Reflections: Extreme Geographies

The political extreme as the new normal: the cases of Brexit, the French state of emergency and Dutch Islamophobia

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In this article we carry out a geopolitical analysis of the turbulent breeze driving the EU into uncharted extremes. To do this we zoom in on three cases that we deem both a response to political extremism and a source of political extremism in themselves: France's state of emergency, Brexit and the pyrrhic victory over the far-right in the Dutch elections of 2017 . Our analysis suggests that even though the political forces behind these events have praised their policies or electoral victories as bulwarks to keep extremism in check, the sort of extremism that they try to keep at bay is not as worrying as the counter-productive realpolitik of the traditional establishment they represent. By surreptitiously adopting precisely the kind of extremist political preferences that they claim to set themselves against, these politics show how the establishment in the EU is normalising the extreme geopolitics of exclusion that are structurally undermining the very principles of rule of law, liberal democracy and overall openness on which the EU is based. The result: what used to be easily dismissed as irrational or evil has become the everyday normal. The extremism we so much fear has become the new *normality*.

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Never react to an evil in such a way as to augment it. – Simone Weil

Introduction

A specter that seemed burried under the ruins of the Second World War has returned to haunt Europe once again: the specter of fear itself. Across the EU, a bulging concert of political forces is normalising a politics of fear while ever more assertively promoting an essentially monocultural, unapologetically dominant and nationally homogeneous community which they imagine Europe once

was. They find their inspiration in the purity of a Europe they construct with cherry-picked distortions of an idealized past – whose troubling chapters have been erased or simply omitted. These purified imaginations are then contrasted with the threatening representations of besiegement, infiltration, pollution and extermination on which their message draws its political force: doctored images, exaggerated statistics and panic-striking narratives portraying the EU as being overrun by 'terrorist fighters', 'fortune seekers' and other unassimilable immigrants. Call it 'great-again politics': this anachronic glorification of a racially homogenous past traces a more or less implicit connection between Europe's recent multicultural societies and whatever challenges the EU is facing today– immigration, terrorism, asylum, climate change, economic and political instability, military threats and a reorganization of power around the world. Great-again politics is wishing a painful past away while focusing on its good things, the equivalent of narrative morphine injected into history: 'We used to be great. Never mind the blemishes. Focus on the big picture: we were great, let's focus on that.' The implications of these evocations are of course grim: they conjure up a lost glory that was predicated on the subjugation of what were considered lesser races and which not only led to the brutality of imperialism, colonization and slavery but whose culmination was the self-inflicted civilisational suicide of the Second World War and its Holocaust (Bauman 1989). Although on this paper we focus on the EU, this great-again politics is shaping politics not only here but also in places like Trump's US, Putin's Russia and Erdogan's Turkey. Overtones of imperial high-handedness, racialized colonial hierarchization and nationalist hubris that seemed confined to the safe boundaries of history books are being tootled again by European politicians, not to warn us from the past but as nostalgia for a future worth striving for.

Unthinkable some years ago, the policies and rhetoric of great-again political parties have become ever more extreme across the EU: the dog-whistle anti-Semitism of the French National Front;[1] the police harassment of Muslims normalised by France's prolonged state of emergency (Safdar 2016); the virulent Islamophobia of the Dutch Freedom Party of Wilders (Darroch 2016); the stark racism behind eastern European Member States' refusals to admit non-Christian asylum seekers (BBC 2015; Cienski 2017); the fanatic isolationism and delusional imperial nostalgia evoked by the rhetoric and policies favoured by British Eurosceptics – who want to cut ties with the EU against the wishes of half their population and defying the judgement of an army of experts warning against it (Olusonga 2017); the immoral bordering regime of the EU, dependant on refugee deals that outsource EU's international responsibilities to regimes known for their poor record on human rights (van Houtum 2010). Examples of extreme and isolationist politics abound and are quickly multiplying.

Even as they keep failing to get hold of public office in most EU Member States, these phobic voices have been gaining influence in the political debate and policymaking across the EU for over a decade. A crucial component of their success – and this is the central argument of our paper – is that the establishment of traditional political parties and coalitions that has been preventing xenophobes from seizing power, either through strategic electoral alliances or by refusing to enter into coalitions with them, has unwittingly become a valuable convenience in their political strategy and propaganda. First, by increasingly normalising and co-opting their phobic policies, a significant portion of establishment parties have not only allowed populists to effectively set the agenda but they have also shielded them from the accountability of its implementation and consequences. Second, the xenophobes' detachment from government has allowed them to keep branding themselves as political outsiders challenging the establishment.[2] The populists' consistent underdog status has rendered credibility to the conspiratorial nature of their rhetoric: they fancy themselves as champions of a free speech stifled by political correctness, speaking out for an aggravated 'silent majority' – 'the people' – whose political preferences the so-called establishment keeps betraying. Ironically, the establishment that is considered the best hope against their radical politics has been able to keep xenophobes at bay not by opposing but by mimicking their rhetoric and by implementing their preferred policies.[3]

And so we argue that the most extreme political geographies threatening the EU are not found in the menacing openness denounced by phobic Eurosceptics or in the lands and cultures beyond the borders of either the EU or its Member States. Rather, we locate the most extreme geographies threatening the EU within Europe itself and, particularly, within the politicians who, having the power

to counter the imaginations fuelling Euroscepticism, nationalism and xenophobia, have been normalising, internalising and hence further enabling them instead. They do not reduce the fear in society, but capitalise on it and further legitimise it under the pretense of 'normality'.[4]

This is what Hannah Arendt referred to as 'the banality of evil': humanity's greatest tragedies are patiently shaped neither mainly nor mostly by grandiose displays of monstrosity but by a thousand everyday rituals of mundane acquiescence with evil (Arendt 1963). Although the recent victories of seemingly moderate parties in the Netherlands and France have been hailed for putting a stop to the ominous romanticism of Eurosceptic nationalists, it would not be prudent to get too complacent. If their victories have sparked so much relief is only because they have averted a relapse into the catastrophical politics from whose catharsis today's European prosperity first arose. Hence, it would not be good judgement to take lightly the foreboding sight of the French National Front – an anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denialist political party with links to the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime – and the Dutch Freedom Party – which has called for the indiscriminate expulsion of a racially-defined social group – competing on equal footing with centrist parties. There is little to celebrate in seeing the politics of racial authoritarianism and nationalist bigotry competing as acceptable contenders against the politics of liberal democracy and openness. It is worth keeping in mind that even though the French National Front and the Dutch Freedom party lost the elections, their respective electoral shares have never been bulkier and, most disturbingly, their formerly ostracised message has been rehabilitated: previously relegated to the fringes of the political spectrum, today it has become an acceptable political alternative.

