

# Populist Fantasies: European revolts in context

Edited by  
Catherine Fieschi, Marley Morris  
and Lila Caballero



Counterpoint is a research and advisory group that uses social science methods to examine social, political and cultural dynamics. With a focus on how civil society operates in different contexts, Counterpoint helps organisations to develop solutions for more resilient and prosperous societies.



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Published by Counterpoint 2013  
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[www.counterpoint.uk.com](http://www.counterpoint.uk.com)

ISBN 978-1-909499-06-5  
Copy edited by Julie Pickard  
Series design by Modern Activity  
Typeset by Modern Activity  
Translations by: Giulio Carini (from Italian),  
Elina Eskola (from Finnish), Catherine Fieschi  
(from French), Basia Howard (from Polish),  
Peter Holm-Jensen (from Danish) and  
Sandra Jasper (from German)  
Printed by Lecturis  
Text & cover paper: Munken Print White  
Set in **Transport** & Scala



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### **Acknowledgements**

Counterpoint would like to thank the Open Society Foundations for their generous support of the project 'Recapturing Europe's Reluctant Radicals'.

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# **Introduction**

**The politics of  
uncertainty and anxiety:  
the age of populism**

**Catherine Fieschi,  
August 2013**



# The politics of uncertainty and anxiety: the age of populism

Anyone familiar with music will know that the art of ‘counterpoint’ is the writing of musical lines that sound very different from one another when played independently but create harmonies when played together. Our ambition for this volume was to write in counterpoint on the concept of populism. Each of the essays tells the very particular story of populism in a European country. But taken together they give the reader a clear picture of the hidden harmonies that allow populism to exist transnationally with real ideological coherence.

The volume is also an inflection point in our three-year ‘Recapturing Europe’s Reluctant Radicals’ project on the springs of populist movements. For us it is a moment to take stock of what we’ve learnt and begin to conclude about populism as a whole, thanks to the research we have carried out on its various manifestations in Europe.

This introduction is intended, therefore, to give the reader a map of our thinking about populism. It situates populism as a manifestation of a particular set of historical transformations; the essays give us a much needed clue as to how these transformations materialise in a given place.

## **The Reluctant Radicals**

When Counterpoint embarked on the ‘Reluctant Radicals’ project two years ago, I had a number of questions and hunches honed over the years as an academic in the field of populist studies. So our first intent as a research team was to test a number of these propositions.

The first was that what people referred to as populism was spreading well beyond the families of the far right or extreme right in Europe. The second related proposition – based on years of discussion and research – was that, if populism went well beyond the extreme right, then many of the people who supported right-wing populist parties were no more ‘radical’ than your average, resentful citizen. They probably turned to this vote somewhat reluctantly – pushed by a number of factors, but seldom by a strong commitment to right-wing xenophobic and authoritarian views. Our final hypothesis was that there existed a substantial proportion of voters who,

while still unable to bring themselves to vote for an outright right-wing, xenophobic populist party such as the French Front National (FN) or the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), nevertheless shared views and attitudes with those who had already succumbed to the electoral siren song of right-wing xenophobic populism. Those were the three *research* hypotheses.

Our main, overarching *political* point was that it was worth understanding these voters' motivations in more subtle ways because their profiles suggested that they were probably only loosely committed to their electoral choice and could be won back to moderate, mainstream politics. As for those who had not yet crossed over, we felt it was important to determine what was holding them back from converting their views into electoral behaviour in order both to strengthen whatever bulwark was at play, but also perhaps to understand when and how the bulwark had ceased to operate for the others. The focus was not on the hard-core, extreme-right supporters who tend to monopolise the limelight and the column inches, but rather on all the other voters for, and supporters of, these parties who were merely ordinary – and quite possibly uncommitted – what Drew Westen refers to as 'the voters with changeable minds'.<sup>1</sup> Our final conviction was that all this needed to be understood on a grand, pan-European (and in principle far broader) scale. But no effective solution for the recapturing of these voters would arise independently of a deep social and cultural understanding of the role that populism played – and continues to play – in each of the countries in which we find it.

Most of our hunches turned out to be true. We found that in most countries at least half of right-wing xenophobic voters were reluctant to identify with the party they voted for. These 'reluctant radicals' did not fit the traditional 'young, male and unemployed' stereotype. They included both men and women in near equal proportion – only 53 per cent of reluctant FN supporters were male at the 2012 French presidential election. In many countries they tended to be older or middle aged rather than young – 35 per cent of reluctant True Finns were aged between 50 and 64 in Finland. And in nearly all countries the reluctant radicals were characterised not by unemployment but by a relatively low level of education. Moreover, while we found that anti-immigration views were still a crucial predictor of support for right-wing xenophobic parties, our analysis pointed to – depending on the country – nostalgia, disconnection, alienation and anxiety as deeper factors behind the vote. And in nearly all of the countries we looked at there was a large well of potential support for these parties by virtue of wider anti-immigration or authoritarian views. In Germany, for instance, firmly

anti-immigration voters amount to 8 per cent of the public, far more than the vote won by the marginalised extreme right. This phenomenon is explored with great dexterity in Herfried Münkler's historical perspective on populism in Germany (Essay 9).

### The logic behind the fight

Our first aim for the 'Reluctant Radicals' project was to create an accurate portrait of the reluctant radicals across Europe. Through understanding the voters we hoped to look for ways to persuade them away from right-wing xenophobic electoral choices.

### Why recapture these voters?

Two questions have often come up when we make this argument, and they are both important because they allow us to explore the nature of populism as an ideological construct. One is about the usefulness of bringing these voters back to the mainstream (and keeping the others from crossing over). Is it not important, some say, to change their minds rather than just lead them towards choosing another party political option? If we change their behaviour and not their attitudes, then what is the point?

The answer is that, of course, we do endeavour to change their minds<sup>2</sup> and our project includes a programme of public consultations and a set of toolkits designed to help do just that. But we think weakening their presence numerically within certain institutions is also very important. Should moderate or mainstream parties be able to recapture the reluctant radicals, then support for populist parties could well fall below the level required for any representation at all. Of course, keeping them out does not solve the problem, but it would prevent them from gaining the disproportionate level of agenda-setting power they seem to have garnered. It is also important because their very presence is one that undermines (and purposefully so) the legitimate functioning of institutions (be they local, national or supra-national). At the same time, paradoxically, their very presence in these institutions is a way for them to acquire a level of legitimacy (and funding) which they would not otherwise acquire; and it is important because their presence in those institutions and the legitimacy they derive from it serve to grant them a level of publicity that often enhances that legitimacy further. Diminishing their electoral gains and their institutional representation is not just cosmetic, it has real political benefits (not least for those communities that are repeatedly singled out by them and whose day-to-day life is made more difficult by their presence, especially at the local and national level).

### Support for populist parties: the canary in the mine?

Given our aims, the project was also designed to explore a number of other key issues that could both shed light on the nature of populism in various national contexts and help to understand how to tackle what populism brings with it. This is where the second question often comes up – why take these populist parties as a ‘bad thing’? Are they not a deeply democratic reaction? Are they not finally ‘speaking truth to power’ as some argue?<sup>3</sup> Should they not, in fact, be understood as a ‘useful corrective’ to democracy? The analogy here is that of the canary in the mine – the canary functions as an early warning system; for some, the rise of populism should be seen as a useful warning that an entire democratic system may be in danger.

Part of the confusion lies in populism’s deep but complex relationship to democracy. Arguably, there is no populism without democracy: populism is a by-product of democracy (or, as the scholar Margaret Canovan once argued, a ‘shadow cast by democracy’).<sup>4</sup> It arises, in great part, from a perception of betrayal of the democratic promise. One could argue that the greater the foundational promise of equality, the greater the chances of populist politics emerging once the promise is seen as broken (whether because a new elite has emerged – the media, the bureaucracy, civil servants, banks – or because leaders are seen as corrupt, or because they are seen as having developed separate interests from those of the people they claim to work for).<sup>5</sup>

France, the United States, the Nordic countries or the Netherlands, with their mythologised promises of radical egalitarianism (either through revolution or through institutional crafting – or both), stand out as particularly promising candidates for the emergence of powerful populist movements. The Netherlands is a particularly appropriate example. In her analysis of the roots of contemporary populism in the Netherlands, Yvonne Zonderop explores how the Dutch tradition of egalitarianism has been eroded by what she terms the rise of meritocracy. This provided fertile ground for the populist movements of Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders (Essay 5).

This is a vivid illustration of the fact that public, enshrined commitments to the pursuit of egalitarianism are inherent to the democratic form as well as constitutive of the form’s fragility. Populism takes root in that fragility; it is a by-product of the fragility and thus is inextricably linked to democracy.

Add to this the increased professionalisation of politics, a forensic media (itself in the grips of radical transformation), and, more recently, a very sharp turn towards technocratic government as a reaction to deep financial, economic and institutional crisis – and you can account for the rise of populist movements that bear a strong but uneasy relationship to a more palatable cousin: democratic accountability.

However revealing these populist surges may be, that does not make them useful. No more, say, than scurvy is a useful reminder to eat fresh vegetables: a bit late and a bit deadly. Let’s not confuse the warning signs of trouble (declining trust, low turnout, street protests) with the trouble itself – populism.

We maintain, in light of our research, that while the voters who choose these parties – or who contemplate doing so at one point – should not be shunned or stigmatised, their choice is not helpful in terms of the kinds of pressures it puts on institutions (the atmosphere generated by the presence of these parties is not conducive to a debate that allows any sort of creative options to emerge). Instead, it generally corners other parties into a discourse and set of behaviours that do nothing to enhance the performance of institutions, the legitimacy of decision-making or the public understanding of issues. Nor can populism deliver the kinds of goods and reassurance that voters seek. In fact, the diagnosis and solutions proposed by right-wing populist parties – were they even to be feasible and implementable – would generally go against the long-term public interest of most people, including their supporters. Pointing this out, as well as the fallacies, oversimplifications and outright lies peddled by such parties is not a matter of elitism – that is precisely the accusation their leaders would make. They are a case of democrats remaining committed to getting on with the work of persuasion and engagement that is at the heart of democratic accountability – much as it is a matter of remaining committed to the terms of the democratic debate, as defined by democrats rather than demagogic populists.<sup>6</sup>

This is a tall order: the digital revolution in particular poses a set of extraordinary challenges for representative politics and creates a context in which populism will thrive. The technological transformations of the past three decades have fundamentally altered people’s understanding of participation, access and information. They have therefore altered both the conditions of democracy as well as what people consider to be a democratic outcome. The calling into question of expertise and of hierarchies in light of the digital revolution creates a set of circumstances defined by radical uncertainty and anxiety.

So as a research team and as advocates, we predict that populism is coming of age as an ideology. And this is so because it is an ideology of reassurance that is tailor-made for the world we live in. Much as nationalism needed print capitalism, and socialism needed full industrial capitalism, so populism will thrive under digital capitalism and the twin movements of uncertainty and the spread of radical anxiety.

## Populism as the ideology of reassurance

### A world transformed: from print capitalism to digital finance

In 1983, the British-American political historian Benedict Anderson wrote what is perhaps still the most cogent and detailed explanation of the transformations ushered in by what he called ‘print capitalism’.<sup>7</sup> Print capitalism, he argued, is what made ‘imagined communities’ possible. In other words, it enabled human beings to think of themselves as connected despite time and distance.

Laying the blame for the development of national consciousness (and modern nationalism) squarely on the doorstep of the printing press, Anderson traced all of those transformations unleashed by the latter: the circulation of ideas in cheaper and faster ways, the creation of communities of thought, the emergence of national languages and the development of secular allegiances which came to be seen as the defining features of modern times. This is a ‘big bang’ theory of the birth of our era and the modern self.

Equating the transformations of the digital revolution with those of Gutenberg’s press has become commonplace but it serves as a useful reminder of the magnitude of the transformations unleashed. Much as the printing press represents a break with the traditional order, so the Internet is the next step in that access revolution, delivering transformations on the same grand scale – an even faster circulation of ideas, a new form of commodification of information, and the creation of new networks and communities.

But like those brought in by the printing press, the metaphysical transformations are the ones that count: the destruction of established hierarchies, the re-imagining of geographies (of proximity and distance), the further compression of time and space, and the final and complete emancipation of transactions from actual goods – to the extent that trading is dominated by either the trade of negative goods (debt), or exchanges based on fluctuations too subtle and too fast for humans to perform or, sometimes, even to detect.

The result is a growing gap, an immense chasm, between the order that is being created by the digital revolution on the one hand and our creaking social, political and economic institutions on the other. And at the heart of this transformation is the agonising, embattled death of expertise – something that (regardless of its positive and negative qualities) is shaking the very foundations of modern institutions.

### The death of expertise

Building on the notion of progress linked to expertise has arguably been the basis for post-Enlightenment institutions across much of the Western world. Regardless of how close we remained to this ideal,

it served as the foundation for an established social, political, commercial and scientific order. Yet the notion of expertise as we know it is on its way out. Both because of its growing inadequacies and the spectacle we can make of these inadequacies through digital communications.

Speed of communication, access to information, open source code and social networking have not only given rise to social activism, citizen journalism and cool geeks devising games and encyclopaedias in their backyards. They have also created a culture in which the availability of information and its lightning-fast circulation have overtaken traditional gatekeepers (good and bad) and quality control (legitimate and illegitimate).

Much of this innovation results in positive outcomes – more connections, more creativity, more inclusion, the sharing of stories, the building of communities.<sup>8</sup> It is nevertheless the case that it is accompanied by the spectacle of debacle: of governments that no longer know how to govern; regulators who no longer know how to regulate; leaders who no longer lead; and an international press in thrall to all those hapless powers. Political parties no longer represent, banks no longer lend, scientists no longer predict (or worse: their disagreements resonate across chat-rooms and blossom, like Climategate, as conspiracy theories). In fact, the cruel paradox is that even the positive stories – about community empowerment, connection and entrepreneurialism – serve to undermine the trust in old institutions. In Marek Beylin’s account of emerging populisms in post-Communist Poland (Essay 7), he describes the young Internet users who protested against anti-Internet piracy laws as ‘disconnected from politics’. In their response to the protest, the politicians, on the other hand, are revealed to be weak, redeeming themselves only by backing down from the debate. Debacle is broadcast on but also, in part, *created* by the web.

This collapse of hierarchies – the suspension of the order and relevance of things – is a change similar in magnitude to that brought about by the print capitalist revolution. Its consequences will be just as profound as those of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. They will be just as exhilarating and just as painful – as reformation moments also give rise to counter-reformations and progress also unleashes new forms of barbarism.

The downgrading of expertise as a fundamental regulator of power is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative. It just is – its consequences can range from the wonderfully life-enhancing and empowering to the promotion of the worst kind of thoughts and behaviour. However, in the immediate context it is having one major and hugely destabilising political and social consequence: it is fuelling the growth of radical uncertainty and, through it, feeding the populist rationale.

### The rise of radical uncertainty and the deepening of anxiety

Current political and social conditions are paradoxical: as citizens and individuals we live lives that reflect the fact that we have more information and more access to information than ever before – while at the same time we have a great deal less certainty about our futures, both individual and collective. We are, some would argue, increasingly living in conditions of ‘radical uncertainty’.<sup>9</sup> This radical uncertainty is something beyond risk. It is a world of ontological uncertainty, which cannot be calculated or priced. A world of unknown unknowns into which we seem to have sleepwalked. As Ulrich Beck puts it: ‘By virtues of its independent dynamic and successes, industrial society is sliding into the no man’s land of uninsured threats. Uncertainty returns and proliferates everywhere.’<sup>10</sup>

As a result, one of the key variables that needs to be factored into how we understand both demands and mobilisation on the one hand and policies and institutions on the other is anxiety.

Not the niggles and worries of everyday life, but rather the surfacing of deep turmoil in the face of an uncertain future whose contours are barely perceptible and thus increasingly frightening. This is a proposition that is existentially different. And, though the condition of radical uncertainty might have existed, objectively, in the past, it existed at times when there had been no experience or expectation of the predictability of the future beyond that imagined in the context of religious or magical beliefs.<sup>11</sup> No experience of the desirability and possibility of controlling our fate. Radical uncertainty in a world in which everyone has come to prize autonomy and control is a different proposition all together.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere is this uncertainty more pronounced than in Greece. In their discussion, Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis explore how severe economic uncertainty has contributed to the rise of populist movements on both the left and the right. Parties such as Golden Dawn have stepped in to provide support – sometimes of the most basic and practical kind – where the state has failed to deliver (Essay 1). But Greece is only an extreme example of the phenomenon – radical uncertainty is an effect of wider global shifts.

It would be humanly disastrous to underestimate the need for reassurance in the context of such deep anxiety. And even more disastrous, politically, to leave the reassurance to populist politicians.

### Governing in a complex world

In a 1999 article Margaret Canovan added to her initial idea of populism as a shadow cast by democracy and went further. Populism was more than that, she wrote, it was in fact the necessary by-product of the

interaction of the ‘two faces of democracy’.<sup>13</sup> Building on Oakeshott’s ‘politics of faith’ and ‘politics of scepticism’, she argued that democracy is a permanent tussle between its two constitutive faces: a redemptive (heroic) face – ‘the promise of a better world through the action of a sovereign people’<sup>14</sup> – and a pragmatic one, which is in fact the ‘grubby business of politics’ – practices and mechanisms that are so many ways of dealing with conflict without having to resort to repression or violence. Populism, she argued, occurs when the gap between the two appears too great and pragmatism seems to overtake the redemptive dimension of politics. In the face of too much dealing and manoeuvring, populism re-emerges in an attempt to fill the widening gap and reassert the people’s need to re-establish control over some key areas of their lives.<sup>15</sup>

I would argue that this describes our situation quite accurately. It is well illustrated by Julian Baggini’s analysis of populism in the UK (Essay 2). As career politicians, opinion polling and political consumerism have become more and more pervasive, Baggini argues, British politics has lost its sense of conviction.

Moreover, this gap between the ‘politics of faith’ and the ‘politics of scepticism’ is set to persist for a few decades yet as we come to terms with the magnitude of the transformations around us. The digital revolution created one of those tipping points at which redemptive politics promised to overtake pragmatism: the power of the sovereign people would be limitless in a world of unprecedented access, voice and scrutiny as provided by the web and social media. In fact, what is unleashed is a growth in expectations and demands. But this is in the context of pragmatism’s declining capacity, of crumbling authority and expertise – the latter being the direct result of increased access to information. The spectacle of that reduced capacity – and perception of outright failure in the case of Europe – and the sense of growing uncertainty about the future create the conditions for increased levels of anxiety. These then find their political expression in the fantasies of control that populism provides. The corresponding increase in pragmatic politics (such as in the form of technocratic governments) that largely fail paradoxically contributes to the growing uncertainty, anxiety and thus resentment toward elites and institutions.

This cyclical aspect, provided by the speed and reach of digital media, is what grants populism its staying power and therefore the opportunity to transform into a fully developed ideology after a century and a half of slow political emergence.<sup>16</sup> I am in no way arguing that there was no populism before the digital revolution – history is testimony to the contrary, and both Herfried Münkler (Essay 9) and Gianni Riotta (Essay 10) provide solid accounts of pre-digital age forms of populism in this volume. The argument here is only that

the digital revolution provides an impetus for the transformation of populism from a set of disparate movements with some shared themes and characteristics into something that has the force of a political ideology. The accelerated quality of political time and social media's capacity to broadcast failure and dissent mean that the digital revolution gives populist movements a steady supply of political opportunity that reinforces its coherence.

So what can we do?

It is true that even if we get some voters to change their behaviour, attitudes will not change unless there is a better alternative. And in the face of the rather colossal set of forces and transformations that fuel populism's growth, curbing its destructive potential is about more than fiddling with an electoral manifesto here and changing an electoral strategy there. Those things need to be done, but they are minimum survival tactics rather solutions. The problem is the manner in which populism as an ideology is capable of marshalling the uncertainties and anxieties that characterise our era and responding in ways that provide the illusion of reassurance. Illusory though it may be, it fills that gap between the expectations of redemptive democracy on the one hand and the lacklustre manoeuvring of panicked policy-makers on the other. A gap otherwise filled with uncertainty and anxiety becomes filled with populist reassurance.

In a changed world – non-linear, non-binary, complex, unpredictable, uninsurable – what does a new democratic political contract look like?

### **Building institutional reassurance**

Too many have argued that the answer lies in taking on board what these voters are worried about and, in a sense, giving in. Suggestions that these fears may be inchoate and unfortunate, but not baseless; that voters have every right to be anxious (true) and that their demands should be met (false); tend to warrant the adoption or the evocation of policies that are, at best, the political equivalent of security blanket. At worst, a costly wild goose chase that stigmatises the vulnerable and does little to address the root cause of the anxiety. Johanne Mygind and Anders Rasmussen's account of the rise in influence of Danish right-wing populism is a warning call for those who advocate mimicking the populist approach in order to contain xenophobic instincts (Essay 6).

This argument has been used especially in the issue of immigration, which is one of the most obvious signs of our world's deep transformation and one of the key issues on which right-wing xenophobic parties can play. The presence of immigrant communities stands as the living illustration of accelerated change – dissolving

boundaries, new skills requirements, the vocabulary of 'flows' and rivers suggesting a lack of control, a danger of submersion and suffocation by what is new, unknown and sometimes depicted as profoundly alien. Immigration is the embodiment of the fear of the new coupled with the fear of irrelevance – of someone, quite literally, 'taking your place'. But acquiescing, even mildly, to the solutions proposed by right-wing xenophobic parties is a costly mistake. It sets governments up to fail because the solutions are unrealistic and the promises are 'born broken', therefore leading to disappointment, an increased feeling of uncertainty (an illustration that 'nothing works'), more anxiety and more backlash against mainstream politics.

So how do politicians and policy-makers take on board the very real anxiety that people feel about being irrelevant and lacking control over their everyday lives on every possible scale: personal, social, political and cultural? And how do they do this without resorting to the shameful and outdated parochialism of nationalism?<sup>17</sup>

This has to take place on a number of levels.

It has to start with taking on board the nature of radical uncertainty and deep anxiety and more broadly the role of various emotions in politics. This in practice means two things. First, acknowledging the depth of the transformation we are faced with and the new, radical form of anxiety that it has unleashed in many parts of the developed West (where the disruption of established political institutions is most obvious). Second, it means more and better research on the nature of emotions, on how they relate to both individual and collective behaviour and how the insights can be incorporated into policy. This isn't about some kind of sentimentalised version of politics. It is about understanding how political choices are made, where emotions come from neurologically, and how best to interpret and work with what they reveal about how we function (not *either* emotionally *or* rationally, but *reasonably* through the interaction of both). It is about understanding not just who we are, but how we can be who we want to be. This understanding of human beings as changeable, resilient, but also fragile and prone to anxiety needs to be factored into policy in much more sophisticated ways.

The present conditions of uncertainty and anxiety (conditions that place human beings under great emotional stress) mean that political outlook, political behaviour and political choice will be dictated by what emotional cluster people fall into for decades to come. It is people's capacity to handle and manage a new kind of deep anxiety related to radical uncertainty that will determine their resilience (and their wellbeing) and therefore their capacity to choose something other than populism as the source of their reassurance and equilibrium. Class is not unrelated to this (affluence can help to build social capital, social capital gives you



resilience, and that, in turn, lowers anxiety), but emotional category will be a more powerful direct predictor of support for a populist outlook.

What can politicians and policy-makers offer by way of real reassurance in the context of radical uncertainty?

Having spent several years investigating what ordinary citizens find compelling about (right-wing xenophobic) populist offers, it is apparent that policy and institutions need to cater not only to the practical needs of citizens but also meet their need for security and patterns. Anxiety provoked by the disappearance of predictability on a grand scale needs to be assuaged by creating – or making the most of – places where predictability exists. This is in people's most basic, daily relationships – families, friends, neighbourhoods. Institutions that place relationships at the heart of their functioning will be tapping into an existing well of resilience: care homes that cater to married couples, schools that cater for families, housing that builds on neighbourhood ties,<sup>18</sup> but also the harnessing and use of non-geographically based networks around which there is much hope but not enough political investment.

#### Variations on a theme

What all of these things have in common is that they are located in context. Fighting populism therefore needs to be about building a set of reassurance institutions in a transformed world. But it has to occur in context. It can happen only in the context of detailed cultural, social and historical knowledge. This is true of most ideological expressions – they can be truly understood only in context. But in the case of populism, this seems to be doubly the case, since it is an ideology that taps into the very marrow of what people feel is being destroyed, sold out or rewritten. Because populism is an ideology that emerges in answer to the anxiety that comes from irrelevance – including the irrelevance of the national – its main force comes from its capacity to adapt to a mythological version of ordinary nationalism. As such, understanding the everyday and the ordinary, the common sense rooted in historical myth, the dirty national secrets and the folklorised national consciousness – in other words, the 'hidden wiring' of a national community – is crucial.

This is what the essays in this volume are all about. They are about bringing together an understanding of populism in Europe, setting it in the context of current transformations, but also rooting it in the national (and sometimes the sum of local) experiences in order to tailor political responses and policy solutions adequately.

The essays, each in their own way, illustrate national variations on the populist theme. They map the asperities of populism as a collection of movements and also as a more or less developed ideology, its trajectory (halted, progressing, thwarted – depending on time and

place) and the manner in which, chameleon-like, it exploits the notion of an ordinary people in the face of a usurping elite. By giving us an account of what makes politics and people 'tick' in various national settings, they yield a map of how populism has been able to impose itself.

More to the point, they work as illustrations of what happens to a set of generic pressures (for example, the digital revolution, the decline of expertise, the rise of uncertainty, the questioning of institutions, the increase in migration flows, and the rise of new powers and emerging markets) when they are applied to different contexts. They demonstrate what happens when these pressures merge with century-old traditions of state behaviour, interpretations of citizenship, cultural trends, individual expectations, clichés, the media, and so on.

In the case of Italy, for instance, as Gianni Riotta articulates in his piece (Essay 10), there is no understanding Berlusconi or the 5 Star movement without understanding the role of humour, buffoonery and irreverence in Italian politics; or the relationship between fascism and populism; or the various ways in which Italian politics have interpreted and re-interpreted the North/South divide. Similarly, from Johanna Korhonen's story of Finland's experience with populism (Essay 4), it is clear that there is no understanding the emergence of Timo Soini's Finns Party without an appreciation of the role of silence in Finnish culture and Finland's deep transformations in the past 20 years from agrarian stronghold to technology and communications leader. The essays on France by Michel Wieviorka (Essay 8) and Sweden by Göran Rosenberg (Essay 3) are two very different but striking illustrations of the role of the state in shaping and protecting mythical notions of citizenship, neither of which accommodate difference especially well. The two essays – in the case of France, the spectre of the colonial past, the symbolism around housing and the factory; and in the case of Sweden, the role of egalitarianism in a largely (to begin with) homogeneous country – act as lenses through which populism interprets the notions of common sense, the people and fairness.

In every case what appears most conspicuously is how useful it is to delve beneath the headlines that centre on immigration or Europe and to focus on that hidden cultural, social and political wiring. It is the capacity to tap into this wiring and offer reassurance that populists use to great effect. Through codes and clichés, through veiled promises of a return to the past, they succeed in, momentarily at least, recreating a lost order and holding, for a while, uncertainty and anxiety at bay.

# Notes

- 1 Westen, *The Political Brain*, p. 115
- 2 There is an argument in positive psychology that changing people's behaviour leads them to change their mind (and not the other way around, which is what has often been assumed). But this is not what we are hinting at here – we mean that we are interested in changing people's minds *directly*.
- 3 Elsewhere I have discussed the relationship to populism of the left – and maintain that neither left nor right populism is good news for democracy. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/catherine-fieschi/plague-on-both-your-populisms>
- 4 Canovan, *Populism*. See also Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy'; and finally for an excellent discussion of populism's relationship to democracy, see Arditi, 'Populism as a spectre of democracy: a response to Canovan'
- 5 That relationship to the founding moment of democracy and its subsequent development is key because it explains why popular revolts against authoritarian regimes obey a different logic and don't fall into any sort of populist category – but rather into the categories of popular uprisings and revolutions. This is not to say that neither of these forms bears similarities to populist movements, most especially in their use of the concept of 'the people'. Hence the apparent but rather misleading similarity.
- 6 For a more elaborate version of this argument see [www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/catherine-fieschi/who%E2%80%99s-afraid-of-populist-wolf](http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/catherine-fieschi/who%E2%80%99s-afraid-of-populist-wolf)
- 7 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*
- 8 See Leadbeater, *Cloud Culture*
- 9 David Tuckett refers to 'ontological uncertainty' (as opposed to truth uncertainty, which is a matter of deciding whether the information is true or not, or semantic uncertainty, which refers to an uncertainty relating to how a proposition affects me). Ontological uncertainty is an entirely different matter: 'Ontological uncertainty refers to a situation in which interpretively able and interacting actors are also uncertain because the future is yet to happen. They recognise it may not look like the past. In this case the future depends upon actors' beliefs about what kinds of entities inhabit their world, the interactions these entities can have among themselves & how the entities and their interaction modes change as a result of these interactions. Rapid change would mean actors cannot generate stable ontological categories valid for the time periods relevant to assessing the outcome of their actions.' See Tuckett, 'Irreducible uncertainty and its narrative implications: a narrative action theory for economics', p. 2; see also Lane and Maxfield, 'Ontological uncertainty and innovation'
- 10 Beck, 'Reinvention of politics: towards a theory of reflexive modernity', p. 12
- 11 See Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*
- 12 On a grand scale, it is tempting to argue that populism is the domestic manifestation of a 'G Zero world' – to use Ian Bremmer's expression – at the international level. In other words, in a context in which states are no longer given to vying (or able to vie) for superpower status, the domestic mirror image of an unstable and unhierarchical international order is populist politics.



- 13 See Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy'; and for an excellent discussion of populism's relationship to democracy see Arditì, 'Populism as a spectre of democracy: a response to Canovan'
- 14 Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy', p. 12
- 15 Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy', p. 12
- 16 It is worth thinking about populism through the lens of Michael Freedden's conception of ideologies – and reassessing Paul Taggart's claim that populism has 'an empty heart'. See Freedden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*; Taggart, *Populism*; and Fieschi, 'Introduction'
- 17 I have addressed the link between class, culture, populism and the left here: [www.policy-network.net/pno\\_detail.aspx?ID=4207&title=Cultural-anxiety-class-and-populism](http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4207&title=Cultural-anxiety-class-and-populism)
- 18 See the work of Andrew Cooper at the Tavistock and Portman Trust on the link between relationships and public policy: [www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/Tavistockpolicyseminars](http://www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/Tavistockpolicyseminars); and also the work of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships and their work on families and couples and public policy: [www.tccr.ac.uk/policy](http://www.tccr.ac.uk/policy)

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# **National populism and xenophobia in Greece**

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September 2012**

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# Introduction: the rise of xenophobic populism in Greece

The success of Golden Dawn (a formerly marginal political formation on the criminal<sup>1</sup> fringe of the far right) in the 2012 general elections has caught the attention of world media. Its spokesmen's vitriolic rhetoric (including the denial that the Holocaust really took place<sup>2</sup>) and its supporters' violent practice (ranging from the systematic intimidation of foreign immigrants to a series of well-documented cases of criminal attacks) have rightly caused widespread consternation at home and abroad.

Nevertheless, we maintain that the rise of Golden Dawn was not as sudden, nor its set of beliefs as alien to those held by the majority of Greeks, as many commentators seem to imply. On the contrary, as we seek to illustrate in this essay, the party's electoral success to a considerable extent rested on a widely shared worldview, which has been consolidated in Greece over the last two decades, and has now come to resemble something of a national consensus. In this sense, Golden Dawn, rather than being an embarrassing outlier, is in many ways a mere manifestation of that consensus, albeit at its most violent (but also 'logical') extreme.

More specifically, we argue that we can make better sense of the recent rise of xenophobic populism in Greece if we set it against the background of five distinct but related developments:

- The consolidation of national exceptionalism as the default worldview of most Greeks: a widely accepted set of beliefs that has helped turn xenophobic populism into a mainstream ideology.
- The discontent associated with the mass influx of foreign immigrants in what was until recently a relatively homogeneous country, causing legitimate concerns about rising crime in inner city areas but also racist and near-racist reactions.
- The political fallout from the economic crisis, the longest and most severe in Greece's modern history, and its disruptive effects in a social context which is conducive to populism and nationalism.
- The rise of national populism as an economic ideology: a set of reflexes originally to be observed mostly on the left, more recently spilling over to other political areas.

- The culture of lawlessness and disobedience: this was always there, but has become much more pronounced in recent years, as people have lost faith in the political system and in the institutions of law enforcement.

Before we move to that, let us return to the results of the two general elections of 6 May and 17 June 2012 – destined to be seen by future historians as a watershed in the country's political history. We will show that there is in fact a continuum of xenophobic and/or populist forces in Greece, at both ends of the political spectrum, with sharply opposing views on many important issues, but (more than they care to admit, even to themselves) also drawing on a set of common beliefs. We will also describe the social and demographic characteristics of those voting for xenophobic populist parties.

## The anatomy of national populism: the general elections of May and June 2012

The two recent general elections, held in quick succession on 6 May and 17 June 2012, and dominated by the question of the country's place in Europe and the Eurozone, confirmed that xenophobic and/or populist forces are on the ascendancy.

### **A dramatically changed political landscape**

To a considerable extent, the rise of national populism would not have been possible were it not for the sharp decline of mainstream parties. Indeed, the results of the May 2012 general election changed the political landscape beyond recognition. The two parties that had monopolised power in Greece for nearly four decades since the restoration of democracy in 1974, the conservative New Democracy and the socialist PASOK, both sank to a historic low: their combined share of the vote did not exceed 35.6%.

Just how astonishing this showing was can be seen by the fact that two and a half years before, in the October 2009 general election, the two parties had obtained between them more than twice as much (77.4% of all votes), which in turn had been the worst performance of Greece's two-party system since 1977! Specifically, in May 2012 New Democracy polled 18.85%, down from 33.47% in October 2009, while PASOK fared even worse: 16.78% of the vote, compared to 43.92% two and a half years earlier.

The decline of New Democracy and PASOK can be traced to the failures of the post-*junta* Republic, which they led for almost four decades, corruption and clientelism being its most visible distortions. However, there is little doubt that the two parties also paid the price for their support of the austerity policies stemming from the bailout package<sup>3</sup> of May 2010 and its subsequent updates. The fact that that support was half-hearted clearly failed to stop the erosion of the two parties' electoral strength (even though it certainly limited the effectiveness of those policies in balancing the budget and setting the economy on the way to sustainable growth).



### The new demarcation lines

The sudden end to a decade of high rates of economic growth (based on strong consumer demand, boosted in turn by cheap credit) was coupled with the humiliation of international supervision and the subsequent transfer of sovereignty from the national government to the IMF–EC–ECB ‘troika’, now dictating economic and much of all other domestic policy. Their combined effect was more than sufficient to inflame political passions to a level not seen since the end of the 1946–49 Civil War.

As a result of Greece’s near bankruptcy in 2010, the resulting austerity and the recession that followed, political conflict assumed new characteristics. On the one hand, more Greeks than in the past, even though still a minority, looked themselves in the mirror and began to ask the obvious questions: How had the country ended up in that mess? What could be done to ensure that it never happened again? And, how in the meantime could they weather the austerity in the most effective and equitable way possible? On the other hand, many Greeks went into denial. They refused to take any sort of critical look at the model of economic development that had led to high deficits and debt, and on the everyday practices that underpinned this model. They preferred to pin the blame on narrowly defined targets, such as a small group of politicians, corrupt businesspeople, and above all, foreign bankers and speculators.

The bailout Agreement with the troika, approved by Parliament in May 2010, was demonised right from the start as being imposed on Greece by a half-foreign prime minister, who was beholden more to global capital than to the interests of the Greek people. It did not help that most government ministers sought to avoid blame, by suggesting that the austerity and reform policies in the Agreement were wrong, unjust, ineffective, etc, and that they had to implement them only because our foreign creditors demanded it. It did not help that Antonis Samaras, as leader of the right-wing opposition, immediately rejected the bailout Agreement in its totality (only to begin implementing a newer version recently, when he gained power). Outside the Prime Minister’s narrow circle, no major political grouping came up with anything resembling either qualified support for the Agreement, or an alternative rescue plan that could be presented to Greece’s EU partners.

Many observers therefore believe that the political tactics of all or most parties are the cause for the angry rejection of any form of austerity and reform package by most people across the political spectrum. It may well be that a different set of party tactics would have contained the rise of extremist feelings. But there were also grassroots processes at work, independent of what leading politicians were doing.

The broader public narrative was shaped not only in traditional media but also, to a very large extent, in blogs and social media on the

one hand, and in street protests on the other. These were not controlled by parties to any significant extent. In the media, both old and new, positions quickly crystallised into two poles, pro- and anti-Memorandum. Almost every take on the crisis was tagged into one of the two poles, sometimes unfairly. Nuances and variations often got lost in the increasing polarisation and accusations of the two camps.

The vast majority of ‘anti-Memorandum’ politicians and commentators did not propose any alternative strategy to deal with the crisis. Often, the implication was that the bailout Agreement was more to blame for the sudden drop in incomes than the unsustainable economic model that preceded the Agreement. This enabled them to focus the discussion (such as it was) on the actions of specific centres of power: the Greek government, and Mr Papandreou in particular; the German government, and Mrs Merkel in particular; the ECB acting as agent of the French and German banks; and so on. It deflected discussion from any painful choices that might divide ‘the people’.

This, of course, is the fundamental axiom of all forms of populism: any ills originate from outside ‘the people’, who are united in their interest. There are no major contradictions or issues to be resolved within this homogeneous entity. There is always an enemy exogenous to the people that must be expelled or demolished, so that prosperity can be attained.

In the case of Greece, this other pole was immediately in 2010 located among foreigners: it was global financial capital and/or ‘neo-liberal’ politicians in Europe. Those (presumably few) Greeks who attempted to reach an agreement with these foreigners could only be their agents, or their ‘willing’ stooges (as in ‘coalition of the willing’ in Donald Rumsfeld’s phrase about the Iraq war). In the words of Alexis Tsipras, politicians implementing the Memorandum were ‘less Greek’ than the rest of us.

Based on this simple polarity, of Greek people versus foreign banks and their stooges, a set of new or transformed political parties grew in popularity, dominated the public sphere, and made great gains in the elections of 2012. The codeword for this broad spectrum was ‘*anti-mnimoniakoi*’ – the anti-Memorandum front. This broad spectrum is what we refer to in this essay as ‘national populism’. Chapter 5 presents the main tenets of this new populist economic narrative.<sup>4</sup>

### The ‘Indignados’ movement

As the austerity measures began to bite, and the recession deepened, large groups of people – now more radicalised than ever before – refused to take (any) responsibility and turned against a variety of culprits, some more improbable than others: the two main parties

of course, which until recently had been happily chosen in free elections by equal large majorities, more often than not by the very same people; then ‘foreigners’ as in the IMF, but also the EU, and – in wilder versions – the Bilderberg Group, Henry Kissinger and other assorted Jews; then ‘foreigners’ again, as in immigrants from Africa and Asia, replacing earlier waves from the former Eastern Bloc, in terms of arithmetic significance, but also as threats to the national body in popular imagination.

This potent mix reached a paroxysm in the spring and summer of 2011, when the central square of Athens, Syntagma (‘Constitution’) Square, with the Parliament at one end and the Ministry of the Economy at the other, was occupied for several weeks by a heterogeneous multitude: thousands of people simply describing themselves as ‘Indignados’. The far right and the far left (positioned in the Upper and Lower Square respectively) coexisted largely peacefully, going their separate ways in terms of improvised debates and other events, but also occasionally chanting the same slogans against politicians, Parliament, and of course foreigners (of various hues).

### Elective affinities?

The coexistence of far left and far right at Syntagma Square during ‘the long summer of the Indignados’ left its mark. For all their differences, and in spite of the occasional protestations of party leaders, at grassroots level the radical left and the nationalist right discovered they had rather a lot in common, and began to take a more sympathetic view of each other. Quite astonishingly (even though not entirely unpredictably), a recent poll<sup>5</sup> found that, among radical left (SYRIZA) voters, the approval rate of Nikos Mihaloliakos (leader of the criminally anti-immigrant Golden Dawn) was 16%, while that of Panos Kammenos (leader of the hysterically nationalist Independent Greeks) was 52%. The sympathy was to some extent reciprocal: the approval rate of SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras among Independent Greeks voters was 38%, and among Golden Dawn voters 14%.

### National populism at the polls I: May 2012

As the summer holiday season began in earnest, the occupation of Syntagma Square slowly dwindled and then ended, but the energies released by the heterogeneous multitude of the ‘Indignados’ paved the way to the electoral success of the equally heterogeneous ‘national-populist’<sup>6</sup> bloc in the general election of 6 May 2012.

On the left:

- SYRIZA (the ‘Coalition of the Radical Left’) emerged as the main beneficiary of political instability and the erosion of support for mainstream parties. Its share of the vote rose to 16.78% (from 4.60% in 2009). SYRIZA, having established itself as a prominent champion of foreign immigrants and their rights, can hardly be described as xenophobic. Nevertheless, many of its spokesmen and most of its activists clearly adopt an anti-western stance that is anti-imperialist in origin, often (especially at the grassroots) assuming shades of anti-semitism not always successfully dissimulated as anti-zionism. This stance, shared with other forces of the left, is often indistinguishable from that of the extreme right.
- The Communist Party (KKE), the most pro-Soviet communist party in the West (when the USSR still existed), surviving as the most consistently anti-western political force in Greece (the only parliamentary party explicitly rejecting the country’s membership of NATO as well as the EU), also did well at the polls: 8.48%, up from 7.54% in 2009.
- Among the scattered forces of the far left, all failing to clear the 3% barrier as required for entry in Parliament, the best result was achieved by ANTARSYA (the ‘Anti-capitalist Left Alliance’): 1.19%, a significant improvement on its 2009 performance (0.36%). Unlike KKE, ANTARSYA had taken active part in the ‘Indignados’ movement of 2011. Earlier, at the local election of November 2010, the party had scored a small victory collecting enough votes in Athens (2.87% of total) to enter the municipal council, electing one councillor.

At the other end of the political spectrum:

- Golden Dawn, as is well known, did spectacularly well: 6.97%, up from no more than 0.29% in 2009. As a foretaste of things to come, party leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos (now an MP), having entered the race for mayor of Athens in November 2010, was elected councillor after polling a surprising 5.29% (reaching as much as 14.70% in the infamous Aghios Panteleimon area, where the presence of immigrants was highest).<sup>7</sup>
- Independent Greeks, a vociferously nationalist formation calling for the unilateral denunciation of the bailout package, which had only shortly before come to life as a splinter group of New Democracy, saw its share of the vote reach 10.61%, briefly emerging as the fourth largest party in the land.
- Less successfully, LAOS (the ‘Popular Orthodox Rally’), formerly the main party of the far right, having joined PASOK and New Democracy

in a coalition government under former Governor of the Bank of Greece Loukas Papademos in November 2011, suffered what seemed to be a terminal blow: from 5.63% (and 15 MPs) in 2009, its share of the vote went down to 2.90% in May 2012, failing by a small margin to clear the 3% barrier and hence enter Parliament.

By comparison, those outside the national-populist consensus fared considerably less well:

- The Greens marginally improved their 2009 performance (2.93% vs. 2.53%), but failed narrowly to clear the 3% barrier. The party had scored its best result in the European Parliament election of 12 June 2009, when it polled 3.49% of the vote and managed to elect one MEP.
- The three formations of the liberal centre (Democratic Alliance, Dimiourgia Xana and Drassi), in spite of a lively campaign that attracted lots of attention, also failed to enter Parliament, even though their combined share of the vote reached 6.50%.
- Democratic Left, founded in June 2010, when the moderate wing of SYRIZA (hundreds of congress delegates including four MPs) walked out in protest at the latter's radical turn, was the sole survivor of those outside the national-populist consensus. The new party quickly became the point of reference for those leftists of a pro-European, anti-populist persuasion. Having skilfully (albeit disappointedly for many of its supporters) refrained from supporting the bailout package and austerity measures, the party obtained a respectable 6.11% of the vote.

### National populism at the polls II: June 2012

When the three largest parties (New Democracy, SYRIZA and PASOK) failed to form a government supported by a majority of MPs, a second general election in quick succession became inevitable and was held on 17 June 2012. For many at home and abroad, if SYRIZA were to emerge as the largest party the country's exit from the Eurozone would only be a matter of time. Moreover, electoral law gave the largest party a bonus of 50 MPs. In view of that, the contest became highly polarised, which worked to the benefit of both contenders.

Indeed, New Democracy increased its share of the vote to 29.66% (from 18.85% five weeks earlier),<sup>8</sup> while SYRIZA leaped to 26.89% (from 16.78%). A coalition government was formed, headed by New Democracy (whose leader Antonis Samaras became Prime Minister) and supported by PASOK and Democratic Left. Both parties largely held their ground: PASOK's share of the vote fell a little to 12.28% (from 13.18% in May), while that of Democratic Left rose slightly to 6.26% (from 6.11%). As a result, the new government rested on a combined

48.20% of the vote, and counted on the support of nearly three-fifths of MPs (179 out of 300). Opposition parties shared the remaining 121 seats: SYRIZA 71, Independent Greeks 20, Golden Dawn 18, KKE 12.

On the left, the rally to SYRIZA seemed to have squeezed competitors. KKE fell to 4.50% (from 8.48%) and ANTARSYA to 0.33% (from 1.19%). On the right, Independent Greeks also lost ground to 7.51% (from 10.61%).<sup>9</sup>

All other parties did worse in June than in May and failed to elect MPs.<sup>10</sup> With one notable exception: with 6.92% of the vote compared to 6.97% in May, support for Golden Dawn proved remarkably stable.

As will be made clear in Chapter 2, national populism (with shades of xenophobia) has long been a staple of Greek politics, and forms at least part of the identity of the two parties that ruled the country in the last two decades: New Democracy and PASOK. Nevertheless, both national populism and xenophobia have changed dramatically (in nature and intensity) since the onset of the current crisis. It is for this reason that in the rest of this essay we focus on the criminally xenophobic Golden Dawn, plus the two leading national-populist parties today, Independent Greeks and SYRIZA.<sup>11</sup>

### Characteristics of the xenophobic and/or populist vote (June 2012)<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to expectations, electoral support for Golden Dawn was not limited to the inner city areas, worst affected by crime, and with a strong presence of illegal immigrants. In geographic terms, its vote was quite evenly distributed across the country, with peaks (approaching or exceeding 10%) in Greater Athens, Central Macedonia and especially the Peloponnese. In demographic terms, support for Golden Dawn was skewed towards younger voters (13% and 16% in the 18–24 and 25–34 age groups respectively), and was much higher among men than among women (10% vs. 4%). In terms of education, its share among those with tertiary education was not very different from its total share of the vote (total 7%; primary education 3%; secondary education 9%; tertiary 6%). In terms of occupation, the party vote was above average (11–12%) among the unemployed, private-sector employees and the self-employed. In terms of economic situation, the party was supported by 8% of those reporting that 'they found it difficult to make ends meet', compared to 4% of those stating that 'they got by / lived comfortably'. Unsurprisingly, in terms of self-positioning along a left–right scale, Golden Dawn voters overwhelmingly placed themselves on the right.

More recent evidence shows that the popularity of Golden Dawn is on the rise. While before the June 2012 general election as many as 16% of those asked said they had a favourable view of the party, by October

2012 Golden Dawn's approval rate had gone up to 21%. The proportion of positive views was higher than average among men (25%), those aged 18–44 (30% in the 18–24 age group), residents of small towns (27%) or rural areas (23%), the unemployed (26%), and those with only primary (26%) or secondary education (25%). Relative to June 2012, support for Golden Dawn in October 2012 seemed to have become more evenly distributed in terms of gender and age: it had grown more among women (+6 percentage points, pp) and those aged over 35 (+8 pp in the 45–54 age group). Otherwise, in terms of geography and education, opinion poll findings in October seemed to reinforce those in June: the proportion of respondents with a positive view of Golden Dawn had increased further among residents of small towns or rural areas (+7 pp), persons with secondary education (+7 pp) and, quite spectacularly, among those with primary education only (+13 pp).<sup>13</sup>

Independent Greeks did particularly well in Northern Greece, Greater Athens and some island regions (especially Cyclades and the Dodekanese). The party scored best (10%) among voters aged 25–44, and better among women than among men (9% vs. 6%). In terms of occupation, it was over-represented among the unemployed (11%). Independent Greeks were supported by 9% of those reporting that 'they found it difficult to make ends meet', versus 5% of those stating that 'they got by / lived comfortably'. In terms of the left–right scale, those voting Independent Greeks said they identified with the centre-right and the centre, followed by the right and (even) the centre-left.

SYRIZA emerged as the largest party, obtaining a share of the vote in excess of 30%, in the urban zones around Athens and Pireaus, in Crete, the Ionian islands, in the former industrial regions of Achaia and Magnesia, in Xanthi and elsewhere. On the whole, the party vote was higher in urban areas (30%) than in semi-urban / rural ones (23% and 22% respectively). Support for the party peaked among youngest voters (37% in the 18–24 age group), falling slightly with age, and was higher among women than men (29% vs. 25%). With respect to occupation, SYRIZA did best among students (39%), followed by the unemployed (37%) and salaried workers (33–34%). SYRIZA was supported by 31% of those reporting that 'they found it difficult to make ends meet', relative to 18% of those stating that 'they got by / lived comfortably'. The party vote fell monotonically as one moved along the left–right scale, but remained substantial among those positioning themselves on the centre-left and even the centre.

On the whole, the formerly dominant parties (New Democracy and PASOK) tended to be preferred by electors of older age, by pensioners and housewives, by those of low educational attainment, and by residents of rural areas. Remarkably, all three parties making up the coalition government (i.e. including Democratic Left) did better

among those claiming that 'they got by / lived comfortably' than those who 'found it difficult to make ends meet'.

In contrast, the xenophobic and/or populist vote was highest among the young, the unemployed, and those facing financial difficulties. On this evidence, it is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

Whether or not it has a future, national, often xenophobic, populism in Greece certainly has a past – and, what is more, not as a minority creed exiled to the political fringes, but as mainstream ideology. This is the subject of Chapter 2.

## National exceptionalism: xenophobic populism as mainstream ideology

‘National exceptionalism’ is one of the founding myths of modern Greece – perhaps the main one. The idea that the Greek nation is not just distinct but radically different (read: ‘superior’) than all the others is steeped in history. Current members of the Greek nation learn early in life to assert a direct line of descent from the Classical Greece of Homer, Pericles and Socrates, to take pride in the latter’s achievements, to claim them as their own.

Never mind that in 1830, when Greece emerged as a modern state (with decisive support from the Great Powers), after a long War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire (with the active involvement on the battlefield of many hundreds of *philhellenes* from Western Europe and beyond), most Greeks did not define themselves as Greek, and many did not speak the Greek language (itself the subject of many transmutations and bitter controversies over the last two centuries).<sup>14</sup>

The notion that an unbroken line connected Modern Greece to the glory that was Classical Greece proved extremely useful in diplomacy, in 19th-century nation- and state-building, and later as a morale-booster and an antidote to the many failures and disappointments that being a Greek often entailed.

### **‘Fatherland–Religion–Family’ (1946–74)**

After the 1946–49 Civil War, the mantle of nationalism was monopolised by the victorious right, claiming for its own supporters (some of whom had actually collaborated with the Nazis in 1941–44) exclusive membership of the national community, and portraying the defeated communists as enemies of the nation. The nationalist rhetoric (‘Fatherland–Religion–Family’) reached an apogee with the Colonels’ *coup d’état* of 1967, and came crashing down together with the military regime in 1974. The event that triggered the Colonels’ downfall, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, which led to the division of the island lasting to this day, showed that more often than not it is nationalism itself that lies at the root of the most catastrophic national tragedies.

### 'National Popular Unity' (1974–96)

With right-wing nationalism entirely discredited, and the ruling conservative party (New Democracy, founded in 1974 by Constantine Karamanlis) firmly pro-European and more liberal than ever, the late 1970s witnessed the transformation of nationalist energies. This time it was the new socialist party PASOK (also founded in 1974, by Andreas Papandreou) that played the game of *holier* – i.e. more patriotic – *than thou*. Its rallying cry, the platform of 'National Popular Unity', blended anti-imperialist sentiments, quite diffuse on the left then as now, with the conviction that the 'people' were the sole depositories of wisdom, and a reasserted belief in the timeless allure of the 'national character'.<sup>15</sup>

Early PASOK was a movement not a party (Papandreou never tolerated internal dissent, and had no time for party democracy and other such bourgeois niceties); it was radical (it promised 'socialism'); it was fiercely nationalist ('Greece to the Greeks', a slogan borrowed from Nasser's 'Egypt to the Egyptians') and anti-Turkish; it was anti-western, i.e. against the US, against NATO, and against Greece's entry into the European Economic Community (in 1980, as the Karamanlis government officially signed the accession treaty, PASOK mobilised its supporters and joined KKE in mass demonstrations against 'the EEC of monopolies').<sup>16</sup>

The recipe proved a winner. PASOK's meteoric rise to a mass party that won one general election after the other and ruled the country for 21 out of the 30 years from 1981 to 2011 amounted to a triumph of national populism.

PASOK in power moderated its anti-western stance, but never entirely abandoned it for as long as Papandreou remained in charge. Under Costas Simitis, PASOK leader and Prime Minister from 1996 to 2004, a pro-European party discourse was tacitly adopted. Too tacitly, most probably: the new party line, taken for granted at leadership level, never really convinced the rank and file. By that time, the anti-American and anti-European sentiments of party activists were too deeply entrenched to go away.

In the meantime, the Berlin Wall had come down, shattering all remaining illusions of 'proletarian internationalism'. Moreover, much nearer home, and too close for comfort, Yugoslavia had imploded into full-scale war, with extensive 'ethnic cleansing' practised on all sides.<sup>17</sup> Both events caused a resurgence of nationalism in Greece, this time across the political spectrum.

### 'Macedonia is Greek' (1992–?)

In the early 1990s, Greek politics and society were infected by the widespread anxieties associated with the new post-Cold War international order. The influx of hundreds of thousands of Albanian immigrants,

who simply crossed the border as their country sank into chaos, caused considerable tension, including a spate of armed robbery and murder cases that shocked public opinion (and, incidentally, shattered the illusion that 'Greeks are not racist').

Even more alarmingly, the Yugoslav war made the Balkans the 'powder keg of Europe' once again, caused old conflicts to resurface (Orthodox vs. Catholic, Christian vs. Muslim),<sup>18</sup> and for a moment seemed to suggest that Europe's borders were not as inviolable as everybody thought.

In particular, the emergence of a 'Republic of Macedonia' north of the Greek border, as the successor to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was provisionally called, encouraged a siege mentality<sup>19</sup> and ignited an unprecedented wave of nationalist feeling at home.

In February 1992, a huge rally took place in Thessaloniki, the administrative capital of the Greek region of Macedonia. Speakers included the conservative mayor, the city's Orthodox bishop, representatives of all political parties (except KKE) and others. Schools and public services helpfully remained closed for the day, allowing the (largely voluntary) participation of thousands of school children and civil servants in the rally. All in all, an estimated one million people marched, chanting 'Macedonia is Greek', many going a bit further ('Freedom to Northern Epirus', i.e. Southern Albania, home to a Greek minority), some shouting blood-curdling slogans (such as 'Axe and fire to the Skopje dogs').

In April 1992, all political parties were invited to a Council of Political Leaders chaired by President of the Republic Constantine Karamanlis: they all agreed to refuse to recognise any state that called itself 'Macedonia', or had the word 'Macedonian' in its name. After that, the Greek government (under Constantine Mitsotakis, New Democracy leader and prime minister) hardened its stance, rejecting all attempts at compromise (including the mediation of the European Union at the Lisbon summit of June 1992).

At the Council of Political Leaders, a seven-point plan of aggressive action on the 'Macedonian Question' was presented by the then young Foreign Minister Antonis Samaras (the prime minister of Greece since June 2012). Both the president of the Republic and the prime minister rejected the plan, and forced Samaras to resign.

Both Karamanlis and Mitsotakis feared that, while a full-scale war raged north of Greece's border, a seemingly innocuous dispute over the neighbour's name could easily spin out of control. Nevertheless, putting the nationalist genie back in the bottle proved impossible. In August 1992, the Greek government imposed an oil embargo on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

With PASOK and Papandreou back in power, the dispute escalated. In February 1994, the Greek government closed down the Greek



General Consulate in Skopje, and extended the scope of the embargo to all goods except food and pharmaceuticals.<sup>20</sup> That went down rather well with public opinion: when 300 personalities from the democratic left and the liberal centre signed a letter of protest against the embargo, they were ignored by the government, ridiculed by the media, and viciously attacked in publications (and, later, websites) of the far right.

Since then, the ‘Macedonian Question’ has been left open. Due to opposition from Greece, the country officially goes by the name of ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYROM). Even though a member of the UN (since 1993) and other international organisations, FYROM has failed to gain either an invitation to join NATO or a start date for accession talks with the EU – because of the Greek veto.

At about the same time, as everyday life began to change under the impact of mass immigration (whose real or imaginary effects began to dominate first the evening news then political debate), xenophobic nationalism became consolidated, its racist undertones more and more pronounced.

The role of the Greek Orthodox Church, with its centuries-old hostility to the West and all it represents, was quite instrumental in all that.

### The Church versus the Government

Far more interested in ‘national issues’ than in Christian charity, the Greek Orthodox Church began to assert its role as guardian of the nation’s purity against all sorts of threats, old and new. This reached new heights under the ten-year reign of Archbishop Christodoulos (1998–2008), whose popularity and media success led him to challenge the authority of the government on any issue deemed ‘of vital interest’ to the Church.

In May 2000, a month after the general election that returned to office the socialist ‘modernisers’ of Costas Simitis, Minister of Justice Michalis Stathopoulos announced that since religion was a personal question, the government intended to remove the field ‘Religion’ from the new version of citizen identity cards about to be issued. A few days later, the Hellenic Data Protection Authority pronounced the Minister’s position consistent with respect for privacy as enshrined in recent legislation. Soon after that, in response to a parliamentary question tabled by his conservative opposite number, the Prime Minister confirmed that the Minister had his full support.

Archbishop Christodoulos was furious.<sup>21</sup> In June 2000, the Holy Synod organised two mass rallies, first in Thessaloniki then in Athens. In September 2000, when that failed to budge the government, it called for a referendum, starting to collect signatures in support of its demand. In August 2001, he handed a list of (allegedly) three million signatures

to Constantine Stefanopoulos, then President of the Republic. It was only when the latter, putting respect for the Constitution above his personal beliefs, refused to second the Church’s demand that the issue began to die away.

In spite of this setback, Church leaders (the Archbishop himself but also the bishops, or at least some of them) continued to pontificate on a variety of issues, including the presence of black immigrants on the streets of Athens (dismissed contemptuously) and the bailout package that kept the Greek state functioning (condemned in no uncertain terms).

### The previous rise of the far right

Hostility to immigrants and a reasserted Orthodox identity were the key ingredients to the success of LAOS (the ‘Popular Orthodox Rally’). The party (founded September 2000), originally a breakaway from New Democracy, exploited the shrewdness and media savvy of its leader George Karatzaferis to make a splash.

Rather moderate by the standards of Golden Dawn, the agenda of LAOS emphasised law and order, and featured calls for the repatriation of those illegal immigrants in excess of a certain limit and ‘not needed’ for their skills. The party also made symbolic gestures towards die-hard supporters of the 1967–74 military *junta*, including the demand that those officers still in jail for their role in the coup should be released ‘on humanitarian grounds’. On the whole, LAOS managed (for a while) to attract ‘traditional conservative and ultra right voters, who were disaffected by New Democracy and its shift [to] the centre of the left–right ideological scale.’<sup>22</sup>

In electoral terms, although it failed to enter the national parliament in March 2004 (having won 2.2% of the vote), LAOS entered the European Parliament in June of the same year (4.1%). It did better in the general election of September 2007 (3.8% and 10 MPs), and better still in October 2009 (5.6% and 15 MPs), having achieved its best ever result in the European Parliament election of June 2009 (7.2% and two MEPs).

As described earlier, at about this point the party’s fortunes ebbed. Its decision to enter the coalition government of Loukas Papademos in November 2011, itself a confirmation that LAOS had gained the respectability it coveted, proved fateful: its share of the vote shrank first to 2.9% in May 2012, and lower still to 1.6% in June 2012. As of now, the party, left with no seats in Parliament, is in disarray – with some of its former MPs (including the two ministers under Papademos) having joined the New Democracy of Antonis Samaras.

### **Xenophobic nationalism as mainstream ideology**

As the previous analysis demonstrates, undercurrents of xenophobic nationalism have now become accepted parts of popular culture and are present in the political discourse of mainstream parties.

In light of that, it should come as no surprise that a recent survey<sup>23</sup> found that 63% of respondents thought ‘the Greek nation superior to other nations’ (up from 43% in 2011), nor that 65% said ‘they were willing to support what the country did irrespective of whether it was right or wrong’ (up from 41% in 2011).

