

POPULISM IN EUROPE

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Introduction

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All over Europe, Green and left-wing political parties are confronted with rising political movements that claim to speak in the name of 'the people'. These movements pit themselves against mainstream politics, which they regard as elitist. Their proclaimed aim is to protect the identity of the 'Christian Western civilisation' by closing borders and attacking cultural, ethnic and religious minorities. They create an unbridgeable gap between the 'bad' elite, the 'good' people and the 'other' (usually minority groups).

By doing so, however, the most fundamental European values are threatened, since the leaders of these movements deny notions of diversity, open-mindedness, critical (self)reflection and tolerance.

That is why their discourse touches the essence of democracy and cannot be left without a retort. In this collection of essays, politicians, scientists and journalists from different parts of Europe take up the urgent challenge of analysing what is going on in our societies today. The authors try to formulate the questions green parties in particular have to answer when it comes to combating these 'fantasts of simplification', as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Edouard Gaudot call them in the first article of this volume.

We usually refer to these political movements as 'populist' – the latin word *populus* means 'common people' – although there is no clear definition of this term. The interpretations of populism differ: it can be seen as a way of doing politics in an emotional, simplistic and

manipulative style that might be employed by both left-wing and right-wing parties; one can, however, also think of this phenomenon as a new, postmodern ideology or as nationalism in a new shape.

The origins of the concept of populism are twofold: on the one hand, the term goes back to the American farmers' protest movement at the end of the nineteenth century; on the other, to the Russian *narodniki* in the same period. Both were agrarian movements fighting for the improvement of the hard life of farmers. Later on, in quite another context, the concept was used to describe political regimes in Third World countries governed by charismatic leaders, and applied above all to Latin American politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

Today, as we have seen, the concept is once again undergoing transformation. The quest at stake in this book is finding out *what populism means today and how to deal with it*. The description mentioned above serves as a starting point.

In the Netherlands, a country that loved to see itself as liberal and tolerant, the rise of the new generation of populists came as a major shock. This is probably the main reason why this project has been initiated by the Dutch members of the Green European Foundation (GEF), and why a relatively large part of the authors is from The Netherlands, although they certainly do not only write from a Dutch perspective.

A New Phenomenon

Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Edouard Gaudot, in the *cri de coeur* that opens this book, point out the similarities between today's populism and the 'old-school' extreme right. Both play on the mechanisms of exclusion and differentiation in order to be heard; both draw from the same source: a demagogic, protectionist and xenophobic nationalism. For the authors, it is clear that since the end of the communist and socialist utopias in 1989, the left has not managed to offer credible alternatives. There is an urgent need for a new social-political project, one that has yet to be invented.

But first an analysis of the nature and character of contem-

porary populism is needed. This is where our discussion starts. Although Dick Pels in his contribution agrees with the need for a new 'ideal of civilisation', he puts more emphasis on the rift between the 'old' extreme right and new right-wing populism, and most authors follow him in their analysis of the new features of populism, which Pels goes so far as to call neopopulism.

For instance, the new populists do not want to abolish democracy. On the contrary, they thrive on democratic support and call for more instruments of direct democracy in our political constellation. A shift can also be observed from racial arguments to cultural elements and from collectivism to individualism – a shift that might be more than just a change in strategy.

Several other authors take as their starting point the analysis of Chantal Mouffe, who states that the eviction of the political from politics that occurred after 1989 gave right-wing populists the opportunity to reshape the political landscape. She introduces the term 'postpolitical', which refers to a political sphere without political and ideological conflict. This can be described as follows: in the nineties, the polarity between left and right, which until then had been the defining opposition in politics, was changing. Social democratic parties abandoned their ideological stance for a pragmatist, (neo)liberal approach. Politics became increasingly a matter of expert administration, technocratic governance and public management. Political issues were no longer defined by socio-economic divisions between left and right, but marked by a cultural opposition between the cosmopolitan multicultural 'elite' and the more conservative, nationalist 'people'.

