The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria

David Art

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This book argues that Germans and Austrians have dealt with the Nazi past very differently and that these differences have had important consequences for political culture and partisan politics in the two countries. Drawing on different literatures in political science, David Art builds a framework for understanding how public deliberation transforms the political environment in which it occurs. The book analyzes how public debates about the "lessons of history" created a culture of contrition in Germany that prevented a resurgent far right from consolidating itself in German politics after unification. By contrast, public debates in Austria nourished a culture of victimization that provided a hospitable environment for the rise of right-wing populism. The argument is supported by evidence from nearly 200 semistructured interviews and an analysis of the German and Austrian print media over a twenty-year period.

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For Julija

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book analyzes the influence of the Nazi past on postwar German and Austrian politics. Given the omnipresence of that past in both societies, and given the tomes that have already been written on the subject of historical memory in Germany in particular, this was from the start an audacious enterprise. My interviewees often told me as much, and many friends feared that nothing really new could be written about the subject. Yet from the early stages of my research, I became convinced that the connections between ideas about the Nazi past, political culture, and partisan competition in the two societies had barely been uncovered. Sometimes it is the influence of the 800-pound gorilla in the room that is most difficult to measure. When the gorilla takes the form of an idea, rather than a structural or institutional force, elucidating and measuring its effects become even more difficult. Yet, ideas clearly matter in politics. Shying away from phenomena as significant as interpretations of the rise of Nazism and the Final Solution in the successor societies of the Third Reich was no longer an option once my inquiry began, attractive as it seemed at times.

I never intended to write about public deliberation and debates, much less offer a framework for analyzing the ways in which they can transform politics. Yet, the deeper I delved into ideas about the Nazi past, the clearer it became that the engine of ideational change was elite-led public debates. These public debates occurred in a discontinuous fashion and produced enduring legacies that shaped not only future debates about the Nazi past, but also the political environment more generally. I found intellectual sustenance for this observation from diverse fields in political science, borrowing liberally from studies of issue evolution, media effects, public

opinion, deliberative democracy, and historical institutionalism. My hope is that students and scholars working in these fields, whether or not they are intrinsically interested in the Nazi past, may find the approach I have taken useful.

One of my central arguments is that debates about the Nazi past have created very different environments for right-wing political parties and movements in Germany and Austria. I thus offer a political-cultural explanation for the divergent success of the postwar far right in Germany and Austria, one that challenges several of the prevailing theories in the literature. Although I admittedly do not test the hypothesis in this book, I believe that the long-term development of right-wing populist parties is critically influenced by the reaction of political parties, the media, and civil society to them. Despite several recent setbacks in some states (including Austria), their power and influence continue to grow in others. The rise of right-wing populist parties has clearly been one of the most dramatic changes in European politics over the past several decades, and uncovering the elements that help or hinder their development is an important area of research, particularly as European integration, immigration, and globalization raise the types of issues around which the far right appears positioned to mobilize.

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I owe substantial intellectual debts to scholars I studied with at Yale and MIT. Fascinating courses with Alex Wendt and Juan Linz spurred me to apply to graduate school in political science. My dissertation committee at MIT provided more guidance and support than I had any right to expect. Melissa Nobles gave me copious and insightful comments on more drafts than I would care to admit, and discussions with her often prevented me from going astray. Richard Samuels came on board to give this project a burst of enthusiasm and helpful criticism on the structure of the argument. I "recruited" Andrei Markovits from the University of Michigan for the dissertation that led to this book, and his deep knowledge of German and Austrian politics was a critical resource. His warmth, wit, and wisdom at crucial stages of this project were more important than he knows.

My greatest intellectual debt is to Suzanne Berger. It was she who made me enthusiastic about comparative politics in the first place, and her intellectual influence appears in multiple forms throughout this book. Suzanne's inimitable combination of unwavering support and razor-sharp criticism helped me grow as a scholar, and I thank her for all the guidance she has given me over the years.

