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**‘In the Netherlands populism has been more of a
corrective than a threat to democracy’
An interview with Dr Paul Lucardie**

POPULISMUS Interventions No. 4

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS

‘In the Netherlands populism has been more of a corrective than a threat to democracy’ An interview with Dr Paul Lucardie

The interview was conducted within the framework of the POPULISMUS research project on 26 September 2014 at the University of Groningen. The transcript of the interview has been edited for publication, with the agreement of Dr Lucardie.

GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS: *Can you tell us a few words about your work on populism and democracy?*

PAUL LUCARDIE: I am a researcher at the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties at the University of Groningen (semi-retired since 2011). I have been interested in populism since 2002 which was, not by coincidence, the year when populism really made a breakthrough in the Netherlands. Before that it did not really seem very significant, but I think there is a consensus that since 2002 populism has become important in this country.

You are referring to Pim Fortuyn, I guess. But before we move to the specifics regarding the Netherlands, would you like to explain how exactly you understand and use populism as a notion?

I try to use it in the sense of a neutral and descriptive term but I realise that this is still very contested. There are quite a few academics in this country who use it in a more pejorative way. Even when they do not do it explicitly, I think they often implicitly use it pejoratively. There is also this eternal debate about whether populism is an ideology or a style. I think, very roughly, you could say that in the Netherlands historians tend to see populism as a style and are more likely to load it with negative connotations of demagoguery, empty rhetoric, opportunistic parroting of what the people want etc. I think most political scientists, though not all, would see populism as either a thin ideology or a mindset, a *Weltanschauung* [world view].

This might be too much to ask at the beginning of an interview, but could you give us a very brief definition of populism?

I stick to the definition that I used in the book with Gerrit Voerman,¹ because, of course, once you have a definition you do not want to immediately change it! There are three elements in our definition. Two are very familiar. Populists make a sharp distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. They tend to see both categories as relatively homogenous, and they tend to value the people positively and the elite negatively. We also think that there is a third element: popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty has consequences. That is to say, populists demand certain reforms that implement their ideas about popular sovereignty. It is not just empty rhetoric that ‘the people should be sovereign’. Populists want to introduce, or expand, referendums, popular initiatives and the direct elections of officials. This is a controversial view, and some people have criticised our book by saying that we push

¹ Lucardie, Paul & Voerman, Gerrit, *Populisten in de polder*, Meppel: Boom, 2012.

this too far. However, I think that it is easier to operationalise the definition if you add this practical element.

I think that the core of your definition is very close to the core of most academic definitions we see these days. We always find a notion of ‘the people’, which is central to populist discourses, the notion of ‘the elite’, and also the idea that there is an antagonistic relationship between the two. Could you elaborate further on the notion of ‘the people’ and how its contents might vary? It seems that it is never the same ‘people’: there are different contents and conceptualisations.

Often you have to ‘impose’ your ideas about this because most populists do not specify what they mean. It is only by connotation or interactive analysis that we can figure out what they mean with ‘the people’. It is always slightly different. There are two parties in the Netherlands which could be qualified as populist. There is the PVV (The Party for Freedom), and I think most people would agree they are populist, and then there is the SP (The Socialist Party). There is more disagreement about whether the SP is populist. The party itself would very strongly deny that they are populist, but that is almost normal. I think that if you look at their texts then it is relatively clear that when the PVV talks about ‘the people’ there is an ethnic connotation. They mean the Dutch people, people who speak Dutch, people who were born in the Netherlands and, almost explicitly, people who are not Muslim. It would be almost a contradiction if somebody said, ‘I am part of the Dutch people and yet I am a Muslim.’ They would say that you are lying, and they would have a problem with that.

So it is quite clear that there is a very strong ethnic and cultural element in ‘the people’ as the PVV defines it. Which, I suppose, differs from the conception of ‘the people’ put forth by the SP.

Yes, I think so. Of course, it is not so easy to define Dutch culture. If you ask them how to define it, they tend to be rather vague. Nonetheless, I still think their understanding of ‘the people’ is basically cultural. The SP, on the other hand, do not use the term ‘the people’ as often as the PVV does, and when they do use the term the connotations are more socioeconomic. The people are relatively poor people, or at least people who are not rich. They are not big businessmen. They are people who have ordinary jobs or who are on unemployment benefit. This seems to be the idea that they have when they talk about the people. It is certainly not ethnic or cultural. There have been a few quotations from people in the SP that you could say go a little bit in that direction of culture, but I think that on the whole the party is not thinking in ethnic or cultural terms when they talk about ‘the people’.

