

GEF's "Populism in Europe" – a review by Andreas Novy



Andreas Novy, director of the Austrian foundation Grüne Bildungswerktatt, reviews "Populism in Europe", a book published by GEF and edited by Erica Meijers of Bureau de Helling. The book contains essays on the rise of the populist-right, with contributions from leading politicians and academics.

Novy discusses two of these contributions in particular, and goes on to provide his analysis on this issue, stressing the socio-economic grounds for the

The book on "Populism in Europe", edited by Erica Meijers and published by the Austrian-based *Planet Verlag*, is a reflection on the rise of a specific form of populism in Europe, a right-wing populism that aims at protecting the identity of the "Christian Western civilisation" (p. 5), thereby denying the core European values of diversity and tolerance. Two articles in the book demarcate the strategies to deal with this phenomenon, taking the specific Dutch case as emblematic for the novelty of current right-wing populism.

To start with, Dick Pels opens the discussion with his article on "The new national individualism – populism is here to stay". Pels stresses the newness of current right-wing populism, as a "uniquely libertarian and media-spectacular" (p. 26) phenomenon. Differently from Austrian or Hungarian right-wing parties which show continuities with traditional "nationalist, anti-Semitic and homophobic past", "the Netherlands may be seen among the avant-garde of a 'second generation' of populist movements and parties in Europe" (p.27). While Haider constantly flirted with Nazi-ideology, "Fortuyn has often been accused of ideological eclecticism" (p.32).

Pels argues that populism "should be studied as a profound reaction to the long-term structural processes of modernisation" (p.29), of individualisation and mediatisation of society as it accelerated after 1968.

Accordingly – and astonishingly, these roots of populism are the same as those of the green-alternative movement. On the political Right, however, this has led to the "unexpected resurrection of the old monster of popular (*völkisch*) nationalism. Even in its contemporary libertarian, if not postmodern guise, nationalism restricts full citizenship to the inborn people (p.34)". Differently from fascist and old-authoritarian movements, current Dutch populism is "national democratic", democracy within borders and for the autochthones. The neopopulist critique of party-based democracy does not issue from a call for its abolition, but from proposals to fine-tune the system via elements of direct, plebiscitary representation that multiply and to some extent 'personalise' electoral procedures" (p. 35). But it is also national individualistic, leading to an unstable juncture of "me first" with "my people first", if the liberties of the sixties "develop populist, nationalistic and xenophobic features" (p. 38).

Pels is against any "essentialist soul seeking" for the true European identity. Instead he argues for political education and consciousness-raising based on a "minimal willingness to relativise one's values and truths" (p. 44) and to enter into dialogue and negotiation. Greens should not hesitate to define themselves as a cosmopolite and innovative elite, entering in dialogue with society to deepen support for an eco-social civilization model based on weak identities.

A different interpretation of populism is proposed by Dirk Holemans in his search for Green Alternatives. His article on "Freedom and Security in the Twenty-first Century" links populism to the decline of the welfare state, the increasing insecurity and the inability of the political establishment to fulfil another role than being "servants of international neoliberal currents" (p. 171). To counter the seductive power of populism, Greens must offer "an identity-conferring narrative for the 21st century, comparable to the welfare state in the 20th century" (Judt 2010). Such a collective undertaking is difficult in a time when developing "oneself is now an individual project, a path to walk alone" (p. 173).

In line with Tony Judt's argument, Holemans identifies neoliberalism as the dominant ideology undermining *Sicherheit* in its three dimensions – security, certainty and safety. The vision he proposes is based on political ecology. It is a society based on "autonomy in connectedness" (p. 185), promoting resilient strategies of community-led responses to external pressures, transition towns being a concrete example of this collective search process.

Pels and Holemans offer inspiring contributions to a decisive public debate by dealing with populism in different ways. While both agree on the strong appeal of populist responses to *Unsicherheit* (security, certainty and safety – p.173f.), they disagree on the strategic Green answer by either sacrificing certainty as a modern relict or suggesting to regain it via embedding socioeconomic development in resilient local communities.