On the whole, national populism PASOK-style (since the mid-1970s) and the ‘Macedonian Question’ (since the early 1990s) built on deeply rooted notions of ‘national exceptionalism’ and helped legitimise xenophobic nationalism once again – in the media, across the political spectrum and in society at large. Mass immigration into Greece, first from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, then from Asia and Africa, gave it a further boost. The current economic crisis, often experienced as causing impotence and humiliation, has made it the default reflex of both left and right. It is only in this broader context that one can make proper sense of the recent electoral success of Golden Dawn, Independent Greeks and – in a different sense – SYRIZA.



## The role of immigration

Apart from the impact of the crisis, it can hardly be denied that the rise of xenophobic populist parties is related to recent immigration trends. More specifically, in the space of merely two decades Greece completed the transition from source to destination of migration movements.

In the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Albanians crossed the border. That first wave of alien migrants caused moral panic and in the view of many was associated with increased crime. In retrospect, it is now commonly accepted that they settled in remarkably well, and their return to Albania in the current crisis is seen as something of a loss. Their economic role was to provide useful cheap labour for micro-employers. While this undeniably contributed to the high rates of growth experienced in the last two decades prior to the crisis, it also kept alive a whole range of otherwise uncompetitive economic activities, while it also had a modest displacement effect in certain sectors of the labour market (particularly in construction).

The recent influx of many hundred thousand migrants from Africa and Asia through the Turkish border is proving more resistant to integration and/or assimilation. It has been associated with a sharp rise in crime and a growing sense of insecurity among residents of inner city areas, in Athens and elsewhere.

It was in the neighbourhood of Aghios Panteleimon in Athens, where thousands of undocumented immigrants have flocked since 2008, that Golden Dawn began its recent ascent to becoming a national political force. There, it capitalised on the fear and angst of the locals. Many of them, independently of Golden Dawn, were discussing forming vigilante groups. Even a few left-wingers were talking of the right to bear arms.<sup>24</sup> In Aghios Panteleimon, at least, it seems that support for Golden Dawn was a reaction to immigration. 'If the problem were to be solved tomorrow, Golden Dawn would finish tomorrow', says a local resident.<sup>25</sup>

The issue is not just crime. Many Greeks are disturbed by the sight of their neighbourhood filling up with dark foreigners, often idle and sickly looking. In parts of central Athens, where poor and unemployed immigrants concentrate, many locals feel displaced or unsafe. Even in areas where immigrants work for a pittance and are

being exploited by local farmers and builders, they are despised and sometimes hated. Fear of the 'other' is deep rooted.

Surveys record the general mood as one of growing unease and, often, open hostility to immigration. The survey mentioned above,<sup>26</sup> conducted in May 2012, revealed that 68% of respondents believed that 'immigrants from less developed countries had better not come to Greece at all' (up from 59% in 2011). That contrasted with the findings of a recent Eurobarometer survey,<sup>27</sup> also conducted in May 2012, according to which only 14% of respondents in Greece cited 'crime' and 7% 'immigration' among the most important issues facing the country at the moment (max. two answers), while the corresponding figures in the EU as a whole were 11% and 8% respectively. In any case, both issues were thwarted by concerns about the economy: in Greece 66% of respondents mentioned 'the economic situation' and another 57% 'unemployment' (relative to 35% and 46% respectively in the EU as a whole).

That there are too many immigrants in Greece has become something of conventional wisdom. Is this true? As the latest Eurostat data<sup>28</sup> show, there is certainly a higher percentage of immigrants in the population in Greece than in the European Union as a whole: in 2011 foreign citizens made up 8.5% of the Greek population (citizens of countries outside the EU: 7.1%), compared to 6.6% (4.1%) for the EU as a whole. Leaving aside Estonia and Latvia, with the peculiar situation of 'recognised non-citizens' mainly from the former Soviet Union, only Spain and Cyprus hosted a higher percentage of non-EU citizens than Greece – and then only marginally so (7.2% and 7.4% respectively).

A similar story emerges when one looks at those born in a foreign country (which allows for differences in the scope of policies of 'naturalisation' of foreign citizens in the host country): the proportion of the population foreign-born was 11.1% in Greece versus 8.8% in the EU (8.3% vs. 6.4% respectively if only those born outside the EU are considered).

Given that official statistics typically underestimate the extent of illegal immigration, the gap between Greece and the rest of Europe may in fact be larger. As the annual reports of FRONTEX (cited by FRA, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights) document, 90% of all illegal immigrants to Europe cross the Greek land and sea border with Turkey.<sup>29</sup> This is corroborated by Greek police statistics, according to which as many as 712,000 persons were apprehended upon crossing the country's borders irregularly in 2006–2011.

Even though the overwhelming majority of those entering the country do not in fact intend to settle there but try to reach other EU countries, Greece's obligations under the Dublin II Treaty render this practically impossible: on the one hand, the western border (the sea border with Italy) is better and more easily policed than the eastern one; on the other hand, those managing to escape to Italy or elsewhere

risk being returned to Greece if caught – or did so until October 2010, when the European Court of Human Rights, alarmed by the manner in which Greek authorities handled the humanitarian crisis along the north-eastern border, called for a halt of transfers to Greece.

Turning to crime, there can be no doubt that the rise of immigration has coincided with a sharp increase in crime rates. This increase has been nothing less than spectacular with respect to petty crime, such as burglaries (from fewer than 42,000 cases in 1991 to 97,000 in 2011) and especially car thefts (from around 850 cases in 1991 to over 32,000 in 2011). Armed robberies also became six times as common, their number rising from around 1,000 in 1991 to more than 6,000 in 2011. In spite of a few horrible well-publicised cases that caught the popular imagination, the number of murder cases in Greece over the last two decades fluctuated (rather than increasing monotonically): the number of cases rose steadily from 138 in 1991 to a peak of 203 in 1997, then fell rapidly to 94 in 2002, only to rise again to 143 in 2009 – and more steeply to 184 in 2011.

Of course, not all victims are Greek and not all criminals are foreign: crime is often confined within the immigrant population, while (as the recent cases of Asian and African immigrants violently attacked by racist mobs illustrate<sup>30</sup>) it can also go the other way.

# 4

## Social structure and the crisis

Up until late 2009, when it became apparent to all that the economy was in deep trouble, most Greeks were firmly pro-European. Despite the ideology of national exceptionalism, the great majority would be offended if anybody suggested that we do not belong to the core of Europe, and very few questioned the benefits that Greece derived from being a member of the European Union.

For many, this changed drastically within a few months. The mood shifted to one of suspicion or hostility towards the government, political parties and European institutions. According to the findings of Eurobarometer surveys, between November 2009 and June 2010 the proportion of Greeks responding that they tended to trust the European Union fell from 60% to 19%. Over the same period, trust in the national government declined from 44% to 25%, trust in the national parliament from 47% to 23%, while trust in political parties declined from 19% to 9%.<sup>31</sup>

This was beyond any rational questioning of the pros and cons of the Eurozone, or of how to share the burden of accumulated past debt. It was a reaction of blame, anger and defiance. To understand this attitude, it helps to look at some aspects of Greece's social structure, and of Greeks' economic behaviour.

### ***Petit bourgeois*, protected, fragmented and low trust**

Compared to all other members of the EU, and of most of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Greece has an exceptionally high number of self-employed and of micro-employers. Very few private-sector employees work in sizeable companies, and even fewer have careers in them. Most households own some land or a house, and many own their business. It is largely a *petit bourgeois* society. This has been a permanent feature of Greek society since the creation of the modern state in the 1830s.

The size of the state by conventional metrics is about average for a European country, but its influence on the incomes of private households, and especially of the middle class, is extraordinary. Whereas in northern Europe states typically provide public services

for all and a safety net for the most needy, in Greece a major function of the state is to provide, or to support, the incomes of middle-class occupational groups, during their working age. Thus it provides pensions to selected groups from an early age, while they can still be active for many more years; it gives salaries and benefits in public utilities that are way over what would be paid in the private sector; it enables engineers, journalists and lawyers to have comfortable pensions without having to set aside much from their current income. Further, by regulation it protects pharmacists, truck owners, tour guides and shopkeepers from competition; by turning a blind eye, it allows civil servants, doctors and planning officers to profit from their position; by tolerating tax evasion, it supports income from self-employment; and it allows many farmers to have incomes for doing nothing, often through fraud.

All this has created a large middle class (broadly defined) that has relied to a large extent on a profligate state and a set of protective barriers.

A polarised labour market reflects and reinforces the state's role: over-protected 'insiders' (working in the public sector, in public utilities, and to a diminishing extent in banking) coexist with unprotected 'outsiders' (active in micro and small firms, often 'informally'), and under-protected 'mid-siders' (formal employees in larger firms of the non-banking private sector).

Outsiders work in precarious jobs, usually badly paid and often uninsured. However, up until the onset of the crisis, an underclass (in the fashion of US urban ghettos or of French *banlieues*) was far more limited in Greece, or concerned only recent immigrants from South Asia and Africa. Jobless or precariously employed Greeks typically were the wives or (grown up) children of 'male breadwinners' with steady jobs paying 'family wages'. Small ownership, multiple sources of income and family support played the role of an informal safety net, preventing precariousness or unemployment from becoming acute social issues. The crisis has changed all that: unemployment and precarious employment no longer spare male breadwinners. But the informal safety net, although under pressure, is still there.

In the upper tiers of society, the Greek elite is composed of public works contractors, global shipping magnates, medium-sized local employers, politicians, media personalities, lawyers, doctors, and a few other high-status professions. Most of these are neither large employers in the country, nor work for large companies.

Prevailing behaviour corresponds to this fragmented and protected occupational structure. Distributional politics rarely takes the form of conflict and settlement between large capitalist employers and organised labour. Rather, it centres around government budgets and ministerial decrees that may improve or damage the income

or privileges of particular groups. Most of the time, industrial action is addressed to the state, either as employer, or as regulator.

Much of this give and take between government and special interests is completely opaque, so that the degree of equity of specific policies cannot be easily assessed with hard data. Independent studies<sup>32</sup> show that the distribution of pensions and other social benefits is skewed towards powerful occupations, rather than towards the needy; but this has not been a central issue in public debate.

In the private sector, firms in unprotected industries prefer short-term opportunist strategies to long-term planning. Tax evasion, 'moonlighting' and breaching of regulations are widespread, and often (but not always) necessary preconditions for survival. Firms in protected sectors also have little incentive to plan for efficiency and innovation.

The cultural traits of a low-trust society (documented in value surveys, and familiar to anyone living or doing business in the country) underpin these patterns of behaviour: cooperation is difficult, sticking to commitments is given low priority, respect for different points of view is rare.<sup>33</sup>

### Crisis and anger

This was the society that sank into deep recession in 2009. The drop in incomes was dramatic. Between the end of 2009 and the end of 2011 GDP contracted by over 10%, and is set to fall further by at least 5% in 2012. Disposable income fell even more due to a sharp increase in the tax burden: a burden which falls unfairly on wage earners and pensioners, since they are the ones whose income can be taxed directly, and therefore don't have as much opportunity to evade taxes.

Official unemployment shot up from 8.6% in June 2009 to 23.9% and rising in June 2012. Unofficial unemployment is probably higher, and there is now extensive under-employment among the self-employed. No one in the public sector has been laid off, so the whole burden fell to private-sector workers.

Many working-class and lower-middle-class people faced destitution in the space of a few months. As the Greek welfare state was not geared to supporting the weakest, benefits for the unemployed and basic services for the poorest are grossly inadequate, at a time when they are most needed. While there are as yet few homeless Greeks, many more are reduced to scouring the garbage containers in the streets looking for food and other necessities.

The sharp drop in incomes would be more bearable if people were given hope that the hardship would be temporary. But to this day, no one has provided a convincing vision of revival in the near

future. This deepens the sense of despair, and has led many to seek to pin the blame and to vent their anger on a handful of easily identified targets.

Because of the class structure outlined above, standard class politics does not apply. Few people believe that taxing corporate profits would solve the fiscal issue and restore justice, because there are not that many corporations to tax. There are few large employers to blame for their insensitive workplace practices. Tax evaders and harsh employers abound; but they are very many and as a rule not so wealthy.

So, who are the most popular objects of anger?

Inside the country, the political class is the primary target. This makes sense, since the crisis in Greece was, in the first instance, a crisis of public debt and of public deficits over many years. At a deeper level, politicians were, for many people, the equivalent of large corporate employers in industrialised economies: guarantors of income and of pensions, and even definers of occupational identity. Once politicians became unable to provide that, they became the enemy, in much the same way as a capitalist employer does, when he lays off employees.

Furthermore, in a state where there is no defined accountability of individual entities (be they hospitals, schools, municipalities, public enterprises or pension funds), a fiscal crisis cannot be contained by targeting the worst offenders; all are guilty and all are victims. So anger can be focused only towards the top, i.e. the government. The culture of fudge and subsidise, which politicians fostered in order to keep public-sector employees happy, has now turned against them.

In addition, many politicians are known or assumed to be corrupt. Most people disliked that, even in good times, but were willing to overlook it. But now, ill-gotten wealth can no longer be forgiven.

So, one slogan which united all 'Indignados' at Syntagma Square was 'burn down the bordello Parliament'. And one demand which is reiterated by people of all persuasions, pro- and anti-Memorandum, pro- and anti-government, is: 'put (some of) them in jail'.

Beyond that, blame and targets diverge. Inside Greece, tax evaders are one group of culprits, and idle public employees are another. Political ideology influences which group is seen as most to blame.

But, here is one interesting distinction: it is moderates who are most vocal on these issues. National populists, at both ends of the spectrum, tend to downplay both tax evasion (except among the very rich) and idle or corrupt bureaucrats as important issues. Because everybody has friends, relatives or neighbours who evade tax, and others who are on the government payroll, to campaign against these would be to divide 'the people'; and that would defeat the populists' strategy.

## National populist economic ideology

Greek politicians may be high on the list of culprits for the crisis in popular narratives, but it is powerful foreigners who are by far the biggest villains. This view, as explained earlier, is an ideal foundation for populist politics.

Originally anti-American, anti-imperialist and leftist, populist economic ideology has recently morphed into a broader anti-western, anti-globalisation and anti-market stance gathering support from across the political spectrum.

The rise of charlatan economics is a more recent twist of the above. Aided by social media, a new type of economics pundit has emerged, devising 'explanations' of the crisis based on conspiracy theories, or on extreme anti-capitalist narratives, taking a hold on popular imagination.

A look at the most viewed Greek videos on YouTube is instructive. The most popular video that we have found (excluding music clips) is titled *The Video that ALL GREEKS MUST see*.<sup>34</sup> In 15 minutes it packs an astounding collection of fabricated stories and bizarre interpretations of the bailout agreements, interwoven with valid questions about the government's actions and reports of real suffering.

It quotes an oft-cited fake Henry Kissinger 'talk' of 1974, in which Kissinger purportedly said that the USA should conduct a campaign to degrade the Greek language and eliminate Greek culture, so as to drain the proud and troublesome Greek nation of its vital spirit. It shows a retired professor of constitutional law, who claims that the Loan Agreement of May 2010 (the basis of the bailout package) allows foreigners to take over any asset of the Greek state, including land of strategic military importance, and implying that they could even confiscate the Acropolis. The American pundit Max Keiser states that the crisis was engineered so that wealthy investors could get their hands on Greek assets, and reports that Steve Forbes, in private conversation, has called it 'the opportunity of a lifetime'. An unnamed source refers to a deal that the USA proposed to the Greek government, by which all debt would be written off, on condition that a joint venture would exploit the oil of the Aegean Sea (which has not been found yet); the joint venture would be owned 60% by Americans, 20% by Turks, 20% by Greeks. And so on.

The second most popular Greek video (again excluding music clips) is titled *WAKE UP!!! HERE ARE THE TRAITORS SHOCK VIDEO!!!*<sup>35</sup> It was produced by a group called Hellenic Research Organization, which appears to be militantly Orthodox Christian. It begins with a photograph of George Papandreou (prime minister at the time) decorated with medals on a broad ribbon and claims that he is wearing his 'Rosicrucian uniform', explaining that Rosicrucians are 'a secret society' which dictates Papandreou's policies. It goes on to show more than a dozen leading politicians (mostly from PASOK and New Democracy, but also Alexis Tsipras of SYRIZA), each with pictures and a caption explaining how they are betraying national interests and that they are obeying orders of Masonic Lodges. Other targets of the video include Patriarch Bartholomaios of Constantinople and several well-known television journalists.

The first video (the one with Henry Kissinger) was produced by a group called Anti-New World Order, which is connected to Dimitris Kazakis. Kazakis is a prime example of the new breed of charlatan economists, who have become a fixture of public debates on the economy. Virtually unknown until 2010, he catapulted to fame on the basis of his videotaped interviews, which went viral on the web.

His two-hour interview, entitled *The Best Ever Technical-Economic Analysis of Greece*,<sup>36</sup> was the third most popular on YouTube. Talking in a self-assured manner, as if everything he claims is indisputable, he provides an even more outlandish interpretation of the default clauses of the Loan Agreement. Our creditors, he says, could transfer part of the loan to Turkey, which could then lay claim to our fighter jets, so that we would be defenceless. Further, the Loan Agreement has assigned to Greece's creditors the wages and salaries of all Greek employees, public and private. As he says: 'not even the Tsolakoglou Government during the German occupation accepted such onerous terms for Greece's debt' (Tsolakoglou being the Greek equivalent of Quisling).

He also argues that none of the debt incurred by Greek governments over many decades was ever used to finance public spending, other than recycling previous debt with ever ballooning interest expenses. All of this debt that the Greek people are called to repay was never used in Greece (note: since Greek governments have been running primary budget deficits of between 3% and 10% of GDP almost every year for 30 years, it would be interesting to see Kazakis' arithmetic).

He denounces our creditor's plans to 'integrate economically' certain Greek regions with neighbouring countries: Crete and the Dodecanese with Turkey, Epirus with Albania. He reveals a German conspiracy to revive the (short-lived) independent state of Crete:

why else would a German university award a doctorate to somebody who is researching that period?

He states that Greece does not need EU support, since it can get a better deal from Russia. Also, that our vegetable produce could be as good as gold. 'We can trade vegetables for oil with Egypt' (yes, Egypt). And many, many more equally 'solid' ideas.

Views like that are not confined to some remote corner of the public sphere. Kazakis is a regular panellist on second-tier television channels, along with similarly minded analysts. Many of these ideas pop up in blogs, in the tabloid press, and in private conversation, among people from different ideological and social backgrounds. They transcend the left-right divide. Kazakis himself, and other nationalist populist public figures have flirted both with SYRIZA and with Independent Greeks.

On a slightly more serious level, a long documentary titled *Debtocracy* produced in early 2011 has also made a big impact. It was crowdfunded, and then shown in cinemas, on television and of course on the web, where it has had several hundred thousand views from around the world.<sup>37</sup> It is technically accomplished, in a typical militant narrative style. Several well-known international personalities appear, each saying a few sentences, all of them icons of the left (Samir Amin, David Harvey, Alain Badiou, and others; and with one exception to the left-wing rule: Ron Paul). Emotional images are intercut into the narrative to suggest evil and guilt by association, when it cannot be directly asserted. The central theses are: the euro is to blame for the crisis (including the Greek crisis); the Greek government is a *junta*, mandated to make the people suffer to save the creditors; and Greek sovereign debt, like that of Ecuador, may very possibly be 'odious' and can be legally written off.

The creators of *Debtocracy* are decidedly left-wing; but their ideas are echoed on the extreme right. Along with Kazakis and with many others, including a few academics, they have shaped a broad narrative which is believed by many national populists. In outline, it is as follows:

- Greek public debt was not used to pay for either wages or pensions or infrastructure; it was all a scam to refinance much older debt at usurious rates; or it was appropriated by the wealthy; or, it was 'odious'.
- The crisis is entirely due to global or European factors; there is nothing Greeks can do on their own to improve their economy. The serious version of this argument has been stated by Y. Varoufakis: Greece today is to Europe what the state of Ohio in the 1930s was to the USA; could the Governor of Ohio have revived the economy without action by the Federal Government? Most national populists take this to mean that domestic policies are not important.



- There is great endogenous potential for growth, which has intentionally been left idle. In the more sinister versions there are undisclosed oil and mineral reserves which foreign powers want to take over after they have humiliated the Greek people. This line is particularly popular among Independent Greeks supporters.
- Privatisation, and even leasing idle land owned by the state to international investors, is a sell-out. Assets will be sold for way below fair value, and no benefits can be had from foreign investment. In the wilder versions, the crisis was engineered intentionally by bankers in order to buy Greek land and public enterprises cheaply.
- Greece could have avoided the bailout package and troika supervision if the government had acted differently in late 2009. They could have sought help from Russia or China; or they could have threatened to disrupt the European monetary system in order to get a bailout without austerity.
- Greek government leaders, in all governments since 2009, are either too spineless, or too beholden to global capital to promote true national interests. A government by our party (whichever that is) will be a more effective negotiator, because we are not afraid of confrontation.
- The Greek economy can now start growing again if only we write off most of the debt and started drilling for oil south of Crete. In most variations, this is combined with exiting the Eurozone.

What is missing from this narrative is any concept of structural flaws within the Greek economy, and any acknowledgement that the Greek crisis was caused to a large degree by behaviour approved or tolerated by the vast majority of 'the people'. Rent-seeking, tax evasion, benefit fraud, parasitic businesses, illegal work practices, a free-spending state, unsustainable pension funds, bad schools, corrupt officials, and useless public-sector organisations do not figure in the analysis (except to the extent that they can be blamed on the very wealthy, or on leading politicians). The populists never accept that the short-term benefits of long-term ruin may not have been equally shared, but they extended to a very large part of the population.

The emphasis of the narrative is much more on issues of sovereignty and national pride than on the perils of austerity. Everybody hates austerity, and many people think it will not work, but these views are not confined to the national populists. Moderates share them too. Furthermore, most people recognise that there has been waste in the state, excesses among the middle strata, corruption, etc. So a total rejection of austerity measures is not convincing even among populist voters, and a serious discussion of how to reduce the deficit risks dividing the people. Sovereignty issues can unite on a visceral level; that is why they are preferred by national populists.



## Disobedience, violence and vigilantism

### Golden violence

In the weeks between the May and June 2012 elections, opinion polls were showing a decline in support for Golden Dawn. Mainstream media and politicians had reacted to the shock result of May with a strategy of stigmatising Golden Dawn. This seemed to be working. Some pollsters were predicting that the party would fall below the 3% threshold and thus fail to get into Parliament. This changed on the morning of 7th June, when during a live TV debate a Golden Dawn candidate, a muscular young man, flung a glass of water towards a female SYRIZA candidate, and then slapped a female Communist Party candidate. The incident became prime news, the video went viral, and polls show that from that day on, support for Golden Dawn started rising, from 4% to 5.4% within a few days, to reach 6.92% on election day, 17 June.<sup>38</sup>

Golden Dawn entered Parliament with 18 MPs. Some analysts predicted that it would gradually soften its profile and become more mainstream, as some right-wing extremist parties have done elsewhere. Instead, during the summer and up to the end of October as we write, Golden Dawn has conducted a campaign of well-orchestrated and publicised events which feature public intimidation and violence against immigrants and atheists, and have stepped up their rhetoric of ethnic cleansing, of jailing thieving politicians, and even of an upcoming civil war. Concurrently, incidents of violent attacks against immigrants resulting in serious injury or death have become more frequent. No direct involvement of the party has been proven in these, but it is generally believed that Golden Dawn tacitly or actively supports the attackers.

In a recent incident, a group of Golden Dawn members, including MPs, bearing Greek flags on wooden poles visited a street market. Some of the stalls belonged to immigrants. The MPs asked to see their vendor permits, and then attacked those who did not produce the documents, smashing their stalls and wares, using the wooden poles. They videotaped the event, which was heavily publicised. A street vendors' association issued a statement in support of Golden Dawn, and the party itself defended its right to support legal Greek merchants against 'illegal' immigrant merchants. 'We are doing the job of the police', was their main argument.

All this raises the issue of the broader culture of violence, of disobedience, and of taking the law into one's own hands: Is this culture particularly strong in Greece? If yes, is it responsible for the rise of Golden Dawn? If yes again, to what extent is the disobedience and violence practised by others in the opposite end of the political spectrum responsible for the rise of Golden Dawn?

These are hotly debated subjects among intellectuals in Greece. The issue is not so much about the 'supply side'. Few doubt that Golden Dawn violence is an independent manifestation of an extremist ideology, combined with a criminal mentality, and it cannot be explained as a reaction to left-wing violence. What is more contentious is the 'demand side'. Many people tolerate or even applaud the violence and the vigilantism. Would they be less approving if breaking the law had not been sanctioned by politicians and opinion makers in other cases, over many years?

The fact is that it is too soon to tell. Nor are there any in-depth surveys of Golden Dawn supporters that could help answer this. We can only offer a macroscopic narrative, and some reflections.

### Disobedience: politics as usual

Protests, both peaceful and violent, have been a staple of post-*junta* democracy. Before the bailout, the high-water mark was reached in December 2008. Following the killing of a teenager by a policeman in Athens, huge demonstrations and then violent riots and guerilla attacks engulfed the centre of the city for weeks, and spread to towns all over Greece. The rioters included anarchists, radical leftists, and some criminal looters, but they were mostly angry young citizens from all walks of life. The depth of feeling, and the wide support for the rioters surprised the political establishment, and led many to state that politics would not be the same after that. The situation calmed down with the New Year holidays, but the shadow of December 2008 is still with us.<sup>39</sup>

In December 2010, the residents of Keratea near Athens erected barricades and conducted sabotage to stop construction works on a waste disposal facility that the regional authority of Attica had decided to establish in their municipality. The whole town was up in arms (sometimes literally), riot police moved in, teargas and street fighting and digging up of roads ensued. The work was stopped, and after four months the police moved out. That was the first major unrest after the Memorandum was signed. What distinguished it from a typical NIMBY protest was its intensity, and the fact that it united the two extremes, left and right. Activists of SYRIZA (a rather small party at the time) and others on its left (including self-declared anarchists) adopted the cause and tried to weave it into a broader anti-capitalist, anti-state narrative. But many on the radical right (including Golden Dawn militants with

party insignia) were also active from the start.<sup>40</sup> In political rhetoric, the 'events of Keratea' were hailed as the beginning of a mass resistance movement that would oust the government and the troika.

More recently, in August 2012, the mayor of Korinthos and hundreds of local people reacted angrily and tried to blockade a large army camp at the edge of town, when it was announced that it would be housing illegal immigrants. Among other acts, the water supply was cut off. Again, the event was politicised – this time primarily by Golden Dawn, whose members appeared among the protesters *en masse*, disciplined and in military formation. The message was: 'only we can protect you from immigrant trash that the government is dumping at your doorstep'.

In between, and starting from early 2010, hundreds of acts of defiance erupted around the country, usually went unpunished, and were often supported by the radical left and the extreme right. These included riots in central Athens, during otherwise peaceful mass demonstrations; strikes and blockades of ports and airports during the tourist season; disruptive picketing at tollbooths on national roads to ensure that no driver paid tolls; more of the same at the Athens metro to ensure that no passenger paid for tickets; secondary picketing by activists not working there to close down factories; and strikes and occupations by students and even academics to block university reform by forcibly preventing other professors from convening and voting; sometimes even locking professors in rooms for hours.

Like elsewhere, bending or breaking the law has been common in Greece in good times as well as bad; so have strikes and protests that disrupted the economy and the life of the city. They occurred regularly in the long period of rising incomes from the fall of the *junta* in 1974 to 2008. During this period, when PASOK and New Democracy dominated the political scene, it was their own voters that swelled the ranks of the protesters, without that eroding the electoral strength of their parties. Protest and defiance became part of the consensus on which the post-*junta* democracy was built, in parallel with joining the EU, and then the Eurozone, and in parallel with adopting increasingly western forms of consumption and lifestyle.

The broader culture of disobedience, including a tolerance for unlawful behaviour, extends well beyond xenophobic populism and precedes its recent rise by decades. Still, there can be little doubt that it has helped legitimise it. Moreover, recent episodes seem to differ from more 'traditional' patterns of protest over the previous period in two important ways.

First, each protest or act of defiance, however local, is now placed within a broad anti-systemic narrative: resist neo-liberalism, defend Greek identity, throw out the troika, bring down the government.

Within current political geography, such protests are naturally adopted by the anti-Memorandum front, even if they do not directly address Memorandum policies. Instead of being a shock absorber for moderate parties, protest now becomes a constant threat to them.

Second, breaking certain laws is part of the core strategy both of SYRIZA and of Golden Dawn, albeit in very different ways. SYRIZA resists the implementation of laws that enact reforms, because it seeks to project a radical identity and broaden its electoral appeal. In some cases, especially in universities, it sanctions the systematic intimidation (although not actual physical violence) of academics who support certain reforms. SYRIZA-supported demonstrations often degenerate into clashes with the police; but they are generally non-violent, and many peaceful people feel they are within accepted bounds of civil disobedience. Golden Dawn on the other hand openly preaches vigilante violence, and it is widely believed that some of its members regularly attack, injure and sometimes kill immigrants.

### The law of the mob

Golden Dawn plays up the lack of law enforcement by the state. When asked about calls to outlaw his party, Nikos Mihaloliakos, the leader, answers sarcastically: 'Why, is there any law, so that they can place us "out" of it?'<sup>41</sup> When he was accused of saluting Nazi-style with an extended arm, he answered, 'Yes, sometimes we do salute this way, but we salute with clean hands. Our hands are not stained by corruption.' They wear uniform black t-shirts, and make a point of appearing disciplined. They stage blood donations, and soup kitchens for the poor, but 'only for Greeks'.

This seems to strike a chord. For some young men it is a chance to 'belong' to an organisation with purpose and power. This is well described in a vignette by somebody who has been observing first-hand:

*The underlying emotion of the new recruit is loneliness, and the party is an answer to this. Society has been unable to teach him to develop mature choices. The starting point of life in a gang is acceptance. Then comes the test period and then membership, like with close buddies, when you are tested for keeping secrets. Today's 25-year-olds like the bravado of Golden Dawners, recognize the power of masculinity, are proud of the fear that they provoke, but mostly, they discover a place to hide.<sup>42</sup>*

Among other supporters, one reaction is: 'Golden Dawners are nazis, fascists, yes, they are whatever you say! But tell me if there is any other, better party!! Doing things for the common people (like providing food, jobs), running a jobs centre, and most importantly being

called in by the police when there is trouble or a problem with foreigners!!!'<sup>43</sup> The reference to the police echoes what many analysts believe, i.e. that many police officers either are active Golden Dawn supporters, or at least prefer to turn a blind eye.

Yet a third line of thought is exemplified by a well-educated man who in earlier years was arguing against nazism in the social media: 'I had business with the state, and they paid me in government bonds which then lost most of their value in the "haircut". I have six kids, and the state has robbed me. How can I trust them again? I'll vote Golden Dawn to punish them, and I am moving abroad.'<sup>44</sup> Punishing the corrupt establishment by voting for a dangerous fringe seems to be another common motive.

So, Golden Dawn draws votes sometimes as a force of disruption, sometimes for its racism, sometimes for its nationalism, and sometimes for its local mafia-style 'law enforcement'. It is all that.

## Synthesis

Most voters pick their party not because they agree wholeheartedly with everything it says or does, but rather because they care about a few significant issues that it champions, or because they like the leaders' style, or because it seems less bad than all the others.

So it is hard to pinpoint exactly what drives 7% of Greeks (now more, according to opinion polls) to pick Golden Dawn. We do know, from exit polls, that only 40% of June 2012 Golden Dawn voters declared an 'ideological affinity' to the party. This was the lowest among all parties.<sup>45</sup> But if it was not ideology, we do not really know what drove the vote. Is criminal vigilantism part of the attraction? Would Golden Dawn get even more votes if it stopped being violent?

How many SYRIZA voters believe the official line that it would denounce the Memorandum and still keep Greece in the euro and avoid chaotic default? Or do some voters really wish that Greece moved to the drachma? Or do they believe neither of the two, but still hope that SYRIZA would do more for social justice?

Do all Independent Greeks voters buy the line that the key to prosperity is mineral wealth, which the treacherous ruling parties are concealing from the public because that is the diktat of sinister global forces? Or are they just protesting against the leaders of New Democracy, who categorically rejected the Memorandum before they switched to defending it?

No detailed survey is yet available of beliefs and arguments that have driven voters to vote for particular parties. What follows is a summary of what seem to be the main drivers.

We have outlined five sets of factors, some of which apply broadly across the political spectrum, while others are more specific to nationalist populism.

The *economic crisis* affects everybody. Poverty, unemployment and economic uncertainty can be fertile ground for the politics of anger and blame. However, on their own, they do not necessarily lead to support for anti-systemic parties, either of the xenophobic variety or any other. In certain circumstances, in a crisis people can rally around a positive programme of reconstruction and reform. In Greece this has not happened, to a large extent because mainstream

parties have been unable to outline a convincing roadmap for exit from the crisis. The only such roadmap currently available is the troika's, i.e. the one implicit in the Memorandum. However, nobody within the country really 'owns' that. The only options left are either to accept the Memorandum reluctantly, or to reject it.

This introduces a second set of factors: *low trust, opportunism, contempt for institutions and disregard of the law*. These have been permanent features of modern Greek society, again across the political spectrum.

At times of crisis, big adjustments are needed; incomes will fall, jobs will be lost, and so others must be created by reforms, and by re-allocating resources. Yet any programme which entails short-term pain for long-term gain can be adopted only by people who trust their leaders and each other. The Swedish recovery programme in the mid-1990s was one example. In the present crisis, the Italian and Spanish governments have announced harsh austerity measures, yet polls indicate that citizens 'remained optimistic that their leaders would be able to address the problems raised by the crisis, with Italians proving the most upbeat, with 83 per cent responding that they were at least "somewhat confident" in their leaders' ability, and Spaniards the least, at 63 per cent'.<sup>46</sup>

Greeks, on the other hand, mistrust their governments, and each other (see Chapter 4). This has always been the case, and is even more so now. This makes it very hard for any extensive programme of cuts and reforms to be accepted by the public. If there appears to be no credible, pragmatic plan for recovery, people are more likely to turn to saviours and to magic formulae for hope.

In addition, if breaking (some) laws is socially acceptable under many circumstances, party strategies that are based on disobedience will provoke no instinctive repulsion, as they would perhaps in countries where the dominant culture is one of respect for laws and rules.

Furthermore, contempt for the state and for the police open the door to vigilantes, such as Golden Dawn bands. Having said that, it is hard to believe that criminal violence, allegedly including murder, can be condoned by the 440,000 persons who voted for Golden Dawn.

It is the third set of factors which partly explains tolerance for such violence. This is the *impact of recent immigration* on the quality of life of Greeks. To some extent the impact is tangible; to some other extent it is perceived (i.e. the result of sensational media coverage of what once passed unremarked). Some people have been victims of crime by immigrants, others feel insecure in their neighbourhoods, as they feel watched and stalked by strangers. To many, foreign looks and customs alter the feel of a city, raising issues of identity; others associate immigrants with dirt and disease. In addition, some (but not much) public rhetoric claims that the scarce resources of the welfare state are wasted on immigrants, whereas they ought to be reserved for native Greeks.

It is interesting to note, though, that support for Golden Dawn is high both in areas that are directly affected by immigrants and in those that are not. This suggests that perception rather than real impact may be at work; this perception is shaped in part in the media. Mainstream television has been accused of highlighting the nationality of criminals when they are foreign, and of downplaying the criminal aspects of Golden Dawn. In addition, Golden Dawn is popular among the police, which in the eyes of some lends the party respectability (while in the eyes of many others it lowers trust in the police even further).

A fourth set of factors concern *national identity and exceptionalism*. A nation which places its greatest achievements in the distant past, and which has little to show in terms of world-class success in recent times, tends to barricade itself behind national symbols, and to be insecure in its international relations. Most Greek politicians in the post-*junta* era have been defensive nationalists: they have reflected, and shaped, the views of their constituents. Most but not all: some politicians and many Greek citizens are open to the world, have worked or studied abroad, travel often, and have contacts with foreign friends and colleagues as well as with an extensive diaspora of Greeks living abroad. But the prevailing attitude *vis-à-vis* foreigners remains one of suspicion and mistrust.

In view of the above, a fifth set of factors came into play when the crisis struck: *an economic worldview* according to which exploitation and instability come from abroad, and can be blamed on a few plutocrats and their political lackeys. The worldview is particularly appealing in a *petit bourgeois* and statist economy, where local class enemies are hard to identify.

So which political programme might help reduce the appeal of xenophobic populism? The logical answer is: a programme which counters, one by one, the five sets of factors that we have identified. Elaborating such a programme is beyond the scope of this essay, but we can offer a summary:

- A growing economy providing good jobs, and a welfare state geared to the needs of the weakest. The most effective therapy of the underdog mentality is hope and economic security. Hope will not be created by Greeks alone: Greece's European partners must help.
- Rebuilding trust in the political system by a combination of punishment of corrupt politicians, law enforcement especially in troubled areas, and transparency in all decision making. In addition, refocusing secondary education towards civic values, cooperation and the institutions of democracy.
- An immigration policy which combines measures for the integration of those who wish to settle here peacefully as well as public information campaigns to allay our visceral fear of the 'other', with a policy of

zero tolerance of violent crime, whether committed by immigrants or by vigilantes. None of this can succeed, however, unless Greece can somehow regulate immigration flows, and this is not possible without sharing the burden with the rest of the EU.

- As for the the last two sets of factors (i.e. the ideologies of national exceptionalism and of nationalist economic populism), we can only call on those who feed the paranoia and the illusions to consider the consequences. This applies to opinion makers in Greece (politicians, journalists, public intellectuals, media stars); but it also applies to all of their European counterparts who from time to time find it expedient to fan the flames of national divisions and finger-pointing.

All of this is much easier said than done, of course. But any victory on any of these fronts might make a real difference in the battle against extremism.

# Postscript

Almost a year after we wrote the main text of this essay, the general outlook has not changed dramatically. The broad political situation has improved, in the sense that the coalition government has proven more stable than many predicted; there is far less visible anger in the streets; and Greece's position in the Eurozone seems to be secure in the medium term.

The economic situation is still poor, with unemployment growing and GDP falling, and expected to fall further. Some positive signs have appeared, such as international investor interest, better 'business sentiment' indicators, and a very recent uptick in employment. But these are slight and fragile.

The appeal of radical populist parties remains strong. SYRIZA on the left has consolidated its position as the main opposition party. In polls it appears to be approximately as popular as the centre-right New Democracy, the main governing party; though its support seems to be close to its performance at the June 2012 election despite a deepening crisis, stagnant support for New Democracy and declining support for the other two coalition parties (the socialist PASOK and Democratic Left). Too many voters declare support for no party, and SYRIZA has not been able to broaden its appeal towards centrist voters. Some factions within the party are trying to present a more moderate face, but others keep to their anti-systemic rhetoric. On the whole, party leaders are trying to present themselves as radical but Europeanist reformers, but they have not come up with any reform proposals. The Cyprus fiasco was damaging to SYRIZA. When Cyprus' parliament rejected the original Eurogroup bailout plan, SYRIZA applauded, saying that it was exactly what Greece should do. When, a week later, this rejection was retracted, and an apparently more painful plan was approved, their position appeared to have been completely unrealistic.

The Independent Greeks party has seen its support as measured in opinion polls decline from 9 per cent in December 2012 to 6 per cent or 7 per cent in summer 2013, at which level it seems to have stabilised. Their extreme nationalist rhetoric remains unchanged. The only significant political development in the party has been that some of its key personalities have been working towards an alliance with SYRIZA.



The self-proclaimed racist Golden Dawn has risen very significantly in the polls, and seems to have consolidated its position as the third most popular party. It is now polling between 11 per cent and 14 per cent of voting intentions. It has a dual strategy of building a disciplined core of party members, while concurrently trying to broaden its appeal to several occupational groups. It has a substantial presence in some labour unions (e.g. bus employees, taxi owners, truck drivers, the municipal police in Athens, etc) and professional associations (such as the lawyers in Thessaloniki). It is also popular in many secondary schools, where it is widely seen as a trendy, macho, alternative movement.

Golden Dawn has a dual strategy in another sense too: acting as 'executioner and protector', i.e. being harsh on immigrants but caring towards disadvantaged native Greeks.<sup>47</sup> It has kept up a rather symbolic welfare activism, providing soup kitchens or donating blood 'for Greeks only'. In one case, party activists intentionally disregarded a ban by the mayor of Athens on the distribution of food in the central square of Athens, Syntagma ('Constitution') Square. The police were called in, the event was cancelled, and there was a violent attack by a party MP against the mayor. The mayor seems to have gained in popularity by this action, but Golden Dawn obviously also felt that they had scored a point.

Golden Dawn has maintained its extreme racist posture. On most accounts, racist violence *per se* rose immediately after the June 2012 general election (when the party entered parliament), but seems to have levelled out more recently. Some of those arrested for racist crimes were identified by police as Golden Dawn sympathisers or members, following which the party has tried to avoid being directly linked to criminal violence, though the virulent rhetoric has not abated.

In parliament, Golden Dawn MPs often aim to disrupt proceedings by using inflammatory, provocative rhetoric. Given that institutions (including the parliament) have lately fallen into disrepute, this seems to be working in the party's favour. On the other hand, the disapproval rating of its leader is also very high, at 82 per cent: Golden Dawn has clearly polarised public opinion, rallying support as well as galvanising those opposed to the party's violent language (and acts).

Golden Dawn leaders are often present in popular TV programmes, of two distinct types: populist political shows that sell anger and paranoia; but also life-style shows where some of the more telegenic personalities show off their 'human' face.

Meanwhile, the rest of the political elite have been arguing about how best to stop the rise of Golden Dawn. A draft bill to ban 'hate crime' came to nothing, as New Democracy, the largest partner in the coalition government, withdrew its support.<sup>48</sup> From a different angle, the draft bill had failed to convince all those alarmed by the rise of

racist violence, including legal experts who feared that a draconian law might turn Golden Dawn into popular heroes, and public dissent into crime.

On the whole, New Democracy seems to be trying to pull the rug from under Golden Dawn's feet with the help of a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, by providing better policing, it aims to improve the general sense of safety among the public, and therefore restrict the appeal of Golden Dawn as a guarantor of law and order. On the other hand, by hardening its stance with regard to residence permits or the naturalisation of second-generation immigrants, New Democracy is trying to 'hijack' Golden Dawn's agenda on issues close to the heart of those sympathetic to the party's anti-immigrant stance.

Restoring public safety would certainly be a positive development in its own right, and a crucial step towards restoring the prestige of public institutions. Nevertheless, partly adopting the racist agenda, while effective in electoral terms, would only help to legitimise Golden Dawn, and might conceivably make state authorities (such as the police and the judiciary) even more reluctant to fight racist crime.

The position of the international community is also delicate. If well-intentioned foreigners, concerned with the rise of the criminal right in a member of the EU, are seen to meddle in internal affairs, their intervention could backfire: it might activate nationalist reflexes, and hence strengthen Golden Dawn (as well as other xenophobic populists).

Golden Dawn is unlikely to go away any time soon, even if the economic climate were to improve sharply (which is not likely in the short term). Nevertheless, citizens opposed to it could still make a difference by helping to create a more serene political climate, which values and nurtures peaceful political dissent, but unequivocally rejects violence no matter what its ideological mantle might be. For this to happen, those charged with law making and law enforcement must ensure that civil rights are protected, and that those breaking the law are swiftly prosecuted, no matter what their colour (or that of their victims) happens to be.

July 2013



# Notes

- 1 As a recent Human Rights Watch report described it: ‘Golden Dawn is an unabashedly neo-fascist party with a logo reminiscent of the Nazi swastika; its manifesto calls for the creation of a People’s Nationalist State which does “not ignore the law of diversity and difference in nature” and asserts that “[b]y respecting the spiritual, ethnic and racial inequality of humans we can build equity and law in society”. The leader of the Golden Dawn, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, won a seat on the Athens municipal town council in local elections in November 2010; he was filmed doing the Nazi salute in the Athens town hall in January 2011. In an interview with Human Rights Watch before the elections, Michaloliakos explained, “We want Greece to belong to the Greeks. We are proud to be Greek; we want to save our national identity, our thousands-year history. If that means we are racist, then yes we are. We don’t want to share the same fate of the Native Americans. Right now, the immigrants are the cowboys and we are the Apache.” He added that if Golden Dawn were in government they would give everyone asylum “and cheap tickets on Easyjet, because they all want to go elsewhere”.’ See Human Rights Watch, ‘Hate on the streets’
- 2 A report by the Simon Wiesenthal Center stated that ‘The extreme right-wing, violently anti-immigrant Golden Dawn Party exploited economic chaos to make an electoral breakthrough in 2012 [...]. Golden Dawn’s flag closely resembles the Nazi swastika. It campaigned heavily on an anti-immigrant platform under the slogan: “So we can rid this land of filth”. Golden Dawn’s leaders proudly unleash the Nazi salute and its charter limits membership to “only Aryans in blood and Greeks in descent”. According to Golden Dawn’s Nikolaos Michaloliakos, “There were no ovens. This is a lie. I believe that it is a lie,” said Michaloliakos. “There were no gas chambers either.”’ See Brackman, ‘European extremist movements’
- 3 The original bailout package, meant to cover the country’s borrowing requirements for the next three years (to the tune of an unprecedented €110 billion), was signed in May 2010. In return for that, the Greek government signed a Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies with the ‘troika’ of donors: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EC) and the European Central Bank (ECB). Under the Memorandum, the government committed itself to sweeping spending cuts and steep tax increases, aiming to reduce the country’s public deficit to less than 3% of GDP by 2014.
- 4 A note of clarification is needed here: The vast majority of the anti-Memorandum front are national populists; but some are not. The exceptions are those who make a reasoned case for Greece to exit the Eurozone, and those who propose a pragmatic alternative strategy for cooperation with Greece’s partners in the Eurozone. These, however, are rare voices, and not part of the main story.
- 5 See VPRC, ‘Political conjuncture and governance’
- 6 See Pantazopoulos, *National-Populism as Ideology*, drawing on the recent work of Taguieff, *Le nouveau national-populisme*
- 7 See Dinas, Georgiadou, Konstantinidis, Marantzidis and Rori, ‘New political opportunities for an old party family?’
- 8 New Democracy mainly benefited from the repatriation of the small Democratic Alliance party (which had polled 2.55% in the May 2012 election), the absorption of a number of former members of LAOS, including the party’s two cabinet ministers under Papademos (LAOS’ share of the vote subsequently declined further from 2.90% to 1.58%), as well as the reluctant support of many voters who feared SYRIZA more than they disliked New Democracy.

- 9 Interestingly, evidence from opinion polls suggests that between May and June 2012 approximately 2% of voters switched from Independent Greeks to SYRIZA, another 2% from Independent Greeks to New Democracy, while 1% of voters switched from other parties to Independent Greeks. See Public Issue, 'General election June 2012: the political origin of current voters'
- 10 Two small liberal parties, Dimiourgia Xana and Drassi, agreed to form an electoral alliance. However, the alliance's vote in the June election did not exceed 1.59% (compared to 2.15% and 1.80% respectively in May). The Green vote declined further to 0.88% (from 2.93%).
- 11 Using Catherine Fieschi's tentative classification of populist movements, we can safely put Golden Dawn in the 'toxic and dangerous' category of Strictly Populists, SYRIZA in the 'populism lite' category of Demagogues, and Independent Greeks somewhere in between. See Fieschi, 'A plague on both your populisms'
- 12 Information on the geographical distribution of the vote was drawn from the official website of the Ministry of the Interior. The remaining material in this chapter relies on opinion polls. See Public Issue, 'General election June 2012: the anatomy of the vote'
- 13 See Public Issue, 'The popularity of Golden Dawn before and after the June general election'
- 14 As the great historian Eric Hobsbawm has written: 'The literate champions and organizers of Greek nationalism in the early nineteenth century were undoubtedly inspired by the thought of ancient Hellenic glories, which also aroused the enthusiasm of educated, i.e. classically educated, philhellenes abroad. And the national literary language constructed by and for them, the Katharevousa, was and is a high-flown neo-classical idiom seeking to bring the language of the descendants of Themistocles and Pericles back to their true heritage from the two millennia of slavery which had corrupted it. Yet the real Greeks who took up arms for what turned out to be the formation of a new independent nation-state, did not talk ancient Greek any more than Italians talk Latin. They talked and wrote Demotic. Pericles, Aeschylus, Euripides and the glories of ancient Sparta and Athens meant little if anything to them, and insofar as they had heard [of] them, they did not think of them as relevant. Paradoxically, they stood for Rome rather than Greece (*romaiosyne*), that is to say they saw themselves as heirs of the Christianized Roman Empire (i.e. Byzantium). They fought as Christians against Muslim unbelievers, as Romans against the Turkish dogs.' See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, pp. 76–77
- 15 '[A key] component of Papandreou's proposed project was ethnocentric nationalism, which was expressed either as a strong belief in the superiority of the Greek nation or as antipathy, let alone fear, towards other stronger nations. Fervently anti-American, early PASOK also opposed Greece's accession into the EU, a stance it modified later in an often ambiguous way.' See Pappas, 'The causes of the Greek crisis are in Greek politics'
- 16 'Particularly important was the hostility of Papandreou to anything foreign to Greece, most notably the "imperialist" US and – lower level but no less important – the EC, which was simply thought of as "an intermediate link in the structure of control of US capital over Southern Europe". Taken together, the EC, the US, and NATO were presented by Papandreou as an unholy trinity threatening Greek democracy and the well-being of the Greek people. In what concerned economics, the EC was seen by PASOK's leader as a route to national dependence and underdevelopment rather than modernisation. Instead, he became an advocate of a policy of "self-sustained" development that would be based upon import substitution and the creation of bilateral relations with nations occupying peripheral positions in the world capitalist system and belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement.' See Pappas, 'Macroeconomic policy, strategic leadership, and voter behaviour'
- 17 For what probably remains the best account of that bloody conflict, see Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*
- 18 Most Greeks actively sided with their Serb 'Orthodox brothers' against German-backed Croats and (Muslim) Bosnians. Media coverage of the Yugoslav war was shockingly biased. The Church helped collect food, clothing and medical supplies to be sent to Belgrade and Pale (capital of the self-styled Republika Srpska of Radovan Karadžić). Greek volunteers were present (and, on some accounts, actively involved) in the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, when 8,000 civilians were killed by units of the Army of Republika Srpska under the command of General Ratko Mladić. The infamous story of Greece's involvement in the Yugoslav war, all too easily forgotten in Greece itself, is told in detail by Takis Michas in his *Unholy Alliance: Greece and Milošević's Serbia*.
- 19 '[N]ationalist populism led many citizens into believing that the Greek nation is perpetually betrayed, nationally superior, but historically unfortunate, always right but always disaffected by "Western foreigners" who detest it and machinate towards its exclusion.' Cited in Kalpadakis and Sotiropoulos, 'Europeanism and national populism'
- 20 See Kalpadakis and Sotiropoulos, 'Europeanism and national populism'
- 21 As the *Guardian* reported at the time: 'Proposals to make Greeks more European by removing their religious affiliation from state identity cards have ignited the fury of the country's Orthodox church. The plans have been dismissed by clerics as nothing short of a sinister plot to rid Greeks of their innate Orthodox faith. "Our faith is the foundation of our identity," said Archbishop Christodoulos, the church's flamboyant leader. "These changes are being put forward by neo-intellectuals who want to attack us like rabid dogs and tear at our flesh.'" See Smith, 'Greek church at war over plans to change ID cards'
- 22 Georgiadou, Kafe and Nezi, 'The radical right parties under the economic crisis'
- 23 See TNS ICAP / BaaS, 'Racist as well as nationalist?'
- 24 Vasiliki Georgiadou, personal communication (25 October 2012). Professor Georgiadou has been conducting field research in Aghios Panteleimon.
- 25 See note 24.
- 26 See TNS ICAP / BaaS, 'Racist as well as nationalist?'
- 27 See Standard Eurobarometer 77, 'Public opinion in the European Union'
- 28 Eurostat news release, 'Foreign citizens and foreign-born population'
- 29 A recent FRA report explained: 'Over the past five years, migration routes at the southern European border underwent an important shift. In 2006, the Spanish towns of Ceuta and Melilla, the Canary Islands, Sicily and the island of Lampedusa, as well as the Greek Turkish sea border were particularly affected by arrivals. Primarily as a result of closer cooperation between Spain and transit countries in West Africa, detections at the sea border of Spain decreased by 70% in 2007. Irregular movements shifted to the Italian and the Greek sea borders, a trend which continued in 2008. Following the return of almost 1,000 persons to Libya by the Italian authorities in summer 2009, arrivals in Italy and Malta almost stopped. Italy reported a 96% drop in arrivals in the first three months of 2010 compared with 2009. In 2009, the number of detections of irregular crossings in Greece accounted for 75% of the EU total. At the end of 2010, Greece reported around 90% of all detections of irregular crossings at external EU land, sea and air borders [...]. This development is the result of the accelerating shift in migration routes from the central to the eastern Mediterranean.' See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Coping with a Fundamental Rights Emergency*, pp. 11–12
- 30 See the recent Human Rights Watch report, 'Hate on the streets'; see also the *Annual Report 2011* of the Athens-based Institute for Rights Equality and Diversity
- 31 By May 2012, trust in institutions had fallen further: EU 19%, national government 6%, national parliament 12%, political parties 7%; see European Commission, 'Public opinion index'

- 32 See Matsaganis, 'The welfare state and the crisis'
- 33 See Papaioannou, 'Civic capital'; see also Doxiadis, 'The real Greek economy'
- 34 See Anti-New World Order, *The Video that ALL GREEKS MUST see*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYGx924PMgU>, uploaded October 2011 (1.2 million views as of September 2012)
- 35 See *WAKE UP!!! HERE ARE THE TRAITORS SHOCK VIDEO!!!*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oWwSadyrug>, 13 minutes, uploaded November 2010 (480,000 views as of September 2012)
- 36 See *The Best Ever Technical-Economic Analysis of Greece*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pgb71Hxi8hE>, uploaded March 2011 (460,000 views as of September 2012)
- 37 Katerina Kitidi and Aris Chatzistefanou, *Debtocracy*; see one of many links to the entire film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKpxPo-lInk>, uploaded May 2011 (with English subtitles)
- 38 See Papasarrantopoulos, 'Golden Dawn's Big Bang'
- 39 For a multifaceted analysis, see Economides and Monastriotis, *The Return of Street Politics?*
- 40 Both SYRIZA and Golden Dawn were handsomely rewarded by voters for their role in these events: in the June 2012 general election their share of the vote in Keratea reached 37% and 10% respectively, i.e. well above their average scores for Greater Athens or the country as a whole.
- 41 Hasapopoulos, 'The two-faced leader'
- 42 Papadaki, 'Golden Dawn voter, aged 25'
- 43 From a Facebook wall. The original comment is in Greek in all capital letters, with the exclamation marks. This style is very common in right wing populists' comments in the social media.
- 44 From a Facebook wall, recounted by an acquaintance of the person quoted.
- 45 Vasiliki Georgiadou, personal communication (25 October 2012).
- 46 Spiegel, 'Germans write off Greece, says poll'
- 47 Georgiadou, 'Electoral revenge of the insecure voters and new political opportunities'
- 48 See 'The Greek far right: Racist dilemmas'

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# **A very British populism**

**Julian Baggini,  
July 2013**

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# Introduction

It is often remarked that Britain has historically managed to avoid the kind of right-wing populism that has periodically infected the rest of Europe. In the 1930s, Mosley's Black Shirts never looked like they were getting anywhere near the same support as the fascists of Germany, Italy or Spain. More recently, xenophobic populist parties have secured big electoral successes in France, the Netherlands, Finland, Greece and Italy while in the UK, the British National Party crashed shortly after take-off. Now the softer-edged UKIP has taken on the populist mantle, inspiring more fear of the main parties losing votes than of anything more sinister.

Some see this as a sign of an inherent gentleness in the British national character that makes it inhospitable to the nastier forms of right-wing populism. Others see it as more of a happy accident, helped by an electoral system that makes it hard for new parties to gain inroads. This party warns against the complacency of the 'it could never happen here' mindset.

One thing we should be pretty sure of: whatever national exceptionalisms may exist, people are more or less the same wherever in the world they live. This means that if populism speaks to an aspect of human nature, then what we might call the springs of populism will exist in the UK as surely as they do anywhere else. The fact that they have not yet manifested themselves in an electorally successful far right party doesn't change that.

So we should start with the assumption that the same kinds of springs of populism that fuel the far right in Europe exist in Britain, unless and until proven otherwise. Working on that assumption, we need to look for manifestations of populism in Britain beyond the usual far right suspects.

A search is more likely to be successful if you know what you're looking for. So before turning to the specifics of Britain, I want to begin with a sketch of populism's key features, as manifest historically and in contemporary Europe.

## An anatomy of populism

In its most general, value-neutral sense, populism is defined simply as ‘support for or representation of ordinary people or their views’.<sup>1</sup> In social science, however, populism is almost always understood as entailing a malign kind of simplification in which the virtuous and the wicked are neatly divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

So Catherine Fieschi, for example, sees populism as involving two key elements: ‘the perception of a fundamental, unbridgeable fracture between the real people and the elite’ and ‘a conviction that ordinary people in their common sense and emotionally direct relationship to politics have all the answers’.<sup>2</sup> She sees this as rooted in a ‘sentiment of betrayal of the democratic promise’ by elites ‘seen as having betrayed the trust of the people, and the former are consistently depicted as usurpers’.<sup>3</sup>

Tim Bale sees at the core of populism a distinction ‘between “the people” – long-suffering, sensible, salt of the earth – and the political (and sometimes financial) class – a self-obsessed, self-interested, nest-feathering elite which will sell them down the river every time’.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the editors of a recent academic book on populism define it as pitting ‘a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who were together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice’.<sup>5</sup> Here, it is the phrase ‘virtuous and homogeneous’ which invites us to assume that populism inevitably results in simplistic fallacies.

It is worth stressing right from the start that not every anti-elitist movement which sides with the people is necessarily going to end up so fatally simplistic in its analysis as to undermine its core soundness. In its struggle against apartheid, for example, South Africa’s ANC could be praised precisely for having achieved a victory of the people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who were together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. Indeed, in the United States (it appears uniquely) populism is understood in positive terms, and not solely as the preserve of the right. There, populism is traced back to the formation of the National Farmers’ Alliance, in 1877, which became part of a wider Farmers’

Alliance, morphing into the People's Party in the 1890s, commonly known as the 'Populists'. The populists fought for the interests of poor cotton and wheat farmers.

Populism is a mistake therefore only to the extent that it exaggerates or creates a false us/them divide, and/or it is based on a false account of deprivation of the rights of the people. To use a horticultural metaphor, populism is democracy that has bolted: concerns have grown from the grass roots of society but because they have not been dealt with properly, they have not produced desirable fruit but have taken over the plot with their highly visible but useless flowers. That is one reason why '[p]opulism seems unable to exist in the absence of a measure of democracy', as Fieschi has argued.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the tendency of human beings to see things in excessively simplistic tribal terms, and for self-serving biases to lead us to attribute lack of personal wealth and success to the injustice of others rather than luck or our own choices, it is very hard for any 'virtuous' populism to avoid descending into something much more malign. Even those with a genuine grievance will tend to demonise the opposition and see injustice even where there is none. The death of Margaret Thatcher is a reminder of when this kind of polarisation took hold. The miners, for example, could have credibly claimed that the Conservative government was a dangerous 'other' that sought to deprive their communities of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. But that idea, in the hands of a rabble-rouser like Arthur Scargill, became a Manichean narrative in which none of the underlying problems with the sustainability of the coal industry were acknowledged and the National Coal Board and government were cast as villains, pure and simple.

Why and when does populism emerge? Every particular outburst has its own particular story, of course, but there are some general trends. First and foremost, there must be something for the 'people' to feel aggrieved about, real or illusory. Populist leaders do not create their cause *ex nihilo*. It should certainly be a working assumption that where populism arises, the populace is experiencing some kind of real hardship or injustice, unless proven otherwise. At the same time, problems alone won't guarantee a populist upsurge. "The masses" do not rebel in instinctive response to hard times and exploitation,' wrote the historian Lawrence Goodwyn, he thought 'because they have been culturally organised by their societies not to rebel.'<sup>7</sup>

These grievances are typically negatives or absences, and four appear to be particularly key.

## No trust

One condition, necessary but not sufficient by itself for populism to thrive, is a loss of trust in authority. As Fieschi puts it: 'Look, say the populists, the media, the bureaucrats, mainstream political parties and every other hallmark of the professional political class and the professionalisation of politics, policy and economics are finally revealed for the useless usurpers they always were: not so much experts as a clique of intellectuals in it at the expense of ordinary folk and along for the ride for as long as it lasted.'<sup>8</sup> The provocation of this could be a major event; the culmination of a slower, long-term trend; or a combination of both. This seems to be the best explanation for the current low status of many experts. The financial crisis seemed to show that economists, bankers and politicians had no idea what they were doing. But even setting that aside, 'the notion of expertise as we know it, and as it has served us,' says Fieschi, 'is on its way out.' Knowledge and expertise have been 'democratised' through blogs, Wikipedia and web self-publishing. Amateurs rub shoulders in cyberspace with experts, while the failures of experts cannot be hidden in the age of the worldwide web. 'The breakdown of authority based on expertise and professionalism, combined with the spectacle of apparent ineptitude flashed across the world,' writes Fieschi, 'have led to the shunning and ridiculing of experts and resulted in a vacuum of authority across all sectors.'