Along with this new cultural opposition, a new political dividing line has developed between libertarian and authoritarian voters. While Green parties are campaigning for post-material issues like environment, equality, individual freedom, individualised lifestyles and minority rights, populist politicians have started to shape the 'will of the people' by claiming to be the voice of the people neglected by the libertarian elite. They focus on the decline of traditional norms and values, the erosion of social structures such

as the family, the loss of national identity and sovereignty, and the need for more repressive and authoritative political methods. They do not use the conventional political methods of convincing and reasoning, but their main tools are provocation and the building of fixed images, which tend to be very effective in our media culture.

New populism thus cannot be easily identified with the old racist extreme right. The differences are great. However, this certainly does not mean that the new cultural approach is more innocent, since the populists are still harping on the old 'mechanisms of exclusion and xenophobic nationalism'. This is why the focus of our volume is on right-wing populism in all its different forms. Their diversity also accounts for the differences in the vocabulary of our authors: some speak, for example, of 'extreme' or 'far right', others prefer to talk about the 'radical' or 'nativist right'.

However, zooming in on right-wing politics does not imply denying the existence of left-wing populism. One could even ask the question whether the new populism can be understood in terms of left or right, since its themes are derived from both leftish and rightish traditions. Therefore, several authors point to the fact that populism confronts leftist and Green parties with their own populist features, while at the same time pointing to the delicate question of how to deal with them.

Populism confronts us with all kinds of questions that touch the heart of our societies, like the functioning of democracy or the meaning of national identity, especially in relation to the project of building a common Europe. Also at stake is the way we should handle immigration and its consequences, and how to provide an enduring balance between freedom and security.

Against the background of this new shape of populism, which is almost exclusively the subject of the chapter by Dick Pels, but can also be found in nearly all other contributions, the reader will find articles on most of the questions mentioned above.

Sarah de Lange, Wouter van der Brug and Inger Baller provide us with figures on the spread of populism throughout Europe and

the rise of a new kind of voters and new ways of doing politics.

Øyvind Strømme answers the question whether or not we have to be prepared for a Europe-wide populist movement. He also compares the situation in Western, Central and Eastern Europe and demonstrates how the nationalistic focus of today's populists obstructs international cooperation on a European level. At the same time, populists appeal to modern European cultural values, especially freedom, and by doing so, they manage to influence the political speech of almost all political parties in Europe.

As populists embrace values that used to be connected to the leftist and humanist tradition, like democratisation and women's rights (sometimes even gay rights), they especially compete with left and Green parties. Olga Pietruchova examines in her contribution what role the defence of women's rights really plays within populist argument. She finds great differences between the line of reasoning in Western Europe on the one hand and Central/Eastern European countries on the other. In both regions, however, women's and other liberal rights become nationalistic values, exclusively connected to the nation-state and the 'common, hardworking people'.

Soňa Szomolányi discusses populism in the context of twenty years of free elections in four Central European countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Are these 'new' democracies more vulnerable to populism than Western European democracies?

Merijn Oudenampsen analyses the way populists are modelling – instead of really representing – the (will of) 'the people'. In his view, progressive parties should be more aware of the power of framing political talk: the political left should attempt to frame conflicts around socio-economic issues, bringing the left-right divide back as the main political fault line.

Robert Misik and Marco Jacquemet touch upon a major issue as they dive into the symbiotic relationship between populism and media. Jacquemet interprets the success story of Berlusconi in Italy as the success of the imaginary over the rational. Reading his analysis, one gets the impression that one is once again encountering the French slogan from 1968' *l'imaginaire au pouvoir*, but in completely

different circumstances and with another outcome. This should challenge the representatives of '68 and their successors within the green movement to rethink what this revolution was all about.