Families are normally thanked last in books of this sort, not because they are an afterthought but rather because their contributions are often so fundamental to the success of the project and the emotional well-being of the author. Mine is no different and, given its academic bent, has contributed more directly than most to my own intellectual development. My father has set a standard in scholarship and professionalism in the field of international relations that I can aspire to. I can only dream of being as prolific and widely read as my mother, Suzanne, who writes history, or my sister Robyn, who writes poetry. I am grateful to have been raised in a family where learning is a way of life. I am also blessed to have found

a new family in Austria that shares similar values and makes fieldwork there a joy.

Finally, no one deserves more thanks than my wife, Julija. She claims to know little about political science, but I turn to her more often than anyone else for ideas, advice, and encouragement. Without her, this book would never have been written and I would not be so happy. I dedicate this work to her as a small token of my gratitude.

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Introduction

Public deliberation and debate are central to both our normative conceptions and everyday observations about liberal democracies. Politicians, journalists, scholars, and ordinary citizens in the United States often refer to the public debate about health care, or gay marriage, or Iraq, or some other issue of national importance. Concerned individuals also often call for a public debate about a topic that has either been ignored or considered unproblematic. In some cases, they might have a specific setting in mind: the floor of the Senate, a town meeting, or perhaps a radio talk show. But in general, what people mean by a public debate, I suspect, is something like a national discussion extending beyond any particular institution or building. Public debates, in this intuitive definition, involve political elites discussing and contesting basic issues, the media reporting these fights and taking sides, and the general public coming to regard the topic of debate as an important national issue.

This book builds on this intuition by analyzing what public debates are, whom they involve, and why they matter. My central claims are that public debates produce new ideas, shift the weight of elite opinion, and change the language elites use to discuss certain political issues. For analytical clarity, I conceive of this process as a three-step sequence:

- *Step One*: Public debates create and consolidate "frames," which I define as an ordered set of messages concerning some aspect of the political world. These frames influence political behavior and can also become enduring elements of political culture.
- *Step Two*: Public debates produce shifts in elite opinion. They can bring the beliefs of political actors closer together or push them further apart.

Although these outcomes are difficult to predict, they matter for future political conflicts and for the formation of mass attitudes.

- *Step Three*: Public debates shift the boundaries of legitimate discursive space in the larger body politic in one of three ways. First, they can create something akin to "political correctness," which defines the realm of acceptable terms and sanctions for those who violate them. Second, public debates can introduce previously taboo subjects into political discourse and extend the limits of acceptable political space. Third, debates can create new "code words" for old ideas. The result of any of these processes is a change in the language that elites, and later ordinary citizens, use to discuss political issues. Changes in discursive space reflect broader ideological shifts in politics and society.

Political elites are the central participants in public debates.[1] I draw upon research in public opinion that explains how elite discourse, and shifts in elite discourse, change mass attitudes.[2] This does not mean, however, that any particular individual, or group of individuals, can manipulate mass attitudes as they wish. Although politicians often spark public debates and hope to profit from them, deliberation often produces outcomes that elites neither intended nor desired. Although mine is largely a top-down version of ideational change, I do argue that public debates can open windows of opportunity for civic activists (still elites, in my definition) to increase their political salience and mobilize portions of civil society. Drawing on work in political communication, I also analyze how the media disseminate and modify elite messages while also injecting their own views into public debates.

My argument is about discontinuous and elite-led political change. It offers a different take on the process of ideational transformation from several existing views in political science. Rather than conceiving of ideas as shifting slowly and gradually, the result of large-scale social processes such as modernization, democratization, or generational change, it focuses on those moments when ideas change rapidly and dramatically. Instead of viewing ideas as preconceived entities waiting for some

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[1] Following Robert Putnam's definition, I define elites as "those who in any society rank toward the top of the (presumably closely intercorrelated) dimensions of interest, involvement, and influence in politics." Putnam, "Studying Elite Political Culture," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (September 1971), 651.

[2] John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

powerful carrier to make them salient, I analyze how ideas are created and changed through political battles. Although strategic calculations play a role in this process, deliberation and argument do much of the work. I do not contend that the better argument carries the day; indeed, sometimes ideas that many people find repugnant emerge and attain a broad following during public debates. In other cases, public debates do change the political-moral foundations of political communities in ways that correspond to common conceptions of progress. In either case, public debates set in motion a series of processes that reshape the political environment in which they occur.