## No alternatives

A second condition, both necessary and sufficient, is a 'perceived lack of real policy alternatives', as Jordi Vaquer puts it. In south-eastern Europe this is manifest 'in a context of formal democracy, with a lack of substantial political choices' while in western Europe the problem is that 'policy alternatives seem excessively constrained by mainstream parties'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Elisabeth Carter has argued that the far right is more likely to do well when the centre-right party is moderate and there is convergence between the mainstream left and right.<sup>10</sup>

We can see examples of this in several countries where populist parties have emerged strongly. In Greece, for example, none of the mainstream parties was able to offer a credible alternative to the EU-imposed austerity plan, embodied in the notorious Memorandum. 'Nobody within the country really owns that,' say Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis.<sup>11</sup> Ordinary Greeks who felt that they were being made to pay the price while the wealthy and criminal got off lightly thus had no one to turn to to express their dissatisfaction at this other than the extremely nasty Golden Dawn.

In the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, the absence of serious alternatives is a result of a deep-rooted commitment to consensus in

politics. This worked fine just as long as the economy was doing well and society was homogeneous and harmonious. But when immigration began to challenge the national culture and the financial crisis brought in austerity, the consensus-minded mainstream simply could not offer a voice for those who were discontent.

### No debate

Related to this lack of perceived options, but not quite the same, is the absence of open and vigorous debate in the mainstream. It is not just that no alternatives are offered; certain key issues are not even discussed. Johanna Korhonen describes just this situation in Finland, whose 'consensus culture' allows 'only a very thin culture of debate regarding society'. She goes on: 'The populist rhetoric cuts through this muffled discussion culture like a hot knife through butter, because people have a pent-up need for discussion. "That Soini guy is so good because he dares to speak! And he really knows how to speak!" I once heard an elderly woman gushing.' If people 'are not allowed to express their views and are not being heard in an appropriate discussion, the only alternative is inappropriate discussion'.<sup>12</sup>

### No voice

Also related, and also not quite the same, is the sense that the 'people' are not even party to any of the discussions going on. As Michel Wievorka has described, this complaint has been used with great effect by Marine Le Pen to bolster support for the Front National. 'Farmers, unemployed, workers, pensioners, those of you who live in rural areas of the country,' she cried in a speech, 'you are the forgotten, invisible majority, crushed by a financial system gone mad.' This resonated. 'We don't exist,' complained one young worker.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, then, the general pattern seems clear. Populism emerges when there is some combination between perceived difficulty for the ordinary person in the street and a perception that elites can't help or are part of the problem, because they lack the expertise they claim for themselves, won't engage with the people, or conspire to maintain a cosy consensus. Although this might seem obvious, one corollary which is not usually drawn out is that, unless conflict is played out within the mainstream political arena, it will be played out outside it. We might call this the populist paradox: too much fear of conflict, too much emphasis on consensus, is therefore a recipe for the creation of more conflict and more challenge to the mainstream consensus from dissenting populist outsiders. Effective democracy relies on a Goldilocks approach to conflict: too much or too little makes it

impossible to balance the competing interests of different members of society, meaning such conflict is essentially what politics is all about. In politics, *Justice is Conflict*, as the late, great political philosopher Stuart Hampshire put it in the title of his last book.

Equipped with this general framework we are now in a position to identify the springs of populism and how they have expressed themselves in Britain, past, present and perhaps even future. To do this all we need to ask is: Who are 'us'? Who are 'them'? And how have they played out their antagonisms?

## Populisms past

If we ask who has been cast in the roles of the virtuous people and the dangerous elite in Britain, we can see that there has been no shortage of actors.

For much of the 20th century, the casting was obvious. The virtuous people were the working classes, who made up the vast majority of the population but who saw little of the wealth of one of the richest countries in the world. The elites who perpetuated this were the upper classes, landowning gentry and rich industrialists. This did not lead to a rise in a kind of nasty-populism for several reasons. First of all, the 'virtuous people' were indeed both largely homogeneous and had genuine grievances. No one was manufacturing scare-stories about reds under the beds or dangerous immigrants. The cause was just.

Critically, this aggrieved people had a respectable voice, initially through the unions and in time through the Labour Party. The system delivered. It was given time to do so because the 'them' was not some despotic monarchy or military dictatorship but an upper class that had been running the show since time immemorial, unfairly but not callously or violently. The popular monarchy no doubt reinforced the sense that for all its unfairness, there was something 'natural' and 'traditional' about the status quo. So there was a lack of animus against the elite other, which, combined with real progress to advance the rights of 'us', allowed the potentially populist impulse to be channelled through mainstream politics.

And so it continued until the late 1970s. Even as the working class as we had known it declined, the social divide still ran pretty much along class lines, and Labour and the unions continued to support their side. So there were plenty of us/them grievances in Britain, but the other conditions for populism's rise were not fulfilled. The crisis of expertise is more recent, and before then the 'people' saw a Labour movement engaging with their problems, taking them seriously and fighting for them in the mainstream.



### The fracturing of we, the people

Things have changed, however, starting in the Thatcher era. Although she was incredibly divisive, it is arguable that Thatcher herself muddled what could have been more neatly populist waters. Thatcher championed several causes on the side of the 'ordinary working man' that she was in other ways the enemy of. People bought their council houses and made a quick buck on British Gas shares. She herself was a grocer's daughter from Grantham and played up the ideas of 'common sense' household thrift and hard work, qualities admired by the traditional working classes. She was also an unabashed patriot in a country where many of the university-educated classes were embarrassed by any flag-waving. So paradoxically, although she was by all accounts the most divisive leader of the 20th century, in several crucial respects she put herself on the side of the good, honest, ordinary people. Populism could not get a hold in this complicated scenario. Those who felt utterly opposed had the Labour Party and unions to stick with, while others saw good things in the ruling elite.

In the longer run, the Thatcher years unarguably contributed to the blurring of any clear sense of who the virtuous, homogeneous masses were. Although the decline in the proportion of people self-identifying as working class has been slow, gradual and non-linear (working-class self-identity weakened in the 1970s and revived in the 1980s), the long-term trend is for a marked decrease in the strength of this identity, as shown by British Social Attitudes survey data. So, in 1964, 65.7 per cent of Britons self-identified as working class and by 2005 that figure had fallen only as far as 58.2 per cent. However, these figures include people who both volunteer a class identity and those who will choose one if prompted to do so. The 'unprompted' are those who answer 'yes' to the question 'Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?' and are then asked to say which one. The prompted are those who answer 'no' to the first question but who

will give an answer to the question 'Most people say they belong to either the middle class or to the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as being in one of these classes?' In 1964, 34 per cent self-identified as working class in the unprompted scenario. By 2004, this proportion had decreased to 25 per cent, at the same time as unprompted middle-class affiliation had grown from 14 per cent to 20 per cent.<sup>14</sup>

Class thus no longer provides a clear divider between a majority 'us' and elite 'them'. However, if you look at British culture over the last 25 years or so, it's not difficult to see that the distinction between perceived elites and the homogeneous people lives on in other forms.

### The new us and them

For much of the middle class, represented by the *Daily Mail*, the villainous elites have been the liberal intelligentsia. You can pretty much capture this in one headline to a Quentin Letts *Mail* column: 'I am white, middle-class, love my wife and adore traditional TV sitcoms. So why does the BBC hate me?' The sense here is of a virtuous, homogeneous people comprising white, respectable, Christian, 'hard-working ordinary families' threatened by a dangerous left-wing elite who want to advocate atheism and minority religions, prefer to give money to immigrants and the unemployed than to working tax-payers, and who are more supportive of gay rights than heterosexual families.

This, however, has not led to nasty right-wing populism, for several reasons. First of all, it is central to the identity of the 'people' that they are decent, respectable and law-abiding. They are very reluctant to get involved with any far-right party which has associations of thuggery and council-estate skinheads. Revolution is after all itself a fishy European import.

The outlet for their discontent is not the street but the pages of the *Mail* and the *Express* and to a certain extent the rank and file of the Conservative party, which has enough members voicing these concerns for people to feel there is some representation of them there. Even though there is a strong anti-immigration and minority strand in this, the narrative they buy into does not lay the blame at immigrants but at the liberal elites who don't care for the traditional character of the country. When people say such things as 'I've got nothing against the immigrants' they usually mean it. Indeed, they often say 'who could blame them? Wouldn't you rather live here, with all the benefits, than in bongo-bongo land?'

The working class now pits itself against the same 'other'. The virtuous, homogeneous people here are the traditional white, working-class Britons who had their dignified industrial work taken away from them by the Tories in the 1980s and who have now seen Labour betray

them as they go hunting for votes in middle England. They also often believe that immigrants and minorities get more respect and better treatment than they do. So although the ‘us’ is a little different in the working-class and middle-class cases, they have enough in common and there is sufficient agreement about who ‘them’ is to have some sense that, despite their differences, they are on the same side, that of the ordinary, decent person.

It surprises many, particularly those for whom Marx remains much more than of just historical interest, why the now often under-employed or unemployed working class is not more rebellious. One reason may be that even when labour was more organised and strikes were the norm, there was moderation in how to go about things which was different from the continental way. Lorry drivers and farmers blockading ports and youths hurling missiles at the police is something the French do. The right way to do things here is to gather round a brazier handing out leaflets.

The miners’ strike of 1984–85 was the violent exception to the rule, and although now it seems it is the police violence that is most remembered, at the time, away from the mining communities, the perception that it was the miners who were resorting to violence too easily did much to undermine public support for them. This perception was widespread: *Private Eye*, for example, made a mock appeal to help the mining families at Christmas: ‘£2 will buy a small brick to throw at the police. £3 a slightly larger brick,’ and so on, until ‘£100 will buy a concrete pillar weighing well over half a ton.’<sup>15</sup> This last item was chosen carefully, since on 30 November 1984 two striking miners dropped a concrete block from a motorway footbridge onto a taxi taking a strike-breaking ‘scab’ to the Merthyr Vale mine, killing the driver, David Wilkie. The miners’ strike was deeply divisive, with some collieries even opposing the National Union of Mineworkers’ strategy. As such, it could never be seen as representing the homogeneous, virtuous people and so was never a truly populist moment. Furthermore, since it ended in a working class both divided and fallen, it perhaps shattered any illusion that ordinary working people represented a homogeneous and virtuous people. The former industrial communities feel as though they are on the margins of society, not representative of the whole of it. ‘We’ are no longer the people but the outcasts.

The springs of populism have therefore been alive and well in Britain throughout the modern era. It is simply that they have found outlets which are more benign than many of its European counterparts, having a habit of manifesting themselves most clearly in relatively non-political contexts.

## Containing populist pressure

Furthermore, mainstream politics has been adept at incorporating populist notes into the tunes it plays. The worship of ‘common sense’, for example, is a common way of pitting the wisdom of the people against the pseudo-profundity of academics and ‘experts’. I’ve interviewed several MPs who were also philosophers, and all acknowledge it is not in their best interests to advertise this. For example, asked if in this country it’s almost a disadvantage to confess a philosophical background, Oliver Letwin replied ‘Massive’, without hesitation. ‘I do my best to conceal it.’ Asked to explain this he sees good and bad reasons. ‘The good side is that this country is a robustly commonsensical sort of place in which people distrust over-intellectualising. After all, it’s possible to intellectualise yourself into the gas chambers. The bad side is that this is also a country in which there is a sort of excessive distaste for intellectuals, and there’s something good about a country like France where people came out in the streets when Sartre died, which certainly wouldn’t happen in England.’

Jesse Norman also says ‘the British public is famously nervous about what it sees as abstract ideas or academic talk’. Tony Wright is another former MP who thinks ‘the thought side is often a disability in the routine world of politics’ and that ‘[i]t doesn’t do to be too reflective, you just have to know which side you’re on and who to cheer for really, and it just complicates matters to be able to see two sides of a question’.<sup>16</sup>

This is a very strong potential source of populism in the UK, but politicians in this country know this and so tend to dodge the bullets. Westminster already talks the languages of ‘ordinary, hard-working families’ rather than that of the Oxford seminar, and occasional lapses (such as chancellors talking of ‘endogenous growth theory’) are swiftly mocked and so not made again. The elites in many ways take on board the anti-intellectualism of the masses, learning that to retain credibility, they must radiate good common sense, rather than theorising.

This is just the most obvious way in which populism has been more of a social and cultural force than a political one. You see it in a disdain for ‘fancy food’ and experts telling people what to eat, even when those experts affect Mockney accents. You see it in the assertion that ‘boys will be boys’ and women are women. You see it in the near universal contempt for ‘political correctness’, an imposition of the intelligentsia who don’t know a joke when they see one. In each case, the virtuous, homogeneous people are defined by their common sense and lack of extremism. Britain’s populists are therefore small-c conservatives and would make for very reluctant radicals indeed.



## A very British populism

Class, however, has certainly not gone away. Today, 'the white working class' increasingly refers to a specific subset of what were its historical members. These are very often non-working classes. There are many families where the main breadwinner in the 1970s was a male miner or steelworker who lost his job in the 1980s and no one in the family has worked since: the phenomenon of a third generation on benefits. Those in work increasingly have low-paid, low-status jobs. As more people stay in school post-16 and nearly half go to university, and more skilled manual work is becoming automated, there are fewer good jobs left for the less educated.

Several of the conditions for political populism's rise among this white working class were clearly fulfilled by the end of the 1980s, and so it should not have been surprising when a party came along to tap into this: the BNP. The problem with analysing the rise of the BNP is that commentators became understandably fixated with its racist agenda, especially since many of its most prominent members had previously been in the National Front. However, the truth is that most people who voted BNP were uncomfortable with its racism. People have learned to be very sceptical of the claim 'I'm not a racist but...', but usually there is more to this. People who claim this often are racist in implicit ways they don't even recognise, in that they hold negative unfounded stereotypes about minority ethnic groups. But then psychological experiments such as the Harvard Implicit Bias test show that almost everyone harbours some unconscious prejudice. But even if 'we are all racist' in some sense, this is clearly different from full-blown racism, and even many BNP voters are usually sincere when they claim to have no hatred of ethnic minorities and wish them no ill.

A very vivid illustration of this came with a recent Channel 4 News film following Nigel Farage on a visit to Bulgaria, whose citizens will soon have the right to live and work in the UK as part of the EU single market. Farage believes that this will result in a 'flood' of immigrants. Farage was at ease mixing with the Bulgarians, who often took to him too, surprised that he was not 'some sort of three-headed monster', as one Roma leader put it. 'I'm not saying anything against the Bulgarian people, I wish them well,' he told reporter Jonathan



Rugman and there seems no reason to doubt this. It is simply that Farage thinks: 'If I was a Bulgarian, I'd be packing my bags now, wanting to come to Britain.' Farage's rage is directed at the politicians who have opened the door to people who, as he sees it, would be mad, not bad, to refuse the invitation in.<sup>17</sup>

That such unease about immigration and minorities need not go hand in hand with hostility towards immigrants and minorities became evident to me when I spent six months in the S66 district of Rotherham in 2005, researching my book *Welcome to Everytown* on British folk philosophy. The conclusion was confirmed when I returned a few years later after Billy Blair secured a seat for the BNP on the town council. A local shopkeeper was happy to say that Blair was 'a friend of ours', a 'good bloke', but what was surprising was that this BNP voter was a Birmingham-born British Asian. Even Blair himself seemed unfamiliar with the BNP's policy that ethnic minorities should not comprise more than 2–3 per cent of the population, appearing to disagree with it. 'We're not talking about any breed or colour here, we're talking about people coming into the country and if you'll do it for £10 an hour, they'll do it for £5 an hour,' he told me. 'I think people worry about their families, their children, their grandchildren, they think that within the next 10, 15 years, there'll be no work for them. I think people are frightened.'

The blame is laid more with politicians and especially Europe for allegedly giving priority to foreigners over the indigenous population. Race becomes the lightning rod for discontent as the supposed priority given to minorities is the most visible sign of how they are now at the bottom of the heap. Discontent about race and immigration should therefore be seen as a symptom of populist discontent, not its cause. (This is probably also true in the rest of Europe as well as in Britain).

### A new populist vehicle

Despite its brief flourish, the BNP could not sustain its early, modest successes, for two reasons. First, it just was too racist for most. Second, partly because of this, it did not have a wide enough appeal to pick up support among the middle classes. Now, however, a party has emerged that provides a more respectable alternative for working-class and middle-class discontents alike. Unlike the BNP and before it the National Front, UKIP's corporate personality, embodied in its leader Nigel Farage, is precisely that of the disgusted *Daily Mail* reader. While being fiercely anti-immigration, it avoids all trace of overt or even implied racism.

Both working-class and middle-class discontents are rallying around UKIP. A fascinating YouGov analysis in February 2013 showed that UKIP has a much more even spread of support across

social classes than Labour or the Conservatives: the profile of its supporters is pretty much exactly a quarter AB, C1, C2 and DE respectively. Twenty-six per cent read the *Sun* and a further 26 per cent the *Mail*, with the *Express* (6 per cent) and the *Telegraph* (8 per cent), and 20 per cent reading no paper at all. Fewer identify themselves as right wing than as Conservatives (46 per cent compared with 60 per cent) and 23 per cent consider themselves centre, as opposed to 18 per cent for Conservative and Labour voters. While 60 per cent voted conservative in 2010, only 7 per cent voted Labour.<sup>18</sup> However, I do not think this means we should conclude that UKIP does not gain support from ex-Labour voters. My experience in 2010 was that many traditional Labour voters had already deserted the party, disgusted by what they saw as its betrayal of the ordinary working man and woman.

The rise of UKIP is therefore an interesting and unprecedented phenomenon. If previous right-wing populist parties have failed to take off because they do not chime with the inherent moderation of the would-be populist electorate, UKIP cannot be relied on to fizzle out for the same reasons. We should take seriously the possibility that in UKIP, Britain's politically underrepresented populist impulses may have found a vehicle for success.

# 4

## The failure of political consumerism

When looking at the ‘supply-side’ factors for the rise of the populist UKIP, the failures of the mainstream parties are usually seen in terms of being too dismissive of popular grievances. However, I think there is a deeper problem here, one that cannot be remedied simply by starting to pay attention to issues which have hitherto been ignored or swept under the carpet. The problem is in how the parties now chase the popular vote and respond to public opinion.

All the main political parties seek to be popular, but none seek to be seen as populist. This is not a contradiction. If the democratic mainstream responds to popular demand, then the political elite does its job and there is no need for a populist backlash against it. However, I would argue that as the political parties have become more professional in their pursuit of the popular vote, so have they aggravated rather than ameliorated the drivers of populism.

### The emptiness of Middle England

The first factor is the realisation by the parties that the mathematics of elections means that it seems obvious that it is more important to listen to public opinion than that of the party membership. From this it follows that parties must appeal to the centre, and that their policies must be driven by opinion polls.

In theory, this would seem to transfer power away from a small cadre of party activists and towards the genuinely popular voice, and so stifle the drive for populism. And yet it is precisely since the parties have fought for the middle that populism has become a significant, though still minor, force in British politics. However, on reflection, this would seem to be an entirely natural result. A politics that focuses on the swing voter and Middle Britain can only marginalise the marginalised yet more. When all parties speak for the mass in the middle, none appear to stand for anyone at the still expansive edges.

What’s more, few identify with this supposed middle anyway. ‘Middle England’ – a term which started gaining currency in the Major years and settled on its current ubiquity under Blair – is everywhere and nowhere, a fictional place which no one calls home.<sup>19</sup>

‘Mondeo man’ and ‘Worcester Woman’ are abstractions, averaged-out constructs that no one would feel represents them. Neither the typical nor the average voter exists in the real world, which means parties are effectively standing up for people who aren’t there. When you try to speak for everyone you end up speaking for no one.

Another effect of the race for the middle is to create a sense that dissent is being stifled. Back in the heyday of post-war two-party politics, although people still complained that ‘all politicians are the same’ – meaning that they looked after their own interests – most took it for granted that Labour and Conservative stood for very different interest groups and values. The drive towards the middle has created the perception of a cosy consensus at the heart of the political establishment. And if there is no challenge, no real conflict, in the middle, then people will feel the need to look to the fringes to provide the necessary dissent.

### The end of representation

There is another effect, less noticeable but perhaps even more important. This is what could be termed the rise of political consumerism. Consumerism is about giving people what they want, without the ‘mediation’, as Tim Bale puts it, of politicians or experts.<sup>20</sup> The parties have adapted to this accordingly. Rather than reflecting the settled will of the party membership, from whose ranks they are drawn, today’s career politician belongs to a separate profession, a kind of executive manager who starts on the career ladder as a graduate. In true consumerist style, this manager’s job is to deliver to the public what it wants, or to make it want what it is able to deliver.

What this erodes is any real sense of representation. The politician *represents* neither the electorate nor her party. No matter how hard she strives to give people what they want, she belongs to the ‘them’ whose job it is to serve ‘us’, and inevitably she does not fully succeed. For the traditional working class, this has become even worse, because there at least used to be a route into Westminster through the trade unions into Labour. But with the unions diminished and the party desperate to avoid being seen as being comprised of union lackeys, that base for entry to political participation is now limited. So, fewer and fewer senior Labour politicians are seen as ‘one of us’. Of the 22 members of the shadow cabinet, ten went to fee-paying schools and three went to grammar schools. Nine went to either Oxford or Cambridge.

The weakening of class identity as a whole also feeds into this. When it is no longer even clear what it means to be working or middle class, there is no clear sense of belonging to a group that can be represented. ‘The likes of us’ are no longer members of a well-defined group, spread all over the country, but more fragmented groupings, such as

the people ‘born and bred around here’ or ‘from the estates’. No mass group even claims to represent these people in anything other than vague, general ways, partly because to identify too much with one such fragment of the population risks putting off those in others.

### Pallid consensus versus red-blooded conviction

Put these factors together and the result is toxic. No one feels as though the political elite represents them, no one feels a connection with Westminster, and a large minority feel that no one is even interested in their problems. So the irony is that precisely by trying to pander to the will of the majority, the mainstream political parties have created a dislocation between political elites and the public, creating the conditions for populism. When consensus politics collides with discontent, there is no channel for that discontent other than through the populist fringes.

The Greek and Dutch examples in previous Counterpoint reports seem to bear this out.<sup>21</sup> In Greece, the mainstream parties offered no resistance, no alternative, to the EU plan. In the Netherlands, the mainstream parties would not talk about immigration. With no room for friction on the key issues at the centre of power, discontent has to find other outlets.

Once that discontent arises, the logic of political consumerism means that there is a new demand which the parties need to supply. But it is too late. The discontents have already lost any sense that the parties speak for them. When the parties claim that they hear what the public is saying about, say, immigration, the public knows it is being told what it thinks the parties wants them to hear. What has been lost is any sense that the parties speak from conviction.

UKIP, on the other hand, comes across as an old-fashioned party of conviction. UKIP doesn’t oppose immigration because focus groups tell it that it must. It exists because it opposes immigration. Nigel Farage may be dismissed by many as a buffoon, but few doubt his sincerity. Could the same be said of the perception of other party leaders? No wonder then, that according to Ipsos MORI’s March *Political Monitor* report, Farage is not only the party leader the public most thinks is doing a good job – he’s the only one to get a positive satisfaction rating. Thirty-five per cent said they were satisfied with the way he was running his party against 26 per cent who were dissatisfied. By comparison, 32 per cent were satisfied with Ed Miliband, 52 per cent dissatisfied; 31 per cent satisfied with David Cameron, 61 per cent dissatisfied; 22 per cent satisfied with Nick Clegg, 65 per cent dissatisfied.<sup>22</sup>

### **No more market politics**

This is a striking example of how profoundly wrong it is to apply market thinking to politics. Giving people what they want doesn't work: they have to believe you want it too. Even in the market, on which this kind of politics is modelled, the most successful companies in the long term create products and services with real merit, not just ones that push the buttons of the day. That strategy may result in a sales peak or a poll surge but it is no recipe for creating lasting appeal.

The lesson for responding to populist concerns should therefore be clear: the mainstream cannot take them on board as a tactic. It has to be convinced of where they have merits and where they do not, champion the former and challenge the latter.

This kind of 'Yes, but...' politics does not go down well. Party strategists will tell you of the importance of clear, unequivocal messages: that much as it would be nice to have a nuanced public debate, nuance doesn't work. Unfortunately, they could be right. But if the current approach isn't working and is simply making populism respectable for UKIP – and who knows what might follow it – business as usual is not an option.

## The response to populism

Perhaps the best way to understand what lies behind the response to populism in the UK is to note the remarkable asymmetry between British and American assumptions about populism. Both see it as a symptom of a lack of faith or trust in the ruling institutions, but whereas in Britain this is taken to be a worrying sign, in America, it is taken to be an encouraging one. In Britain, democracy is working when the electorate can trust its government to get on with things; in America, democracy is not working when the electorate leaves government to get on with things.

This is despite the fact that British culture has a deep-rooted suspicion of elites, most obviously manifest in its historical anti-intellectualism. But this is not straightforward. The right attitude, it seems, is a world-weary sceptical quietism, not rebellion. The typical working man or woman, for example, may scoff at the pros and toffs, but there is a tacit understanding that institutions like parliament are not 'for the likes of us'. We complain about elites but do not convert that into action. The spirit of America, however, is that complaints can and must lead to remedial action. This is captured in Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, 16 April 1963: 'So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action.' Today, protests such as Occupy are described as populist by supporters as well as opponents.

In Britain, although populism is defined as mistrust of elites by the masses, its identification is more a symptom of mistrust of the masses by elites. There is a long tradition of this in the UK, as, for example, John Carey's brilliant *The Intellectuals and the Masses* detailed for the 1920s. It continues today in images of chavs, irresponsible crisp-munching slob, reality-TV-watching morons and shopaholic robots.

### The populist trap

This deep-grained suspicion of mass opinion by elites has led the left to dismiss too many popular concerns as mere manifestations of populism. There is a kind of populist trap here: if elites do not respond to

genuine grievances, then populist parties step into the void. This means that genuine grievances get hitched onto nationalist and xenophobic wagons, and so lose even more legitimacy through guilt by association.

Take white working-class grievance as an example. From 1945 until the late 1970s, the white working class always felt it had the Labour Party and the trade unions to defend its interests. But as the working class shrank, Labour had to reach out beyond its natural constituency in order to become a viable party of government. And in the 1980s, the Conservative government smashed union power. Since then, the white working class has with some justification felt ignored or patronised. Indeed, the very name of the class has often become a misnomer. Work, once a source of pride, has either vanished or become something considered more demeaning, often less well paid. You can see this in *The Full Monty*, in which the ex-steelworker becomes a security guard, but this is not seen as a proper, ‘man’s job’. Contrary to what Marx believed, the wage-earner did not often perceive this alienation from his labour as problematic, so long as the work was well paid and respected. What is problematic is having a low-status job, or none at all.

In this context, it is natural for the white working classes to perceive even the historical party of their interests as ‘others’ who were complicit in depriving them of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. The situation echoes that of France, where ‘[t]raditional trade unions have lost their capacity to act as a frame of reference for the working class and the FN has rushed in to fill the gap’.<sup>23</sup> In the UK, into that same void came the BNP, and then UKIP, as well as to a lesser extent the populist left party Respect. They take on the grievances, which then adopt a xenophobic edge: the problems of the white working class are seen to be a result of giving priority to immigrants and ethnic minorities. With this radical right agenda blended in, the real grievances get dismissed as simply manifestations of bogus grievances against minority groups.

### Detoxification

The conclusion reached by many is that to avoid ugly populism, mainstream political parties need to recognise the truth in populist complaints. Another of these is the growth in inequality, or at the very least awareness and tolerance of it. A vastly unequal society is bound to lead to mistrust of rich elites. If low- and median-earning households are feeling pressed while higher earners carry on happily, it is only natural that people will feel the elites are complicit in denying the ordinary mass of people their fair share.

This argument has received quite an airing in recent years. Most would agree with Jordi Vaquer that ‘The isolation and policies

of “cordon sanitaire” around populist parties have not, in the long run, proven effective. Trying to delegitimize these parties as anti-democratic has not worked either.’<sup>24</sup> As Tristram Hunt has put it: ‘It is incumbent on all mainstream political parties to meet this [populist] challenge head on.’<sup>25</sup> David Goodhart has led the call for progressives to acknowledge as legitimate the concerns about population influxes. The Labour Party has for some time been prepared to grasp populist nettles, recognising ‘real grievances’ over immigration and undeserving welfare claimants. These changes, more than anything else, are probably responsible for the detoxification of populist complaints about immigration from its automatic racist associations.

The consequences, however, may not be quite what many intended. While the extreme right has indeed been declawed, this has not allowed the mainstream parties to regain the trust of the proto-populists. Rather, it has simply allowed the more moderate populist UKIP to widen its support. The mainstream has made populism respectable: it has not made itself respectable for populists.

What UKIP represents therefore is a detoxified populism, providing a channel for populist grievances that can credibly claim to be free of the kind of racism that has tarred previous populist parties. Such a detoxification was always possible because there is nothing in the core idea of populism that need be toxic.

If this is right, then it raises an intriguing question. Is it better to have a nasty populist movement at the fringes or a nicer one closer to the centre? By taking the populist agenda on board, rather than taking it on, the mainstream has effectively opted for the second strategy, however unwittingly.

Answering this question is difficult because we don’t know the counterfactuals. Could populism have been defeated without acknowledging its merits? Would simply dismissing populist concerns have only increased the sense of grievance that allows extremist parties to flourish? We simply don’t know. However, it should also be recognised that choices are rarely neatly binary. It’s not simply a question of *whether* the mainstream acknowledges populist concerns, but *how*.

## Progressive populism

Before turning to what the response to populism ought to be, I want to briefly mention an often overlooked aspect of contemporary populism in the UK: its progressive, liberal and left-wing manifestation. This is most evident in the new localism, which is a reaction against national and multinational business and/or national and supranational governments and governing bodies.

The new localism identifies the virtuous and homogeneous ‘us’ as the local community, defending its interests against the dangerous ‘others’ who impose their bland, homogeneous, placeless, insensitive values and products on an unwilling populace. In this populism, multinational corporations take the role usually occupied by national government, depriving the people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. You can see this in initiatives such as the Bristol Pound, which has the slogan ‘Our City. Our Money’.

This kind of populism might appear benign. But, ironically, although it appears to be anti-consumerist, it is in fact consumerism’s logical extension. Late capitalism encouraged people to think their demands could be satisfied, with as little mediation as possible. It was therefore only a matter of time before ‘fat cat’ multinational middle men came to be seen as standing as much in the way of consumer interests as patrician politicians and experts. Perhaps more significantly, this kind of progressive populism quite clearly bolsters the kind of parochialism that is the antithesis of progressive internationalism. Behind the virtuous rejection of faceless multinationals lies a more questionable elevation of the local community over distant others. The result is that people are repeating slogans which surely, on reflection, they would reject. Many businesses supportive of the Bristol Pound, for example, are also supportive of Fair Trade. So why on earth do they talk as though keeping money in the local community is the best thing?

The risk is that this kind of thinking takes on a life of its own. There was an example of this in a recent BBC report on the new trend for ‘suspended coffee’, which originated in Naples, whereby customers at cafés buy a drink for anyone who is short of cash to have later. Cafés taking part in this scheme do so for good intentions. Coffee7 in Forest Gate, East London, for example, gives many of its suspended coffees to

asylum seekers from a nearby project. Nonetheless, there is something worrying in the explanation of one customer, Lloyd, who buys suspended coffees. 'I know the people here, they know me,' he says. 'I know the person who runs the asylum project, the renewal programme, I trust everybody. You see your contribution actually working in a direct and local way, rather than going off to some international charity.'<sup>26</sup>

It is as though international charities are as much to be avoided as multinational corporations. Charity ends at home, among people you know and can see. There are limits to how much people are prepared to give away and so every pound spent on a suspended coffee is a pound that won't be going to a larger aid organisation. Buying lattes for local people takes precedence over supplying clean water to people in developing countries.

Another form of progressive populism has been manifested in protests like Occupy. This identifies the virtuous and homogeneous 'us' as the '99 per cent', defending its interests against the dangerous 'others' of banking and finance. It distrusts elites to the extent of refusing to have any kind of leadership at all. Again, there is some good to the motivation. But the movement is also Manichean and lacks a positive programme. It becomes a focus of discontent without providing any real option for its relief.

These kinds of 'progressive populism' need to be attended to for several reasons. To the extent that they reflect good values, they are a reminder that populism is not in and of itself necessarily a force for bad. To the extent that it taps into bad values – parochialism, tribalism, us and themism – it serves as a reminder that the right has no monopoly on pernicious populism. But most importantly, it shows how disillusion with mainstream political parties is a reality across the social board. Political consumerism has left people of every ideological stripe feeling disenfranchised, needing other outlets for their feelings of injustice. An alternative is needed, not just to keep the far right at bay, but to rebuild trust in mainstream politics across the political spectrum.



## A better response?

The political response to populism is often to cave in to the rhetoric but not to the substance, which feeds the immediate appetite without removing the causes for the gnawing. Visible measures are taken to address concerns over immigration, for example, but nothing is done to deal with the issue of refused asylum seekers. There is grandstanding at a major EU summit but no progress on applying the principle of subsidiarity more rigorously. The opposite should happen: there should be more challenges to populist complaints when they are misguided, but also more of a response to the genuine underlying grievances when needed.

It needs to be understood that a lot of populism is rooted in decent principles, such as ideas of fairness and everyone doing their bit. It gets ugly only when these principles are misapplied, often due to misinformation. Sometimes the rage is fully justified, when it is perceived that the elites don't abide by the principles they preach. There needs to be more of a charitable interpretation of popular discontent, because even if it is ultimately misguided, it doesn't come from nowhere. There is also too much fear of pandering to popular discontent, when this is not the same as listening and responding to it.

### **Disentangling truth from nonsense**

This alternative, however, need not be wishy-washy 'on the one hand this...' rhetoric. What is needed is a principled response that is not afraid to look for the truth in populist concerns as well as challenge the falsehoods. For many, it seems to be easier to do the former than the latter, when both are equally essential. The problem we have is the same as the one Yvonne Zonderop identifies in the Netherlands: 'To a certain extent it would actually take some courage to admit that one thought the populists' views to be absolute nonsense. If one admitted this openly, one would immediately be accused of fostering elitist attitudes.'<sup>27</sup> But disentangling the truth from the nonsense in an issue where both have been woven together is essential if the mess is to be cleared up. Otherwise you have to give up on what is good or true or take on board what is pernicious or false.

Take as an example the issue of refused asylum seekers. Britain has had a large problem with people who have not been granted asylum but who cannot easily be returned to their countries of origin. I was involved in an ultimately failed attempt to persuade the government that it could be both progressive and face populist concerns when, in 2007, I served on the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust's Inquiry into Destitution among Refused Asylum Seekers. At that time there were nearly 300,000 such people in the country, by the National Audit Office's conservative estimates, and removing all the refused would have taken an estimated 18 years and cost over £3,000 million. Without either benefits or the right to work many end up destitute, often working in the shadow economy.

Populist sentiment about asylum seekers was almost completely negative. Urban myths abounded about them being given houses, food, cash and even vans. The political pressure was to be tough on them. But when I ran some focus groups in Leeds – with members of an almost all-white working men's angling club, a group of nurses and social workers, sixth-form students and a group of Bangladeshi women – I was struck by how people on all sides of the debate agreed on so many of the key issues. People supported the right for people to seek sanctuary from persecution. They also believed new arrivals should contribute to society if they are to gain the benefits of living in it. They agreed that bogus claimants should be dealt with swiftly and returned. And they also agreed that newcomers should not profit at the expense of existing citizens. You could hardly put a cigarette paper between the views of the white anglers and the Bangladeshi women: it was one of the latter who said: 'The government should look after its own first.'

The problem that concerned the inquiry was with people who had not passed the test of asylum but could not be returned. Here, on reflection, people also agreed. It was vital to keep tabs on them but locking them up was expensive and counterproductive at best, unfair at worst. Supporting them with taxpayers' money was unacceptable so they should be made to work for their keep until such time as they could be removed.

So there was a sane and rational response to asylum that should satisfy everyone. In order to return failed asylum seekers you first have to know where they are, and you won't succeed in finding that out if you adopt a punitive approach: people will just disappear from the system. International experience suggests that the best way to return people to their countries of origin is to provide voluntary means for them to return. Forcing return may sound tough, but it just doesn't work. Nor can people contribute to society if they are denied the right to work. Indeed, without such a right, people have no choice but to be either a burden on social services or to vanish into the shadow economy. So

what is needed is a conditional licence to work, one which probably does not come with all the benefits of full citizenship.

Those working closely on asylum issues have been pleading for such a change for years. Their arguments have not won the day because they sound 'soft' when many of the public demand hard. But enlightened policies give the tough brigade more of what they want: fewer foreigners living off the official radar, in illegal work or none at all; fewer public health problems; more effective tracking and recording of asylum seekers; more refused asylum seekers returning home; less of a financial burden on taxpayers for those who stay in the system but are forced to accept benefits.

It is assumed that it would take suicidal political courage for any of the two main parties to stand up and make the case for a more humane asylum system along these lines. But where's the courage in telling all sides they can have what they want, when currently neither has anything? Nor is it a robust idea that the right to work rewards rule-breakers. Put it another way and it in fact sounds very tough indeed: if you want to stay here, you must work. Nor need granting a right to work mean granting the same rights as citizens.

Normally, failing to please all of the people all of the time is political reality, but failing to please any of the people any of the time is political stupidity. Normally, a political win-win is preferable to a manifest lose-lose. But normally the issue is not asylum and refugees, where the assumption that the choice is between being hard and soft has blinded successive home ministers to solutions that are both fair and effective.

Cynics will say that you can never be tough enough for the xenophobes, and you can never be soft enough for the bleeding hearts. But the status quo is not a decent compromise between two irreconcilable camps. Rather, it is paradoxically neither soft nor hard enough, for the reason that this debate should never be about toughness or softness in the first place.

### **Policies rooted in principle**

Would a government have been able to adopt and sell our recommendations? We'll never know as the government buried the report, too fearful of the populist reaction to deal with populist concerns. But whether our precise proposals were right or not is not the central point. The point is that if governments are going to bring people fleeing to the populist fringes back into the mainstream, they are going to have to be strong enough to adopt policies rooted in principle that grapple with the populist concerns and don't just offer simple reactionary responses to them.

Part of the problem with populism is that it believes in simple solutions and this mistake is only repeated if the mainstream talks

and acts as though it can completely remove the springs of populist outrage. Half-hearted appeasement merely encourages the populist parties and sends out the signal that the mainstream is not comfortable with the issues. They cannot just be managed or ignored – they have to be tackled head-on. This means challenging the kind of pessimism that questions the possibility of shifting public opinion where it is out of tune with the best way forward, and so settles for trying to meet misguided demands with misguided policies.

## 8

# The future of populism in the UK

The response of those worried about populism in the UK has centred too much on the need or otherwise of ‘addressing the real concerns’ of the disaffected. This is a decent start but in a strange way it both goes too far and not far enough.

It goes too far in that what it often amounts to is little more than conceding points to the populist complainants. Tim Bale, for instance, calls ‘cosying up to... populist challengers, focusing on the concerns they focus on, and even copying (albeit in slightly diluted form) their policies’ the ‘snogging’ strategy, and ‘inviting the populists to join you in coalition government or else to support your minority administration in votes of confidence’ as ‘marrying’. The problem is that both risk merely ‘lending credibility and legitimacy to the populists’ charges and their platform’ so that ‘the system’s centre of gravity and momentum then slips away from the centre towards one or even both of the extremes’.<sup>28</sup>

The same applies if the mainstream merely imitates or mirrors the populists rather than metaphorically mixing bodily fluids with them. ‘Once a populist radical right party has established itself as a credible political actor that owns certain salient issues (e.g. crime and immigration),’ writes Cas Mudde, ‘it is largely immune to counter-strategies of other political actors.’<sup>29</sup>

So in another sense the strategy does not go far enough, in that it amounts to a kind of grudging concession rather than a genuine, whole-hearted willingness to struggle with the issues at the root of the populist discontent. This relates to the point about the problem of political consumerism: the deep problem is that politics has become depoliticised. This plays squarely into populist hands. As Fieschi puts it: ‘Democratic discourse and practice recognise the diversity inherent in the concept of the people,’ which means acknowledging that politics is the arena not of consensus but of peaceful, managed conflict. ‘Populism, on the other hand,’ Fieschi goes on, ‘denies this complexity.’<sup>30</sup> So now does mainstream politics. Without a public, political square in which differences are acknowledged and negotiated, the reality that politics is a messy, divisive business gets forgotten, and it is easier to imagine that choice is simply between the self-interested political class and the will of the people.

### Reviving ‘messy’ politics

What then is really needed to counter populism is nothing less than a renewal of politics as an arena of difference, debate and diversity, where everyone’s interests and concerns are included. This requires, as Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis put it, ‘rebuilding trust in the political system’, which includes doing a good job of managing the economy in the interests of all: ‘the most effective therapy of the underdog mentality is hope and economic security.’<sup>31</sup> It is not simply a matter of diffusing a handful of potentially explosive issues. Immigration, the EU and outrage at bankers are just the flowers of a populism that has deep roots in the gradual disenchantment of huge swathes of the population in mainstream politics.

It is hard to predict whatever fruits this populism will give rise to. Only a few years ago, if you were to have suggested that bankers would be the object of populist revolt, you’d have been laughed at. Indeed, what we might be seeing in the rise of UKIP (and perhaps also in the rise of the 5 Star movement in Italy) is populism becoming much less focused on particular issues. The populist parties of the future will build their success on a more widespread discontent. Marley Morris has pointed to a statement by UKIP which reinforces this point: ‘the EU is only the biggest symptom of the real problem – the theft of our democracy by a powerful, remote political “elite” which has forgotten that it’s here to serve the people.’<sup>32</sup>

The problem with this is that if you are elected on the basis of a myth – that all ‘ills originate from outside “the people”, who are united in their interest’ and that ‘[t]here are no major contradictions or issues to be resolved within this homogeneous entity’, as Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis put it – there is simply no way you can govern.<sup>33</sup> At best, you have a short-term disaster and a return to traditional parties to clean up the mess. At worst, you create an ongoing situation in which governance becomes impossible, since the only electable parties are irresponsible. This is arguably already the position in Italy, where distrust of politicians has been so deep for so long that the country has preferred to elect a criminal fool or a comedian rather than the only candidate with a decent track record of responsible rule. Italy shows how, when populism becomes the dominant mode of doing politics, it becomes impossible to tackle the complexity of real problems. ‘Just to name a few of Italy’s troubles that are never cited – lagging behind in productivity, organised crime, a debilitating North/South gap, the digital divide: the evil is in the “Caste”, the wastefulness and costliness of politics,’ writes Gianni Riotta. ‘If only, the lament goes, we could “send them all home” (them being the corrupt politicians) – Italy would experience a re-birth.’<sup>34</sup>

The idea that we need nothing less than a revival of real, messy, disputatious politics should not be a pessimistic conclusion. Indeed, for many it will be a welcome one, as there are many other reasons for lamenting the rise of political managerialism and for the return of real debates about values and priorities in the public sphere. Rather than having seen the death of ideology, we have actually seen a dearth of it. Politics hates a vacuum more than nature does, and so it should not surprise us that populist parties have been more than willing to fill this gap with simplistic ideologies of their own.

# Notes

- 1 *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- 2 Fieschi, 'A plague on both your populisms'
- 3 Fieschi, 'Who's afraid of the populist wolf?'
- 4 Bale, 'Countering populism: snog, marry, avoid?'
- 5 Albertazzi and McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism*, p. 3
- 6 Fieschi, 'Who's afraid of the populist wolf?'
- 7 Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, Introduction
- 8 Fieschi, 'Populist expectations (or: The Dead Expert)'
- 9 Vaquer, 'Reclaiming democratic demands from the populists'
- 10 Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, p. 142
- 11 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 67
- 12 Korhonen, 'The crumbling of Finland's consensus culture'
- 13 Wieviorka, 'The Front National's new clothes'
- 14 Heath, Curtice and Elgenius, 'Individualization and the decline of class identity', pp. 27–28
- 15 *Private Eye*, 'The Secret Diary of a Lord Gnome Aged 73¾'
- 16 Interviews were all in *The Philosophers' Magazine*: Oliver Letwin in issue 32, 4th quarter 2005; Jesse Norman, issue 55, 4th quarter 2011; Tony Wright, issue 46, 3rd quarter 2009
- 17 *Channel 4 News*, 'Immigration nation: Nigel Farage's Bulgaria trip'
- 18 'Profile of voters February 2013', YouGov, 5 March 2013, [http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/mse55iouje/Ukip-profile-Feb-2103.pdf](http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/mse55iouje/Ukip-profile-Feb-2103.pdf)
- 19 You can track the rise of the term 'Middle England' in the corpus of British English using Google's Ngram Viewer. Its frequency increased nearly tenfold between the early 1990s and early 2000s.
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- 23 Wieviorka, 'The Front National's new clothes'
- 24 Vaquer, 'Reclaiming democratic demands from the populists'
- 25 Hunt, 'The dangers of Tory populism'
- 26 *BBC News Magazine*, 'Would you buy a "suspended coffee" for someone in need?'
- 27 Zonderop, *The Roots of Contemporary Populism in the Netherlands*, p. 21
- 28 Bale, 'Countering populism: snog, marry, avoid?'
- 29 Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, p. 289
- 30 Fieschi, 'A plague on both your populisms'
- 31 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 67
- 32 Morris, 'UKIP's rise' (see <http://counterpoint.uk.com/media-centre/ukips-rise>), which refers to the 'About us' page of UKIP's website, [www.ukip.org/page/ukip-history](http://www.ukip.org/page/ukip-history), accessed 29 April 2013
- 33 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 12
- 34 Riotta, 'The front of the ordinary man'

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# **Sweden: the reluctant nation**

**Göran Rosenberg,  
September 2012**

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## Paradise gained

I grew up in a small industrial town south of Stockholm. My father was a Polish Jew, a survivor of Auschwitz, brought to Sweden by the Red Cross in the summer of 1945. My mother was a survivor of Auschwitz too, joining my father in 1946. Sweden had committed itself to receive a limited number of people from ‘the camps’, to recover from their sufferings until they were strong enough to go elsewhere. The Swedish minister of social affairs at the time, Gustav Möller, stated to a reluctant *Riksdagen* (Parliament) that the Swedish government had found it difficult ‘to reject requests of this kind’.<sup>1</sup> Eventually thirty thousand survivors were received by Sweden, among them ten thousand Jews. Most of them stayed longer than a few months; a few thousand permanently. Among them, my parents.

At the time Sweden was a country with few foreigners and little interest in having more. The leading national daily, *Dagens Nyheter*, warned in September 1945 against the potentially dire consequences of allowing the survivors to stay: ‘We are not accustomed to deal with people who are so alien to Swedish mores and standards.’<sup>2</sup> Another daily, *Expressen*, wrote: ‘It will not be easy for them [the survivors] to adapt and not easy for anyone to employ them. For the latter is demanded far more of tireless understanding and generous humanity than can be expected of the average.’<sup>3</sup> The fact that Sweden a few years later (1948) registered more than a hundred thousand foreigners, or rather foreign workers, did not necessarily imply that Sweden had changed from averseness to acceptance, only that Sweden’s need of foreign labour was larger than its aversion to foreigners.

At war’s end Sweden was a nation in which the criteria for belonging and inclusion were enigmatic and demanding, with a host of unwritten codes and customs that would take a generation or two to fully decipher and assimilate. In addition, Sweden had been spared the devastations of the European wars and was therefore not directly touched by the experiences shared by most foreigners. In Sweden the fabric of society had remained mostly intact, no generations were lost, no national pride was hurt, no political visions were shattered. The emerging Swedish welfare project of the 1930s could take off from where it had been interrupted, as if there had been no war. Where the rest of Europe had to confront

and reconsider tarnished national myths and narratives, no such thing was necessary in Sweden. The non-war experience had rather reinforced the self-image of Sweden as a more peaceful, more rational, more advanced and more humane society than the conflict-ridden nations on the Continent. A somewhat paradoxical self-image undoubtedly, since there was a time when mothers on 'the Continent' used to threaten their disobedient children with the Swedes – a living collective memory from the 17th century when the brutish armies of Sweden roamed their countries.

In the small town where I grew up in the early 1950s there were few foreigners, and even fewer Jews. I was the only dark-haired kid on the block. The perks of the new Paradise – work, security, social advancement and economic well-being – however, seemed to be within reach of newcomers as well. There was nothing yet to shake the notion of Sweden as a society rapidly moving towards social bliss for all. In the local newspaper you could read about reforms that made people of the older generations pinch their arms in disbelief: 'As a start we will provide every mother with free natal care and cash benefits. From the day of birth to the age of sixteen we will ease the economic burden of families with children through yearly cash supplements. In addition we will pay for their child care. We shall subsidise housing for large segments of the population. In our schools the children will be given free lunches, free dental care, and free trips abroad during the summer recess. When new generations enter the labour market they will be financially secured against unemployment, illness and accidents. If need be there will be social assistance, *socialhjälp* [provided by the state], replacing the [local] poorhouse, *fattigvård*.'<sup>4</sup>

There was already a name for this society, *folkhemmet*, or People's Home, with apparent association to the more ominously sounding German *Volksgemeinschaft*. The term was originally coined by the Swedish nationalist and conservative politician Rudolf Kjellén in the early 1900s. He also coined the even more ominous term National Socialism (well before it was appropriated by a certain German Party), by which he denoted the idea of a cohesive community based on common national and ethnic roots. Kjellén viewed society as an organism in which the People constituted an indivisible whole and in which distinctions of class, status and ancestry were superseded by the common bonds of nation and home. Kjellén was certainly not a democrat; *folkhemmet*, as he imagined it, was a hierarchical and corporatist construction, populated by people defined by their distinct and fixed functions, professions and positions, justly managed by a benevolent patron, in the case of Kjellén, a constitutional monarch.

In 1928 the term *folkhemmet* was nevertheless appropriated by the Swedish Social Democrats and would henceforth denote a tight-knit national community striving for a class-transcending social order based on peace, justice, progress and democracy.

The Social Democrats became Nationalists and the nation became Social Democratic.

## A brief history of Swedishness

This ideal of *folkhemmet* inevitably begged the question of who was a bona fide member of the national community and who was not. The notion of Swedishness, *svenskhhet*, thus came to play an important role in the emerging narrative of *folkhemmet*. Originally part of a national-romantic myth about the origins and nature of the Swedish nation, it now also entered the rhetoric of leading Social Democrats. Notions of race, roots and social fitness were frequently invoked. The mentally ill and other ‘social misfits’ became the objects of forced sterilisations. Jews, Romas (*gypsies*) and Travellers (*tattare*) were regular targets of prejudice and disdain. Anti-semitic jokes and slurs were ingrained in the national discourse. Sweden became home to the first governmental Institute for Racial Biology (in 1922), which turned Swedishness (and non-Swedishness) into a matter of skull form and facial profile. The radical homogenising ambitions of the architects of *folkhemmet*, with the state reaching into the most private spheres of human life such as reproduction, child-rearing, personal hygiene and food habits, demanded high levels of public trust and a strong sense of cultural affinity.

The Swedish Social Democrats of the inter-war years were intensely preoccupied with discussing and defining the specific and unique traits of the Swedish national character. Swedes were ‘democrats at heart’, stated Social Democratic party leader and prime minister Per Albin Hansson in a speech in 1933. ‘They love freedom and hate repression [...] but they also want the state to keep the order, harness avarice and excess, help all to work and sustenance, make it safe and good to toil and live in old Sweden.’ In theory *folkhemmet* was to be open to all Swedes, but in practice there was a condition at the entrance: the adherence to a specific ‘Swedish way of life’.<sup>5</sup>

The latter was the title of a widespread educational brochure published during the war (1942).<sup>6</sup> The Swedish form of life, it said, had been moulded over centuries and even millennia, creating a homogenous people with a common history, a common religion and a common national character. The Swedes were anti-authoritarian, cooperative, independent, strong-minded, consensus-prone, with an innate sense of justice, sharing the ‘instincts’ of an ancient people. Swedishness

was a home-grown quality, owing very little or nothing to foreign influences and ‘imports’.

The strength of this both nationalist and socialist narrative was first and foremost its remarkable success. In contrast to Germany, where similar ideas had fomented extremism, polarisation and social unrest, the Swedish experiment in ‘national socialism’ was a democratising and socially pacifying venture based on a tradition of consensus, with historical roots in the creation in the mid-1600s of strong civil service departments, *åmbetsverk*, with the purpose to consolidate central control of a vast and still splintered nation. A distinctive feature of these new departments was their collegiate leadership. Decisions were taken by a group of men, a *collegium*, not by single individuals, creating over time a specific culture of bureaucratic independence and self-importance. While these *collegia* became efficient tools in the forging of a centralised Swedish state and undoubtedly strengthened the king’s control of the country, they also restricted his autocratic prerogatives. Most royal initiatives henceforth had to be examined through the cool prism of an independent state bureaucracy and to have their merits weighed against new standards of reason and rationality. A language of matter-of-factness began to cloak and disarm potential conflicts between king and administration. This specific culture of administrative independence and impartiality, *åmbetsmannakulturen*, was further strengthened by the large influx of young, educated, and to nobility, elevated commoners, into the services of the rapidly expanding and incessantly warring Swedish state. Thus was created an extensive class of ‘lower’ nobility, promoted on the basis of education and administrative skill rather than on traditional aristocratic virtues and prerogatives. This contributed to an exceptional social mobility in Swedish society at the time, making the step from yeoman to nobleman not only feasible but also sometimes rapid. Towards the end of the century Sweden had five times more noblemen than during any year of the preceding century. This actual and potential social mobility created a link between separate strata of the Swedish population. The mental universe of Swedish yeomen was thus formed in a specific sphere of ‘facts and representations’, creating, among other elements, a preference for common solutions in ‘a spirit of consensus’.

In Sweden of the 1930s this spirit most likely contributed to a historic compromise between the employers’ central organisation (SAF) and the central organisation of the labour unions (LO), instituting in 1936 the ‘Spirit of Saltsjöbaden’. This essentially corporatist arrangement (delegating state power to non-state civic organisations) was the emblematic foundation of ‘the Swedish model’, arguably creating the conditions for social peace, economic growth and extensive welfare reforms.

## Welfare for all

A central feature of the emerging *folkhemmet* was its class-transcending ambitions. Government subsidies of health care, housing and child support were to be accorded to each and every citizen, rich or poor, on the basis of general and well-defined rules and not on the basis of discretionary means testing. This also gave the middle class a stake in the welfare state, adding to its status as a genuine expression of 'the Swedish form of life'. Such a general and indiscriminating welfare system naturally presumed high levels of public trust, low levels of corruption and strong bonds of class-transcending loyalty, which in fact came to be the peculiar characteristics of *folkhemmet*. This, at least for a time, created a virtuous circle, reinforcing and widening the popular support for, and trust in, the Social Democratic project.

Another explanation of why the narrative of *folkhemmet* so rapidly captured the Swedish collective imagination and became a defining feature of Swedishness was its claim to a presumed Swedish tradition of enlightened reason and principled pragmatism. The national experience of a long and unbroken period of inner and outer peace further reinforced the image of *folkhemmet* as a haven of rational prudence in a world of irrational emotions and conflicts, while Swedishness was propagated as the foundation of it all. When ten (!) German-Jewish physicians in 1938 pleaded for asylum in Sweden, there were massive protests by Swedish student organisations, invoking the foreigners' incompatibility with Swedishness and the threat to the prudent Swedish race (*folkstam*).

On the other hand, making democracy the foundation of Social Democratic nationalism effectively served to hinder the emergence of anti-democratic and xenophobic parties and movements. The political terrain of both right-wing and left-wing radicalism was effectively occupied by the joint national and socialist narrative of *folkhemmet*. In the political and economic turbulence of the 1930s, Sweden in effect became the reluctant nation, wary of extremism, unwilling to endanger its welfare project through foreign alliances and military adventures, making neutrality a national posture and the construction of *folkhemmet* a national priority.



This element of reluctance became even more apparent when Sweden, through a combination of luck, opportunism and geopolitics, managed to stay out of yet another European war. The claimed rationality of Swedishness was thereby more firmly integrated into the national self-image, as were the virtues of neutrality.

Effectively then, the Swedish model came out stronger and more self-confident than before. Projects and reforms that had been interrupted by the war were resumed and even radicalised. A devastated world had to be rebuilt and the unharmed Swedish industry was in a unique position to provide whatever was needed to do it – steel, trucks, timber – creating a Swedish post-war boom that made even the most costly welfare reforms seem within reach. Uncontaminated by the memories of war, cut loose from the chains of history, liberated from national aggressions and emotions, Sweden was to become a model society heralding a new era of peace and progress.

It was in this post-war Paradise of never-darkening horizons that my young parents were expected to make a new life for themselves after Auschwitz. The tacit condition was that they rid themselves of the unbearable memories of the past and fully submit to a society based on collective oblivion and moral self-righteousness. No wonder perhaps, that Swedishness to them remained a strange and unattainable quality and Sweden a world apart. At the same time Sweden actively recruited foreign workers to meet the continuous shortage of labour in the booming Swedish economy. Into the post-war narrative of *folkhemmet* was thus also incorporated the story of successful immigration and assimilation, testifying to the universal significance of the Swedish model.

They were to be called ‘the record years’, these years of seemingly endless social progress and boundless optimism. A contemporary Danish-born observer, the journalist and writer Jytte Bonnier, later noted: ‘Rationalism was the highway of Swedish thinking and materialism the fuel of the Swedish welfare project [...] Science and technology showed the way, planning was the order of the day: This was something completely different from the pragmatic view of life characterising my home country [...] We had two separate traditions and mentalities...’<sup>7</sup>

## The secularised church

The distinctive Swedish blend of hard-to-penetrate cultural codes and claims to a universal culture of reason and rationality was perhaps most clearly manifest in the role of religion in Sweden. Up to the post-war period Sweden could reasonably be described as a monolithic state-church society with a distinct and visible Lutheran cultural identity. Linked to the ideal of a People's Home was the Lutheran ideal of a People's Church, *folkkyrka*, originating in Germany in the 1880s and particularly cherished by Christian Social Democrats. The Church of Sweden thus came to be identified with the state and the state identified with the church and protected its interests; the church relinquished its moral and spiritual independence from the state while the state provided it with a *de jure* monopoly on religious affairs. Prior to 1860 the only organised Christian denomination allowed was the Lutheran. Thereafter you could leave the Church of Sweden only if you joined another Christian denomination approved by the state. Full freedom of religion was not instituted in Sweden until 1951, and the formal separation between church and state in Sweden took place only in 2000.

All this made for a culturally entrenched state religion indivisibly intertwined with the national and social ambitions of modern Sweden. The Church of Sweden not only refrained from challenging the mainly secular foundations of this enterprise, but largely served to support and legitimise them. The Church became progressively secularised, if you will, imbued with the emerging tenets of reason and rationality, owing its power less to its spiritual authority than to its role as the official custodian of semi-religious national traditions and specific matters of state (such as population registration).

When this increasingly anachronistic position was publicly challenged in the late 1940s it triggered a fierce public debate that lasted several years and in which the church more or less conceded the high ground to its secular critics, or rather, claimed the critics' ground for itself. The church had no argument with secularism, it was said. Reason was not alien to religion but part and parcel of it. The dogmas of the church were no longer seen as incompatible with secular principles. In fact, the debate did not so much pit the tenets of reason

against the tenets of faith, as it revealed the tacit cultural bonds between church and state in Swedish society.

Religion in Sweden thus became the great invisible in the narrative construction of Swedishness, adding yet another component to its peculiar fusion of tradition and modernity, religion and reason, cultural exclusion and political inclusion. Although the Christian roots of modern Sweden are rarely acknowledged there is no doubt that the self-professed secular nature of modern Swedishness is deeply steeped in a Lutheran tradition of national self-sufficiency and moral rectitude. Beneath the claims to universal tolerance and cultural openness, Sweden remains a society with a historically short experience of cultural and religious pluralism and therefore remains somewhat uncomfortable in confronting cultural and religious difference. A foreign surname and a foreign accent, not to mention foreign social codes and un-Swedish manners might still make a difference between being employed or not.

At the same time Sweden, perhaps more than any other European country, subscribed to an official policy of openness, acceptance and tolerance towards new immigrants. Although labour immigration to Sweden formally came to a halt in the late 1970s, it was soon to be replaced by a relatively generous policy for the reception and absorption of asylum seekers and, eventually, of their extended families. This has dramatically changed the demographic make-up of Sweden, where 15 per cent of the population, 1.4 million, is now foreign-born (as of 2010). In some urban areas the share of inhabitants with a foreign background is approaching 90 per cent.

