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Emphasis on nationalist right-wing populism conceals underlying systemic crises

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The disproportionate emphasis in politics, the media and academia for ‘populism’ conceals the big changes taking place in Europe. Populism is a reaction to these changes. By merely discussing the form, the populist expression, a debate is avoided on the economic and democratic crises in Europe, the cultural shifts taking place, and the causes of the security threats we are facing. It is more important to establish that European economic and political institutions are no longer designed to the global problems of today. And this vacuum is filled by rightwing nationalist actors. Crumbling centrist parties are trying to hold on to the neoliberal *status quo* by adopting similar identity politics. Lack of systemic vision and leadership on the left strengthens the resulting nationalist turn. However, left-wing populist experiences might provide some clues for another way out. Recent political developments in two quite different European countries, the Netherlands and Spain, will illustrate this point.

The whole world watched Argus-eyed the first showdown with ‘populism’ on the European continent in 2017. After Brexit and Trump, would there be a ‘populist’ victory in the Netherlands too? Even in the Netherlands itself the election campaign was dominated by excessive and one-sided emphasis on the right-wing nationalist PVV (Party for Freedom) of Geert Wilders and the concerns of his constituency. These concerns were seen by the centre parties and mainstream media as ‘genuine’, without scrutinizing underlying currents in past decades that caused increasing uncertainty and diminishing sense of control in a fast changing globalized world. The rhetorics of Wilders (and of the late Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn before him), warning against ‘the islamisation of the Netherlands’ as the cause of all their troubles have been able to attract a substantial part of Dutch voters for more than fifteen years. Although in the polls Wilders never exceeded 20% of the votes and in the elections the PVV gained no more than 20 (of the 150) seats in parliament, other parties feared worse in advance.

A sigh of relief followed the news that the Dutch voters had gone *en masse* to the ballot in order to stop Wilders’ rise to the top. This is, however, no more than a Pyrrhic victory. Anyone who takes a step back can see that the Dutch political landscape has made a strong swing towards right-wing nationalism. Established parties may oppose the ‘populism’ of Wilders, but they to a considerable extent went along with his nationalistic and anti-muslim rhetoric. Some even applied a ‘Wilders light’ approach, such as the neoliberal VVD and Christian democrat CDA, by using somewhat less radical terms but in effect saying the same thing. Others went along with this cultural frame, that focuses entirely on external threats of a fictive national identity, but became reactive. They proposed a conciliatory perspective as a counterweight to the polarisation between different groups of the population.

The VVD and CDA in particular used a discourse on identity similar to that of Wilders. The VVD placed an ad in national newspapers in which prime minister Rutte made an appeal to ‘people who came to our country because of its freedom’ to ‘behave normally’. ‘People who harass

gays and women in short skirts, or call normal Dutchmen racists...’ (read: Muslims) should ‘act normally, or leave’, according to prime minister Rutte. CDA-party leader Buma tried to overtake VVD on the right by repeatedly bringing up the ‘jewish-christian’ values, which all people in the Netherlands (read: Muslims) should respect and acknowledge. And the social democratic PvdA from (caretaker) vice-prime minister Lodewijk Asscher initially advocated a renewed ‘Proud of the Netherlands’ progressive patriotism, that put ‘strict requirements for integration based on Dutch values’ as one of its priorities.

Even if we assume that politics is to a large extent a battle to determine cultural boundaries – the values and principles we adhere to in a community – the debate was limited to Muslims (sic) not sufficiently adapting to core values like gender equality. Even leftist parties – except GreenLeft – scared back to point out that the Netherlands is and has been for centuries a multicultural society – a term that has become contaminated in the Dutch political debate since Pim Fortuyn and others criticized it. Nothing about whether their might be anything useful in other cultures, like for example a greater emphasis on communality as a counterweight to excessive individualism.

With the conceptualization of ‘the Dutch community’ around liberal values, centrist parties tried to create a ‘reasonable political centre’ that is able to represent the average white people’s concerns.

