



**GREEN EUROPEAN  
FOUNDATION**

# **Populism, National Identity and Europe:**

## **Populism and National Identity, the Dutch case**

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The following text is a transcript of Dick Pels’ input in a round-table discussion on populism in the framework of the General Assembly of the Green European Foundation on 10 May 2010.

Rightwing populism came late to Holland, and it came in a peculiar shape and style: that of the playful, spectacular political dandyism of Pim Fortuyn. It therefore took on an unexpected quality, both in terms of ideological content (a ‘libertarian nationalism’) and communicative form (the breakthrough of media personalization and celebrity politics). Media are of course crucial in the populist equation. But due to the narcissism and bravura of Fortuyn, they were perhaps more crucial in the Netherlands than anywhere else (excepting the case of Berlusconi in Italy).

But there are advantages in being a latecomer: it sharpens our (hind)sight. The uniquely libertarian and media-spectacular Dutch case precisely underscores the newness of neo-populism, and may therefore shed some much-needed light on post-war European populism as a whole.

## The Fortuyn ‘moment’

The Fortuyn ‘moment’: eight years ago now. It all happened so fast: rise and fall within a time span of six months. A former Marxist sociology professor left academia, turned public columnist and entered into politics in August 2001 (just before 9/11), murdered 6th May 2002 by an animal rights activist. National elections 15th May: Fortuyn posthumously gained 26 seats, pulling 1.3m votes. 2002: sense of living a crisis, the acceleration of history, historical watershed between ‘new’ and ‘old’ politics. Widely seen as ‘un-Dutch’, both at home and abroad.

Initially, Fortuyn’s success was considered an unfortunate incident, a temporary derailment of a generally well-ordered democratic system that would soon return to its normal, predictable, even tedious routines. But with the benefit of hindsight and a broader historical view, we now realize that it was Holland that was ‘normalized’. Other European countries were confronted with rightwing populist movements far earlier: the Front National was founded in 1972, the Flemish Block in 1979 (in 2004 re-baptized into Flemish Interest), Forza Italia in 1993). Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister for the first time in 1994. In Austria the FPÖ scored major election victories in 1994 and 1999. The successful Dansk Folkeparti was founded in 1995. Eight years after 2002 we acknowledge that rightwing populism has also become a durable, stable feature of the Dutch political landscape. The success of Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party already more than matches that of Fortuyn: 9 seats in 2006, virtual victory in European elections, a few months ago the largest party in the polls. Presently diminishing, but still at 18 virtual seats.

History never repeats itself (in quite the same way). Neo-populism is indeed something new, not the rehearsal of something old. First reflexes were indeed to identify it with far-right movements from the thirties: fascism and national socialism. Fortuyn as ‘polder Mussolini’. But one distinctive comparative feature of the Dutch case is that it stands at the furthest remove, in terms of personnel and political conceptions, from the post-war extensions and residues of historical fascism (cf. the movements led by Le Pen, Haider, DeWinter). As historian Te Velde phrases it: the post-1945 taboo on populism in the Netherlands was based on the fact that the national socialists were populists; its 2002 breakthrough rested on the acknowledgment that most populists are not national socialists (Te Velde).

## An ideological quick-scan

By way of ideological quick-scan, I like to propose two labels that serve to accentuate the newness of post-war neo-populism. The first one, 'national-democratic', was proposed in a recent Dutch report on radicalization and the PVV. A movement and party such as the PVV stands in some tension with the democratic rule of law, but remains within the broad confines of parliamentarian, representative democracy – whereas all fascist and national-socialist movements aimed to abolish the democratic electoral system and party competition in order to replace it by a system based on the authoritarian 'leadership principle'. The populist critique of the closed elitism of traditional party-based democracy does not issue in a call for its abolition, but in the proposal to fine-tune the system by introducing elements of direct, plebiscitary representation which multiply and to some extent 'personalize' electoral procedures. A democratic version of the Führerprinzip?