I think that what you’re describing is something that we very often see in other political parties in Europe as well. If we compare, let’s say, the Front National with the Front de Gauche in France, or other left-wing populist parties with right-wing populist ones, something like a pattern seems to emerge. Right-wing populists seem to prioritise the ethnic and cultural dimension whilst the left prioritises the socio-economic one. Now, apart from defining ‘the people’, do

you think that we can also perceive differences in the very way that the antagonism between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ is constructed in left and right-wing populist discourses?

The elite is somewhat different for the two parties [SP and PVV]. They do not always define the elite either. Still, you might assume that the SP thinks in more socioeconomic terms about them. Interestingly the PVV is even less clear about the elite. In the case of the SP it is relatively clear what they mean because sometimes they are fairly explicit. The elite are the managers, the bankers, and probably most of the politicians that govern – the ‘neoliberals’ as the SP calls them. Even though it is not very precise it is relatively clear. I think the PVV tend to see the elite not in exactly cultural terms, but more in political terms. The elite comprises all the established parties. In fact, in their opinion it comprises almost all the other parties. I think most intellectuals and academics would belong to this elite too. They tend to also associate the media with the elite. The elite are almost everybody who disagrees with them.

The PVV appears to adopt quite a radical position against most of the political establishment. But, nevertheless, it has recently participated in government, in contrast to the SP.

There is some ambiguity there because at the same time the SP also wants to join a coalition and govern. In 2010 the PVV joined this sort-of coalition whereby they supported the minority government. Since then I think they have been realistic enough to understand that there is very little chance they will be invited again to join a government. So, they can much more forcefully oppose all governing parties as they realise that they are really in the opposition.

The other crucial point relates to the concept of the ‘other’, of otherness. I do not think that the SP thinks in terms of the ‘other’. In the case of the PVV, however, there is an ‘other’: the Muslim. It is very hard for them to argue that the Muslims are part of the elite but somehow they have constructed in their imaginary this curious perverse alliance between Muslims and the elite. Some of them go very far in this direction. Wilders also occasionally talks about a ‘Eurabic conspiracy’. This theory implies that there has been a tacit, or even explicit, agreement between European elites and the Arab community that they will not start a war so long as Europe tolerates Islam increasing its power and numbers within Europe. I do not think that everyone in the PVV agrees with this, but it is difficult to know.

Is this explicitly expressed by Wilders himself?

Occasionally. As far as I know he has never said that he fully believes it, but he considers it to be a possibility. He says that there are serious people who argue in favour of that so it is possible. One of the PVV’s ideologues, Martin Bosma, who is considered the number two or the number three in the party and often writes texts for Geert Wilders, carries this a little bit further. He has written a relevant book, and some of the chapters really suggest that there is this agreement between the European elites and the Muslims; that they will somehow co-operate and avoid blocking each other.

This brings to mind the cliché view, which we often find on the right of the political spectrum, that ‘the homeland’ is somehow under threat from intruders or outsiders who threaten to transform or corrupt ‘our culture’, and so on. Cas Mudde terms this as the ‘nativist’ element of the populist radical right.² This element seems to be quite important for understanding parties like the PVV.

Well, two comments. First, though I admire Cas Mudde very much, I have some problems with the term ‘nativism’ that he uses. The PVV are nationalists, but I do not think that they would exclude anybody who was not born in the Netherlands. Where they talk about the Dutch people they implicitly argue, or they suggest, that it is the people who are born here. Yet someone recently pointed out to me that quite a few of their leaders have actually married foreigners. For example, Wilders has a Hungarian wife. It would be kind of difficult for him to say that his wife is not really Dutch or does not belong here. Since Islam is so important to them I think they would be willing to accept immigrants from almost any culture as long as they are not Muslim. For example, I think they would accept Christian immigrants from different countries as refugees. The PVV also has some problems with Eastern Europeans, but that is a different matter.