The left-wing parties (GreenLeft and socialist SP, both 14 seats) and the social liberal D66 (19 seats) didn’t come up with a clear alternative for the neoliberal *status quo*, but emphasised the moral imperative for tolerance and empathy as an answer to Wilders’ islamophobia, without questioning the premise that citizens’ concerns were indeed the sole consequence of so many people with other cultural habits living in the Netherlands. The PvdA later also switched to a plea for togetherness, but the die was already cast. The social democrats suffered a historic defeat: from 38 to 9 seats.

In the Dutch electoral campaign substantive discussions on the root causes of European discontent and on an increasingly less delivering European neoliberal project were avoided

Barely any discussion was held about the economic model and its implementation by the European institutions, or about the fundamental flaws in the Eurozone, in fear of encouraging Euroscepticism. Ruling party PvdA openly defended the ‘successes’ of the cabinet’s neoliberal policies that would have ‘taken the Netherlands out of the crisis’, without even remotely tackling the underlying causes of the financial crisis. The SP translated its criticism on neoliberalism into sectoral points of action, especially regarding the health care system. Only the GreenLeft managed to formulate some sort of criticism of the neoliberal model with an emphasis on a more sustainable economy. This, combined with an optimistic and idealistic campaign, brought them a historic victory (from 4 seats to 14), in particular among youth with concerns about climate change. The only party openly criticising capitalism was the PvdD (Party for the Animals), which managed to acquire five seats.

Overall, substantive discussions on the root causes of European discontent and on an increasingly less delivering European neoliberal project were avoided. This project, which suffers from ideological decay for many years but is still predominant, seems to be rescued for

the time being. In many countries governments use some hybrid form of nationalism while adhering to the neoliberal European free market model. The centre-right government that is currently negotiated in the Netherlands might be next.



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'Instead of calling right-wing populism for what it is, media and academia painted a picture by a known populist pattern: The 'reasonable centre' versus the hateful Wilders.'

A contributory cause to this course of events is the focus on 'populism' in the media and academia, purposely picked up by the centre parties. The negative connotation of the term renders a substantive discussion about the current model impossible. Any criticism could simply be put away as 'populism' without even defining the term. Instead of calling right-wing nationalist populism for what it is, a contrast was created (by a known populist pattern): The 'reasonable centre' that represents the values of the whole versus the hateful populist Wilders.

It would have been better if the PVV (and Le Pen and Trump, etc.) were discussed with the use of other keywords, such as nationalism, interests of specific groups, demagoguery, fake news and propaganda, racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and always connected to a frame of identity and societal politics which tries to exclude outsiders. In response to the unsatisfactory side-effects of globalisation, they want to return to an imaginary past, in which (in the case of Wilders) some liberal or conservative values are essential. They create a fictive community and identity around 'the' national culture, drawing a line of demarcation with foreigners. In many cases it concerns authoritarian leaders who often speak of rescuing democracy, but mostly see it as an instrument (e.g. through referenda) to destabilise the *status quo*.

And, crucially, they 'construct' a supposed unity against scapegoats. In Europe these are mostly Muslims, but in Turkey these are Europeans and in the United States these are Mexicans. In other words, it is not that they represent the interests of large groups of civilians and make sure their real concerns are heard, as is presumed by established parties as well as a sizable portion of the media and academia. It is the other way around: They funnel the unrest

and discontent by singling one problem out of a complex clutter, enlarging it and generalising it. This is not to say there are no problems with jihadist terrorism or Moroccan criminals. But these problems do not serve to explain all the issues our society is facing.

By continuously calling Le Pen, Wilders, Trump and others ‘populists’ (not even nationalist right-wing populists) to summarize the qualifications above, the term ‘populism’ has become very negative. This conceptualization of populism conceals that these nationalist tendencies are essentially one answer to underlying systemic failures and an increasing loss of control felt by many European citizens. The ‘populism’ is in effect an instrument, a political strategy to get into power to counter these crises or to defend specific interests. It can be right-wing nationalist, blaming the elites for mixing up the supposed national homogeneity and the national interest with foreign influences and interests, or left-wing, opposing powerful elites that disregard the needs and interests of large parts of society.