There are a limited number of issues that can spark such transformations. Technical policy questions, or other topics that require specialized knowledge, known in the American politics literature as "hard issues," cannot muster the broad participation required for the types of national discussions I have in mind. The universe of cases for public debates is thus restricted to those over foundational issues, such as race, abortion, gender, war, and the like. These issues are often described as "easy," not because they are always pleasant to think about or conceptually simple, but rather because one does not require an extensive background to form opinions about them. Such gut issues have real consequences for the basic ideas and values that guide political communities.[3] The meanings of historical events, particularly traumatic historical events, are such foundational issues.

Debating the Lessons of History

Over the past several decades, "coming to terms with the past" has become a global phenomenon. In advanced industrial societies, the victims of past atrocities have demanded material and symbolic redress from the state. In third-wave democracies, transitions from communism and authoritarianism have involved reckoning with the crimes of the previous regime. In states emerging from ethnic conflict, political elites have established truth commissions to create a public record of atrocities and give victims a forum to tell their stories. International organizations have recently begun to assist developing countries in dealing with their pasts and to identify this reckoning with history as a human rights concern.

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[3] On hard and easy issues, see Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, "The Two Faces of Issue Voting," *The American Political Science Review* 74, no. 1 (March 1980), 80.

The "politics of the past" has captured the attention of academics and intellectuals. Some view coming to terms with the past simply as a moral imperative, but many others claim that dealing with the past goes beyond settling moral accounts. Carl Nino, for example, argued that deliberation about past atrocities fosters democratic attitudes among citizens in a state transitioning from authoritarian rule.[4] Others view the reconciling of clashing historical narratives as a method of healing rifts in societies plagued by ethnic conflict or of mending fences between adversarial states.[5] Confronting history has also been linked to the deepening of democracy in advanced industrialized countries.[6] There is, in other words, a strong presumption that the way in which a state confronts the past has profound implications for its long-term political development.

This claim, however, rests on scant empirical evidence. Political scientists have only begun to explore how coming to terms with the past matters for later political outcomes.[7] There is currently no vocabulary for analyzing the process of confronting the past, no set of theories or hypotheses to guide inquiry into it, no research program organized around it. As a consequence, we need to ask a number of first-order questions about how ideas about the past, specifically a shameful past, shape the political present. What are the political stakes of coming to terms with the past? Who are the relevant actors in this process? How might such an analysis contribute to enduring concerns for political scientists and for scholars of comparative politics in particular?

I recast coming to terms with the past as a series of punctuated elite-led debates over the lessons of history. Historical interpretations matter because they contain normative and causal claims about politics in general. Political elites try to use the past by framing historical events in ways that justify both their immediate political aims and their worldviews, but history – especially a history burdened by massive violations of human rights – is an unwieldy tool because it invites multiple interpretations. Even in the prototypical case of "radical evil" – the Holocaust – the

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[4] Carl Nino, *Radical Evil on Trial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[5] See, for example, Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War," in *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace*, eds. Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 209–211.

[6] W. James Booth, "Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt," *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (June 1999): 249–263.

[7] Two examples are Nancy Bermeo, "Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship," *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 1 (April 1992): 273–291; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

"lessons of history" are far from self-evident. Indeed, they are wide open to ideational contestation among political elites seeking a foundation for their policies and ideologies.

The Nazi past is ubiquitous in contemporary German and Austrian politics.[8] Far from fading into history, public debates about the Nazi past have only increased in frequency and intensity. What the legacy of the Holocaust means for politics in the present and future is a question that continues to preoccupy political elites in both states. It is also one that Germans and Austrians have answered very differently over the past two decades, and these differences have had important consequences for political culture and partisan politics.

One consequence is particularly striking: the extent to which right-wing populist parties have established themselves in Austria and Germany over the past two decades. The rise of the far right is, of course, a pan-European phenomenon, and as recent developments in countries like Denmark and Belgium show, a strong indigenous Nazi or fascist movement is not a historical prerequisite for developing a successful right-wing populist party half a century later. But what is nonetheless remarkable about the German and Austrian cases is how divergent the development of the far right in the two surviving successor societies of the Third Reich has been. In terms of the far right's electoral success and integration into the political establishment, Austria and Germany represent opposite ends of the continuum in Western Europe, as Table 1.1 demonstrates.

