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The populist revolt against globalisation

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2017 was declared to be the Year of Populism.^[1] After Brexit and the surprising Trump-victory, nearly all commentators expected a populist tsunami taking over the Western political space. With crucial elections at stake – in the Netherlands, France, Germany – it was to be expected that the nationalist-populist revolt against the establishment would also succeed in Continental Europe, endangering both the European Union and harmonious multicultural relations. It turned out completely different. 2017 so far seems to be the year of the anti-climax of populism and the victory of the ‘non-established establishment’.

In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders (PVV) came out as second largest party, but politically got out-manoeuvred completely. In France, Marine Le Pen’s *Front National* was beaten in the second round by a non-established movement of the political centre, *En Marche* of Emmanuel Macron, who succeeded to become the new French President on a pro-EU, pro-reform platform. In Germany in the meantime, all signals point to a continued Chancellorship of Angela Merkel (*‘The Forever Chancellor’*^[2]). The right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* completely lost momentum because of internal leadership battles and the waning impact of the refugee crisis. Also the ‘Martin Schulz Effekt’ of the new leader of the German SPD collapsed after the SPD lost three regional elections against Merkels CDU, including the crucial election in North Rhine-Westphalia, once the heartland of German social democracy.

Nevertheless, the victory against the nationalist-populist revolt of the ‘left behind’ in the globalised world might very well turn into a Pyrrhus-victory of the establishment. If the new elected leaders, such as Macron, do not acknowledge the deep causes behind this populist uprising, if they do not address the perceptions and sentiments of social injustice and political orphanage of these strata in society, things can get really problematic in the future. A comeback of the right-wing populist momentum should not be ruled out. No doubt the populist revolt is a dangerous attack on the post-war liberal order, so is bad handling of populism by the establishment.



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Meeting between Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders and Frauke Petry. Will 2017 be the year of the anti-climax of populism?

This essay focuses on the widening gap between the political and policy elites and large parts of the population in continental European welfare states. In many Western countries there is a massive level of unease, trust in institutions and politics is at a record low and there are crises in voter confidence and political representation. The ever-growing pan-European presence of right-wing and left-wing populist movements, which often emerge following contested reforms of the post-war welfare-state settlements, remains an alarming and grimy reminder of the general unease among the population and the crisis of confidence which besets the established political scene.

Globalisation and its disruptive cultural dimension

Of this crisis of trust and representation that hurts the post-war 'system parties', such as social-democratic and Christian-democratic mass parties, most is not restricted to the economic dimension of the process of *technoglobalisation*.^[3] The disruptive cultural dimension of globalisation appears to have even more impact, especially in Western Europe. Fareed Zakaria is pointing to this:

“Immigration is the final frontier of globalization. It is the most intrusive and disruptive because as a result of it, people are dealing not with objects or abstractions; instead, they come face-to-face with other human beings, one who look, sound and feel different. And this can give rise to fear, racism, and xenophobia. But not all the reaction is noxious. It must be recognised that the pace of change can move too fast for society to digest. The ideas of disruption and creative destruction have been celebrated so much that it is easy to forget that they look very different to the people being disrupted.”^[4]

Both the economic and cultural dimension of globalisation put the system parties under pressure. This can be explained by the interplay of globalisation and technological disruption which lead to mass downward socio-economic mobility, expanding inequalities and the return of the forgotten class from European social history: *the déclassé*.^[5]

As a consequence of all this, we see the manifestation of a populist momentum, all over the Western world. Populism is an alarm signal – caused by an abrupt modernization process and by rapid transformation of social structures; by failing management of change & insecurity; by citizens being disconnected from political systems, a clash between elites and non-elites; by an explosion of (perceived) social inequalities and fear for social *déclassement* by ‘the squeezed middle’.^[6]

Core elements of populism can be traced back to four characteristics: (1) Populists emphasize the central position of the pure people; (2) they criticize the (corrupt) elite; (3) they perceive the people as a homogeneous entity; and (4) they proclaim a serious crisis.^[7] All this comes together in the often used definition of populism by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde:

“Populism is a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people.”