In what follows, we will first provide a discussion on the meaning of 'extreme political geographies'. And we will discuss the tensions between normality and liberal democracy. Then we will offer an analysis of three case studies in three western European countries that show how the European establishment's policies and normalisation responses reinforce the very extreme politics they attempt to tame. Our first case is France. The Paris attacks of November 2015 heightened the fear of insecurity in France and the EU, yet the French state responded with a state of emergency that has opened the door to a more systematic and widespread insecurity perpetrated not by terrorist attacks but by abuses of the state. Our second case is Brexit. Even though the UK's departure from the EU was motivated by both an anxiety over loss of prosperity and by a nostalgia for former imperial greatness, the prospect of Brexit now threatens to leave the UK poorer, perhaps disintegrated, more isolated and geopolitically less relevant. Our last case is the 'normality politics' in the Netherlands. The recent victory of the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) over the Eurosceptic and Islamophobic Freedom Party (PVV) in the Dutch general elections of March 2017 was praised as timely obstruction to the rise of xenophobic Eurosceptics. And yet, the VVD's victory was a pyrrhic one: it was achieved by promoting a platform that embraces the xenophobia of the party it succeeded in keeping away from power.

The autocratic construction of normality

Who defines what is 'normal', on which grounds and with which legitimacy? In a democracy, this is and should be an open question. For, unlike laws, which are enforced by the state, the enforcement of norms derives from an (inter)subjective internalisation of their inherent value. What is considered to be the norm and thus 'normal' is crucially dependent on the notion of normality and thus on the incompatibility against which normality necessarily defines itself. Making pleas for normality presupposes an assumption about the opposites that define it: the extremes of abnormality. To be sure, there are very basic, commonsensical, perhaps universal norms whose intrinsic value could hardly be disputed regardless of context, such as those promoting good will or preventing harm among people. Yet, we should hear some alarms ringing whenever governments of liberal democracies start to advocate normality. Unlike liberal laws, which derive from principles that assume universal preference – for example, murder is illegal because presumably pretty much everyone detests getting killed and freedom of speech is enshrined as a sacrosanct principle because presumably everyone enjoys speaking up their mind –, norms stem not from an assumption of universal individual preference – the main referent of liberal philosophies – but are the expression of collective convention: the tyranny of the majority that liberal democracies try to prevent.

This is where the tension between pleas for normality and liberal values lies: collective conventions of *what is normal* have been traditionally used to oppress rather than to emancipate the individual. Accusations of abnormality have been the basis to discriminate against minorities, disadvantaged groups and political opponents. Hence, whenever the government of a liberal democracy starts making appeals to normality, it might be subverting the very principles of its political regime by asking people to conform not to laws drafted through mechanisms that ensure the respect for minorities and political liberties and which ultimately have an abstract best interest in mind but to the subjective social expectations of either an oppressive majority or an authoritarian minority. Such a government might be dismissing legality in favour of the tyranny of tradition such as religion or Romantic political myths like nationalism. For a society to define and enforce 'normality' is hence principally illiberal. Taken to its extreme consequence, absolute normality presupposes absolute subjugation: only totalitarian dictatorships can enforce a complete homogenization of preferences, thoughts and actions or, in other words: a total normality.[5]

One could anticipate this claim (i.e., that total normality leads to totalitarianism) to be dismissed as a paranoid exaggeration. Surely, a critical mind could plausibly counter, the appeals to normality from today's moderate political parties across the EU need to be contextualized as a reaction against the resurrection of national socialism across the EU.[6] Thus, appeals to normality within the EU's current geopolitical context are not aimed at a homogenization of preferences or at the promotion of an illiberal autocracy but rather the opposite: a return to the moderation and liberal values that national socialist parties shun. This counterargument would be persuasive if the rhetoric and policy-making did not contradict it so blatantly. Although establishment parties across the EU are making appeals to normality while seemingly rejecting populist rhetoric, a closer look into their words and policies reveals that they are not rejecting the national socialist approach but merely sugar-coating it, making it politically acceptable, morally digestible or, in other words: *normal*. Against this deceitfully reassuring aspiration for normality, it is however worth remembering that throughout most of history those who have been considered abnormal are precisely those whose protection liberal democracies consider their most ennobling historical triumphs: the formerly stigmatized as 'sexually deviant', 'racially corrupted', 'morally aberrant' (Foucault 1965). That is why it should awaken some suspicion to see self-styled moderate and liberal political parties across the EU making pleas for normality, when it is precisely in the defense of diversity – and what is diversity if not a collection of abnormalities? – that liberal democracies have philosophically and historically cut their teeth (e.g. Mill 1859, 89). This is one of the most defining characteristics of the post-war project of European integration: a cautiousness about the slippery slope of allowing power to define what is normal and what is not on the basis of phenotypical and cultural ideals. Hence, the 'normalisation-of-the-extreme' agenda that we are seeing in today's EU politics is arguably no less than perhaps the most self-harming political movement since the Second World War. To illustrate our argument, in the following sections we train our eyes to perceive the hidden radicalisation behind three cases of normalisation of the extreme in France, the UK and the Netherlands.