This divergence is puzzling for many reasons. Germany possessed several of the underlying conditions – such as persistently high unemployment, massive immigration, and popular discontent with the European Union – that right-wing populist parties successfully exploited elsewhere in Western Europe. *Eurobarometer* surveys also regularly show that negative attitudes toward immigration are more widespread in Germany than in practically every other European country. Sixteen straight years of Christian Democratic (CDU) rule (1982–1998), coupled with the massive financial scandal that accompanied the party's fall from power, also would have seemed to augur well for the development of a political party to the right of the Union (the political coalition between the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Socialists [CSU]). For these and other reasons, German specialists predicted in the early 1990s that the

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[8] "Germany" refers here to the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) until 1990 and unified Germany thereafter. The German Democratic Republic (GDR), the former East Germany, is not the focus of this book.

TABLE 1.1. *The Far Right in Western Europe*

Country	Average Far-Right Vote in National Elections: 1986–2002
Austria	18.0
Switzerland	15.0
Italy	12.4
Norway	12.3
France	11.8
Denmark	8.2
Belgium	7.5
Portugal	7.0
Netherlands	4.6
Sweden	3.0
Germany	1.4
Luxembourg	0.8
United Kingdom	0.2
Greece	0.1

far-right Republikaner Party (REP) would become a permanent presence in the German party system. Why this party failed to do so, and why the far right more generally has failed politically in Germany, is an important and underexplored question.

The success of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) is also surprising given Austria's strong economic performance over the past two decades. The party engineered its electoral breakthrough in 1986, when the unemployment rate was 3.1 percent, and continued to gain strength over the next thirteen years, when Austria had a lower annual average unemployment rate than any other Western European country except Luxembourg and Switzerland. When the FPÖ won 26.9 percent of the vote in the 1999 national parliamentary elections, the unemployment rate was only 3.9 percent (compared with 8.4 percent in Germany). While immigration was high in Austria, it was slightly less than in Germany and fell off dramatically after 1993. Compared with most other Western European states over the 1980s and 1990s, Austria does appear to have preserved its status as the "island of the blessed," as former Prime Minister Bruno Kreisky once described it. That the FPÖ could do so well under such conditions, and enter a national government with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in 2000, to the consternation of the international community, is remarkable. Whether or not the FPÖ recovers from its electoral implosion in 2002, and whether or not Jörg Haider's newly formed Alliance for Austria's Future (BZÖ) gets off the ground, the populist right has

succeeded in radically altering the Austrian party system and will most likely remain an important political force.

To account for the divergent success of the far right in Germany and Austria, I explore the main conventional hypotheses about right-wing populism in advanced industrial societies. Some scholars claim that a postmaterial transformation has led to the rise of right-wing populist parties, and that the variance in their strength depends on their ability to offer a "winning combination" of neoliberalism and xenophobia to a shifting voter base.[9] The German and Austrian cases, I argue, provide only limited support for this theory. The two cases also do not confirm a second group of explanations that focus on immigration and unemployment as the key independent variables. Nor do explanations that focus solely, or mainly, on differences in electoral institutions, such as electoral formulas and district magnitude, provide much analytical leverage. I find some evidence for the hypothesis that established political parties decrease support for right-wing populism by adopting xenophobic discourse and strict policies on immigration. Such cooptation was one factor in the demise of the REPs in Germany. Yet the Austrian case, as well as other cases in Western Europe, suggests that cooptation can also backfire by legitimating right-wing populist parties and increasing their electoral strength.

Using the German and Austrian cases for theory construction, I develop an alternative explanation for the variation in the far right's success. Although postmaterialism, immigration, and European integration have created a host of pressures that favor the far right, these forces in themselves do not translate into electoral success. Like the cooptation hypothesis, I see a large role for other political parties in influencing the fate of right-wing populist parties, but cooptation is not the only possible strategy.

Existing political parties can choose to cooperate with, or try to "tame," the far right and integrate it into the party system. This process often begins at the municipal and state levels, and can result in the formation of coalition governments that include right-wing populist parties at the national level. Although participation in government weakens right-wing populist parties in the short run by eliminating their protest votes, I suggest that cooperation and integration strategies ultimately strengthen them.

