policy.

Starting in the late 1990s, the party couched its demands increasingly in terms of a comprehensive assault on *mondialisme*, characterized as a ‘monstrous totalitarian utopia, which exploited the economic phenomenon of the globalization of information and exchange’ in order to ‘attain a complete domination of the planet’ via the destruction of the nations and their identity. The party’s strategy was to reconfigure political conflict in terms of a new cleavage between nationalism and *mondialisme* instead of the earlier dichotomy of rootedness versus *deracinement*. Ideologically, the goal was to contextualize differentialist racism by making it part of a larger political strategy of comprehensive resistance to globalization, both within France and abroad. In its own words, the party saw ‘itself as the stronghold and bastion of national identity against cosmopolitan projects aimed at mixing peoples and cultures’.

With this strategy, Le Pen not only re-emerged as a credible candidate for the 2002 presidential election, but even made it to the second round, having beaten Prime Minister Jospin in the first. The *Front National* thus recuperated much of
the support the party had lost after the acrimonious split in 1998, which led to the establishment of the rival *Movement National Républicain* under Bruno Mégret. Despite the temporary turmoil in the French radical right, parts of the European populist right have continued to greatly admire Le Pen, with some going so far as to consciously model themselves after the *Front National*. This was most obviously the case with parties like the *Vlaams Blok* and the German *Republikaner*, which adopted much of *Front National* rhetoric and many of its demands and propositions. But in recent years, elements of the *Front National*’s differentialist ideology have also been adopted by right-wing populist parties, which in the past had paid only minor attention to questions of immigration and multiculturalism. In the process, these parties modified the ethnopluralist appeal to a significant degree, away from the original focus on the protection and preservation of national cultural identity and toward a growing concern with questions of European identity in the face of new socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges associated with globalization.

**FROM NATIONAL IDENTITY TO EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION**

In 1998, the Zurich branch of the *Schweizer Volkspartei* (Swiss People’s Party, SVP), which in the 1990s made remarkable electoral gains in local and national elections, issued a position paper on immigration. In this paper, the party charged ‘certain immigrant groups’ with ‘cultural intolerance’, which made ‘living together with them on a multicultural basis simply unthinkable’. The party was not loath to spell out precisely which groups it meant:

Islam is increasingly becoming the main obstacle to integration. And yet, the proportion of immigrants from Islamic countries is continuously on the rise. In Europe, we fought for centuries for liberal and democratic values, for the separation of state and church, and gender equality. It is a particular irony of history that the same left-wing and liberal forces, who led this fight, are today the most eager to advocate generous immigration policies – policies that threaten the basic occidental values.

The SVP is hardly an extremist party. Until the 1990s, it was the smallest of Switzerland’s four major parties, a national–conservative party representing rural interests in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. The party’s fortunes changed dramatically with the rise to dominance of Christoph Blocher, a wealthy and influential businessman, in the party’s Zurich branch. Under the charismatic Blocher, the SVP adopted a populist stance and strategy, which proved highly successful. Within only a few years, the party more than doubled its support and became Switzerland’s largest party. Blocher’s major themes focused on the defense of Switzerland’s political and cultural idiosyncrasies, particularly against the challenge of the process of European integration, as well as Switzerland’s reputation as a neutral country, which had successfully withstood Nazi Germany during the Second World War against growing criticism from abroad.
In the process, the SVP tried to establish itself as the only true defender of Switzerland’s values and cultural identity against the rise of multiculturalism promoted by the political Left and in response to the growing influx of foreigners and especially refugees. For the SVP, multiculturalism was a dangerous experiment that threatened to bring about nothing less than ‘the demise of culture’. Not surprisingly, the SVP in the canton Zurich, the city with the largest number of foreign residents in Switzerland, made the fight against multiculturalism the centre of its position on the future of immigration. Arguing that multiculturalism threatened Swiss culture with destruction while provoking hostility toward foreigners, the Zurich SPV demanded that foreigners intent on staying integrate themselves completely and unconditionally into Swiss society. The Zurich party’s position was later adopted, albeit in somewhat modified form, by the SVP as the basis of its position on integration.

