

Populism and the *Vox Populi* as a *Pandora's Box*

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Abstract

It is widely believed that there is something like 'the voice of the people' which should be leading in taking political decisions. Such an idea, on the other hand, is particularly blamed on the 'populists' who systematically emphasize this and accuse politicians of not connecting sufficiently well to it. Is this justified?

Democratic politics is formally legitimized by the voter's vote, but this by definition comes down to a *diversified, open mandate* with which there are many options. The voter does not speak with one voice. Democratic majorities are never absolute, because they always involve a certain combination of different orientations and opinions. To that extent, therefore, the 'voice of the people' does not exist. Nevertheless, in the background the concept of the «**Sovereignty of the People**» always plays a role that should not be underestimated. This tricky concept – because it is open to different interpretations – is used in different ways by *both* (alleged) populists and anti-populists, making it a vehicle for interpreting *both* (alleged) democratic and anti-democratic tendencies. This 'interpretation' then often lacks the constitutional dimension and connotation that should be associated with it. We will discuss this further hereafter.

keywords:

contemporary politics; populism; sovereignty; freedom; etatism; individualism, libertarianism; civil rights

Context

Since the rise of the politician *Fortuyn* in the Dutch national political arena over twenty years ago, many appear to have great difficulty with the concept of *populism*. Populism, however, is *by definition* a basic characteristic of politics, as *all* political parties to a greater or lesser extent use strategies to appease 'the People' and in this way increase their electoral support. However, this essence does not alter the fact that there can of course be major differences in terms of *political content*. However, when such differences affect important issues and questions such as *matters of causality*, there is something the matter. But even this phenomenon is *not exclusive* to populists, as is often mistakenly believed. Various parties regularly indulge in extremely sloppy reasoning and present matters (too) simplistically. This transcends the rather arbitrary throwing around of terms such as populism, with which especially the 'own right' should be adduced and other (unwelcome) views disqualified. However, when Fortuyn in addition to widely embracement was publicly slammed with united ('right-thinking') forces for 'the danger to democracy' that he was said to embody among other things because of his Islam statements, people did not know what to do with the undeniable fact that this politician had nevertheless, as a true people's tribune, touched sensitive chords with 'the People'. The reproaches were vitriolic, for there was much at stake (including the continuation of the then ruling 'purple' government which he called into question). Afterwards, politicians expressed 'regret', but the harm had been done.¹ Did they 'learn' anything from this? Hardly. Now that the all-new *farmer-citizen-movement* (BBB party) has recently won a massive election victory, the accusations of 'populism' and 'gut feelings' that would have led

voters to vote are once again unrelenting. The disqualification process seems to be repeating itself unabashedly.

The recurring central question seems to be *who* believes they can present themselves as the 'true' representatives of the people *on the basis of what*. Formally, all those elected are representatives of the people, but it is clear that not only differences in electoral numbers, but above all *differences in content* matter and can be of decisive significance in political practice. In the end, it is always a (tough) fight for *positions of power*. When populists are accused of unilaterally wanting to convert popular opinions into policy one-to-one and thereby hindering or threatening 'the democratic process', one could just as easily accuse other parties of hijacking democracy in the name of 'market freedom'. Where 'populists' point to mangled state functions and the neglect of subsistence conditions, others sometimes appear to care little about principles of the rule of law.

Two fundamental issues aligned with each other appear to compete for precedence time and again:

1. How do we think about the *role of the state* and its constitutionally codified functions. In other words, what are the party-political relations in terms of *etatism versus anti-etatism*.
2. How do the people think about *freedom* where individual and collective interests are concerned and how *sovereign* they are in this regard.

The *citizen-state relationship* is the core. But in order to answer the above questions, it is first of all important to determine *what kind(s) of freedom* one has in mind.

- i. Is that primarily an *individual freedom* to pursue interests as anti-etatist *economic liberals* emphasize? This will become rather problematic in the absence of sufficient livelihood opportunities in a structurally unequal society.
- ii. Is that the *freedom to be safeguarded from coercive moralism and patronization* as advocated by anti-authoritarian *libertarianism*? The encroaching *new Victorianism*, however, does nothing but constantly exhort citizens to conform benevolently to a rather hypocritical morality of selective hypersentimentalism in which it is preferred to look away rather than face issues.
- iii. Is it the (polyarchical-) *corporatist* freedom to get mainly *particularistic interests* implemented in policy via lobbying networks and/or to be able 'to do one's own thing' in local communities?
- iv. Or is it about the *freedom to join hands in solidarity* and fight alongside one another for the common good, as more *etatistically* and *collectivistically* inclined people emphasize?