A fairly large influx of non-European asylum-seekers has thus challenged the official policy of multicultural integration by going hand in hand with a growing socio-economic divide along cultural and ethnic lines. Unemployment and poverty have hit the foreign-born part of the population significantly harder than the rest of the population. So far the narrative of a rational, pluralistic and tolerant society open to all has prevailed over the narrative of a homogeneous society threatened by immigrants feeding off the welfare state, introducing alien religious beliefs and practices while refusing to adapt to Swedish norms and traditions.

## A culture of cultural blindness

Nevertheless, the latter narrative seems to be gaining influence. This change of political atmosphere was not only manifested in the election in 2010 of an openly nationalist and anti-immigration party (*Sverigedemokraterna*, the Sweden Democrats) to the Swedish *Riksdagen*, but is also evident in the appearance of a new ‘muscular liberalism’ (to borrow a term from David Cameron) calling for the state to impose enlightened Swedish manners and traditions on recalcitrant foreigners.

This Jacobin impulse to pursue a policy of coerced secularism, claiming its universal and culturally neutral character, is however deeply steeped in a most specific Swedish cultural tradition. What to Swedes might seem a matter of enforcing universal principles against archaic and irrational religious and cultural practices, is in fact the imposition of an invisible majority culture, largely formed by the conflation of secularised Lutheranism with Lutheran secularism. This has served to make the Swedish national narrative remarkably unaware of its own cultural premises and prejudices. The very notion of culture (not to mention multi-culture) has mainly come to be associated with foreign traditions and lifestyles, whereas the cultural peculiarities of the distinctly Swedish claim to universal reason and rationality have been largely invisible in the emerging landscape of cultural pluralism.

It is thus important to recognise the extent to which this particular cultural feature of Swedishness has continued to define a distinctly majoritarian view on issues concerning the relation between private and public, individualism and collectivism, rationality and irrationality. It is precisely this cultural amalgam that explains why a number of Lutheran ministers have been prepared to close ranks with professed atheist (‘humanist’) critics of religion against what are perceived as irrational foreign religious beliefs and practices.

A recent case in point was a petition by a group of people, including a well-known minister of the Church of Sweden, to outlaw male child circumcision, i.e. a cultural and religious practice almost exclusively associated with two religious minorities, Jews and Muslims. Among the signatories was also a former leader of the Liberal Party and minister of social affairs, who at the same time as he was publicly

ostracising Jews and Muslims for their religious practices, was chairing a governmental commission on how to combat xenophobia and intolerance. The petition was ceremoniously shrouded in the language of reason and progress, maintaining that it was solely motivated by the protection of the child against religious coercion and the imperatives of universal human rights. Its harsh characterisation of those practising male child circumcision however betrayed its tacitly anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim nature. Parents circumcising their male infants were thus compared to child molesters: 'To show empathy and respect for adults who wish to cut into the healthy bodies of their children is to turn the back on the children.' The article further made a comparison between male infant circumcision and an imaginary religious custom to cut off children's ear lobes. The article concluded: 'Sweden cannot be considered a progressive country with regard to human rights if we continue to compromise the bodily integrity of children. When approximately 3000 male bodies per year are *religiously mutilated* [italics added] in Sweden, we cannot rightfully call our engagement with human rights anything but half-hearted.'<sup>8</sup>

In the ensuing debate the anti-circumcision activists further argued that their position was only a matter of secular reason against religious superstition. In yet another article, the former leader of the Liberal Party dwelled in detail upon the irrationality of the Jews, adhering to a fictional Biblical covenant and obeying archaic instructions from their 'high priests' (a term frequently used in the Gospels to denote the Jewish accusers of Jesus). Instead the Jews should be '*mature enough* [italics added] to accept the principle that every child from birth has the same rights as other persons, including the inviolable right to freedom from bodily changes they have not consented to and which are not medically motivated'.<sup>9</sup>

Nowhere in the articles attacking circumcision was there any mentioning of the fact that infant children, from their birth, are constantly and unavoidably subjected to adult interventions that infringe on their 'right' to self-determination. Also within the Swedish majority culture the 'healthy bodies' of infants are allowed to be irreversibly changed on other than medical grounds. Aesthetically motivated surgery (i.e. improving the shape of ears, sexual organs, teeth) is regularly done at the request of parents and without the consent of the child. To this should be added the irreversible psychological and physical effects of unhealthy food, unhealthy habits, dangerous sports and parental neglect. It can reasonably be argued that the baptising of infants is another transgression of the child's right to self-determination. In any case, the child is not asked whether it wishes to join a particular religious community, which is what baptising is all about.

In yet another attack on irrational religious practices, a prominent public figure within the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*, the former Communist Party) suggested that each and every child should be protected against 'all religious practices' up to the age of 12.

By whom and how? one might ask.

And by what rationality is a fictitious right of the child to self-determination to replace the actual rights of parents to raise their children according to their beliefs and best abilities? And what is to be done about the 'infringements' on the child by the particular social and cultural environment into which it is born? Call the police?

What was then presented as a straightforward application of universal human rights to an offensive religious practice was in fact an attempt to impose the norms of a majority culture on the norms of cultural minorities.

This conspicuous blindness to the cultural roots of the anti-circumcision campaign in particular, and Swedish secularism in general, is perhaps indicative of the extent to which the Swedish national narrative is still coloured by the conflation of Swedishness with universal morality and rationality. This perhaps also serves to explain the astonishing unawareness among the church ministers supporting the anti-circumcision campaign of the long and dire tradition of Christian anti-Judaism. Unlike several churches in post-war Europe, the Church of Sweden has not deemed it necessary to expunge the anti-Jewish elements from its sermons and rituals. On the contrary it has further developed its peculiar Swedish claim to a religious tradition of universal enlightenment and rationality. Not surprisingly then, the Church of Sweden has been a haven for supersessionist theology: the idea that Christianity has superseded Judaism. In the specific Swedish context, this has been interpreted as Christianity being the embodiment of universal human rights and principles, while Judaism has been branded as the embodiment of archaic, outdated and particularistic rites and rules.

When finally (six months later) a small group of female only (!) Church representatives, among them two bishops, publicly criticised the anti-circumcision campaign, they perceptively noted its xenophobic implications and its roots in the Swedish majority culture: 'The debate tends to associate everything you like with its being Swedish, while associate everything you dislike with its being un-Swedish and uncivilised. Not only [the nationalist] Sweden Democrats but also other groups are speaking of human rights as something Swedish [...], as something that "the foreigners" must learn to live with in Sweden.'<sup>10</sup>

I believe this amalgam of national enlightenment and cultural self-righteousness has made the Swedish narrative noticeably ambiguous: on the one hand the inviting myth of *folkhemmet*, a generous

welfare state open to all; on the other hand the dissuading myth of Swedishness, i.e. a particular Swedish way of life based on a deep-rooted ethnic and cultural tradition, hard to emulate and penetrate. The conflation of these seemingly irreconcilable myths has arguably fomented a national culture largely blind to its own cultural peculiarities and prone to disavow the peculiarities of other cultures. This then has made for a national narrative predicated on the success of a particular social order, the Swedish model, as well as on the cultural hegemony of a particular set of values and traditions. One might therefore expect that the weakening of the social model and the challenge to the hegemonic status of Swedishness would eventually undermine the authority of the Swedish narrative and provoke a growing resentment among those adversely affected by its demise.

## Paradise lost

As a young journalist in the early 1970s, working at the central news service of the Social Democratic press, I one day came across a government working paper discussing the prospect of a 'reform pause', a term previously unheard of. The idea that the reform process, for one reason or another, would come to a halt was completely alien to the Social Democratic creed. The construction of the People's Home was far from being finished, and I was rebuked for bringing forth unsubstantiated rumours. There could be no such thing as a reform pause.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when the success story starts to crack, but the promise of boundless material and social welfare begins to reveal its fine-print qualifications already in the late 1960s. The symbolic event was perhaps the wildcat strikes in 1969 and 1970 among 5000 workers in the large iron mines of Kiruna and Gällivare in the far north of Sweden. Not only did the strikes, which lasted for almost two months, challenge the social contract of the 1930s between capital and labour, trading labour peace for material growth and social welfare, but it also called into question the promise itself. The strikers not only demanded higher wages but also a halt to the increasing pressures on working conditions to meet growing demands for higher productivity. The wildcat strikes would continue throughout the 1970s as the social contract started to crumble and for all practical purposes came to an end in the late 1970s. It was followed by a period of weakened political consensus about the Swedish model. While the Social Democrats and their trade union affiliates were radicalised in their efforts to restore and pursue the promise of *folkhemmet*, the employers' federation and the Liberal-Conservative opposition (which came to power in 1976 after 44 years of continuous Social Democratic rule) increasingly began to argue for a 'system change', *systemskitte*, thereby challenging the basic tenets of the Social Democratic post-war order. This happened to coincide with first oil crisis in 1973 and the ensuing difficulties in sustaining competitiveness in a number of Swedish base industries. The 1970s saw dramatic closures and large layoffs in textiles, shipbuilding, and pulp and paper, with production moving to countries with lower labour costs and fewer social obligations.

The textile industry largely moved to Portugal, the shipyards to Japan, and the pulp and paper industry to North America.

The Social Democrats and the Trade Union Federation responded to these developments and the growing discontent within its own ranks, by proposing radical schemes to increase workers' influence on corporate decisions. The most far-reaching of these was a proposal to create collective wage-earner funds, *löntagarfonder*, by which the workers, through their unions, would receive partial 'democratic' ownership over private Swedish enterprises. 'This is a thorough reformation of society',<sup>11</sup> stated Rudolf Meidner, a prominent economist of the trade union federation, LO, and the leading mind behind the proposal: 'We wish to deprive the old owners of capital of that power which comes with ownership. All experience shows that influence and control are not enough. Ownership plays a crucial role.'<sup>12</sup>

What ensued was an increasingly antagonistic political battle for the heart of the Swedish narrative. The cherished spirit of reason and consensus soon dissolved into an atmosphere of conspiracy and suspicion. Proponents of wage-earner funds were at times accused of planning a *coup d'état*. Although the Social Democrats eventually relinquished the idea of a radical ownership transfer and considerably watered down their proposal, the wage-earner battle had made it apparent that the narrative of *folkhemmet* had reached a critical juncture, and that the Social Democratic hegemony in Swedish politics was coming to an end. The provisions of the welfare state were still largely considered sacrosanct; to openly advocate 'system change' was still a recipe for political defeat.

Nevertheless, a significant ideological shift was underway. Even prominent Social Democrats became wary of promoting and defending a system which they perceived as counterproductive to economic growth and thus to the financing of the welfare state. Instead they were increasingly tempted by the idea to have the market replace the state as the guarantor of efficiency and productivity in the welfare system. The bursting of the real estate bubble in the early 1990s, leading to a severe financial crisis and painful cuts in welfare programmes, further undermined public confidence in the Social Democratic ideal of 'the strong society' (meaning a strong state) as a means to redistributive justice and social progress.



## System change

Thus it happened that in the 1990s Sweden embarked on one of the most far-reaching privatisation programmes in the Western world. Publicly financed schools, hospitals, health clinics and geriatric care were all offered to be run as business ventures by private investors. No distinction was made between for-profit and not-for-profit 'providers'. Furthermore, private providers of publicly financed services were free to start new schools and new health clinics at their discretion. Through free competition for customers (pupils) and clients (the sick and the elderly) efficiency would increase and costs would decrease and there would be better welfare for less money.

This has largely turned out to be a political illusion. After it was discovered that investor-owned schools had manipulated grades (to attract new customers) and investor-owned homes for the elderly had understaffed their operations and mistreated their clients (to reduce costs and increase profits), there has been a public outcry against the excesses of privatisation and the unrestricted pursuit of profits. Perhaps the most provocative consequence of the new Swedish system has been the large-scale entry of private equity firms into the welfare business. They now do not only own and run a growing share of the publicly financed school and welfare systems, but have also managed to squeeze large profits out of them. Even more provocative have been the advanced schemes employed to shelter these profits from taxation.

Although the privatisation system has generated powerful vested interests and will be hard to reverse or significantly change, it is by now clear that in no way has it contributed to the preservation of the Swedish welfare model, but rather has hastened its demise. The radical nature of the Swedish privatisation scheme, going from one extreme to another, largely with Social Democratic acquiescence, might at first seem puzzling, but is perhaps a logical consequence of the Swedish penchant for technical (rational) solutions to political problems. For a while, the privatisation and marketisation of welfare services simply seemed to offer a more efficient and economic way of delivering and even improving the same public goods. It also served to mask the deeper causes of the malaise affecting the Swedish model, not least the impact of European integration and economic globalisation. The financing of a welfare state providing

economic security and collective benefits to all, ‘from cradle to grave’, had been based on levels of economic growth and/or taxation that no longer seemed feasible. It had also been based on a degree of national sovereignty that no longer was at hand.

The Swedish model thus turned out to be exactly that, a profoundly Swedish project, hard to emulate and hard to sustain under rapidly changing international and national conditions. During the deep economic crisis in the early 1990s, when the Swedish economy shrunk, the budget deficit mushroomed and unemployment rose to previously unthinkable levels (8 per cent), an anti-immigration and anti-tax party, *Ny demokrati*, New Democracy, gained 25 seats in the *Riksdagen* and the mood of the country changed.

As a response to the crisis, Swedish governments (of all colours, *nota bene*) tacitly began to shrink the welfare system, making it renege on previous commitments and reduce rapidly swelling costs. This coincided with a dramatic overhaul of the tax system (again by consensual decision) and a considerable lowering of tax levels, based on the ideological conjecture that ‘dynamic effects’ would ensue, increasing economic growth, generating new employment and enlarging the tax base instead of reducing it.

Nothing of the sort happened of course; the tax base was further reduced, and yet another nail was driven into the coffin of the Swedish model.

Perhaps the most radical departure from the far-reaching commitments of *folkhemmet* was the sweeping overhaul of the pension system in the late 1990s, again by political consensus. A system based on a state-guaranteed pension for all wage earners, predictably calculated on lifetime earnings, was changed into a system making pension payments contingent on national economic growth and demographic change. No matter how much you had paid into the system there was no longer a guarantee that you would get the money back. The immediate outcome was a lowering of pension levels and the introduction of hazard and insecurity into the system. In another radical departure from the principles of collective responsibility and solidarity, the new system mandated that part of the future pensions be individually invested in equity funds, in the sanguine promise that large financial returns would compensate for the weakening of public guarantees. Swedish pension levels were thus made contingent on the ups and downs of the global stock market. To this was added the risk of having already earned pensions reduced by a mechanism for ‘balancing’ pension levels. With no or little growth, Swedish retirees would see their actual pensions dwindle. This happened in 2010 and 2012 and will most likely happen again, with the result that Swedish retirees who thought they already had earned their pensions will discover they have not.

Since then, the breaking up of the Swedish model has continued apace, substituting collective obligations with individual responsibilities. A few examples:

- The fees of unemployment insurance (publicly subsidised, but administered by the unions) have been raised, while the ceiling for maximum compensation has been lowered, driving hundreds of thousands employees out of the public insurance system altogether, choosing to rely on opportunity, luck and relatives.
- The rules for paid sick-leave have been toughened considerably, introducing harsher public scrutiny of individual cases and a mandatory procedure for a return to the labour market after a fixed period.
- The large-scale introduction of private health insurance as a supplement to public insurance and provisions, is laying the ground for a dual health care system, with priority lanes to priority care for those who can pay for it.

The all-over effect of these retreats from the original principles of the Swedish model has been growing socio-economic inequalities. During the heydays of *folkhemmet*, Sweden probably had the highest social mobility in the world. It also had the smallest differences in wages and benefits (based on a centralised policy of wage solidarity), the most equalised housing standards (based on generous housing subsidies) and the most widespread access to higher education (based on far-reaching education subsidies). The sons and daughters of workers and farmers were given life opportunities that their parents would never have dreamt of. The advantages of inheritance and privilege were offset by decisive political measures to enhance the opportunities of education and social advancement for people of a disadvantaged background. Considering the radical nature of the changes to the Swedish model and their far-reaching social consequences, there has so far been astonishingly little public discussion on the implications for the Swedish narrative and self-image. The official rhetoric of both the Social Democratic Party and the main Liberal-Conservative party, The Moderates, *Moderaterna*, has rather been about saving and preserving the Swedish model, albeit with renewed means, and not about exchanging it for a system based on lower taxes, less public security and more individual risk. The Moderates even underwent a remarkable ideological face-lift when they, after a shift in leadership, started to call themselves The New Moderates and rhetorically embraced welfare policies and principles that for years they had fought tooth and nail. Swiftly they presented themselves as the true custodian of the Swedish model, accusing the Social Democrats of having undermined its foundations: by weakening individual responsibility, by having work pay

less than support, by allowing welfare abuse, by hampering efficiency and fairness. They even presented themselves as the New Workers' Party.

This turn-about was motivated less by a deeper change of mind (the grassroots of the party were in disbelief) than by the calculation that most Swedish voters were still attached to the basic principles of the Swedish model: high levels of social mobility, equalised life opportunities, a general safety net for all, the efficient production and fair distribution of common public goods. All this was based on the imperative of work, sustainable wages and high taxes, or what in Sweden has been called *arbetslinjen*, an axiomatic policy of actively promoting, preparing and facilitating employment.

None of this has obscured the fact that the model is inexorably unravelling, and that the narrative which for more than 80 years has been a constitutive element of 'Swedishness' is losing its foothold in collective experience.

What then remains is the 'politics of nostalgia'; the yearning for a social model that is vanishing but still appeals to the minds and hearts of large segments of the Swedish population.

## The politics of nostalgia

In the best-selling crime novels by the Swedish writer Henning Mankell, the hero is a seasoned, disillusioned and somewhat depressive police superintendent, Kurt Wallander. The crimes that Wallander is set to investigate are all heinous and macabre in character: heads are cut off and scalped, victims have sharpened wooden poles driven through their bodies, others are crucified, or dismembered, women and children are molested, burnt and tortured. These horrible events all take place against the backdrop of an idyllic Swedish landscape, inhabited by trusting and innocent people, unable to imagine such crimes, and even less to plan and execute them. In contrast, the perpetrators are all aligned with sinister and alien forces that invade the Swedish paradise and undermine it. The increasingly depressed Kurt Wallander is given many reasons and ample opportunities to mourn the good society which he once knew and which is now falling apart before his eyes. When the last skull has been splintered, and the last child has been molested or burnt, and the last foreign plot has been exposed, and Wallander warily has demolished the last lie, what has been conveyed is the image of Sweden losing its bearings and mores and becoming a society like all others. The personal depression of Kurt Wallander becomes inseparable from his mourning of the Swedish welfare utopia. There is no doubt in my mind that Henning Mankell, a self-confessed supporter of the radical left, is having his protagonist, Kurt Wallander, represent his own disillusionment with the retreat from the ideals of *folkhemmet* and his own yearning for its political restoration.

The rhetoric of nostalgia remains in fact a potent factor in Swedish politics. This is most explicit in the party that still claims political ownership of the Swedish model, the Social Democrats. Although the party, while in government, has been instrumental to many of the changes signifying a retreat from the model, and while in opposition has largely acquiesced to Liberal-Conservative proposals to the same effect, it has skilfully managed to retain most of its traditional rhetoric, depicting itself as the true custodian of *folkhemmet*. According to this rhetoric, the radical reforms initiated and implemented have not been about dismantling the model, but about restoring and maintaining it under changing

economic and social conditions. The political debate has largely been about who is preserving the model and who is dismantling it, largely concealing the fact that many of the crucial changes in the welfare system have been implemented in broad consensus.

## The War of the Roses

This growing chasm between political rhetoric and actual policy has provoked a sometimes fierce ideological battle within the Social Democratic Party ('The War of the Roses') between 'right-wingers' and 'traditionalists'. The former have called for an overhaul of the welfare state, introducing market competition for 'clients' and 'customers', allowing for corporate providers with profit incentives. The 'renewers', as they call themselves, have also encouraged private health insurance as a supplement to the public health system. They argue that Sweden must use market forces to transform public welfare into a competitive and efficient 'industry' with global ambitions. Most importantly perhaps, the 'renewers' constitute the pro-European faction of the party. In 1995 they advocated EU membership, and in 2003 they campaigned for the euro. The 'renewers' overwhelmingly dominate the party leadership and are so far in control of the official Social Democratic agenda.

The 'traditionalists' are mainly to be found among the core activists of the party. They have largely opposed the agenda of the 'renewers', characterising it as a submission to neo-liberal ideologies and the abandonment of fundamental Social Democratic principles and goals.

The 'traditionalists' want to restrict the impact of market forces on the welfare state, stop the privatisation of public goods, use state power to reverse the trend towards inequality and segregation, and defend the independence of the Swedish social model against global pressures and directives from Brussels. Consequently the 'traditionalists' only reluctantly, and only after strong opposition, formally submitted to the official party line in the referendum on EU membership, and were actually allowed to openly confront the party line in the referendum on the euro. In both cases it became evident that the 'traditionalists' remained an influential force within the Social Democratic Party, and that the party in fact consisted of two factions, held together by a strong tradition of party discipline and the imperatives of political influence and power.

This unofficial and unresolved ideological conflict within the Social Democratic Party has, among other things, manifested itself in a persistent ambiguity towards the European project: yes to the perks of economic integration of membership, no to political integration and the impingements on national sovereignty. This deliberately inconsistent

position has not only served to appease the strong anti-European sentiments of the 'traditionalists' within the party, but has also appealed to a broader segment of the population. Anti-Europeanism is a persistent and widespread undercurrent in small-town and rural Sweden, where the perks of EU membership and globalisation are not so obvious, and where the weakening of the welfare state is sometimes perceived as an existential threat (and perhaps rightly so).

This then, is the climate of political nostalgia, a widespread sentiment that Sweden can and must remain a nation apart, fully sovereign to retain, reshape and restore its welfare system at will. This is a climate in which Europe and the EU will always represent a threat rather than a promise, and in which the populist rhetoric of welfare nationalism (defending the welfare system from foreign intrusions of all kinds) might have a potential appeal on both the far right and the far left of the political spectrum. This climate is also sustained and nourished by the long Swedish tradition of neutrality, having created a sense of national independence with little or no footing in a world of mounting global interdependence.

The fact that this apparent rift within Swedish society, between renewers and traditionalists, pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans, globalisers and welfare nationalists, has largely been contained within the Social Democratic Party also means that the rhetoric of nostalgia has so far been a part of mainstream politics. Two parties represented in the Swedish *Riksdagen*, the leftist *Vänsterpartiet* and the nationalist *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats), have platforms demanding that Sweden leave the EU. Both parties have promised, albeit from different positions and with different means, to restore *folkhemmet* to its former glory: the former by resisting the forces of globalisation, the latter by resisting immigration and multiculturalism. However, neither the Left Party nor the Sweden Democrats have yet been able to attract a larger political constituency: 5.6% and 5.7% respectively in the last elections (2010). As long as the promise of *folkhemmet* is seen as a legitimate and credible posture within mainstream politics, the politics of nostalgia will resist becoming the domain of political radicalism. As Sweden remains a reluctant nation, the Swedes still remain a reluctant people.

## The radicals

Extreme right-wing or left-wing radicalism has so far had a negligible impact on Swedish politics. The Communist Party has only once gained more than 10 per cent of the voters (in 1944) and extreme nationalist parties and movements have remained outcasts in Swedish society. Whatever radical opinions Swedish voters might tacitly harbour, they have so far been effectively absorbed and domesticated by mainstream parties. The historical success of the Swedish model is still widely attributed to the virtues of ideological pragmatism, political consensus and social democracy.

When in 2010, the Sweden Democrats gained 20 seats in the Swedish *Riksdagen*, it signified the first breakthrough of a radical nationalist agenda in Swedish politics. The previous anti-immigration party, *Ny demokrati*, which was represented in the Swedish *Riksdagen* between 1991 and 1994, had a neo-liberal and anti-tax agenda, advocating a break with the Social Democratic welfare state.

The Sweden Democrats, however, is the first party in parliament to harness nationalism and xenophobia to the politics of nostalgia and the restoration of *folkhemmet*. Their propaganda constantly evokes the image of a lost paradise in which once 'a high level of economic and social security' was sustained and in which Swedish national culture was supreme. An election poster in the 2010 campaign depicts two blond children walking in a pastoral landscape with the text 'Give us Sweden back'. In the Sweden of the Sweden Democrats there would again be solidarity, community and a high level of welfare for those belonging to the nation. Immigration and public support to immigrants must cease. Immigrants in Sweden must assimilate to the Swedish way and culture. Islam should be considered an alien and offensive religion.

In an effort to whitewash the extremist roots of the party, the criteria of common blood ties and genetic ancestry has been replaced by the criteria of cultural ancestry and belonging. The homogenous cultural identity of Swedes, *svenskheten*, is said to go back a thousand years in time. The party makes a distinction between inborn Swedes and assimilated Swedes. Only the former belong to the Swedish nation.



A significant number of people voting for the Swedish Democrats in 2010 had previously voted for the Social Democrats: mostly young unemployed men and union members, disgruntled with the weakening of public benefits and attracted by the unabashed pro-welfare propaganda of the Sweden Democrats. In the election campaign of 2010 the Sweden Democrats produced a suggestive TV commercial in which an anonymous mass of black-dressed women in burkas or niqabs, pushing a horde of baby-strollers, is seen overtaking an old Swedish retiree, laying claim to her welfare benefits. The message is clear, the People's Home can be restored by restricting its benefits to those truly belonging to the Swedish nation.

The Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*, on the other hand, is programmatically immigrant-friendly, multiculturalist and internationalist. In its political practice, however, it is advocating policies that can reasonably be realised only through some form of welfare nationalism. Unlike most left-socialist parties on the Continent, the Swedish party is principally against EU membership, representing a paradoxical mix of nationalism in the European context and international solidarity in the global context. The restoration of *folkhemmet* will be achieved by protecting the Swedish system from the alleged neo-liberal policies of Brussels, successively undermining the Swedish model. Although other left parties in Europe, in the wake of the euro crisis, have moved in the same nationalist and isolationist direction, the Swedish party has been consistent in its Europe-sceptic and welfare nationalistic stance. To finance the return to higher levels of general benefits and insurance and to protect wages and working conditions, it is proposing higher taxes on the rich, higher taxes on banks, higher taxes on profits, elimination of tax fraud, transfer of tax money from defence and profit-making to welfare. Some of these policies arguably presume certain restrictions on capital movements, a certain economic isolation from market pressures, and thus a certain amount of protectionism, although this is rarely explicitly stated.

The Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*, is then clearly appealing for the votes of the traditionalists within the Social Democratic Party. In the run-up to the elections of 2012 the traditionalists successfully pressed the party leadership (against its will) to enter into a formal alliance with the Left Party (and the Green Party) aiming at forming a coalition government (for the first time in the history of the Social Democrats), scaring away middle-class voters and contributing to a historic defeat at the polls. However, as long as the traditionalists are seen as a legitimate and even genuine expression of Social Democratic values and policies, the reluctant radicals among the voters will most likely remain reluctant. The threshold to

right-wing radicalism appears to be even higher since the narrative of anti-immigration and cultural intolerance is intuitively alien to the self-image of Sweden as a society based on universal and non-nationalist principles.

This is of course a political climate that might change, particularly if and when the narrative of the Swedish model becomes incompatible with mainstream politics, and the politics of nostalgia becomes the domain of radicalism.

## The extreme radicals

On 22 July 2011 the world was shocked by a combined bomb attack on government buildings in Oslo, Norway, leaving seven people dead, and the mass killing of 69 young people on the island of Utøya.

As soon as it became clear that the perpetrator was a thoroughbred Norwegian and not an Islamist terrorist there was a sense of unease. How could this possibly happen in a rich, peaceful and democratic welfare society? And how could any Norwegian wish to undo the very foundations of this society? Even more so when it became clear that his political universe was shared by many others and that his main source of inspiration was a Norwegian blogging under the name Nordman, *Nordic Man*.

The narrative of a Christian-Jewish (!) Europe, undermined by rampant ‘multiculturalism’ and threatened by a planned Islamic takeover, is being widely disseminated in books with titles like *Eurabia – the Euro–Arab Axis*, *The West’s Last Chance*, *Menace in Europe*, propagated on a great number of websites (The Gates of Vienna, etc) and cherished by most right-wing extremists in Europe. Less conspiratory forms of Islamophobia have become the mainstay of growing populist and nationalist parties with parliamentary representation in most European countries, among them Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. In most of these countries the political discourse has changed remarkably. The aggressive rhetoric of the Danish People’s Party, *Dansk folkeparti*, against Muslims, immigrants and foreign intrusions (EU) has successively, and mostly for opportunistic reasons, been assimilated by mainstream parties and permeated national media and considerably coarsened public language and debate. In Finland, the True Finns Party, *Sannfinländarna*, which gained 20 per cent in the parliamentary elections of 2011, becoming the third largest party, has clearly contributed to a more hesitant Finnish attitude towards further European integration and an open reluctance to underwrite further European bailout programmes for debt-ridden states with crumbling banks, demanding safer collaterals for payments and loans. The Finns are also showing a dwindling enthusiasm for supporting the euro at the cost of Finnish interests. This marks a considerable

change of attitude, since Finland until recently was seen as one of the EU's staunchest proponents among member-states.

Sweden has so far remained an exception in this regard. Mainstream public discourse has largely been restrained and conciliatory in debating the issues of immigration and multiculturalism. Neither have forthright nationalist sentiments had a significant voice in defining Sweden's relationship with the EU. This does not imply that such sentiments do not exist, they clearly do, only that they have so far been subdued by a culture of reason and consensus. Danish critics have argued that the Swedes merely suppress their true opinions and feelings and that the Swedish debate is hypocritical, unrealistic and prone to wishful thinking. Against this it could be argued that 'true' opinions and feelings are conditioned by social and cultural traditions, and that Swedish traditions so far have produced a different political discourse based on a distinct national narrative. The alleged 'self-censorship' of Swedes might be understood in this perspective as the manifestation of a society historically averse to open conflicts and 'irrational' sentiments.

## The reluctant radicals

‘What would it take to make a Stockholm out of Moscow?’, Swedish political scientist Bo Rothstein once asked.<sup>19</sup> Or more precisely, what would it take to transform Moscow from a society with little or no incentive to pay taxes (and little or no ability to collect them), to a society where taxes were duly paid and impartially collected and widely expected to benefit the public good rather than feed corruption and private pockets.

The question might also be posed in reverse: what would it take to make a Moscow out of Stockholm? Or more precisely, what would it take to unravel that particular political and social culture in which the Swedish model was once formed and sustained? Or in other words, what would it take to make radicals out of reluctant?

There is of course no way to know. The collective memory of a formidable success story will take time to eradicate. The rhetoric of nostalgia might for a long time still resonate with mainstream politics. The peculiar Swedish combination of strong collective institutions and extensive individual freedom will remain a hard act to follow. One might even say that Swedes are still ill prepared to live in a society in which the state abdicates from previous obligations and individuals are asked to take more responsibility for their own welfare. This will inevitably lead to the further waning of a social order that could once pride itself on having achieved the smallest socio-economic gaps in the Western world, the highest social mobility and the most level playing field in higher education.

Although most Swedes do not yet perceive a radical change in the social order, at most a transition from an outdated version of the Swedish model to a more updated one, there are nevertheless some potential developments that might make for a more radical turn in Swedish politics.

As in most European societies, employment is seen as a fundamental good, but perhaps more so in Sweden than anywhere else, since the promise of secure employment for all is at the core of the Swedish model. Full employment is the prerequisite for an extensive tax base and an extensive tax base is the *sine qua non* of an extensive welfare state. There is still in Sweden a broad political consensus on *arbetslinjen*, the imperative to take people off public support and into paid work.

This explains the introduction, by the present liberal government coalition, of stricter rules for sick leave, reduced levels of unemployment insurance and higher pressure to seek employment. So far these new programmes have contributed little to the overall employment situation. Young people have largely been kept off the unemployment rolls by publicly financed programmes for training and short-term entry jobs. Similar programmes have been created for people who would otherwise be considered ‘unemployable’. An increasing number of jobs are nevertheless short term, with less security and fewer prospects of social advancement. The number of people in various forms of higher education has increased but the link between education and reasonably secure and well-paid jobs has weakened.

Long-term youth unemployment is a disaster in any society, but perhaps more so in a society where the national identity and self-image is at stake. The long-term loss of economic and social security in significant segments of the Swedish population would be perceived as nothing less than the unravelling of the Swedish model.

The Swedish model has also been contingent on very high levels of public trust and very low levels of public corruption. Yearly surveys by the Swedish SOM Institute (University of Gothenburg) show that these levels are consistently moving in the ‘wrong’ direction. Not that Sweden in this regard differs much from other Western countries, but again, Sweden is a society that must deal with a potential threat not only to its social fabric but to its national self-image as well. The adaptation of Sweden to whatever new social model might emerge out of this transition will then demand no less than a redefinition of what Sweden ‘is all about’.

The idea of a Swedish *sonderweg*, a separate destiny, was once – and not so long ago – a uniquely powerful and successful one, and it is hard to imagine how Sweden would fare without the institutional framework that still embodies that destiny. The art of creating and sustaining an extensive welfare society is certainly a most difficult and challenging one, particularly under circumstances when national cohesion is waning and national consensus is weakened. If at the end of the day, the Swedish model would be widely perceived as either failing or obsolete, and the gap between traditionalists and renewers would be harder to accommodate within mainstream politics, the politics of nostalgia might transform into an outright nationalist defence of the Swedish model, making radicals out of reluctant.

# Notes

- 1 Gustav Möller, Minister of Social Affairs, in a speech to the second chamber of the *Riksdagen*, 25 May 1945
- 2 Editorial, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 September 1945
- 3 *Expressen*, 25 June 1945
- 4 *Stockholm Läns- och Södertälje Tidning*, 25 November 1950
- 5 Cited from Alf W. Johansson (ed.), *Vad är Sverige? Röster om svensk identitet*, Stockholm: Prisma, 2001, p. 243
- 6 Cited from Johansson, pp. 303 ff
- 7 The Danish daily *Information*, 24 July 1958, cited from Johansson, *Vad är Sverige?* p. 386
- 8 Bengt Westerberg et al, *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 November 2011
- 9 Bengt Westerberg, from the website *Newsmill*, 19 April 2012
- 10 Antje Jackelén et al, *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 June 2012
- 11 Rudolf Meidner, in the official organ of the Swedish trade union organization, LO, *Fackföreningsrörelsen*, 1975, no. 19, p. 17
- 12 Rudolf Meidner, Anna Hedborg and Gunnar Fond, *Löntagarfonder*, Stockholm: Tiden, 1975
- 13 Bo Rothstein, *Sociala fällor och tillitens problem*, Stockholm: SNS, 2003, pp. 7 ff



# Ten paths to populism

How silent Finland became  
a playing field for loud populism

Johanna Korhonen,  
September 2012



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# Introduction

In the early summer of 2012, I was listening to YLE Radio 1 in Finland. The morning programme of the national broadcasting company aims to be known for its high-quality current affairs journalism. This time, the participants of the discussion were party leaders Timo Soini, from the populist Finns Party (formerly known as the True Finns), and Carl Haglund from the Swedish People's Party of Finland, which represents the Swedish-speaking minority.

The topic was the euro crisis. How could we get over it? Why should the Finns, who had been acting responsibly regarding their economy, finance the debt-ridden Greeks?

'Finland is the only country paying,' Soini fumed. He was in full flow. 'Sweden isn't paying, Norway isn't paying, Denmark isn't paying, England isn't paying! Finland pays,' Soini explicated with a triumphant voice.

Carl Haglund said something rather bland about 'joint responsibility' and 'a difficult situation'. Soini livened up even more. Soon after he stated: 'A Finnish granny deep in the woods is paying, but a rich American Republican isn't taking any part in this!'

The journalist hardly interfered in the speech at all. Carl Haglund was civilised, composed and polite, as he and his party usually are. Both Haglund and the journalist did not tell Soini that of course Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Britain were not taking any part in the euro crisis, as they were not members of the eurozone but used their own currencies instead! No one commented to Soini that no Finnish old-age pensioner had lived 'deep in the woods' for a hundred years and that there had not been a decision made anywhere that pensioners should be the ones to pay for the euro crisis. The only thing that Soini got right was that rich American republicans had nothing to do with the matter.

The 15-minute radio discussion was sheer torture, but it was nothing unusual. It summed up the central factors in Finland's political playing field today: a loud populist politician who talks triumphantly and boastfully, a politely subdued, traditional politician, and a journalist who likes to be a neutral onlooker but who comes across as slightly helpless.

It was as if there were an ice hockey game and a figure skating show happening on the same ice rink. The petite figure skaters, skilfully repeating the figures they had practised, were scared for dear life as they dodged in front of the darting ice hockey forwards, who quickly changed directions according to the changing situation. The referee was befuddled and certainly did not know whether the rules of figure skating or ice hockey should be followed, or what he should be doing altogether – so when the clock struck half past eight, he politely thanked the speakers for ‘an interesting debate’ and moved, relieved, to the next topic. Some of the audience were delighted, some were shocked and some had left the spectator stand in irritation a long time ago.

In this essay, I look for answers as to why and how Finland became a country where, according to the polls, as much as one-quarter of those entitled to vote support the populist Finns Party. In the parliamentary election of 2011, the party received a backing of 20 per cent, and is now the main opposition party.

By the term ‘populism’, I mean a way of policy-making where matters are reduced to simple confrontations and where the speaker appeals to the listener’s selfishness rather than their sense of joint responsibility. This kind of policy-making involves mentioning various threats, pointing out the culprits, and offering simple solutions to complex problems.

On this conceptual framework, people are divided into three groups: the evil elite (which seeks only its own benefit), the good people (whom the populist movement is advocating for) and the ‘others’, who are annoyingly varied small groups that do not belong to the ‘people’, at least not the good people, and should be gotten rid of in one way or another. At the very least, they should become invisible so that the unity and peace of mind of the people does not suffer because of them. The ‘others’ include ethnic and linguistic minorities, foreign-born people and sexual minorities. The annoying ‘others’ also include intellectuals belonging to the majority population, who defend the minorities and are enemies of the ‘people’ with their tolerant attitudes in their writing and speech.

Finnish populism is in many ways different from the populist movements of southern Europe. The increasingly popular Finns Party is not a right-wing party, since its ideology leans more towards left-wing socialism: it defends ‘poor people’ and the ‘disadvantaged’. Old-age pensioners are one of its most important groups of supporters. Another difference lies in the age structure: many supporters of the populist movements in Europe are young, whereas in Finland the Finns Party gets most of its support from elderly citizens, more often men than women.

A central difference is that, while the populist movements of many other countries are demanding change, the Finns Party first and foremost hopes to slow down or stop change and bring about a ‘return’ to

the old. The Finns Party’s utopia is a dream of a past Finland which no longer exists – and never really existed in the first place.

The Finns Party also includes some extreme nationalist forces whose thoughts have fascist characteristics. Some of these extreme nationalists are in the party’s parliamentary faction. Finns Party MP Juho Eerola wrote on the website Hommaforum in July 2010:

*I’m attracted to fascism and especially the economic policies carried out by Benito Mussolini – We could learn a lot from that model.<sup>1</sup>*

His party colleague James Hirvisaari sees multiculturalism as underlying all evil:

*The terrorist attacks are due to the supporters of multiculturalism. The real culprits are not the Muslims (what can they do about their madness) nor those criticizing immigration (although they are often blamed) but multiculturalists who are hankering after the richness and glory of Islam here in the deep north.<sup>2,3</sup>*

The extreme nationalist wing inside the Finns Party aligns with the idea of a fascist and racist radical right more than the majority of the party, which campaigns for public healthcare and social security, and advocates for ‘the poor’. The front man of the extreme nationalist wing is MP Jussi Halla-aho.

It is difficult to say how many of the party’s voters agree with these extremist views. Probably a great majority of them flinch from all kinds of bigotry. The support given by even the moderate voters, however, strengthens the mandate of the extreme nationalists and increases their freedom to act.

A basic feature of populism is protest, a ‘we are against everything, especially the elite’s’ attitude. I wonder what the Finns Party members actually are against, when they protest against multiculturalism, the European Union and foreign influences. Are they against these things in particular or is there a deeper underlying fear looking for an outlet?

Why has a furious ‘anti-immigration’ discussion suddenly started in a country where there are few foreigners? Why did the established domestic linguistic minority, the Swedish speakers, end up in the same firing line as the foreign-born groups? How can a country, whose citizens have been raised to be politely silent rather than to express their opinions loudly, become the home of furious web-based discussion in less than a decade? Why did the political system not know how to react to the pressure of voters and give space instead to a populist movement through which the pressure was let out? Why have the journalists awoken so late – or at all?

The answers are connected to the Finnish sense of security, self-respect, honour, identity and belief in the future. They have to do with the economy, work, culture, religion and political leadership. At the heart of the answers lies the Finnish culture – i.e. our way of being, living, communicating and forming images of ourselves and others.

The Finns drawn to populism are not ‘radical’ in any ordinary sense of the word: they do not want change, and even if they demand the end of the ‘current course of action’, they primarily do not want to revolutionise anything. On the contrary, they seek security, appreciate traditions, and are appalled by fast changes. They think that the ‘current course’ is an exceptional state, from which we should quickly get back to the normal state. Their ability to adapt to new situations is not necessarily very good.

They are also genuinely worried about the existence of Finnish culture and language in a world where cross-cultural interaction is much faster, more widespread, and more seamless than ever before. They are people who feel hard-pressed and silenced. They want to remonstrate.

I am part of the population appalled by racism, xenophobia, narrow nationalism, short-sighted selfishness, and the populist marketing of these ideas. Nonetheless, instead of focusing on wonder or resentment, I have for several years strived to think about the situations of those drawn to the populist rhetoric in Finland. As a journalist I want to empathise with their situation and examine their viewpoints. I have read their texts online and have had discussions with them. I have consulted researchers and, equally, those whose lives they research.

I examine the relationship between hope and fear in the Finnish culture. The populists appeal more to fear than to hope. Their party programmes, as well as those of other parties, promise all things to all people, but the hands-on policy-making seems to concentrate more on the whipping up of fear and on general protesting than on building a future.

At the end of the text, I discuss what we can do if we want to turn Finland towards a more humane future.

## How the collapse of the Soviet Union muddied our economy but opened our mouths

I started my career as a young business journalist in the Finland of the early 1990s. The first thing I got to write about was the worst depression in Finland since the war.

Since the mid-1980s, Finland had started to liberate its financial markets and open up its borders to foreign capital movements. This resulted in a big foreign debt and an overvalued currency, which forced the economy of the export-dependent, forest industry-dominated country to its knees. When the Finnish mark's rate in relation to other currencies was improved through fierce compulsory devaluations, thousands of businesses that had taken foreign loans went bankrupt or at least faced serious difficulties.

As a young business journalist, I interviewed entrepreneurial families who had lost it all and unemployed factory workers who, eyes wide in disbelief, told me how they were on the dole for the first time in their 30- or nearly 40-year career. Once a month I wrote about the unemployment rate; 20 per cent was unheard of in the nation's economic history, but in those days it was a common piece of news.

As if there was not enough to cover in Finland's own financial crisis, at the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s, our neighbour experienced a collapse in the governmental system and consequently an extensive change in society.

On one occasion I was at the airport meeting a minister coming back from an official trip to the Soviet Union. That was the name we used when speaking of our neighbour, although we should have learned to say 'the Commonwealth of Independent States, the CIS' when during the year 1991 the Soviet Union broke up into 15 states. The minister returned from his journey to a situation where everything was unclear, even the trading partner's name. Soon after that, Russia announced that it was just Russia again and could not care less about what its smaller neighbouring countries wanted to be called in the future.

The minister was tired and grumpy and not delighted with all the journalists waiting in the arrivals hall. In the early 1990s no one could be contacted by cell phone, so waiting at the airport was in certain situations the only way for journalists to acquire fresh information about the results of such official journeys.

'It's over,' the minister grunted. The clearing. The trade between Finland and the Soviet Union, which at its best was a tenth of Finland's foreign trade. For decades, Finland had exported, among other things, textiles and other consumer goods, and had mainly received oil in exchange. Sales had been negotiated between the states. The businesses had simply implemented the agreements.

When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, so did the clearing trade. During the year 1991, Finland lost 65 per cent of its Eastern Trade.

The effects of the sudden end to the Soviet trade for the Finnish economy were drastic. Although the Eastern Trade was not discussed much among the citizens – who were perhaps even ashamed of it because they sensed the politically awkward interdependence it was connected to – the loss of a trading partner was widely reflected in the economy. When this was combined with the existing high indebtedness and the decrease in value of the overvalued mark in relation to other currencies, it contained the ingredients for more than one financial crisis.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the depression of the early 1990s were an important turning point, because they represented the end of an era. Until then, Finland had been a fairly stable nation, which credulously trusted in progress, and during several post-war decades had not experienced any major upheavals. Now it had. The effects can still be seen in our culture, especially in the form of a weakened sense of security and various fears focused in particular on the economy.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has for its part affected the Finnish culture and the country's atmosphere, meaning that radio programmes such as the one I described at the beginning have become a part of today's reality.

In the last 20 years, Finland has made the long journey from a silent, regulated culture based on self-control to a loud, rumbustious culture, and in a certain way a culture 'ruled by the people'. The 'voice of the people' is now heard, and it is loud.

In my childhood and youth I lived in a country where politics belonged to the elites. The most sacred of all areas of politics was foreign policy, which, for the most part, was equivalent to managing Soviet relations. This was first and foremost the job of the president, and the president was decade after decade the same man, Urho Kekkonen (in office from 1956 to 1982).

In the Finland of my childhood and youth, everyone understood without saying that managing Eastern relations was difficult and

dangerous. The citizens served their country best by staying silent and hoping that the president would succeed in his mission. The few dissidents were scowled at; boat-rockers were not needed in Finland.

The language of domestic policy was at times very colourful, but the discussions were conducted among the political elite. It was as if the citizens were in the spectator stand and knew only what the media respectful of the status quo felt it necessary to tell them.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s loosened tongues – not immediately, but little by little. During the last couple of decades the Finns have found that you can blurt out pretty much anything without falling from grace or otherwise suffering.

The change in the country's discussion culture has been dramatic. The nation, whose most important discussions 20 years ago were conducted between top politicians and the elite, has turned into a free-for-all, bubbling with speech.

The existence of the Internet does not explain everything. First and foremost, there is an underlying change of atmosphere, an idea that now we are free to speak.

## How Finland adopted a new culture of fear

The great depression of the early 1990s started a new culture of fear in Finland. Before we had been afraid of the Soviet Union – even though it was best to keep one’s mouth shut about it. As the foreign policy fears faded away, they gave room to another kind of fear: the fear of unemployment and personal financial collapse.

For generations, the Finns were brought up to think that you could make it if you worked hard. Work has always been highly appreciated; countless proverbs and sayings have taught the Finns to believe that ‘there is great honour in a man’s work’ and that standing idly by, or slacking helplessly, is one of the worst sins. The appreciation of work has also to do with the traditional, masculine role model.

Work as part of the Finnish – especially male – identity has been researched by sociologist Matti Kortteinen among others.<sup>4</sup> He sees the connections between urbanisation and gender roles, and I think that those connections play a central part in the rise of populist politics in Finland. Kortteinen, for instance, noted the first major identity crisis as early as when people moved from the countryside to the cities in the 1960s and 1970s. When the traditional ‘men’s jobs’ were left in the countryside, many men had a difficult time adapting to life in small apartments in the suburbs, without a yard and a workshop. After the work day, they had nothing meaningful to do except to watch television and perhaps drink beer. Women, on the other hand, had their hands full with the combination of paid work and unpaid housework.

Kortteinen’s research shows a strong ethos of work: for Finns, work is a ‘field of honour’, and a person without work is incomplete in many ways. In the same way, a person without work or any other meaningful occupation is especially susceptible to seeking an outlet for his feelings of dissatisfaction and worthlessness. In the men lying on the sofa that Kortteinen has acknowledged, I see the characters who today hate immigrants, long for a new ‘Spirit of the Winter War’ in Finland, and are convinced by the easy-sounding populist solutions.

In past decades, there was work on offer. The employment situation in Finland was rather good from the war until the depression of the early 1990s. In the 1970s, the oil crisis and economic fluctuations

briefly produced a higher unemployment rate, when the government led by President Kekkonen took vigorous and grand measures to create jobs.

For those with vocational training or a university degree there had always been work, if not immediately, then at least without too long a wait. The depression of the early 1990s broke this ideal and made it clear that anybody could lose their job, any job. Even those working for the most reliable employers such as the state or municipalities could lose their jobs. In Finland, this deeply shocked those countless people who had grown to believe that ‘although the state’s bread is narrow, it is long’, meaning that a job in the public sector was practically safe until retirement. It was not any more. The 20-something per cent unemployment rate meant that in every family or circle of friends there was someone who was unemployed, laid off, or under the threat of unemployment.

During the depression of the early 1990s, the old sense of security was quickly and dramatically swept away. For some, it has never returned. At the same time, we started to talk about globalisation and to see how jobs physically started to move, for instance, to Asia. The Finns could no longer trust that ‘work pays’.

This lost sense of job-related security is a central factor when we look at what has opened up the playing field for populist movements in Finland.

For me, a significant discovery was that one-half of the Finns Party’s supporters are afraid for their personal finances. This phenomenon was first discovered in a comprehensive survey in 2010. The survey charted threats experienced by the Finns.<sup>5</sup>

The differences in the sense of security between the supporters of different parties were clear: of those who supported the Finns Party, 56 per cent were afraid for their financial wellbeing, whereas of the other parties’ supporters only 33–40 per cent were afraid.

The supporters of the Finns Party were more afraid than others that they would be marginalised in society. Unemployment was a big concern for them because they believed that once they had become unemployed it would be difficult for them to find a new, equivalent job. They had less faith in the future than the supporters of the other parties.

The hard core of supporters of the Finns Party are in no way unfortunate. On the contrary, they are people who are used to steady employment and often traditional occupations, and who have their own homes, cars, summer houses and can afford a beach holiday or at least a cruise to Tallinn every now and then. Their income is not big but they trust that you can make it by working hard, and it pays to be economical. They are afraid of globalisation because they have a lot to lose. Production in traditional industries has already been moved abroad, especially to Asia. The relative position of the forest industry,

for instance, has weakened while IT production, which requires new kinds of know-how, has strengthened. There are no longer new paper-making machines built in Finland. If you read job advertisements, you can see English job titles, which can be unclear. What on earth is a Key Account Manager? For a forest-industry labourer, this kind of labour market has little meaning, but is still of concern.

Finnish society is more unequal than it has been in the past, the result of which is that the Finns Party is gaining more support. People who experience insecurity and already have a small income – or at least a significant number of these people – are no longer voting for the Left, but for the populists.

The great depression produced a state of fear that has not receded. Even though most of the Finnish working population is working again, the fear of personal economic collapse can be seen in election results and heard in public discussions.

The same time period, over the past 20 years, saw a crumbling of social security. In the 1980s, the Finns strongly trusted their welfare state. They thought that if something bad happened, a safety net would stop them from falling to the very bottom.

In the great depression of the early 1990s, politicians sought large savings in the public economy. Both income transfers and welfare services were cut. Welfare benefits, which had already been pruned back, stayed below the general income level during the post-depression boom. Many citizens felt that it was becoming harder and harder to get any help from the welfare office because the criteria had been tightened during the depression. The relative and absolute weakening of social security had a major effect on people’s sense of security. This psychological and psychosocial change was not really brought up in public discussions when the cuts were made, but its consequences can be seen now.

When a person feels that losing one’s job would probably lead to financial and social degradation, this fear will have a deep impact on their choices – even if the fear never comes true. It is interesting how this fear of falling seems to have an impact on the higher social classes as well.

Statistics Finland regularly measures consumers’ confidence in the future of their personal finances and Finland’s economy. The survey results show how bad economic news can easily be seen in people’s expectations, and a sizeable group have very pessimistic expectations regarding the improvement of their own finances. According to the latest consumer survey, in August 2012 only 23 per cent of working Finns feel that they are not threatened by unemployment at all! More than three-quarters of the employed are constantly haunted by the thought of possible unemployment. One-sixth of the employed believe that the threat of their unemployment has grown.<sup>6</sup>



I once received feedback from a citizen who had read one of my columns. This person felt that there are far too many economic news stories in the media these days, and that they create unnecessary concerns for people. It is true that the volume of economic news stories has increased significantly over the last couple of decades. They have an influence too: earlier this year, when the mobile phone manufacturer Nokia declared their plans to cut jobs, the media was flooded with stories with people directly or indirectly dependent on Nokia giving vent to their distress. In factory towns, unemployment also concerned those not working for Nokia.

Also, there are more and more young adults who have never even gotten a job. They live off welfare benefits and perhaps some wage-earning family members. They are not the slightest bit interested when the political elite talks about accelerating economic growth.

The Finnish political, financial and intellectual elite's way of reacting to citizens' fears has evidently been faulty. Leading politicians, of course, speak year after year about the importance of creating jobs. The words hold no power, because the listeners know that jobs are created only by employers, not by political leaders.

I understand the politicians' pain: in the global economy and this world of free movement of capital, companies move their production to where it is the most profitable or feasible. The speech-giving politician understands this and maybe tries to explain it to the listeners. Some of the listeners understand and get worried; some only get worried.

Finland's strategy is to focus on education and high skills, which it hopes will also help in the new situation. This speech, however, appeals to only some of the voters: the highly educated, multi-skilled people accept the situation and are able to adapt to it better than the lowly educated. 'There is no problem,' said one Finnish youth (in English). 'I'm studying to become an engineer, I could specialise in environmental protection technology and move abroad to work. By the way, I've been thinking about moving to California anyway.'

As for the others, their fears are fed and even worsened by the fact that the speech about Finland's means of coping, produced by the political and financial elite and passed on by the media, differs completely from the citizens' experience of their own lives.

Financial discussion, led by the elites, has been governed during the last couple of decades by themes such as high technology, innovation, creative work, high know-how, internationality and uniqueness. According to the elites, Finland will succeed as long as the Finns are skilled, hardworking, creative, co-operative and always excited to learn.

Where in this scene is there room for a person who was at best average in school, has sufficient vocational skills, but is far from excellent? Where is the place for a person whose creativity manifests itself

in a bear statue carved with a chainsaw, standing in front of a summer cottage? Is there any space in the top expert's image of Finland for a citizen whose idea of 'internationality' is a package tour to a Turkish tourist destination, as cheap as possible? How can you succeed, if you are not talented, capable, multi-skilled, socially skilled, or anything else worth mentioning? What can a person do, if he is average at best, and in general not even that?

The elites' image of a high-performing Finland filled with creative talents is far from the reality of the overwhelming majority of the people.

This is a crack for the populist rhetoric to sink into. While other parties' leading figures are committed to a high-performing Finland, the populists just let the citizens be. I noted this, for instance, in the 2001 parliamentary election campaigns: the MP candidates of many parties underlined their varied know-how and education, whereas the Finns Party's candidates settled for emotional communication in the sense of 'we understand who the people really are'. This message certainly appealed to that large group of people which does not see itself reflected in the shiny success strategies of the elite.

Other parties usually expect, even require, something from their voters. The Left wishes that the voter, too, is socially righteous and ready to share their wealth by paying taxes. The Right requires briskness and an entrepreneurial spirit. The Green League requires, or at least strongly recommends, an ecological way of life, the Swedish-speaking party calls for Swedish skills and the Christian Democrats want us to follow Jesus.

The Finns Party does not require anything from its supporters. You are free to lie on the couch, be who you are, and not have to try anything special. You have the right to do that – just being a Finn is enough.

For this to be possible, threats have to be eliminated. Such threats include the shapeless 'globalisation', which moves ordinary Finnish jobs to Asia; foreigners, because they compete for the same manual labour jobs as uneducated Finns; multiculturalism because it makes the playing field too complicated; and all kinds of new ideas which undermine the 'traditional Finnish value base' and further weaken the frail sense of security. The ideas that are still considered new include the environmental movement, feminism, and standing up for the rights of sexual and gender minorities.

## How rhetoric about a lack of alternatives made room for an alternative

During the great depression of the early 1990s, the Finnish government adopted the rhetoric of ‘no alternative’: there are no alternatives in economic policy, savings have to be made, benefits have to be cut, and there is no room for choice. This kind of rhetoric does not only apply to Finland – TINA or ‘There Is No Alternative’ is known in all western democracies where governments have had to make decisions in order to calm the financial markets.

The rhetoric of ‘no alternative’ is a manner of speaking in which those who wield power justify their decisions by saying that they are the only ones possible. For instance, the government justified the social security cuts during the early 1990s depression by saying that Finland had to save, otherwise the lending taps would be turned off and it would result in a terrible disaster. In reality, this was not the case. Finland kept its high credit rating even during the deepest depression, when it had to take out a large loan for its public finances, despite the belt-tightening. The message got through: when people’s awareness of the crisis had been raised, it was easier to make many decisions that meant their wellbeing would deteriorate.

When the depression ended and turned into a strong economic boom, this kind of rhetoric continued. One government after another assumed a manner of communicating that is usually associated with civil servants. Instead of vivid political discussions, matters were presented as something that needed to be taken care of, necessities that the government had to handle. ‘Politics became colourless’, says one of my colleagues who has been following politics for a long time.

For instance, Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (in office from 2003 to 2010) from the Centre Party felt it was rather problematic that unfinished matters still in the process of preparation were discussed in public. He thought the government should be allowed to work ‘in peace’, without premature public discussion.

The rhetoric about a lack of alternatives is obviously a political strategy that is not grounded in reality. There are always alternatives in politics. For the elites, the TINA rhetoric was and is

naturally convenient: when there are no alternatives, the solutions do not really have to be justified.

In countries where policy-making is built on the juxtaposition of two major parties, political debate is usually vivid. In Finland's multi-party system, discussion is paralysed by the fact that when 'nearly everyone' is in the government, the opposition's voice is left faint.

Finland's political elite is small, and when a significant part of this elite takes part in decision-making regardless of the governmental coalition, criticism of the decisions is often tepid or non-existent. Mistakes made in politics are not analysed or learnt from, because 'everyone' has made them 'together', in a situation, no less, where 'there were no alternatives'.

In the Finnish TINA discourse, there is a great cultural difference from Sweden, which also has a multi-party system. The Swedish discussion culture is more open, and in addition to the elite, influential people from its cultural life also take part in the discussion. Situations and alternatives are discussed better and more broadly than in Finland, where the discussion is often stymied by those in power saying there is no possible or reasonable alternative.

The 'no alternative' rhetoric and a culture of avoiding political confrontation did a disservice to the elites themselves: they created space for alternatives. The most obvious alternative channel so far has been the Finns Party whose programme could be summed up in a few words: 'Stop heading in this direction!'

The populists know how to transmit the message that the current way of dealing with things is by no means the only one possible, but that there are alternatives. Often they do not specify what those alternatives could be. Despite this, citizens tired of the Only One Option Politics happily clutch at the thought that there are other options as well.

The 'no alternative' rhetoric has also prompted the leftist youth movement to seek and demand alternatives. Another counter-movement in Finland is the de-growth movement which criticises economic growth. Compared to the populist movement, there is little support for these kinds of movements.

# 4

## How suppressing anti-EU supporters backfired on the elites

One reason for the rise of populism in Finland in the 2000s is that the political and financial elite suppressed the Finns who in the 1994 referendum voted against Finland joining the European Union. A significant number of the votes of these citizens, who felt suppressed, goes to the Finns Party these days.

Finland joined the European Union in early January 1995. The entry was preceded by long campaigns and a referendum, in which 57 per cent voted for EU membership and 43 per cent voted against. The Finnish political elite decided that Finland would vote as the first Nordic country, before Sweden and Norway. If the order had been different, the result would probably have changed, too, because in Sweden, opposition to EU membership was even stronger than in Finland in the early 1990s. When Finland as a more 'pro EU' Nordic country rushed to vote, Finland's decision also affected Sweden.

If Sweden had voted before Finland, based on opinion polls from that time one could estimate that both Finland and Sweden would have stayed out of the EU, like Norway. Finland's political leaders knew this and thus felt it necessary for Finland to vote as the first Nordic country.

EU membership was opposed by nearly half of the people in Finland. The membership was a project of the elites, lobbied strongly by the media. In the early 1990s, I worked at the biggest Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, which supported EU membership very prominently. Based on my experiences I could say that writing EU-critical journalism in the paper was challenging in those days. I ended up voting against EU membership, based on all the knowledge and understanding I had acquired of the matter, and therefore I can strongly sympathise with the people who felt that they had been walked over.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of EU membership for Finland was its membership in the eurozone. The elites brought Finland into membership half secretly: before the EU referendum, Prime Minister Esko Aho from the Centre Party reassured the people that the referendum was only about union membership, and that there would be a separate vote for the monetary union. When Finland

had joined the union, the social democratic Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen said that no referendum was needed because when joining the EU, Finland had already committed to the Economic and Monetary Union as well.