After presenting these two positions I will propose a proper framework, elaborated in Social Polis, a European Research project on social cohesion in the city (www.socialpolis.eu). According to the framework elaborated in Social Polis, there are two elements missing in the proposed interpretation of populism:

First, there is an implicit agreement that the rise of populism is related to the crisis of social cohesion, especially in the Netherlands. But the places where social disintegration and cultural conflicts are felt in day-to-day life differ from the places where these dynamics emerge: Financial crisis, migration and deindustrialisation are related to supra-local dynamics which people perceive as out of control, but having destructive consequences for their culture and daily life (Holemans p. 179). In his impressive and combative testament *Ill fares the land*, Tony Judt (2010) reminds us that the “golden age” of post-war development resulted from a collective learning process and was based on a class compromise which gave priority to social security and general welfare as the key policy to ban right-authoritarian politics from Europe. Judt identifies, much in line with Richard Sennett (2003) – another key thinker without radical inclinations – the declining sense of security and the increase in fear as the key destructive element of neoliberal transformation of the last four decades. Their analysis does not substantially differ from the view of the radical geographer David Harvey (2005), according to whom neoliberalism is class struggle from above, a deliberate political project of shifting power to the top and eroding the middle classes. Today, even the OECD acknowledges the deteriorating distribution of income and wealth (OECD 2011) with the resulting deterioration in the quality of life (Wilkinson/Pickett 2010). These socioeconomic developments in Europe in general, but especially strong in the Netherlands (Apeldoorn 2009), offer fertile breeding ground of national individualism as a strange mix of possessive individualism and social exclusion via nationality. It is the specific form of neoliberal modernisation which erodes social cohesion in Europe. What is, therefore, needed is an analysis which links the cultural concerns, as skilfully elaborated by Pels, to the current political-economic analysis of really-existing neoliberalism.

This leads to the second argument: In my understanding, the interpretation of populism by Pels has the merit to clarify that right-wing populism is not an essential evil which has to be banned, but a contradictory force which skilfully exploits real contradictions. And the real contradiction is the existential tension between a desire to belong to one or the other community and the equally strong desire to differ and to distinguish oneself from others. Right-wing populism offers national individualism as a contradictory solution to link the desire to belong to libertarian individualism. On the political left, however, the desire to be different and self-reflexive is posed in opposition to the desire of belonging and security. But as long as the offered solution is presented in term of either/or, right-wing populism will be the winner of any political confrontation. Instead, we have to overcome these dualist interpretations of either/or: a dualism which forces us to choose between certainty and self-reflexivity, freedom and security, belonging and diversity. This leads to the difficult challenge to define the adequate mix of autonomy and connectedness (p. 185). In Social Polis we called this tension in the different ways of living together differently a *problématique*, an inherent contradiction which cannot be solved once and for all, but requires context-sensitive negotiation and public debate (Novy et al. forthcoming-2012). I also agree with Pels that we have to be modest as well as clear with respect to our values and objectives. However, I doubt that the elitist standpoint of disregard to the merits of post-war welfare capitalism has any chance of gaining the hearts and minds of people. Maybe, it will be us who will have to “relativise our cultural values and identities” (p. 44). In this respect, I agree with Holemans that we need a green narrative as proposed by the Austrian Green Foundation (Grüne Bildungswerkstatt) which valorises past achievements of other political movements: While the liberals fought for the good life of the few in the 19th century, social democrats were the key driver of the welfare state and a good life for all in the straightjacket of capitalist consumer societies. The 21st century has to be built on these achievements, looking for resilient forms of development which link justice and ecological concerns (Novy 2011). As Holemans proposes, this requires decentralised experiments and a collective search movement for a way of living which is less exploitative, but more joyful, convivial and cooperative – this will be the green narrative of the years to come (Welzer 2011).

To sum it up, I cite once again Dick Pels. “From this perspective, the good life can also be defined as a way of life which enables us, among other things, to permanently, freely and civilly discuss the meaning of the good life. A well-tempered, pluralist democracy does not

require a stronger value base than this commitment to democratic civility” (p. 45). The best immunisation against right-wing populism would be broad public debate and a democratic polity in Europe which offers civil, political and social citizenship to all inhabitants in Europe.

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Green European Foundation asbl
1, rue du Fort Elisabeth
1463 Luxembourg

Brussels Office:
15 rue d'Arlon, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 2 234 65 70 - Fax: +32 2 234 65 79
E - mail: info@gef.eu - Web: www.gef.eu