The French state of emergency as the new normal

The EU's political centre has shifted so sharply to an illiberal right that seeing a socialist president, Francois Hollande, implementing policies otherwise evocative of far-right right political inclinations, was considered an appropriate response to the terrorist attacks on Paris in November of 2015. The French president ordered the bombing of Raqqa, a city four thousand kilometres away, a state of emergency to justify searches without warrants, and a reinstatement of France's border controls. All this to avenge crimes committed by mostly French and Belgian gunmen. We should be alarmed to see such illogical measures finding widespread support and unquestioned imitation across the EU (Der Spiegel 2015; Sparrow 2015), for the geopolitical reasoning that justifies them is morally nefarious: the policies it advocates are dislocated from the geography that caused the problems they are intended to address.

The significance of the French response is that it was by no means atypical. Like France, the EU as a whole has been basically following France in its response to terrorist crimes. The mechanism of this response typically follows the following faulty yet recurrent reasoning. First, the attack is grounded on

an essential ideological and cultural incompatibility: as an assault on 'our values' and 'us', which in turn leads to the perception of terrorists not merely as individual criminals or as militants of a terrorist network but rather as the undifferentiated members of a civilisational clash (Huntington 1996). The hardening of the borders between 'us' and 'the terrorists', who are assumed to be 'Muslims' in terms of both identity and motivations, in turn justifies the scapegoating and harassment of the already stigmatized Muslim minority in the EU (Roy 2006, 2017). Second, although most terrorists are the EU's own citizens, the response aims at avenging victims at home by carrying out military attacks that inevitably end murdering more innocent people in the Middle East – for there is no such thing as "surgical bombings" – and sowing the suffering that legitimises the grievances fuelling Islamist terrorist attacks against the EU (Bueno Lacy *et al.* 2016). Third, the biopolitical response of the EU implies tightening its borders through a harder border management. This border reconfiguration is premised upon the structural breach of the EU's international obligations to protect refugees and thus threatens the very foundations of the EU by promoting policies that run against both the humanism that the EU is supposed to take its inspiration from and the liberal principles it is supposed to champion. In the discourse about the causes of Islamist terrorism in France or the EU, there is an absolute lack of awareness about France or the EU's own responsibility. To the contrary: EU Member States together with the US are targeting Muslims, closing their borders to refugees and bombing ISIS in Syria as if that would put an end to what is at least partially a secular home-grown threat.

A telling contrast is found in the way the EU deals with extreme-nationalist terrorists, whose crimes are not only treated as individual crimes rather than as structural threats but whose ideologies find in the xenophobic and autocratic discourses and policies of the EU increasing legitimisation and motivation (EUROPOL 2016, 5). In the case of extreme-nationalist terrorism, often no ideology is exposed and problematised. In order to grasp the absurdity of the different approaches to Islamist and extreme-nationalist terrorism, it is useful to imagine, as a counterfactual exercise, the EU implementing the same policies to address nationalist extremism as it uses to address islamist terrorism. Imagine EU Member States dropping bombs on the terrorists' 'hometowns' and afterwards dismissing the many murdered civilians as mere 'collateral casualties'. Imagine media outlets and political leaders across the EU demanding Christians, their churches and religious communities to expressly distance themselves from the right-wing extremists that claim Christianity as a source of either inspiration or concern. Imagine police forces across the EU breaking into the homes of Christian families without warrants to harass and intimidate them on grounds of national security. Imagine EU Member States demanding that the borders be selectively closed to all Christian refugees. It sounds as sensible as using a butcher's knife to heal a broken bone.

As argued above, the absurdity of the EU's geopolitical narrative about Islamic terrorism also lies exposed in the striking mismatch between the geography of the crimes carried out in Paris and the geography charted by the French president's response. "La France est en guerre", François Hollande ventured in the aftermath of the attacks. Yet, the perpetrators were by no stretch of the definition an "army" but a handful of mostly EU citizens. By framing these attacks as threats stemming from outside of France and from outside of Europe, Hollande – like George W. Bush before him – justified the unjustifiable to give support for airstrikes bound to kill innocent people outside their own country in order to avenge compatriots killed by other compatriots.

Hollande further speculated that the attacks were directed "against the values we defend". This is questionable. The 'against-our-values' rhetoric implies that Muslims, for ISIS pretends to embody the purest version of Islam and the French and Belgian gunmen of Paris claimed to be acting in its name, in general rather than ISIS in particular endorse such violence. Plus, what we see happening is the targeting of places where the highest number of French people can be killed. The idea seems to be to kill random numbers of people in order to spread fear, not attack values *per se*. To turn this into a conflict between antagonistic value systems, which in the debate on islamist terrorism are always assumed but never specified, is only fuelling the unnecessary fear that justifies Islamophobia and hence the dividing of EU societies along ethno-religious lines, which is precisely the aim of the psycho-political strategy of islamist terrorists.

What is more, the terrorist attacks, Hollande advanced, were directed "against who we are". This is even more unsound: as far as we know, the terrorists were all EU citizens; people who grew up in

France or Belgium and spoke fluent French or Flemish. We should be aware that Islamic terrorism in the EU is not a foreign import but a homemade recipe. Contrary to what the mainstream narrative suggests, Islamic terrorism is not set against "the West" but it is by and large a product of the West itself. The terrorists that carried out the Paris attacks should not be seen as either a product of Islam or as isolated incidents, but rather as the most violent manifestation of a structural problem: the kind of Westernisation that takes place through the spatial, economic and socio-political marginalisation of entire ethnic groups with a migratory background in the EU and through the European-assisted bombing that has fashioned the relentlessly violent tragedy of the Middle East over the past decades. In this vein, the terrorist attacks on Paris can also be seen as part of a longstanding tit-for-tat: ISIS' response to France's Opération Chammal, the French government's military operation against ISIS (Graham 2015). It is understandable that Hollande was wary to admit such a link and thus that the terrorist attacks in Paris were the price France paid for his government's foreign policy in the Middle East, which could confront him with the critique that he may have used military intervention in the past less to foster French strategic interests than to boost his plummeting popularity. The "against-our-values and against who we are" rationale seems to imply not merely a troubling prejudice but a convenient excuse for the fallout of failed imperial recklessness. EU Member States' military adventurism in Africa and the Middle East is thus coming back to the EU in the form of Islamist terrorism. And this in turn is tapping on the resentment that some EU citizens with a migratory background have for a longstanding orientalist segregation in Europe's neighbourhoods as well as in its educational and labour markets – a discrimination worsened by memories of colonialism and the islamophobia unleashed since 'the war on terror' was declared in 2001. ISIS is targeting European Muslims' resentment by inserting their personal struggles into a greater epic of Muslim martyrdom.

