

The Populist Deficiency of European Social Democracy*

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It is only when leftists and liberals themselves talked in populist ways – hopeful, expansive, even romantic – that they were able to lend their politics a majoritarian cast and help markedly to improve the common welfare.

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Less than six years ago, the vast majority of European Union member states were run by center-left governments. The average EU summit was a »red« or »pink« affair. However, the European political landscape would soon look completely different. Social democrats lost ground, with parties of the center and right winning elections. Particularly striking in this rightward shift was the rise of a new family of political parties, the right-wing populists. Italy, Flanders, France, Hungary, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands – everywhere they stormed the political stage.

These parties can be called populist because they claim to represent »the people« and to be mobilizing them against a domineering Establishment. And they can be classified as right-wing because they claim to be defending national or cultural/ethnic identity against »outsiders« or external influences. One could call this new populism, as espoused by Haider, Berlusconi, Orbán et al., a »third way of the right«, a middle road between the democratic and the undemocratic right, between traditional conservatism on the one hand and the antidemocratic extreme right of the past on the other.¹

* With thanks to Frans Becker for his lucid comments.

1. Cf. Michael Ehrke, *Rechtspopulismus in Europa: Die Meuterei der Besitzstandswahrer*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, International Policy Analysis Unit, p. 3.; also Meindert Fennema, *Populist Parties of the Right* (IMES Paper, 23 July 2001).

More recently, the right-wing populist parties in countries such as Austria and the Netherlands have lost considerable ground. Both the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) have fallen prey to internal conflict when given the chance to participate in government. Both have experienced an implosion, as a result of which they lost a large number of their parliamentary seats in recent elections. But does this mean that the meteoric rise of right-wing populism will appear, with hindsight, as no more than a brief, hysterical episode? Are political conditions now »normalizing«, with the traditional political parties regaining their power?

This article is an attempt to show that nothing could be further from the truth. The »populist moment« – that specific constellation of conditions under which populism is able to thrive as a political force – may well have passed, at least for the time being, but its underlying causes most certainly have not disappeared. First and foremost, right-wing populism in Europe must be regarded as a response to a social crisis. Almost by definition, populist movements react to the downside of modernization. They are a response to current social friction and turbulence which for many people – objectively or subjectively at the conscious level – go hand in hand with an apparently impending crisis and an actual or feared collective loss of identity. In addition to dynamism and new opportunities for prosperity, the processes of globalization – including immigration – individualization, meritocratization and post-industrialization which have for some time been at work in Western society also breed resentment, frustration and unease. And these, under certain circumstances, can lead to a political eruption.

Looked at in this way, populism is a backlash against a world in flux: an anxious, angry cry to preserve a familiar way of life and identity. It is a protest against threats from outside, and at the same time an alarm signal that the existing political and social system is failing to represent people. And it is that signal, far more than populism's political power as expressed in parliamentary representation, which deserves to be taken seriously – not least by social democrats.²

This article concentrates upon the difficult relationship between social democracy and populism. To put that complex relationship in a real-life

2. See Paul Taggart's clear introduction to the phenomenon of populism: Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Concepts in the Social Sciences (Open University Press, 2000); and Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'Illusion Populiste. De l'archaïque au médiatique* (2002).

perspective, it begins with an examination of the topical case of the so-called »Fortuyn Revolt« in the Netherlands. How could the Dutch political system, and social democracy in particular, have been caught unawares by the late Pim Fortuyn's mass movement? Where do the causes lie? What is the background? And who is to blame?

The Fortuyn revolt: a Textbook Case of Populism

In retrospect it is obvious: the Pim Fortuyn »revolt« in the Netherlands came straight from the pages of »Populism for Beginners«. Anyone who flicks through the theoretical literature on the new populism, describing the breeding conditions, the requirements and the characteristics of the recent wave of right-wing populism in Europe, will realize – again, it must be stressed with the wisdom of hindsight – that a de facto paradise was being created for it in the Netherlands during the 1990s. The periods of »Purple Coalition« government (1994–2002), in particular, inadvertently paved the way for Pim Fortuyn. So what happened?

Most leading theoreticians of populism, such as Taggart, Betz and Kitschelt,³ set out from the fact that in our type of society there exists a large and growing reservoir of dissatisfaction, protest and frustration. This arises out of massive transformation and turbulence, in particular, globalization and the transition from an industrial society to a post-industrial »knowledge society«. Such processes produce winners and losers, and it is the latter – known in the German debate as »Modernisierungsverlierer« or »modernization losers« – in whom we largely find the fear and frustration. It is these »losers in contemporary societies, unskilled and semi-skilled workers, people with little cultural capital« who form the potential electorate of the right-wing populist parties. A change in their political preferences can be empirically established: a shift towards right-wing authoritarian ideas.

According to the theorists, this repressed frustration and desire to protest will, under specific conditions, lead to political mobilization and expression in the form of right-wing populist parties. The following conditions for the rise of right-wing populism can be distilled from the research

3. P. Taggart, *Populism* (2000); H. Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe. A Comparative Analysis* (1995); H.G. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (1994).

literature:⁴ (i) a post-industrial economy; (ii) dissolution of established identities, fragmentation of culture, multiculturalization; (iii) growing salience of the dimension of socio-cultural cleavage; (iv) widespread political discontent and disenchantment; (v) convergence between the established parties in political space; (vi) popular xenophobia and racism; (vii) economic crisis and unemployment; (viii) a reaction against New Left or Green parties and movements; (ix) proportional representation; and (x) experience of a referendum which cuts across the old party cleavages. Not all these conditions need to exist, but a combination of a number of them will often lead to the formation of right-wing populist parties and so they are usually cited by academics as the explanation for this process.

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It does not take much effort to evaluate the »Fortuyn Revolt« against these criteria. According to the »political« explanation of Pim Fortuyn's success,⁵ its key cause was the fact that the differences between left and right in Dutch politics had disappeared. This in turn was due to the fact that the two main parties, which had previously confronted one another across the left-right divide, each excluding the other from power, – the social-democratic PvdA and the conservative, pro-market VVD – had started to work together during the early 1990s in the so-called »Purple Coalition«. The void created by the disappearance of the left-right confrontation was, in effect, filled by another fundamental political cleavage: the characteristic opposition of populism, political outsiders against the established order.