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[9] Herbert Kitschelt, in collaboration with Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). See also Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

On the other hand, political parties can choose to combat right-wing populist challengers. The most effective strategy for doing so appears to be a combination of cooptation, confrontation, and marginalization. Established political parties seize on the themes of right-wing populist parties (cooptation) while simultaneously denouncing them as enemies of the system (confrontation) and refusing to cooperate with them, or even speak with them, at any political level (marginalization). By pursuing this strategy, political parties are sometimes forced into unpopular alliances with other parties to avoid cooperation with the far right. In some cases, parties have given up power rather than rely on the support of right-wing populist parties. By denying the far right any hope of participating in coalitions or passing its own legislation, the combat strategy ultimately undermines its electoral appeal.

For the combat strategy to be effective, it must be supported by the national media and by civil society. When the media universally denounce right-wing populist parties and launch campaigns against them, some contumacious voters might be attracted to the far right, but the net result is to weaken public support for it. When members of civil society protest against and stigmatize right-wing populist parties, they create a host of organizational and recruitment problems for such parties. When parts of the national media and civil society are either quiescent or actively supportive of right-wing populist parties, however, this can allow them to overcome their marginalization and attract a wider following.

In short, this book departs from previous studies of right-wing populist parties, and from much of the literature on political parties in general, by focusing on the broader political-cultural environment in which they operate. The emphasis is on the long-term trajectory of parties rather than on the results of any particular election, although I do maintain that the initial reactions of political parties, the media, and groups in civil society to the far right critically influence the latter's development and position in the party system. In this sense, I view party development as path dependent.[10]

How do political parties, the media, and civil society choose between combating and taming right-wing populism? Although strategic considerations can be important for political parties, I argue that reactions to the far right are basically structured by ideas about the legitimacy of right-wing populist movements and perceptions of the threat they pose to the

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[10] On the path dependence of political parties, see Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organisation and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

quality of democracy. These ideas and perceptions, I hypothesize, vary across time and space. In the case of postwar Europe, the fascist era of the interwar years is an important point of reference for contemporary views about the far right.[11]

As noted previously, Germany and Austria have confronted the Nazi past in radically different ways. This was not always the case. In the early postwar period, elites in both states held remarkably similar ideas about the relevance of the Nazi past for contemporary politics. Both saw Nazism as a historical aberration in their nation's histories. Both viewed their own populations as the primary victims of Nazism. Both made only fleeting and vague references to the Holocaust. The political integration of former Nazis proceeded rapidly in both countries, and those who called for critical examinations of the recent past were either isolated or came from the margins of politics and society. Although the extraparliamentary protest movement in Germany challenged this wall of silence in the 1960s, it was only in the 1980s that the Nazi past became a serious political issue in Germany. In Austria, there was no challenge to the idea that Austria was "Hitler's first victim" until the presidential candidacy of Kurt Waldheim evolved into a debate about his, and by extension Austria's, Nazi past. In both states, public debates about the past in the 1980s produced new frames, reshaped elite opinion, and created new discourses about the Nazi era. As we shall see, however, these debates produced radically different outcomes.

This book represents an exercise in theory construction. My arguments about both public debates and the development of right-wing populist parties were arrived at inductively during more than two years of fieldwork in the two countries. I present my theories in abstract, generalizable term so that they may be used, or contested, by scholars working in other areas. I make no claim to have tested them here. For scholars less concerned with social science methodology and more interested in my substantive findings, the theoretical architecture helps to structure what would otherwise be an intricate, unwieldy narrative.

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[11] It is important to note that I do not view these parties as neofascist, nor do I argue that they share programmatic affinities with National Socialism. Like other far-right parties in Western Europe, such as the National Front in France, the Progress Parties in Denmark and Norway, and the Northern League in Italy, these parties are normally classified as right-wing populist parties. For a further discussion of the differences between neofascist and right-wing populist parties, see Cas Mudde, "The War of Words: Defining the Extreme Right Party Family," *West European Politics* 19, no. 2 (1996): 225–248.