In some cases the nationalist populism adopts some left-wing demands in the social economic sphere, like Wilders and Le Pen do, taking advantage of the gap that the social democrats have left in this respect. What makes this right-wing is that they do this by excluding scapegoats.

The academic debate on populism focuses on similarities in discourse between various populist outings. Hence it is missing the bigger picture, and fails to see the differences between the various political movements that are being generalised on one populist heap. No links to any underlying structural causes are being made and the fact that the political dynamic follows the wearying of the non-delivering neoliberal project is not recognised.

Context

Modern history takes place in cycles. After World War II a political-economic project was built up in Europe characterised by a welfare state with strong solidarity between all layers of the population and a Keynesian economic policy. From the 1970s on this project was replaced by a neoliberal political project, distinguishing itself by having an absolute confidence in the free market which should eventually work best for everyone. It tore down the welfare state and eroded the public’s trust in the government for its management of public goods. But neoliberalism is more than economics: it is an ideology, a culture, a concept of man and a concept of society that is institutionalised in bureaucracies, including the European institutions, for the past two decades.

By continuously calling Le Pen, Wilders, Trump and others ‘populists’ (not even nationalist right-wing populists), the term ‘populism’ has become very negative

Furthermore, neoliberalism has eroded democracy. By stimulating globalisation it shifted ever more power to multinational companies and to European or supranational institutions, governed by technocrats and only accessible to insiders and informal lobby groups. These institutions are less visible and more difficult to control without appropriate democratic mechanisms put in place at the European level.

Neoliberalism also eroded social justice. Through financial deregulation it led to the financial crisis in 2008, in which many hundreds of billions had to be paid to major banks, which led to large structural unemployment and stagnating growth for a decade already, from which we haven't recovered yet, despite the rhetorics of centrist parties that the worst is behind us. The burden of the bailouts of banks was put entirely on the shoulders of tax payers. The model led to an ever rising inequality, a declining labour income quote (the part of the GNP that goes to incomes) and a decay of the middle classes. A social 'race to the bottom' is taking place through precarisation of labour, and the environment is maltreated. The ECB is 'printing' sixty to eighty billion euro's, which isn't leading to investment in the real economy but mainly to speculation (making money with money or debt, e.g. housing bubbles popping up again) in favour of profit increases for a small group of wealthy people. Multinationals are diverting billions of tax money, elites keep enriching themselves, and the warranted 'trickle down-effect' fails to occur.



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'The ECB is 'printing' sixty to eighty billion euro's, which isn't leading to investment in the real economy but mainly to speculation in favour of profit increases for a small group of wealthy people'

An individualistic culture has rooted itself in the minds of young and old, blaming their failures, their bad prospects or lack of useful jobs only on themselves. Technocratic governments are focusing one-dimensionally on 'efficiency' through market forces. Neoliberalism is a political project which bases itself on Hayekian selfish values. This concept of man and society, this individualistic culture, also explains what many contemporary surveys in the Netherlands are presumed to point out, i.e. that most individuals are doing fine, but the society in which they live is doing poorly. As if these two are separable.

One can doubt the outcomes of these surveys. Not only because of the growing uncertainty about jobs or income in a battle of all against all. But also because at the same time other research points to the significant increase of loneliness among Dutch citizens, especially in the

big cities. It seems we face here the downside of the ‘liberation’ of society since the 1960s that resulted in a one-dimensional individualism and erosion of old communality without putting in place new solidary structures.

With the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the subsequent Eurocrisis this project has reached its limits. Inequality has increased significantly, causing direct trouble for people in terms of less income or less jobs. But material inequality is not only an economic problem, it is also a problem of distribution. Inequality is more than just poverty, which may be solved by way of creating more jobs or distributing more generous unemployment benefits. It sets up groups against each other; hence it is both a political and a societal problem.

Similarly security threats are felt closer to home. Where once the periphery was far away, it is now growing inside of Europe as well, and in many ways inside European countries. Where the Western and Eastern blocs used to fight bloody proxy-wars faraway, armed confrontations have now entered the heart of Europe, through jihadist terrorism for instance. Refugees are coming to Europe, although there are still much more of them in the countries of origin and surrounding regions.