The Zurich party’s position on Islam has to be seen in this context. The argument was that Muslims were both incapable and unwilling to integrate themselves into Swiss society, i.e., to respect its laws, customs, and habits. At the same time, the party charged the political establishment with promoting a false culture of tolerance and understanding, which contributed to the destruction of Swiss culture. These latent fears are reflected in the title of a review of a book on Islam by the German orientalist Hans-Peter Raddatz, which appeared in Schweizerzeit, a weekly edited by the prominent SVP national councillor, Ulrich Schlüer: ‘Islam in liberal Europe: Christian–Occidental Culture before its Self-Liquidation?’ Raddatz was once again given an opportunity to express his views on Islam in Schweizerzeit a few weeks after the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the article, he charged the political and intellectual class with having created a type of ‘dialogue fetishism’, which ‘prohibited under the threat of severe punishment’ any kind of scepticism toward Islam, even if historically justified. Its proponents insisted that there was a difference between Islam and fundamentalism, which was largely the result of ignorance and ‘fundamental incompetence’. Under the circumstances, the attacks against the United States on September 11 should hardly have come as a surprise.

The case of the SVP offers a clear demonstration of the extent to which the preservation of European cultural identity, reflected in the strict rejection of multiculturalism and particularly Islam, has become central to differentialist nativism in contemporary Western Europe. To be sure, attacks against Islam had always been a staple of right-wing populist rhetoric. Already in the late 1980s, Mogens Glistrup, the leader of the Danish Progress Party, created quite a stir with his demand to make Denmark a ‘Muslim Free Zone’. At about the same time, Carl Hagen, the leader of the Norwegian Progress Party sought publicity for his party by citing a letter sent to him, ‘which later was shown to be a fake – saying that Norway was on the way to becoming a Muslim state unless the borders were closed’. In Belgium and Germany, too, the radical right warned that the growing number of Muslim immigrants threatened to displace the native population. These early attempts to mobilize resentment against Muslim residents
were rather sporadic and largely designed to take advantage of growing concern about the demographic development of Western Europe.

In recent years, however, the campaign against Islam has taken on a new dimension. In the context of differentialist nativism, Islam serves at least two purposes. For one, Islam generally serves as ‘the other’, against which the radical right constructs its notion of Western civilization and Western values. Second, given the all-encompassing, totalizing claim of Islamic fundamentalism, Islam fits perfectly well into the radical right’s postmodern politics of difference. Islamophobia has therefore increasingly become a constituent element of radical right-wing populist ideology, both before and after September 11.

Again it has been some of the more moderate parties, such as the Danish People’s Party (DPP) and the Lega Nord (LN), which have played a prominent role in propagating these ideas. A few months before the most recent national elections in Denmark, from which the DPP emerged as the third largest party, the party issued a 226-page pamphlet with lots of photos entitled *Denmark’s Future: Your Country – Your Choice…*, solely dedicated to the question of foreigners and immigration in Denmark. Even before the election campaign, the DPP had made Islam the central issue of its political strategy. Among other things, the party resolutely objected to the building of mosques and the establishment of Muslim cemeteries and demanded that all members of Muslim families be deported if one member had committed a criminal offence. At the same time it started a billboard campaign asking whether one had to be a Muslim to get social housing in Denmark and placed a one-page ad in a national newspaper publishing the names of recent naturalized citizens, a majority of whom were from Muslim countries.

Although the party’s pamphlet on immigration covered a range of issues and questions, a large number of the photos depicted Muslims, the vast majority of whom were dressed in traditional garb. The strategy clearly was to equate Islam with fundamentalism. This impression was supported by the way the party depicted Islam in the chapters devoted to it. The argument was that Islam was not a religion but a ‘political program’, which, because it left no scope for individual decisions, was fundamentally incompatible with democracy. Referring to the discrimination and oppression of women in Muslim countries, the party described Islam as promoting ‘medieval practices’, which were incompatible with a modern society. Finally, the pamphlet emphasized that Denmark was ‘a Christian country’ reflecting Christian values as they had evolved through history, such as tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect. Given its very nature, the ‘Muslim way of life’ is ‘not compatible with the Danish Christian mentality’.42