So they seem to articulate a peculiar form of xenophobia. ‘The people’ is based on a specific notion of common culture, and not necessarily of descent or blood.

Yes. It is secular Christian culture vs Islam. I think you will find it is the same with other European parties, though the PVV is more extreme to the extent that for Wilders this anti-Muslim attitude is really located at the core. In that sense, to go back to your other point, for him anti-Islamism is almost an ideology in itself. It is, indeed, more important than populism. Actually, my hypothesis is that this is true for many so-called populist parties in Europe. I think that for most of them populism tends to be subordinate to nationalism in most cases, especially for right-wing populists. You see it when they negotiate to form a government. They hardly talk about constitutional reforms or having a referendum. You would expect populists to press on these issues.

So there is an absence of the programmatic aspect of populism, that you mentioned earlier, in these parties?

Yes. If you look at the programs there is a demand for referenda. In every program there is a demand for it, but once they start negotiating they do not seem to push it very hard. The immigration policies are much more important to them.

Let me return to the appeals to ‘the people’. In your recent book on Democratic Extremism³ you focus on how such appeals, and the calls upon popular sovereignty (‘power to the people!’) relate to democracy from its

² Mudde, Cas, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007.

³ Lucardie, Paul, *Democratic Extremism in Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2012.

classical form to modern representative democracy. If the appeals to ‘the people’ and to popular sovereignty are a constant in any democratic context, how can we differentiate between populist appeals and democratic, radical democratic or extremist-democratic appeals to the people?

That is a good question. I think it is a very difficult question too. These appeals often resemble each other. For instance, in the Netherlands there is this party, Democrats 66 (D66). Some historians have said, ‘Maybe they are populist too’ but if so then it is a very strange kind of populism. They are generally considered to be part of the elite, and so people have coined the term, ‘elitist populism’. This seems like a bit of a contradiction! I would rather call D66 ‘democratic radicals’, or ‘radical democrats’. Actually, this label was more appropriate when they were in their initial stages. Right now they are more left-wing liberals. Initially their main aim was to change the constitution, to introduce direct democracy and referendums. But, they have more or less shelved their ideas about radical transformation of the constitution. Also, you could not say that they have a homogenous idea of ‘the people’. They have never talked about the people. Instead, they have talked about citizens and individuals and so on. I suppose it is a different kind of framing. Superficially there is some resemblance with populist demands, but if you look at the whole framework you cannot really say that D66 is populist.

I would like to do some more work on the difference between radical democracy and populism. I sometimes refer to this article by Robert Barr where he wrote about this distinction.⁴ He did not make it very explicit but he suggested that there were distinctions. Perhaps he was not too clear himself! I am not very clear either about the exact difference, but I too feel that there is a distinction.

Following on the same track, would you say that populism is an inherent characteristic of modern democracy, rather than a pathological form of political behaviour or ideology?

This is what Margaret Canovan has been arguing for. She says that there are different elements in democracy, and one of them is this ‘redemptive element’.⁵ It is also problematic because in many cases populism is subordinate to nationalism. When populism is not tied so strongly to nationalism, as is the case with most left-wing populist parties, it is okay. Of course, you might also say there is some latent nationalism there as well, but it is obviously not as important to them. For instance, when you look at the program of the SP in the Netherlands many of their demands could be considered radical democratic demands. They propose, and seem to be serious about, more referendums and popular initiatives and that kind of thing. I think there is an ambivalence in modern democracy and sometimes I even hesitate to use the word, ‘democracy’, for the present system. I think that in most cases, and

⁴ Lucardie actually refers here to the distinction between ‘populist’, ‘outsider’ and ‘anti-establishment’ politics, put forth in Barr, Robert, ‘Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics’, *Party Politics*, 15(1), 2009, pp. 29-48.

⁵ Canovan, Margaret, ‘Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, *Political Studies*, 47(1), pp. 2-16.

this is a classic idea, the system is a mixture of aristocracy and democracy. I would prefer to have democratic radicals rather than national populists. But, I think we need some of these forces and ideas to push more democracy into our system.