The key question is why this populist momentum is taking place? Why now, why all over the Western world? Why and since when exactly are former widely supported parties being conceived as ‘the corrupt elite’ betraying the (ordinary) people? What went wrong with established political parties?

Revolt of ‘The Left Behind’

The pan-European rise of right-wing populism has had far-reaching consequences. First of all, the political and public agenda has shifted from a socio-economic perspective to a cultural one. Right-wing populism is ‘*culturalising*’ (mostly ‘Islamising’) all political issues, and is characterised by a nativist focus on ‘our own people first’.

Secondly, the rise of right-wing populism is increasing the chances for right-wing or conservative governments. The sum of centre-right and right-wing populism in theory diminishes left-wing government opportunities and participations, unless in the case of a ‘cordon sanitaire’. In this situation, grand coalitions of political left and right antipodes have to be formed, to see right-wing populism out, but this undermines the left/right divide by definition and ‘confirms’ the populist view that established political parties are creating a *There is No Alternative*-cartel.

Western democracies are entering the future in ever more separate worlds

In the analysis of the success of the Front National (hereinafter FN), the concept of ‘*La France périphérique*’ came to the surface. FN is strong in those regions and cities which feel excluded from the mainstream of the modernising, globalising society. In those regions people tend to see themselves treated as second-class citizens, with an uncertain future, without social security and cultural continuity. The concept of peripheral France has been developed by the French geographer Christophe Guilluy in his essay *La France périphérique: Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*.^[8]

And although voting for nasty, xenophobic, or even racist and extreme-right parties should never be justified or explained away by sociological or cultural-psychological determinism – ‘angry, marginalised people’ always have different moral options and freedom of mobility; and also a lot of non-angry, non-marginalised people vote for right-wing populism – we here nevertheless touch upon the failure of the mainstream parties. We encounter a citizen’s story of social orphanage, feeling left behind, not being accompanied and not protected in the new modernity of the global era.

Restoration of trust

All is pointing in the same direction: Western democracies are entering the future in ever more separate worlds. The divisive tensions seem to triumph over the binding, bridging forces. Brexit and the Trump victory in the United States are two key outliers. For other examples we may point to the Dutch Ukraine referendum (April 6, 2016) or the two-round presidential elections in Austria between far-right candidate Hofer and Green candidate Von der Bellen. The political centre is out of the game. In Austria, the former powerhouses of Christian-democracy and social-democracy played no role in the iconic president’s race. In the French presidential elections something similar was happening: in the second-round political battle between political outsider Emmanuel Macron (*En Marche* Movement) and Marine le Pen (Front National) the established parties of PS and *Les Republicains* were exit.

Our society is split in half

The alarming news about these events is that they all are a complete reconfirmation of the populist cleavage running through contemporary Western societies: the clash between the establishment and the non-establishment, splitting society into more or less 50% versus 50%. The fact that this 50/50-distributive code resurfaces in research, elections and referenda (Brexit, Trump vs. Clinton, Hofer vs. Von der Bellen) suggests we are confronted with the following fundamental phenomenon: about half of the population may well resist the future direction of our contemporary society. Fifty percent distrusts neoliberal globalisation, is against EU integration, resists the overall erosion of the post-war welfare state, criticises

increasing inequality, has big worries about labour migration and refugee migration in general, and Islam in particular. They fear that, as a result of immigration and open borders, their country is losing too many of its characteristic traits.



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Trump, Le Pen & Orbán. Populist pressures constitute a huge challenge to all established politics.

This analysis has recently been empirically demonstrated by a big country-comparative research project carried out by the German Bertelsmann Stiftung: ‘Globalisation fears weigh heavily on European voters.’^[9] Large groups of citizens do no longer feel at home in their own society because of immigration; they also feel that economic globalisation will not benefit them nor their children or grandchildren. They have a strong conviction that ‘people like us’ can do little to nothing about these changes and developments. Politics and politicians just go their way. That’s why this near-majority of 50% is in favour of referenda, in order to wake up, correct or punish the political class. They have the feeling that the political class no longer represents them or listens to them.