Security threats and immigration are exclusively answered by closing the borders, pushing the problems away, and by an ever growing digital surveillance of society

The world has always been a complex space, and cruel wars have been with us for ages. During the Cold War a devastating nuclear attack was a real threat and in the 1980s as a result of the economic crisis large groups of youth saw no future for themselves at that time either. But then threats seemed to be clear and life still used to be more local for many. Nowadays immense amounts of information enter our daily lives through television and internet – a fundamental contrast with the past. And threats seem to be manifold and near.

This confusing world explains the discontent among ever growing amounts of people, who at the same time see established parties hardly taking notice of their discontent. These parties are holding on to a neoliberal project which emphasises individual gains and short-term interests. The fundamental flaws of the Eurozone are putting large parts of Southern and Eastern European countries in an ever more dependent position, serving the export sectors and financial institutions of the Northwestern core of Europe. This systemic crisis is creating large instability because the ruling institutions can no longer come up with answers.

Similar to the 1930s and 1970s we are now living in a vacuum, a period of transition. In this neoliberal vacuum two types of alternatives may be envisaged to address the crisis of the economic and democratic institutions, the security threats and the cultural and technological shifts that come along with globalisation.

A nationalist right-wing alternative

One alternative – the growing nationalist movement – is already surging all over the world. As of yet domestic enemies are being framed, especially muslims or immigrants. But enemies can also be framed across the border, as illustrated by the dangerous rhetoric of Turkish president Erdogan.

In economic terms this leads to a strange contradiction: a growing group of governments opts for protectionist measures and the national interest, but within the neoliberal free market model that dominates. Protecting the interests of national corporate powers or multinationals based in their country, they go for short-term wins on a global economic battleground. This creates more instability on the longer term, and provides multinationals and international finance with the opportunity to even more exploit this competition between nations to acquire tax cuts and other advantages.

It also increases the possibility of diplomatic and even armed confrontations. Security threats and immigration are exclusively answered by closing the borders, pushing the problems away, and by an ever growing digital surveillance of society.

All of this was hardly discussed during Dutch election campaigns and in the media, not even in less abstract or more accessible terms. Discussions were rarely about employment, climate change, distribution, tax avoidance by multinationals, the intertwining of business lobbies and national and European institutions, let alone a more fundamental debate about the Dutch revenue model that is based on exports to the peripheries of Europe and beyond. The unstable basis of the European financial system which once more is creating the prerequisites of new bubbles and crises, was addressed by the PvdD (Party for the Animals) only.

Nor was there any significant debate about dealing with security threats and immigration on the longer term, by addressing the root causes of migration and armed conflicts in the unstable belt around Europe.



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Massive square occupations in Spain on the 15th of May in 2011 by the Indignados saw the start of an unprecedented political and societal shift.

An internationalist left-wing alternative

For a different way out of this political void we may turn to Spain. The emergence of the young Spanish political party Podemos and large local and social movements offer an alternative for the centrist parties' attempts to defend the neoliberal *status quo* by gushing nationalist rhetoric, accompanied by a 'closing borders' approach to security and immigration.

Podemos is often referred to in relation to 'left-wing populism', together with Bernie Sanders in the United States, Syriza from Greece and most recently *La France Insoumise* of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Here too the term 'populism' is distracting from what is really at stake, i.e. a radical left-wing criticism of the current neoliberal European project and its Fortress Europe twin brother. This criticism is inspired by the left-wing populist theories and experiences in Latin America which Podemos-intelligentsia are indeed identifying with, but they are just one component of the ideological fundamentals of Podemos.

First the similarities with populism: Podemos too is consciously inciting contradictions. A much used term is 'La Casta' (the elite). "We are neither from the left nor from the right. We are those from the bottom and are against those at the top." This slogan appeared during massive square occupations in Spain from the 15th of May in 2011 onwards by the *Indignados*, the indignant. That day – known in Spain as 15M – was the start of an unrivaled political and societal dynamic. The slogan is likely the most defining maxim in the Spanish political landscape of the past decades. The energy released on 15M led to the foundation of Podemos three years later. Podemos took the slogan of 15M to heart. Its leader Pablo Iglesias declared, in criticism on the path of established left-wing parties: "I am and I will stay left, but I want to go far beyond that. We must create our own arena."