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4. Mentioned by the Swedish sociologist Jens Rydgren in his paper »Why not in Sweden? Interpreting radical right populism in the light of a negative case« (ECPR Paper, 2001).
 5. See R. Cuperus, »From Polder Model to Postmodern Populism. The Fortuyn Revolt in the Netherlands«, R. Cuperus, J. Kandel and K. Duffek (eds.), *Migration, Multiculturalism and European Social Democracy* (forthcoming 2003), I analyze five explanations of the Dutch »Citizens' Revolt« in detail. I have classified and defined these as follows: (i) the political explanation; (ii) the multicultural explanation; (iii) the public-sector explanation; (iv) the media-democracy explanation; and (v) the sociological explanation.

The reasons why this populist definition of politics – the idea of an inward-looking political establishment divorced from the electorate – found fertile ground in the Netherlands are, first and foremost, political and sociological. The Fortuyn Revolt has with some justification been called »the Revolution of the Excluded«. ⁶ Those excluded or unrepresented citizens fell into two very different groups. On the one hand, those with »new money« – such as entrepreneurs in information and communications technology (ICT), the law and property – who feel misunderstood by society and do not form part of the organized business community which has a formal stake in the so-called »Polder Model«; and on the other hand, misunderstood and neglected native Dutch residents of run-down, so-called »multicultural« urban working-class neighborhoods, who felt unable to express their dissatisfaction with turbulent cultural changes – the spread of foreign languages, customs and habits, and Islam – and crime in their immediate living environment without being branded as racist by the politically-correct »chattering classes«. So the Fortuyn Revolt was an almost unholy alliance of frustrated emotions, ambitions and expectations on the part of two groups which felt unrepresented by established politics.

A second reason for the populist momentum was the disappearance of ideological confrontation in politics and the creation of a generally depoliticized climate during the 1990s. Many factors contributed to this: from postmodernism, through Fukuyama's »end of ideological history«, to the international debate on the »Third Way« with its transcendence of traditional left-right positions. To this must be added the centripetal force of a middle-class society, divorced from its traditional social, political and religious affiliations, increasingly gravitating towards the center, as a result of which all political parties shifted towards the electoral middle ground in order to win votes.

A third reason which could be posited to explain why an »anti-Establishment frame« fell upon fertile ground in the Netherlands can be linked to Max Weber's theory of »Herrschaft« (»mastery« or »rule«). This states that, after a long period of dominance by a bureaucratic style of government which is regarded as incapable of solving what are seen as pressing social issues, it will be replaced by a phase of charismatic authority. And it does have to be said that the rise and impact of Pim Fortuyn can quite convincingly be described as such a case of charismatic authority.

6. Adri Duivesteyn, »De revolutie der buitengeslotenen«, *Socialisme & Democratie*, no. 5/6 (2002), pp. 60–67.

To be sure, a technocratic administrative style had come to dominate the Netherlands under the Purple Coalitions. Fortuyn caused an earthquake in the country's political system of alliances and Polder models simply because, before he emerged, politicians had been used to solving the issue of primacy during the Dutch welfare state's period of adaptation to globalization and European economic and monetary union through »wheeling and dealing« between employers and the labor movement, through off-stage policymaking by interest groups and civil servants, and through a trade-off between the conflicting interests of the PvdA and the vvd in the form of the Purple Coalitions led by Wim Kok. The citizen-voter was left simply standing on the sidelines and looking on.

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Alongside this populist attack on the self-absorbed, bureaucratic political class, Fortuyn's rapid rise can also without doubt be attributed to the burning social issues of immigration and integration, which he addressed head on. In this respect, one could with equal justice associate him with Haider's anti-Establishment populism and describe him as a radical defender of Western liberal culture. As a matter of fact, political significance must be attached to his homosexuality. It is no coincidence that in the supposedly progressive, libertarian Netherlands – with its tolerance towards sex, drugs, rock'n roll, and euthanasia to boot – it was a gay man who climbed the barricades to take up the struggle against the notion of the multicultural society and unchecked immigration.

At least, that is one way of looking at it. Fortuyn considered it his task to sound the alarm »against the Islamization of our culture«, as the title of a book he published in 1997 put it. Fortuyn's criticism of the multicultural society arose out of his fear of such »Islamization«: of a culture in which there would be little place for individual autonomy or freedom for women and homosexuals. He wanted to defend hard-won Western liberal and democratic freedoms – such as gay and women's rights, the separation of Church and State, and freedom of expression – against Islam, which he called a »backward culture«. Muslim immigrants, particularly those from a fundamentalist background, could threaten those

Western values. For that reason Fortuyn also attacked the West's cultural relativism, which he viewed as dangerous and threatening, given the anti-democratic nature of Islamic regimes. This Islamophobic discourse not only became less controversial following the terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001, but it could also count upon more support in the Netherlands. As elsewhere, a fear of political Islam and of Muslim fundamentalism gripped the country.

There was something else, too. Particularly since the Dutch publicist Paul Scheffer had intervened with a ground-breaking article entitled »The multicultural drama« in the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, the debate on multiculturalism in the Netherlands had been dominated by notions of failing integration, adaptation, assimilation and cultural integration. This instead and to the detriment of the previous discourse, which had been about multiculturalism or »interculturalism«: actively stimulating people to learn to accept one another's differences.

We can now say that Pim Fortuyn simply managed to transfer, using provocative and radicalized language, the public and intellectual debate already being conducted in the opinion columns of the newspapers onto »the street« and into relatively run-down city neighborhoods, particularly those of Rotterdam. Places where members of ethnic minorities grouped together in large numbers, not to form ghettos in the socio-economic sense but certainly creating segregated communities in the cultural sense.