This little prank by the elites is connected to my own work history as well. When a few fellow journalists and I tried to explain in our paper *Helsingin Sanomat* before the referendum that EU membership would, according to the treaty papers, also entail committing to the Economic and Monetary Union, we were unequivocally prohibited from promoting this kind of view in order for people to not get scared and vote against the EU. According to the editorial leaders, the paper should not draw attention to or emphasise the connection between EU membership and the monetary union, even though it was a very central matter in Finland's Treaty of Accession.

Unlike Finland, Sweden and Denmark held a referendum on the euro. Both countries decided to keep their own currencies.

Now that the eurozone is in great trouble, the populists are utilising the disappointment and frustration that was left behind by this undemocratic and therefore rather awkward process. Membership in the eurozone has brought Finland low interest rates and probably benefited our economy in many ways if compared to a situation where Finland kept its own currency. However, we cannot be certain how Finland would have fared outside the eurozone. Therefore, in hindsight, it is easy to think that it was a wrong decision to join the euro. As the elites enforced the membership without asking the people and were misleading in their communications, many feel as if they have been duped.

Against this background, it is very easy to understand the resentful discussion on the financial needs of Greece and Spain, for instance. The main question is why Finland, having always taken good care of its economy, is partially liable for the debts of others. Why are we even a part of the eurozone, the membership of which we never got to vote for? Even though the anger should be directed towards our own decision-makers in the 1990s, it seems to be directed irrationally towards the Greeks.

For the populists, this is an enjoyable situation and they are using it in every way they can. It is easy to get at the careless Greeks or the irresponsible EU leaders. For this complex situation, the populists have simple solutions: Cut off the money now! Greece must be kicked out! Finland must break away from the euro! The EU must be dissolved immediately!

As news headlines trumpet about billions and billions of euros and both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance look paler and paler in newspaper pictures, the populists are able to rampage unrestrainedly: Jyrki (Katainen, Prime Minister) and Jutta (Urpilainen, Minister of Finance) are promising away the Finns'

hard-earned money to pay the debts of the spendthrift and carefree southerners! What would the war veterans say about this?

In July 2012, the Finnish Parliament was recalled at short notice from summer holidays to decide about an additional support package given to Spain. The majority of the government parties accepted the support package, but the parliamentary debate prior to the decision was a feast for the populists. TV images showed tired, dull ministers and the Finns Party's cheerful leader Timo Soini who, as the opposition leader, arrived at the Parliament directly from his summer holiday. In the Parliament, Soini quoted the famous children's song *Happy Robbers*. By quoting the song, he was referring to the Mediterranean countries: 'On the coasts of the Mediterranean, it has for decades been like in the night of Cardamom Town. We're softly, softly sneaking through the night of Cardamom Town. All and sundry are lying down, only crooks are toiling away in the night.' The metaphor depicted the southern states of the eurozone as crooks that are cleaning out the decent citizens' houses while they are sleeping.

'Now it's time to pay, and suddenly everyone thinks of small and gutsy Finland in the north,' said Soini to the Parliament, or rather to his supporters. The word 'gutsy' ('sisukas' in Finnish) is still often used to describe Finland's fight against the Soviet Union during the Winter and Continuation Wars. The phrase 'small and gutsy Finland' is from the Finnish author Väinö Linna's war novel *The Unknown Soldier*, which is a very significant book to many Finns. Soini often uses these kinds of literary quotes, presumably very deliberately.

When the political elite in the autumn of 1994 had its way and got Finland to join the European Union, it made a grave mistake in ignoring the people who had opposed the membership. The opposition constituted nearly one-half of the Finnish people, so it was not right to ignore them completely and act as if they had never existed. The fact that there was never a vote on joining the eurozone, but that the elite took Finland into the euro without asking the people, is now visible in the support of the Finns Party.

'Put up and shut up' is a Finnish way of silencing critical discussion. Intellectual EU-critical discussion was scarce in Finland during the first years of its membership. The few critics were quickly branded as 'boat-rockers' and holdouts who were bitter because of their defeat, and should therefore be ignored.

When intellectual discussion is not allowed or possible, non-intellectual discussion begins. For years on end, it has been churning on the Internet, where all imaginable problems are always 'the EU's fault'.

For an ordinary citizen, the EU has remained distant regardless of whether the citizen was originally for or against the membership. A shapeless and bureaucratic organisation is an easy target for the populists.

In anti-immigration circles, the EU is typically seen as a force that makes Finland open up its borders to foreigners. Many support economic co-operation but at the same time are against free movement of persons and a common asylum and refugee policy.

Someone wrote on the nationalist Hommaforum site:

*If we want to stop the unnatural multiculturalisation, we have to resign from all international treaties that are overrunning Finland's autonomous power of decision.*

Another writer continued:

*EU is dangerous to Finland. Corruption, massive bureaucracy, funds appropriated on wrongful grounds, idealisation of immigrants, positive racism, stupid laws and directives, diminishing of Finland's autonomy, and soon TURKEY!*

## The crumbling of consensus culture: silence into rumpus

In recent decades in Finland, there has prevailed a management and decision-making culture known as consensus culture – meaning striving towards agreement and understanding. In consensual decision-making the debate is not reduced to alternatives that can be voted on, instead a solution is sought by negotiating. In this consensus culture, minority interests are taken into consideration and they are fed into a whole that aims to please as many people as possible.

### Consensus-minded Finland

There is a history to this: for a small country which has always had to get along with an external authority (Sweden, Russia, the EU), it has been beneficial to stay internally united, or at least pose as united. Often this has been wise indeed. One of the strengths of a small country is that many voices have the opportunity to be heard in the decision-making process and have their views taken into account.

For instance in labour market and social policy, employers, employees and public authorities have for decades collaborated closely. If employers and employees are ready to agree on a general policy for salary rises in a rigorous and orderly fashion, without strikes or anything out of the ordinary, then the state is often committed to supporting these decisions through its own decisions on taxes or social policies. Consensus politics has often been successful: it has been regarded as a central background factor in the creation of a welfare state.

President Urho Kekkonen, a central architect of this consensus-minded Finland, was excessively powerful in office. Since then, the President's power has been significantly and concertedly diminished while the Parliament's – and in particular the government's – power has been increased. But as a decision-making culture, consensus has lived on: many Finnish organisations want to base their decisions on negotiations rather than on voting. Consensus may sound like a pleasant and compassionate decision-making culture but it has its clear drawbacks. Agreement is often not genuine but dictated by the stronger party. 'Forced consensus' is just as alive as consensus in Finland.

Finland has a true multi-party system: today, there are eight government parties, and as many as six of them are in the government. There are no large parties in Finland, but there are four middle-sized ones. Each of these receives a little under or a little over one-fifth of the votes. Today, both the most rightist and the most leftist party are in the government. The same motley government also encompasses the cultural liberalist Green League and the socially conservative Christian Democrats.

This six-party Rainbow Coalition means that, often, the government maintains a forced consensus and smiles through clenched teeth, whereas the main opposition party, the populist Finns Party, is able to easily find faults in the government's actions.

### Rocking the boat

A drawback of the consensus culture is that in Finland there is only a very thin culture of debate regarding society. When agreement is sought too fast, without a decent discussion, some views are bound to be left unexpressed. In Finland, 'rocking the boat' or expressing dissent is often considered inappropriate behaviour. One can easily get a reputation for being a 'dissident' with very little original thinking. Debaters who present even mildly non-mainstream opinions are publicly branded as 'uncooperative'.

The populist rhetoric cuts through this muffled discussion culture like a hot knife through butter, because people have a pent-up need for discussion. 'That Soini guy is so good because he dares to speak! And he really knows how to speak!' I once heard an elderly woman gushing.

A prerequisite for a consensus culture is a command of certain behavioural codes that have been polished over the years, as well as good personal contacts. Finnish policy-makers have been criticised because they are friends with each other and often understand the other parties' views all too easily. In a country with a little over five million inhabitants, the political elite is also small. It is not wise to break off contact, because you will probably have to work with the same people later. This is both a strength and a weakness in Finnish political culture. The consensus culture and the behavioural code linked to it can sometimes hinder differences of opinion from coming to a head, or even being expressed. On the other hand, it helps in finding solutions that suit as many as possible.

When this subdued discussion circle is penetrated by a force who states that he will follow only his own rules, and who strides into the middle of the room unconcerned with traditional behavioural codes, the result is confusion.

### 'Immigration-criticism'

A good example of the connection between the lack of a discussion culture and the rise of populism is how the term 'immigration-critical' has wound up as part of the Finnish vocabulary. The term 'immigration-critical' is a concept created in anti-immigration circles, which has successfully infiltrated the Finnish language. Ten years ago, this word did not exist. Now it is often used by even the mainstream media. A continuing topic of discussion is whether 'immigration-criticism' is simply a euphemism for racism – and where the boundary between freedom of speech and racism lies.

Researcher Milla Hannula, who supports nationalist politics, has published a book called *Maassa maan tavalla – Maahanmuuttokritiikin lyhyt historia* ('When in Rome – A brief history of immigration-criticism'). Hannula says that only some years ago it was forbidden to discuss the negative phenomena linked to immigration.<sup>7</sup>

'From the 1980s to the 2000s, immigration-criticism was a taboo subject in society,' Hannula said in an interview on the Hommaforum site in February 2011. 'Patriots are in certain circles of power a subject of laughter, ridicule, and slander.'

It is an interesting thought that patriotism, which used to be a virtue in Finland, has turned into something to be ridiculed. It is true that the word has developed a reactionary aura in present-day language, which certainly insults many who consider themselves traditionally patriotic.

In her book, Hannula states that in addition to the powers that be, the media also 'psychologised and demonised' citizens who expressed critical views, and did not publish their letters to the editor. According to Hannula, this was the impetus behind the creation of the civic organisation Suomen Sisu, 'a modern nationalist movement which aims to strengthen a healthy national and cultural self-esteem'. The movement is considered one of the central coalitions of immigration opposition in Finland.

As I now read the Sisu website, I find the typical 'different peoples should not be deliberately mixed' kind of thinking.<sup>8</sup> To my surprise, I also find a lot of good in the organisation's principles. I, too, am patriotic; I appreciate Finnish culture and love my mother tongue. I, too, do not support replacing national cultures with a single, English-speaking world culture. I, too, balk at the idea that 'the development of natural gender identity needs to be secured from childhood', but I doubt if I understand the word 'natural' in the same way as Sisu members. For them, 'natural' refers to heterosexuality, whereas for me it covers the whole spectrum of nature, including transgenders and intersexuality.

But as a citizen and a journalist I agree with these nationalist citizens that 'limiting and removing people's freedom of speech may give



rise to radicalism, which is why there should be nothing that cannot be discussed or criticised’.

Here the nationalist Sisu members hit the nail on the head. I am afraid that Finnish consensus culture, which favours silence and adaptation instead of discussing and handling conflicts, has for its part laid the groundwork for populist movements. If some people have felt, as Milla Hannula states, that they are not allowed to express their views and are not being heard in an appropriate discussion, the only alternative is inappropriate discussion. That is what we have now.

### The culture of silence

Another wholly separate and especially important point is that conflicting matters should be discussed without insulting others: this is a skill in which Finns need further practice. After a long era of silence, we are now at the other extreme.

Nowadays on Internet discussion forums, many appeal to freedom of speech. This concept has moved from applying to speeches by the elite to citizens’ everyday use – but at the same time its meaning has changed. Many regard freedom of speech as a motivation or even as an obligation to express oneself without any restraint, manners, or other boundaries.

‘If someone is insulted by what I say, it’s not my responsibility,’ wrote one freedom-of-speech-loving Finn on a discussion forum. Many are completely surprised by the fact that freedom of speech is restricted by criminal law, in Finland as well as in all of Europe, and that defamation is a crime on the Net as well.

The culture of silence has been a topic of many letters to the editor in the last couple of years. The writers have vented their resentment at how, for instance, when a Finn is shouting obscenities at a brown-skinned youth on a bus, the other passengers do not react at all, but instead stare out of the windows as if they have not heard a thing.

This is a typical Finnish way of behaving, but sometimes there are exceptions as well. A while back we saw in the media how Pekka Sauri, Assistant City Manager of Helsinki, had politely escorted a shouting racist off a tram. ‘The journey continued in typical Finnish silence,’ Sauri said of the situation afterwards in an online news article on the MTV3 channel. Interfering with racism is so uncommon in Finland that when someone does so, it makes the headlines.

## How party politics became a permissible topic

Unlike in many other countries, in the Finnish culture it is not appropriate to actively comment on party politics. Politically active people are a group of their own, and they naturally converse with each other and the media. One essential element of being ‘an ordinary citizen’, however, is a kind of passive neutrality. It is not generally considered appropriate to ask colleagues or neighbours which party they voted for in last weekend’s election. Sometimes even family members or close friends do not know each other’s political views or electoral choices.

Only 3 per cent of the adult population has joined a party. A party card is quite a rarity. Still, some 80 per cent of voters are loyal to their chosen party and always vote the same way.<sup>9</sup>

For someone to abandon allegiance to a party, there has to be a very compelling reason. For instance, in the second round of the January 2012 presidential election, the two candidates were the Coalition’s Sauli Niinistö and the Green League’s Pekka Haavisto, who was known to be homosexual. Polls and interviews showed agonised leftists who voted for the rightist Niinistö because they could not bear the thought of having a homosexual president. According to post-election polls, as many as a third of President Niinistö’s voters had voted for him most importantly because of his heterosexuality!<sup>10</sup>

Those with the greatest influence in Finland’s multi-party system are the swing voters, the one-fifth who choose their party and candidate based on the current circumstances. I once counted that during the last couple of decades, I have voted for candidates from six different parties.

Committing to a party in Finland is considered a risk because it is seen as ‘branding’. Even for municipal elections, everyday local democracy, the parties have a hard time getting candidates, because they are afraid of becoming branded. This again could be harmful first of all in the workplace. Neutrality, or posing as neutral, is felt to be a safer option. It is a paradox that, in a country where legislation grants great possibilities for political participation and contribution, people themselves limit their rights due to various fears, mainly the fear of becoming ‘branded’.

This form of the culture of silence was at least somewhat broken when the Finns Party started to rise. At the election tents, there were ordinary people who proudly stated that ‘I belong to the Finns Party’

or told of their plans to vote for the party. The voters for the other parties mainly stayed silent. Of course, it is always nice to be in the winner's camp, or the camp that is predicted to win, but there was something in the Finns Party's appearance that drew people in and brought the joy of participation to those who did.

At the election tent, I chatted with a young woman who was a parliamentary election candidate for the Finns Party. I knew her because she had participated in my writing course. She was full of joy. She told me she had never been active in politics, but now she felt that she had found the right group. She felt it was great to say out loud that she belonged to a group.

Pride in announcing one's position is a strength for the populists and a weakness for every other party. Of the 3 per cent, who despite the fear of becoming branded have had the courage to take a party card, most keep their political line in the background of their everyday life. At the workplace, very few start to talk about their membership of the social democrats, the centre, the coalition or the left. It is just not done in Finland.

One of the positive effects of the populists' rise is definitely the fact that politics has become a more permissible topic of conversation. The division in many civic discussions is, however, very rough: for or against the Finns Party? Many intellectuals may join forces in disapproving of the Finns Party, but still keep a tight lid on which party or candidate they themselves support.

This kind of culture is beneficial for the populists. If the supporters of other parties were as visibly proud of their choices as the Finns Party, public discussion would be wildly different.

## How the Finnish man no longer felt at home

At the heart of populism's popularity I see one central theme: the man's status. I regard a change in the traditional role model, a questioning of traditional masculinity, as a central factor when thinking about the reasons for the new kind of political activism among certain male groups.

According to the latest research, the typical Finns Party supporter is a 60-something man who lives in the countryside or in a small population centre and identifies himself as working class. He might have built his house with his own hands for his family. He appreciates the war veterans' sacrifices in the Winter and Continuation Wars against the Soviet Union. He eats honest, no-frills food such as potatoes, meat and sausages, but only as many vegetables as his wife tells him to. He likes to watch quiz shows and other entertainment on television. He reads the newspaper and votes. He sometimes places bets online. He is critical towards the elites and sometimes grunts at his wife from behind the newspaper that the current situation is unbearable and that the leaders should be replaced.

If everything in his family and immediate surroundings stays as it was, however, he is rather happy with his life.

I know a woman in her 60s, whose husband was jealous of her sporting activities and trips to competitions. The situation escalated, and the woman filed for divorce. After the divorce, the woman was happy with her freedom and enjoyed more and more trips and other activities.

I know another 50-something woman who got tired of her husband's unreliability and irresponsibility, got a divorce, and then found a nicer man. My friend in her 40s felt that in her marriage it was unfair that her husband did not take responsibility for the household chores. After her divorce, this woman enjoyed her own time and the new lease of life when she only had to take care of herself and her children and did not have to clean the kitchen every time her husband made a sandwich.

Divorced Finnish women emphasise their newfound freedom and tell us in women's magazine interviews how divorce was the only right decision. Men, on average, are not doing as well. The prototype of a dumped Finnish man is a sighing wretch next to a pint of beer, who looks at first for our sympathy, but preferably a new partner as soon as possible, because he cannot cope alone.

In Finland, like in other European countries, divorces have become more common and mundane in recent decades. Wives rather than husbands tend to be the first to ask for a divorce. Research has shown that women also cope better after the divorce. A man left alone is in greater danger of becoming an alcoholic than a woman left alone. For a man living alone, his life expectancy is shorter than for a family man.

In recent years, Finns have been shocked by several family murders where a man has killed his children, his spouse, and in some cases also himself. In some cases, the wife had filed for divorce, and in other cases the motives are unknown to the public. Regardless, these extreme cases tell a sad story about family crises behind the facade, loneliness and the insufficiency of the authorities' help. In some cases, the man had sought help, for instance for substance abuse, but had not received any.<sup>11</sup>

According to populist rhetoric, family life was better before, too: a sweet mother bustled into the kitchen, wearing an apron, set tasty food on the table, and saw to it that the husband and kids always went out in clean clothes. This ideal scene is straight from the 1950s – or rather from the 1950s ideal, which even then many did not achieve.

In the middle of the last century, in the childhood of the now 60-odd-year-old, the man's place was clear: he was the head of the family with rights and responsibilities. Now the situation is much more complex, as it is taken for granted that both spouses go to work. They should therefore also share other responsibilities fairly. A man's relationship to his children is formed through everyday care and responsibilities. Because it is usually the mother who mostly takes care of the children, in divorces the mother often gets custody, which only adds to the man's loneliness after a divorce.

What does a man left alone do in the late-night hours in his rental apartment where he moved to after the divorce, and which he has tried to furnish for the children's weekend visits? He turns on the computer, of course. He quickly browses through the news, checks his emails, feels a bit lonely, maybe even a bit bitter, and wants to communicate with someone.

There is company on the Internet, many who are just like him, plus others, and there is a lot to say. The man types in an address he got from his friend: [hommaforum.org](http://hommaforum.org). On the front page, there is immediately a thread about social workers. According to a writer called Lasse, 'the social service hags [social workers] just aggressively take away children with no good reason'.

Hommaforum is a website that was formed around the MP Jussi Halla-aho and whose male-dominated visitor group keeps up the mainly xenophobic discussion. There are other common complaints as well as irritation with the 'social service hags'. Reasons for irritation vary from the handling of children's visitation rights and alimonies

to how the social workers, according to the writers, protect foreigners, especially foreign criminals.

While the men feel they are the underdogs in custody matters, some of them feel a new kind of empowerment in the Internet's political, especially anti-immigration discussions. The populist movement in Finland has a man's face. So far there has not been a female Timo Soini, but the power in the Finns Party is mainly in the hands of men. Two-thirds of the movement's voters are men.

## How the Internet became a megaphone for the voice of the people

A central force that enabled and still enables the rise of populism in Finland is the Internet. The Web has opened up incredible possibilities to connect with like-minded people and confirm one's own views. You can say many things on the Net that in traditional Finnish discussion culture it would never be appropriate to say out loud. On the Net, you can freely hate an immigrant, anonymously, without getting caught and without anyone's appalled expression indicating that the discussion has become inappropriate.

It is very strange that immigrants can even be considered a problem in a country of whose population less than 5 per cent are foreign-born or non-citizens.<sup>12</sup> There are few true immigrants in Finland, but on the Net there is a lot of Finnish discussion about them. Two-thirds of non-natives living in Finland are European. Less than one-tenth of the foreign-born population is African. The aggression seems to be directed especially towards Africans and Russians.

I have put a lot of thought into why Finnish populism is most visibly concentrated on the theme of immigration. The populists will always be against 'the current course' in general and the European Union, whenever the issue is raised, but this critique is more ambiguous than judging the foreigners in Finland and their cultural traits. It might be easier to direct one's anger towards the brown-skinned bus driver than the complex decision-making systems of the EU. Instead, critiques of Russia are almost rare in populist rhetoric. One reason could be that the primary supporters of the Finns Party are elderly folk, who were raised to keep one's mouth shut about everything related to our eastern neighbour.

I am from the town of Oulu in northern Finland, where I was born in 1968 and where I did all my schooling. In my childhood,

I never saw a brown-skinned person in Oulu. I remember how I saw the first brown-skinned people in Paris, when my family travelled there because of my father's work contacts when I was seven. After that, I also saw one African in Helsinki. One. There were not many foreigners in Finland in the 1970s.

In school, we received cross-cultural education according to the spirit of the time. Because of its geopolitical position – next to the Soviet Union – Finland underlined the significance of the United Nations, and UN Day was celebrated very prominently in schools. We crafted flag strings and drew pictures where children of different colours played hand in hand. Most of my classmates had never seen people of different colours; I remember how I told my schoolmates that I had seen a black man in Helsinki.

We were taught to talk about ‘international co-operation’, which was in Finland’s best interests as a small neighbour of the Soviet Union. Of course, this was not said aloud, and neither were any other delicate facts relating to foreign policy.

Our polite culture of silence also affected the way we dealt with the world outside Finland. When that world finally opened, when Finland’s borders opened up and the crisis in Somalia in the early 1990s brought many more Somali refugees to the streets of Helsinki, the Finns did not know what to say at first. First we were quiet. When things started to come up that should have been talked about – like suspicions of social security being abused or crimes committed by foreigners – we still remained quiet. Those in the media believed – and rightly so – that the cases were occasional and so insignificant that they probably would not make the news if they were committed by Finns. When the Internet suddenly made discussion possible, a Pandora’s Box was opened.

According to populists, the ‘kukkahattutädit’ (flower hat aunties), those usually female officials who consider themselves broadminded and civilised, ‘fuss over’ refugees and asylum seekers at the expense of the Finns. On the Internet, there are juicy stories that multiply and snowball. A Somali family got a five-room apartment when there were Finns queuing for the apartment as well! The asylum seekers get so much social assistance that they can send money to their homeland – a man saw it with his own eyes on a visit to Western Union! The neighbours of a friend of a friend of mine are African, and they are driving a Mercedes, certainly paid for with social security money! One popular type of story has to do with accommodation: foreigners, especially brown-skinned foreigners, do not know how to live in Finnish apartments, where the inhabitant’s most important responsibility towards the neighbours is to keep one’s door shut and remain in the apartment as quietly as possible at all hours.

Some of the stories have their basis in reality, while some seem to be misunderstandings or fictive folk tales. Those who circulate the stories are on a mission: the mainstream media, allied with the ‘kukkahattutädit’, is not talking about these things, but the people reveal the truth online.

As a consequence of the early 1990s depression, charity organisations and the church’s meal centres, or in other words breadlines, became a permanent part of life in Finland. The breadline has an important symbolic meaning in Finnish social debate, because it is relatively new as a phenomenon and it crystallises the shame brought on by the financial collapse. As long as there is a Finnish person who can no longer make a living by working and has to stand in a breadline, we should, according to the populists, allow no foreigner in our country to enjoy our social security.

Hommaforum is an ‘immigration-critical’ website whose most popular discussion area, ‘the Cabin’, includes over a hundred thousand comments on the topic of ‘immigration and multiculturalism’. Hommaforum is the central meeting place for extreme nationalists and populists on the Net. Its discussions started in the blog comment section of the Finns Party MP Jussi Halla-aho, from where they were moved under the Hommaforum heading in 2008.

In the summer of 2012, MP Jussi Halla-aho, one of the Finns Party’s central forces, received a Supreme Court sentence because he had written a racist text about Muslims and published it on the Internet. He was fined for infringing the freedom of worship of Muslims and for incitement to ethnic or racial hatred, meaning racism. After the judgment, many demanded that Halla-aho resign from the office of the chairman of the Administration Committee. That committee handles immigration-related legislative matters, among others.

The significance of the Hommaforum website is shown by the fact that when Halla-aho decided to resign under pressure from the chairmanship of the committee, he did not notify the Parliament first but published a notice on the Hommaforum site. From MP Halla-aho’s viewpoint, that community was more significant than the Parliament.

## How even Jesus got involved in Finnish politics

Rapid change in the world has given rise to a neoconservative trend in Finland, which coincides with the rise of populist ideology. Like certain extreme Christian groups, the Finns Party is against marriage for sexual minorities and adoption rights.

Even though the number of members in the Evangelical Lutheran church has been declining for a long time, nearly 80 per cent of Finns belong to the church.<sup>13</sup> Finnish church habits are restrained: children are christened, weddings are celebrated in the church, and the deceased are blessed in church ceremonies. Some Christian groups and extremist movements have raised their profile by opposing the rights of sexual and gender minorities. The noise made by these extremist groups does not really move an ordinary church member in Finland.

In Finnish Christianity, religion is centrally a private matter. It is not appropriate to ask about one's faith or religion, at least not based on a short acquaintance. Even family members do not necessarily know each other's beliefs, if any. The underground religiousness resurfaces in times of crisis and at life's turning points: when a community is struck by disaster or an unreasonable act of violence such as a school shooting, the churches are filled. Otherwise we remain quiet about religion.

Even though most Finns Party supporters belong to the overwhelming majority of religiously passive members of the Lutheran state church, the Finns Party's rhetoric includes an emphasis on religious and traditional values. The motives for parading matters of faith are not necessarily religious but have more to do with underlining the 'traditional Finnish values'. Religion fits into the package of traditional family values, being a Finn, the Finnish language, and admiring traditional national romantic art.

The Finns Party leader Timo Soini is an 'exceptional' Finn in one matter: he does not belong to the Evangelical Lutheran church but instead to the Catholic church. Soini was baptised as a Lutheran but he moved churches because the Finnish Lutheran church accepts female priesthood whereas Soini does not. He has been happy to tell the media about his Catholicism, and his rhetoric is filled with



phrases and metaphors based on Christianity. In compliance with the Catholic line, he is also against abortion.

Soini also resorted to religious rhetoric in the summer of 2012, when he should have taken some kind of action because the High Court fined his party colleague, Jussi Halla-aho, for racist behaviour. A few years ago, chairman Soini said that he did not tolerate people convicted of racism in his party. When, unlike he had promised earlier, Soini did not take any action against Halla-aho, he found salvation in the Bible: sighing, he told the media that he did not want to ‘throw the first stone’. Confronted with this phrase even the media were unarmed: who among us has not done something wrong sometimes. Soini’s skilful rhetorical move cut the discussion short, and afterwards the media did not bring him to book for retracting his earlier promise.

Practically all Finns have received enough Christian education to recognise these sorts of phrases on some level. Soini never underlines where the phrases are from but still – and maybe because of that – the message gets through.

A researcher from Turku University, Laura Parkkinen, has researched populist rhetoric and written about Timo Soini’s manner of speaking.<sup>14</sup> According to Parkkinen, Soini draws from the Bible but also from sports. Part of his attire is the fan scarf of the British Millwall Football Club. In his biblical rhetoric, Soini builds on the personal and relaxed style of American preachers but adapts his messages to the subdued Finnish style. He likes to use the ambiguous word ‘Word’, which he biblically capitalises in his blog: the Word remains, the Word is the core. This kind of communication can be interpreted both as religious and as secular speech – whatever the reader or listener wants.

One can also discover similarities to the Jesus of the Bible in Soini’s speech. When in January 2012 Soini did not get to the second round of the presidential election, he comforted his supporters by starting his speech with the same words that, according to the Bible, Jesus used to comfort his: ‘Let not your heart be troubled.’ As usual, he left out that the quote was from the Gospel of John, although the old-fashioned linguistic form undoubtedly produced the right association in many listeners’ minds. Nor did he mention how that Bible verse continues: ‘Ye believe in God, believe also in me.’ Soini likes to appear messianically as the hope and salvation of his movement.

How did the other politicians react to the new Jesus in Finnish politics? Some were bothered, some stayed silent. It is interesting how Finns do not usually respond with religious rhetoric to a populist politician who himself uses religious rhetoric. Most of the MPs belong to the Evangelical Lutheran church, there are large numbers of church members in every party, and nearly all have at least adequate command of religious rhetoric. Why do they not respond to Soini in kind?

Because most of the other politicians are powerless in front of this kind of religious figure. Because faith is a private matter in Finland, it has been deemed inappropriate to mix it with politics. For instance, the MPs from the Centre Party who belong to the Laestadian revivalist movement emphasise how they are expressly social and political figures and not representatives of a certain religious group. They even avoid talking about religion in connection with politics rather than actively bringing it up. The Christian Democrat party is very small and emphasises that it is a general party and not a religious party. Religious speech has never been part of Finnish political discourse.

When Soini monopolises religious language as part of his party rhetoric, others seem to just watch on helplessly. It is hard to object to Jesus, because people usually do not do that in Finland.

The neo-religiousness of the Finns Party panders better to the public than to political professionals. In late 2011, Soini took part in an event of the Lutheran revivalist movements called ‘Is the man lost?’ (The traditional revivalist movements are worried about the male position that, according to them, has been weakened by ‘the crumbling of traditional family values’.)

At the event, Soini wooed the conservatives of the Lutheran church by saying that the reformists were harassing the conservatives. ‘I usually do not commit myself on matters of the Lutheran church. Nevertheless, I am worried about them harassing certain parts of their own church in a manner which will not lead to any good,’ Soini said. He implied that the ever more powerful liberal trend of the Evangelical Lutheran church had put the conservatives in a tight corner.

This kind of speech panders especially to elderly folk living in the countryside, who value the traditional interpretation of Christianity. The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church has been renewed and modernised in recent years. For instance, the bishops have expressed their support towards homosexual church members more clearly than before. This has appalled many conservative believers and may paradoxically even strengthen the populist political forces: if the church has too liberal a line, only Jesus or Timo Soini can save us.

## How the new publicity game confused the media

As a journalist, I, like my colleagues, have been trained to make observations, to analyse them, to deepen my knowledge, and then to serve the results of this process to the audience. I am still ashamed that I, like most of my colleagues, refused to see the signs of the rise of populism even though they were there to be seen as early as ten years ago.

In the early 2000s, men started to appear on the streets wearing lion pendants. The lion is in the coat of arms of Finland, and the pendant is made to the pattern of the coat of arms' lion. I did not pay much attention, because the men wearing the pendants were in every way ordinary Finnish men. However, Finnish men do not usually wear necklaces. An ordinary man wearing a pendant was something new but not strange enough for me to start thinking about the significance of the lion.

At the same time, there began to appear T-shirts with a picture of the coat of arms, and other T-shirts with writing that praised war veterans and remembered the Winter War. This is where the onlooker should have noticed that those wearing the shirts were young and middle-aged; that is, men who could not have any personal ties to the past wars because of their age. They had another reason for their choice.

Hate speech started to gain strength online little by little, at first very quietly. Journalists did not pay attention for years. I guess we thought that they were the lonely acts of some individual troublemakers, and did not feel the need to intervene.

Finland is a small country of a little over five million inhabitants with a comparatively united media environment. The news of one news agency, Finnish News Agency STT, is distributed all over the country in print and online newspapers and through radio channels. The national broadcasting company produces its own news but the agenda is typically very similar to the news desks of commercial media houses. If a news desk of a newspaper makes a significant piece of news on its own, the others copy it in an instant, and the same information is again on offer through several media sources. It has been said that there can be only one talking point at a time in Finland.

For a long time, the populists did not get to be this talking point. When they finally did, the publicity was even bigger.

Many political desks were slow to react to the populism phenomenon. Political journalists were used to hobnobbing with the elites of the major parties (Coalition, Centre and Social Democrats). The political elite and the media elite thought for a long time that everything would remain more or less unchanged.

When the opinion polls in 2000 and the years that followed started to show a rise in the Finns Party's support, the media woke up. Prior to the parliamentary election of 2011, the media binged on about the rise of the Finns Party with such enthusiasm that the publicity probably only added to the popularity of the party. Friendly and sympathetic feature stories were published about Timo Soini. Jussi Halla-aho was covered as well, but his 'original thinking' stayed in the shadow of the jovial and funny Soini.

In the parliamentary election of 2003, support for the Finns Party stood at 1 per cent and in 2007 it stood at 4.1 per cent. In the parliamentary election of 2011, the party received 19.1 per cent of the vote. Its parliamentary faction in the 200-seat parliament grew from seven to 39 seats.<sup>15</sup>

As early as the European Parliament elections in the spring of 2009, Timo Soini was the leading vote magnet with his 130,000 votes. The anti-EU group had found a channel for expressing their opinions.

The Internet has strongly reduced the elites' ability to control the public debate. Media and especially tabloid papers still have influence over the talking points of the day, but the voice of the political elite especially has grown ever fainter. The politicians often feel that even their significant initiatives do not get enough attention in the media. They do not make the headlines by default any more, as they did when the media supply was smaller than today and the Internet did not exist.

In the fight for media attention, the weapons used are different from before. Populist politicians, with the Finns Party's Timo Soini leading the way, know how to utilise the possibilities of fast, superficial publicity. They also know how to speak to the point – and do not let fact hinder their communication. 'Where there's the EU, there's a problem,' Soini summarised years ago and many Finns grinned with satisfaction. The difficult, complex and distant European Union for once was comprehensible, for one sentence.

The media's task is to convey accurate and meaningful information. Its primary task is not to worry about the possible effects of publishing the information. Naturally, the media had to react to the Finns Party's rise in the polls but it is reasonable to ask if it carried out its task well enough.

Representatives of other parties have criticised the media for cosetting the Finns Party and letting them play by their own rules before the election, instead of expecting from them the same things as the

others. According to the critics, journalists liked to publish Timo Soini's amusing speeches but did not require information and factual arguments from him as they did for other party leaders. I, too, observed this while following the election debates: Soini got off easier than the rest because the journalists saw something new and interesting in him.

After the election, the wind turned in the media. In the parliamentary election, several politically inexperienced people were elected from the Finns Party's list who had no experience working with the media either. The media triumphantly reported on their blunders: one freshly elected MP talked in front of the cameras about 'nigger men', drank with motorcycle gang members and told a school group visiting the Parliament that if homosexuals have children, the children will be 'double homos'. The aide of another MP wrote in her blog that foreigners and the Swedish-speaking should be assigned a mandatory badge on their sleeve. All this made big headlines, although with the 'sleeve badge' sensation it was unclear whether it was a serious proposition or just a failed attempt at humour.

The excessive publicity of this kind has lately stirred up a discussion on whether the media cover the Finns Party's blunders more easily than those of others. It is probable that if one of the rank-and-file MPs of the Social Democrats or the Coalition said stupid things about foreigners, the matter would be covered with a much smaller headline. Some Finns Party MPs have expressed their frustration at how the no-nonsense motions made by the party are lost in entertaining, sensational headlines.

I think that the biggest problem in current reporting on the populists is that the populists offer the media an easy way to produce easy journalism. Today there is a lot of financial pressure in the editorial offices, and more and more content is produced faster and faster, but with a smaller editorial staff than before. There is a great temptation to step into the populists' trap.

This was visible in the news coverage of the euro crisis in the summer of 2012. We hit rock-bottom in July, when the Finnish Parliament was recalled from its holidays to debate a vote of no-confidence in the government on the decision regarding Spain's support package. It was clear beforehand that the majority formed by the MPs from the governing parties would vote in the government's favour. The parliamentary discussion, which was widely reported on, was a triumph for the populists and offered the media an easy way to produce easy journalism. At the forefront of the coverage were the populist leader Timo Soini's wisecracks about the Mediterranean way of life and Finland who has to pay for it all.

In this questionable show of fireworks, what really mattered was left in the background. For instance, the main daily in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, reported on how the MPs had to familiarise themselves with

a 130-page, ‘rather indigestible’ EU financing document and its 17-page summary, which had been translated into domestic languages. Even though the newspaper proudly reported having acquired the document, it did not really explain to the readers what the document contained.

If the paper had at least published the document online, the readers could have familiarised themselves with it if they wanted to. Although the material was indigestible and mainly in a foreign language, some of the Finnish public would probably have liked to know more about Finland’s financing commitments than the quips the populists were making on the matter. Even if the editorial staff could not understand the material, there probably would have been people in Finland who could have understood it.

One would naturally hope that the editorial staff would perform their demanding expert jobs properly and not leave it to the readers. This, however, requires a change in emphasis: instead of reporting on Timo Soini’s wisecracks, time should be spent reading up on the matter. That is exactly what the desks did not seem to have time for.

The challenges of journalism include defending freedom of speech while the use of that freedom becomes more and more frenzied. In many editorial offices, it seems unclear what the media’s reaction to populist speeches should be.

As little as ten years ago, there was an impression that ‘there is no racism in Finland’. During recent years, there has been a lot of racist speech. Racism as a concept has entered the public domain: the cover of a women’s magazine asked a while ago if it is okay for a woman to say that she is ‘slightly racist’. A new phenomenon is people who even take pride in their publicly expressed racist attitudes.

Because the debate on racism is something new in Finland, many have had difficulties in drawing the line between racism and normal discussion. The problem can be seen both in the media and elsewhere in society. Is it racist to say the jeweller’s robber was from Somalia? The media have mainly wanted to act correctly and not underline the offenders’ ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, this has led to some of the public angrily asking why the media cover up crimes committed by foreigners.

Now when people are discussing the matter anyway, without asking for the media’s permission, the media have to work out what to do about the debate. Should an MP’s racist speech be published as such, so that the public will know what kind of person is representing them? Or should the editorial staff refuse to publish and distribute the racist thoughts, and report in a summary only that the MP has made an inappropriate appearance? Or should they leave the whole thing out, in which case it would inevitably come out through some other channel and raise the question of why the media did not want to report the MP’s speech?

These are questions that are under constant consideration in editorial offices. They are affected by legislation as well as journalistic ethics and the cultural climate: what can be said. On the other hand, a journalist’s task is to correctly bring to the fore all relevant information, even when the contents are questionable.

The journalists’ role as a whole has to be reformed now that they do not have their prior status as ‘gatekeepers’ and information filters. The public often has unrestricted access to the same sources of information as the journalists. For this reason, just conveying information is not enough; instead more structuring and assessing of information is needed.

## Why now?

Populism is in no way new in Finland. The Finns Party is a continuation of the Finnish Rural Party (SMP), which was founded by the charismatic and folksy Veikko Vennamo in 1958. The movement appealed to the low-income rural population, many of whom were evacuees from Karelia, which Finland lost to the Soviet Union in the Winter War. The SMP was a government party from 1983 to 1990 but went bankrupt in 1995 due to internal conflicts and weakening election results. In the same year, the SMP's party secretary Timo Soini together with the old party executives started a new party, the Finns Party.

Considering this background, it is funny how Timo Soini, who joined the SMP when he was 16 in 1979, likes to present the Finns Party as something new and fresh compared to 'the old parties', which he calls the other big and middle-sized parties. He himself has belonged to the political elite for decades but likes to appear as if he was a fresh face in the midst of the 'dirty old scoundrels' (as Veikko Vennamo put it).

It is interesting why the rise of the Finns Party started just when it did, no sooner and no later. In this text, I have aimed to outline the cultural factors and reasons that have shaped Finland into a favourable playing field for populist players. Another important explanation is foreign influence, such as developments in Europe, which is covered in other essays in this Counterpoint series. Finland is in step with the rest of Europe in this matter as well.

The Finnish Rural Party used loud rhetoric to champion the unsatisfied small farmers and other poor folks in the countryside, the war veterans, and the uneducated working classes. The Finns Party defends the 'Finnish people'. Compared to the SMP, what is new is the extreme nationalist wing that shuns foreigners. It hardly could have arisen in the Finland of past decades, where there were very few foreigners.

The spiritual heritage of the SMP can be seen in the Finns Party's attitudes in many ways. For instance, the party does not place a high value on education, but instead emphasises the citizen's opportunity and right to work with little education. This appeals to the lower educated, who do not think that they are able to compete for jobs with better-educated foreigners.

Veikko Vennamo did not trust expertise based on education but repeated ad nauseam that 'the people know'. The same attitude has continued in the Finns Party. Instead of knowledge and expertise, the party utilises feelings and moods. It underlines everyone's right to tell 'home truths' regardless of whether the speaker really knows anything about the subject in question.

Both the SMP and the Finns Party parade equality but in a slightly different sense than how the intelligentsia have traditionally understood the word. For populists, 'equality' means that no expert is above others. The educated, the intelligentsia and the 'gentlemen' are no more experts in Finnish matters than the uneducated. If a journalist interviews a researcher and the man in the street, both should receive the same weight in the story.

I was once on the radio commenting on politics in a broadcast, where the other guest was Matti Putkonen, a representative of the Finns Party executive committee. He calls himself a 'workman'. In the discussion, our arguments did not meet at all: even though the subject was the same and the journalist tried to lead the discussion, Putkonen played with one set of cards and I played with another. It was as if each of us was speaking a foreign language that the other did not understand at all. It was not a discussion but two parallel presentations.

But populist rhetoric is not directed towards debating partners in the political elite and the media but towards the public. If the party leader's emotive metaphors about the 'granny deep in the woods' bring at least a few new voters to the party, the party executive's time spent participating in the radio show was not wasted.

## What can be done? Six paths towards a more humane politics

The aim of this Counterpoint essay series is to consider the means with which voters drawn to populism could be encouraged to support a humane, genuinely constructive politics.

Although I do not sympathise with populist politics, I feel that it has brought some good characteristics into Finnish politics. These are a good starting point when thinking about what in general should be done differently from before in the political field.

The first good thing is that *the populists have increased Finns' interest in politics and their faith in the possibilities of democratic contribution*. The Finns Party got those people to vote who would have otherwise left their right to vote unused. This would not have happened if the Finns Party's candidates had not managed to convince the voters of the possibility of change.

Secondly, in their communication the populists have *broken the hierarchies of Finnish society and offered people an opportunity to be heard*. Instead of the elites conversing with each other and the people conversing with each other, the populists have integrated the citizens into political discussion, especially on the Internet.

Thirdly, the populists have *increased people's pride in contributing to politics*. They have managed to gather people on their candidate lists that have no previous connections to policy-making. They have managed to show that participating in politics is a normal and relevant civic action. One should be proud and happy about political participation instead of avoiding or hiding it, such as at the workplace.

Fourthly, the populists have *broken the taboos of the Finnish debating culture*. They have brought subjects into discussion that the elite ignored before. There are many opinions on the sensibility of those subjects but in a healthy democracy there needs to be an atmosphere with no so-called forbidden subject matters.

Fifthly, the populists *aim to express things understandably*. The aim is excellent, although they have not really succeeded in implementing it. The results have been unintelligent, have used excessive simplifications, and at the same time the issues have been polarised into



one-dimensional confrontations. However, it is praiseworthy that there is an aim to use clear language, which is also understandable to non-experts, when talking about complex matters.

If we want to encourage the people drawn to populism to vote for parties that are constructive for society with respect for everyone's human dignity, we need changes both in the culture and in the practices of politics. In the following, I will present six paths that could help us take a course towards a more humane Finland.

### 1 Enhance citizens' sense of security

The people elected as decision-makers should give serious consideration to citizens' concerns about their own livelihood. Employment-promoting economic policy should be of primary importance. Young people's access to education and labour markets is important, as well as the genuine re-education of those in the 50–63 age group (instead of humiliating them in low-quality pseudo-education.)

Social security must be enhanced so that it really grants the minimum livelihood for all life's transitions and creates a sense of security for the whole population, as well as for those who are currently doing well.

Finland's plans for the future need to clearly take into consideration that not all can be 'top experts' but that everyone still has to have their place in society. In the decision-makers' rhetoric, hope and survival must be underlined instead of constant threats and dangers.

There should be significantly more expert help for supporting families. Changes in role models, loneliness and financial worries are burdening relationships and families. Family support, preventative therapy and early intervention significantly improve the wellbeing of the whole society.

### 2 Utilise the pros of the consensus tradition

Unlike the members of many larger populations, the Finns can still be assured that in certain matters our interest is common, and we should seek solutions that are accepted by all. Finland is small and culturally still so unified that all citizens can be reached, and we can obtain extensive information about their views, desires and hopes. Even though we have many kinds of people and subcultures in our country, they can still agree on those things that serve everyone's interests.

### 3 Improve the culture of debate and communication

Unlike in many other countries, Finnish schools do not generally include, for instance, debating in their curricula, and it is not widely used as a teaching method. The Finns should be taught to disagree politely and amicably.

The media should take responsibility as a promoter of an objective debating culture among the adult population. For instance, offensive posts using aliases on the websites of media outlets should be intercepted more vigorously than at present.

All Finns are partly responsible for racist attitudes being visibly judged and inappropriate behaviour being disapproved of.

### 4 Normalise politics

Participating in politics should become a normal, appreciated civic action which does not cause any kind of 'stigma' or other negative effects such as discrimination in working life. If this occurs, the officials and the judiciary must react swiftly and lawfully.

When participating in politics, for instance as an election candidate, which is an ordinary civic activity, the political spectrum is diversified. When there are more and more citizens who are familiar with politics and have good knowledge, the playing field for the populist forces is reduced.

### 5 The political elite must learn how to listen

The method of keeping the public out of policy-making is so devastating that it has to change. Listening is genuine multi-way communication and interaction. It is not enough that there is a dull discussion forum on the party website where a couple of activists squabble over trivialities. We have to create truly significant channels on the Internet and in other media for citizens' contribution.

Citizens' knowledge, intellect and care must be included in politics as central driving forces. Citizens must be integrated into preparatory work in a more varied manner than today, where there are 'always the same experts' in working groups and other preparatory bodies. We need more referendums.

The political elite has to understand that the citizens are not an 'audience' to which policies are made or presented, but instead they are the central reason, target and driving force for all political action. Their existence and views must be able to influence politics, including in between elections.

### 6 The political elite, officials and the media must learn to communicate complex matters understandably

'This is too difficult to explain' is a wrong attitude. All matters related to decision-making in society have to be explained popularly; this is a question of communications skills. If the political elite does not bother to explain or does not know how to explain to the people what the matter is about, the populist will do it – in their own way, which does not necessarily serve the overall interests of society.



The media must aim to produce high-quality journalism which sheds light on the backgrounds and the connections between different matters and explains all this in a way that is both understandable and interesting, by means of text and visualisation. Instead of reporting on populist politicians' statements, the journalist should concentrate on clarifying the actual matters at hand. The populists must be treated in the media with the same requirements and criteria of knowledge as other policy-makers.

## In conclusion

In a small society such as Finland, isolating any group is always the worst option. Instead of branding the populists' supporters as 'basket cases', they should be encouraged to explain what the real problem is – and their message should be taken seriously.

Finland is going through a cultural change, where the pace of change is fast in many aspects of life. Some of the changes are certainly necessary, but some could be slowed down or postponed so that those suffering because of the pace would not be left so badly behind.

I think that the most important thing to do is to strengthen citizens' general sense of security – and by this I certainly do not mean border surveillance or the army, but livelihood, activities, the experience of a meaningful life, and self-respect.

A person who is not afraid has a better chance of seeing the humanity in others.

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# The roots of contemporary populism in the Netherlands

Yvonne Zonderop,  
July 2013

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## A culture of equality

### To condone rather than command

The Dutch rarely dwell on the fact that their country is a small paradise for children. According to new research by the World Health Organization (WHO), Dutch children are the happiest of all countries in the West. They are the most healthy, enjoy going to school and have a good rapport with their parents.<sup>1</sup>

This remarkable international result does not evoke special pride in the Dutch. It goes without saying that children are happy and perform well; it is part and parcel of the Dutch culture. Parents are expected to provide as carefree a youth as possible for their children, preferably with few duties. Responsibilities will enter their lives eventually, when they have reached adulthood.

In raising children, the Dutch consider one aspect crucial: the bond of trust between parent and child. The Dutch consider their children to have individual personalities from an early age. They have ‘an interest in the soul of the Dutch child’, as journalist Greta Riemersma puts it. Parents do not instruct their children often, nor do they forbid much. Compared to children in other countries, Dutch youth enjoy many freedoms. Raising children is a matter of example and condonation, the practice of letting children explore the world on their own initiative, while keeping a watchful eye. Parents are not absent; they stick around in order to intervene when necessary, but they try to limit this. Preferably, children teach themselves to control their impulses, so as to internalise good behaviour – Dutch education is an exercise in civilisation. In this process parents behave as loving counsellors, rather than exercising clear authority. They try to shield their children from conflict. Even if they give their children a clear assignment, the purpose is for them to be happy.

The obvious consequences are visible, for instance, in public spaces. The Dutch cultural critic Michael Zeeman once said: ‘If, on the service stations adjacent to the European highways, one sees children jumping on the tables and benches, one can be certain: these people are Dutch.’ Indeed, Dutch parents will not easily get their children to behave; and even then usually only after a while. One cannot count on young people to yield their seats for older passengers on buses or trams, certainly

not in cities. They may not even allow all passengers off the bus before boarding. The national airport Schiphol has adjusted to this behaviour. Electronic signposts explicitly state walking on the conveyor belts is prohibited, an announcement I have never seen at any other airport.

The Dutch way is essentially about condoning, so that children will gradually learn how to behave themselves. This explains a lot about Dutch culture and it clarifies much about the social behaviour of the Dutch. This approach is not limited to raising children, of course. It manifests itself in the social mores of the country. The Dutch are known to tolerate a lot. They will not easily address each other about unwanted behaviour. Ideally, people become civilised by learning from surrounding examples. Authorities are supposed to interfere as little as possible. Clear attempts to exert authority often evoke jeering reactions. The Dutch treat each other as equals, even when in fact they are not – just as parents and children actually are not.

### No breaking rank

Equality is an important concept in Dutch culture; the country is steeped in it. This is also well recognised abroad: ‘going Dutch’ is generally known as an equal split of the bill by all participants. The characteristic Dutch landscape is a fitting background for this mentality. The word ‘the Netherlands’ literally means ‘the, low lying lands’. The territory has been known as the lowlands, or Pays-Bas, across the world for many centuries. Indeed, large parts of the landscape consist of flat land as far as the eye can see. Even from a distance one can observe what the neighbours are doing. No hills or mountains obscure the view. The landscape does not change its appearance in twilight. No mysteries here: the Dutch landscape is open, clear, light, spacious and flat.

Folk wisdoms, expressed in idioms, reflect this ‘flat’ culture. A typical Dutch saying goes ‘behave normally, that’s weird enough already’. This saying conveys two ideas: the Dutch must behave ‘normally’ – they are expected to live modestly and not brag or show off. At the same time, they should not deviate from common practice. All are equal and woe betide those who depart from this: the consequences will be dear. Another popular saying refers to this danger explicitly: ‘one is not supposed to stick one’s head above the hedge’. Anyone who does risks losing it to the hedge trimmer.

Behaving normally is an internalised code. The magnificent Dutch paintings of the 17th century exhibit the most beautiful examples. Rembrandt, Vermeer and Pieter de Hoogh became world famous for their focus on humans and their depictions of scenes at the home: no kings in all their splendour and glory, but instead hand-scrubbed streets in Delft, lonely old men, or a mother playing

with her child. Art historians have indicated that women are depicted benignly in these paintings as they fulfil normal daily chores around the house. This is also an aspect of Dutch culture. The famed Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede demonstrated with a self-developed index that the Netherlands enjoys a feminine culture.<sup>2</sup> Brute force is seldom applied and is rarely effective. Dutch men are not known to be bursting with testosterone. Police and army are service-oriented rather than aggressive. In Afghanistan ‘the Dutch approach’ was known as a method of winning trust from the local population by helping them with their daily practical problems instead of simply cruising around in tanks.

### The virtues of modesty

This is all very nice, but it does have a downside. Feminine-value patterns do not always stimulate people to bring out their best. The inclination to constantly judge each other can be stifling. One could make a comparison to the way crabs prevent each other from climbing out of a basket. As soon as one of them tries to escape, all crabs join forces to pull her down. Feminists may be familiar with this example, but it applies to other cultures too, especially in the Netherlands. Shared misery is preferred to one or two escaping their fate; one is not supposed to elevate oneself above the group.

This feeling is deeply rooted in the Dutch mentality. If one were to wander along the Amsterdam canals – the historical city centre classified as world heritage by UNESCO – one would not expect them to have belonged to the wealthiest parts of the world during the 17th and 18th centuries. In an interview with *De Groene Amsterdammer* magazine, Professor Giseline Kuipers was quoted as saying, ‘Modesty has long been a persistent attribute in Dutch society. One was not supposed to show that one was doing quite well. This principle is represented in the architecture of the grachtengordel buildings. Only by looking very hard could one perhaps discover a tiny ornament on the top floor of these houses. This, of course, stems from culture.’<sup>3</sup>

One will search in vain for expensive palaces full of mirrored rooms in the Netherlands; they simply have not been built. While kings and emperors ruled in surrounding countries, the Netherlands was a Republic in which burghers enjoyed far-reaching rights and freedoms. Only much later did the Netherlands become a kingdom. Since the end of the 19th century, a line of queens has led the royal house of Orange. The royals are now quite popular, provided that they behave according to the norm. For instance, the Crown Prince’s three daughters travel to school by bike every day, rain or shine, just

like everybody else. The family sold the expensive villa they had bought in Mozambique due to the ruckus it provoked in society. Those complaints were typically Dutch. Even the royal family would not dare to assume airs.

### Among equals

Globalisation has certainly left its mark in the Netherlands, yet the egalitarian mentality persists. An Air France board member, whose company merged with the Dutch national carrier KLM a few years ago, supplied two illuminating examples in an interview with the Dutch business daily *Het Financieele Dagblad*. In France, he said, if a manager happens to have lunch with his subordinates, he speaks while the employees listen. But in the Netherlands it is the other way around. The manager is expected to listen, which he or she usually does, while staff members openly express their opinions.

Bluntness is a typical Dutch manner, indeed. Dutch managers working abroad often learn this the hard way. Suddenly they have to give clear assignments as staff are waiting for instructions, not being used to voicing their opinions – let alone blatantly expressing their views – as the Dutch do.

All this voicing of opinions has a cause, as the Air France board member shrewdly remarked. The Dutch attempt to reach consensus. It is their ultimate goal. If in Italy or France eight out of ten team members are in favour of a certain course of action, the matter is settled: majority rules. Not so in the Netherlands. Here, people discuss the matter until all ten team members agree and are convinced. Even if this process takes time, it must be done. The Dutch conscientiously work towards mutual agreement; only then will they move forward. As long as overall consensus is lacking, they feel free to abstain. For people with a non-Dutch background, this is often difficult to grasp.

### The social polder

This urge towards universal consent is expressed in a nearly untranslatable, specifically Dutch concept: ‘to polder’. It means discussing, giving and taking, until everybody has agreed. The concept ‘to polder’ refers directly to the specific Dutch custom of winning land from the sea. It made the Netherlands famous across the world. More than one-third of Dutch territory lies below sea level. High, self-made dykes protect the land against the sea. Much land was extracted from the sea, sometimes by natural causes, but more often by human labour. Over a thousand years ago the first dykes were built to protect the inhabitants against the rising tides.

The Dutch also built dykes around lakes or other bodies of water, which they slowly milled dry, using the iconic windmills.

This procedure resulted in flat and level lands that the Dutch call polders. The soil consists of wet clay, fertile for grass, making it excellently suited for livestock that produce the Dutch milk used for making cheese. For the Dutch, the iconic picture of their country consists of a polder meadow with cows grazing, rather than a picture of windmills or tulips. The polders were even used to offer protection against enemies. When their armies approached, the Dutch would puncture the dykes, causing the polders to flood and the armies to drown, keeping the burghers in their small cities out of reach.

The battle against the sea and the subsequent winning of the polderlands resulted from intensive collaboration between farmers, burghers and the aristocracy. All had an interest in keeping their feet dry, and all needed to put in an effort to reach this goal. Lacking a central authority to enforce action, the Dutch needed to solve the problem among themselves. That was why it was essential that everybody agreed and actually participated.

This last aspect has often been ignored by critics of the practice of ‘poldering’. Indeed, it takes time to get everyone involved, and surely a decision-making process would be faster if decided by majority vote. But once an agreement is reached, this implies all participants are bound to execution. All share responsibility. Time lost in the initial phase often gets regained in execution. The open and flat polder offers no place to evade responsibility, to hold one’s ground, to say ‘yes’ but to do the opposite. This goes towards explaining Dutch economic successes. Although minimal authority has been exercised, quite a lot has been achieved.

## Consensus unmasked

### **The informalities of professional interaction**

Or should we say: used to be achieved? In recent years the polder model has lost nearly all of its lustre. Whereas in the 1990s the Netherlands was lauded worldwide for its excellent economic results and the social welfare it developed, the Dutch themselves developed serious doubts. Public opinion regarding 'polderen' has dwindled considerably in the last few years. To polder still represents lengthy discussion, but without the striking results. Nor do people feel it to be a joint effort any more. For a country that holds discussion and consensus to be crucial to the national identity, this is quite a dramatic outcome. Its development coincides with the rise of populism.

In recent years 'to polder' has become synonymous with a single aspect of Dutch society: the socio-economic infrastructure. The underlying cultural connotations of the age-old dyke-builders from the Middle Ages have been lost. Now the polder symbolises the regulated discussion between unions and organisations of employers, who have struck deals on lots of topics, ranging from pensions to vocational training. This socio-economic polder has gained power since the 1950s. Any deal between employers and unions regarding workers' pay automatically receives legal force – a measure of the polders' weight in Dutch politics.

But the climate has been changing. In the 1970s and 1980s the unions could enforce improvements by means of action. Gradually, however, the polder model became a culture in itself, serving professionals from both sides, who, with the best intent, nevertheless slowly lost sight of their constituencies. High-level stakeholders would meet and discuss conflicting interests; but in fact they had turned into similar kinds of people, who were supposed to be adversaries, yet had lots in common and spoke the same language.

### **Backroom politics**

The populists were the first to criticise this development. They certainly succeeded in damaging the polder model image. Today, the Dutch think of poldering as almost equivalent to discussions among insiders who eventually reach incomprehensible compromises. According to

recent research conducted by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), half of the Dutch population consider aiming for compromise to be unsatisfactory politics.<sup>4</sup>

Populism has been present in the Netherlands for more than 10 years now, and it shows. Ideas have been discussed, considered and debated between strong proponents and opponents for many years. Simple statements against ‘those hideous’ populists have given way to intelligent criticism, not only regarding populist views but also regarding some of their complaints. Many Dutch people still dislike the populists and the majority of the Dutch electorate could hardly be considered supportive. But populism has not been a whim and it has proven not to be a mere hobby of a specific interest group. Its rise signals a changing equilibrium in Dutch society and must be understood as such.

### The mystery of Pim Fortuyn

Who, for example, would be able to put a finger on the first Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn? He proved difficult to pinpoint, even for the Dutch. Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002, was a frivolous character, openly homosexual, who let himself be driven around in a Daimler by his butler. He provided a unique spectacle in the Netherlands. Fortuyn argued for putting a hold on immigration. Many regular Dutch people supported this idea but others thought it outrageous, and elites were horrified. They accused him of racism, but whether this was true is open for debate. Fortuyn judged Islam for being a backward culture, not for its religious values, although many failed to see the difference.

At the same time, Fortuyn attacked the management culture in large parts of public services. He accused managers of promoting their own interests; of awarding themselves ever more pay, while forcing teachers, nurses and housing staff into all kinds of anonymous and bureaucratic management schemes. This critique struck a note not only with the staff involved but also with many Dutch people who worried about public services being taken over by technocratic management. Fortuyn wrote: ‘We have become lost.’ He touched a nerve with many.

Fortuyn actually led the polls during the 2002 election campaign. He might have been prime minister. But his party LPF soon became a magnet for discontent of all sorts, even more so after Fortuyn himself was assassinated.

The murder of Fortuyn in May 2002 – committed by a lone animal activist who had lost his bearings – proved to be a watershed. Politics lost its innocence in a single blast, no matter what one thought about Fortuyn and his approach. For a while, LPF took part in a haphazard

coalition government, but soon decay set in. The party disappeared from the stage. However, it did prepare the ground for others to sow – and harvest – populist sentiment.

Since then, populism has grown in the Netherlands. Gradually, it has become clear that the movement is not solely targeted at the multicultural society. Populists have tried to grasp any topic that might bother common citizens: bankers and their bonuses, a failing EU, Greek national debt, young criminals of Moroccan descent. Still, the attitude towards immigrants has become quite nasty in the Netherlands. Unemployment rates among youths from non-Dutch origin are astoundingly high. Discrimination persists, but this causes considerably less disapproval than it did, for instance, 10 years ago. The populists’ style has left its mark; Fortuyn’s phrase ‘I say what I think’ has become a pretext for easily hurting people’s feelings. Over the past 10 years the Netherlands has not been a comfortable place to live in for immigrants, not even for those who were born there. Still, one could argue this to be a consequence of the populists’ style, heartily embraced by a fascinated media, than being their actual goal. Professor of national history James Kennedy said: ‘In the end, populists are far angrier with the elites than with the immigrants.’<sup>5</sup> The elites have only recently started to learn this lesson.