This brings me to my next question. In your book your main theme is 'extremist democrats'. In the last few years it has become a trend to study populism and extremism together. There is even a standing group in the ECPR [European Consortium for Political Research] that studies populism and extremism. Yet one might argue that it is rather problematic to view populism as a form of extremism. What is more, the terms 'populism' and 'extremism' are often used together in a very pejorative way, seen as threats to an idealised 'moderate' democratic system; a system that works rationally, prioritises stability, consensus, and so on. What is your view on the relation between populism and extremism, extremism and democracy?

In most languages 'extremism' is even more loaded and pejoratively used than 'populism'. In some cultures populism has a relatively positive connotation but I do not think that extremism has positive connotations anywhere. It is always considered negative, dangerous, violent, or fanatical. So, actually, one of the reasons that I used the term 'democratic extremism' as a title was because it is a little bit provocative. We tend to think of democracy as positive and extremism as negative. If you put them together a lot of people are puzzled. It is a way to provoke them.

I think that most populists are not extremists in the sense that they do not use violence, they do not want to impose their ideas on everybody in a dictatorial or authoritarian way. Those are things we tend to associate with extremism. I would almost say that most populists are not democratic extremists because they are not radical enough. They do not push their ideas to the limits. They basically accept the existing system, and just want to add some referendums and so on. If you look at their constitutional programmes – here I am not looking at the practice but the theory – they are very modest in their reforms. They are not extremists in that sense. An extremist would say, 'We have to abolish parliament and we should decide everything by referendum.' I do not know of any populists who propose this.

What about the various uses of 'populism' in public discourse? Is 'populism' used as a characterisation of political opponents within the Netherlands in a particular way?

Neither the PVV nor the SP call themselves populist. It is always the others who label them like this. This is happening to the SP less and less. Occasionally some journalists still like to compare the two, and say, 'The PVV and the SP are really more similar than we often imagine.' And, to some extent both parties agree about European integration. They are both very sceptical about European integration, though in different degrees.

I think that in parliament the term 'populist' is not used all that much. It is used by journalists, and occasionally during election campaigns. During elections the term is used by the established parties; by the Liberals, the Social Democrats, and D66 primarily against the PVV, but also sometimes against the SP. At the moment we

have a coalition of two parties. There are also three parties in the 'constructive opposition' which more or less support the government. Sometimes they are also supported by a fourth party, the Greens. These parties are considered as the 'serious' parties. The other parties, basically the SP and the PVV, do not take part in all these talks and are the real opposition. But, they are criticised as the people who do not take responsibility and who have easy answers to all the problems and so on. The subtext is that they are populists. They do not have 'constructive' ideas, they just criticise everything and tell the people what they want to hear.

So, is this a way to dismiss a political opponent?

Very often, yes. I must say that there is also a 'Yes, but' option. Some of the journalists in the newspaper I read, which is broadly liberal intellectual, will say, 'Of course the populists do have a point, but they are not responsible etc.' They start by saying, 'They have a point, we should listen to them. We should talk with them seriously.' This is perhaps slightly more sophisticated than just dismissing them.

This can bring us back to the academic discussion at a more theoretical level. You suggest in your book that it is very hard to describe today's Western democracies as actually democratic. They are 'mixed' systems. There are various ways of describing them, and I have in mind here what thinkers like Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Ranciere call 'post-democracy'. In his last book Peter Mair made a similar point, stressing that the 'popular component' of democracy is today marginalised. Do you think that populism, in some occasions, could somehow work as a way to re-introduce the popular element into today's democracies?

In the Netherlands I think that there is, of course, this technocratisation of the political debate. There is also the other factor that political parties are losing members. This is a long-term trend of course. It has been going on for decades, but it is also another indicator that popular participation is declining. Party members have always been a minority of course, but at some point 20% of the adult population was a member of a political party. Now it is about 2% in the Netherlands.

If you are a bit optimistic you might say that even now populists have had some input into political debate. Regardless of constitutional reforms populists have broadened the political debate a little, even if it is by raising some taboo issues like European integration. In the Netherlands this subject was practically taboo. First of all it was never discussed, and then when it was discussed it was always positive. It was perceived as something that was inevitable so there was little debate about it apart from by the very marginal parties that were against it. Now, thanks to the PVV and the SP, there has been some more debate about the European Union.