What is more, we need to reflect upon the role that the memories of colonialism might play in the contexts of stigmatisation experienced by the French of Maghrebi descent and how Islamic terrorism offers them a tool to express their dissatisfaction. After all, terrorism was a tool of national liberation in Algeria and the marginalisation faced by French of Algerian descent in the land of their parents' former colonial oppressor could beguile some of them – the most frustrated, the most unstable, the most aggravated – to compare their situation with their parents' and dignify terrorism as a time-honoured roar of defiance against their own oppression. It is not a mere coincidence that the Front National, a political family clan founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen – a blatant anti-Semite, Holocaust-denier and former torturer during the war of Algeria (Beaugé 2012) – has gained so much in popularity in a time when France is threatened by the Islamic terrorism committed by its youth of Maghrebi descent. So rather than a civilisational clash (à la Huntington) between "the West" and "the Islamic World", what seems to be more helpful in explaining the conflict is a longstanding and unresolved clash between France and its former Maghrebi colonies as well as within France itself.

All this means that neither continuous military operations in the Middle East nor more soldiers patrolling the streets of Europe will address any of Islamist terrorism's structural causes. Indeed, militarization might only create a bigger problem, for whenever the next terrorist attack strikes among soldier-patrolled streets, both people and politicians might call for ever stronger measures: more militarization, more profiling and more repression, which will lead to a more closed, more fearful, more authoritarian and less free society. To prevent this from unfolding it is urgent to question the geography that Hollande and the EU are making accountable for Islamist terrorist attacks. The people they point to as culprits as well as the places they want to bomb and the culture they frame as threatening have the goal to convince their electorates about the wisdom of their policies against terrorism. Yet, there is no wisdom but petty recklessness behind them. The debate has turned into a well-rehearsed circus of banal representations of a civilisational war between Islam and the West. Misrepresentations have taken most of the political foreground and pushed alternative, more truthful representations, to the background. It is the same foolish response as the "war on terror" that was conceived by George W. Bush's administration. George Bush's "war on terror" was supposed to make 'us' safer. Instead, this geopolitical rhetoric and the devastation it has inspired over the last 16 years has been intimately linked to the worst 16 years of Islamic terrorism that Europe has ever seen.

The new normality is creating a *Ban-opticon*: the disciplining of normality and the expelling or banishment of what is seen as 'deviant'. It is the kind of governmentality that has been dominating

geopolitical thinking around big swathes of the world, particularly the US and Europe, since the attacks on New York in 2001 (Bigo 2006a). The policies related to this new normality share two main characteristics: normalisation of a permanent state of emergency and violence on the one hand and practices of exceptionalism (Agamben 2003), profiling practices and containing foreigners on the other. The concern is that there is "an Orwellian society in the making, through a 'liberal' agenda" (Bigo 2006b, 46). Although a literary work of political fiction, Orwell's *1984* prescient description of the function that permanent war served to preserve the power of the dystopian totalitarian government he imagined is a useful analysis of how today's violent normality operates (Orwell 1949, 243): "It does not matter whether the war is actually happening, and, since no decisive victory is possible, it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly. All that is needed is that a state of war should exist." Migrants, asylum seekers, and political dissidents have been conflated with terrorists while the ceaseless outcries denouncing the erosion of the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups as well as of the institutions intended to uphold them have been drowned in a sea of hysteria about terrorism. Political speech and policies which long ago would have been immediately lambasted as inconceivably authoritarian are leading to the securitization and militarization of life across the EU. Procedures of exclusion that seemed to have been relegated to the darkest and ever faintest memories of the European psyche are making a grand return to the fore of European politics and allowing us to envision the advent of a dystopian future.

We should not be shy to ask: how is bombing the Middle East a sensible answer to Islamic terrorism when military intervention is responsible for the creation of ISIS in the first place? How are EU citizens becoming safer by states of emergency that allow the further stigmatisation of Muslim minorities in Europe while legitimising fears against Syrian refugees and intra-communitarian EU migrants? How is killing indiscriminate numbers of Muslims going to quench the hatred and determination that keeps fuelling Islamist terrorism in the EU and beyond? How would stricter border controls have helped prevent French and Belgian citizens from entering their own countries and causing the mayhem they did?

Brexit and the extreme geographies of imperial nostalgia

Our second case in point here regarding the normalisation of the extreme is Brexit: the process spanning the decision to hold a referendum on Britain's membership to the EU to the UK's formal notification to leave the EU until today. So far, Brexit is perhaps the most dramatic consequence of the nostalgia for normality that Europe is experiencing. Like France, where the new normal is a state of emergency and a state increasingly alienated from parts of its own citizenry, the case of Brexit constitutes an enlightening case study to cast light upon the extreme imaginary geographies being charted by the establishment. The same as France's course, the British is leading to equally dramatic destinations. At the core of the Brexit narrative we can find the same extraordinary rarity that has been fuelling populist insurgencies all across liberal democracies: a curious blend of postcolonial grievance and imperial nostalgia.

The post-colonial grievance was recurrently evoked through the repetitive discourse of political emancipation. Nigel Farage – perhaps the UK's most famous exponent of xenophobia and Euroscepticism – and Boris Johnson – London's previous major turned prominent Eurosceptic – referred to the referendum's date as 'our independence day' (BBC 2016; Stone 2016). This is an unexpected metaphor. Narratives of unjust oppression redressed through independence constitute the central trope of former colonies' national mythologies as well as the historical outrage fuelling decolonial theories (see e.g. Fanon 1961; Mignolo 1992). Hence, it is surprising to find the same postcolonial grievances in the mainstream discourse of a country that is perhaps the epitome of European imperialism.[7]

The British discourse of emancipation from the EU's 'oppression' is, in turn, based on the two accusations most recurrently denounced by the figureheads of the UK's campaign to leave the EU: freeing the UK from Brussels' dictates and "taking back control of our borders" (Ross 2016). Although it goes without saying that the UK joined and can leave the EU voluntarily, what gives this discourse – and any other – its strength to shape people's minds and actions is its repetition and thus its ability

to contest or silence alternatives. Although misguided – for neither is the EU a dictatorship nor is the UK by any stretch of the definition its colony – the domination that these discourses acquired through their sustained replication endowed them with the status of plausible claims to truth: they portrayed the project of European integration that has achieved the most opulent prosperity Europe has ever seen as a dictatorship and the open borders that have allowed such prosperity as its main threat.