Even more problematic is that this 50% more or less equals the amount of lowly educated and average/secondary/medium-educated people in countries such as the Netherlands. These segments of the population feel much less comfortable in the globalising knowledge-based economy, where the world has become a ‘global village’, but the village has become the world. They profit less from this new global order.

The Anywheres versus the Somewheres

In his new book, *The Road to Somewhere. The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (2017), David Goodhart distinguishes two new camps in our societies: *The Anywheres* versus *the Somewheres*. The *Anywheres* are liberal, highly literate, mobile, progressive and feel no particular attachment to place or nation. For over 50 years they have dominated the political agenda, with their support for an economic and social liberalism based on individual rights and an open society. Overwhelmingly, they are university graduates whose lives are characterised by social mobility. Career progression, tolerance and social independence are their core values.

In contrast, the *Somewheres* live close to where they were born, have insecure jobs in the private sector, usually did not attend university, but do feel part of a national community from which they consider themselves increasingly excluded.

In this clash of cultural identities two main topics emerge, i.e. EU and migration.

The Dutch parliamentary elections

As a matter of fact, the latest parliamentary elections in the Netherlands (March 15) could be analysed along these new cleavages of identity politics. The good news from the Netherlands was that the nationalist-populist tsunami against the post-war Establishment – starting with Brexit and the Trump victory, and assumed to be continued by a Geert Wilders-victory, a Marine Le Pen-triumph in France, and maybe even a game-changing result of the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany – was brought to a halt there. Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) was beaten by the conservative-liberal party of current Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD): 33 seats for VVD versus 20 seats for PVV in a 150-seat parliament.



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Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) with Angela Merkel. The nationalist-populist tsunami against the post-war establishment was brought to a halt in the Netherlands.

However, this win over right-wing populism was accompanied by a strong shift to the political right and a collapse of the social-democratic labour party (PvdA): from 38 seats down to 9, a loss of 29 seats, the heaviest in Dutch political history. The GreenLeft party, under the charismatic leadership of 'Jessias' (Jesse) Klaver, managed to mobilize anti-populist Millennials, and profited to some extent from the PvdA-losses. This was not the case with the radical-left Socialist Party, which somewhat surprisingly lost a seat.

The pattern was more one of social-democracy exploding, or disintegrating into its constituent parts. Identity politics took over strategic voting. Social-democratic votes went to all directions: to the Party of the Elderly *50Plus* (anti-pension reform), to the Party of the Animals (*PvdD*), to a newly established Migrant/Muslim party (*DENK*), which was very successful in the migrant-majority-quarters of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Academic professionals and Millennial-students went to their own biotope-parties: *D66* (social-liberal) and *GreenLeft*. This election left behind a totally fragmented and polarised political spectrum. The social-democratic *PvdA* was torn apart between ‘*Anywheres*’ and ‘*Somewheres*’, or left in ruins in the No Man’s Land in-between.^{¶10]}

The image of politics as an old boys’ network for academic professionals only, is destroying traditional political institutions

This deep cleavage in our post-welfare state societies does not seem to be socially sustainable. No country can welcome and embrace the future with such a bizarre rift between future-optimistic academic professionals and future-pessimistic non-academic professionals; between insiders and outsiders in the new ‘meritocratic democracy’ – let alone the growing tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims as a result of jihadist radicalisation and terrorism.

All signals point to polarisation and a sharpening of dividing lines. Worrisome is that this diverging of opinions is accompanied with more and more poisonous smears and slurs on social media and with mutual contempt between establishment and anti-establishment.

What such divided countries now need most is a break-up of stereotypes and group identities. Concepts such as ‘people’, ‘elite’, ‘establishment’, ‘populism’ and ‘Islam’ must be refuted and invalidated as false entities. Pluralism and pluriformity must unsettle and shake up solidified contradistinctions. The image of politics as an old boys’ network for academic professionals only, is destroying traditional political institutions. The ‘elite’ should leave its post-political bubble, and fight against each other for a left-wing and right-wing alternative political future. Muslims who wholeheartedly and deliberately opt for the Western way of life should distance themselves sharply from radical Islam, as right-wing populists should demarcate themselves sharply from the far and extreme right.