The other main issue in the 2002 general election campaign was the public sector. Political discontent and disenchantment in the Netherlands focused upon government performance in its delivery, both quantitatively and qualitatively, of public services. Health-service waiting lists became the symbol of that dissatisfaction, along with alarm about increased and »multicultural« crime. The political program of Pim Fortuyn and his *LPE*, as set out in his book »*De Puinhopen van Acht Jaar Paars*« (»The ruins of eight purple years«), was mainly concerned with the so-called decay of the public sector.⁷ The neglected public sector was also the main target for

7. »After two Purple Coalition governments«, wrote Fortuyn, »the public domain and the collective sector are in a disastrous state. They have minded the shop, but nothing more. Health-service waiting lists are unjustifiably long, education is in an alarming state, public security is too low, the public administration has lost its credibility, and so on and so forth«, Pim Fortuyn, *De Puinhopen van acht Jaar Paars* (2002), rear flyleaf.

Jan-Peter Balkenende's Christian-Democratic CDA, which in its election manifesto promised a »post-Purple reconstruction«, and of the radical socialist SP, which accused the PvdA in particular of »neoliberal betrayal of the public sector« and even talked of the »clearance sale of civilization«. The coalition partners were unable to defend themselves convincingly against such a mass attack. The question remains, however, whether this image of a totally collapsed and crumbling public sector represents reality, or is merely a perception, perhaps even a manipulated one?

To summarize, it is striking just how much the criteria defined in the political science literature concerning the rise of right-wing populist movements seem to apply to the Netherlands of the 1980s and 1990s. The extensive convergence of the main political parties, the evaporation of the left-right divide and the replacement – once the problem of mass unemployment had been solved – of a socio-economic cleavage by a socio-cultural one; the slow breakdown of the taboos imposed by political correctness, enabling the exposure of more and more critical problems in the integration of ethnic minorities and high levels of dissatisfaction with the »multicultural society«; and disinvestment from and strong negative perceptions about the public sector.

Just as the rise of populism went by the book, so too has its recent fall in both the Netherlands and Austria. The implosions of both the LPF and Haider's party follow a pattern which proves that populist movements are usually extremely unstable internally. The populist aversion to institutions and representation, and hence its allergy to the formation of parties along traditional lines, means that it lacks powerful political machines built around »cadres« and with some degree of continuity and consistency in their programs. Instead, it often seeks refuge in charismatic or authoritarian leadership.

It goes without saying that a populist party which loses its undisputed leader through a tragic murder on the eve of a general election is going to find itself with major problems, especially if it is set to participate in the new government. And governing always has been the Achilles heel of and main source of conflict within populist protest movements. Just as leadership conflicts are endemic to them – as in the Haider case, for example. Right-wing populist parties are much better at being an alarm-sounding protest movement than a stable partner in government.

One could say, in fact, that their power lies in that ability to signal, to agitate and to raise issues. And this, too, goes entirely by the book. Regardless of their actual political power, populist parties have a great ability

to affect the political debate. In other words, right-wing populism as a body of thought can exist and propagate itself without requiring the lasting presence of populist parties, particularly when the political mainstream in a country adopts or even internalizes parts of the populist agenda, thus effectively making right-wing populism part of the mainstream.⁸

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In this respect, the situation is more or less a mirror image of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when social democracy was by no means in government all the time or everywhere, but particularly in the countries of north-west Europe certainly set the political tone with its paradigm of the social welfare state. The right-wing populist agenda, on the other hand, focuses upon the following themes and issues: the social upheaval caused by the ongoing process of modernization; the »illusion« of the multicultural society; crime and insecurity, and the restoration of standards and values, order and authority; abuses of power by governing political elites and the established »cartel« of political parties; shortcomings of democratic representation in today's parliamentary party democracies; the apparently unstoppable European integration and expansion being imposed by elites; leftist tolerance (political correctness, libertarian permissiveness); and the »crisis« in the public sector caused by government's failure to perform.

This agenda does encompass real problems and it mobilizes difficult-to-ignore discontent. The rise of populism sometimes even assumes the guise of a »Citizens' Revolt«, evidently based upon a great unease about society and liberal democracy, the causes of which are more cultural and

8. This has been called the »Haidering« of the political system as a whole. Perger writes: »the importance of right-wing populist parties lies first and foremost not in the party-political arena, as expressed in election results and parliamentary representation, but above all in the discursive arena. Populist right-wing politics is part of a new, postmodern political debate centering on the question of political culture.« Werner Perger, »Vorwort«, *ZEITdokument: Populismus in Europa* (2002), p. 4.

socio-psychological than socio-economic. The obvious question, then, is: what are the deep-seated roots and causes of this right-wing populist revival in Europe? What explains this huge yet unexpected explosion of dissatisfaction and desire for change amongst the European electorate?

Populism: a Revolt Against the Modern Age

Ever since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, the modernization of Western society has been one continuous story of de-traditionalization, demystification and rationalization. This process of technical, rational and material »progress« has always been accompanied by fear and criticism, countermovements and protest. In their most extreme variants, these manifest themselves as religious fundamentalism and Fascism; in milder forms, as democratic conservatism, intellectual cultural pessimism and archetypal populism.

Let us look at this last phenomenon. In the late nineteenth century it was Russian peasants (»Narodniki«) and American farmers who formed populist movements to resist modernity. Both, in their own way, turned against a capitalist modernization and rationalization of »their« agriculture. The American version of this populism arose out of resistance by small farmers who felt threatened by the expanding railway system. The Populist Party which emerged as their representative exploited the farmers' distrust of professional politicians in Washington, and of lawyers, bankers and big business. These personified the »bulldozer« of modernization which was destroying their land, life and traditional economy.

Just as those American farmers resisted the relentless advance of the railway system and all that came with it – uncontrollable modernization, the technical and scientific rationalism which was filling, disrupting and dominating their lives – so one can understand the basic motive behind the new populism which emerged on the threshold of the third millennium. What the arrival of railways and banks meant to small farmers in America over a century ago is – although the parallel is rather forced – what globalization in all its forms means to large groups of people today.⁹

As for the most fundamental cause underlying the rise of right-wing populism in Europe today, Betz and Kitschelt state that »the emergence

9. For this parallel, see Helmut Dubiel, »Die Stunde der Verführer«, *ZEITdokument: Populismus in Europa* (2002), pp. 10 et seq.

of populist parties is a consequence of a profound transformation of the socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of advanced Western European democracies«. ¹⁰

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So it is about far-reaching social turbulence and such processes as globalization, post-industrialization, individualization, immigration and meritocratization which, particularly during the closing decades of the twentieth century, led to accelerating economic, social and cultural modernization. Since the 1950s Western economy, society and culture have been »hypermodernizing«, which has led to new and intense forms of »detraditionalization«, real or perceived: fragmentation, differentiation, individualization, splintering communities and collectivities, disrupted identities. Above all else, (right-wing) populism must be regarded as a manifestation of the »downsides« and »flipsides« of that hypermodernization. The new populism is resistance against a changing world, a retrospective desire for the lost world of the past (which sounds more romantic than it should: that desire can easily manifest itself in xenophobic or racist ideas which result in a horrible social and political climate).