## Elites under fire

### Repressive tolerance

How could populism become so popular in a prosperous and egalitarian country like the Netherlands? There are several answers to this interesting question, and they each have a point. First, simply because it can. The Dutch political system is very open to newcomers. It is an easy job to start a new political movement. The voting threshold is low and parties, instead of voters, decide who their members of parliament will be. Since the decline of the pillar system, many Dutch people are in search of their political identity. Newcomers often get the benefit of the doubt. So for years political movements have come and gone in the Dutch parliament. Some have disappeared as quickly as they emerged. In the 1990s, for instance, three different political parties representing the elderly participated in parliamentary elections. One of them actually occupied six of the 150 seats. But only five years later, none of those parties still existed.

The low voting threshold conforms to the old Dutch polder tradition. Polder management used to be in the hands of coalitions of parties that had little in common except for their communal worries. Historically, the Netherlands was home to all sorts of church communities, each one a little different from the other. They all sought representation. The polder tradition supported this. Parties would not dwell on their differences but focus on what could be achieved together. Conflicting views simply would not be debated, but rather were taken for granted – otherwise nothing would be accomplished.

The Dutch parliament offers a similar picture. Over the years many parties have been represented, sometimes with only a handful of seats, while at the same time the larger factions have led the way. As a consequence, a party has had to last one or preferably two elections before being taken seriously by the Dutch voter. The populists have withstood this test easily, albeit in different forms. So today they are part of the political landscape.

But the rise of the populists is also connected to the attitude of the Dutch elites. In his rather brilliant book *Building New Babylon*,<sup>6</sup> historian James Kennedy argued that the Dutch elites are not inclined to defend their positions and interests as a matter of principle, unlike

the elites in surrounding countries. They react in the usual Dutch way: using a form of repressive tolerance, such as condoning the new movement, while hoping it eventually becomes civilised. There is an analogy with Dutch upbringing: when possible, one tries to avoid conflict, while also allowing room for change.

Only when a new movement persists – as for instance in the case of the 1968 youth movement – does the elite come around and adapt. This is how politicians and governors behaved during the student uprisings. By occupying the Catholic University of Tilburg and renaming it the Karl Marx University, students achieved a fundamental democratisation of the governing board, winning an important vote for the student factions.<sup>7</sup>

Something similar has happened with regard to the populists. Instead of fighting Pim Fortuyn and his successor Geert Wilders, the governing elites absorbed part of the criticism, with the effect that the populist view became more and more mainstream. Nowadays hardly any political party opposes strict immigration policies, thanks to the populists. Dutch attitudes towards the European Union have become far more hostile, even though a majority probably favours continued membership. People will not easily admit to regarding the populists' views as nonsense. It would make one look like they were being 'elitist', a severe insult nowadays.

By bending towards the populists and trying to solve the problem in their usual compromising way, the governing elites have in fact strengthened their critics. In public opinion, elites are worse off than only a few years ago. Although politicians have been claiming to 'listen to the people', it hasn't helped them much. According to an influential pollster, in 2013 esteem for politicians has reached an all time low.<sup>8</sup>

### A social system under strain

Immigration policies have undoubtedly contributed to the rise of populism. However, one could argue that the populists' critique has not primarily been directed against the immigrants who resided in the Netherlands, but rather against the politicians for allowing society to develop in this way. Some scientists assume that the fear of immigration relates to workers' fears of losing their jobs to cheaper labour. This aspect, however, does not apply to the Netherlands. Most immigrants were never competitors in the labour market; quite the opposite, in fact. Often they came to the Netherlands to do the kind of labour for which the original Dutchmen considered themselves too good, like factory labour or working in greenhouses. Allochtonen, as the Dutch call their non-native inhabitants (from the Greek for strangers), often have a hard time finding good jobs.

Populists more commonly objected to the cultural aspects of immigration. They complained about immigrants not mastering the Dutch language, different ways of dressing, conflicting attitudes regarding sexual equality, people misbehaving in public. Immigrants were accused of not adapting to the Dutch way of doing things, of visibly holding on to their own identity while living in the Netherlands.

Some socio-economic factors were also related to this concern. The Netherlands maintains a generous welfare state from which immigrants could possibly reap benefits. At least, some feared they might. Obviously, most immigrants came to the Netherlands to earn money from working hard. But one has to admit that mistakes were made in previous decades, including by those who bore political responsibilities.

These mistakes revolved around the welfare state, which in the Netherlands was built on the idea that all participate and all contribute. This idea is similar to the old polder model. The system works fine as long as everyone who is able does actually participate. All who work are supposed to pay social premiums. Only the sick and the old should apply for welfare, which is paid for by the social premiums of the workers. However, no one mentioned this to the newcomers who fled to the Netherlands in the 1980s and the 1990s. In fact, among the Dutch themselves it also became morally acceptable to lean on easy social provisions. Social benefits were increasingly viewed as a right, not as a provision. Nobody seemed to care much about who contributed and who benefited. The logic behind the system was lost. This is how the social system itself came under severe stress.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the figures clearly indicated that a relatively large number of immigrants had fallen back upon social security – for whatever reasons. However, little was done to address this problem. It reeked of racism – or so many thought, the elites included. They missed their chance to actually address the problem and look for good solutions, such as better guidance for immigrants on the labour market, in combination with the clear message that social benefits are related to social duties. Immigrants, many of whom were hard workers, gradually gained a stigma of being looters.

Some Dutch people are still angry because in those days they were not able to voice their criticism due to the risk of being branded as racists. This anger has been fermenting, and has directed itself at the governing elites who let this all happen while the 'common men' were not taken seriously.

### Distributive justice

The Netherlands has always suffered a difficult relationship with its elites. Often one would pretend they simply did not exist, believing



that all were equal. Both lower and higher classes would adhere to this mentality. It goes to explain why the Dutch nobility has had little influence in politics. The Dutch kept no court to speak of, no centre of power; they did not even have a single obvious capital. The government was located in The Hague, trade and culture flourished in Amsterdam, and the most important seaport was developing in Rotterdam, which in the 20th century grew into the largest seaport in the world.

This is how the balance of power has been kept until this very day. Every Dutch city boasts its own museum with its own collection. Not a soul would consider changing this. Distributive justice prevails. Just imagine the repulsion over a building were it to raise itself above the so-called hedge!

The Dutch elite – which of course exists – used to be primarily an elite of burghers, coming from well-off Calvinist families for whom modesty was a prime virtue. They would hardly distinguish themselves from the common people, and only then by language rather than by their possessions. It would simply not be done to flaunt these too obviously, just like their predecessors who lived on the Amsterdam canals. The elite, largely consisting of a small group of privileged and wealthy families, would mostly confer among themselves. They would support the public cause out of their sense of duty. Noblesse oblige was – and still is – strongly felt.

During the 20th century Dutch society developed its famous pillar system, based on the idea of like-minded people conferring among themselves, just as the elite had been doing for so long. The system defined Dutch society for many years. Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals would each host their own sphere. Different religious groups would have their own public services, paid for by the state. Pillars provided an identity; one was born into a club. Members would go to their own schools, would be sent to their own hospitals and would frequent their own baker or butcher. The elites within these pillars would run church administration, govern the orphanage or attend the school board. All would meet in church – each in their own row, but still... People knew each other, greeted each other; there was a bond of community. This universal pillar system also explains why the Netherlands experienced little social unrest, even during the years of economic crisis in the 1930s. While all over Europe masses of workers took to the streets, in the Netherlands the socialists kept their own social strata with their own newspaper, broadcasting service and sports clubs. It was a matter of mutual adaptation; the socialists moulded themselves to the civil society of burghers while society ensured that the contradictions remained manageable. Child labour was made illegal and general voting rights were introduced; but this

did not take a revolution. The threat of the masses rising made elites come around – just as Tilburg's university board would do 50 years later. Compliance and compromise – it was all part of the deal.

### From vertical to horizontal

Today, the pillar system has nearly vanished. Religious groups still have the right to start their own school, subsidised by the state, but this is a bit of a relic. The system of organised vertical compartments is quickly disappearing. The liberal/social-democratic government decided to do away with the old broadcasting system, built on the pillar system, in favour of a more neutral national broadcasting system, like the BBC. But not all the divisions have completely vanished; over the years the vertical compartmentalisation system has made way for a system of horizontal connections. Economically and socially like-minded people share the same neighbourhoods, their children attend the same schools, they shop at the same supermarkets. Rather than living among the (religious) group they were born into, they choose to live among people who share their status and lifestyles. Today a new form of compartmentalisation has developed in the Netherlands. Horizontal, not vertical divisions prevail. This is an unforeseen but important consequence of the rise of meritocracy.



## Our kind of people

### Measuring by merit

The term ‘meritocracy’ as a concept is not familiar to many people. This is remarkable, as the idea behind the term has had a huge influence in the Western world. British sociologist and freethinker Michael Young coined the term.<sup>9</sup> He had a prescient mind. In the mid-1950s Young wrote a biting satire regarding the latest ideas in Britain. His point would be noticed only many years later, perhaps even more so in the Netherlands than in the United Kingdom. Young continued a line of thought that was quite popular at the time: rather than having the country run by the British upper classes, government and management should be handed to the smartest people with the best qualities – regardless of heritage. This was a leftist emancipatory idea, hailed by Labour. Not one’s status at birth, but rather one’s personal achievements would define one’s place in society. Society would be best served by putting the best people in the best positions. Meritocracy was not a plea for personal development but a concept instrumental for the improvement of society. Society would be best off if the smartest, hardest-working people held key positions.

Michael Young’s achievement was that, without hesitation, he pointed to where this well-meaning logic would lead: to a top layer of self-congratulating individuals who, just like other administrators and politicians, would ultimately attempt to secure their power base for as long as possible. His satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, describes how putting too much value on intelligence and merit undermines the self-respect of those who are less smart or less industrious. Appreciation for human qualities like courage, imagination and caring for others diminishes. Those who do not stand out intellectually are simply not able to excel. In Young’s satire a large part of the population eventually reverts to this mode of thinking. Its protest movement calls itself ‘The Populists’. By brute force they acquire power from a surprised and defenceless elite.

The UK in the 1950s was obviously a different society from the Netherlands of today; still, the similarities between Young’s descriptions and now are striking. Social bonding based on common beliefs has made way for social bonding based on socio-economic status.

The effects are most noticeable in the behaviour of the ever-growing league of well-educated Dutch people. Populists object to these consequences.

### The end of the old boys' network

It should not come as a surprise that the concept of meritocracy made headway in the Netherlands easily. The idea presents itself as a prime example of egalitarian thought: effort and talent – instead of right of birth – should decide one's success. It sounds like true equality of opportunity. This view was part of the zeitgeist of the 1950s, advocated by a generation that were young during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and who vowed to deliver to their own children a better youth and a better future than they had experienced themselves. This is how the baby-boom generation was formed: a large group of wanted, blessed children with a shining future ahead of them. They benefited significantly from a booming economy. A welfare state was being built. Money became available for better education. On the wings of the zeitgeist, all sorts of youngsters flocked to university, the institution that had previously been reserved for the long-standing elite. Radicalisation flourished: students demanded change. They occupied universities in Tilburg and Amsterdam. The '68 generation clearly made their mark, only to become even more influential in Dutch society. In politics, in government, in civil society and even in business they would establish a new mentality.

Dutch social scientists Meindert Fennema and Eelke Heemskerk published an extensive and insightful study a few years ago on the development of Dutch corporate governance in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> In the first few years, managers from proper families with the right connections and a decent, modest background made up most of the boards. Only five years later, this old boys' network had been largely wiped out. Leadership had been taken over by a talented, ambitious generation of newcomers who had flooded in on the waves of the meritocracy. They might not have originated from wealthy families, but what they lacked in upbringing they made up for with ambition.

Fennema's and Heemskerk's study provides an example of a determined and self-assured generation that changed the way the Netherlands was governed – not only in business but everywhere in Dutch society. They were greeted warmly, as many believed the brightest should be in control, rather than the best connected. The elites quickly and quietly made way – as always during big societal changes in the Netherlands. But while a lot was gained, something was also lost – in this case the noblesse oblige, common to the old families. The meritocratic newcomers assumed their success was of their own making. This was hailed as a democratic revolution. But one could also regard it as a coup by a generation that subsequently hardly ever doubted its claim to power.

In the 1980s and 1990s the influence of this often left-leaning generation of baby boomers gradually increased. These were the years when the government decided to limit itself. Privatisation became the new magic word – the market was supposed to provide what government had failed to deliver: growth and jobs. All over the Western world, neo-liberals gained influence. And even though the Netherlands never had a Thatcher or a Reagan, and even though changes were not as extreme as in the UK or in the US, the meritocratic movement thrived. The idea grew, especially among the governing elite, that public services would perform better when distanced from the central government. And who would secure themselves a leading position in these newly independent housing corporations, educational institutions, cultural organisations and so forth? Indeed, the same baby boomers who, in the 1970s, had been preaching revolution, but had now moved with the spirit of the times.

## The crisis of the left (and the right)

### A purple revolution

History may well look back on the 1990s as 'the roaring decade'. After a slow start, the world economy nearly burst from its seams. Stock exchanges rose intermittently; housing prices followed suit. On a large scale, Dutch women started to participate in the labour force, causing family income to rise drastically. Many felt the free market had prevailed. The Berlin Wall had not been brought down for nothing: it felt like a moral victory.

But what did all this mean for the ideology of the Left? In previous years, many lower-qualified jobs had been lost due to early forms of outsourcing, such as in Enschede's textile industry. Furthermore, many jobs had been sacrificed for efficiency, as in the case of the Rotterdam harbour, where manual stevedores had been replaced with high-skilled machine control. Historically, the Netherlands had not had much factory labour, but now the proletariat was nearly dissolved. Surveys by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) showed that low-wage labour in itself had not disappeared; rather, it had changed in appearance. "Heavy manual labour for working-class and uneducated men became obsolete. Instead, many service jobs like waiting tables became available. But this 'service' work required a very different mentality from unskilled, hard physical labour like carrying or mining, for instance.

At the same time, skilled labourers such as plumbers and construction workers did quite well. As housing prices rose, so did their salaries. Some of them actually took part in day trading at the stock exchange, while having a beer in front of their caravan at the camping site. Newspapers were eager to report on this. Hence, the continuing stock rally became known as the 'camping rally', a development common people could benefit from. But that could hardly be considered as leftist.

In a speech in the mid-1990s, the then prime minister and leader of the Social Democrats, Wim Kok, declared the end of the class struggle. He was later accused of disregarding his ideological heritage, but it was a clear fact that at the time hardly anybody felt close to the old ideology. The Netherlands was ruled by a 'purple' coalition of Social Democrats and Conservative Liberals, a combination

that would have been unheard of only 10 years before. Its policies gave rise to a certain political confusion. The Social Democrats lost much of their elderly base. Lower-educated classes found solace in other parties like leftist and rightist populists – though such a distinction between these two parties is in fact inadequate.

Nowadays, the ‘purple’ years of Wim Kok and his peers are considered to be an era dominated by technocracy. Differing ideological viewpoints made way for a pragmatic debate about how best to achieve certain goals. This debate did not reach most voters; it was mainly interesting for those who were involved with policy questions. Because of the rising wealth of the nation, boosted by a general sense of optimism, few foresaw that a serious political crisis was looming. The first indication of a new populism came in the form of the rising star Pim Fortuyn. For a large part of the governing elites, he came as a complete surprise.

### **You’ve failed? Blame yourself!**

Looking back one must conclude that in the years of growth, the seeds of populism were sown. Demographic research shows that during these years the better educated created a class of their own. To this effect, a new professor of demographics, Jan Latten, in his commencement speech gave a striking example of how in the old days a Catholic doctor would marry a Catholic nurse, whereas in more recent times a male doctor would marry a female doctor.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they would have met at university, where women were now clearly catching up. These highly educated people, earning double incomes, would move to certain neighbourhoods. They would stay and live in the city, even when they had children. These children would all go to the same (Montessori or Jenaplan) schools and visit the same day care. Furthermore, they would meet at the same hockey and pony clubs. While their parents had grown up in the later years of the pillar system and so had visited mixed-class activities, these children did not know any better than to spend the entire day among their ilk. Social mobility, typical of the 1960s and 1970s, gradually came to a halt, even though it took many years until the effects were recognised. Nobody had foreseen this and probably nobody wanted it to happen, but the laws of the meritocracy so sharply defined by Michael Young manifested themselves unremittingly. An ever-larger group of higher-educated people was slowly shielding themselves from the rest of society.

This phenomenon also manifested itself in the economy. Board members would raise their own salaries with a single stroke, first in the corporate sector, then soon followed by the top layers in semi-public services. Surely they were working hard? Were they not doing a good

job? Had they not risen by their own efforts? The logic of meritocracy was relentless; these were the successful people who genuinely believed that their successes were of their own making and that they should earn a good reward. Even though they would never say so in public – only some rightist intellectuals would – this reasoning also had its flipside. If one’s success was by one’s own merit, one’s failure was one’s own fault. Those who were lower class could start to assume that they should blame themselves for a lack of success. And even if they did not think this, the lack of appreciation for their contribution to society was remarkable. A survey of ten to twelve year-olds demonstrated what the Dutch youth aspired to be when they grew up: not astronauts, police officers or teachers, but simply famous, for whatever activity. It is an illustration of how the culture of success penetrated everything. This has provoked a new question: how can the lower class or uneducated people get respect when their work changes or disappears, when the better off pretend success is a matter of choice? In that case, resentment is not a strange reaction at all, even more so when society keeps pretending that equality is paramount.

### **The hotchpotch neighbourhood**

While the highly educated were increasingly seeking each others’ company, living in neighbourhoods full of similar people, lower-educated classes experienced something quite different. Their neighbourhoods grew more and more diverse. As early as 2001 Godfried Engbersen, professor of sociology in Rotterdam, described how the culturally homogenous city boroughs, formerly inhabited by working-class and middle-class families, transformed into multicultural neighbourhoods full of dropouts, petty and organised crime, and growing unemployment. He wrote: ‘The social fabric of these neighbourhoods has been infringed upon and the old codes of conduct for the interactions between residents have lost their validity. The current borough has become a kind of hotchpotch. One can distinguish between several social groups and connections, of which some are close and others are shallow. Each of these groups – who hardly interact with each other any more – has its own set of rules and informal modes of communion. Because of this, mutual distrust and misunderstanding could grow, especially during times of economic hardship. Such an atmosphere can enhance cultural misunderstanding, encourage the appointment of scapegoats, and above all lead every group to a process of withdrawal from social life.’

Godfried Engbersen’s 2001 survey<sup>13</sup> illustrates that the change from a vertical to a horizontal social division has had far more impact on the lives of the lower educated than of those with a higher education.

The Netherlands seems to have developed into a class society of sorts – but one with a twist. The highly educated may well be recognised as a distinct class, but for the lower educated this is far less the case. They tend to live amid very different neighbours, with whom they have little in common and may not even be able to communicate with. This is another argument that populists have tried to address. They want old social relations restored.

## A stubborn divide

### Shame as motive

The demarcation between higher- and lower-educated Dutch has grown to be quite persistent. Research demonstrates that children of the highly educated perform better at school. This allows them to advance to university where they meet the same people all over again. In the once-so-egalitarian Netherlands, a social structure has developed which essentially resembles a class system – never mind the official denials. True meritocracy no longer rules.

In the summer of 2012 *NRC Handelsblad*, a Dutch quality daily, published an illuminating series from the fifth largest city in the Netherlands, Eindhoven.<sup>14</sup> The reporters described daily life in two adjacent neighbourhoods: one decent and middle class; the other a neighbourhood with lower-educated inhabitants. How would the middle-class neighbourhood address problems caused by a noisy neighbour? Reporters described how the complainant would deliver a note to the mailbox of the person who caused the disturbance, who would then respond with a bouquet of flowers and abundant apologies, after which everybody would know that the problem was solved. But in the poorer neighbourhood the complainant did not even know how to attract the attention of his upstairs neighbour because the door had no bell, the curtains remained closed and it was not certain whether the stranger scurrying by was indeed the neighbour. The series painfully demonstrates how difficult it has become to find a political answer to these kinds of problems. The lower classes in the Netherlands have felt increasingly abandoned over the past several years. This feeds the indignation that is an undeniable part of populism. There is an elite which takes excellent care of itself and which does not have a clue about the kinds of problems lower-educated people face. Giseline Kuipers suggested in the aforementioned interview that these highly educated people actually feel ashamed, as this situation is obviously not in line with the egalitarian, meritocratic ideology. ‘Shame is both the motive and the problem,’ said Kuipers. ‘It leads to evasion and denial. People find it difficult to cope with the idea of a power difference. Evasion of contact with the lower classes becomes a solution.’

The idea that serious power differences exist between social groups is still a taboo in the Netherlands. Kuipers cites as an example research among higher-educated women and their domestic workers. The bosses find it very hard to give clear instructions about what exactly must be cleaned. They act in an extremely friendly way, as if the worker really is a friend happening to drop by. Otherwise they may put the guilt-ridden wages in a corner as if they were not honestly earned. The workers, on the other hand, prefer clear assignments. They are well aware of the difference in power and they are especially annoyed by its denial.<sup>15</sup> This evasion and denial contains an important clue to understanding the discontent between the upper and lower classes.

### The reign of middle-class morality

Yet the facts speak for themselves. After thorough research, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) last year mentioned ‘stubborn’ differences, not only in terms of socio-economic position but also in terms of contentment. ‘Lower educated people, in general, are more pessimistic about society, more negative about politics and more concerned about crime and material affairs. Those with a higher education are distinguished by higher levels of optimism, trust and tolerance.’<sup>16</sup> The difference in levels of trust is especially meaningful. When asked whether they trust other people, 80 per cent of highly educated people answered ‘yes, I do’, whereas only 40 per cent of lower-educated people gave the same answer. According to the SCP, this directly relates to the manner in which people feel they have a grip on their own lives.

Differences in health are also remarkable. The Royal Institute for National Health and Environment (RIVM) raised the alarm bells on this in 2011.<sup>17</sup> The lower one’s education, the higher one’s chance of a chronic illness. The higher one’s education, the longer one’s life expectancy and the longer the years spent in good health. The RIVM found direct correlations with differences in lifestyle. Smoking and bad eating habits – practised more often by lower-educated people – increase the risk of heart and vascular diseases, lung cancer and diabetes. These outcomes show that Dutch policies aimed at preventing these diseases by informing the public have not been very effective for the lower educated. Could it be because their campaigns speak not to the lower but to the higher educated instead?

Middle-class morality now dominates the public domain. Highly educated professionals design policies that often fail to reach groups that they themselves hardly ever meet any more. Even social workers who specialise in helping with childrearing in the old multicultural Rotterdam neighbourhoods find it hard to express clearly to parents what the recommended behaviour towards their children is, as shown

in research conducted by Marguerite van den Berg.<sup>18</sup> During a course, these parents often learn more from each other about their children’s bedtime than from the course leaders. The latter prefer to ask the parents: ‘what do you yourself think about these issues?’, convinced that self-reflection is the way to civilisation. Here again we see the analogy with old-fashioned Dutch childrearing.

### Noise as politics

The differences between higher- and lower-educated people have recently stabilised, according to Dutch expert Mark Bovens, professor of public administration in Utrecht. This may be one of the reasons that populism as a political movement seems to have come to a halt. It has taken about 10 years, but now people in the Netherlands indeed recognise problems that could not be mentioned in earlier years. Moreover, many different methods are being used to try to tackle the problems.

That is exactly what Geert Wilders’ supporters hoped for. At least, that is the impression of Erasmus University professor of political communication Chris Aalberts.<sup>19</sup> He conducted interviews with PVV voters about what they expected from Geert Wilders. The PVV leader has in recent years frequently advocated extreme proposals, often deliberately formulated in offensive language. For example, he proposed a ‘head-rag tax’, a tax specifically designed for women who wear a head scarf. Also, he advocated the Dutch exit from the euro, using the motto ‘let the Greeks pay for their own problems’. According to Aalberts, many PVV voters knew that these kinds of policies were unexecutable, but that was not the point. ‘By voting for a politician who wields extreme, sometimes unexecutable policies, PVV voters ensure that policy is ultimately pushed a little in their direction.’ This is what the majority of PVV followers aim for, Aalberts wrote on the op-ed pages of the daily *De Volkskrant*. Its headline was ‘Geert simply needs to make noise’.

This considered, the Dutch political system seems to have done its usual job: to allow, to adapt, to encapsulate, and to thereby file off the sharp edges while acknowledging people’s complaints. Perhaps this is even more visible regarding the Socialist Party (SP). Whether this party should be considered part of the populist movement is debatable, but the fact is that the base of its followers – just like the PVV – mostly consists of the lower socio-economic classes. Once a radical splinter group, the SP developed into a classical leftist alternative for those voters who thought the social democratic PvdA had bowed too much in the direction of the meritocratic trend. The SP unequivocally represented those workers who suffered from the disadvantages of privatisation and forms of competition in the public domain, like home assistants, nurses and cleaners. While management grew and earned higher wages, workers

had to deal with zero-hour contracts, temporary engagements and increased insecurity. The SP made this an issue and demanded counter-measures. In this respect, it was Pim Fortuyn's heir. In 2006, this critical position delivered the SP a huge victory at the ballot box and the party grew from nine to 25 seats in parliament, out of 150 seats. But its victory did not lead to government participation, and the SP dwindled back down to 15 seats. Last year it made a lot of headway with its strong criticisms, a new leader and a rise in the polls. Some even thought that the SP would become the largest political party at the September 2012 election, but this expectation was not realised. The party got entangled between the choice of being a protest movement and opting for governing responsibility. The closer it came to being a serious candidate for government, the more it seemed to adapt to the inevitability of budget cuts, just like the usual parties. Eventually all virtual winnings evaporated and on election day the SP won exactly the same number of seats as it had two years earlier – no losses, but no gains, either.

This result was widely hailed as the end of the rise of populism. The SP did not realise its predicted growth, and Wilders' PVV visibly faded also. His seats in parliament shrank from 24 to 15. This decline was larger than the polls had indicated. Geert Wilders paid the price for walking away from the government that he had supported since 2010, thereby causing it to fall. Just like the SP, he – in his own way – found himself caught between the burden of shared responsibility and vocally protesting on the sidelines. The PVV chose the latter, as the SP had chosen the former during the election campaign. But both paid a price. They ended respectively as the third and fourth most powerful parties in the country, each with the support of about 10 per cent of the electorate.



## The pacification of populism

### Part of the picture

With the undeniable victory of both the traditional left party (PvdA) and the traditional right party (VVD), people argued that ‘the middle’ had returned to Dutch politics. The relief was significant. Populism from both wings seemed to have been neutralised. The movement had been pacified, to use the term with which the famous political scientist Arend Lijphart once labelled the Dutch pillar system. Or at least so it seemed last year. Hadn’t the governing elites given in on several of the populists’ key complaints? Immigration had been limited and made more difficult, to such an extent that Poles eager to find work now preferred to earn their money in other countries. Excesses in the semi-public sector had gradually been dealt with; all board members of housing corporations, hospitals and public broadcasting services were forced to limit their salaries to a maximum of two hundred thousand euros, the so-called Balkenende-norm. In the EU, the Netherlands could now not always be counted on as a supporter; on the contrary, the Dutch were very hard-pressed to appease Brussels or the Southern Europeans. Many believed – or at least, wanted to believe – that the lower educated had shown their fists, politics had listened, and the process of upbringing and civilising seemed to have come to an end. Geert Wilders had become part of the picture; after losing one-third of his base he resembled a fading pop star, no longer a fierce attacker of Dutch society. The Socialist Party of the Netherlands were the most leftist party in parliament, but it still advocated a maximum budget deficit of only 3 per cent of GDP. The country could breathe freely again; all sharp edges had been expertly removed.

### Opting out becomes the norm

Or was this all an illusion? Nine months later all euphoria has vanished. The Dutch political climate has seriously deteriorated. A coalition government of conservatives and social democrats is having problems convincing the population of its political course. The economy is in bad shape – and it seems like everybody blames everybody else for the state of the Netherlands. Geert Wilders reigns in the polls once again.

Not that he will soon be part of any Dutch government – he has blown his opportunity and will not be trusted by any coalition partner any time soon. But he has found an alternative way to execute maximum power. He has decided to team up with extreme right parties in Belgium and France. Together they aim for an anti-European landslide at the European Parliament elections in 2014. Considering sentiments among European citizens, they could be quite successful.

Perhaps, by choosing the European loophole, Wilders will dominate the Dutch political debate once again. But some things have definitely changed. By partnering with Marine le Pen from France and Filip Dewinter from Belgium, Wilders takes his party to the very right of the political landscape – a place it didn't belong to when Pim Fortuyn started his populist movement. It remains to be seen how many people will actually follow Wilders there. Also, populism has proved to be contagious. While visiting the Netherlands, Herman van Rompuy, president of the European Council, was quoted as saying 'populism is no longer reserved for populist parties'. Many politicians from all different directions are now trying to please the public by exaggerating their commitments, by promising the moon, or by appearing angry at any proof of irregularities. It all speaks of a volatile political climate, from which no party can escape. Populism has definitely made a mark on our political culture. It is not quite clear if it is now possible – or even if it will ever be possible – to return to the old ways of doing things. This is the populist legacy. Cultural relationships have changed. The elites no longer dictate how things are done. A telling example occurred during the crowning of the new King Willem Alexander. The public was invited to contribute sentences to a newly composed Coronation song. Thousands obliged, but with mixed results. When the composer added some flawed sentences that had obviously been contributed, the elites went roaring: what a shame. Still, the Crown obliged – they would not have it any other way. The elites had lost their battle for proper language in what they would consider a proper song.

Still, two important questions remain and the answers are far from clear. The first is about true representation. Does the parliamentary democracy properly reflect the citizenry? In 2012, more than 26 per cent of the electorate did not vote, almost the same percentage of people who voted for the largest victor, the VVD. This growing group of 'quitters' demonstrates the discontent among the population. Lower-educated people, youngsters and immigrants make up most of the non-voting population, as National Election studies have shown. If the non-voters had voted, the benefiting parties would have been left- and right-wing populists.

Political scientist Kees Aarts of Twente University, who has been studying non-voters for years, argues that they feel sincerely let

down by the political system. No matter how often parties like the PVV or the SP enter the stage, in the end they always lose out. In *De Groene Amsterdammer* Aarts was quoted as saying that 'voters who thought they had a voice in politics now say to themselves: it's not true at all, I've been fooled again. The attraction of participating in democracy has waned.'<sup>20</sup>

Disillusioned by the PVV and the SP not being able to govern, many voters disengage. But some actually decide to be non-voters; it is their subtle protest. Sociologist Godfried Engbersen has remarked on this. By not voting, people who live in drastically changed neighbourhoods convey the message: 'I will not participate in your bargaining.' Engbersen says: 'They are very suspicious of politics. They will say: politicians will overlook us anyway. That is why they pass up the vote.' Non-voting becomes a matter of keeping their dignity.

In political circles this problem has not yet been addressed seriously. Most parties know that a higher voter turnout will only cost them seats. But if the recent history of populism demonstrates at least one thing, it is that a problem will not go away by ignoring it. 'An increasing number of people consider politics to be one big joke. This concerns a large but very diverse group, who are defined by their increasing indifference to politics,' Kees Aarts says.

What if this group goes off the radar? What will the consequences be for Dutch politics? This is a relevant question, as experience tells us that two out of three non-voters will stick to their habit. Will divisions between the haves and the have-nots grow, as in some surrounding countries? Will the Netherlands become the stage for revolts in banlieues or for arson and robbery of convenience stores? Until now this image has not fit the Netherlands because the inclination towards consent was too large. Also, the welfare state provided some sort of protection, a social cushion of sorts, for the less fortunate. Will this remain intact if severe budget cuts diminish social welfare while a growing group of dissatisfied people do not have any political representation?

This is not only relevant for politicians and governors, but also for the representatives of what used to be the polder model. Will they be able to keep up the Dutch polder tradition and make sure the interests of most Dutch people are heeded? The answer remains to be seen.

### The polder model at wits' end

Of all the victims of populism, the old Dutch polder model may be the worst hit of all. The rise of Pim Fortuyn, the SP and the PVV made it painfully clear that this model no longer represented the issues and interests of the lower educated. Professional policy advisers who had all too often lost contact with their constituents would fill many a conference room trying to ensure the best arrangements for their members,

but often failing to convince them of their results. Fortuyn and especially Wilders objected that in backrooms shady compromises were reached that damaged the interests of the people. This rhetoric was so convincing that half of the Dutch public in mid-2012 rejected all practice of compromising in politics. At the same time, supporters of the leftist SP gained power in the unions. They fought hard for better terms of employment, while making the professionals look like they were being stitched up by the industry.

The Dutch labour unions have been severely wounded by these developments. They have become torn between radicals and moderates, between associates who want to strike a deal with employers and the government, and associates who want to enforce concessions by means of strong action. Their power struggle continues to this very day. The unions have felt the loss of many higher-educated workers in recent years – if they ever were members. Now only 20 per cent of the Dutch work force are union members. A new generation of self-assured, ambitious thirty-somethings and forty-somethings hardly feel at home with what they consider to be the losers of the labour movement. They deal with their own affairs, without the mediation of professional unions.

The decline of the unions is illustrative of the old governing system that has shaped the Netherlands for so long. By ‘poldering’ with different kinds of interest groups, Dutch institutions used to secure their base. Whether it concerned the planning of the countryside, housing policies or socio-economic policies, all concerned would gather around the table and debate until they reached an agreement and generated consensus. All this would be done according to the old tradition that all were eventually bound by the outcome.

But which of the interest groups can still rely on its fixed base, let alone speak in its name? Smart, involved, higher-educated civilians collaborate nowadays to establish their own energy corporations that produce ‘green’ energy themselves, instead of buying energy from large companies. New, loose networks of ZZPs – independents working for themselves – share their risks on Medicare, without the help of a union or an insurance company. The Dutch AA, which with its two million members is one of the largest associations in the Netherlands, supplies a road emergency service and also assists with emergencies outside the country. But when the president, in the name of the association’s core, wanted to strike a deal with the government about its policy plan for taxing car mileage, this stirred up trouble. Members no longer allowed him to take a stand in their name; they wanted to decide for themselves.

A clear majority of the Dutch now feel in charge of their own lives. They want to make their own choices and feel at ease with the consequences. They support the idea of meritocracy: one does one’s best and

one reaps the benefits of one’s efforts. At the same time, a large, diverse group of Dutch people have difficulties succeeding economically and socially. They shy away from politics and opt out mentally. How can these two groups confer? Who will represent the interests of the lower classes? Will the Netherlands still be a country based on seeking consensus? And if so, how can this be achieved, given the crisis in the Dutch governing system?

Since the labour movement really seems to be losing ground, employers and politicians have come to their help, after realising that this crisis affects them too. The new government has deliberately engaged the unions and the employers in building policies for the near future. It has done so in the hope of gaining broad support. But most voters have not been convinced, as the underlying crisis in representation has not been dealt with. The government has tried to resurrect the polder, when in fact it should have aimed for renewal. There is only one conclusion: the polder model will have to reinvent itself.

### All aboard?

While the Dutch may have gotten used to populism, important questions remain. These include: how do we ensure that everybody is included? Traditionally, the Netherlands focused on consensus. The Dutch shared the values of equality and of tolerating differences in worldview. Systems of representation ensured that distinctions remained manageable, so the idea of equality would not be damaged. But the old systems have lost their usefulness and new methods have not become available yet. Several experiments are being conducted regarding new forms of civil consulting. People are invited to share considerations on an issue that is close to them, before decisions are made. But these developments are still in their infancy and will not likely replace the old discussion models. One of their problems concerns the fact that the exchange of ideas by means of argument is a tool for higher-educated people. As a consequence, lower-educated Dutch people will only feel more left out.

In short, a new structure and new forms to ‘polder’ are fundamentally necessary to keep the Dutch tradition alive while also modernising it. Only if the Dutch find a workable solution that serves all parties will the problem of populism be truly solved.

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# Homosexuals and headscarves

When Danish right-wing populism  
became gender-political

Johanne Mygind,  
Anders Rasmussen,  
December 2012

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## A party gains influence

*... And so I say to the Danish People's Party: no matter what you do, no matter how much you try, you'll never become respectable in my eyes!*

These were the words of Denmark's then Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, during the Danish parliament's opening debate in 1999. At that time, many Danish intellectuals and politicians still believed that the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) would remain on the margins of political life. They would be proved wrong.

In the 2000s, the Danish People's Party grew to become a significant force in Danish politics. As the parliamentary basis of the Liberal-Conservative government, the People's Party voted in favour of the government's proposal to significantly tighten the country's immigration policy which, as it jubilantly declared in 2008, had become the strictest in Europe. The party served as a model for the right-wing populists Jörg Haider in Austria and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. The British newspaper *The Guardian* has described the Danish People's Party as 'probably the most influential right-wing populist party in Europe'.

Its influence on the country's value-based politics was even greater. From 2001 to 2011, all Danish politicians were forced to take a stance on the party's definition of Muslims as the greatest threat to Danish society. Not only did the attitudes of the Danish People's Party become mainstream and 'respectable', they were also adopted by large parts of the political spectrum.

This is a spectrum which, from left to right, mainly consists of the Red-Green Alliance, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Danish People's Party. It was from 2001, as the parliamentary supporting party of the Liberal-Conservative government, that the People's Party gained most influence, until the elections in 2011 when the Social Democrats formed a government with the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberals.

One of the most striking aspects of Danish right-wing populism in recent years is the way feminist arguments about gender and sexuality have been used in an attempt to appeal to the general public. In this essay we will show how issues such as male violence, Muslim

headscarves, forced marriages and homophobia have been central factors not only in the success of the Danish People's Party, but also in the spread of xenophobic rhetoric and attitudes in general.

To understand the rise of right-wing populism in Denmark, we must first understand how the party was created.

Pia Kjærsgaard founded the Danish People's Party in 1995, along with three other MPs. It was the beginning of what was to become one of Europe's most successful populist parties.

The founders of the Danish People's Party were former members of the Progress Party: a liberal party established by the lawyer Mogens Glistrup in 1973 as a challenge to the welfare state. During the 1980s, members of the Progress Party began to speak more and more critically about immigration and Muslims, but remained marginalised in parliament, partly because the party's founder had been imprisoned for tax fraud. But Kjærsgaard sensed that there was room for a new party in Danish politics that shared the Progress Party's opposition to the EU and criticism of refugees and immigrants, but at the same time was a strong supporter of the welfare state. As soon as the Danish People's Party was founded, Kjærsgaard distanced herself from the Progress Party and made it clear that she wanted to be taken seriously in Danish politics.

'We won't be the kind of party that's only known for complaining,' she said at the time.

The Danish People's Party addressed itself to the marginalised part of the population who needed the welfare state and who were hit hard by a tougher job market. To this day, 41 per cent of Danish People's Party voters are unemployed and 43 per cent have only a primary school education.

### From victory to victory

In its very first general election in 1998, the Danish People's Party gained 7.4 per cent of the votes, and the following year the party won its first seat in the European Parliament. Most of its voters were former supporters of the Progress Party, but former members of the Social Democratic Party also voted for the party.

In 2000, the Danes voted against the euro in an election that Kjærsgaard later described as her biggest electoral victory, and in the 2001 general election the party achieved another major victory, gaining 12 per cent of the vote and forming the parliamentary basis for the Liberal and Conservative government. In the following 10 years, Kjærsgaard had a very strong influence on Denmark's immigration policy and value-based political agenda.

From the start, the Danish People's Party broke with the traditional left-right divide in Danish politics. In terms of values, it was in line with

and possibly more radical than the traditional right, but it did not favour restrictions on the welfare state. Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's warning to Kjærsgaard that the Danish People's Party would never be respectable came after this statement from the party in 1999:

*In the event that a young second- or third-generation immigrant repeatedly commits crimes, and is impossible to reform, then yes, not only he but his whole family will be sent home and repatriated. It's the only thing they respect.*

It is symptomatic of the debate that followed this statement that it is Rasmussen's attack on Kjærsgaard that is remembered, and not Kjærsgaard's attack on immigrants. In the wake of the Danish People's Party's success, the left was in a hurry to set out a value-based agenda that was as strong as the People's Party's and that would satisfy the left-wing voters who wanted to break with the government's liberal immigration policy and the 1990s' movement towards a multicultural society.

Kjærsgaard did not just effect a change in the rules on family reunification. Even more important, perhaps, was her role in transforming the Danish public's attitude to immigrants, especially Muslims. As a result, the left more than any other group was forced to change its tone and rhetoric. The first major sign of this change occurred in 2008, when the then chairperson of the Socialist People's Party, Villy Søvndal, came under fire for condemning the decision of a school with many Muslim students to deny fathers access to a parent-teacher meeting. He urged Copenhagen's school council leader, to 'put the head teachers in their place':

*We must not sacrifice equality and the rights of fathers to participate in their children's school life because of some outmoded religious beliefs.*

Søvndal faced fierce criticism both from his own party and the Social Democrat school council leader for his statements, which he eventually withdrew.

Again, the Danish People's Party was quick to use this discussion on gender equality to expose those on the left as being either hypocrites or soft-headed politicians who were selling out their values. For example, Kjærsgaard made the following comment on Villy Søvndal's attitude towards the mother-teacher meeting at Holberg School:

*Personally, I have a sneaky feeling that Villy expresses the opinions Villy thinks will get him votes. These opinions change from case to case. In the Danish People's Party, we don't change our opinions from one day to the next. In the case of Holberg School, the head teacher's decision is in my view hopeless for two obvious reasons. Firstly, in 2010 we won't tolerate that a Danish primary school is swayed*

*by Muslim demands for gender segregation. In Denmark, men and women are equal, and we won't change our society according to the norms and demands of immigrants. The immigrants must adapt to Denmark, not vice versa.*

The Danish People's Party's influence perhaps became clearest when Kjærsgaard announced that she was stepping down as party leader in spring 2012. The leaders of all the other parliamentary parties paid tribute to her, including the prime minister.

'Pia Kjærsgaard has been an important party leader in Danish politics. And even though we haven't always agreed, I have great respect for her and the commitment she has shown in her political work for more than 25 years,' said Helle Thorning-Schmidt. Kjærsgaard herself declared that the Danish People's Party would gain a key position in Danish politics at the next change of government. This time it would not be enough to form a parliamentary basis. The Danish People's Party would go after ministerial posts.

*We made a change in the political system possible, secured a break with three decades of completely irresponsible immigration policy – three decades of irresponsibility that will take more than one decade to put right, and whose monstrous consequences we therefore continue to live with. [...] It's easy to let go of the reins – harder to hold them tight. We took a difficult step, we faced rows and confrontation. And we'll do it again when the Danish People's Party wins a key role in government at the next election.*

So said Kjærsgaard when she took leave of a jubilant and tearful assembly at the People's Party national conference.

### **In the name of equality**

An important feature of the Danish People's Party's rhetoric was its use of the gender-equality debate and its involvement of Muslim women in the value-based political debate. By defining gender equality as a special Danish value, the party made the theme a centrepiece of the debate, repeatedly using it to argue for everything – from tightening the rules on family reunification to a ban on headscarves in public spaces.

For example, in a radio debate in 2006, the Danish People's Party MP Peter Skaarup argued for a ban on headscarves in public places on the grounds that 'We've fought to achieve women's liberation and equality. That's what we want, and that means Muslim women must refrain from wearing headscarves and get accustomed to our way of life in Denmark.'

In the autumn of 2010, the Danish People's Party declared that women's freedom to bare their breasts is a mark of a free society.

The party was criticising the lack of topless women in the film *A Life in Denmark*, which is shown to foreign applicants for residence permits when they take the so-called immigration test. The film is one and a half hours long and covers a range of topics, including Harald Bluetooth, absolute monarchy, the WWII resistance movement, the youth rebellion in the 1960s, free hospitals and equal pay, to a soundtrack of piano Muzak and images of cornfields and sand castles, Nordic walkers in Fælledparken, fathers on paternity leave, gays at Café Oscar and homeless people in front of Mariakirken Church.

But no naked breasts, to the annoyance of the Danish People's Party. As the party's Søren Espersen said in a radio debate:

*It's important to send a signal to the young girls who come here that now they're getting away from the puritanical society that they've lived in [...] and which we had here too in the old days. Now they're coming to a country where there's freedom [...] Here you can be free, here you can be yourself.*

Espersen's statements are a good example of how sexual liberalism is used for chest-puffing in a political and symbolic power struggle designed to position the 'others' as unfree and old-fashioned. Denmark is known for being a country with a relatively relaxed sexual morality: it was the first country in the world to legalise pornography in 1969 and the first to allow registered partnerships between two persons of the same sex in 1989. Women's control over their own bodies is another element in the story of the equal, emancipated society.

But the Danish People's Party's disappointment at the lack of breasts in *A Life in Denmark* is an excellent example of the double standards behind much of the politicisation of gender and sexuality issues. A couple of years earlier, another debate on bare breasts arose when Copenhagen Municipality had to decide whether women were entitled to be topless in the city's public swimming pools. The municipality's Culture Committee was almost unanimous in deciding to allow bare breasts. Only one party voted against the proposition: the Danish People's Party.

It is hardly surprising that the Danish People's Party would vote no to a proposal to allow women to be topless in public pools. Neither the Danish People's Party nor its predecessor the Progress Party are known for proposing or voting for feminist bills. On the contrary, the Danish People's Party has flatly refused to take part in the other gender equality discussions, stating that the Danish feminist agenda is not relevant compared to the problems of Muslim women.

*At a time when the Social Democrats and the Socialists pretend to take integration problems seriously, for them the 8th of March [International Women's Day,*

*which in Denmark is mainly celebrated by female political activists and feminists, ed.] was solely about paving the way for a handful of upper-class women to the high circles of the boardrooms. [...] The Muslim woman, on the other hand, is left to her own devices.*

So wrote the Danish People's Party's equality spokesperson, Marlene Harpsøe, after 8 March 2008.

Rather than working for equality in the whole of Danish society, the Danish People's Party has instrumentalised the gender-equality discussion in order to limit it to the rights of Muslim women.

The claim that Denmark had achieved gender equality became an important element in the narrative of the superior Danish culture that was threatened by Muslim immigration.

In this essay we will tell the story of the Danish People's Party's use of gender-political agendas to further their own cause. In the following four chapters, we will attempt to show how discussions about violent immigrant boys, oppressed immigrant girls, headscarves and homosexuals were all used to establish an anti-Islamic political agenda that was critical of immigrants – an agenda that still features strongly in Danish public debates.

## Muslim thugs

On Sunday 20 February 2000, a 14-year-old girl took a bus to Bispehaven in Aarhus to meet a boy. He picked her up at the bus stop, after which they walked to a nearby workmen's hut and had sex. This was not in itself remarkable. Two days earlier they had had sex in a basement. But this Sunday was different. The boy had two friends with him, and the 14-year-old girl performed oral sex on one of them. Soon, more boys and young men arrived, and before the girl took the bus back home at 11pm, she had had sex with nine different youths from the neighbourhood.

Nine months later, after what has been described as one of the most talked-about rape cases in recent Danish history, the judge delivered his verdict in the High Court of Western Denmark. The boy who initially had sex with the girl was acquitted. Another was sentenced to one year in prison, five others were sentenced to nine months in prison, and two were too young to be prosecuted.

Outside the courtroom, the Aarhus rape was used to deliver a much more far-reaching judgment. The 14-year-old girl was ethnically Danish, while all the young men were from a Palestinian background – a fact that did not go unnoticed. Studies have shown that around 2,000 girls and women are raped every year in Denmark, but the Bispehaven case was not primarily seen as part of a general rape problem.<sup>1</sup> It was understood as a specific cultural problem associated with the offenders' culture, nationality and ethnicity.

This was apparent in the coverage of the case in much of the national media, which described the boys' 'Islamic view of women' and raised concerns about 'the interaction of Danish and Middle-Eastern gender roles'. It was concluded that 'the group rapes are culturally conditioned', and the Aarhus case was linked to gang rapes in Sweden and the UK where ethnic minorities had been convicted.

As associate professor Rikke Andreassen writes in her book *Der er et yndigt land – Medier, minoriteter og danskhed* (There is a Lovely Land: Media, Minorities and Danishness), the coverage of the Aarhus case was a good example of how crimes committed by ethnic minorities are described in ways that render entire populations suspect:

*This means that rapes committed by ethnic minority men are represented as part of a wider racial pattern, while rapes committed by ethnic Danish men are represented as one-off cases.<sup>2</sup>*

It did not come as a big surprise that the Danish People's Party tried to use the Aarhus case as an argument in support of its anti-immigration policy. According to the party's then leader, Pia Kærsgaard, the rape of the 14-year-old girl was yet more evidence that 'the biggest lie in Danish public life is to believe that both cultures can co-exist peacefully on equal terms', as she wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Ekstra Bladet* newspaper in spring 2000.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the Danish People's Party's role in a shift towards increasingly Islam-sceptic and xenophobic policies over the past 20 years. It is easily forgotten that discriminatory rhetoric was heard far and wide even before 2001, when the Danish People's Party gained serious political influence as the Liberal-Conservative government's supporting party. During the Aarhus case, the right-wing populist MPs were far from the only ones who saw the rape as a sign of a culture clash. The Danish Women's Society voiced its concern when the first legal process in the district court resulted in such low sentences that those convicted were free to leave the courtroom – and did so to the accompaniment of boisterous celebration. As the Women's Society put it in a press release:

*The Danish Women's Society wants to know how young boys of Arab origin are ever to learn how to properly respect girls and women, when the convicted teenagers were able to walk out of the courtroom to the accompaniment of enthusiastic applause and whistles by their families, friends and girlfriends.*

This contributed to the general representation not only of the convicted rapists, but of all Arab boys, as misogynist.

As early as the mid-1990s, similar views had been put forward by the Social Democratic Minister of Social Affairs Karen Jespersen when, in connection with a case involving crimes committed by immigrants, she refused to send the young criminals on so-called re-education trips to their countries of origin:

'I don't think it is a good idea, because the point is they have to learn to behave like Danes [...] We have to be careful of keeping them in the culture they come from,' she said on the evening news in September 1996.

The opposing argument could not be clearer: being a Dane is synonymous with being law-abiding, while the immigrants' culture is seen as something undesirable, problematic and criminal.

## The criminal Muslims

The image of violent and sexist male immigrants has played a central role in the division between 'them' and 'us'. When the Liberals and Conservatives took power in 2001 it followed an election campaign that used posters showing the convicted boys from the Aarhus rape leaving the courthouse, with the headline 'Time for Change'. The message was that political action was needed to deal with young male immigrants' violent tendencies and misogyny.

Given that 45 per cent of Danes today believe that Muslims create unrest in society,<sup>3</sup> it is worth noting the type of language that has been used to describe cases such as the Aarhus rape over the past 15 years. When referring to ethnic minorities, politicians, experts and journalists are often not happy with simply describing the accused as 'men' or, for example, 'the 16-year-old'; they opt for using 'Arabs', 'Muslims', 'foreigners' or 'immigrants'.

First, in a strictly linguistic sense, this has contributed to creating a link between the criminal acts and the men's non-white, non-Danish and non-Christian backgrounds, as if the crime is connected with or even caused by their religious or cultural deviation from the norm. Second, this use of language has played a part in causing a misleading confusion of labels. 'Immigrant', 'ethnic minority' and 'Muslim' have increasingly become synonymous in the public sphere, especially in the media's usage. Figures from 2006 show that immigrants or descendants of immigrants make up 8.5 per cent of Denmark's 5.4 million inhabitants. Muslims make up 3.5 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

'Before We Were Immigrants – Today We're Muslims' was the title of a 2007 article in the newspaper *Information* on the new spotlight on religion:

'In the 1990s, the focus was on "immigrants", and that term was used again and again in the media to describe a group of people that caused a lot of problems. Today it is the "Muslims" who are targeted as scapegoats', wrote Noman Malik, the then Secretary General of the association Muslims in Dialogue.

Others have expressed frustration that the one-sided focus on Islam reduces them to identical, unthinking believers.

'When I came to Denmark I was just a doctor from Egypt. Now I'm perceived as a Muslim immigrant. People are practically starting to think that I'm a robot and that the Quran is my manual', said Akmal Safwat, a chief physician from Aarhus, to *Avisen.dk*.

This may help to explain why, according to a 2012 survey, 59 per cent of the Danish population perceives immigrants from the Middle East as 'religious fanatics'. According to the same survey, only 19 per cent of Danes see immigrants from the Middle East as



'law-abiding'.<sup>5</sup> To understand why, it may help to look at the way in which crimes committed by non-white minorities are understood and presented by the police and media.

### Criminal culture

Throughout the 1990s, several Danish TV channels reported on rising crime rates among ethnic minorities.

'While crime among young Danes is declining, the same cannot be said for young immigrants,' said a TV 2 news report in 1992.

'More and more young people with minority ethnic backgrounds are becoming criminals,' said a news anchor on the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's channel in 1996.

This was in fact correct. Ethnic minorities have been and still are overrepresented in the crime statistics. In 2002, Dr Britta Kyvsgaard, a researcher specialising in Law, found that non-ethnic Danes were overrepresented by 48 per cent compared to ethnic Danes.<sup>6</sup>

The usual explanation has been that the criminals' non-Danish origin and their difference to 'us' is the cause of the deviant behaviour. As police commissioner Knud Jensen told the DBC news programme in November 2011:

*I think some of it has to do with the cultural background. In this country we still have respect for human life. I think that the further away you get from our latitudes, the easier it is to pull knives and the less other people's lives are valued.*

'It's also natural for some of them to bring baseball bats with them when they go out,' said police officer George Moos to the DBC news programme in June 1993.

These references to violence as inherent to ethnic minorities or as a product of a foreign culture play a role in the creation of a division between violent 'strangers' (or 'others') and non-violent Danes. The division is even confirmed by official statistics. But as is often the case with statistics, they contain more than one truth.

The above-mentioned Britta Kyvsgaard reviewed the figures to determine whether there might be other explanations for the high proportion of non-ethnic Danes. She first looked at the age category. It is well known that young people commit more crimes than children and the elderly. It turned out that there were far more young people among immigrants than in the general population. Part of the explanation for the high crime rate therefore lay in the uneven age distribution. After Kyvsgaard controlled for age difference, the overrepresentation of non-ethnic Danes fell from 48 per cent to 38 per cent.

She then looked at the education levels among minorities and Danes – another factor known to affect the likelihood of crime. As expected, ethnic Danes were significantly better educated than ethnic minorities. This reduced the overrepresentation from 38 per cent to 30 per cent.

Once Kyvsgaard had controlled for the differences in income and employment status in the figures, she ended up with an overrepresentation of 4 per cent.<sup>7</sup> If the story had been told correctly, it would have sounded something like this:

*Young, unemployed men with no education and low incomes commit more crimes than others; men with non-Danish ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented among young unemployed people with no education and low incomes.*

But this headline will hardly sell any newspapers. Instead, the story of violent immigrants has been told over and over again.

It has been told, for instance, in reports on the gang conflicts that occurred in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s. In these conflicts, two groups repeatedly clashed as part of what one news report described as a 'confrontation between second-generation immigrants and certain people associated with biker gangs'.

One group is referred to by its ethnicity and not-quite-Danishness (so that its criminal acts are potentially linked to all descendants of immigrants), while the other group of ethnic Danish bikers is referred to in terms of single individuals (dissenters whose behaviour is not representative of ethnic Danes in general).

### The Danish psychopath

We noted something similar in the introduction to this chapter, when the Aarhus rape was compared with rape cases in other countries where ethnic minorities were involved in gang rapes. But the reality is that rapes committed by ethnic Danish men still account for the vast majority of sexual assaults in Denmark, mostly as isolated incidents that are explained by the individual perpetrator's personality and character traits.

The individual journalist, police officer or other public person does not necessarily have a xenophobic agenda, even if he or she is guilty of negatively stereotyping Muslim men and immigrants. It is rather the case that this kind of rhetoric, which spread in Denmark through the 1990s and 2000s, was a kind of breeding ground for outright xenophobic and populist policies.

Part of the reason why the Liberal Party felt entitled to appeal to the population with the slogan 'Time for Change', on an election poster showing a picture of some young men coming out of a courthouse, was

that the voters had already been primed to see violence as a problem linked to Muslim immigration.

In the same year, the Danish People's Party (which became the government's supporting party in 2001) published a book called *Danmarks fremtid – dit land, dit valg* (Denmark's Future: Your Country, Your Choice) with a cover showing riots in the Middle East, led by a man with a gun. This was possible because a link between immigration, Middle Eastern masculinity and violence had long since been established.

The Liberal Party was the big winner of the general election in 2001, gaining 14 seats and becoming the parliament's largest party. That October, the party's then chairperson and new Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen gave the parliament's opening speech. It seemed fitting to criticise his predecessor's 'lax immigration policy' and repeat the news outlets' language in his description of the challenges posed by immigration:

*Almost half of those who are arrested and jailed for very serious crimes in Copenhagen are foreigners. Two out of three reported rapes in Copenhagen are committed by foreigners. There are still several examples of large groups of young immigrants cowardly luring police into an ambush and attacking them. There are neighbourhoods in Denmark which the police can now only patrol with heavy reinforcement. These are facts that can be backed up with figures and statistics, facts that should be made public, facts that worry more and more people, facts that we have a duty to respond to.*



# 3

## The fight against forced marriages

The declaration on integration and active citizenship in Danish society, which all immigrants and refugees must sign when seeking permanent residence in Denmark, states:

- *I acknowledge that men and women have equal rights and duties in Denmark, and that both men and women should contribute to society. [...]*
- *I know that in Denmark it is an offence to carry out violence against and unlawful coercion of one's spouse and others, including children.*
- *I know that circumcision of girls and forced marriages are punishable acts in Denmark.*

This declaration was adopted in 2006, along with a wide range of proposals, all of which were intended to send a signal to immigrants and refugees that they had a duty to integrate into Danish society. The package was adopted with the support of the Danish People's Party.

The linking of the right of permanent residence in Denmark to applicants' views on gender equality was not just a legal formality. It spoke volumes about the Danish public debate, in which gender relations has been the focal point of a political process that has made it harder and harder to seek residency and to stay in Denmark. As the Danish People's Party wrote in its brochure *Integration på dansk* ('Integration through the Danish language'):

*Many immigrant girls and women are oppressed in the name of religion and tradition. It is therefore important that immigrant girls are helped to break with outdated family patterns, so they are liberated and become a resource for society and the process of integration.*

By assuming the role of defender of oppressed immigrant women, the Danish People's Party gained broad political support for an increasingly restrictive immigration policy.

### The 24-year rule

In 2002, the then government, supported by the Danish People's Party, proposed a series of measures to tighten the Aliens Act. The so-called 24-year rule was particularly controversial. It made it impossible for any citizen under the age of 24 to apply for family reunification with their foreign spouse. The political purpose was twofold: to limit the number of family reunifications in general, and to prevent forced marriages among young second-generation immigrants. When the proposal was debated, the government put particular emphasis on the latter. When the Act was in its third reading in parliament, Birte Ronn Hornbech, the Liberal's spokesperson on legal policy, said:

*We strongly support the basic tenet of equality between individual citizens. We will not accept forced marriages, oppression of women and the like. So fortunately there are many things we agree on. Unfortunately, we will only be voting the Act through with support from the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Danish People's Party, but voters have demanded that we do this work, and I would like to thank the Danish People's Party for constructive, sometimes cheerful and sometimes excited debates.*

### The oppressed Fatma

It was no coincidence that the oppressed immigrant woman in need of rescuing was a familiar figure in 2002. In her analysis of Danish news reports from 1971 to 2007, associate professor of communication Rikke Andreassen found that there had been little progress in the way immigrant women were portrayed. The women have generally been portrayed as victims of domestic violence and honour killings. More and more of these types of stories appeared in the news throughout the 1990s, a decade that also saw the introduction in the public sphere of the concepts of forced marriage and honour killings. In her analysis of individual news reports, Andreassen pointed out that the portrayals of immigrant women tended to be thoroughly stereotypical. In the reports, the women spoke of histories of violence and threats from their male relatives. They were almost always anonymous, and were often called Fatma.

Andreassen compared these reports to a story about an ethnic Danish girl who was abused by her Arab boyfriend, and found significant differences between how the two battered women were portrayed: the Danish woman looked straight into the camera, was filmed going about her daily life, and was finally given the opportunity to show viewers her new life in Iceland. Andreassen concluded:

*News programmes like this contribute [...] to a racial gender construction in which women of colour are portrayed as passive victims and white women as survivors of violence.<sup>8</sup>*

### The murder of Fadime Şahindal

The controversial 24-year rule was debated in the shadow of a murder. Four days after the rule went through its first reading in parliament, the Swedish-Kurdish woman Fadime Şahindal was murdered by her father as punishment for living with her Swedish boyfriend.