The deleterious effects of the EU's open borders were evoked by Theresa May's insistence on the UK leaving both *The European Convention on Human Rights* and the European Court of Justice (Ashtana & Mason 2016). She denounced the European Convention on Human Rights as a threat to British security because it prevented the deportation of terrorists. These denunciations not only exaggerated the Islamist threat (for they did not prevent the UK from punishing terrorists) but they conflated islamist terrorism with migration from Muslim countries. Overall, the anxieties about the ECHR and the ECJ uttered by May suggest that the particular kind of immigrant that Brexiteers have as their concern is, more than any abstract immigrant, 'the Muslim immigrant'.

This cuts to the core of Brexit: not only has it been a process obsessed with immigration but particularly preoccupied with Muslim immigration in particular (Jeory 2016; Wadsworth 2017). The famous UKIP poster reading "BREAKING POINT" showed this strikingly: in its visual composition, the main slogan championed by the campaign for the UK to leave the EU, "To take back control of our borders", is reinforced by an image picturing a thick long line of dark-skinned refugees (Fig. 1; Stewart & Mason 2016).

Several media outlets pointed out that the image of this poster is a reminiscent of Nazi propaganda film warning about the Jewish threat (Fig. 2; Stewart & Mason 2016). The poster of Farage's party UKIP promotes anxiety not only about immigrants but, by contextual association with the refugee crisis that has been grabbing headlines since the summer of 2015, also for the many asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries that have been seeking refuge in the EU ever since.

The discursive thread of subjugation to a project of self-destructive miscegenation unscrupulously imposed by a treacherous elite is a common trope traditionally found in the discourses of the European and American far right (Ferber & Kimmel 2000). For example, Anders Breivik's manifesto,

Fig. 1. Nigel Farage, one of the main advocates for the UK to leave the EU, posing in front of a poster whose visual composition conflates high numbers of refugees from Muslim countries with the EU's failure to its Member States. This poster was part of the campaign aimed at persuading British voters to cast their ballots in favour of the proposal for the UK to renounce its EU membership ahead of the referendum that decided this question.

Fig. 2. Comparison of the poster 'Breaking Point', used by the campaign aimed at persuading the British electorate to vote in favour of the UK to leave the EU, and a Nazi propaganda film picturing large streams of Jewish refugees as a threat (source: Indy100).

2083: A European declaration of independence, espouses the emancipation from this yoke as its title and motivation: "More than 90% of the EU and national parliamentarians and more than 95% of journalists are supporters of European multiculturalism and therefore supporters of the ongoing Islamic colonisation of Europe; yet, they DO NOT have the permission of the European peoples to implement these doctrines" (Breivik 2011, 4). Through this narrative wizardry, the project of political integration that has created unseen prosperity in Europe is turned into betrayal, while Muslim immigrants and refugees are turned into colonizers. This is not only historically nonsensical but morally devious: by turning the vulnerable into the powerful and the powerful into the vulnerable, this misrepresentation of power relations legitimizes the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Brexiteers have adopted this very apocryphal narrative, an affinity that has revealed yet another thing (Williams & Law 2012): it is not so much immigration Brexiteers are against, but rather a certain kind of immigration; theirs is a selective xenophobia, an Islamophobic and illiberal phobia, a fear of a Muslim geography that cannot be fended off using the tools of liberal legal frameworks, for it is the liberal principles of the rule of law, equality before the law, non-discrimination and respect for human rights that prevents taking the necessary measures to exclude 'the Muslim".

"We are back to being a normal country, in charge of our own laws and able to start making our own relationships with the rest of the world. Maybe even reengaging with the Commonwealth", was the statement uttered by Nigel Farage the day after the referendum on Brexit. Although much of the enthusiasm for the UK's drive to leave the EU was the desire to curb immigration, Brexiteers have consistently expressed an odd enthusiasm for an open-borders agreement with the Commonwealth after leaving the EU. This project is known as the Canzuk Union (Bennett 2016): a confederation of Commonwealth countries – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain – allowing free trade, the free movement of people and mutual defence. The rough brushstroke of this grand scheme paints not so much an aversion for open borders as an aversion for the kind of open borders that the EU stands for. In contrast to the EU, this 'Empire 2.0' envisions a mostly white union of English-speaking peoples based on the symbolic legacy of the British Empire, a structure in which the UK acquires the privileged association with 'the motherland'. What the discourses and allusions surrounding the references to the Commonwealth suggest is that it might not have been open borders and immigration what angered British voters as much as an anxiety over a notion of diluting English-speaking whiteness, which reminded them of homogeneity and dominance they had lost. The anxiety over open borders expressed by the proponents of Brexit might be understood as a fear to be mixed with the very subjects

that the British empire colonized mixed with a desire to recover the British empire's unapologetical domination over its former subjects in order to overcome the burthensome constraints of the rule of law and simply get rid of them. It is imperialism coated with the politically correct nuance of anti-colonialism. It is a perversion of history, geography and language. It is newspeak. Under this light, Brexit may appear to be a quixotic attempt to revive British imperialism. And yet, like we have seen in the case of France, it is not the extremists of UKIP or the English Defence League who are carrying out Brexit but the elites of the British conservative establishment. Theresa May's government approach to Brexit as business as usual and a normal political course disguises an uncomfortable truth: the establishment Tories are not only the true radicals but very efficient ones, for they are able to take traditional politics by assault while sailing under the flag of normality. They are the Trojan horse that a certain kind of mild authoritarianism is employing to infiltrate liberal democracies, whose gullible electorates are receiving it as the gift it purports to be rather than as the threat it may turn out to be.