It seems, too, that the rise of right-wing populist movements changes not only the political color and themes, but also the political style (»Us against the Establishment« and »plain language« rather than official, technocratic verbosity). The tone of this movement is classically populist, anti-Establishment and classically nationalist, for maintaining national identity and against further European integration, sometimes mixed with xenophobic ethno-nationalism. In the wake of the rise of parties of this kind, the very nature of democratic legitimacy also seems to change. The virus of »plebiscitary democracy« ¹¹ advances insidiously, with the culture

10. Quoted in Jens Rydgren, op. cit., p. 5.

11. See Bart Tromp, »Het virus van de plebiscitaire democratie«, *Socialisme & Democratie*, no. 12 (2002), pp. 31–34, and J. Raschke, »Die Zukunft der Volksparteien erklärt sich aus ihrer Vergangenheit«, in Matthias Machnig and Hans-Peter Bartels (eds), *Der rasende Tanker*, pp. 19 et seq.

of democratic debate between equals being replaced by personalized leadership with a »democratic« mandate. A tendency which is reinforced by the logic of the prevailing media democracy, which demands extensive »personification without consultation«.

As already stated, processes of social transformation create winners and losers – plus a vulnerable group between the two. Flexibility, adaptability, resilience and susceptibility are distributed unequally amongst individuals and groups of people. The most common explanation of the rise of the new right-wing populism is that it is, above all, a revolt of the »Modernisierungsverlierer«. All the forces bearing upon society also bear upon people, their communities and their identities. The knowledge-intensive, dynamic market and media society into which the West has been transformed requires an enormous ability to be flexible and adaptable, plus considerable social and cultural capital. Just as some people are better than others at coping with upheavals in their way of life, so the current social transformations are creating winners and losers. This has been called a »new class society«, in which the criteria for upward mobility are intelligence and education, and those without them form a »meritocratic underclass«. »The advantage«, writes Ultee, »is that everyone ends up where they should. The drawback is that people at the bottom are left without hope.« In particular, they are those employed in disappearing unskilled or semi-skilled factory work. The jobs in the service sector which are replacing that often require social and communication skills which have not necessarily been mastered by members of the traditional working class.

Those affected are not just unskilled workers and the unemployed, but also private-sector professionals, members of the middle class and small businesspeople who fear social decline and loss of status. Empirical research has confirmed that these groups are heavily – and increasingly – over-represented amongst the grassroots and potential electorates of the new populist parties. This has been called the »proletarianization« of right-wing populism. In recent years the populist parties in Europe have been developing more and more into workers' parties. For example, 45 percent of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and 48 percent of skilled manual workers voted for Haider's FPÖ in the Austrian general election of 2000. More than half the electorates of both Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National in France and of Pia Kjaersgaard's Folkeparti in Denmark are made up of the unemployed, manual workers and those with few or no educational qualifications.

But right-wing populism appeals not only to the poorly educated. It also attracts middle-class and »nouveau riche« groups. And this was particularly so in the case of Pim Fortuyn. Research by the Netherlands Institute for the Social Sciences (SISWO) into social discontent in Rotterdam and in Almere – a new town founded during the 1970s on reclaimed land to house people leaving Amsterdam's inner city – identified two groups as the main harborers of dissatisfaction with society. The »stragglers« were those who had failed to benefit from the »seven fat years« of the Purple Coalitions in terms of increased prosperity, employment and social mobility. They lacked the abilities needed for the new jobs and had not moved to the modern, out-of-town housing estates built during the period. Educationally disadvantaged, on low incomes and often literally left behind in the deprived problem districts of cities like Rotterdam, with their rising crime rates, disturbance, declining social cohesion due to very high rates of population turnover and the influx of ethnic-minority newcomers, this group can be classified as the Netherlands' own victims of modernization. And they voted in huge numbers for Pim Fortuyn, as shown by the election results from across such »problem areas« – including the former eastern coalfields of Limburg.

But there was also support for Fortuyn in suburban, apparently flourishing towns like Almere, Purmerend and Capelle aan den IJssel. According to the SISWO research, this came from the »social climbers« – people who have done well materially during the past decade, with better jobs, better houses and better cars. But the survey found that this group, often people living on new owner-occupier estates in places like Almere, increasingly felt dissatisfied with society – sometimes with a xenophobic dimension – because the inner-city problems from which many had fled seemed to have followed them in the form of disturbance, crime, insecurity and »foreigners«. And there is a third group, much smaller but highly visible in the upper ranks of the LPF: the »nouveaux riches«, a new class of entrepreneurs from the worlds of ICT, property and the law who feel insufficiently represented and appreciated by the current sociopolitical system.

But sometimes even progressives have been receptive to the new right-wing populism, particularly in respect of its anti-globalist sentiments: the defense of Dutch national and social identity in the face of Europe and globalization. Many »liberals« also share Fortuyn's abhorrence of anti-gay, anti-women Islam. Betz even goes so far as to describe the new right-wing populism as not merely a popular resistance movement but also the standard bearer for an alternative model of Western European identity de-

signed to maintain a common identity in the face of the threat from multiculturalism and globalization. He writes of a populist politics of identity with components drawn from the left and the right, which allow it to appeal not just to »modernization losers« but also to middle-class groups.¹²

To explain why it was that right-wing populism became such a force during the final decade of the twentieth century three factors can be identified. *First*, the theme of immigration increasingly appeared on the journalistic and political agenda in Europe. Not only because of the increasing numbers of immigrants, but also due to the realization that the right to asylum was being used more and more by »economic migrants« – and by organized people-smugglers – as a way into Europe. This was coupled with the fear, particularly in countries like Austria, of massive waves of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe as a result of EU expansion. And there was something else, too. The issue of multiculturalism and integration, the »new social question«, became an ever-more important aspect of the political debate in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Ever since alarmist analyses of the failure of immigrant communities to integrate began to appear the debate has been dominated by notions of failing integration, adaptation, assimilation and cultural integration. This last aspect is regarded as ousting and working to the detriment of the previous discourse, which had been about multiculturalism. That, however, is now regarded, pejoratively, as »politically correct«. In some countries more than in others, the idea of the new right-wing populism as a »third way« between the democratic and the far right has come to be viewed as acceptable as an outlet for »multicultural frictions«.