This will result in more varieties of the elite, more flavours of Islam, more sorts of populists, and thereby a visible break-up and deconstruction of stereotypes and identity-political group stigmas. How else could segregated, divisive and unequal societies in future be tackled?

A shortcut between elites and non-elites

The traditional mass parties that have ruled the region at least since the end of the Second World War have lost members, voters, élan, and a monopoly on ideas. Because they are the pillars of both the party-oriented parliamentary system and the welfare state, their slow but steady decline affects European societies as a whole. Due to changes in labour, family and cultural life styles, the Christian Democratic (conservative) and Social Democratic pillars of civil society are eroding away, leaving behind ‘people’s parties’ with shrinking numbers of people. This corrosion of political representation eats away at the foundations of the European welfare states and European party democracies.

The representation problem of the traditional political-party system; the anger about growing inequalities and the growing cleavage between the higher and the lower educated; the discontent with ill-managed mass migration; the growing unease with the European integration process (not a shield against globalisation, but instead the transmitter and ‘visible face’ of globalisation): these all fuel the political and electoral potential of (right-wing) populist movements, which exploit feelings of anxiety, fear and resentment while constructing a narrative of social and moral decline.

In the process of adaptation to the New Global World Order, there has been a fundamental breakdown of trust and communication between elites and the general population. The pressures of adaptation to the new globalised world are directed particularly at those who do not fit into the new international knowledge-based economy, i.e. the unskilled and the low-skilled. The overall discourse of adaptation and competitive adjustment has a strong bias against the lower middle class and non-academic professionals. This bias is one of the root causes for populist resentment and revolt. Policy and political elites are selling and producing insecurity and uncertainty, instead of showing security and stable leadership in a world of flux.

Populism is putting the vulnerable relations between higher- and lower-educated, cosmopolitans and communitarians, workers and migrants, under extreme strain

Unease and distrust in contemporary European society must be located at more levels than welfare state reform. We are experiencing a shift right across the board: the magic of the post-war period seems to be used up: the post-war ideal of European unification, the post-war welfare state model and the post-Holocaust tolerance for the foreigner; they all seem to be eroding and under pressure. The overall process of internationalisation (globalisation, immigration, European integration) is producing a gap of trust and representation between elites and the population at large around questions of cultural and national identity.

Europe faces a dangerous populist revolt against the good society of both the neoliberal business community and progressive academic professionals. The revolt of populism is, at least partly, ‘produced’ by the economic and cultural elites (Christopher Lasch). They advocate, without much historical or sociological reflection, their ‘brave new world’ of the bright, well-educated, entrepreneurial and highly mobile. Their TINA-project is creating fear and resentment under non-elites. The deterministic image of a future world of globalisation, open borders, free flow of people and lifelong-learning in the knowledge-based society is a nightmare world for non-elites, the ‘losers of globalisation’.

In conclusion

The post-war order is in a state of flux. In a negative state of flux, for that matter. Everywhere we see a crisis of trust and representation, a shortcut between electorates and mainstream political elites. Anti-pluralist, anti-democratic authoritarian tendencies attack the established liberal order.

One of the symbolic manifestations of this shortcut is the pan-European rise, or even global rise, of populist movements and parties. Keywords: Brexit, Trump Revolt, Central-East-European ‘Putinism’, West-European right-wing populism. Populist pressures and discourses

at the level of institutions (the crisis of representation), individuals (media-driven authentic-authoritarian leadership) and ideas (anti-globalisation, anti-EU, anti-migration, anti-internationalist, anti-solidarity) constitute a huge challenge to all established politics.

Populism is putting the vulnerable relations between higher-educated and lower-educated, cosmopolitans and communitarians, workers and migrants, under extreme strain. Populism may be the face of morbid transition, in a time where traditional party systems are fragmenting, where democracy in a global era has to be reinvented, where an apolitical technocracy of experts and NGO's is running the neoliberal global world without much democratic interference.

There is a famous expression of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci for this time of transition: "The political crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

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Noten

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[10] H. Alpen, M. Broening & A. Schildberg, 'Holländischer Käse. Die Erleichterung über die gefühlte Wahlniederlage von Wilders überdeckt eine handfeste Katastrophe', in: *IPG*, 16 March 2017.

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