In the POPULISMUS project we are also trying to deal with what we term as 'anti-populism'. By this we are referring to certain forms of discourse that have mainly developed at a European level in the last ten to fifteen years. We can see that certain top European Union officials often portray populism as the number one danger for European democracy. Manuel Barroso and Herman van Rompuy, for example, were recently asked what is the top danger

facing Europe nowadays. They did not say unemployment, rising racism or the crisis in general. They said that our major concern, the most serious danger that we face right now, is the rise of populism. It is not entirely obvious what they mean by that, but I was wondering if you could speculate about what is behind this 'fear of populism'. What does it actually mean?

The vulgar answer would be that their power is threatened by populism. Obviously they do not want to say that. That said, perhaps they would actually admit that their European project could be put in danger from populism and Euroscepticism. I think they probably consider Euroscepticism and populism to be more or less the same. Even though we probably cannot reverse European integration they see scepticism as a danger. I do not think that Euroscepticism is that strong. At least, if you look at the European Parliament it is still relatively weak as a force and it is divided. Even if the parties were not divided it would still not be a very large faction. Of course, it could act as a veto minority and oppose any further integration. They probably figure that public opinion is certainly not anti-European but it is also no longer pro-European. So, the Eurosceptics can mobilise this latent opposition against further integration, and that would go against both the ideals and interests of the European elite.

Interestingly, the only time when you could say that there was some evidence of anti-democratic behaviour by so-called populists was with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Even then a lot of people would disagree that he was really a populist. Now, it would be too much to say that he was authoritarian, but from a democratic point of view you could criticise the way that he treated the judiciary, opposed the courts, and controlled the media. Most other populist parties have been too small to do that sort of thing. One cannot accuse them of suppressing freedom, at least not yet. So, yes, I agree with what you say. I think it is very interesting.

I also find what is happening in Germany very interesting, and a little bit disconcerting. I have in mind the party Alternative for Germany (AfD). This party has been founded by people who are relatively high up, almost belonging to the elite, such as academics or lawyers. It is difficult to consider them populist but there are some populist elements in their discourse, and of course they have had to mobilise some popular support in a somewhat populist style. A friend that is in the party says that a lot of them are seriously concerned about the future of the Euro and that this is one of the reasons why they joined. They think that, even if we want to be Europeans, Europe has gone in the wrong direction. They think that we somehow need to dissolve the Euro or find some kind of a solution. I have a feeling that in the media the German establishment is trying to portray these people as extremists. They avoided all of these technical debates about the Euro, saying that, 'These are not only populists but they are nationalists and they are extremists'. In Germany that term is even worse than in other countries. If you are a right-wing extremist you are practically a Nazi and you should be banned from everything. In this way they made discussion impossible.

More generally, what role do you think has populism played, in all its variations, from the early 2000s until today in transforming the political system in the Netherlands?

First of all it has changed the language and the style. We have this term where you say, 'I don't like this parliamentary language' if someone is cursing, using rough words or coarse phrases. I think that if you look at the language used in parliament after 2002 it has changed. It is much more normal to use crude terms in parliament. Wilders is very good at this. We have just had the general debates about the budget, which always take place in September. In the old days you would talk about the Government with capital or 'Your Excellence' and so on. He talks about 'These stupid people over there!' He does not even say the word, 'government', he just says 'those stupid people'. He avoids the terms, 'government' or 'ministers'. He calls them 'the stupid people in Section K'. Section K is the section in the parliament where the government sits. He calls them 'crazy' and other things that you would never say in parliament before. So, the language and the style have changed.

There is some polarisation in what I have just mentioned between the government parties, the so-called 'serious' opposition and then the 'radical' opposition. Even before 2002 there was always some radical opposition in the parliament, but they were very small. They were not taken seriously, but people thought, 'It is good that we have a communist in parliament. You should listen to him and then not take him seriously.' It is sort of difficult to ignore the SP and the PPV. They are too big. So, there has been a change in political culture, and also in the whole party system. The coalition between Liberals (VVD) and Social Democrats (PvdA) would have been difficult to imagine before 2000. It would have also been difficult to imagine the opposition against it. It almost seems to be a permanent feature of the Netherlands that there is a centre-coalition and then radical opposition from both sides. So, the party system and the political culture have changed.