Second, the 1990s were the decade of »the ideology of change«. »Embrace change« became the slogan of the New Democrats under Bill Clinton. At a summit in Lisbon, Europe officially declared its intention to win the global race with the United States and Japan by becoming »the most competitive socially-inclusive knowledge economy in the world«. ¹³ The apparent determinism and inevitability of processes such as globali-

12. Betz, op. cit., p. 258.

13. At the very least, it can be said that there was a rhetorical dramatization of the Great Divide, as expressed in the New World ideology of the information gurus and the new-economy hype, and all massively reinforced by the dramatic power of the modern media. As Michael Ehrke rightly states, it is mainly the mass media, the economists and the consultants – the »rhetoricians of upheaval« – who in recent decades have incessantly been telling nations, state welfare systems, companies and individuals alike to »adapt or die«, Michael Ehrke, op. cit., p.27.

zation, ICT, deregulation and the creation of a new post-industrial knowledge economy have even been declared subject to the »TINA« principle – »there is no alternative«. First, right-wing governments and later the more or less social-democratically inspired »Third Way« administrations like those of Britain's Tony Blair, Holland's Wim Kok and Germany's Gerhard Schröder fell in line with the neoliberal »Washington Consensus« of the IMF and the World Bank, with its ideology of a world in flux, a world of permanent change, all of it in the same direction. Much more than people realize, this has created a climate of huge uncertainty in which, for example, individual unemployment is regarded as a punishment for not being sufficiently flexible, mobile or willing to take risks. Harsh processes of selection and meritocratization in education and the labor market have come to be dominated by this theme: »Don't miss the boat to the New World.«

Third, and as a natural extension of the above, there is the fact that social democracy has more or less disappeared as a counterweight to and buffer against the prevailing social dynamic. First – certainly in the case of Germany's SPD and the British Labour Party – because of a long, forlorn period of opposition and then, once finally back in power, a desire not to force a sudden change of policy direction but instead to »ride the wave« of dynamism with the world in flux. This was the »Third Way« as an ideology of adjustment to the new global knowledge society, »beyond left and right, beyond state and market«. This ultimately left a vacuum which right-wing populism – the cultural revolt of the »little man« against social change – eagerly filled.

The Predicament of Social Democracy

Right-wing populism can in many respects be regarded as the competitor, the foe or the antithesis of social democracy. The populism which emerged in Europe after the Second World War, in particular, can be defined as a reaction against the social-democratic welfare-state consensus of mixed economies, the Beveridge Plan and Keynesianism; a consensus which also embraced other institutional arrangements, such as a strongly interventionist bureaucratic state, a representative democracy based upon mass parties and collective bargaining between employers and workers.

Populism – which by nature is anti-institutional and anti-representational – rejected this post-war consensus, viewing it as counter to the real

interests of »the people«, if not a form of self-enrichment for special interests and corrupt party elites. Populists regard the sociopolitical system as a whole, and certainly political parties such as the social democratic »machines«, as a corrupt filter separating »the rulers« from »the people«.

It is no coincidence that right-wing populism has most prospered in social-democratically inclined nations like Austria, Denmark and, to a lesser extent, Belgium, the Netherlands and France, where it has concentrated its wrath against various models of consensus democracy: the »Church of the Left« in the Netherlands, »concordance democracy« or »proportional democracy« in Austria and »cohabitation« in France.

For this reason alone populism throws down the gauntlet to social democracy, which it accuses of betraying the people and which it portrays as a corrupt component of the high-handed Establishment. For a mass party which considers its *raison d'être* to be »social justice for all« and equal rights, achieved by challenging the prevailing elites of capitalism, this is nothing less than a frontal political assault. Something like this attacks the progressive social-democratic principle of an open society. In terms of both internationalism and international cooperation – European unification, world citizenship – and, culturally, in terms of tolerance and liberal values; certainly since it embraced new social movements and »liberated« intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, social democracy and the progressive left have represented a libertarian, cosmopolitan and post-material ideal of citizenship built upon the values of ecological sustainability, feminism, international solidarity with the Third World and multiculturalism or cultural relativism.

Social democracy has refused to side with the anti-globalization movement, yet it has also failed to develop its own model of globalization which differs substantially from that favored by neoliberalism.

On this point, in particular, right-wing populism can be viewed as an attack upon the very culture of social democracy. The populists counter the progressive values of social democracy with the argument that they threaten cultural, national and even ethnic identity. This, they say, is the »dark side« of those values, the price to be paid for modernization and immigration.

In Austria, the fuel for populist resistance against »Konkordanzdemokratie« (»concordance democracy«) was the equal distribution of power

across the entire social and political system between the main social democratic and Christian Democratic milieus. The form in which populism appears is highly dependent upon the national context. In Scandinavia it is about resistance to the »extravagant and paternalistic welfare state«, with the excessive tax burden and – formerly – cosmopolitan immigration policy as core issues. The trigger in Belgium is the federal constitution, with the »Flemish card« being played against the supposedly favored Francophone provinces. The system of patronage and clientism endemic within the established parties also plays a role there, as does immigration policy (»Our people first«). In France there was the Poujadist movement of small shopkeepers opposed to Parisian centralism, from which Le Pen would eventually emerge. In the Netherlands, much later, Pim Fortuyn would insist that »the Netherlands is full« and fulminate against the »ruins of the Purple years«, the imperious »Polder Model« and the bureaucratic »manager state«.