Central to the DPP’s line of argument is the notion of a fundamental cultural incompatibility between Islam and Danish values and the Danish way of life. There is no chance to integrate Muslim immigrants into Danish society, since by their very appearance the immigrants indicate that they do not want to adapt to the Danish way of life. Therefore, if Danes want to remain masters of their own country, they have no other choice than to expel all Muslim immigrants from Denmark and send them back to their countries of origin.43
Given the DPP’s electoral success, this line of argument is likely to play an increasingly important role in radical right-wing populist strategy. Ideologically, it marks a significant departure from the simplistic xenophobia of the early years of right-wing mobilization. At the same time, as an examination of the *Lega Nord*’s ideological development in recent years shows, it is only a point of departure toward a comprehensive right-wing differentialist ideology.

Unlike the DPP, the *Lega Nord* experienced a substantial decline in electoral support in the past few years. A part of the current coalition government, it has largely come to depend on Berlusconi. At the same time, the party has increasingly radicalized its rhetoric, in the process adopting the language of differentialist nativism in order to launch a frontal assault on multiculturalism and globalization, which is distinct because of its internal consistency and comprehensiveness.

The party’s differentialist turn started in the late 1990s. It was affirmed by the party’s leader, Umberto Bossi, in 2000. According to Bossi, the party stood for ‘the diversity of the peoples, starting from our own peoples, and from their right for freedom’. Already two years earlier, a section of the party had produced a position paper on immigration, ‘identity and multiracial society’, which was later diffused via the party’s web site (www.leganord.org). The authors claimed the ‘sacrosanct right of our people to maintain and defend their ethnocultural and religious identity’ and the right ‘not to be reduced to a minority in their own home’. For the authors, immigration and multiculturalism were part of a larger process of globalization (*mondialismo*) designed ‘to destroy the peoples’ in order to construct an ‘Anglophone and totalitarian Global Village on the ruins of the peoples’. This was not an anonymous development, but one propagated by two forces – the Americans and the Muslims, who used it to construct new global empires. Immigration threatened to transform the European countries into colonies by means of what the authors called ‘a form of demographic imperialism’ designed to turn ‘our nations demographically, culturally, and politically into an appendix of countries that do not belong to the European continent’.

These trends could only be reversed if the people reaffirmed and defended their cultural identity and ‘reappropriated’ their own territory, presumably under the leadership of the *Lega Nord*, whose ‘differentialist vision of the world’ offered the most effective weapon against mondialismo and American and Muslim imperialism.

In the next few years, Bossi himself not only adopted the pamphlet’s differentialist vision but also its characterization of *mondialismo* as an American instrument to gain global hegemony. Starting in early 1999, Bossi warned on numerous occasions that the ‘invasion’ from outside Western Europe was intricately linked to the ‘American ideology of *mondialismo*’, an ideology ‘which wants to impose on all of Europe a “multiracial society” in order to weaken the Old Continent and subordinate it even more to the American superpower’. Given the growing pressures from globalization, the *Lega* had to shift its strategic objective and concentrate on finding ways to get the people ‘to revolt against this new authoritarian ideology, which seeks to annihilate all Europeans’.

In this context it was hardly surprising that *Lega* increasingly focused on Islam.
Bossi had written as early as 1993 that ‘Islam on the one side, and colonization by America on the other put the great European culture in danger .... (T)he battle for the cultural identity of the continent coincides today with the battle for the protection of the culture of the little people, ambushed by massification and by ideological or religious fanaticism’.50 In the late 1990s, the *Lega*’s position on Islam turned into a comprehensive *Kulturkampf* inspired by Huntington’s notion of the clash of civilizations.51 Thus in a special issue in 1999 on Islam of the *Lega* journal, *Quaderni padani*, Islam was characterized as one of the ‘three worst illnesses of history’ (together with Roman imperialism and communism) – three ‘great plagues’, held together by ‘the glue of *mondialismo*, the enemy of any difference (like communism), any autonomy (like Rome), any tolerance (like Islam) and any aspiration toward freedom (like all three’).52

In the process, the *Lega* developed a comprehensive conspiracy theory built around an increasingly strident anti-Americanism. Thus the party maintained the Italians had a choice between a ‘mondialist American multiracial society’ and a ‘Padanian (or Italian) and European society based on its peoples’. America meant an individualistic-type capitalism without guaranteed pensions and minimal health care, which would destroy the small enterprises and lead to mass unemployment while allowing America to regain its economic position which it had lost with the creation of the European Union in 1993.53