But the label 'national-democratic' also fits because the idea of democracy is literally being nationalized. Sovereignty of the people is emphatically seen as sovereignty of the Dutch people. Democracy is viewed as a historical accomplishment of 'us' and denied to 'strangers'. First of all to muslims, who are seen to embrace a religion which is by definition totalitarian and violence-prone, and hence can never fit in with 'our' democratic traditions. Secondly, it is denied to strangers beyond our national borders. Europe, for example, can never become a true democracy, since there does not exist a European 'people' or a European culture. The nation state is the only conceivable home of democracy.

A second, equally suggestive label points to a similar nationalization of civic liberties: 'national individualism' (or 'libertarian nationalism'). Once again the contrast with historical fascism and national-socialism is evident (if [a big if] we are prepared to take the 'socialism' in national-socialism seriously). While these movements rigorously subordinated the individual to the popular community and the economy to the state ('Du bist Nichts, dein Volk ist Alles'; Göring's rigorous 4-year economic plans), modern rightwing populism more nearly figures as a mouthpiece for a 'people of individuals' (or individualistic producers and consumers). We encounter a novel mixture of the sovereignty of the people and the sovereignty of the individual, both of which are infused with a similar absolutism. A new balance between the neoliberal 'me first' and the neo-nationalist 'my people first'.

On the cultural level, individuals are deemed fully sovereign in their opinions ('saying what you think'). Freedom of speech turns into the loud-mouthed freedom to insult. On the political level, 'we the people' own the truth and should exercise the fullness of power. The (leftwing) political elite is decadent and corrupt and must be deposed. On the economic level, the new populism no longer suffers from the anti-capitalistic Sehnsucht which still characterized historical national-socialism, but fully subscribes to the logic of market rationality, entrepreneurship, state minimalism, privatization, income inequality and unlimited consumer sovereignty.

This absolutization of individualism and of the 'people of individuals' easily degenerates towards simplistic, splitting us/them, white/black and good/bad dichotomies and the cultivation of scapegoats and enemies. Freedom of religion, but not for muslims. Freedom of speech, but the Koran must be banned. Equality of the sexes and gay rights, but primarily in order to defend our Dutch identity and (again) to bash muslims. Defence of 'our' democracy and state of law against islam, which is 'essentially' and incurably undemocratic. Conservation of 'our' welfare state and the earnings of hardworking Dutchmen against the threat of foreign fortune-hunters and economic profiteers who are only out to get 'our' unemployment benefits.

## Alternatives? A new idea of the Netherlands, and by extension, Europe

What alternatives can be mobilized against this libertarian nationalism and its absolutization and nationalization of freedom and democracy? I think we need first of all to radically dismiss the concept of sovereignty itself, both in its individual and collective form. We must de-nationalize and de-absolutize both the concept of individual freedom and that of national identity. How to do this? In my 2005 book 'A Weakness for the Netherlands' I plead in favour of a positive 'identity weakness' and an 'active relativism' as core values of Dutch (and by extension, European) democratic culture. Such ideas are of course pure horror to those (populists and neoconservatives) who view cultural relativism as the fountainhead of all decadence, nihilism and cultural evil, and identify it with cultural 'self-hatred' and the selling-out of our most cherished foundational values.

But a 'new idea of the Netherlands', I claim, must not be developed in terms of a strong but rather in terms of a weak identity. Holland is a suitably vague, diverse and dynamic whole which is continually being reconstructed and contested, not a finished and rounded thing or a constraining essence which can be fished ready-made

from the depths of historical reality. The Netherlands is reinvented every day by all those who have a stake in it or take an interest in it. We must not attempt to artificially repair this 'ontological weakness'. We can do without the powerful, militant, and proud national identity such as advocated by the populist right. The power of the Dutch national character dwells precisely in a certain 'character weakness', which is informed by moderation and modesty with regard to our values and accomplishments, and hence offers room for permanent differences of opinion about what these values and accomplishments are. Not a superior certainty about a hard normative core, but an uncertain idea of the Netherlands offers the best point of departure, both for the integration of 'strange' cultures into 'our' society, as for the integration of our own culture in Europe and the larger world.