Social Democracy as the Establishment

So, whilst the national contexts may vary, virtually everywhere social democracy is in the dock, facing a whole list of charges. The first is that, much more than its own self-image would like, social democracy is an integral part of the Establishment in the Western liberal democracies. Since the 1950s it has been a standard bearer for the European model of the welfare state, alongside Christian Democracy in its role as a traditional movement of actual or potential government. It is this friction between being part of the »ruling Establishment« on the one hand and the »party of the common man« on the other which is the Achilles heel of social democracy, making it highly and increasingly vulnerable to populist attack. As a result of growing political cynicism, better education and people's greater assertiveness, the tension between political elites and the public which has long been an integral part of representative democracy has, if anything, increased, whereas the technocratic-consensus politics of social-democratic governments has tended to point in a different direction. Government has sometimes so stifled democracy that in Austria, for example, social democrats have been branded »Haidermakers«: their style of and attitude in government was such that they effectively brought right-wing populism – in this case, Haider's success – upon themselves.¹⁴

14. Perger, op. cit., p.8.

Ideological Inertia

Second, there is an ideological and policy problem. The political project of social democracy can be defined, in a few words, as »to organize capitalism according to standards of justice and emancipation so as to achieve full citizenship«. But social democracy has recently aroused the suspicion, at the very least, that impotence has caused it to abandon this project, unable as it is to organize the ideological and political process of globalization and shareholder capitalism at world level. Not only does social democracy rightly no longer think in terms of an alternative to capitalism since the total collapse of Communism, but now it also seems unable to adjust capitalism on a global scale even to the extent of humanizing it or tempering it socially. Social democracy has refused to side with the anti-globalization movement, yet it has also failed to develop its own model of globalization which differs substantially from that favored by neoliberalism. The idea of presenting the European social model as a blueprint for the world as a whole has not yet really taken off, to put it very mildly. Indeed, it is still not even clear whether the »Rhineland« or corporatist model of capitalism could be globally competitive in the long term. That will depend upon the prospects for economic renaissance in Germany or Japan.

The Third Way philosophy is a perfect illustration of the ideological dilemmas facing social democracy. This was originally a refreshing criticism of social-democratic »etatism« – addressing the failures of government as well as those of the market – and provided a useful recognition of the importance of an active welfare state and a dynamic private sector. But it eventually became far too much of a reconciliation with the dominant Anglo-American neoliberalism of the 1990s. Here, sadder but wiser, I would like to share an observation made by Werner Perger, »Third Way correspondent« of the German newspaper »Die Zeit«. »That the large traditional parties increasingly resemble one another«, he writes, »is probably due in part to the ›majority strategy‹ adopted by the social democrats – the much vaunted ›Third Way‹. In the age of globalization, left politics seems to consist mainly of cuts, labor-market reforms, benefit reductions and deregulation. Perhaps these were unavoidable, but it is difficult to view them as anything other than neoliberal revisionism in a ›light‹ form. Whatever the case, the new revisionism has failed to impress the traditional grass roots of the governing leftist parties ... As soon as the impression set in that only foreigners and marginal groups were

still profiting from the slimmed-down welfare state, the authoritarian face of ›worker culture‹ appeared.«¹⁵

This seems to be a crucial factor. According to many people, the welfare state no longer offered – or was perceived as no longer offering – a safety net. And what security remained went – or was perceived as going – to those with no right to it: undeserving recipients of long-term disability benefits, recent immigrants, tax exiles, and so on. As a result, the alliance between social democracy and its traditional supporters in the educationally underprivileged low-income groups – whose link with it was the protective, reliable welfare state – was put under strain.

But beware! It would be wrong to think that the Purple Coalitions and the associated ›Third Way‹ route adopted by the PvdA was the most risky option it could have taken. It is certainly possible to strongly criticize the pragmatic ›strong and social‹ (a party slogan) middle way chosen by Dutch social democracy during the 1990s, just as there is much in that course which is defensible. But those seized by nostalgia for the ›true left‹ and the old, trusted ideological certainties forget that the left-wing credentials of, for example, the PvdA during the 1980s – prior to it becoming a party capable of government under Wim Kok – were based largely upon such themes as nuclear disarmament, the environment, feminism and the Third World – a program that simply did not appeal to ordinary people in ordinary neighborhoods. During the 1980s the PvdA in the Netherlands – like the SPD in Germany and the Labour Party in the UK – became so unelectable precisely because, amidst economic crisis, mass unemployment and a welfare system bursting at the seams, it decided that it should be concentrating upon post-materialist issues like nuclear missiles, nuclear energy, the environmental apocalypse and the unconditional basic income. However unsatisfactory it may be in so many respects, the Third Way was a reaction against that attitude and should therefore be considered as a return to the socio-economic bread-and-butter issues, and as a necessary acknowledgement of the process of globalization and the appearance of the post-industrial service-based economy.¹⁶

15. Perger, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

16. The most shocking example of the dominance of post-materialist over materialist themes which I ever witnessed in social democracy was at a conference of the German SPD in Mannheim in 1991, shortly after reunification, when the topic ›The economy of the former GDR‹ was scrapped from the agenda so that a debate on the gender distribution formula for appointments to party bodies could be extended.

The Cultural, Political and Sociological Fault Line

The third reason, therefore, that social democracy has been put in the dock by populism is its political program in the area of »post-materialist« issues. For example, its internationalism in terms of European integration, foreign policy and development cooperation, and its ideal of an open society at the global level. In principle, social democracy resists economic and cultural protectionism. All this rests upon a so-called progressive view of humanity and the world, one which is rather cosmopolitan, culturally relativistic and »politically correct«, and dovetails with a generally progressive stance in terms of libertarian tolerance, pluralistic democracy and respect for individual human rights.

It is here that a clash occurs with the rightist populism defined by Taggart as »the politics of the heartland – a backward utopia, a justification for the exclusion of the demonized – which accounts for the inward-looking nature of populism. Internationalism and cosmopolitanism are anathema to populists.«¹⁷ By »the demonized« can be meant everything which threatens the »heartland«: the old, trusted world and identity of the past. In the case of right-wing populism that includes, and not unemphatically, foreign influences – in particular, the influx of immigrants and foreigners.

