

Book Review

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

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Professor Ruth Wodak is professor of discourse studies at Lancaster University. She moved to the U.S. from Vienna, Austria, where she was full professor of applied linguistics since 1991. She has stayed co-director of the Austrian National Focal Point (NFP) of the European Monitoring Centre for Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism.

Besides various other prizes, Dr. Wodak was awarded the Wittgenstein Prize for Elite Researchers in 1996, which made six years of continuous interdisciplinary team research possible. The main projects focused on "Discourses on Un/employment in EU organizations; Debates on NATO and Neutrality in Austria and Hungary; The Discursive Construction of European Identities; Attitudes towards EU-Enlargement; Racism at the Top. Parliamentary Debates on Immigration in six EU countries; the discursive Construction of the Past - Individual and Collective Memories of the German Wehrmacht and the Second World War." In October 2006, she was awarded the Woman's Prize of the City of Vienna. (Taken from <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/ndcc/download/rw.htm>)

The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean is a linguistic deconstruction of right-wing populist parties' presentations and coded messages. The author seeks to understand and explain the movement of right-wing political parties from the fringe of European and, to some extent, United States politics to the center. She argues that these groups prey on and develop fear of change by exploiting upsets and change in the world and construct scapegoats, whom they

argue are responsible for the trouble. Each chapter analyzes vignettes from campaign materials, television interviews and news stories, which demonstrate how various rhetorical devices are used to communicate coded and ambiguous content.

Chapter 1: Populism and politics: Transgressing norms and taboos, states, "Most importantly, right-wing populism does not only relate to the form of rhetoric but to its specific contents... (p.1 italics in original)." Right-wing populism creates scapegoats, who are blamed for threatening or damaging European societies. Proponents also encourage renationalization and oppose the European Union. They play to and encourage fear and propose a politics of exclusion. They are outrageous in their public statements, which gains them press coverage and helps them control the political agenda. Right-wing politicians claim to say what others are thinking but fear to say.

Chapter 2: Theories and definitions: The politics of identity, reviews many scholarly approaches to defining and explaining right-wing political effectiveness. It distills three main themes: a concept of "the people" or the "homeland," a racially pure community, and the nation as a body. These themes are developed through the rest of the book. In other words, identity politics.

Chapter 3: Protecting borders and the people: The politics of exclusion, distinguishes between left-wing and right-wing populism based upon content of arguments. Right-wing populism is exclusionary and assumes a homogenous internal

population in the nation-state. It defines “others” and seeks to exclude them. The chapter ends with a summary of the politics of fear.

Chapter 4: Language and identity: The politics of nationalism, explains how right-wing populists use the “mother tongue” to construct their picture of national identity and propose exclusionary practices based on who speaks a particular language. They do this in spite of, and in contradiction of the European Union’s acceptance of multiple languages. They propose that citizenship must be based upon speaking the native language. The author states, “It is obvious that we are dealing with nativist ideologies of ethnic nationhood, related to birth, blood and a mystical notion of a homogenous demos and history (p.94, italics in original).”

Chapter 5: Antisemitism: The politics of denial, establishes that anti-Semitism has not been replaced by Islamophobia, but the European history of anti-Semitism continues. The chapter demonstrates how through techniques of plausible denial, right-wing populists convey coded anti-Semitic messages. Actors claim to have Jewish friends and/or claim to be the victims of their statements being misunderstood while communicating holocaust denial and other biased messages.

Chapter 6: Performance and the media: The politics of charisma, analyzes how right-wing political actors construct their appeal. They construct immigrants as threatening the country’s way of life and as taking jobs. The chapter notes that in both Europe and the U.S. right-wing actors do not oppose wealthy immigrants. Right-wing demagogues promote the fear and danger then promote themselves as the “savior” of the people and the nation. They claim they will speak what others know, but fear to say. They offer no clear plans, but ask that they be trusted to save the nation.

Chapter 7: Gender and the body politic: The politics of patriarchy, deconstructs how these groups and leaders use the idea of freeing Muslim

women from the burqa to exploit Islamophobia and to promote traditional female roles. They promote motherliness as the primary value of women. The chapter notes that abortion is not an issue in Europe, but has been made a major line of division by American right-wing groups. In Europe, the burqa-wearing Muslim woman symbolizes the threat to the culture. In the U.S., the threat to “family values” is constructed as the threat.

Chapter 8: Mainstreaming: The normalization of exclusion, analyzes how the rhetorical strategies, coupled with right-wing content discussed throughout the book, have gained control of much of the political debate. It presents the author’s strategies for changing the debate and her hopes for a better approach.

The book was published before Donald Trump began his campaign, but he and Ted Cruz are using many of the approaches discussed in the book. I believe this book could be very useful in social work macro-practice courses. It could help students understand how politicians use rhetorical devices to communicate their content. It could help them understand the logical fallacies in much political rhetoric. Every social worker, who is concerned for social justice and bothered by policies being promoted by right-wing demagogues will find this analysis helpful in understanding how rhetorical devices are used to communicate often fallacious content.