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Horseshoe Theory and Covid-19

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It has been approximately six months since the coronavirus pandemic spread to the world. In Europe, the pandemic has created a new wave of nationalism which the French President Emmanuel Macron named “virus nationalism” (Rettman 2020). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has used the coronavirus to increase his power (Zerofsky 2020). Traub (2020) points out that the increasing importance of the state due to the pandemic and stresses caused by this situation will continue even after the coronavirus. Perhaps the most interesting effect of the pandemic on politics can be seen on the far-right and far-left. In general, these are thought to occupy different parts of the political spectrum, yet there are similarities in the policies of these two views including the period of Covid-19. The horseshoe theory indicates that the far-right and far-left policies indeed share a number of beliefs. According to this theory, the political spectrum looks like a horseshoe rather than a straight line. The farthest points are the far-left and far-right, and they are bending toward each other. The shape of horseshoe represents common features of two previously distinctive and opposed views (Benyamin 2020).

The theory is attributed to the philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye. Faye used “horseshoe” as a metaphor to describe the relationship between the Nazis and the Communists in 1932 (Mayer 2011: 101). Nowadays, this theory is used to explain the similarities between the far-right and far-left especially with regard to right-wing populism and left-wing populism. The theory has also received substantial criticism from scholars such as Choat (2017), Berlatsky (2018), Paul, Hanel, Zarzeczna and Haddock (2019). Nevertheless, there are obvious common features among left and right versions of popularism which compel us to reevaluate the theory.

Although this study focuses on the common behaviors of the far-right and far-left during the pandemic, the horseshoe theory does not describe a new situation. For instance, conspiracy theories have been the common point of the far-right and far-left for quite some time now. As can be seen in Greece and Spain, far-left politics use conspiracy theories to criticize social elites while far-right politics in Turkey and France also mobilize resentment against social elites, along with refugees and foreign powers (Grigoriadis 2020; Nougayrède 2015). This is not a coincidence. The YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project conducted a survey in 19 countries, showing that populists are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that are contradicted by science or factual evidence. These theories include vaccinations, global warming and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For instance, according to the survey, ‘populist views were almost twice as likely to believe vaccines had harmful effects that were being hidden from the public.’ (Lewis, Boseley & Duncan 2019; Smith 2019). This makes conspiracy theories especially important during the Covid-19 global health crisis.

Another feature seen in both groups is that they see themselves as victims. In other words, they portray themselves as aggrieved parties. While far-right parties blame migrants and refugees for economic and social problems, far-left parties hold the system responsible for the problems and underline the inequality between majority and minority populations. Furthermore, not all but some voters of extreme parties are known for their violence. In general, lone-wolf attacks are associated with the far-right while some violent groups such as the Antifa movement are identified with the far-left (Berntzen & Sandberg 2014: 760). The last common feature is maybe the most interesting one: boredom. A significant number of extremist voters are young people who seek a sense of purpose, challenge and excitement (Benyamin 2020; Tilburg & Igou 2016).

A study conducted in the United States concludes that anti-vaccination is more widespread and tolerated in liberal

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cities and conservative rural communities in the country compared to more central ones (Conrow 2018; Olive et al. 2018). Another study shows that vaccine hesitancy is stronger in Western Europe where populist parties, both left and right, receive more votes (Kennedy 2017). These common characteristics of the far-right and far-left politics are clearly reflected during the pandemic. As already mentioned, anti-vaccination as a conspiracy theory is a common feature of right-wing and left-wing populism (Michailidou & Kennedy 2017). This may cause the pandemic to last longer. Moreover, the extreme right in America is suspicious about the pandemic. In fact, President Donald Trump once called the coronavirus as Democrats' "new hoax" (Egan 2020; Christou 2020). In short, both political views try to "silence" science by using conspiracy theories (Lassa & Booth 2020). As mentioned earlier, considering the tendency of the people who vote for the extreme parties to conspiracy theories this situation is hardly surprising.

Doubting mainstream science can be seen in the far-right and far-left but cannot be explained only by conspiracy theories. The relationship between alternative and social media sources such as YouTube and extreme-right/left voters is also a key concept to understand how fears are expressed and amplified about mainstream science. *AWall Street Journal* investigation of whether YouTube supported extremism concluded that 'YouTube often fed far-right or far-left videos to users who watched relatively mainstream news sources.' Tufekci (2018) claims that 'YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.' For example, if someone searches on YouTube to information regarding vaccination and other cures, this person probably will come across videos of conspiracy theories about anti-vaccination (Fisher & Bennhold 2018).

A victim complex can be traced in the argumentation of both the far-right and far-left under the pretext of the entry and spread of infectious diseases, including COVID-19. For example, far-right parties in Europe accuse migrants and refugees of carrying the disease. This is especially true for countries in the Mediterranean region, such as Italy and Greece (Andreou 2020). As expected, far-left politicians in the United States blame the health care system for the spread of the virus and want "reparations" for minority groups because of 'economic inequality', which makes them more vulnerable to infection and death (Bowden 2020; Gaffney 2020).

Covid-19 also has an impact on extremist groups in terms of violence and protest. In the United States, demonstrations including far-right groups have been against the government-imposed lockdowns. Some of these groups 'use lockdown resistance as a platform for extreme rightwing causes' (Wilson 2020; America's Far-right... 2020). In France, violent demonstrations involving extreme left groups are organized to support the rights of healthcare workers (Coronavirus: Violence... 2020).

One might expect that the pandemic should prevent far-right and far-left groups from protesting on the streets. This is not the case. Although it is expected that the protests that started with the death of George Floyd will accelerate the spread of the virus, this does not stop the protesters (Meyer 2020). It is clear that not all protesters or those who oppose protesters are made up of the far-right or far-left groups, but some of the groups in the protests can be classified either far-left or far-right such as Boogalo Bois, Antifa and Proud Boys (Sardarizadeh & Wendling 2020). Moreover, there are claims that the far-left and far-right protesters have hijacked the protests for their own interests, and they are behind the destruction and violence that sometimes occurs. Members of the far-right groups sometimes appear heavily armed against the protesters (MacFarquhar 2020). Trump's proposal to recognize the Antifa movement as a terrorist organization is also important to understand the significance of political extremism amongst the protesters (Wilson 2020).

It is also true that the far-right and far-left sometimes use similar tactics to attract more voters. This situation has not changed during the pandemic. The far-left and far-right are located at opposing ends of the political spectrum, yet both groups doubt mainstream science, instead having a predisposition to conspiracy theories and using the pandemic for their own aims such as reaching more people and creating chaos. Although these similarities do not prove the validity of the horseshoe theory, it certainly makes the theory worth considering further.

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