The nostalgia for the 'normality' associated to the Commonwealth constitutes a fascinating geographical imagination revolving around the debate on Brexit. Mentions of the Commonwealth have been plentiful in the debate surrounding Brexit, as if this reminiscence of the British Empire hid the key for its resurgence (Tomlinson & Dorling 2016). So much of this geopolitical imagination points to a desire to go back to the unequal power relation of empire, where the UK got "to have its cake and eat it" (Elgot & Rankin 2016). As Theresa May put it (Batchelor 2017), "We want to make sure that we are ending the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and that we are able to control movement of people coming from the EU," a desire that taken together with the nostalgia for the Commonwealth suggests that the loss of empire may have misled the British to soften and refrain from dealing with the non-native with the force or violence they would otherwise deserve; as if the EU was emasculating for repressing the British Empire's virtuous sense of righteous violence.

Moreover, it is important to remember that it was not fringe politicians like UKIP's Nigel Farage who set in motion the process that has led to Britain's exit from the EU. The referendum was started by David Cameron, a liberal pro-EU prime minister who, by his own choice, decided to put the UK's EU membership to a referendum whose validity he did not even take the care of condition to either a representative voter turnout or a qualified majority. Cameron's promises to reduce immigration and to hold a referendum on the UK's permanence in the EU were his ways of appeasing populist xenophobes as well as Eurosceptics within his own party.

David Cameron should have known – as well as May must know – that that the promise of more border controls and a better future is at best dubious. Brexit is like a "leap of faith" attempting to bridge an abyss of warnings so wide that no rational government would be expected to have even considered it. Not only does the economic outlook loom devastating but the integrity and even the peace of the country are at peril. Spain has acquired a veto over Brexit negotiations due to the British enclave of Gibraltar; the conflict in Northern Ireland could break out again or Northern Ireland could break away and join Ireland; and Scotland seems in course to push for a new referendum of independence. Whatever this normality might bring, it seems that it will be anything but the easiness and comfort it that its proponents promised. Instead, it looks as if a rather extreme path littered with perils and uncertainties lied ahead. How is that taking back control? And at what price for the UK and the EU? The disconnection between policy and interests in the strategy pursued by the British governments that have led to Brexit and are in charge of its negotiation with the EU should make us rethink the way we speak about traditional European parties. Perhaps, rather than conceptualising them as establishment parties, it would be more analytically useful to regard them as not so different from the radical, deeply ideological and irrational political parties of the fringes or perhaps even as dangerous extremists.

'Act normal or go away': Extreme Dutch normality

Perhaps no other political discourse condenses the hypocrisy of the political centre's pleas for normality as roundly as that of the biggest party in the recent Dutch election, the Dutch VVD (the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) (Wittenberg 2017). Ahead of the elections of 2017, the VVD's political programme charted a geographical imagination of a threatening 'outside' that matched

the tone of the populist rhetoric of the stridently xenophobe and islamophobe party of Wilders, the PVV (Wijnberg 2016). In short, the VVD´s programme depicts the Dutch as a peace-loving people "who simply want to get along with everyone"; helpful people "who will give each other a hand in case of need". The contrast are the destitute immigrants taking away the comfort of the well-natured, hard-working Dutch, threatening the prosperity of "Dutchmen who worry about the international misery they see replicated in their own neighbourhood", migrants who are also insinuated to be irrationally unfriendly and violent, unlike the people which the VVD stands for: "people who want to live a comfortable life. People who find it logical that you have to do your best to achieve it".[8]

In a letter[9] printed in the national newspapers that openly flirted with the Islamophobic right, Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, in a thinly veiled attempt at political opportunism, crafted the slogan "Normaal. Doen." (Act.Normal.) His message was "Doe normaal of ga weg" (Act normal or go away). The subtext is clear: those who do not behave according to what he assumes as the norm. Those deviating from the norm clearly did not presuppose misbehaved white, unhyphenated Dutch, but rather Muslims and immigrants overall: those with an insecure footing on Dutch society, the ones holding two nationalities or the naturalized Dutch, the immigrants and their 'half-Dutch' children, the refugees. This subtext becomes evident if one is familiar with the Dutch context, where criminality has long been wrongly associated with Moroccan immigrants and their offspring (Driessen *et al.* 2014), and thus where the formulation 'act normal or go away' carries the unambiguous prejudice about Moroccans' overrepresentation in criminality as well as a veiled threat of expulsion from Dutch society predicated on their implicit second-class citizenship: 'act normal or go away' within the Dutch political context is equivalent to 'Act Dutch or go back to your country'. Neither a very reassuringly liberal message nor a policy that could reasonably be applied without breaking the Dutch rule of law. How would it be possible to expel Dutch-Moroccan citizens otherwise?

These few words 'Act normal or go away' perhaps best capture the political strategy that not only the VVD but all the centre political parties in Europe have been following over the past years. The 'act-normal' politics has become the new extreme. It is the conservative and centre parties who have shifted to the right: a right that not so long ago would most definitely have been considered extreme, yet is now seen as the new normal. Illustratively, a wave of international relief flooded international news outlets after the VVD – and not the PVV – came out as the biggest party in the Dutch elections of March 2017 (Henley 2017). The headlines the next day were a parade of renewed confidence in normality. In his victory speech, Rutte declared that the Netherlands had put a stop to the rise of populism (e.g. Henley 2017; Wildman 2017). Most of the press closely followed his enthusiasm. After Trump's victory, Brexit and a year of looming populist victories in the Dutch and French elections, these were good news.

However, the enthusiasm seems to be unjustified. An analysis made by the "Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten" (Dutch Order of Barristers) published before the Dutch elections of March of 2017 assessed how the different political programmes of the Dutch political parties might fall into three categories: 1) improve the rule of law; 2) be potentially in conflict with the rule of law or; 3) endanger the rule of law. According to this classification, after the PVV – the Dutch far-right party of the islamophobic Geert Wilders – the VVD, which declared itself as defender of normality and the party of law and order, was evaluated as the party whose programme most endangered the Dutch rule of law as well as international treaties and human rights. This reveals the gravity that the autoimmune disorder in the EU has reached: one of the most egalitarian and liberal countries in the EU has adopted the rhetoric and policies of the very far-right party it is now been praised for having kept at bay. The new freedom across the EU is being framed in narrow, exclusionary terms: the freedom to close borders and put locks to keep away those we irrationally dislike.