Another banner of the *Indignados* read 'Do not vote PPSOE', in which the abbreviations of the Partido Popular (PP) and the social-democratic PSOE were combined. This slogan illustrates the distrust of the right-wing PP, but also in the traditional left-wing parties like the PSOE. PP and PSOE have alternately governed Spain since the end of Franco's dictatorship and differences in their policies faded as the years progressed. In the discourse of Podemos these two parties constitute the group of politicians that designed the neoliberal economic project in a corrupt pact with large construction companies, property developers and financial institutions in Spain and the rest of Europe. These institutions provided mortgages for families and financial loans for building far too many houses, prestige projects and useless infrastructure.

When the housing bubble burst during the financial crisis of 2008, banks (both Spanish and Northwest European) were bailed out with European loans. In return, the trojka (the ECB, the European Commission and the IMF) imposed a strict austerity policy on Spain. The crisis caused massive unemployment, hundreds of thousands of families were put out of their houses and seven hundred thousand youth were forced to find jobs elsewhere in Europe. Social security was heavily cut, the labour market was made more 'flexible' and today, short-term contracts are the norm. Spain was left with a bankrupt economic model, because in the context of European labour division the Spanish industry was replaced by quick profits through real-estate speculation. Only low-grade jobs in tourism remain.

The discourse of Podemos, like all discourses in politics, is a form of framing. A clear line is drawn between the 'majority' and the 'elite'. Podemos uses the interchangeability of PP and PSOE and puts them down as a block stubbornly clinging to their vested interests.



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Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias declared, in criticism on the disastrous path of left-wing parties: “I am and I will stay left, but I want to go far beyond that. We must create our own arena.”

Podemos doesn't call its own approach 'populist', but a 'return of politics'. There is something to choose again. That is also what denotes the name of Podemos: *We Can*, an alternative is possible. An alternative for an ideology that assumes that we live in the best world possible, and that *There Is No Alternative*. The free market should eventually provide the best for everyone. Podemos is constantly questioning this dominant ideology, by systematically proving that the profits of this model are only benefiting a small group of people and leave the future generations with the rubble.

Next to a socioeconomic discourse Podemos is also emphasising international solidarity, a deepening of democracy, emancipation of women and minorities, and a sustainable transition of energy. On the political side, Podemos emphasizes the need of real pluralism, meaning the ideological battle between several world views and visions on what society should be. Scholars and critics of populism often state that populism and 'liberal democracy' are opposites, suggesting that populists are no real democrats – securing the rights of minorities, separation of powers, the rule of law, pluralistic media.

In this definition Podemos certainly is not populist. But it does heavily criticize what then may be called 'neoliberal democracy': the actual state of democratic institutions in Spain that favour powerful groups which exclude majorities, use the law for their own privileges and interests, and manipulate mass media, either directly or through close links with corporate media holdings.

Besides Podemos, a multitude of local civilian platforms, action groups and parties have emerged after 15M. In large cities such as Barcelona, Madrid, La Coruña, Zaragoza and Cádiz they make up the municipalities. The new urban coalitions are ambitiously experimenting with local participation. Thousands of people are discussing the priorities of their municipality

in town assemblies and online. Madrid has consulted its citizens on the spending of a hundred million euros in 2018. The ‘municipalities for change’ are trying to roll back the privatisation of public goods. In cities, parties and platforms transparency is the norm. All loans, compensations and financial transactions can be found online. In this way these parties are trying to differentiate themselves from the corrupt administrative practices of the large parties, which are entangled in hundreds of corruption lawsuits.

On the cultural edge, these municipal platforms and also Podemos try to establish a more ‘common’ and solidary society, including people from other countries, strengthening communities and creating different forms of social and political participation.

Podemos is trying to provide a political umbrella project for the multitude of movements in Spain, in which they are battling with established parties, which have been halved through the years. Podemos already had 22% of the voters just two years after its foundation. While always operating in a democratic way, Podemos doesn’t want to compromise in the minimal margins of the neoliberal project. Podemos wants a ‘ruptura’, a rupture. They are proposing a ‘proceso constituyente’, a constitutional reform process in which new lines can be drawn.