The *Lega*’s uncompromising anti-Americanism was once again evident in the party’s vehement objection to NATO’s campaign against Yugoslavia over the question of Kosovo. As far as the party was concerned, the war had nothing to do with humanitarian aims but was an American attempt to gain a foothold in the Balkans ‘in order to prevent what Washington fears most, namely a commercial and geopolitical union between us Europeans and the Russian area’.54 In Bossi’s view, the conflict in Kosovo was a conflict between

> two different religious identities, on the one hand the Albanian immigrants – and, for future memory, I underline immigrants – who are Muslims and who are asking for the independence of Kosovo from Serbia and its annexation to their motherland, Albania; and on the other the Serbs who are Christians and for whom Kosovo represents a mythical place, the very root of their politics and history.

And, referring to the United States, Bossi continued that the Americans, ‘men who only value money’ and who want nothing more than to destroy all peoples, are fundamentally opposed to the values which the Serbs – ‘a great people that keeps its word, solid and serious’ as compared to the ‘easy-going’ and ‘superficial Americans’ – want to preserve, values such as family, children, and true beliefs.

In the course of the NATO intervention, the *Lega* adopted the ideas of an obscure French expert on Islam, Alexandre del Valle. Del Valle charged that the NATO war against Yugoslavia was essentially designed by the United States ‘to compromise the construction of an independent and strong Europe’ in order to
prevent it from challenging the United States economically. US foreign policy
aimed at bringing about a ‘clash of civilizations’ pitting the Europeans against the
Muslim world. At the same time, Islam itself presented a fundamental threat,
hanging like a ‘“Damocles sword” over Europe’. The Lega’s motives for
opposing the NATO intervention in Kosovo were obvious: for Bossi and many
in his party, in Kosovo, the Albanian minority had gradually reduced the Serb
majority to a minority and pushed it out of the province, largely on a demo-
graphic basis. Kosovo thus was a prime illustration of what might happen if
Europe failed to halt the ‘Islamic invasion’.

In line with these arguments, the Lega, in the late 1990s, started to promote
itself with growing urgency as the defender of Western values, of a Christian
Europe, and of the Catholic faith against the ‘new colonialism’ under the banner
of Islam. With this strategy, the Lega gained new visibility, especially after it had
started to embark on a crusade against the construction of mosques in northern
Italy. The most spectacular instance was a demonstration against the planned
construction of a mosque in the town of Lodi in late 2000, which turned into a
major anti-Islamic manifestation with slogans such as ‘Europe is Christian and
must remain so’, and ‘the shadow of the minaret will never darken our
campanile’. For the Lega, the aim was simple: to stop the ‘Islamic invasion’. In
the words of one of the Lega Nord’s leaders, Islam was ‘an intolerant religion’.
The party was ready to call for ‘new crusades in order to defend our culture, our
identity, and our future’.

By the time the Lega entered the second Berlusconi government, the party had
made the question of illegal immigration and the defense of northern Italian
cultural and religious identity the cornerstone of its political strategy. In the
process, its position grew ever more extremist – a development recognized and
applauded by Italy’s re-emerging intellectual extreme right. Circles like Rinascita
considered the Lega its most important ally in the campaign against ‘the illegal
immigrants invading our lands’, a campaign provoked by ‘the war against all men
and all peoples waged by the City and Wall Street, by mondialismo and global-
ization, by the culture of homogenization’.