Conclusion

Over the last years, political discourse in the EU has painted a picture of openness ever more defaced by increasing outside threats. Yet, what this painting fails to show is that the reality inside the EU is more threatening to the EU than the outside threat we are supposed to fear. The EU is suffering from a politics of autoimmunity. The EU's policies to address Islamic terrorism are doing more harm than

terrorism itself. States of exception are encroaching on the liberties of the EU's vulnerable Muslim minority. The bombing of ISIS is causing the murder of innocent people and thus breeding further Islamist radicalisation (Roberts 2017). Letting military forces patrol European metropoles and thus paving the way for the militarization of civilian life and the establishment of ever more permanent states of emergency is doing more to undermine EU citizens rights than the threat of terrorism. The ever more paranoid borderism (van Houtum & Bueno Lacy 2015) and inhumane biopolitical practices to keep refugees from trespassing the EU's borders is legitimising the overall closing of internal EU borders and thus threatening Schengen and the openness on which the EU fundamentally depends. The cooperation with authoritarian countries characterised by a disregard for life in order to keep terrorists and refugees at bay is doing more to radicalise Islamist and right-wing extremists than any ideologue could. Yet, instead of addressing the prosaic roots of the problem, the EU has made it normal to address the perceptions of the problem. In consequence, the EU's responses are not capable of solving the problem which they are supposed to mend; rather, they are merely intended to assuage people's fears by giving them the impression they address their concerns.

Our thesis here is that, by increasingly allying themselves with the forces of xenophobic national socialism, the centre parties that used to dominate the EU's political landscape have sold out their liberal and social democratic principles – principles which have led every single EU Member State to top the Human Development Index's rankings and to experience the longest, most prosperous lapse of peace Europeans have ever seen. The depth of radicalisation among traditional EU political parties is of such magnitude that the problem is not even an ideological contest between the merits of either socialism or liberalism or between conservative and progressive ideologies.

We tend to focus on the most inflaming speeches, the most impressive acts and the most entertaining circus through which media and politicians keep mutually constituting one another and making each other mutually relevant. People like Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in Europe – and further afield autocratic and narcissistic leaders like Putin, Erdogan and Trump – are nothing but the most recent refinement, the grotesque excess of a political theatre put in place and normalised by the establishment itself. We are too focused on all their theatrical grandiloquent gestures, apocalyptical depictions, impressive military operations, handshakes and overacting. The unmeasured amount of attention that both media and the political debate overall give to the antics of our political parties is precisely what makes them relevant regardless of the senselessness of either their statements or policies. The irrationality of their policies is beside the point, what counts is the aesthetic appeal of their words and policies and the ability that these give them to reach the news and remain a constant topic of discussion in social media. The banality of irrational repetition creates purely discursive, non-existent realities that nonetheless exist by the mere act of being ceaselessly repeated and thus normalised. Politics thus becomes a daily reality show of aesthetically impressive dramas, in which politicians themselves are the key scriptwriters as well as their main acts and performers (Wijnberg 2017). Furthermore, our obsession with the most melodramatic extremists might be clouding our sight, preventing us to see that the main threat to freedom and liberal democracy are not necessarily them, but us, who sustain them by either supporting the political parties that surreptitiously imitate them or by resisting too little the small but cumulative and thus significant steps leading towards more surveillance, fear and exclusion. A society that not only allows this normality to be acceptable but successful and which encumbers their advocates to the leading positions of its political apparatuses has no one else to blame for its problems but itself.

The low-key banality of evil is at work: it is the moderate middle classes voting for self-fashioned centrist parties what is dismantling the system on which the prosperity of these very middle classes depends. In spite of all their theatrically impressive spectacles, it is not the neonazis or the islamic terrorists who we should be most concerned about. They are terrible symptoms of a much larger, much more structural problem. They are the excuses. The ones with the power to change the system and the ones indeed steering the system to the right are the middle classes; the voters so obsessed with luxury, celebrity and so unconcerned with inequality, climate change, and the violence promoted by massive military apparatuses which operate with impunity and unaccountability at the border and all around them. Perhaps the epitome of the moral hypocrisy upon which this extreme normality has

been built is manifested in the deals between Turkey, Libya and other autocratic states that the EU has been reaching out to in order to contain refugees. As if there was no other way for the richest countries, some of the most efficient bureaucracies and some of the most educated liberal democracies in the world to deal with refugees and migration than to act like thugs, abetting torture, death, rape, mass graves and the worst kind of racism (Dearden 2017).

The sophistication of the EU's border system lies in its ability to endow all the abuses that it directly or indirectly causes (rape, torture, kidnapping, murder, robbery, enslavement, etc.) with the appearance of morality. We want to believe it is others who abuse them or cause their demise. We want to believe it is them who are reckless or stupid enough to cross the Mediterranean and kill themselves. We want to believe that the EU exists in a geopolitical void where its historical and contemporary responsibility in the dramas of Africa and the Middle East in no way affect politics and life in Europe.

This is the banality of evil of our time: those who define themselves as the normal legitimise the manufacturing of an abundance of geographical imaginations that present the outside, the beyond Europe as a threatening geopolitical geography – terrorists, hordes of destitute and culturally incompatible migrants – to promote what ultimately are their egoistic interests. The problem with these extreme geographies is not only that they hide the true people, places and cultures that are responsible for the threats that afflict European societies, but by blaming the wrong geographies this inaccurate 'cartography' keeps in place policies that sustain these threats through a vicious circle, always blaming the consequences without ever being aware of the causes. It is the establishment, the EU institutions and the center political parties who are yielding ground to all those who threaten the EU, its peace and its prosperity. At least populists are either honest or obvious about their dislike for liberalism, human rights, equality and open borders. That is what makes the deception of mainstream parties the most troubling: they present themselves as the standard bearers of morality, common sense, practicality, level headedness and yet they are the ones cunningly undermining the system. Their political programmes make pleas to return to normality, and yet, once one examines what this normality implies, one notices that it is perhaps them who constitute the biggest threat to the very normality they claim to want to preserve.