But, and this complicates the matter, this is a clash which cuts right across social democracy, too. Or, at any rate, does not pass it over. Research shows that social democracy's electorate divides into two sharply-defined groups: materialists and post-materialists. And the dividing line between them largely coincides with the cultural split which is defined by educational level, between those with few qualifications who feel insecure and vulnerable and the well-educated who, armed with social and cultural capital, are consciously working to carve out their place in the world. This fault line passes right through social democracy far more than it divides any other political party or movement.

And that fact conceals a whole story about the sociological basis of social democracy and what groups it can and does represent. Historically speaking, the alliance within social democracy between the proletariat and the professionals, between the working and middle classes, between the intellectuals and the managers has never been an easy one, particularly during the post-war period. At the time of its ideological reorientation

17. Taggart, op. cit, p. 96.

during the 1930s, a debate raged within social democracy about whether it was a workers' movement or people's one: class-based versus nation-based social democracy. This discussion was conducted against the menacing backdrop of advancing Fascism, which portrayed itself as both anti-capitalist and anti-socialist and which proved highly attractive to farmers and the petty bourgeoisie who had fallen victim to the economic crisis of capitalism. So the revisionist debate within social democracy was also about »detering the petty bourgeoisie and the workers from extremism – read: Fascism and Communism – by generating prosperity«. ¹⁸ This extension of social democracy's ambitions beyond the traditional boundaries of the proletariat and the working class would later, after the Second World War, become permanent.

Ever since it was founded, the Dutch Labour Party has attempted to forge an electoral coalition of the working and middle classes;¹⁹ of those with some way still to go towards gaining full membership of society in the face of deprivation and discrimination, and of those who support social democracy from a more comfortable position. The sociological links between the party and its electoral grassroots have become much looser in the structural sense since the 1970s, driven by the breakdown of traditional religious and sociopolitical affiliations in favor of individualization. This phenomenon is in turn linked to that of political parties' own estrangement from their grassroots. The close links between society and politics, between parties and their rank and file, have largely been broken. The structure of our society itself has changed significantly, and that of representation no less so. Voters have become floating voters, their behavior considerably more capricious than only a few decades ago. Ideological loyalties and class identification have become less and less significant. In an increasingly meritocratic society, lifestyle and cultural identity profile have gained ground.

The type of individualism practiced by today's citizen is difficult to reconcile with attachment to a collective entity such as a political party. And the modern media landscape has further encouraged the loosening of ties

18. F. de Jong Edz., »De Nederlandse sociaal-democratie en de dreiging van het fascisme 1930–1940«, *Socialisme & Democratie*, no. 6 (June 1984), p. 198. See also Annemieke Klijn, *Arbeiders- of volkspartij. Een vergelijkende studie van het Belgische en Nederlandse socialisme 1933–1946* (Maastricht, 1990).

19. The following passages are partially drawn from the report of the PvdA's »De Boer Committee«. With many thanks to Frans Becker.

between citizens and parties by giving the business of politics a new logic and dynamic, and by taking over traditional party functions such as socialization, communication and the dissemination of information. This means that not only has the relationship between voters and parties changed, but also that between parties and their own members.

Politics has become a marketplace in which political entrepreneurs compete for the votes of citizen-consumers, and the traditional mass parties have extensively rationalized and professionalized themselves, with, as a result, even more drastic social deracination and the further expansion of the state's influence. The party organizations are centralized. Especially when a party is in government, its center of gravity shifts to the corridors of power. The logic of the media has stimulated more plebiscitary elements within the organization – the personalization of a politically mediagenic leadership – and turned internal debate and differences of opinion into an electoral liability. In the shadow of power, the party organizations have withered. In general, the political leaders of the parties have shown little interest in fundamental policy debates. Their maxim in running their party has been risk management; they have shied away from more open, intellectual debate. In practice, when in government a pragmatic middle way has prevailed and the party's political profile faded.

In its style, communications and program, social democracy should dare to be more »populist«, in a leftist way, if it is to combat and compete with right-wing populism.

As a result of all this, the »natural« rank and file of social democratic parties such as the PvdA has become highly fragmented. Large sections of the traditional working class have become part of the broad middle class. From the 1970s on, the PvdA became in many respects a »party of the collective sector«: for teachers, nurses and civil servants. And new groups have appeared, mainly as a result of immigration. The increased heterogeneity of what a social democratic party wants to regard as its electoral base is a breeding ground for different and difficult-to-reconcile interests. Traditional working-class bastions alongside free thinkers and the new knowledge workers, the traditional intelligentsia and immigrants. And, for fear of alienating groups within its electoral base, the party has suppressed the growing frictions between them.

Just whom the PvdA does represent and wants to represent was therefore one of the main questions following its May 2002 general-election defeat. The modernization of social democracy in Europe – the so-called »Third Way« or »Neue Mitte« – has been a conscious attempt to break further into the sociological middle ground, including those working in business and commerce. At the same time the social democrats still counted the remnants of the old working class, and in a more general sense those at the bottom end of the labor market amongst their core support. But not only did they fail to represent those diverse groups simultaneously in a credible way, but they have also not adequately acknowledged that problem.

Herein lies the new representational dilemma for social democracy, including the issue of the multicultural society and all that is projected onto and around it. The election outcomes in several European countries may possibly have brought to the surface a more structural change within the electorate, a change which could confound social democracy for a long time to come. It could well become more difficult for the left to forge successful and robust alliances between the well-educated and the less well-educated, between rich and poor, and between the middle class and less privileged groups.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the Fortuyn revolt and the success of similar political movements.

First, the Fortuyn Revolt was a natural consequence of the comprehensive convergence of the main streams in Dutch politics which occurred during the closing decades of the twentieth century. With the participation of supposed arch rivals, the free-market liberal VVD and the social-democratic PvdA, in a series of so-called »Purple Coalitions« the traditional left-right divide in mainstream politics all but disappeared and existing processes of de-ideologization and technocratization were accelerated. At the same time traditional socio-economic fissures disappeared with the successful solving of the mass-unemployment problem, but this opened the way for non-materialistic issues such as immigration and integration to take center-stage and allowed the culture of political correctness which had grown in this area to be smashed.