The murder caused a sensation throughout Scandinavia, since Fadime was politically active and just a few months before had spoken in the Swedish parliament, saying:

*No matter what your cultural background is, it should be a matter of course that all young women can have the families and the lives they want. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many young women. I hope you don't turn your backs on them.*

Fadime Şahindal's father was later convicted of the murder.

The murder of Fadime gave the right a strong political argument to introduce a tightening of immigration law. In several interviews, the then Minister of Integration, Bertel Haarder, said that he kept the books of the Norwegian social anthropologist Unni Wikan on his bedside table. Wikan argued that the concept of culture had been too loose in Norway and that the Scandinavian welfare states had allowed misogynist practices in order to accommodate the immigrants' culture. She was also an avowed supporter of the 24-year rule. As she told the newspaper *Information* in 2003:

*It's impressive that Denmark has the courage to carry through legislation restricting family reunification. In principle there's nothing wrong with arranged marriages. [They] can work very well. The problem arises when they are used to obtain visas for family members who otherwise cannot get to Denmark.*

She thereby delivered what the Danish People's Party could not give the government parties: an intellectual legitimisation of the 24-year rule.

### Protect Denmark

The Danish population's general shift in its attitude to forced marriages and honour killings was also evident when another spectacular case went to trial in 2007. The Pakistani-Danish woman Ghazala Khan was shot outside Vejle Station by her brother after she had married an Afghan man against her family's wishes.

The sentences given in the subsequent trial were much tougher than had previously been the norm. Not only was Ghazala's brother convicted of murder; eight other relatives were also convicted of complicity. After the judgment, the Danish People's Party demanded better protection for women like Ghazala Khan. In a press release, the party's political spokesperson Peter Skaarup wrote:

*The Danish People's Party believes that if Denmark is to be preserved as a humane democracy, it is crucial that all its citizens have the right to choose their own partners. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to support those who are affected by outdated family norms.*

The youth wing of the People's Party later used a picture of Ghazala Khan in an ad that was headlined 'Protect Denmark' and showed a number of statistics on the prevalence of honour killings. The conclusion was clear: to prevent honour killings, Denmark must limit immigration.

### Did it work?

When the 24-year rule was adopted in 2002, it was in spite of the 'no' votes by the Social Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the left-wing parties – the Socialist People's Party and the Red-Green Alliance. The parties that voted against the bill considered it incompatible with the charter of human rights. In 2004 the Danish Institute for Human Rights reviewed 22 cases in which applications for family reunifications had been rejected, and concluded that they were in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>9</sup> Tøger Seidenfaden, the late editor of *Politiken* (one of Denmark's largest newspapers), wrote that the 24-year rule was a 'blatant, coarse, brutal and offensive curtailment of our individual rights – motivated by a desire to reduce an "influx" that has long since been brought down to one of the lowest levels in Europe'.

But the 24-year rule was not changed. Ten years on, it has become institutionalised as part of Denmark's immigration policy, only directly opposed by the radical left-wing party the Red-Green Alliance. Even former Chief Rabbi Bent Melchior, who has been a strong critic of the current and former governments' immigration policies, described the 24-year rule as follows in a 2010 opinion piece:

*The intention itself was most commendable. We want an end to forced marriages. Most will agree that such marriages must be opposed. They involve elements of human trafficking and, while not ending in prostitution, deprive individuals of their right to decide over their own lives and livelihoods. It is usually women who are coerced into marrying a perhaps unwanted spouse in the hope that this will give her food on the table and a roof over her head.*

In 2008, the Danish People's Party proposed a further tightening of the requirements for family reunification. The party wanted to make it impossible for people under the age of 28 to be reunited.

*The 24-year rule has had a tremendously positive impact on forced and arranged marriages. It is therefore natural to replace it with a 28-year rule, so we can reap even more benefits.*

So said the People's Party's former group chairperson, Kristian Thulesen Dahl. The proposal was rejected by the government.

The extent to which the 24-year rule actually changed the marriage practices of immigrants and refugees has been much discussed. The number of family reunions has fallen from around 10,000 annually in 2002 to 4,000 annually in 2008.<sup>10</sup> Whether the number of forced marriages has fallen is difficult to determine, since there are no figures on how widespread the practice was, either before or after the introduction of the 24-year rule. What is clear is that in the past decade immigrant women have stormed into Danish educational institutions and time and time again have presented a counter-image to the oppressed immigrant of TV news reports. In 2011 the 'new Dane' Sengül Köse wrote in *Politiken* that it was absurd that politicians were so busy taking credit for the fact that she and others like her went to university and weren't getting married.

*The perception that this rule has had a positive effect on new Danes' education masks its negative consequence, namely that it robs you and me of the freedom to choose our own spouse. Many politicians have trouble facing this fact, and therefore there is a need for a positive discourse in order to preserve the rule: [...] Dear politicians, do not give the 24-year rule credit for the fact that I and other new Danish women go into education. The simple explanation for why we study at Danish universities is that we want more financial and personal freedom.*

## The veiled fanatics

In 2007 a young woman, Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, announced that she was running for parliament on behalf of the Red-Green Alliance. This caused a stir, since the woman was a Muslim and wore a headscarf, and intended to continue to do so.

'If I'm elected to parliament, it will be with the headscarf. It's a part of me, and I won't defend who I am, but I'm happy to explain it,' said Abdol-Hamid to TV 2 when she announced her candidacy.

Abdol-Hamid was a new figure in the Danish media. This was not 'Fatma', the oppressed immigrant woman who anonymously described the violence her own relatives subjected her to. On the contrary. Abdol-Hamid and others like her were independent young women who demanded to take part in Danish society on their own terms and in various fields. Practically every year from 2000 to 2010, the Danish authorities had to take a stance on the Muslim headscarf in a number of high-profile cases. The first debate took place in 2000, when the department store Magasin was ordered to pay compensation to a young girl who had been refused work experience because she wore a headscarf. The discussions were repeated when the supermarket chain Føtex, the trade union FDB, the Danish courts, the Home Guard, parliament, Odense Municipality and the Danish Football Association all had to decide how to deal with footballers, MPs, judges, childminders and cashiers who wore headscarves.

Whereas in 2002 the Danish People's Party used the familiar story of the poor oppressed immigrant woman to significantly tighten immigration law, the constant debates about headscarves now became arenas for all parties to discuss a range of political values. The symbol of the scarf could be used to discuss multiculturalism, Danishness and gender equality in immigrant communities. It also became an issue that could be used to send out clear political messages.

The then leader of the Socialist People's Party Villy Søvndal did just this in 2008 when he declared in a constitution meeting that:

*For me personally, the headscarf does not signal equality. On the contrary. Of course women can decide for themselves whether they want to wear a*

*headscarf or not. Of course they can. But in my opinion it does not change the fact that the headscarf is a religious symbol that says men and women are not equal.*

Precisely by distancing itself from headscarves and the women who wore them, the left could defend itself against the Danish People's Party's constant accusation that they had betrayed the Danish community. But discussions about headscarves were also an effective way of excluding Muslim women from the public arena. To this day there are no headscarf-wearing women among Denmark's political, cultural or economic elites.

### **Ban the headscarves?**

In 2004, parliament held its first debate on whether Muslim headscarves should be banned. The proposal was put forward by the Danish People's Party.

'[H]eadscarves keep young girls in a cultural pattern that many of them would rather be out of. A ban on headscarves would therefore be a helping hand to the many Muslim girls who want to integrate into Danish society,' the party argued in the bill, which also specifically stated that the same rules should not apply to clothing and symbols common to the Judeo-Christian culture – like crosses or skullcaps.

The subsequent parliamentary debate became a struggle to evaluate Danishness and Danish values.

'A scarf precisely signifies a person who is against Danish norms and values,' said the People's Party MP Louise Frevert.

The parliamentary assembly did not agree with this argument.

Anne Baastrup of the Socialist People's Party presented a picture of the wife of the Danish hymn writer and cultural figure Grundtvig and said:

*[Grundtvig] is the one who gave flesh and blood and even an immune defence to the notions of Danishness and Danish popular culture, of our fatherland and our mother tongue. So it's quite interesting when you look him up [...] and see a picture of his wife. She wore a headscarf.*

But the scarf was not just seen as a symbol of 'un-Danishness'. In the view of most of the parties' spokespersons, it also symbolised the oppression of women. However, they did not agree with the Danish People's Party that a ban was the right way to end this oppression. As Margrethe Vestager of the Social Liberal Party put it:

*It is the wrong tool precisely because it involves taking the father's place and letting the state act as the patriarch that tells individuals what they can and can't do.*

The other parties in parliament rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would contravene the Danish law of ethnic equality and Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights concerning freedom of religion and non-discrimination.<sup>11</sup> It would be possible to ban headscarves in public places only if all other religious symbols were also banned. Nevertheless, the People's Party continued to propose a ban in the years that followed. For instance, in 2007 the party's leader Pia Kjærsgaard said to TV 2 news:

*I want a Denmark without headscarves. Absolutely. I think it's completely unacceptable that doctors, nurses, social and health workers, police officers – I could go on – go around wearing scarves.*

Although a ban on headscarves would be in conflict with the Danish Constitution, the desire for a scarf-free Denmark became a way to formulate a basic agenda: Denmark must be freed from Islam and preserved as a monocultural nation.

### **A veiled parliamentary candidate?**

At the beginning of the millennium, Muslim headscarves were mainly discussed in Danish public debate as a symbol of women's oppression and lack of willingness to integrate. However, during the 2000s the debate on headscarves changed. The Danish People's Party changed the terms of the debate by interpreting the headscarf as a political symbol: a sign that the wearer was in favour of Sharia law and was associated with terrorism. The party operated with two possible understandings of women with headscarves: *either* they were forced to wear them by their fathers and brothers, making them living arguments for the necessity of a tight immigration policy to protect women from forced marriages; *or* the woman herself was a follower of a religion that threatened Danish society. Thus the stage was set to throw suspicion on all headscarf-wearing women who entered the public debate.

Asmaa Abdol-Hamid's headscarf was interpreted in the latter way, and the Danish People's Party considered her a woman that Danish society should denounce rather than help.

'[T]he headscarf is a totalitarian symbol and as such it is equivalent to the totalitarian symbols we know from communism and fascism,' stated one of the Danish People's Party intellectuals, the priest Søren Krarup, on the same day that Abdol-Hamid announced her candidacy for parliament.

Abdol-Hamid's candidacy led to a fierce debate on both sides of Danish politics.

In the same television report, Søren Gade of the Socialist People's Party responded to Krarup's statement as follows:

*The west is threatened by a form of Islam that is totalitarian, and [that] wants to suppress all others in the name of its holy law. The dangerous people are both those who are fundamentalists on the Islamic side and the likes of Søren Krarup.*

In this way Gade managed to characterise both Krarup and Abdol-Hamid as fundamentalists. Even the then prime ministerial candidate for the Social Democrats, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, criticised the headscarf in her comments to the DBC news:

*I personally don't care for the scarf, and I hope more women will disclaim it, and that young girls are not pressured into wearing it by their families. [The scarf] is a very powerful symbol that sets boundaries between people.*

Abdol-Hamid ran on behalf of the left-wing party the Red-Green Alliance, and her candidacy meant that the debate on headscarves, which before had been mainly conducted on the right, suddenly spread to the far left parties, which could not decide what stance to take on the matter.

The older, well-known feminist and member of the Red-Green Alliance Bente Hansen said to the DBC news:

*[I] am still firmly of the opinion that [Asmaa Abdol-Hamid] represents the view that quite simply says that men and women are not equal.*

The Socialist People's Party subsequently declared that they had no intention of putting forward a scarf-wearing woman as a parliamentary candidate. The scarf was thus used to signal that, unlike before, the party now had clear values and control over their policies.

The Red-Green Alliance ended up convening an extraordinary annual meeting to discuss whether Abdol-Hamid should continue to represent the party. However, the meeting was not held, since in the meantime an election was called – Abdol-Hamid was elected as an alternate member.

The Danish People's Party later raised a discussion about whether it was permissible to wear a headscarf at the parliamentary podium and thus, in effect, whether a scarf-wearing woman could play an active role in Danish democracy at all. The Danish People's Party MP Mogens Camre, who was also a member of the European Parliament, commented:

*It's a sick idea and completely unnatural that a fundamentalist with a scarf should be a member of our democratic parliament. [...] Follow the customs or leave the country, it's as simple as that. The sooner she leaves the better.*

Camre then asked the parliament's executive committee to ban headscarves at the podium. But again, the People's Party did not get its way, as the committee chose not to ban headscarves.

'It's a sad day for democracy and equality between men and women,' said the People's Party MP Søren Espersen in response. Yet it could be argued that in a sense the Danish People's Party did achieve what it wanted. Asmaa Abdol-Hamid did not become the first woman to wear a headscarf at the parliamentary podium, since she later withdrew from politics. Instead, the first two Muslim women to speak in parliament were Özlem Cekic and Yildiz Akdogan, who had Kurdish and Turkish backgrounds respectively. They did not wear headscarves and explicitly stated that they perceived their faith as a private matter. When she was interviewed by the newspaper *Information* in the run-up to the general election, Cekic said:

*I don't use the Koran or my faith to determine whether I'm a good enough mother. I can read the Koran, but I rarely do. It's not the book I open when I'm in doubt. Religion does not play a special role in my daily life. It does for some Muslims, but not for me.*

### Is a judge allowed to be a Muslim?

In 2008 Sabba Mirza, a 25-year-old law student, suddenly became a hot topic in the Danish media. She was the only example of a potential future problem in the Danish courts.

Mirza wanted to become a judge, but declared that she would refuse to take off her headscarf if she were given a job in the Danish courts. In an interview with *Avisen.dk* about her future plans, she said:

*My scarf is part of the lifestyle I've chosen. It outweighs my career. If I can't get a job in Denmark I'll have to move to a country where people are more enlightened and can see beyond the scarf.*

The Danish Court Administration had just made an internal decision to allow Muslim women to wear headscarves in Danish courts, even though there were no other potential Muslim women judges besides Sabba Mirza, who at that time was still a student. Nevertheless, the Administration's decision sparked much debate.

'It is very regrettable that the Court Administration in this way has tried to sneak headscarves in by the back door,' said Danish People's Party MP Peter Skaarup. And for the first time, there was a parliamentary majority in favour of a ban.



*All religious and political symbols must be kept out of the courtrooms, regardless of whether it's scarves or turbans or crosses. Most people would feel uncomfortable in a trial with a judge who paraded his or her political or religious persuasion.*

So said the then Liberal Minister of Gender Equality, Inger Støjbjerg, while the Danish People's Party argued that not only judges but all government employees should be prohibited from wearing headscarves. 'What matters is whether it's something that makes people uncomfortable. This varies widely, but there are some people who feel uncomfortable when they see a woman with a headscarf, because they see her as oppressed,' said Skaarup, thus portraying his own view of the Muslim headscarf as an oppressive practice as if it were the view of the Danish population as a whole. The prohibition against religious symbols in courtrooms was adopted in May 2008 and thereby became the first ban on headscarves. The decision can be seen against the background of the People's Party's success in defining the headscarf as a political symbol since 2004. The ground had been prepared for the general view that the headscarf would conflict with the judge's neutrality.

*Emboldened by this triumph, the party will now continue its struggle for the survival of the west, as Søren Krarup put it in parliament the other day. After all, the requirement of impartiality can rightly be extended to many other places besides courtrooms. For example, is it not logical that teachers and nursery school staff should also be neutral in their appearance and behaviour? This will undoubtedly be the next step down the slippery slope.*

So wrote the editor of the Christian-Democratic newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* in an editorial, calling the ban on headscarves in courtrooms the Danish People's Party's greatest political triumph. The law made Denmark's only potential female Muslim judge Sabba Mirza drop her plans of a career in the Danish courts. She said at the time:

*The purpose of my student job was to work with former assistant judges so I could really get to know Danish values, which would have helped me if in due course I had applied to become an assistant judge myself. But wearing the scarf is part of the lifestyle I've chosen, and I won't give it up. So apparently that means it's not possible to become a judge.*

Today Mirza is writing a PhD thesis in law and has recently contributed to the debate about forced marriages, stating that she does not believe that the maximum penalty is tough enough.

## Tolerance, Islam and homophobia

One spring day in 2011, the Copenhagen district of Nørrebro was visited by a famous imam. Bilal Philips, who was born in Jamaica and raised in Canada, where he converted as a 25-year-old, was invited by the Danish Islamic Society's youth wing to give a lecture on Islamophobia at a conference in the Korsgadehallen cultural centre.

In the week leading up to Philips' visit, a heated debate took place, especially in left-wing media and blogs, in which politicians, activists, academics, feminists and representatives of LGBT organisations discussed how to respond to the event. Some felt it was important to show up and demonstrate against Philips' visit, while others insisted it would be best to stay away.

All agreed to publicly distance themselves from Philips' views. The controversial imam is known for his reactionary interpretation of Sharia law. He has repeatedly argued that men should be allowed to beat their wives, that extramarital sex should be punished by 200 lashes and, not least, that gay sex should be punished by death.

Against this background, the dissatisfaction with Bilal Philips was understandable. As Trine Pertou Mach of the Socialist People's Party wrote in an opinion piece on the portal *Modkraft* the week before the conference, he represents 'the complete opposite of what a left wing characterised by solidarity works for'. Nevertheless, Mach was in doubt about how best to respond to the event. She remembered all too clearly what had happened three months earlier, when left-wing activists and politicians assembled outside the Danish Royal Library to demonstrate against the radical Islamic group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which held a public rally that was given considerable media attention.

At that rally, Mach and her allies suddenly found themselves side by side with representatives of the right wing. Denmark's National Front, the Nazi party DNSB and the organisation Stop the Islamisation of Denmark had turned up along with uniformed soldiers. They carried the Danish flag, sang the national anthem and raised banners bearing slogans such as 'Deport These Fifth-Column Traitors' and 'Go to Hell'. A group of masked people tried to provoke violent confrontations by shouting 'Arab scum' and 'come over here' to the participants of the rally.



Now Mach and others feared that something similar would happen outside Korsgadehallen. And their suspicions seemed to be justified. Several politicians known for their xenophobic and populist rhetoric made public statements prior to Philips' visit. One of them was Minister of Integration Søren Pind, whose attitude to intercultural encounters is perhaps best summed up by the following quote:

'I don't want to hear any more talk about integration. Spare me. The right word is assimilation. There are lots of cultures elsewhere that people can go and promote if that's what they want.' Pind told the Christian paper *Kristeligt Dagblad* that Philips' statements about homosexuals 'violate Danish norms', and that the Islamic Society should repudiate him.

The Danish People's Party, which has conservative and nationalistic tendencies, also joined in. It wrote to the Minister of Justice to request a change in legislation so that Bilal Philips could be denied entry into the country, again on grounds that he advocated the death penalty for homosexuals.

The researcher Michael Nebeling Petersen argued that the left should refrain from playing into this populist right-wing division between 'them' and 'us'. As he wrote in connection with Philips' visit:

*This contrast between the modern, secular, liberated west and the backward, oppressed, religious other was one of the arguments for invading Afghanistan and Iraq, it is one of the arguments for Denmark's racist immigration policies, and it is one of the arguments for the discriminatory policy on headscarves, language teaching, family reunification, public benefits, housing and so on.*

Gender researcher Jasbir K. Puar wrote in an opinion piece in 2010:

*'How do you treat your women?' became a key question when it came to determining colonised or developing countries' ability to govern themselves. The 'women question' hasn't exactly disappeared, but it has been linked up with the 'gay question', or 'How do you treat your homosexuals?' as a paradigm used to evaluate the ability of nations, peoples and cultures to adapt to universalist notions of civilisation.*

### Innate hatred

In Denmark this can perhaps be seen most clearly in the debate on hate crimes against gays and lesbians. Images of young and immigrant boys from the Copenhagen district of Nørrebro throwing stones at participants of the annual Pride parade have featured prominently in the media. Representatives from the gay community have contributed to the debate with anecdotes about aggressive second-generation

immigrants, and right-wing politicians rarely miss an opportunity to deliver their message that 'where Islam enters, tolerance leaves' – as the People's Party's former leader Pia Kjærsgaard wrote in her weekly newsletter. In the same letter she also described how 'homosexuals had to run the gauntlet' during their procession through Nørrebro to avoid violent clashes with 'the Muslim brotherhood'.

As we saw in the chapter on violent male immigrants, homophobic behaviour among non-whites is typically explained in cultural or religious terms. It becomes a question of immigrant communities' inherent hatred of gays and lesbians. In this area one rarely sees socio-economic explanatory models or references to single 'depraved individuals', as is the case when ethnic Danes commit their extensive hate crimes. To use another example, when a paedophile ring consisting of white middle-aged Danish men is exposed in the media, it is not usually presented as an event that affects the perception of white middle-aged Danish men in general.

In addition to contributing to the stigmatisation of an already marginalised minority, the condemnation of 'Muslim' homophobia helps camouflage the general discrimination experienced by people with different sexual preferences in Denmark. The Danish People's Party's concern for the welfare of homosexuals was evident during the riots in Nørrebro, but is otherwise difficult to spot in their own policies. The party's official website clearly states that homosexuals should not have the right either to adopt children or have children through artificial insemination.

Similarly, Søren Pind – who as mentioned saw Bilal Philips' views on homosexuals as contrary to Danish norms – has himself fought to deny single and lesbian women access to artificial insemination in public hospitals. And when interviewed in 2008 about his views on men and women, he referred both to the Stone Age society's division of labour and to the Bible in his explanation of why women purportedly talk more than men and why men have more power than women.

### Whitewashing and beautiful breasts

The right's strategic use of feminism has been met with resistance. 'I refuse to be held hostage by populist and inflammatory agendas,' wrote Güzel Turan from the information centre Kvinno in a 2009 article on male politicians' involvement in the debate on Muslim women's veils.

'I'm tired of my burqa and breasts being used in Espersen's feud against the archrival: the Big Bad Muslim,' she wrote about Danish People's Party MP Søren Espersen. Espersen had denounced multiculturalism and Muslim women's style of dress on national television because, as he said, 'I'd like to be allowed to see Muslim women's beautiful breasts'.

Recently similar reactions have come from Danish organisations and political activists fighting for the rights of sexual minorities. In 2010, under the heading 'There's no pride in racism', the Red-Green Alliance's Queer Committee distanced itself from the annual Pride parade precisely because it was being used in the service of a xenophobic and nationalistic agenda.

*We will not use Pride's festivities to celebrate 'Danish tolerance' of sexual minorities [...] We will not be used to whitewash xenophobic politicians and parties by helping them appear gay-friendly and hence inclusive.*

It was this same concern that led many to stay away from the demonstration outside Korsgadehallen when Bilal Philips came to visit on Sunday 17 April. On the surface their worries appeared to be unfounded. Politicians from the Socialist People's Party and the Red-Green Alliance, as well as Muslim feminists, stood on a box and made speeches. There was no sea of Danish flags, no right-wing nationalists singing the national anthem. The left had apparently succeeded in protesting against a conservative imam and his views on women and homosexuals without being caught up in a broader xenophobic agenda.

The demonstration itself was 'not hijacked by right-wing radicals or other nationalists', wrote the researcher Michael Nebeling Petersen, but he wasn't convinced this meant that all was peachy.

He noted that in the week leading up to the event all the political parties had sent spokespeople and ministers out to give media interviews distancing themselves from the Danish Islamic Society for inviting a man with such extreme views. Regardless of how the demonstration turned out, the overall impression was of a reinforced distinction between 'them' and 'us':

*The way the whole debate was run in the media circus, it again ended up as a confrontation between white, gay-friendly Denmark and the homophobic parallel society in Nørrebro. Wouldn't it have been great if we'd appeared on TV in a different light?*

## New times

At the general election in September 2011, a centre-left coalition won a narrow majority in parliament and appointed Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt as the new prime minister. It seemed that the Danish People's Party had lost its political authority. Yet political commentators pointed out that the party still had a major influence on Danish politics. As Christian Jensen, editor of the newspaper *Information*, wrote the day after the election:

*The Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party have long since taken over the conservative immigration policy that the conservatives themselves have abandoned. [...] So today, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, along with Pia Kjaersgaard, stands as the strongest advocate of the very symbol of a decade's scandalous immigration policy.*

Indeed, the government has not abolished the 24-year rule, and although it is hinting at changes to the rules on permanent residence and citizenship, among others, this does not mean that xenophobic attitudes have disappeared from Danish politics.

One might just have to dig deeper to find them.

In 2012, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation decided to mark the Muslim Eid festival for the first time. This was by and large welcomed by the Danish public. But the good atmosphere vanished when at the end of the Eid festivities, 60–70 people, many of them armed with clubs, knives or brass knuckles, stormed into Odense University Hospital. There they destroyed equipment, threatened staff and vandalised an ambulance and police cars in an attempt to find a particular patient. This was a young man who earlier in the evening had been shot and stabbed during an Eid celebration elsewhere in the city. Security officers had to call in reinforcement and the police had to draw their guns before the many intruders left the hospital. It was assumed that the rioters had been involved in a gang conflict in Vollsmose, an ethnically diverse part of Odense that had previously been in the media spotlight in connection with Islamic radicalisation and crime.

Immediately after the violent events, the Social Democratic chairperson of the parliamentary integration committee, Trine Bramsen,

stated that the riots at the hospital were ‘so far from Danish norms’ that the perpetrators must either return to their home countries or, if Denmark was their home country, consider ‘whether they want to be part of Danish society or not’.

Trine Bramsen was aware that this statement might appear harsh, but it was necessary, she explained:

*The reason why I'm fighting fire with fire in the case of these violent offenders is precisely that Vollsmose is also home to many people who are well-integrated and employed. And those are the people who are hit hardest when something like this happens at the hands of a group that refuses to follow the rules we have in Denmark.*

In many ways this resembled an argument that Simon Emil Ammitzbøll of the Liberal Alliance party had put forward just a week earlier, in a debate on measures to tighten deportation sentences:

*If this development is allowed to continue and a higher and higher percentage of crime in Denmark is committed by foreigners, we risk ending up in a situation where people with dark skin and foreign-sounding names are made suspect simply because of their ethnic origins.*

The logic of both Bramsen’s and Ammitzbøll’s statements is the same: it is necessary to crack down hard on criminals with immigrant backgrounds. Otherwise, it will affect the ‘good’ immigrants. ‘Those are the people who are hit hardest,’ says Bramsen, implying that this ‘damage’ will take the form of the hatred and stigmatisation they will be exposed to from the white Danish population. The latter group are assumed to be so fundamentally racist that they cannot distinguish between a statistical overrepresentation and actual people with non-white skin colours – they cannot distinguish between 70 non-white people running amok in an Odense hospital and all other non-white people.

In 1999, the then Social Democrat Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, described the Danish People’s Party in uncompromising terms. They were not respectable and never would be. He felt that their views on immigrants and refugees were unacceptable.

It speaks volumes about the political developments that have taken place since then that, in 2012, Trine Bramsen took a line against immigrants that was as tough as that of the People’s Party. The justification is clear: politicians have to take this line against immigrants to prevent Danish racism running rampant. The unacceptable has become acceptable. Racism is taken for granted. It is now just a matter of reining it in.

As Jeppe Wedel-Brandt, an external associate professor at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at Copenhagen University, wrote on his blog under the heading ‘When Racism Becomes Natural’, these types of statements show how radically the terms of the debate on ethnic minorities have changed:

*Racism is now seen as a force of nature. It is seen as something that cannot be fought – either in society or within ourselves – and as something that is a natural reaction to living among people who are different from oneself.*

# Notes

- 1 Balvig and Kyvsgaard, *Vold og overgreb mod kvinder*
- 2 Andreassen, *Der er et yndigt land – Medier, minoriteter og danskhed*
- 3 Thomsen
- 4 Integrationsministeriets Udlændingedatabase and Brian Jacobsen, 'Muslimer i Danmark – en kritisk vurdering af antalsopgørelser'
- 5 YouGov, Kasper Møller Hansen, Toril Aalberg and Shanto Iyengar, 'Danmark er en Tea Party-bevægelse'
- 6 Kyvsgaard, 'Notat vedrørende kriminalitet og national oprindelse 2002'
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Andreassen, *Der er et yndigt land – Medier, minoriteter og danskhed*
- 9 Petersen, 'Institut: Danmark handler i strid med konventioner'
- 10 Schultz-Nielsen and Tranæs, *Ægteskabsmønstret for unge med indvandrerbaggrund*
- 11 Andreassen, *Der er et yndigt land – Medier, minoriteter og danskhed*

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# **Polish adventures with democracy**

**Marek Beylin,  
September 2012**



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# Introduction: Society is paramount

In winter 2012 scores of thousands of young people came out onto the streets of Polish cities to protest against ACTA, the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement. The government signed this international agreement to prosecute internet piracy despite warnings from experts that it could infringe on the freedom of internet users, and give massive power to gigantic commercial corporations. Having mobilised via that very same Web, they demonstrated together: left and right wingers, liberals as well as anarchists, and football yobs known previously for stadium brawls and nationalistic excesses. The only link between them was their sense of themselves as internet users under threat. The protest lasted for several weeks, and was one of the largest opposition movements in the Third Republic of Poland – i.e. since 1989, when Communism fell in Poland and democracy came in. This was one oddity. Another was the fact that these numerous manifestations were peaceful, didn't become violent, and weren't accompanied by acts of vandalism. The anger was under control, the demonstrators policed themselves; the protests had no leaders or unified structure, and no organisations stood behind them. Any politicians who would have liked to join the street protests were chased away. The demonstrators were supported on the internet by hacker groups which disrupted government websites. The Web was seething, and the protest grew, encouraged by similar protests taking off in other European countries.

The government caved in. Prime Minister Donald Tusk apologised to internet users for the mistake and announced that even though Poland had signed the Agreement, the government would not submit it for ratification by Parliament. Tusk also invited the Web activists to a meeting to discuss the problem of how to achieve protection from internet piracy without infringing liberties. Many ignored the invitation, saying they had nothing to talk about to the government, and the best discussions are online anyway.

These events demonstrate much more than just the significance of the Internet in the life of the younger part of society. The protests revealed the ever-stronger presence of a society composed of autonomous individuals, who become engaged in the name of their own individual interests. Some later attempts to get these people engaged in

campaigns on other issues came to nothing. This society is distanced from politics and distrusts it. It demands concessions from the authorities, but has no intention of forming any connections with them, whether through dialogue or permanent monitoring, leaving it to specialised and not very numerous non-governmental organisations. These events also exposed the authorities: rather weak, but making up for it with flexibility, surprised by the social responses, and then saving themselves with acquiescence.

And, just as important, we have witnessed how a conflict that has dominated and organised political life for seven years can suddenly lose its primacy – the conflict between the two strongest Polish parties: the nationalist-populist-authoritarian Law and Justice (the PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, and the ruling, conservative-to-the-core, Civic Platform (PO) led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Both groupings feed on the stand-off between them; significant numbers of voters support the PO – the party of sluggish though inevitable modernisation – out of fear of the PiS, while the PiS attracts those who are fed up with the rule of the PO. The protesters against ACTA proved emphatically, to those who hadn't realised it before, that Polish problems do not end with that Manichean division. Because society is buzzing with problems that often create unpleasant surprises for the politicians.

Poland's transformations since 1989 can be viewed from various standpoints. You can focus on the creation of institutional democracy, the foreground of political parties' development, the changes to the electorate, the parties' different discourses and campaigns, and show the process of solidifying central and local authority. You could also conclude that the most important thing in this short – barely 20-odd years – episode of Polish history is the creation of a market economy as the foundation for a liberal democracy, including individual rights. Or you could describe the birth of the market; the emergence of the entrepreneurial class; or the never-ending discussions about the interventionist role of the State, mainly whether and how the state can alleviate the effects of the market.

But I am more interested in another perspective: society's adventures with democracy and its mutual relationship with politics. Not least because there is an obvious dearth of such accounts. Most of all, the era of Polish democracy has involved immense changes, including violent social differentiation, often accompanied by false political expressions of these differences. And also an explosion of aspirations, in terms of lifestyle and identity. All these processes, rapid in themselves, accelerated even more after Poland joined the European Union (the EU). It's only a slight rhetorical exaggeration to talk about the Polish revolutions – not just evolutions – that we have experienced for a decade. It is the speed and the ruthlessness of the changes, regardless

of their beneficial effects, that are shaping society and politics. They also give rise to populist attitudes. 'Enough of change, stop Time!' is one of the main though unarticulated messages that come from a significant section of society – messages that form a permanent foundation for Polish populism. The complications do not end here. Beneath public life, the hidden parts of society are teeming. I mean those attitudes, attachments and expectations that do not find political articulation or get folded into politics belatedly. Quite often, due to a lack of available formulas or language, people adopt articulations that falsify their desires. This means that Poland is comprised of many Polands, and each of them impacts on what we see: the state of democracy.

There is one more reason why I shall deal mainly with this society's political adventures. It is because I think, as many other observers do, that our democracies, including Poland's, do not just keep morphing: they are also in need of urgent regeneration. All over Europe the current practice of democracy is failing the expectations of increasingly growing numbers of people, especially the young. Well, I am profoundly convinced – and let this be a statement of faith – that the energy and the reserves of ideas required for such regeneration lies not with the party or the state, but with a society that nowadays organises itself outside the formal institutions of the system.

When the Poles, in their first unriggered elections for several generations,<sup>1</sup> rejected the bankrupt dictatorship of what called itself 'real Socialism' for 'Solidarity' on 4 June 1989, one part of society reacted with euphoria, one part with reluctance, and another part buried itself in silence. At the time hardly anybody investigated what was behind the silence, or what was revealed by the euphoria. No wonder. The Poles, emerging from a dictatorship, did not know themselves as a community. Decades of being deprived of freedom and political representation, censorship, and the falsification of history from above and the repression of social memory all made for a society that found itself impenetrable. True, the mass 'Solidarity' movement, lasting from August 1980 to December 1981, allowed us to watch ourselves in action, organising ourselves around values and public goals, but it lasted for too short a time; and the need for unity against the authorities was too strong for us to be able to express our diversity alongside the protests. To many this society seemed homogenous; today some would wish to restore that alleged homogeneity.

Thus the June 1989 elections initiated an ongoing series of unexpected social and political events. Since 1989, massive and uncontrollable changes have held sway over both their supporters and opponents. This is democratisation and modernisation. Or rather: democratisations and modernisations, because they were and still are taking place at varied speeds within various social groups.

## The Poles enter democracy and the market

### **Market: faith, hopes, despairs**

The free market, the foundation of this liberal democracy, introduced by a series of statutes known as the Balcerowicz Plan,<sup>2</sup> became a source of social shock as well as a collective faith in success. There was a massive collapse of the huge and inefficient heavy industry factories previously subsidised by the Communist state, which were the bastions of 'Solidarity'. The workers lost their jobs and became the recipients of unemployment benefit. This not only had an economic dimension but was also symbolic. Most protests against the dictatorship had originated within these kinds of industrial plants. The workers had become legendary, the system-tamers. Therefore, the fall and marginalisation of the working class under the new system was seen by many as proof of 'Solidarity' betraying the workers.

A share in the misery lot also went to the state-owned farming system, which was an economically backward gigantic network that devoured huge state subsidies. It was liquidated, and out of the hundreds of thousands of employees, only a handful found their feet in the free market. Today there are still haunted housing estates scattered in the fields all over Poland, whose inhabitants have fallen into alcoholism and live mainly off benefits. They are permanently excluded from the system.

But at the same time it was an era of beneficiaries. Millions of people threw themselves into business. In a country yearning for consumption, the symbol of early capitalism became a camp bed with goods arranged on it: second-hand clothes, perfumes, tinned food, electronic goods, cigarettes. People bought and sold everything, making money bit by bit – though business stability was achieved only by some of them. Alongside small business activity, there were spectacular examples of sudden fortunes being made and then spectacularly lost. Having thrown themselves into consumption, the Poles experienced what consumerism makes so ostentatiously obvious: the wealth gap. They also started getting a taste of the future, because in the new system the future meant the strong promise of better conditions, and its visible symptom was a great drive towards career, wealth and education. Under the previous system the future shrank; devoid of

substantial hope, people were concerned mainly with the present, with securing some sort of decent existence for their loved ones. This required considerable time and effort, bearing in mind that you often had to spend hours queuing for a piece of meat, soap or toilet paper. 'Hope it doesn't get worse' was the sad motto of that era. The new times proclaimed: 'Everything is possible.'

Now the market stood at the centre of life. It would be a mistake to identify it only with the institution of rational exchange and material expectations. The market was also the focus of social hopes and fuelled the myth of universal welfare. These hopes and myths were in fact encouraged by politicians and the media, claiming that the market economy by its very nature would in the long term bring profit to everyone, including those who lost their previous means of existence as the result of bankruptcy or the privatisation of many industrial plants. Such promises, taken of course not from personal experience but from reading about economics – mainly from the school of Milton Friedman, which was then at the peak of its fame and power in the West – reflected a fascination with the market which was as overwhelming among Polish elites as it was among the social majority. The market seemed to be an unfailing vehicle carrying society into the future. Sometimes, as with some liberals and conservatives, the market was more important than democracy itself.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously not everybody fell under the charm. But at that time the voices critical of the market were not very audible. They were treated as nostalgic echoes of the faith in socialism. Or, quite often, as a criticism of democracy. For in the collective imagination the beliefs about market merged with the beliefs about democracy: the market guarantees the creation of a free, rich and just society, while democracy is meant to ensure that nothing obstructs the market. Of course there was more rhetoric than practice. The Balcerowicz Plan, which was seen for good reasons as 'shock therapy', was accompanied by various welfare schemes for those who lost work or could not find it. The problem was that the Polish system of social security – on the face of it quite extensively developed – was from the start inefficient and unreasonable. Help often did not reach those who were in greatest need. It is still like this today. For over 20 years, attempts to introduce sensible reforms to social policy have failed, although they have been championed by politicians of legendary standing such as Jacek Kuroń, or by influential figures within left-wing government such as Jerzy Hausner. This is because much of the political elite see the welfare state as something of a burden – incumbent on democracy, and unavoidable, but also not worth getting involved with – rather than an effective and convenient tool for social change. The conviction that a welfare state is one of the foundations of democracy is not yet ingrained.

### **The helpless and the resourceful, or the beginnings of Polish populisms**

When, as a result of market activity, Poles started observing themselves closely, they noted an antagonistic division between those who were well off and those who could not find a place for themselves under capitalism. And because both groups heard regular bulletins from fresh enthusiasts for the market, saturated with a proselytising spirit and stating that the helpless under the new system had only themselves to blame, the dividing line became stronger. It often shifted into a separation between two 'peoples', who gazed at each other angrily, with a mutual lack of understanding. Both these 'peoples', the resourceful Poland and the helpless Poland, excluded each other morally: the 'resourceful' often viewed the 'helpless' as parasites and layabouts, who devoured the money the others' effort fully earned; while the 'helpless' saw nothing but thieves and racketeers on the other side. This mutual stigmatisation is still functioning today, still fuelling politics, and mostly bearing fruit in their rival versions of populism. In one of them, populism appears as a false substitute for absent social solidarity: it takes under its wings the helpless and the excluded. In the other version, a liberal populism stands for an ersatz idea of individual freedom and an apology for free enterprise as social Darwinism. The key champion of the populism of the dispirited was Andrej Lepper, but the herald of this position was Stanisław Tymiński, who defeated Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first Prime Minister of democratic Poland, in the first round of the presidential elections in 1990. Tymiński drew together the anxieties and disappointments with the transformation, only to be thoroughly beaten in the second round by Lech Wałęsa.<sup>4</sup>

Wałęsa, the legendary leader of 'Solidarity', is rightly considered one of the founding fathers of Polish democracy, but he is also the founding father of contemporary Polish populism. In his 1990 campaign, he attacked the elites for betraying the interests of the people, presenting himself as a saviour. He promised the disadvantaged money and a new, benign order, at the same time promising them that he would facilitate their economic activities. Moreover, he did not shy away from an antisemitic tone, despite not being an antisemite. When he was president (1991–95), he demanded extra powers for himself, to end the quarrels and divisions, and to take Poland onto a 'straight road'. He presented himself as the only spokesman for the nation's interests. He then saw politics as a kind of a cage full of monkeys, which he wanted to shake every now and again, to take advantage of their bickering. And he did take advantage, by setting himself in opposition to politics and politicians. But to be fair, I must add that his actions never took him onto the road leading to authoritarianism, from which the public would have made him turn back. He bullied democratic laws, sometimes bending them brutally, but

never invalidated them. However, he created the figure of a leader-patron who knew best how to tidy up his Polish household, without resorting to asking for others' views, which would only bring about a mess. The figure of a leader who had privileged contact with his people. This creation of his is still a subject of envy and aspiration for many politicians, particularly Jarosław Kaczyński and, to a slightly lesser degree, Donald Tusk.

But the icon of Polish populism is Andrzej Lepper, the protagonist of a spectacular career and equally spectacular downfall, the instigator of many scandals, both rhetorical and criminal. His movement Samoobrona (Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland) was founded at the beginning of the 1990s, and mainly drew in farmers who had fallen into debt because they were unable to pay off loans because of the massive importation of cheaper grain from abroad. Lepper started by blockading roads and spilling imported grain from trains. He quickly attracted the interest not only of the courts, but also of the media and politicians. His rhetoric evolved quickly too: primarily anti-free-market and directed against the ruling elites, it became enriched with nationalist, xenophobic and anti-European elements. He understood that if you wanted to be heard in Poland it wasn't enough to present yourself as a victim of the market. You had to root your victim status in nationalist ideology. Having styled himself as the defender of the whole nation from the designs of the elites, he entered the Sejm, the Polish Parliament, in 2001, bringing with him 50 elected members (out of 460) and some new customs. Insults and slander gushing from the Sejm platform and blocking debates – this is the contribution of Samoobrona to parliamentary culture. Other parties officially denounced Lepper, but flirted with him. Samoobrona was settling into Poland's political life. Along with it, its political customs settled in.

Lepper owed his greatest high and greatest low to Kaczyński. After the election success in 2005, the PiS needed to go into a coalition to form a government. So it got into bed with Samoobrona and Liga Polskich Rodzin (the League of Polish Families: LPR), and promoted Lepper to the rank of Deputy Prime Minister. Actually, Kaczyński did not need Lepper, but rather the power Samoobrona was now endowed with. His team designed a plot, which was carried out by the secret services, aiming to expose Lepper's habit of bribe-taking and to get him arrested. The plot failed, Kaczyński excluded Lepper from the government, the coalition fell apart; the early elections of 2007 were won by the Civic Platform (PO). Lepper's career was brought to an end not only by this plot, but also by a criminal scandal: at a time when he was still basking in honours, it was revealed that his party officials demanded sex from young women in exchange for employment. Lepper vanished from politics and committed suicide in 2011. His populism was taken over and ideologically consolidated by the PiS.

Liberal populism does not have such striking and obvious icons; for obvious reasons it is a minority phenomenon. It does not use political slogans and does not appear as a clearly stated programme. Even in Poland, where the political elites are still often recruited in an accidental and sudden way, there is a lack of eccentrics who, in their struggle for voters, will talk openly about scroungers or parasites on unemployment benefit. A lack, that is, except for one case: Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a politician who is always on the margins, cut along the strikingly extreme lines of the Tea Party, although capable in the 1990s of seducing quite a few enterprising young people. In this version we deal with a permanent confrontation between society and the 'socialist' elites, and a 'socialist' state sponging off the industry and hard work of individuals. According to Korwin-Mikke, the state should support only the army, the police and the borders. Everything else should be up to people's industriousness, mediated by the market. These convictions led Korwin-Mikke to a radical condemnation of the EU, accusing it of being – what else – a Bolshevik creation.

But more often than not this liberal populism has softer spokesmen; in political journalism, in statements made by economists and some politicians, it appears as a tone or an implication – carrying a concrete and clear message, nonetheless – rather than as a programme. And I call such an attitude 'populism' because it links neoliberal rhetoric with a narrow, exclusive definition of the legitimate people: those who have made it and do not have to cling to the state to survive. They are the rightful citizens, the rest stand in the way. This is an extreme portrait of normal life, whose only regulator must be the market.

Of course, Polish populisms have deeper roots. Their articulations grow out of the past, recycling at will certain old patterns of collective behaviour and ways of viewing reality. Besides, the populisms and the past shed light on each other. Because next to the obvious question – How do old events influence populism's shape and effectiveness? – there appears a question about the past itself: what is there in its currents that serves as a vehicle for populism today and makes it acceptable to society?

Mistrust of the state and its elites; the nation in its constant common struggle for survival; permanent division and at the same time permanent expectation of national unity – these are the basic tropes of history, mutually dependent, which breathe life into our populisms today. Let's have a look at them. We have become used to the idea that mistrust of the state, of authority, of political careers and of politics in general comes from our experience of Communism. True, People's Poland (PRL) reinforced such attitudes, at the time of both Stalin's totalitarianism and post-Stalin dictatorship, because the majority in society – although they adapted to life under that system – did not

consider it their own. That empty space was filled by the Catholic Church, which offered – regardless of one’s faith – that which was not given by the state: a sense of national identity and belonging, continuity of tradition, falsified and destroyed by the regime, as well as spiritual and institutional authority. In this sense the Church provided the substitute traits of the state within the frame of the dictatorship. The Church peaked in that role during John Paul II’s visit to Poland in 1979. The millions attending the masses celebrated by the Pope – and a dozen million who watched them on TV – both the believers and non-believers, saw where the symbolic and persuasive power was located. Right there inside the Church. Hence the frequent examples, particularly in the 1980s, of people who did not believe in God but practised religious rituals.

But the division into nation and state – powerfully and efficiently built and maintained – has not grown just out of People’s Poland. Its sources are older. They go back to the partition of Poland, which was achieved at the end of the 18th century by the three great powers of the day: Russia, Prussia and Austria. More precisely, it was in the 19th century, particularly under Russian rule – the most autocratic and culturally alien – that the framework of ideas and attitudes was formed.

It was necessary at the time for the survival of the nation and for its acts of resistance; today it fuels populist demagogues. Primarily the division into a nation that demands its sovereignty versus the oppressive state – that is, into ‘us’ and ‘them’ – established a barrier preventing the community from dissolving within these hostile structures.

Respect for this division was the proof of patriotism; breaking it was met with social stigmatisation. The division was further strengthened by the fact that the Polish community, devoid of its own political and social representation within the system, built alternative representations of its own. The moral authorities – writers, veterans of the Polish cause, conspirators, social activists, émigrés – made for a substitute parliament that shaped the opinion and norms of conduct. In the second half of the 19th century the substitute parliament was joined by the Church; it was an important source of its later power.

The building of the separation between the nation and the state was linked with the call for national unity, which was rich in rhetoric and symbolism. That call obviously reflected the weakness of a dispirited nation looking for ways to change its lot for the better. The demand for unity and collective heroic sacrifice for the fatherland, in uprisings or conspiracies, made for a substitute form of politics shaping the notions and norms of the community, which in other places was formed mainly by parliamentarianism. In fact it was a politics that both called for action and gave comfort by offering the community a messianic vision of the nation as the saviour of the world.

The bid for unity and the quest for remedies for dependence made it possible for modern nationalism to take easy root in Poland. At the end of the 19th century, nationalism became one of the era’s basic points of reference, alongside left-democratic ideologies. This nationalism – embracing xenophobia and antisemitism within a joint doctrine; making unity and national discipline an absolute, while at the same time disregarding the rights of the individual – together with its later fascistic mutations in the 1930s, constitutes the foundations of a contemporary language of hatred which is typical of authoritarian populisms. Reinforced and enriched in People’s Poland by propagandist patterns for dealing with opponents. This does not mean that all populists are antisemites or racists – Jarosław Kaczyński, for one, is free from such prejudice – but it means they are prepared to exploit prejudice in their struggle for power. And, still more important, one of Poland’s central traditions offers them patterns of authoritarian politics.

Certainly, to a large extent the nationalist tradition became so strong thanks to the Communist regime. Since the 19th century (and still in the 1930s) the nationalists, supported by the Church, had been conducting a great battle for society with the socialists. Communism not only compromised left-wing traditions, it also amputated them by censoring their anti-totalitarian tendencies. Therefore the main carrier of tradition – besides people’s personal memory – became none other than the Church. It was the Church that upheld the patterns of Polishness and patriotism, so it’s no wonder that the formula of the Catholic Pole, established in the 19th century, gained greater momentum than ever before in People’s Poland. It meant, in spite of the facts of course, the unity of national identity and religious belief. But as we know, facts often give way to social convictions. The Catholic Pole, blending the elements of nationalism, resentment towards the ‘others’, and religious tradition, is one of the icons of the populist right, and is also strongly present in Kaczyński’s party.

But the Communists, longing for social legitimisation, also reached for the patterns of the past. And they often went for the worst: nationalism and antisemitism. The peak of national-Bolshevism was reached in 1968, when the Communist apparatus wished – by means of repression and antisemitic cleansing – not only to carry out an internal revolution, and not only to suppress the rebellious intelligentsia, but also to identify themselves with society at its most prejudiced. The regime did not gain legitimacy this way in the eyes of the Poles, but it managed to awaken repressed prejudices. Today’s acts of xenophobia and antisemitism are not only a direct legacy of the nationalist thought carried by the Church but also, and to a significant extent, an inheritance from the Communist dictatorship.



More than that, People's Poland not only brought nationalism and antisemitism into our times, and not only authoritarian patterns of politics, which also added to the popularity of populist formations like the PiS. People's Poland – let's say it again – also strengthened the traditional mistrust of the state. That regime stands accused of the permanent destruction of the stock of social trust. Under the system of organised fear – in many ways ineffective and leaking after the thaw in 1956 – people mainly trusted their family and friends. This is partly true, but not quite. Because if you take the banal assumption that social trust depends on the cohesion of society – on whether people think of themselves as a community connected by common practice, patterns and institutions – then in this respect Poland's history is a history of consolidated mistrust. What still remains the pride of the Polish past – i.e. the noble republic, which gave every nobleman equal civil rights, restricted the central power of the King, and for several hundred years maintained tolerance towards religious minorities, not to say religious indifference – has also another, darker aspect. Because even though the nobility, amounting to about 7 per cent of the population, enjoyed their freedom, other classes, including town-dwellers and peasants, were without any basic political rights in that republic and – in the case of peasants – were without simple human freedom. Under Russian rule, serfdom in Poland was not abolished until the second half of the 19th century; before this they were their masters' slaves. In fact, the nobility, who in accord with the fashion of the times sought out ancient genealogies, traced their origin back to the Sarmatians, an ancient people who settled on the land of the Poles to rule over them.<sup>5</sup> The myth of the noble nation was at the same time the myth of genealogically different identity from the peasants and town dwellers. The sense of difference, even of foreignness, was still present in the 19th and 20th centuries, so society lacked the social resources and cultural patterns that would allow for building up the stock of social trust. This was particularly true in the society of mainly peasant origins. So People's Poland did nothing but reinforce the phenomenon, coupling it with a kind of egalitarianism that, rather than using the notion of the common good, treated with suspicion all those who departed from the accepted social norms or the norms of wealth. I would call it a 'barracks egalitarianism' rather than community egalitarianism. It is the lingering sense of a different status and the deficit of social trust that create the vacuum, which becomes filled even more easily with the populist mirages of unity and solidarity.

There remains the question of why the different traditional themes – like the heroic history of resistance against the oppressors; or the collective consciousness of enslavement; the hope for a victory that used to support the survival of the nation – today often support the survival of populist leaders. We could give a superficial answer

that it's just a simple instrumentalisation of the past. But it would be a very optimistic statement. Because instrumentalisations reveal what allows them to exist: the collectivist vision of society in which the rights and aspirations of individuals take second place after the demands of the community. In the 19th century, Poland did not go through the liberal revolution; until 1989 – with brief intervals like the interwar period, and to varying degrees – Poles had been told that the nation demanded, and the fatherland expected, an effort or a risk or the sacrifice of life. People listened to the challenges or, most often, avoided them; but everybody was shaped by such collective expectations, in accordance with which the life of an individual makes sense if one makes a sacrifice of oneself for the sake of national unity. So when after 1989 a liberal democracy came in, when the rights of the individual and the minority became the basis of the system, the protest against the new reality was soon dressed up in the old robes. The nation against the licentious individuals, minorities and faithless elites – in this central populist trope, the past rings out.

### The society of the silent

These populists, who are they really talking to? To say that they speak solely to the losers or the winners would be an oversimplification. Among the great unknowns in a democracy are those who remain silent. The democratic parties want to bring out their voice; the populist groupings want to invoke them. To catch the silent – that is the perpetual phantasm of democratic politics, but it quite often transforms itself into the political rejection of those (silent ones) who seem to be absent. It's particularly important because from the beginning of the Third Polish Republic there have been legions of people who were cautious, even distrustful of the new times and, beyond that, were generally hesitant about revealing their distrust; so that explicating their attitudes barely figures in the public arena. Their problem lay and still lies in the fact that their ever-present reservations, or distrust, have been pushed down into false ideological sidings for over 20 years. And the problem of the system, of us all, lies in the fact that their attitudes, decoded wrongly, have a strong influence on Polish political life.

But of course, in 1989 everybody experienced a state of confusion. We were stupefied and uncertain about the next step – this is the most common memory of those days in June 1989 when 'Solidarity' won the election, and nobody yet knew how much of the Communist dictatorship would remain in Poland and how much democracy would come in. The only clear thing was that the 'round table' compromise between the authorities and 'Solidarity' – a sort of negotiated power-sharing – would



be temporary. However, no one had any idea what concessions the existing authorities were prepared to make nor whether they were going to try and regain the lost positions. And crucially, no one was able to draw a clear picture of the future.

One unknown became clear quite quickly: after the absolute victory of 'Solidarity' in the 4 June election, the old regime authorities had no intention of taking the hard-line approach to defending their position, but were instead adjusting in order to engage in the ordinary – though for them, and for everybody else, extraordinary – parliamentary power game. However, there was still not only the problem of Poland's unclear future, but also of its opaque present. For what was the meaning of the fact that barely 62.3 per cent (in the later elections the percentage would be much worse) of the electorate cast their vote in the 4 June plebiscite for the dictatorship or for democracy as represented by the 'Solidarity'? Why did over one-third of Poles refuse to take part in one of the most important political decisions in their lives?

Various reasons were given at the time. First of all, the argument went, the economy was in ruins, hyperinflation was rife, the shops were short of goods, so people were mainly concerned with survival and any other engagements were considered a dispensable luxury. Some also said that after decades of living under a Communist dictatorship in which elections were a fiction, many could not understand the significance of the act of voting. Which often led to more general conclusions about this society's poorly developed civic consciousness. These arguments about the destructive power of the 'real socialism' were joined by other supporting statements. 'People,' they said, 'remember how Martial Law broke up "Solidarity" and confiscated Poles' hopes for freedom; now people are afraid history might repeat itself. Hence, people are cautious.' It was also pointed out that ignoring the elections was paradoxically an act of freedom, an irrational one, perhaps, but people were entitled to it. Because previously the authorities viewed it unfavourably if someone exercised their formal right not to vote; the elections always had to be a massive show of support for the authorities.

All these commentaries pointed out real problems, but it was only on the margins of the debate that some explanations could be found that today allow us to better understand later social developments and the reasons for Polish society's permanent distrust of politics. And the explanations went roughly like this: will the new times really bring us more stability and security than the old meagre stability, where somehow we always got by? From this, a more general question poked its head: do the rising political elites understand these needs?

Two decades later, those moods were reconstructed well by writer Julia Fiedorczuk, who had been 14 at the time. Here's how she describes the fears in a so-called average family at the time of the

system's breakthrough: 'Father watched television and feverishly commented on the statements of the politicians and the journalists: sometimes he was as happy as a child, but you could also see how scared he was. Of what? It wasn't till much later that Anna could begin to understand that father was afraid of freedom: he was scared that the poor little order he had created for his family – for "his girls" – could get disrupted. "My girls" – he sometimes addressed them that way at the dinner table, proud of the bread and sausage, proud of the earthenware plates and the French polished furniture. "My girls" – it was the mantra of a man who deeply believed in the world, in the meaning of days and nights, in the fundamental decency of the creatures called people. He was sure everything would be all right – actually, not just all right, but simply wonderful – if he could only infect "his girls" with his optimism. After all there were rare moments between the three of them of intense joy, almost happiness, based entirely on a lie, with which they showered one another like strange socialist angels.'<sup>6</sup> Everyday bread with sausage, shoddy furniture and a coarse set of plates – these were the attributes of normal life for many families under their poverty-stricken socialism. Hunting for such things for the sake of the family – in the gigantic queues outside the shops or getting things organised through contacts – produced not only satisfaction but also some sense of dignity. The everyday battle for survival in the 1980s occupied more attention on a mass scale than did 'Solidarity's' struggle with the authorities.

The fears and the distrust conceal a more important issue: living standards and, more than anything else, the historical experiences of Poles over many generations – filled with wars, occupation, failed uprisings, deaths and oppression – created a situation in which the sense of dignified existence was linked to stability and quiet, even if in relative poverty. Dignity involved various or even different measures. According to tradition and cultural norms, a formal ethos still demanded that one must engage in freedom-fighting and public struggle, whether in the name of truth, national sovereignty or civil rights. This ethos expressed itself most fully in the opposition movements against the Communist regime. But under the surface there was another lasting social ethos, manifested in living practice but not embraced by tradition: the ethos of protecting your loved ones from the upheavals and woes of the outside world. It's easy to label this attitude conformist or petit bourgeois, but if we refrain from patronising moralising, we will see the obvious. This is the ethos of survival, whereby the measure of your own dignity comes from caring for your loved ones. And refraining from doing others down.

The problem is that the ethos of survival, although prevalent, did not find a public language through which it could fully express itself. It was present, but it was invisible as a set of values. For many within the elites opposing the Communist regime – and the new centres of power

emerged from there – the widespread ethos of survival was one of the images of social passivity or even compliance towards the dictatorship; it was the opposite of civic engagement and patriotism. So ever since 1989, when the new system began to be built, that ethos of survival – expressed in fears for the future, the threat of losing what provided some sense of dignity or control over the small scrap of existence defined by the practical needs of the family – was very often perceived as a signifier of the Communist mentality. As a restraint on the new times.

The budding democracy had no way of calming those fears; the new times shook the foundations of life. You could not even dream about a quiet secure existence. The new democratic elites committed a new error: they stigmatised those attitudes, and so consolidated and increased the distance between such people and democracy. So their fears became fostered by others: the populists, the Church, the opposition parties, including the Communists. Today the main beneficiary is Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS.

## Exorcisms: driving away Communism

### Tracking down Communism

The confusion and uncertainties of the beginnings of democracy were conducive to a general alertness for traces of Communism. This often transformed itself into obsession – a particularly extravagant one, considering that everything around was changing profoundly. The past weighed down on people’s ways of thinking more than on the mechanisms of change. One of the silliest jokes of the time went like this: ‘In twenty years the son asks his father: “Dad, what is Communism?” “Son, it’s what you see around you, you just don’t know what it’s called.”’ The joke became quite popular and it didn’t just express a desire for fast, radical changes, but also a lack of faith that Communism could go away so easily, that it could just vanish into thin air. This lack of faith embraced both the system and the people. The phrase *Homo sovieticus* became famous. It was given a philosophical dimension by the priest Józef Tischner, the chaplain of ‘Solidarity’ in 1980–81, a philosopher, and a popular journalist; according to him it denoted a man enslaved by Communism, who expects the same supervision from the new liberal state that the old regime ineffectively offered.<sup>7</sup> *Homo sovieticus* is a man running away from freedom. This notion became so trivialised and so widespread that a picture emerged of an enslaved and demoralised society. It created a dangerous fake distance between the elites who felt brilliantly at home in liberal democracy, and the quite sizeable part of society whom it scared. So, some were wiser and ‘better’, others lumbered behind the changes, unable to grasp what the new reality promised – this was the message of the formula *Homo sovieticus*, exemplifying the symbolic distribution of power within the liberal elites.

Just as many at the time were tracking down Communist thinking in society – today it’s the task of the radical right or the toughest liberals – many were also wondering what had happened to the system itself, its institutions, its power. Suspicion was deepened by the ‘round table’ compromise and the ensuing bloodless changes to the system. The fact that the Communists were not expelled from the new Poland but were allowed to join the democracy as a social-democratic party ignited the conspiracy theories. It’s a plot of the elites, they’ve divided up power in secret – was the mildest such assessment of the ‘round table’.

A peculiar record in this race to expose the truth was set by a well-known sociologist, Jadwiga Staniszkis, when she announced that the fall of Communism in Poland was orchestrated by the KGB HQ in Moscow. Polish discourse on this subject could easily compete with Robert Ludlum's thrillers. Like other conspiracy theories, this, the most absurd – claiming that the Soviet secret services organised the peaceful collapse of Communism to salvage their own influence on the new system – anchored itself in the Polish imagination. It was repeated and developed, pointing out who was in the Soviet, and then in the Russian, secret service. And since this was mainly the pastime of the national right, they pointed not only at the people working in the new system who had recruited themselves from the old state apparatus, including the secret services; not only at the ex-activists in the Communist party, currently the social-democrats; but also at the liberal-democratic intelligentsia. The national right accused particularly those influential individuals in democratic Poland, who, after their youthful engagement with Communism in the 1940s and 1950s, broke up with it, co-creating the democratic opposition to the Communist regime.