After the respite provided by the results of the French and Dutch elections of 2017, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel are being urged to take the staff of liberal democracy and preserve what is left of a 'free world' and an EU that seem to be crumbling (The Economist 2017a). However, if they are to be successful their efforts will demand more than cosmetic changes or a different tune of gestures and speech (The Economist 2017b). It will require addressing the structural causes that are increasingly and relentlessly legitimizing the circular violence that keeps turning both the EU's territory and its surrounding neighbourhood into ever more insecure geographies. This includes stopping the shameful deaths in the Mediterranean once and for all (Bueno Lacy & van Houtum 2013; Ferrer-Gallardo & van Houtum 2014; van Houtum & Bueno Lacy 2016; UNHCR 2016), which in turn requires legal pathways to the EU and a comprehensive EU-wide asylum system. And it requires the EU's taking responsibility for its commitments not only to international refugee law but also to the very ethos enshrined in its foundational documents and thus no more deals with authoritarian states to outsource the asylum procedures and the EU's border controls (EC 2006; Bialasiewicz 2012). These extreme measures sold under the pretense of normality are creating dangers far bigger than the extremism they are trying to mend.

We need self-reflection. We cannot fall into the easy anthropocentric trap of believing that those who attack us hate 'our values and who we are' even though they grow up in the same countries as we do and live among us. It is EU Member States and EU societies which are producing people that feel alienated from society and discriminated to such a degree that they can be persuaded to kill in order to exact their vengeance or let out their frustration.

This episode in the history of the EU is perhaps the most serious threat the EU has ever faced, not because of terrorism but because EU leaders seem readier to deface the very ethos upon which the EU has been built than confront how EU member states' bigotry towards its Muslims as well as their unscrupulous foreign policies in the Middle East are as responsible for terrorism as ISIS. Surely, criminal and terrorist acts need to be properly addressed by the police, but that will not be enough.

Europe can only defeat ISIS with an equally appealing counter-narrative. The EU needs to provide its citizens of Arab-Muslim heritage with a narrative that allows them to simultaneously identify as both Muslims and Europeans. Such narrative should allow them to claim a proud historical place in European history that they can use to claim the space that xenophobic ethno-nationalists try to deny them whenever they talk about a Europe that is essentially Christian, white or an anti-Muslim. As long as western values keep including the indiscriminate marginalisation and stigmatisation of European Muslims and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in the Middle East, the EU should not be surprised to find some of that hate knocking at its door at some point or another. Moreover, the EU should also address terrorism by avoiding taking part in military invasions in Africa and the Middle East; by dismantling their ethnically segregated neighbourhoods, educational systems and labour markets; by creating a historiography of Europe and a symbolism of the EU that gives both a geographical, historical, political and emotional recognition to an almost entire millennium of Arab-Muslim influences that paved the way for Europe's Renaissance (Brotton 2002); and by promoting more compassionate, rational and sustainable policies for the reception and integration of Muslim migrants and asylum seekers through the creation of a border management adapted to the unavoidable mobility of today's globalized world.

A specter is haunting Europe, the ghost of Europe's own shadow, leading to panicked reactions that are seriously self-inflicting. There is nothing normal about that.

NOTES

[1] Although formally the National Front has renounced the overt anti-Semitism of Jean-Marie Le Pen, telling disclosures by Marine Le Pen suggest that this is a mere electoral convenience and politically-correct formality (McAuley 2017).

[2] Geert Wilders has been a representative in the Dutch Lower Chamber since 1998 and Marine Le Pen grew up involved in the politics of her father's party (of which she has been an active member since 1986).

[3] For an insight into this phenomenon, which can been categorized under the umbrella term of Euroscepticism, see Brack and Startin (2015).

[4] To illustrate, the prime-minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, gave an interview in which he stated that normality should be the new norm. Later, in the election campaign of 2017, his party VVD, focused its entire campaign on normality. Their main slogan was: Doe. Normal. VVD ("Act. Normal. VVD"). Likewise in his plea for a Brexit, Nigel Farage repeatedly argued that Britain should be a normal, independent country again. Similarly, in France, after the terror attacks in 2016, the state of emergency, which is an exceptional measure, has become the new normal.

[5] Arrow's impossibility theorem postulates that individual preferences can be all the same only when they are enforced by a dictator to be so.

[6] Although the nomenclature for national socialist parties across the EU has prefered the term 'populist', 'Eurosceptic' or 'nationalist', calling them national socialist is far from a hysteria. Today's insurgent parties across the EU are reviving the nationalist symbols of ethnic and racial homogeneity while promoting socialist policies as the privileges of 'the people' contained within their racialized boundaries.

[7] See Stuart Laycock (2012) All the countries we've ever invaded: and the few we never got round to. Although a rather sensationalist account based on a liberal definition of invasion (it claims Britain has invaded the territories of 171 out of 193 UN member states), its larger point is revealing: an overwhelming proportion of the world has been touched by British imperialism in one way or another.

[8] The quote in the original reads: "We weten voor wie we het doen: optimistische en nuchtere Nederlanders die van aanpakken weten en waarde hechten aan onze typisch Nederlandse manier van leven. Nederlanders die zich zorgen maken over de internationale ellende die ze terugzien in hun eigen buurt. Nederlanders die gewoon goed contact willen hebben met iedereen, maar de Nederlandse gewoonten niet willen inleveren. Wij staan voor al die mensen die een prettig leven willen leiden. Mensen die het logisch vinden dat je daar zelf je best voor moet doen. Mensen die dat ook van anderen verwachten. En mensen die elkaar een handje helpen als het niet lukt " (VVD 2017, 7).

[9] <*https://www.vvd.nl/nieuws/lees-hier-de-brief-van-mark/*>

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