There is a relevant discussion about how populism affects democracy, and whether it is a 'threat' or a 'corrective'. I know this might be difficult to answer with certainty, but in the case of the Netherlands do you think that populism has worked as a corrective or as a threat? Or, maybe, both? And, how has the institutional order managed to react to populism?

I think that in the Netherlands populism has been more of a corrective than a threat. Populists have not exercised all that much power, but if they did then I am not sure that they would pose a threat. Though you could criticise the SP a little bit for its internal democracy I do not think you could accuse them of being anti-democratic. In the case of the PVV it is more difficult to answer that question as they have never been in power anywhere, not even at a local level. I do not think, however, that they are a threat to democracy; at least not at this stage.

Populism has been a corrective. For example, the debate has been broadened. There is now some debate about immigration and about Islam; even though they are very sensitive issues and they are not usually very good debates. From both sides it tends to be simplified and emotional. But at least there is a debate about Islam, the role of

Islam in the Netherlands, and about Europe. The last European elections were the first real European elections in the sense that Europe was an issue. All the previous European elections resembled national elections and, though it was discussed, Europe was far away. We should appreciate this, and thank the populist-nationalists. In this sense populism has been a corrective, even if the populists have not been successful in changing the constitution or the institutional structure. We still do not have referenda or popular initiatives, and we do not have direct elections for Mayors and so on. In this sense we are still far-away from the populist ideal.

I think that what you mentioned about the character of the European elections in the Netherlands is also the case in most European countries, where during the years of prosperity nobody really criticised, opposed or debated Europe. Today this picture has changed, mainly due to the ongoing crisis. And here, we see journalists and some scholars often associating this crisis with the rise of populist parties throughout Europe. How do you approach this dialectic of crisis and populism within the Netherlands?

This is complicated. If you go back to Pim Fortuyn's breakthrough in 2002 you could not say there was a crisis in the background. On the contrary, the economy was in good shape, though it did start to decline a short time after the elections. It depends on whether you are talking about a crisis in terms of politics, culture, or representation. I tend to be a little bit careful with using the word 'crisis'. In the economic sense crisis is fairly specific and we can define it fairly well. In the political sense it is a little less clear.

You could go back a little bit further and say that there was already a crisis in the Dutch case. You could even say that Dutch 'confessionalism', which according to Lijphart was the core of the Dutch political system, was going through a crisis. The churches were declining and the confessional parties were losing voters. The fact that in the 1990s there was this so-called 'purple coalition' between the Liberals, Labour and D66 was quite unusual. Before that the Liberals and Labour had always been opposites in the socio-economic spectrum. Liberals in the Dutch case are rather conservative. The fact that they were in a coalition made it a little bit easier for Pim Fortuyn to break through. He could say, 'Well, all the main parties are really the same. They govern together.' It would have been more difficult for him to say that in the 1980s rather than the late 1990s.

So, there was a little bit of a political crisis, and this helped Pim Fortuyn, but really it was a conjuncture of different factors. It would be too easy to say that there was a political crisis and therefore Pim Fortuyn succeeded. Of course, the rise of Pim Fortuyn made the crisis more serious for a while. The LPF (Pim Fortuyn List) then disintegrated and it looked by 2003 as though everything was back to normal again. There was this huge sigh of relief. Then Wilders came along. At first people said, 'Wilders is just a maverick. Come today, gone tomorrow.' But we now realise that he may be here for a while.

What is the relationship between Fortuyn and Wilders? We often see this simplistic picture of continuity; that Wilders stepped directly on the legacy of Fortuyn.

To some extent this is true. Fortuyn was a really unique sort of character. His party, also, was a personalistic kind of party, though it gradually developed in a more right-wing direction. Fortuyn started off as a radical Marxist at the University of Groningen. He was a sociologist. He was with Labour first, and belonged to its left-wing. He gradually shifted, and then at some point resigned from the Labour party. He developed his own mixture of ideas. He was a very different personality from Wilders. Even though I disagreed with some of Fortuyn's ideas I had a sort of admiration for him; some sympathy. I was shocked when he was killed, and I think a lot of people felt like that. They thought, 'We will never vote for him, but he is a good guy.' I think Fortuyn could be considered charismatic. In a sense, Wilders is an appealing leader, but I would not say that he is charismatic. I am using 'charismatic' in a fairly restrictive way; in the Weberian sense of having an almost religious mission.