The dichotomy *individualism-collectivism* depends in particular on what is meant by the «**general interest**». In addition to individual interests, citizens benefit from good living conditions and facilities which they do not have to arrange themselves – and as a rule are not even in a position to do so – , but for which appropriate *authorities* have a series of *mandatory responsibilities*. This goes beyond all ideological controversy (and often unproductive bickering about it). Here, by the way, ideological positions threaten to get more and more mixed up, so that rather confusing interrelationships arise. ² In other words, no matter how one views 'freedom', one cannot escape taking into account a *real or realistic distinction* between *state/government, market and society* that offers *both individual and collective* protection and security. If this important distinction is disregarded, policy degenerates into a hopeless madman's ride of *ad hoc* decisions, usually putting the cart before the horse.

Although one can never satisfy all social wishes, it remains important to properly regulate basic living conditions such as housing, work, health, education and income security for *all* inhabitants. That is the *common assignment* from which no party – 'populist' or not – can escape. The 'voice of the people' will always be loud in this regard, whether one likes and applauds it or not. In this respect, the people are indeed sovereign. Especially in a (parliamentary) democracy that takes itself seriously and respects itself.

Paradoxal developments

All these ideological controversies that are hardly addressed in a *direct* way nevertheless pay off in all kinds of environmental issues. For now, although many natural products such as cotton and various types of wood may no longer be processed, to give one example, what takes their place? PFAS, or non-degradable and harmful synthetic chemical compounds! ³ This is the paradoxical reality of a global market economy and international chemical industry that cares little about objections and regulations. The 'big right' of environment and market gets in the way so that neoliberals – and by no means are they alone – who embrace both the 'market' and the 'environment', find themselves squarely at odds. A (blind) focus on 'Holland parkland' for instance does not alter this. The artificial 'laboratory society' is advancing unabated. Another 10-15 years or so before people can carefree imagine themselves 'climate neutral' without actually being so. To many people's delight (or little concern) apparently. But once it becomes clear what one has been causing or tacitly allowing to happen, then it really is too late for 'regrets'. Then the so cherished 'freedom' is also far away and the *uniformization* of life is a fact. Long live the *Chinese model*. ('Some sambal at it?'). The ominous clash of arms around 'Taiwan' will turn out to be merely a diversionary tactic, just as the alleged *dichotomy* between the 'free West' and the autocratic-dirigiste world is largely based on illusions, since in practice it is much less sharp than usually thought. ⁴ Global *state capitalism*, by definition, is pregnant *everywhere* in the world. Tricky, yes, but not 'inescapable' if one were willing to take a more realistic approach to one's own positions. But that too will turn out to be *wishful thinking*.

One bright spot: the farmers, to the dismay of many pseudo-democrats, have discovered *the citizen* after all the misfortunes they have experienced and have put him back on the (political) map. A firm start has been made with a *repositioning* that will (may) have far-reaching consequences if one manages to maintain a stiff upper lip and a straight back. It is no coincidence that the media are avoiding the French solidarity demonstrations against the pension laws as if it were a plague of 'old Egyptian' proportions, because it might just give their own society unwanted 'foreign' ideas. Under no circumstances, apparently, should the assembled civil community be seen as a *political entity* to be duly taken into account. The 'policies' and 'objectives' you know. After all, work 'pays' and saved assets are in good hands, right...? Well, that remains to be seen, as the following explanation may illustrate and clarify.

Violated solidarity and crumbling pension rights

In the midst of all the commotion about environmental and energy transitions, one would almost forget that in addition to previous 'reforms' such as the social security system and health care, one of the most far-reaching 'transitions' is currently in the Dutch and other governmental pipelines, namely the *complete commodification of the pension system* with uncertain consequences for citizens and society. All this euphemistic combating of (merely virtual) 'inequality of wealth' ⁵ comes

down to a squandering of the *solidarity* on which the current (Dutch) system is based and an unashamedly chasing of current and future individual pensioners into the undefined financial market, giving almost untouchable pension funds *completely free rein*. This does not promise much good, as has been experienced many times before in major privatization and corporatization operations. Pensioners will *lose* most of their existing rights and in the near future will have to put up with the whims of fund managers without having any insight into how their 'flexible' pensions are calculated and determined. The simple fact that politicians cooperate and give the green light to this is therefore outrageous. The 'left wing cloud without feathers' and the 'appealing right wing' will therefore have to think twice about what they are enabling and doing with this, before crowing about victory on the backs of the *entire* community. Nevertheless, governing appears to come down to shirking responsibilities as much as possible and saddling others with virtually impossible work. By contrast, the actual (re)distribution of 1,500 billion in pension funds will prove to be a 'job' of unprecedented magnitude that, according to financial experts, will be almost impossible to manage. On top of the existing implementation problems, it will be a downright attack on the existing inadequate capacity of tax authorities and designated implementing organizations. However, those who complain about the social consequences of neoliberal policies will, as a political party, at least have to account for the support they have given to such policies over the years. But given the popularizing marketing with which the voice of the people – even on this issue – is systematically fooled, one need hardly expect anything of this. After all, the stakes had long since been raised on the advice of many fellow travellers, so this is merely a rearguard action — *if* it even comes to that. Not for nothing have young people been systematically pitted against the elderly in order to make it clear that the aging 'parasitic' population is the culprit. This reprehensible playing off of generations against each other will nevertheless prove counterproductive once it is realized in what murky waters the entire population has allowed itself to be maneuvered. But by then it will be too late. A belated echo of what was once cowardly called the *anti-solidarity* 'freerider' phenomenon, of which the victims of the reforms of the social security system and other benefit recipients of the time, were the victims. Nothing at all has been learned and the lessons are not taken to heart, let alone there is a willingness to restore such gross missteps. After all, all that is 'passé' and 'done with' Well, why should there actually be so much ongoing societal 'discontent' and distrust? For those who absolve themselves of all policy consequences for which they have been (co-)responsible, surely this can only be due to 'populism'? Anything else is out of the question. But this hypocritical conceit will not last long.