The problems of social security and economic uncertainty are being discussed in the contributions of Barbara Hoheneder and Dirk Holemans. Hoheneder describes the neoliberal pre-history of populism, whereas Holemans focuses on a green alternative and draws the first outlines of a new trade-off between freedom and security. He is convinced that populism can only be overcome if green politics offer an affective story, an identity-conferring narrative that provides sense and meaning for citizens.

Open Questions

According to Merijn Oudenampsen, the approach of the progressive parties to populism is far from uniform. Some parties choose the line of opposition, others prefer a policy of accommodation. The author considers both responses to be problematic. The oppositional approach tends to discredit the populist imaginary outright, without engaging with it, whereas the accommodation policy entails uncritically accepting the fact that the populists speak in the name of the people. His suggestion is that green and other leftist movements have to undertake an in-depth analysis not only of the manner in which populists are framing political talk, but also of the way they are influencing the political talk of mainstream parties.

Oudenampsen is not the only one to think along these lines. Dick Pels, Øyvind Strømme and Marco Jacquemet also point to the necessity of framing political discourse. This seems to be one of the important challenges this book poses to the Greens: how to profile themselves clearly in the political debate. Will they have to become more populist in their methods, show more emotions, become more personal? Or should the Greens stick to the old political practice of convincing others by way of arguing and reasoning? Since form and content are increasingly intertwined, this issue is closely related to the proposal of Dirk Holemans, which is to give more attention to

the development of a green narrative and a vision of a meaningful and desirable world to come. Triggering the imagination of others begins with using our own imagination.

Some of the contributions leave Green parties with a dilemma, as is the case with the contribution of Sarah L. de Lange, Wouter van der Brug and Inger Baller. Both populist and Green parties are gaining votes in most European countries; by exploring the similarities and differences between them, the authors conclude that the populist and green voters have very little if nothing in common, since the one follows the libertarian, and the other the authoritarian line. This leaves green campaign strategists with the question whether or not Green parties should try to win the populist vote. If the latter is considered useless, the challenge remains to come up with better strategies. To put the question differently: how do the Greens evaluate their relationship to the “orphans of globalisation”, as the British historian Robert O. Paxton calls the members of the new underclass, who do not profit from globalisation and who no longer understand the language of politics?

The reader will find contradicting opinions and analyses in this book, which might be inevitable in a project like this. Hopefully, it will only sharpen the discussion. Is populism about the (maybe false) promise of community and belonging against growing individualism, as Barbara Hoheneder puts it, or is it excessive individualism, as Dick Pels believes? And is the challenge therefore to look for a new vision on individualism, since Pels does not want to abandon the importance of individuality, or do the Greens have to find ways to ensure more security and to offer a communal perspective to people, as Dirk Holemans argues? Does the answer to populism belong to the cultural realm (Pels) or should a socio-economic perspective be our first priority (Oudenampsen, Holemans)? It remains to be seen whether these propositions really contradict or, in some way, complement each other.

Another topic mentioned in this volume that needs more research and discussion, is the question of popular sovereignty as the basis of democracy. Populists use the term ‘people’ in an abso-

lute and exclusive way. How to develop a truly European pluralistic democracy when the notion of national sovereignty is being used to exclude people from our societies? Populists compel us to reflect on the essence of democracy. And since they nationalise democracy, the Greens are confronted with the question what democratisation means from an international or at least European perspective. How to establish democratic structures that interconnect international and local communities? How to use the new 'social media' in order to promote democratic structures that transcend national borders?

This volume leaves the reader with many open questions. If the book makes anything evident, it is the insight that populism poses a great challenge to Green parties all over Europe to review their own political concepts and narratives. And if they take their own traditions seriously, there is no way to avoid this challenge. If they intend to be of significance for the future of Europe, they will have to offer a real alternative to populism. Since the issues at stake go beyond our national contexts, it is imperative to discuss populism in the midst of our pluralistic and unruly European reality. Maybe more than anything else, this book attempts to be an exercise in transgressing our own national, political and intellectual borders, and as such is already a retort to populism.

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