So he was something like a quasi-messianic figure?

That is true. When he was shot people spontaneously went to their City Halls, and many put down flowers and little notes saying, 'Fortuyn, I love you.' Of course, if other politicians were killed you might get similar things but not to the same extent. People do not normally care about politics, so it tells you something if they go and put down flowers.

This brings us to the role of the leader; the way that the leader can symbolically incarnate the people. Do you think that the leader plays a crucial role in populist mobilisation? Or, is it just another contingent element that can obviously play a role but is non-necessary?

I do not think that the leader is always necessary, but I do think that it helps. This is especially true in a country like the Netherlands where populism had a very weak tradition and found it very difficult to break through. In other countries where there is more of a populist tradition perhaps you do not need a charismatic leader.

This is my theory, and I would generalise it even for other political movements. I think that in the first stage of a political movement it is almost necessary to have a charismatic leader as you have to break through something; attitudes, customs and so on. You could argue the same point about the socialist movement in the 19th century. In many countries movements had charismatic leaders in the beginning, but once they got going they did not need them anymore. Leaders came in handy sometimes, but they did not really need them. In a sense, this is what happened in the Dutch case. Once you had Fortuyn then you did not need charismatic leaders to build on the movement, and that is why Wilders could walk in his footsteps. Even without charisma he could follow and build up his own movement. And, even though he used some of Fortuyn's support and followers, he really did build his own movement. It was a lot easier though, as after Fortuyn there was this opening.

Initially people said that Fortuyn was some kind of an extremist. I remember, and I am ashamed of this, when I was at a Green-Left conference before the assassination. Fortuyn had made a speech and the Green-Left leader reacted to it by saying, 'This speech of Fortuyn is not just right-wing. It is right-wing extremism!' Everybody applauded. I applauded too, and afterwards I thought, 'Why did I applaud? I do not agree!' It was an automatic reaction.

Would you say that Wilders is more radical and extreme than Fortuyn was?

Yes. If you look at Wilders over time he seems to radicalise. Not all the time, but there are sudden jumps where he shifts his views. Some people say that he does this in order to get attention: at some point people become used to his statements, so they have to become more radical in order to attract attention.

Do people see his radicalism as instrumental?

That is the hypothesis, yes. Of course, it is difficult to know what Wilders is really thinking. The radicalisation can also cause problems in his own movement, because people say, 'Now you have gone too far' and give up the PVV. When Wilders makes an extreme statement there is a little dip in the opinion polls, but then it climbs up again. This has happened this year. He made a statement about Moroccans and there was a dip, but now he is back up again. These statements do not seem to matter too much to most of his followers. Quite a few studies have asked people in the street what they think, and they tend to say, 'Well, I don't agree with everything Wilders says but it is good that he says it. Somebody has to.' Potentially, quite a few of his followers may not be as extremist as they appear.

Does this have something to do with the way that he passionately and aggressively addresses the public? Mainstream politicians have become so mild, but political passions might always re-emerge in the public sphere.

Again, if you look at the Socialist movements in the 19th century they were very passionate. There was this rhetoric against capitalists, and all these cartoons of capitalists as fat guys with cigars. There was a lot of passion, and I agree that this has diminished and almost disappeared. For this I even appreciate Wilders, though I regret that he directs his passion against minorities. The fact that he brings in passion is in-itself okay.

Talking about passions and movements, what are your thoughts on recent social movements, such as the 'Indignados' in Spain and Greece or Occupy Wall Street? They seemed both very passionate in their actions and discourse, as well as populist in their rationale (e.g. 'we the 99%' vs 'they the 1%', etc.).

They have things in common with populism, and maybe they are populist. My doubts relate to what we call the third element of populism. I agree that they talk about the elite and the people, the 99% and so on, but I am not sure if they have specific demands for more direct democracy.

Actually I think they do. They deliberated in open assemblies, and one of their first demands, in Greece, Spain, and everywhere, had to do with referenda and

recall. They also wanted to have democratic control over Banks, big businesses and so on.

In that case I think they should be qualified as populist. They are probably more left-wing populist rather than right-wing populist because their notion of the people is more social and inclusive: certainly not ethnic or xenophobic. I would say they are more internationalist-populist.

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS



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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismiss the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.



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