SEPTEMBER 11

For the European populist right, the terror attacks of September 11 against the
United States represented a strong vindication of their position on Islam. Bruno
Mégret said as much when he charged that the attacks reflected the ‘confronta-
tion between two worlds, a genuine clash of civilizations’, which pitted
‘European and Christian civilization against the Arab-Muslim civilization’. When the Americans had played the ‘Arab and Muslim card in order to counter,
contain and weaken Europe’, they had played with fire. Now they reaped what
they had sown. The Vlaams Blok echoed the DPP’s position that Islam repre-
sented a ‘political-religious ideology, which with regard to essential aspects is
incompatible with our European values’. The party proposed a list of measures
both to control the activities of Islamic organizations in Belgium and to prevent
the influx of new arrivals from Muslim countries. Jean-Marie Le Pen, although more cautious in his references to Islam (in order not to antagonize Harki voters and their descendents), was also quick to evoke the memories of what he considered active American support for the ‘reimplantation of Islam on the Balkans’ by supporting the Bosnians and Albanians against the Serbs. Undoubtedly, both men interpreted the events of September 11 as a historical turn, which presented an opportunity to revive their political fortunes. And in fact, by the end of October 2001, a survey by the renowned SOFRES institute showed a significant rise in support for Jean-Marie Le Pen’s presidential candidacy. As a result, by early 2002, Le Pen had once again become a serious political challenge commanding a steady 10 per cent support in opinion polls.

The Lega Nord saw in the attacks a declaration of war on the West on the part of a militant Islam, which it called the latest form of totalitarianism. In the word’s of del Valle, from an interview with La Padania, September 11 represented the beginning of the ‘great war of the twenty-first century between post-colonial Islam and the rest of the non-Muslim world’. For Islam, the objective was to convert the whole world to Islam, to transform the whole world into one ‘Islamic nation’. In order to reach this objective, any means was allowed, including violence and (holy) war, which Islam considered ‘a collective duty’. And del Valle warned that, at least at the moment, Europe, which had allowed Islamic fundamentalists to settle in Europe without asking them to integrate into society, was too weak to face ‘Islamic totalitarianism’.

In order to overcome this weakness and to combat the new totalitarian threat to Europe, the Lega proposed both immediate and long-term measures. Within days of the attacks, leading representatives of the party called for strict controls of mosques and Islamic centres and even the closing of Italy’s borders to foreigners from Islamic countries. Others proposed that Italy give preference to foreigners of Catholic faith, thus adopting an idea launched by Cardinal Biffi of Bolgona in late 2001, which at the time had caused a major uproar in the country. At the same time, the Lega reaffirmed its position that only the recollection and reaffirmation of traditional Christian values would enable Europe to overcome the spiritual damage caused by Europe’s adoption of globalization.

DIFFERENTIALIST NATIVISM IN THE NEW EUROPE

This essay has tried to show that the contemporary Western European populist radical right has developed a comprehensive alternative ideology grounded in the notion of cultural difference. Among the core elements of this ideology are a strident Islamophobia and an increasingly pronounced hostility toward globalization. In the process, the populist right has sought to position and propagate itself as a resistance movement defending a conception of European identity that it sees as fundamentally threatened.

The populist right’s challenge derives in large part from the fact that this ideology feeds directly into the ‘politics of recognition’, which Nancy Fraser has identified as the major area of political contestation in advanced liberal
democracies. In her view, ‘claims for recognition drive many of the world’s most intense social conflicts – from battles around multiculturalism to struggles over gender and sexuality, from campaigns for national sovereignty and subnational autonomy to newly energized movements for international human rights. Theses struggles are heterogeneous, to be sure; they run the gamut from the patently emancipatory to the downright reprehensible’. Nevertheless, there is a ‘widespread recourse to a common grammar’, which, in Fraser’s opinion, suggests ‘an epochal shift in the political winds’.71

Although clearly on the reprehensible side, the claims advanced by the contemporary populist right are very much part of this new political configuration and derive their legitimacy, at least in part, from its common grammar. At the same time, the appeal of these claims has to be seen in the context of ‘the culturally fragmenting, depoliticizing impacts of neoliberalism and postmodernization’, and, one might add, globalization.72 In significant ways, the populist right advances today one of the most trenchant critiques of these developments while problematizing their impact on society and the individual. Today it is more often than not the populist right (for example, in Denmark and Norway) which comes out most forcefully in defending the weakest and least well-off in society.73

This suggests that the success of the populist right’s exclusionary appeal should also be seen in the larger context of the traditional left’s retreat from central positions of the postwar social democratic agenda. As Douglas Holmes has forcefully argued, it was the ‘unforeseen retreat of this wide ranging societal agenda’ which ‘opened the way for a tortuous resurgence of integralist politics and its tainted discrimination of human difference’.74 In fact, during the past several years, the populist right has appropriated and, in the process, radically refashioned and redefined the two major projects associated with the left: on the one hand, the traditional left’s focus on social justice and redistribution; on the other hand, the postmodern left’s concern with identity and recognition.