This is different from multiculturalism and its equal normative treatment of all cultures ('bad relativism'). But it is equally different from the monoculturalism of a 'leading' and superior Dutch national culture which legitimately dominates all others. I argue instead for a miniculturalism which affirms the normative and material preconditions for maintaining open channels of communication: debate-in-permanence, guaranteed access for everyone, pluralism of values and ideas, toleration, and empowering everyone to develop the competences and values which are required for successfully participating in this debate. This requires a minimal willingness to relativize one's own values and truths as 'entrance ticket' to this debate:

the capacity to endure criticism, to tolerate cultural differences and be open to doubt, complexity and ambivalence.

In the familiar enumeration of so-called non-negotiable 'core values' of Western culture, such as the separation of church from state, the equality between men and women & hetero- and homosexuals, the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, the constitutional state and the rule of law, one core value is conspicuous by its absence. One crucial Enlightenment value is systematically erased and underplayed (the Enlightenment is in this sense hijacked by the right) while it is precisely capable of softening and restraining the potential absolutism of all the others: the capacity to be self-critical, to relativize and moderate our culture and identity. Interestingly therefore, we do fully embrace these values, but simultaneously conduct an unending dispute over their precise meaning and limits (e.g. the freedom of speech, the separation between church and state). What binds us together is therefore not so much a

set of non-negotiable values but the debate (the unending negotiation) about their content, limits and significance.

The point d'honneur of a democratic constitutional state is that it does not possess a clear-cut identity, but provides room for a multiplicity of identities. Not a shared national culture or public morality, but the maintenance of a public forum which allows for the conduct of differences and conflicts of opinion. Democratic politics is the practice which accommodates and regulates this lack of community, this lack of shared values, this lack of national unity. What binds us is precisely the lack of consensus about what binds us together: the unending debate about who we are and want to be. The good life can also be defined as a way of life according to which we are able to permanently, freely and civilly discuss the meaning of the good life. It is my view that we do not need a stronger value base than this shared agreement about the preconditions for democratic debate (in which everything else is up for grabs). No more, but also no less.

### **'A weakness for Europe'**

This perspective can be raised one notch higher and extended into 'a weakness for Europe'. The European slogan is unity-in-diversity; but what should be the weight of both in the balance? How much unity do we need, how much diversity can we suffer? Do we really need to be 'one' in order to sufficiently cohere? The search for a univocal, unambiguous European identity, for Europe as a single-minded community of values has been a long one. Some found it in Christianity, others in the secular humanism or in market liberalism.

In 1998 Fortuyn wrote a small book called *Soulless Europe*, in which he stated that national cultures such as the Dutch one had a 'soul' which was absent from Europe. European culture and identity did not really exist, at least not among ordinary citizens. The nation state was our true family home. Europe did not constitute a 'people', did not have a 'popular will', and there were no European citizens. In his view, Europe could therefore never become a true democracy.

We must stop this essentialist soul-searching. A new idea of Europe is a weak idea of Europe. It is not one big family with a single culture, language, home and history, but a loose conglomeration (an entity not a unity) with vague borders and a thin rather than a thick identity. Such lack of a clear-cut profile and identity is not a deficiency but a source of strength (Verhofstadt). This is the ideal of Europe as 'community lite' ('Europe travelling light'),

which coheres through an ever-advancing Euro-English, high speed trains, the Euro and European football.

Perhaps the new Europe might even be conceived in terms of a 'Greater Holland'. That is to say: the model is not the unified monarchy that came into existence after 1813, but the Republic which preceded it. The Dutch Republic and its Seven (not so) United Provinces was remarkably successful in its time precisely because of its loosely-knit political community, its multilayered structure of cooperation and competition, and its precarious cultural unity-in-diversity. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that a praise of weakness and a defence of democratic uncertainty should issue from the Netherlands.

This text is a transcript of a contribution to the Green European Foundation's round table on "Populism, National Identity and Europe in the framework of its 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly on 10 May 2010 in Brussels.

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