Podemos is a significant factor in Spain, which may explain the lack of strong right-wing xenophobic political movements

The success of Podemos is of course partially due to miserable socioeconomic circumstances in Spain after the financial crisis of 2008. This explains the impact of the radical criticism of Podemos on the neoliberal economic model and its austerity policies. But there are more components to the approach of Podemos that explain their success: their criticism of the shortcomings of Spanish democracy and the large scale of corruption in their own country. It’s not the ‘losers of globalisation’ who are first instance voters for Podemos. Supporters of Podemos consist mostly of well educated youth from big cities. They have been hit by the crisis as well, but their discontent is also denoted by a lack of perspective on a bright future.

Podemos is capable to articulate this discontent. They see that the grievances of the people are versatile and undefined, and manage to link these grievances to malfunctioning institutions. They manage to do so by learning from left-wing populist theorists like Ernesto Laclau, where concepts like ‘articulating’, the ‘constructing’ of collective identities and ‘significating’ (giving a political meaning to depoliticized themes) are central. There is a similarity with the channeling of discontent in the direction of scapegoats by right-wing nationalist populists. This however does not mean that using a similar method makes moral or political comparability between the diametrically opposed political projects of Podemos and Wilders possible.



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15M, with its horizontal emphasis and focus on direct democracy, has been decisive for the political atmosphere that gave Podemos so much steam in Spain.

Whether Podemos manages to gain a majority is uncertain. However, denouncing Podemos' ambition as 'populism', resembles a rhetorical trick of the centre parties and economic interests that stubbornly cling to a model with which they feel familiar, which gives them influence and of which they form the administrative core. The academic debates on populism fall into the same trap, by focusing on the antithesis of 'a homogenous people' and 'the elite'. Podemos does mention the 'construction of a people' but at the same time welcomes pluralism and diversity. It is primarily a way to build society around different and more justified values.

However, even if these views (the homogenous people) would become central within Podemos' manifold strategies, there is enough counterweight to be found in Spain as the base movements and local coalitions of the municipalities are strong. There is simultaneously a strong desire for emancipation of multiple minorities and for a horizontal democracy and in Barcelona this resulted in a pragmatic and realistic (but radical nonetheless) way of governing. In addition, 15M, with its horizontal emphasis and focus on direct democracy, has been decisive for the political atmosphere that gave Podemos so much steam in Spain. To ignore this is quite risky for Podemos.

Podemos is a significant factor in Spain, which might be an explanation for the lack of strong right-wing xenophobic political movements. In fact, what they try to do is to construct a modern 'peoples party', representing lower classes and a large part of the middle classes, just like social democrat and Christian democrat parties used to do in a far past.

Towards a new narrative

Although the context in Spain and the Netherlands is quite different, the Spanish experience might give some clues for an alternative approach towards both the national-populist tendencies and the centre parties sticking to an ever less successful neoliberal model. To learn from these experiences we should go beyond the fruitless and overhyped populism debate, which only results in defending the neoliberal *status quo*. We better look at the content of the proposals of the different political actors. Some populist theories can be useful for the articulation of interests, as well as for the opposition against the neoliberal democracy that represents less and less people. The creation of a new 'arena' in which there is really a choice between different world views and political projects could result in the necessary systemic changes.

This does not entail a negation of all kinds of contradictory interests and conflicts between societal groups – which the use of the term 'homogenous' by populism scholars suggests – but a different articulation of those interests. In other words: consensus politics that is crucial for liberal democracy, is certainly compatible with left-wing populism, but along other lines. Not with a bias towards neoliberalism and the interests of powerful groups within that model, but representing the many interests within the majority of society. Such a left-wing populism can very well be internationalist, as is also the case with Podemos. But it does oppose the current institutional setup of the EU.

A new narrative based on humanity, communality, social solidarity and seeing people as social creatures instead of the Hayekian selfish concept of man, can bind large groups in European society. This might be the only way to counter the current nationalist turn in Europe.

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