The result is a coherent and internally consistent programmatic position of what one might characterize as a combination of differentialist nativism and comprehensive protectionism, which is arguably one of the main factors behind the populist right’s success. It seeks to exploit the anxieties and feelings of insecurity provoked by the socio-economic turmoil and ruptures associated with globalization and neoliberalism as well as the widespread resentments in response to the socio-cultural transformation of Western European societies caused by the presence of a growing resident alien population. A second, equally important factor is the populist right’s mobilization of resentment against political and intellectual elites, consciously designed to appeal to latent sentiments of political disenchantment, frustration and cynicism on the part of a large, and arguably growing, number of West European voters.

This suggests that the political success of the populist right in Western Europe is primarily a left-wing problem. As long as the left continues to fail to advance a convincing alternative vision to the prevailing neoliberal model while at the same time seeking to outdo the populist right on the question of immigration (as
did, most infamously, the Danish Social Democrats), it will neither regain the constituencies that have defected to the radical right nor be in a position to reverse the resulting strategic gains of the political right. Given the disarray on the political left in Austria, Denmark and Italy, to name only the most prominent cases, the chances for a genuine revival of the left appear slim for the moment, which leaves the field wide open for the exclusionary nativist politics of the postmodern populist right.

NOTES

7 Notable exceptions are the comparative work of Cas Mudde and Marc Swyngedouw. See, for example, Cas Mudde, The Ideology of the Extreme Right, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; Marc Swyngedouw and Gilles Ivaldi, ‘The Extreme Right Utopia in Belgium and France’, West European Politics, vol. 24, no. 3, July 2001.


Alain de Benoist quoted in Taguieff, p. 103.


See the title of point 5 of the Manifeste de la Nouvelle Droite, ‘Contre la Nouvelle Classe, pour l’autonomie à partir de la base’.

Kitschelt, The Radical Right in Western Europe. The Lega Nord is often not even considered to belong to the right-wing radical party family. The second edition of the Hainsworth volume has a chapter on the Movimento Sociale Italiano / Alleanza Nazionale (MSI/AN), but not on the Lega Nord. See Hainsworth, ed., Politics of the Extreme Right.

The quotations are from Le Pen’s latest personal website created to promote his candidacy for the presidential elections 2002: http://www.lepen.tv.


Le Pen, Passeport, p. 96.

The term ‘multiracial and multicultural society’ can be found in Jean-Yves Le Gallou and Philippe Olivier, Immigration: Le Front national fait le point, Paris: Éditions nationals, 1992, p. 22.


Front National, 300 mesures, pp. 15-16.

Gallou and Olivier, Immigration, pp. 19-22.


Holmes, Integral Europe, p. 69.

As Le Pen put it as early as 1997, the Front National was the only political force in France to propose a complete break with mondialisme. See ‘Discours
33 See Mudde, *Ideology of the Extreme Right*.
34 See Betz, ‘Exclusionary Populism’.
43 As Mogens Camre, the party’s lone European Parliament deputy said after September 11, ‘Muslims are only waiting for the right moment to murder us’. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 November 2001, p. 10.
47 Ibid., p. 22.


57 Stefano Piazza, ‘No all’impero mondiale’, La Padania, 29 April 1999.

58 ‘Siamo davanti a nuovo colonialismo: un tempo fa opera degli occidentali, ora sono i musulmani a farlo a casa nostra’ (‘We confront a new colonialism: in the past it was the work of the occidentals, now it is the Moslems who do it in our home’). Quoted in ‘Sull’Islam le bugie della sinistra’, La Padania, 17 October 2000.


60 Savoini, ‘Basta all’invasione islamica’.


63 Mégret, ‘Discours de Salon de Provence’.


70 ‘Il Senat: “Recuperare I valori cristiani”’, La Padania, 31 October 2001;
Maccanti, ‘Torino si interroga sull’Islam’.


74 Holmes, Integral Europe, p. 16.