Concluding remarks

There is always an ongoing battle around the sympathies, preferences and support of the general public concerning political matters and decisions. Therefore 'influencers' of all kinds are *omni-present*. Varying from mainstream and critical media, lobbying networks and their spokesmen, to individual commentators and blogging scribblers of all sorts. Although the *vox populi* is a rather 'fluid' phenomenon, it cannot be underestimated or ignored in political life.

Nevertheless, current issues and developments (such as the war in Ukraine or the climate and environmental debate) can only be understood in their *full historical and geopolitical context*, such as the (legacy of the) Cold War and global interdependence of states. Debates based on *idea-fixes* – sympathetic and attractive or not – therefore miss the point of what is at stake in contemporary politics, namely: *power politics* in which major interests are always at stake. *Conflicts of interests*, in short, which cannot be covered by the cloak of love. Eyes will therefore always have to be opened

to prevent people from being blinded by *wishful thinking* without any prospect of real insight or understanding, therefore allowing 'the voice of the people' to remain an easy target for unbridled *propaganda*. Propagandistic marketing frenzy already leads to too much debilitation. One should free oneself from this, but that can only be done by detaching oneself from the solipsistic delusion of the day. Such a distancing, however, requires a fortitude that is sorely lacking in all *disorientation*. Wanting to close Pandora's box is not a realistic option, but neither is turning it into a noncommittal grabbing box, while many civil rights are under severe attack. Return to the neglected ('forgotten') *political roots*, one would say, and see things again in their proper proportions and impact, in order that 'opinions' and 'narratives' are no longer interchangeable objects to be taken for granted at will, or with which noncommittal runs can be made. For that, politics and political issues, as well as freedom(s) are too important. Count your 'blessings' (in disguise)...

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Notes

¹ Fortuyn was shot at an expected (and later realized) resounding election result, even before he could have actually entered the Dutch National Assembly (May 6th 2002)

² Accordingly, there are far-reaching connections on both the left and the right between (neo)liberal, libertarian/libertaristic and (neo)corporatist orientations with a common feature of *anti-etatism*, while *also* traditionally more etatist-inclined people and parties are increasingly turning to corporatist (decentralization and 'community') orientations. This obscures political policy and decision-making in no small degree.

³ PFAS is the collective name for more than 6,000 chemicals that include a combination of fluorine compounds and alkyl groups. They do not occur in the natural environment. The use of *some* of these substances may have been restricted by the EU since 2006, but most of the products manufactured with PFAS products (such as clothing, footwear, furniture and automotive parts) come from China and other countries outside the EU so the net effect of this rule is virtually nil.

⁴ See Amlinger, C. and O. Nachtwey, *Gekränkte Freiheit*. Suhrkamp, Berlin: 2022 on the powerless and mostly unfocused 'authoritarian libertarianism' which, although it is advancing everywhere and with which many identify - carelessly or not - is nevertheless unable to make a fist against the increasingly complex world of power concentration. Instead, it gets bogged down in resentment and democratic hostility. "*Ein Bedrohung für eine Gesellschaft der Freien und Gleichen: die Verleugnung einer geteilten Realität*", as the accompanying text reads in no uncertain terms.

⁵ The term «inequality of wealth (assets)» is selectively applied. In general, unlike business organizations and institutional investors, citizens do not possess substantial liquid assets as their 'assets' mainly consist of (deferred) *pension deposits* and *mortgage obligations*. Such savings are generally not readily available. This does not apply however to the inequality of assets associated with the *disproportionate system of (minimal) taxing capital incomes*. The disparity between (income from) *capital and labor* remains problematic and disruptive, in spite of all attempts to impose unrealistic reforms on citizens that they neither benefit from nor have asked for.