The second conclusion is that the Fortuyn Revolt was an integral part of the wider pattern of rising right-wing populist movements in Europe. This indicates that, as well as its cyclical and specifically Dutch origins, that revolt also had more structural causes. And that they were part of a bigger international phenomenon. It is argued that right-wing populism is a resistance movement against a world in flux and an alarm signal for dysfunction in the representative political system.

Third, right-wing populism hits social democracy particularly hard. The new populism which developed in Europe after the Second World War can be characterized as the arch foe of the post-war welfare-state consensus, à la Beveridge and Keynes, which was largely colored by social democracy. That consensus rests upon a mixed economy, collective bargaining through employers' and workers' organizations, the bureaucratic institutions of the welfare state, a representative democracy built upon mass political parties and, finally, a culture of liberal – sometimes libertarian – freedoms and international co-operation.

All this is complicated by the fact that, both electorally and in their sociological background, social democracy and right-wing populists are partly fishing in the same pond – that of the »little man«. In places their electorates overlap: educationally underprivileged working and lower-middle-class groups from the cities and their suburbs. The result of this is that a populist »revolt of the little man« highlights the long-standing divide within left-wing and progressive social-democratic parties between the well-educated and the less well-educated, between so-called »materialists« and »postmaterialists«. Looked at in this way, could right-wing populism be the cultural revenge of the »working class« against the intellectual elites within what are supposedly »workers' parties«?

If, despite everything, social democracy still regards its historic task as being »to keep society together«, to face up to the disruptive and destructive powers which are acting upon society to the detriment of liberal democracy and the social constitutional state (Rechtsstaat), then it should start by paying far more attention to the darker aspects and unsettling effects of the hypermodernization which has gripped world society in recent decades. Social democracy must show more courage in making use of the political room for maneuver which this apparently deterministic process still allows. As Michael Ehrke puts it, »Politics in the Age of Globalization appears to be subject to a process of progressive desubstantialization: it is being reduced to making minor adjustments to inevitable processes and managing crises. The lack of fundamental options is under-

mining political competition and forcing politicians to dramatize the most minimal of differences or to substitute them altogether with symbols and media events.«²⁰

Are competing political options for globalization possible? Can a global social capitalism be developed as a competitive alternative to the Anglo-American model, and what alliances and global agreements will this demand of European social democracy – if we can even say that it exists?

As a »force of political moderation«, social democracy must in essence keep the so-called »modernization losers« away from right-wing populism and even worse forms of extremism and radicalism. This means both that the forces of modernization need to be tempered and steered as far as possible and that its economic, socio-psychological and cultural impact has to be cushioned as much as possible. This on pain of entering an »authoritarian century«, as the Anglo-German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf recently warned us, if we do not succeed in solving the crisis of democracy in the Western sociopolitical system.²¹

A civilized democracy can survive in the long term only if the political moderates sing the best tunes, and keep on doing so. That it is an end which justifies many means.

Put simply, if social democracy wishes to reduce resentment in society – socio-economic, democratic, cultural and multicultural discontent – and thus remove the breeding conditions for socio-economic marginalization or the polarization of communities along ethnic lines (the so-called »Antwerp scenario«), then its program, style and communications must make concessions to its educationally underprivileged constituency – if necessary, at the expense of its other constituency: the well-educated intellectuals. This is the painful dilemma facing European social democracy amidst a situation of social turbulence, unfavorable political conditions and attacks from a right-wing populism which promises to protect »the little man« as »a bulwark against real or imagined global forces«.

20. Ehrke, op. cit., p. 19. See also Susanne Falkenberg, *Populismus und Populistischer Moment in Vergleich zwischen Frankreich, Italien und Österreich*, Elektronische Dissertationen, Universitätsbibliothek Duisburg (2003), www.ub.uni-duisburg.de/diss.

21. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Die Krisen der Demokratie* (Beck, 2003).

I must make it absolutely clear that I am not calling here for »Haidering« – adoption of the rhetoric and program of right-wing populism for strategic reasons – in any shape or form. What I am appealing for is that the underlying causes and reasons for the rise of that populism in Europe be taken very seriously; and for a populist discourse and style as the »language of true reality« to be taken more seriously alongside, against and in confrontation with the »language of policy reality« used by politicians, political parties, experts, observers and technocrats. As Michael Kazin formulated it for the situation in the United States, »The desire to transcend populism is shortsighted. It ignores the very persistence of the language, rooted in the gap between American ideals and those institutions and authorities whose performance betrays them ... At the core of the populist tradition is an insight of great democratic and moral significance ... We should not speak solely within the terms of populism, but, without it, we are lost«.²²

In its style, communications and program, social democracy should dare to be more »populist«, in a leftist way, if it is to combat and compete with right-wing populism. Even if this risks creating major existential problems in the long term: the cleaving of social-democratic parties along cultural lines.

»Left-wing populism« entails: (i) acknowledging the »dark« sides of the current process of modernization and the forces which directly affect people's lives far more than is done at present; (ii) prioritizing the plight of those who have been left behind by the process of economic and cultural modernization as it has accelerated (specifically, through a generous program of compensation for the residents, black and white, of deprived and decaying inner-city districts), as well as making crime-fighting and prevention policy more effective and immigration and integration policies more coherent, as a matter of urgency, in order to check the tendency towards social disintegration; and (iii) disengaging as far as possible from technocratic and bureaucratic complexes so as to »repoliticize politics«. The cozy, introverted and isolated world in which political power is concentrated needs to be smashed. Through better political communication, greater respect for common sense and increased politicization – fewer technocratic inevitabilities, more political freedom of choice – the gap, be it perceived or real, between debate-defining, decision-making elites and ordinary citizens should be closed as far as possible. A civilized left-wing

22. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion, An American History* (1995), pp. 282–84.

populism is necessary if the wind is to be taken out the sails of a right-wing populism which is rooted in authoritarian and xenophobic sentiments, if not worse things.

A civilized democracy can survive in the long term only if the political moderates sing the best tunes, and keep on doing so. That is an end which justifies many means.