Probably the most diligent accuser was Antoni Macierewicz, who has a noble record as a dissident and much less noble views. Since the 1990s he has been under the influence of the fascistic ideology of the 1930s. He became notorious for many excesses. As a minister for internal affairs in the early 1990s, he prepared a list of alleged agents for the Communist secret services who were active in Polish politics. On that occasion he 'exposed' the serving president, Lech Wałęsa, the Speaker of the Sejm who was also the Chair of his party, and many parliamentarians. There were justifiable suspicions that this was a *coup d'état* by means of 'lustration'. But parliament, though politically fragmented, dissolved the government, halting the whole operation. The government departed in disgrace, while democracy solidified itself in the struggle. Over a decade later, Macierewicz, an important politician in Jarosław Kaczyński's ruling PiS, announced that most ministers in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Third Republic of Poland had been Soviet agents. Now he insists on proving that President Lech Kaczyński, the twin brother of Jarosław, died in Smoleńsk in 2010 not in an accidental plane crash but in an assassination attack. And he pronounces all these revelations with the quiet confidence of a man who is claiming to be Napoleon.

I refer to this character for several reasons, not just as an amusing anecdote. Macierewicz is currently an important figure in Kaczyński's populist party, which illustrates how strongly some Polish populisms have linked themselves with the exploitation of the past. Exclusion via the past is their speciality. This requires rewriting history, particularly the history of Polish society under Communism. So a new genre has

blossomed in thousands of publications, offering a recipe for writing history: the story of unpatriotic, and therefore illegitimate elites. They cut themselves off from Polishness, and, even worse, they act to its detriment, because they gave in to the Soviets or to Europe. Brussels is the new Moscow – this is the unending theme of these wild rantings. These are all obvious reactions to social changes, to the pluralisation of tradition and identity. The stronger the multitude, the stronger the defence of unity. But there's something more to it: in Polish politics legitimisation through reference to the past competes with legitimisation through evoking the future. In this contest the power balance is changeable, though so far the future has won. However, the issue of the past figures most strongly in radical attitudes: in the right-wing groupings nostalgia and reflections – because you cannot call them cohesive thoughts – reclaim the past for themselves, not the future. They wish to rule over history, indicating what is legitimate and what is not. It seems like nothing new. It is the well-known malady of the European conservative right becoming anxious as the systems democratise: mystified visions of the past are to replace the future; it's not about putting back the clock, because after all the imaginary past never existed, but about coming to a standstill according to ideological notions about an innocent history. The problem is that in Poland the dream of annihilating the unpredictable future and locating 'real' Poland in ideas about the past stumbles on the issue of Communism. For how do you treat a real nation which between infrequent moments of resistance and protest adjusted quite successfully to life under 'real socialism'? One option is to select another version of Poland, claiming that the real one perished under two occupations – German and Soviet – and that the extant community, a quasi-nation, became demoralised and duped.

### **Decommunisation and 'lustration', or a hammer for the people and the past**

Naturally, the nation did not really become convinced that it was not a nation. What's more, it asserted its subjectivity, sometimes alarming the elites from different ideological camps. Something like this happened in 1993, when the post-Communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) won the election. In the election campaign the SLD brutally attacked the Solidarity reforms, exploiting the drop in support for them. It accused the previous governments of driving Poland into poverty (this accusation later entered the canon of the populist demagoguery; for instance it was creatively developed in the PiS campaigns). Many activists of this group claimed that the old regime, unlike the current liberal one, took care of the working people. Barely four years after the overthrow of the old system, the SLD tried to convince people:

Enough of changes, it's time to rehabilitate People's Poland! The Solidarity groups, from nationalists to liberal democrats were terror-struck. 'The SLD has no right to rule Poland' – these were the milder comments. We read in the papers that we were under threat of Communism and could go back into the Russian orbit (the Russian army had just left Poland). The Alliance retorted: the Solidarity politicians are loonies. The war-like division into the Solidarity followers and post-Communists obscured Polish politics for the years that followed. But when the Alliance was in power, it forgot about their campaign slogans. It slowed down the reforms, but it did not abandon them. The Alliance developed Poland's relations with the West. It turned out to be the same participant in democratic politics as the Solidarity groupings, and their getting into power stabilised the democracy. The ten years (two terms) of presidential office held by the leader of the SLD, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, only confirmed it.

But as the post-Communists became assimilated into the democratic system, a question emerged: where is the new if you can see so much of the old? Psychologically you could understand the anxiety, because the political and official landscape was populated by the characters from the old regime, sometimes highly suspect ones. After all, the SLD was a party of biographical and not ideological choice. Although it included a handful of those who still wanted to modernise 'real socialism' in the 1980s, to a large extent it became a shelter for the people from the old rungs of power. So there were a fair number of conservatives, xenophobes, antisemites – just as in the various post-Solidarity groups. This was painful, but the effects of transforming that discomfort into politics proved intensely more so. A particular kind of historical politics became activated, the source of many excluding radicalisms. Roughly speaking, it relied on introducing spectacular discontinuities where there were ongoing processes. And it hinged on introducing revolutionary decrees where the institutional revolution had already taken place and the democratic system was stabilising. This concerns decommunisation and lustration, which were to redefine the transition from dictatorship to democracy: from the process and compromise-oriented transition to one that would be uncompromising and revolutionary. And at the same time, there was a chance to get rid of various rivals. Decommunisation projects had been seething in Poland for almost 20 years since the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> They proposed introducing a ban on ex-functionaries of the Communist party holding public office. Some wanted the ban to cover even party activists within party units in factories and universities. It aimed at some of the democratic intelligentsia – one-time party members who had later turned into rebels. The tone of such thinking was reflected in this mocking saying: 'Chop off five heads, then go back to democracy'. Decommunisation, like lustration,

strongly divided Solidarity groupings and communities, as well as the democratic intelligentsia gathered around the Freedom Union (Unia Wolności: UW). Among those who were against such plans were Jacek Kuroń, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Adam Michnik and Bronisław Geremek, who wanted to build an inclusive democracy to avoid creating its enemies. The decommunisation projects came to nothing, not because there were not enough enthusiasts to push them through, and not even because they were openly violating the democratic law. Most significantly, democracy showed its strength. The integration of the post-Communists in the system took place so efficiently on every level that it was impossible to make such a cut, because it would equal the political delegalisation not only of many communities and politicians, but also of millions of votes cast by the electorate.

Another scene in the drama of decommunisation was the attempt on a massive scale to change the names of streets, if they had any Communist connotations, and to expel 'inappropriate' statues from public places. Quite often, poorly educated politicians tried to remove all the names that they associated with People's Poland or generally with the left wing. The public observed some weird battles with amusement – for instance over a street named after Ludwik Waryński, a 19th-century Polish Socialist conspirator, who died in a tsarist prison. Meanwhile, the residents of the decommunised streets were not too happy about the changes to their address, because it meant having to apply to several offices for new documents. Many considered the whole operation an unnecessary and costly luxury in an impoverished society. This was expressed emphatically by a certain tipsy citizen of Bogatynia, a town in Silesia: 'I don't give a s... where I drink, in Lenin, Stalin or Gagarin Street. What's the point of changing it after all those years?'<sup>9</sup> Such exorcisms merely intensified nostalgia for People's Poland, because many people saw it as the official confiscation of their private memories of – and who cares if it was bad? – Poland.

But the strangest emotions were stirred by lustration, the hunt for agents of the Communist secret services. It proved a convenient tool for compromising political opponents and an excellent instrument for falsifying history, both the grand collective narrative and the story of individual lives.<sup>10</sup> Particularly since the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej: IPN) dealing with lustration was occupied by radical historians who raised the notion of suspicion against others to the rank of historiography, and at the same time put blind faith in the records contained in the files of the secret services – completely forgetting that the officers of the old regime often embellished their reports to earn bonuses and promotions. And so during the lustration extravaganza the truth about those times vanished: about the complicated and sometimes inevitable (particularly

prior to 1980) relations between the people and the authorities on many different levels. Many whose careers took them abroad had been condemned to contacts with the authorities, sometimes, directly or indirectly, the Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa). Some were unscrupulous informers, others were bravely courageous, many tried not to damage themselves or others. Within their relationship with the authorities – not outside of it – they set the boundary separating honesty from indecency. In IPN politics, the shades of grey turned black. You went to meetings and said something to save your skin – you were an agent. This was the IPN dogma.

How convenient for those quite numerous, younger politicians, activists and academics who wanted a great comprehensive lustration, and acted personally as the revolution against the older generations. These hopes peaked under the PiS government in 2005–07, but the Constitutional Tribunal mauled the Act that was prepared in this spirit. But let's try to look at the lustration with a more merciful eye. Many of its supporters didn't have bad intentions; they wished to identify old hidden oppressors, those who harmed others by informing on them, who betrayed friends. They also wanted to expose evil. Others, also without bad intentions but rather blindly, saw new Poland predominantly as a continuation of what was there before. It is understandable to a certain extent, because it is not easy to discern what's new in social processes, which are also turbulent. The new takes time to hatch; while it's happening, all you can see is the continuation of the old times. Even the French Revolution seemed at first like a reform of the monarchy. So, impatient Poles wished to 'improve' social democratisation by means of lustration, to make it more transparent. Since the lustration was motivated from the beginning by many political and personal agendas, it is probably of secondary importance to mention that very few truly evil agents were uncovered. There was a moment when lustration might threaten the stability of the state and democracy; today it may only stir up individual dramas.

## Democracy and its democratisations

### Democracy: dissent and separation

Since its birth Polish democracy has evoked enthusiasm and rebellion – with the proviso that enthusiasm not only brought support for the changes, but also resulted in suspicion of them, because many committed democrats worried that uncurbed change would threaten the emerging democracy. This emerged clearly in the 1990s, when the first new movements, marginal at the time, began to bud, including the feminist and environmental movements and those claiming minority rights for different sexual orientations. Similarly, new emergent models for the visual arts and theatre – transgressive and taboo-breaking – provoked considerable mistrust. After all, democracy is meant to be a set of clear, stable rules, not a continuing state of experiment and contravention – this was the belief of many liberal democrats. Today it is easy to see these views as anachronistic even as they were being expressed. In any case, the anachronism was confirmed by the evolution of the system, which demonstrated emphatically that democracy is in constant movement and it must be in order to last. But at that time, let's remind ourselves, it was not certain that liberal democracy would take root and establish itself in Poland. Amid such worries, people were thinking of how to stabilise it – not how to stimulate it.

Also, the objections to the new system had – and still have – varied faces and aims. Some negate the principles of democracy, particularly the spirit of liberal democracy, reaching for the nearest available language of protest, which is the nationalist-Catholic discourse. 'Never mind if Poland's democratic, the important thing is that it should be Catholic,' as a certain MP declared in the 1990s from the podium of the Sejm; and this statement prompted no disapproval from his party's ranks. Though not very subtly, the MP touched the heart of the matter, creating a hierarchy of values. Democracy – yes, but only if it doesn't upset tradition, faith, or the mystical 'spirit of the nation'. If it doesn't affect social practices and customs. In this version, democracy should resemble the redecorated facade of a dilapidated house: you can demonstrate it exists, but you can't live in it. Of course not all the formulas of protest were expressed with such unabashed honesty; but even in the subtler versions, narrowly defined collective features – whether the



Catholic religion, or the nation of one tradition, or of ancient customs – become signs of a universal imperative. The nation as a pluralistic community of many traditions, memories and social practices – this is a lesson that still has to be learnt by many Polish conservatives. It is precisely those conservative-authoritarian formulas of community, based on the idea of elevating and sanctifying the nation, that give many Polish populisms their identity; even those that begin as purely plebeian movements set on economic repossession end up as nationalistic-authoritarian movements opposed to any civilisational changes, like Lepper's 'Self-defence' ('Samoobrona') party.

Alongside such objections, there has been a marked increase in protests, particularly during the last decade. Roughly speaking, they are concerned with repairing or transforming democracy, rather than demolishing it. According to these critics, Polish democracy is still backward or on a false path. Backward, because women and various minorities, mainly sexual, are still hammering for their rights. And the false path is visible in an inadequate concern with social equality and justice. Currently these are the main conflicts, which have become more obvious as the crisis hits at people's awakened social aspirations, particularly those of the young. Culture plays a significant part in these battles – this is a new phenomenon – where it is used as a tool for criticising the system and a vehicle for civic education.

On top of this, the conflicts are often played out beyond the traditional democratic institutions, outside parliament, the political parties or trade unions. The political elites, both central and local, are increasingly confronted by a society that organises itself spontaneously, as with the protests against ACTA. The consequences are significant. It is not simply that pluralism is consolidated. This is accompanied by a contrary mechanism that is gaining in strength and indicates the weakness of the system: the organisation of political life according to the principle of separation. It is supported by the characteristics of a self-organising civic society: it is scattered, uses its power unpredictably, and maintains a distance from politics and the institutions of power. More than that, this society is separatist within itself; this can often be observed when communities assert their own interests and disregard even the most justified demands of others if they are not directly in their own interests. But the principle of separation is introduced most strongly by the political parties. As their relations with society grow weaker, they focus on minding and maintaining their existing influence.

This is most spectacularly true of the main opposition party, Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS. Unable to regain power for five years because it keeps losing elections, it had created a parallel quasi-state and quasi-society with its own elites, media, sacred spaces and symbolism. Equally, some Catholic bishops do not regard the democratic state

as theirs and immerse themselves in resentment and nostalgia for a 'real' Catholic state. This separatism finds expression in accusatory discourses against the state, the elites, and society. This attitude is symbolised by Father Rydzyk, a charismatic monk who has gathered around himself over a million of the faithful; he controls his own media platform and higher education institution. His xenophobic and anti-democratic statements resound all over Poland, and he is followed by many priests and bishops who believe that in this way they will salvage the power of the Church.

So everyday voices resound claiming Poland is ruined, society is in penury, and the government consists of no-goods and thieves. The government and the liberal elites suppress the opposition, want to eliminate it from public life; we are experiencing a coup d'état by stealth, ready to introduce a kind of soft totalitarianism ('Don't kill us' – this was the call from a significant PiS politician during the 2010 local elections campaign, after an incident in which one of the party's activists was killed by a madman). This view is propagated by the PiS, which has the support of about one-quarter of the electorate. It is the same with international relations. According to the PiS, Poland is on its knees before Moscow and Berlin; it has lost its independence for the sake of a German–Russian condominium. As for the European Union, this is primarily a tool for the destruction of Polishness in accordance with a left or leftist ideology. Because, according to this account, most Polish elites originated from the imposition of Communism or from non-Polish leftist traditions. Poland's existence obstructs them; they yearn to eliminate it – as the spiritual leader of this political tendency (otherwise an outstanding poet), Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, put it.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, extremism is an aggressive form of helplessness. Both cognitive and political. The PiS, despite its appearance of strength, is weak and helpless in its relation to society. It fails to recognise society's needs and aspirations; it wants to impose its own. The group's weakness reveals itself, for example, in the fact that it reduces the nation to a small minority of 'true Poles' in order to maintain the fiction that it is the party of all patriots. Let's add, however, that the multiplicity of extreme messages shows the weakness not only of the PiS but also of the entire system.

This is because all public issues become a battlefield within party politics, where the measure of victory is not so much successful persuasion as the effective maintenance of division. This is served particularly by the politics created on the basis of opinion polls: when the divisions dwindle, the parties intensify their activity. So battles are fought not only about the fundamentals, such as the state, the market, the crisis, unemployment, the limits of freedom, the position of the Church within the state, foreign politics, the role of Poland in the EU, the reckonings with



the past. They also embrace events that seem to be taken out of a trivia almanac – for example, announcements made by various starlets on gossip websites. The principle of separation operates ruthlessly. And really, the problem isn't about politics turning into a pub brawl, because this isn't troublesome – in fact, it's gone that way all over the democratic world. The worse problem is that this division, which is imposed by the media with the media's intensity, obscures other divisions, no less important and equally real, but kept hidden. Yes, politics is drawing another curtain between itself and society, through which it cannot see the social world. It doesn't spot society till it explodes in its face. This kind of separation must be the most significant in its consequences. As the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet puts it, in modern democracy – including Poland, I should add – society searches in vain for an authority, and the authority constantly looks around for the society and does not find it.<sup>12</sup>

### Democratic emancipations

So it isn't out of place to ask: If looking around the world of politics we find so many weaknesses, what are the powers that rule Poland? I would say cautiously that the strongest power, though surely not the only one, is the democratic impulse. Everywhere in big cities and little towns, even in the countryside, people reject pre-existing hierarchies, norms, customs. They wish to decide for themselves how to live, regardless of the patterns in their environment. Because to a large extent they take their own patterns from the European circles with which they are in steady contact, mainly via the Internet and the legions of emigrant Poles. I would say they often participate in this exchange more intensively than with their traditional circles. This revolution of individuals embraces young people most fully, but it intervenes in the lives of everyone – including those who usually remain silent as citizens, such as in rural Poland, until recently the anchor of conservative and patriarchal social relations. In a village in eastern Poland which I know quite well, one summer evening, a few middle-aged men and women got together near the local shop. They were couples, but there were no husbands or wives. Everybody talked about 'my partner' – they lived in informal unions, something not tolerated in their community until recently, but taken for granted today. Some of these women are active in the AA (Alcoholic Anonymous), organising activities for wives of alcoholics. They had experienced this problem in their previous relationships. These are obviously just some fragmentary observations, but if you put these and others like them together, you will see that Poland has given some people democratic micro-emancipation. They form a vast, ever-present undercurrent to social life and – slowly but surely – prepare the ground for democratic changes on the macro scale.

All this does not mean the inevitable march of democracy. After all, as we know very well, nothing is historically inevitable; everything is a changing economic situation. Poland has its traditions of non-democratic modernisation, both under Communism and in the inter-war period, as well as in the 19th century. And it seems that authoritarian modernisation, associated today with the Chinese model of capitalism, is beginning to form a dangerous alternative to the European model of a welfare state. One can imagine that during great political upheaval, well, maybe even in the event of the collapse of Europe, Poland would turn to authoritarian solutions. The imaginary 'party of order' is deeply ingrained in the Polish social imagination, and it feeds into not only the populist but also the democratic ranks. So there are no foregone conclusions, particularly since even the most insipid or dangerous ideas do not disappear once and for all; they stay concealed in a weakened or dormant state until, in the wake of a change in the economic situation, someone drags them out into the open, into social life. To discipline and order society – today this is one of those weakened ideas. But it pokes its head out regardless, if only when it comes to the issues of minorities.

# 4

## The society of minorities and individuals

### The time of minorities

November 2011: the first session of the Sejm after the re-election of the PO. Among those present are MPs representing a new grouping set up by Janusz Palikot – a businessman who used to be an MP for the PO – they include Anna Grodzka, a transvestite, and Robert Biedroń, a gay activist. There is no end to the jokes and laughter among the other MPs. The roaring collective laughter accompanies Biedroń's speech, including the laughter of the PM and the Government. The Sejm's seen a minority.

Twenty years ago the principle of Polish freedom was enlisted to defend a minority, and it hasn't won the fight yet. Yet one of the great achievements of the new Poland since the early 1990s is the fact that it has granted rights to ethnic minorities, and has supported their organisations. For the first time after decades of oppression, Poland's Ukrainians, Jews, Byelorussians and Germans gained their voice. This was the achievement of the liberal-democratic elites – concentrated mainly in and around Unia Wolności (the Freedom Union), who saw it as a point of honour to resolve this burning issue as quickly as possible. But the rights and the free voice of the minorities have caused and still cause powerful conflicts resulting in national uproar. Especially because redefining the relationship with the minorities accelerated a profound revision of history, and this often impacted on personal memories. Poles used to see themselves as the nation which was usually wronged and was always innocent. History certainly did not spare them: occupation, slaughter, material losses, oppression and slavery constituted a significant portion of Poland's fate. Therefore to drag the dark pages of history into the light – where Poles themselves used violence and oppressed their own 'others' – was to destroy that lofty and comforting vision of the innocent nation.

The problem first of all concerned relations with Jews and Ukrainians. Many were appalled when they were reminded of the excesses of Polish antisemitism, particularly prior to the Second World War, and its prevalence up until now. But the real shock was caused by Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish sociologist living in the USA. His book *Neighbours*<sup>13</sup> described the collective murder of the Jewish inhabitants

of the small town of Jedwabne, committed by their Polish neighbours in 1941. All hell broke loose. It was one of the most fierce but also most fruitful debates in Poland. Gross was accused of falsifying history, of wishing to humiliate the Poles, of an anti-polonism characteristic of various Jewish circles. But when other historians confirmed, in essence, Gross's account and additionally tracked down cases of similar Polish crimes, the clear vision of the pure nation began to crumble. This and other discussions about antisemitism in Poland – about the redemptive or the villainous behaviour of Poles towards Jews, particularly during the Nazi occupation – stirred up Polish social consciousness. It was also changed by numerous debates about Polish-Ukrainian relations and by conciliatory gestures from the authorities. The fact that Poles discriminated against Ukrainians, suppressed their aspirations, and acted towards them like colonisers, ceased to be a secret. To the memory of the carnage perpetrated by Ukrainians on Poles during the Second World War was added the knowledge of its cause: the unwelcome presence of the Polish 'masters'.

These important issues are merely examples of an explosion of ethnic and local memories. There are still new stories and experiences demanding to be heard. This is most evident in Silesia, a region where there is not only the resurrection of an old, almost century-old, strong tradition of autonomy, but there is also a budding sense of separate nationality. Democracy is pushing Poland into becoming a nation with many histories. But there is a powerful counterforce, which depends on mystifying the minorities in such a way as to make them appear as aggressors. I remember a typical discussion a few years ago about putting crosses in classrooms. This is a dominant practice in state schools. A compromise proposal whereby symbols of other religions should be placed next to the cross – a proposal made by the editor-in-chief of an opinion-forming conservative paper – was met with a strong reply: 'It would be a denial of Polish history.'<sup>14</sup> The cross, this writer concluded, must have sole rights because Poles fought and died for it. Such a fraudulent definition of a nation made up exclusively of Catholics, who moreover had fought purely for their religion, doesn't just serve to mobilise their own ranks under the slogan of the inviolable Catholic nation. It also summons up the spectre of hostile minorities who, instead of keeping quiet and being tolerated, join in a European fantasy war against the Poles. So they become part of those hostile external forces.

The case of gay people is similar; they are accused of waging a war against the Polish family and Polish morality, and are treated like social dirt. Like the feminists, whom many still treat as alien to the Polish spirit. This is what happens when the mere existence of a minority reminds the majority that it does not make up the entire nation or society.<sup>15</sup>

Three years ago the influential daily *Rzeczpospolita*<sup>16</sup> published conservative opinions under the headline: 'How many rights for minorities?' The contributors to this pseudo-debate announced, with astonishing unity, that minorities are a threat to Poland. According to Janusz Kochanowski – now deceased but at the time the Spokesman for Civil Rights – when religious, ethnic or sexual minorities claim their rights, they contribute to the 'destruction of the vision of social harmony and the common good'. According to Jarosław Gowin – then only an MP for the PO and today the Minister for Justice – we in Poland are witnessing the revolt of the liberal minority against tradition. The philosopher Dariusz Gawin, a respected ideologue of Polish conservatism, tried to convince us that the sexual minorities 'are not trying to obtain rights, they are trying to change the culture and society. What is more, they are not trying to convince us, the majority; they want to force us to change. And because they are minorities, in their struggle with the majority they utilise an external factor: it is the European Union.' One local minority transforms itself into the global majority. And lurks, waiting for the Poles, from the position of power. But let's introduce a little optimism. Their manufacturing of hostile minorities proves that the position of these ideologues – of a nation imagined as one indivisible whole – is weakening. In the long term, nothing can hold back twilight – apart from organised violence, and fortunately those concerned lack the sufficient will to go that way. Particularly since society has moved in another direction: forming increasing numbers of permanent or transitory minorities.

This is how growing citizen pressure on the state and the parties manifests itself when people feel endangered or stripped of influence. They then organise themselves spontaneously outside the established political institutions. There are thousands of examples in Poland, at the central and local level. The best-known ones are environmentalists and women's movements.

In Europe the environmental movements began several decades ago in weak, small, scattered groups outside of politics; in the 1990s they not only went into coalition in several European countries but – more importantly – they created a great global network of groups, associations and initiatives. In Poland, too, environmental movements, though less developed, have enforced a stricter policy of environmental protection. There are constant debates on the environmental forums, which anyone can join.

Women's movements have also grown stronger in their struggle against gender discrimination. Considered absurdly marginal several decades ago in Europe – and in Poland until quite recently – they have introduced new ways into political and social life. In many countries, the charge of gender discrimination is a grave one. In Poland, women's movements are slowly gaining strength: for instance, they have managed

to enforce a statutory requirement that 35 per cent of the candidates in parliamentary party election lists should be women. And the problem of discrimination against women has entered the political agenda.

But besides these permanent movements we are dealing more often with the temporary self-organisation of the discontented. I wrote earlier about the protests against ACTA, which covered the whole country, but there are also many local examples. During the mayoral elections in one small town, the ruling party (PO) candidate tried to blackmail voters by claiming ‘if I don’t win, the Government won’t give us the money’. She managed only to infuriate people, who voted virtually *en masse* against her. In the face of such threats, people felt themselves to be citizens who were being robbed of their right to independent views. It didn’t help that the PO candidate was supported by the local party elite. Increasingly people organise themselves in opposition to the parties, or in parallel, in order to mind their own backyard or to circulate their own ideas.

‘It was nothing more or less than... hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government,’ wrote Hannah Arendt at the beginning of the 1960s in *On Revolution*, ‘that would permit every member of the modern egalitarian society to become a “participator” in public affairs, that was buried in the disasters of twentieth-century revolutions.’ Because the essence of freedom is ‘having a share in public business’.<sup>17</sup> Arendt’s accusation is that what the democracies remember from the revolutions on our continent is mainly oppression, presented as the rule of necessity – and from the American Revolution they remember that it produces a system of power which removes citizens from a real influence on public affairs. Arendt admonishes the democracies for forgetting how to care for the spirit of freedom. And they have forgotten that economic development in itself does not lead to liberty.

‘When we were told that by freedom we understood free enterprises, we did very little to dispel this monstrous falsehood,’ Arendt argues, ‘and all too often we have acted as though we too believed that it was wealth and abundance which were at stake in the postwar conflict between the “revolutionary” countries in the East and the West.’<sup>18</sup>

According to Arendt, the revolutions’ malign legacy also includes the political party system. In Europe all parties are characterised by ‘autocratic and oligarchic structure, lack of internal democracy and freedom, tendency to “become totalitarian”, claim to infallibility’.<sup>19</sup> Such a system is not conducive to the citizens’ participation in public life: they are only represented, and the representation covers their ‘interest or the welfare... but neither their actions nor their opinions’. Why? Because there are no opinions: ‘opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinions exists, there may be moods... but no opinion.’<sup>20</sup>

Arendt was a severe critic of what was then contemporary democracy; but our democracy is also subject to passing human moods and subject to the party apparatus that tends to eliminate elites and figures with authority. She saw a remedy in the past, in the destroyed tradition of the councils formed at the advent of revolutions or great political upheavals, and which were always destroyed, whether by the revolutionaries or the counter-revolution. The councils – spontaneous bodies where the most significant ideas were forged in free discussions – were meant to be where the ideas of the citizens and the political elites were forged. It’s a utopian nostalgia: turn to the unresurrectable past. But what for Arendt constituted a crystal-clear form of politics – equal access to the public debate of free citizens – has been reborn today in another form. Poland is living through a participatory revolution in the public sphere and a revolutionary change in the way elites are formed. This is being achieved through two processes with equally unpredictable consequences: radical social individualisation, and the technological breakthrough in collective communication.

The ambition of those living in Poland, as was already the case in the West, was now to create their own biographies, rejecting previous role models and institutions. Personal biographies, independent of states and institutions, are created not only by the many activists for local and global causes, but also by the excluded.<sup>21</sup> Those who choose sovereignly their own engagements – private and public – and, thanks to the ease of intercommunication, create mass networks of diverse pressure groups. ‘The state today must respond to the voices of all kinds of groups and minorities... not only the old organisations like trade unions, churches and the media. Even sportsmen have their own strong organisations. And so do homosexuals, arms dealers, drivers, the disabled, parents, tax evaders, divorcees, environmentalists, terrorists, etc.’ The German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger said this almost 20 years ago.<sup>22</sup> These words fit today’s Poland well; meanwhile, the state and the political parties are as unprepared for the changes as the West was earlier. Because to a large extent those changes take place outside current politics, and oppose it.

### Weakening state, withering parties

Over 20 years we have grown used to a democracy where the state defines the general aims of the community. Introducing the free market, economic reforms, joining NATO and the EU – with these objectives the state was ahead of society; it gave directions for development in the name of the general good and universal values such as democracy, rights, justice and prosperity. Citizens who entered public life had to refer to these values and interests. They took part in democracy and

shared in what was general and universal. The state mobilised the people, led society, and thus fulfilled its 'natural' task: offering a future. Faith in the future was one of the dogmas in the democratic catechism. That's how it was in Poland for well over ten years after 1989. But this form of democracy is passing away, and very quickly. Democracy is changing – from guaranteeing the functioning of the entire society and its 'majority' interests to guarding the rights of individuals and minorities. The rise of individualism, a collective desire for emancipation from imposed rules, and a desire to choose one's own companions are accompanied by the waning prestige of the community and by a crisis of representation. When its representatives – politicians, experts, figures of authority – occasionally try to formulate some basic aims for society and appeal to its better instincts, this increasingly falls on deaf ears.

This long-unnoticed transition into individualistic democracy has sent the political elites into confusion. What they had taken for granted in democracy, namely a politics based on the system of party representation, blew apart like a mud hut in a hurricane. The new form of democracy is a hurricane that has ravaged our political concepts and power structures. Suffice to say that in the last few years there has not been a single significant political or social debate in parliament or within the parties. Quarrels and futile declarations predominate. So we have a silent Sejm and a chattering society, which politicians draw on for ideas and opinions while they themselves contribute almost nothing to the debates.

A massive transformation dependent on the individualisation of societies and the reversal of the traditional relationship with the state was described thoroughly over ten years ago by Marcel Gauchet, who based his analysis on the French example.<sup>23</sup> Poland's changes are going in a similar direction, although the current crisis – I'll return to this theme later – intensifies politicians' ideas, usually unsuccessful, about how to restore the previous mechanisms of power over the community. Today's great argument is whether the state should mainly be the instrument of civic society. In this conflict, which encompasses the state and political elites on the one hand and the increasingly animated society on the other, the state is steadily giving ground. It formulates collective political aims less and less frequently, and when it tries to it meets resistance. The objectives of politics – this is the current democratic statement of faith, though it's not entirely new – are to be defined directly by the citizens. Either those associated with established pressure groups, or those loosely linked and mistrustful of politics. The problem is that such a society, where everyone represents only themselves or their own environment but never the entire community, fails to create an overall self-portrait. It is not transparent to itself. Hence the twilight of politics that embraced the whole society. Fragmentary politics corresponds to a fragmentary society.

Moreover, this society is largely apolitical. Gauchet – noting the liberational momentum of these changes and the fact that they are conducive to building a society of equals in freedom – at the same time analyses this with some anxiety, because the conviction that politics can change reality is diminishing. Individualistic societies are dominated by antipolitical attitudes where – Gauchet concludes<sup>24</sup> – conversations about politics are in bad taste; and when people do gather around causes, they are more concerned with confirming or searching for their own identity than with the public effects of action. Of course, it is not always like this; as I have already mentioned, civil society has its spokespeople, as well as activists who are not there by chance. But given the scale of the changes, its direct political effectiveness is negligible. To date it has failed to persuade the rulers to pass a frequently promised resolution about civic partnerships, granting couples basic rights arising from cohabitation. Worse, it cannot enforce a law introducing ethical education into the school curriculum as an equal alternative to religious education. It has also failed in numerous attempts to persuade the government to sign the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Polish politics is more conservative than its electorate. But I should add that there was a recent victory for civil society. After years of pressure and in spite of radical opposition from the Church and the PiS, the government is introducing partial financial reimbursement for in-vitro fertilisation treatment. For the time being this is only as a pilot scheme, but it has done it because a similar measure was implemented earlier by several local governments, not the central state.

### Society under the cross

This mix of strength and weakness can be seen clearly in the conflict surrounding the plane crash at Smoleńsk in April 2010, where among the victims, alongside many politicians of different parties and high-ranking officials, was President Lech Kaczyński, the twin brother of the chief of the opposition party, the PiS.<sup>25</sup> The most spectacular political conflict since 1989 broke out during the official mourning period, when the PiS and part of the Catholic Church hierarchy decided to bury the president in Kraków's Wawel Castle, the symbolic resting place of kings and legendary leaders. To critics of this decision, the groundless elevation of the late president – a politician who was unpopular, parochial, and sided with the PiS in total opposition to the government – was an act of seizing power over a mourning, grief-stricken society. 'We wanted to pay respect to the head of state; we are forced to worship a great politician' – said many such voices at that time. Those critical of the politics of Lech Kaczyński were told by journalists close to him and the PiS that they were scum, because

they had attacked the most patriotic president. Then it escalated. An idea germinated in the mind of the PiS that the government was to blame for the crash. This conviction quickly turned into another: the president was feared by both the Russians and the government; the prime minister is conspiring with the Russians: therefore – it's not a crash, it's an assassination. Crowds of supporters of the PiS and the late president gathered in front of the presidential palace in Warsaw. They erected a cross, around which a continuous political rally blended with prayers. The assembly chanted: 'Traitors', 'Go to Moscow', which was directed at the PM and the palace's new resident, Bronisław Komorowski. The head of the PiS regularly visited the rally and became its leader. Some of the Church hierarchy warned the assembly that the cross at the palace was being used for extra-religious purposes, and that it should be taken into the church where it could play its proper role. But no bishop dared confront the crowd. When the local parish priest tried to carry the cross into his church nearby, he was chased away. The cross remained in place, and the spontaneously constituted 'people of Smoleńsk' grew stronger. After some time its vigilance weakened, and it became possible to transfer the cross to the church. But the rallies have not stopped: on each monthly 'anniversary' of the plane crash, people gather in front of the presidential palace, and Jarosław Kaczyński remains their patron.

But let's take a closer look at the defenders of the cross, because this isn't at all straightforward. People gathered there not as party foot soldiers or servants of the Church. They accepted the support of the PiS, and on the whole they support the party – but do not join it. They heard the reactions of the Church's patriarchs, but did not listen. Quite the opposite: the hierarchs listened to the rally. The Church, instead of disciplining the faithful – as it once used to – emulated them. It proved weaker than them. In the Church, the relationship between the faithful and the hierarchy is becoming reversed, exactly like the relationship between the state and society. Well, immediately after the plane crash, during the days of mourning, some bishops were seduced by the idea that the late President should become the patron of a crusade to restore a lost patriotic-Catholic identity, which the Church would watch over. These leaders fell victim to the illusion that if people filled the churches to pray for the victims of the disaster, if so many mourned so religiously, and if for a time the Church became the most important site for collective emotional expression – then this meant the people everywhere would heed the Church's voice stating how we should be, whom we should listen to, what the state should be like. But at this point the Church suffered a defeat. Most churchgoers did not see it as a desirable patron of the state and public life. The Church has weakened as a social force to such an extent that the government can now argue with it

openly, which was unthinkable only a few years ago. People interpret Church dictates in their own way, choosing what suits them – this trend has been noted for years. And, most importantly, they increasingly treat faith as a matter for their own sovereign choice, not a legacy from their ancestors. Churchgoers now are as 'individualised' as non-churchgoers. They value their personal search for goals and identity above signing up to the collective tradition of the Church.

In today's Poland the only cohesive, comprehensive and assimilated language of rebellion is taken from nationalist-Catholic ideology, which most fully opposes the present and most easily instrumentalises the past. This does not mean that all those using such language are chauvinists, xenophobes or antisemites. True, there are plenty of those amid these 'people', but there are also feminists, there are people friendly to ethnic minorities, there are supporters of Poland's presence in the EU. There are also those who feel excluded from the rapid and constantly changing reality. When there are not enough stable points of support, when norms, customs and hierarchies become fluid, the need for an order that could stop a world in constant movement is easily born. And what about those who long for collective emotions, for communal experiences? So they go to demonstrate outside the presidential palace? And what they find there is not their own view but a sense of participation? What about those who want to discharge their fear of the crisis, their fear of poverty, or their fear of losing their flats in newly privatised blocks? There are also quite well-off employees of huge corporations there – that is to say, people who function well in society and the market. And only some of them share a faith in authoritarianism. They are driven into the ranks of the 'people of Smoleńsk' by a sense of exclusion that is hard to quantify. For instance, experiencing the miscellaneous failings of the state – and the plane crash is a symbol of such a failing – makes them feel alienated from the state.

Their problem is that while they can express their anger in that closed, nationalistic language, they cannot formulate expectations. Because in truth only some of them cared about chasing Tusk and Komorowski off to Moscow. Many others were trying in this clumsy way to make a desperate appeal to the state, to Tusk and Komorowski: Help us to live. Help us to live better, safer, more justly – anything. By that cross, people also called upon the state as the arbiter and protector of individual lives. Only they did so in a vile substitute language, because those people do not know a different language. Of course these are just my intuitions and observations; nobody knows how complex this community is because nobody has examined it. But they are confirmed by a demonstration organised on 29 September 2012 by Kaczyński and Father Rydzyk under the slogan 'Poland, awake'. Many young, well-dressed people marched among the nearly



one hundred thousand participants; it was a socially varied demonstration, not a unified force on the march.

This shows that it's unreasonable to treat the 'people of Smoleńsk' merely as dangerous lunatics or enemies of democracy. It also allows us to ignore fears and disappointments which take a radical form in front of the presidential palace, but in milder forms embrace a large part of society. Additionally, Jarosław Kaczyński's greatest wish is for us to see the 'people of Smoleńsk' and all his other supporters only as radicals out to overthrow the system. That is what he wants them to be: united and determined. What strengthens Kaczyński's leadership and facilitates false myths about the unity of PiS support is the inscrutability of his 'people'; it does not see its own diversity, so it adopts its leader's image – that of a collective unified force. This is one of the main features of populism: it makes society even less transparent than it really is; it lures with false clarity.

There has been some recent interest in the argument<sup>26</sup> that political parties and civic associations or foundations should get in touch with the 'people of Smoleńsk', who are currently separated from the state and form a sort of closed sectarian movement. Because it is vital for the people to start talking about their problems in their own languages; to reveal their wide variety and to allow their anger at democracy and the state to express itself, not just through negation but through proposals for change; to transform these mystified people from inaudible phantoms into citizens, even enraged ones. There would be a gain in clarity for others and for themselves. Then we would see how many in that camp believe they have been abandoned by democracy and would like to beckon it back, and how many wish to abandon democracy themselves. But for the moment the voices calling for a connection with the 'people of Smoleńsk' are crying in the wilderness. The PO will not do it; it's made a bid for those who have made themselves a home in the present and are above all frightened of losing what they've got. In other words, it has made a bid for ordinary citizens with the usual aspirations of working their way up. The SLD, presenting itself as left-wing, will not go that way either, because it is mainly interested in the support of the emancipated part of civic society. And in that part of society there is no demand for such actions.

This was clear during the protests at the cross. For those who gathered there were not only its defenders – there were counter-demonstrators too. The thousands by the cross were answered by thousands of others, a highly varied group with no leadership, no common symbolism or uniform language. Among these demonstrators were religious people and atheists, conservatives, liberals and left-wingers. Some objected to the use of the cross for political reasons; others were calling for a stronger secular state; some protested

against the PiS. So they did not transform themselves into a permanent 'people', did not create a collective sense of belonging or of a common cause. And, equally important, although they were varied themselves, in the 'people of Smoleńsk' by the cross they saw only their own stereotype: a unified, hostile mass. I should add that this was fully reciprocated. Yet at the same time these counter-demonstrations spectacularly revealed the civic energy of a secular democratic state. For now, however, it is still roaming, scattered all over Polish politics, finding no collective harbour for itself.

There is one not very promising exception: a new party led by Janusz Palikot, a businessman and an ex-MP for the PO. Palikot and his people were lifted into parliament by a citizen protest against a conservative state deaf to so many expectations, as well as by democracy's problems with the Church. But Palikot consistently transforms the energy invested into his movement into a gutter-level political show. His exaggerated rhetoric often resorts to abuse (denouncing the Establishment's hypocrisy and presenting politics as the domain of fraud); lunatic promises (like 'zero percent unemployment'); contradictory messages; frantic changeability on 'burning' issues – all of which show how a movement that aspired to represent an important sector of active society comes to represent and market an idiosyncratic populism.

### Towards a populist democracy

Populism, however, does not distinguish Palikot's party from the rest, although we have to admit populism has shown exceptional originality on Polish soil. In Poland, as all over Europe, populist trends blossom within ruling parties and in opposition, left and right; the disease has spread both to the parties of the centre and to the radical groups. Indeed populist tendencies accompanied the new Poland from the very beginning, as I have already mentioned.

But a qualitative and quantitative change took place in the 2005 election campaign, when the PO, the PiS and the nationalist party, the League of Polish Families, jointly announced a moral revolution, presenting the extant state and its elites as a gambling den where scum and thieves gather – and as the creation of the secret services and the Communist network. It was a brief alliance, because its basis was not conviction but the need for victory. In the last phase of the campaign the PiS turned on the PO as liberals insensitive to the lot of ordinary people, and won the twin prizes: parliament and the presidency. The two years of the PiS government made smear campaigns and witch hunts – it habitually juxtaposed the evil and greedy elites with the virtuous nation – the backbone of politics. The PiS never changed after that; the PO evolved towards forms of soft populism, like most democratic

parties. But, most significantly, after those events nobody believes you can practice politics without populist methods. Or without the populist imagination. Politics has become the Midas touch of delusion: anything it touches turns to populism.

Here is an intensification of what exists as a possibility within democracy: drawing political strength from appeals to the people or to the nation, above the rule of law. And a growing tendency to manufacture ‘peoples’ in order to impose convenient divisions and convenient problems. This of course is a negligible but real answer to the question of activating society beyond traditional politics. There are countless examples. When some time ago, following another storm, Prime Minister Tusk announced that Poland would castrate paedophiles, it was easy to conclude that those offenders were being denied their humanity, and that the promise of revenge was being exploited in order to communicate with the nation. When the government, following sensational headlines about a few people dying as a result of taking stimulants known as *dopalacze*, hastily enforced a half-baked law banning their sale – which is sure to result in major compensation to shop owners – this was supposed to improve the public mood, not the law. Even serious issues and debates drown in populisms, and sometimes never surface again. During its previous term, the government decided to move part of the pension contribution from private pension schemes into public ones. This flared into a long factual and passionate discussion, involving most respectable Polish economists; the majority criticised the government with regard to facts as well as demagoguery. The prime minister also voiced his opinion: he labelled the critics of the initiative ‘pseudo-experts’ and tried to transform the discussion into a spectacle, with the worthless elites on one side and, on the other, the leader and his people. This tone and atmosphere permeate government politics. Another typical trait is the traditional message of populism: namely, a declared dislike of politics, and especially of politicians. This trait was present in one of the main PO slogans during the 2010 election campaign: ‘We don’t do politics. We build bridges.’

On the other side of the political conflict is the authoritarian populism of the PiS. Both types of populism, the PO’s and the PiS’s, converge on one point: they rely on their ‘people’s’ passivity. They are meant simply to be viewers and judges at a show called ‘politics’, which increasingly generates atmosphere and spectacle instead of creating opinions and arguments for debate. They are passive and therefore loyal – for all the parties this could be the definition of the ideal voter. The problem is that, amid this postulated and organised passivity, when factual debate disappears, opinions that express some concept of the general good also vanish. However, the populisms of the PO and

the PiS differ fundamentally. The PiS wants to overthrow the system, whereas the PO wants to preserve it. But the consequences are probably unexpected for both groups. The revolutionary projects of the PiS become a separation from the system that sticks to the changes and important problems. Whereas the populism of the PO, which is meant to defend established liberal democracy, frequently transforms into attempts to introduce some order into society, attempts that are neither democratic nor liberal. Particularly in times of crisis.

### Society in crisis

It is well known that the crisis is not good news for European democracies, but in Poland the consequences and anxieties connected to it are creeping out slowly. The Poles’ support for the European Union is the strongest in Europe, seeing it as the most assured – perhaps the only – guarantee of the country’s development. It’s surely connected to the mighty flow of money from Brussels for investment and equal opportunities. But there is one more motivation: Europe remains the symbol of civilisation, progress, and a better life. The crisis has not upset these convictions. Besides, unlike the societies of Western Europe, Poles are still upwardly mobile in terms of status and material standards. The middle classes are working their way up and developing; to join them and settle in is what many Poles desire. So while the crisis is depriving the Western middle classes of their stability, future, career, and sense of personal dignity, in Poland it is different: for the moment, the crisis does not have that effect. It slows down advancement, but does not thwart it. ‘For the moment’, because if the crisis gains momentum and undermines the majority’s aspirations, the mood might easily change. As we know from European history, the stability of democracy depends precisely on the middle classes. But for the time being most Poles believe that, although the country is not doing very well, the future looks quite rosy.

They base their belief on experience. According to Eurostat research from February 2012, Poland is quickly reducing poverty – over a six-year period it fell from 13 to 5 million people living in poverty, i.e. from 34 per cent to 18 per cent.<sup>27</sup> Yes, this is still above the EU average (8 per cent), and five million people are still in danger of poverty, but the trend is clear. It is the same in urban and rural areas and in fact covers almost everybody except for one social category: young people.

Unemployment among the young – up to the age of 34 – has reached 28 per cent,<sup>28</sup> while in the less developed provinces in the south-east it reaches as much as 60 per cent. There are also more women among the unemployed than there are men, which points to



persisting inequality between the genders in terms of access to employment. Another massive problem is the fact that most employed young people are working on the basis of so called 'rubbish contracts', which usually means unstable work in poor conditions for low wages. All this also affects young people with education; very many young people work below their competence, wasting their qualifications and their future. It isn't without reason that they are known as the generation of lost opportunities. It's as if it were obvious to everyone, including themselves, that for them Beck's risk society has turned into a failure society.

As yet they're not protesting; there are no Polish 'indignants'. An attempt in 2011 to create such a movement ended with nothing: about a hundred people turned up. Not many, even if you compare it with the quite modest numbers of indignados in Spain or the Occupy Wall Street movement. No wonder: it's the young who most fully embody the new form of society, i.e. individualistic democracy, which comes into being at a certain level of general wealth: it embraced the older generation in Poland when they were already mature. But alongside the characteristics of the individualised society, devoid of established forms of representation, another factor is at work: a conviction, still vivid in Polish modernisation, that you should owe everything to yourself. You make your success by yourself, bear your failures by yourself – this is still Polish capitalism's normative horizon. Young Poles are distinguished by a lack of social solidarity – more than that, by a lack of belief that some kind of communal solidarity should be shaping society. True, within this constantly shifting reality they desire stable points of support, but they look for them in their private life, not the collective, and thus the younger generation so often proclaim conservative values. Family, home, opposition to abortion – a little private stabilisation becomes a coveted shelter from the uncertainty and humiliation brought about by the external world. This attitude, widespread in the People's Republic, strongly present in the 19th century under foreign rule, turns out to be alive again now, which emphatically demonstrates the growing sense of threat.

Because although – judging from many public statements – there are no obvious signs of rebellion among the young, there is a growing anger and sense of hopelessness. It grows on different levels. First of all, they feel increasingly excluded from the system, betrayed by the established liberal democracy, which promised them – like everybody else – a dignified life and a good future in return for honest work and competence. This is because they see that, while working on rubbish contracts, moving in and out of unemployment, without a future they can imagine, in practice they are not fully entitled members of society.<sup>29</sup> Often the employers or they themselves do not pay any pension contributions or even medical contributions – so they are deprived of basic

social benefits. They also have problems obtaining loans, planning and organising their future. So they are justified in worrying that they are on the way to becoming a social underclass. Worse, it's not just them, it's also their children, because when there is a shortage of work accompanied – as usual nowadays – by cuts in social security, not only does the number of losers grow but the role of inherited social status suffers. Contacts and social background facilitate a start in life. The losers' children are more exposed to failure; the children of the winners have privileged access to those rare goods: jobs and careers. The argument that a class society is returning is not preposterous. Add to that Poland's deeply rooted tradition of nepotism, present at all levels of power and in all parties. This is hard to relate to the rules of fairness, not only those stemming from the European welfare state tradition, but also those offered by the free market.

So the conviction that capitalism, free enterprise and possession constitute foundations for liberty is eroded. Globalised capitalism seems like a dark force ruling over the fate of individuals and societies according to some incomprehensible rules. You can see it now. One rumour is enough to send the markets into a frenzy, often destroying the savings of many people. A few emotions in the market are enough to endanger the finances of entire states. This power, anonymous, capricious and irrevocable, horrifies and enrages. 'Subject global capitalism to controls!' is a demand heard increasingly in Poland and Europe. But so far nobody knows how to do it. So an average person whose existence depends on the market – in other words, each and every one of the scores of millions of Poles and the hundreds of millions of Europeans – stands helpless in the face of this force, stripped of the sense that he or she is a citizen entitled to decide their own fate. This sense of helplessness cannot be remedied by any state or even the European Union. They are too weak to take on the markets.

So I have no illusions: when it sinks in that the present democracy has afforded a basic stabilisation for the older generation, while offering a society of failure to the young, a time of rebellion will come to Poland, as it surely will all over Europe. Because in the long term Polish society will not withstand a phenomenon that blocks the path of development for increasing numbers of individuals. How will the young rebel? The anti-ACTA protest gave us some foretaste of what is to come. I'm allowing myself to speculate again, but I do not think the protests will be very different from those we observed in Spain or the USA – fundamentally good-natured, and pro-democratic, at least at the start. They might give rise to the rebirth of the communal and precisely democratic traditions of 'Solidarity'. There was no spirit of revolution hovering over the protests of the Spanish *indignados*. They did not want to demolish the system;

they only demanded that it change. If they announced anything else, it was a peaceful exit without a clear message about where they would like to go from there. In Poland, faith in the justice of democracy and the free market is weakening; this probably indicates a return to favouring the welfare functions of the state as the way to support a little 'personal stabilisation'. So an urgent task faces democratic politics: to reformulate the historic compromise between the state and the market that is the European welfare state. Obviously this must take place all over Europe, including Poland. Because there is another option. If Europe proves too inept to reform social politics, the rebellion against the reality may assume a gloomy face: a series of populist revolts. In that case, Poland is not very likely to take a different route.

However, for the time being, in the face of creeping social anger and a society that occasionally becomes active, Poland's rulers have yielded to the desire to discipline society. The ruling coalition has pushed through a law limiting freedom of assembly and demonstrations, particularly if spontaneous and at short notice. Prior to that, they won an emergency parliamentary vote passing a law that allows the authorities – both central and local – to limit citizens' access to public information. Yet the most obvious attempts to rein in what many politicians see as an unruly society can be seen in culture.

### Who's afraid of culture?

It is culture, particularly the theatre and the visual arts, that reveals most powerfully what I would call a 'diagnostic revolt'. I cannot recall a time when such a huge wave of artists concerned themselves so intensely with society's condition. Democracy, capitalism, the elites, the genealogies of the nation, traditions, family, customs, minorities, gender issues – the present moment, usually treated critically, virtually seethes on the stage and in galleries. And not just in the capital, Warsaw, but in smaller towns across the regions. These exhibitions and productions – often not easy to grasp – find their audience not just among fellow-artists but among local so-called 'ordinary' people too. As if Poles, trying to understand themselves and their surroundings, were turning to a culture traditionally seen as niche – which to a large extent points to the weakness of society's other cognitive tools. Easing access to culture, particularly in places far from the cultural centres, has found its way into the government's politics – assisted by the grassroots movement 'Citizens of Culture', which has forced the authorities to increase the budget gradually, ensuring access to old and new artistic work.

But alongside this cultural politics a momentous battle is taking place in many areas of Poland today – or rather a series of skirmishes

between the people of culture and the local and central authorities. In these struggles the authorities are aided by the crisis, which provides a good excuse to put pressure on artists to create more commercial and less socially engaged art. 'We can't afford the excesses of artists' is a frequently used phrase in these conflicts. However, it hides two intentions which are not often formulated openly. And two misunderstandings regarding culture.

A memorable scene from Miloš Forman's film about Mozart: the Emperor will judge his opera, the Court awaits, and finally the ruler gives his verdict: 'too many notes'. The courtly mechanism for judging culture from the peaks of the political hierarchy still operates in democratic Poland. Everywhere you hear politicians (local and central) who think they know best what artists should and shouldn't be doing and how they should be doing it. They treat artists and the organisers of cultural life like courtiers: they must be watched and, if they step out of line, refused favours. Whenever a scandal breaks out, it is usually the Minister of Culture who intervenes, calming the situation, amid the complete indifference of the country's most important politicians.

This is, of course, a wider problem. The treatment of culture as 'decoration' for the authorities is endorsed by a more general (to put it in an old-fashioned way) philistine belief (ever-present among the Polish middle and upper classes) that culture is supposed to be a respite from the hardships of work and life, outside 'true', serious reality, outside one's engagements.<sup>30</sup> But the fact that culture is seen as the kept woman of elegant ladies and gentlemen is only one side of this miserable coin. Culture that tries to break free from these limitations is often perceived as a threat to the prestige of the authorities, to society, to order. 'Artists, keep your hands off of political ideas! It's our business, we're the politicians!' You hear this almost feudal admonition in many parts of Poland.

But contemporary societies, including Poland, live in a constant state of acceleration, which constantly invalidates our previous experiences, our stable orientation points. If we lack such points of support, the German philosopher Odo Marquard claims, ripped-up traditions give way to a flood of ideological yet also essentially practical everyday fictions and illusions. Deprived of firm ground – tradition, continuity, role models – we look to imaginary worlds for miraculous recipes for the good life. 'Children,' writes Marquard, 'for whom reality is overwhelmingly alien, need an iron dose of something familiar in compensation: their cuddly toys, and for that reason they drag them everywhere.' In just this way contemporary adults – to whom the world, due to its acceleration, constantly reveals its alien face – need an ideology that promises the rapid arrival of a long-awaited, healed and earthly world: this is the contemporary infantilised adult's psychological cuddly toy.<sup>31</sup>

Today, the main barrier against the enthronement of illusion in society is culture. Because it's certainly not the Church, nor the political parties, nor politics, which has ceased to define society's collective aims; it's not the old role models. Culture keeps us grounded in reality; it is the carrier of continuity; it tests it relentlessly, and restores it. It is the remorseless analyst of our mental states; of the state of ideas, both collective and individual; it exposes illusion, blurred stereotypes, false or suspect beliefs. And it is the body that collects and transmits individual and collective narratives about fate, the past and hope. So it gives us a multiform presentation of the world and of history, without which we would fall into an enslaving homogeneity. Thus culture is the guardian of a life in the real world, protecting us from insane delusions; it is the guarantor of freedom, offering us variety; and it is a mirror out of which, when we look into it, the ideals of humanity are still peeping out.

So I too turn to culture, and out of many recent works I find a valuable path suggested by Weronika Szczawińska and Mateusz Pakuła's theatre production *Ill Fares the Land*.<sup>32</sup> This is based on Tony Judt's book with the same title, but its main protagonist, unlike in Judt's work, is the 'Figure That Understands Nothing', which aptly reflects the situation of those who live in Poland, and probably Europe, today. In this production, the 'Figure' is amazed by the absurdities of our democracies, subjected to the pressures of untamed capitalism, and by the fact that we treat ourselves to a life that gets worse and worse. Looking around the world, the 'Figure That Understands Nothing' is constantly fed false beliefs about how to live and what is important. But from these teachings no coherent faith emerges, not even a false one. We get only shreds of certainty, we move across the ruins of thoughts and ideas. There are no more merciful illusions, not even fully blown lies that smooth out our sense of the absurdity and strangeness of the world.

I would say: just like life. If there is any connection between Poles (and Europeans) with different views and different positions in society, it is precisely the fact that between them they understand nothing of the contemporary world. Furthermore, they have no hope of a chance of comprehending anything in the foreseeable future. This is a new experience, because we were accustomed to the presence of faiths and ideologies that somehow glued our existence to the world and ordered it, even when that order was built on malevolent foundations. For centuries, visions of wonderful futures on earth or after death made it easier for us to become part of collective life; we were also fed on faith in historical or social necessity. Even vile beliefs – for example that the weak must perish to give way to the strong, as well as every brand of racism and nationalism – made the world bestial but comprehensible because they operated according to some kind of logic.

But since neither visions of good nor of organised evil help us understand reality – they have evaporated – our relations with the world are overwhelmed by a sense of alienation. In their production, Szczawińska and Pakuła test whether it is possible to make reality more comprehensible and less alien by going back to the past; by reaching, that is, for the origins of contemporary democracy. But the result isn't unequivocal; even though reaching out to the past allows us to see ourselves today, at the same time it plunges us into nostalgia and resentment. Instead of restoring continuity, which is the condition of settling into the world and changing it, we have a factory of resentments which makes the reality even foggier and closed. A sense of helplessness has often been the source of new thoughts and great changes. In this sense, too, the 'Figure That Understands Nothing' is the protagonist of our time. At this moment, it is roaming isolated from the world, history and the future. As our societies are. But all this will pass.

# Notes

- 1 Elections were already rigged in interwar Poland; after the Second World War the Communists mastered the practice to perfection.
- 2 The package of systemic and economic reforms introduced from 1990, under conditions of economic disintegration and a hyperinflation that reached over 600 per cent.
- 3 As early as October 1994, Donald Tusk, then a young leader of the liberal circle within the Freedom Union (Unia Wolności) – the party of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Jacek Kuron and Bronisław Geremek – declared in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (a Catholic socio-cultural weekly): ‘You must be efficient in the most important matter, which is getting Poland out of socialism. And if there is not enough democratic legitimacy for this, you have to look for another, even extra-constitutional, way.’
- 4 Tymiąski started off in the elections as a man from nowhere. It was known only that he was a businessman operating in North and South America, which made an impact on the Polish imagination. During the campaign he presented himself as a candidate from outside the party system. He attacked Balcerowicz’s reforms and gathered around himself people from the Communist secret services and ‘orphans’ of the People’s Poland. He had a famous black briefcase, which he showed at press conferences, claiming it contained information about the competition. But he never opened it. Later he ran in several elections, gaining only minimal support.
- 5 See an interesting essay by Jan Sowa: *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (*A Phantom Body of a King. The Peripheral Struggle with the Modern Form*)
- 6 Fiedorczuk, *Biała Ofelia* (*White Ophelia*), p. 63
- 7 Originally it was used by Alexander Zinoviev, the Russian writer and dissident. In Tischner’s version it was modified.
- 8 Decommunisation was included in the PiS programme of 2005, although the party did not take any such action.
- 9 Quoted from ‘Bogatynia szczęśliwa z czerwonymi ulicami’ (‘Bogatynia is happy with red streets’), *Gazeta Wyborcza*
- 10 This is a peculiar return to Leninist doctrine. In 1946 Jan Strzelecki, the socialist philosopher, published an essay ‘Mała i wielka historia’ (‘Little and Big History’) (see Strzelecki, *Kontynuacje* (*Continuations*), pp. 27–38), in which he argued that vulgarised Marxism falsified history by ignoring individual lives.
- 11 ‘There is a Poland of those Poles who wish to remain Poles. And there is another Poland, little and scared and ashamed of its Polish existence. This is the Poland of those Poles who have become bored with Polishness, who are repulsed by it.’ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz in *Newsweek* (24 November 2010, Polish edition).
- 12 See Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (1998), pp. 172–73
- 13 Gross, *Sąsiedzi* (*Neighbours*)

- 14 Paweł Lisicki, *Rzeczpospolita*, 14 November 2009
- 15 This universal mechanism is aptly analysed by Arjun Appadurai in *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (*Strach przed mniejszościami. Esej o geografii gniewu*)
- 16 *Rzeczpospolita*, 10 October 2009
- 17 Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 115, 268
- 18 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 219
- 19 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 272
- 20 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 272
- 21 See Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy. Etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego* (*Hunters, Collectors, Practitioners of Powerlessness. The Ethnography of the Degraded Man*), an excellent study of the activity of excluded people, who construct their worlds parallel to the system.
- 22 Enzensberger, *Mittelmass und Wahn*, p. 230, quoted in Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Modernizacja refleksyjna* (*A Reflective Modernisation*), p. 60
- 23 See Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (2002)
- 24 Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (2002)
- 25 The visit to Katyń, where during the Second World War the NKWD buried the Polish officers who had been taken into captivity and executed, was to be a stage in the pre-election presidential campaign. It was particularly significant because a few days earlier a similar journey had been made by Prime Minister Tusk at the invitation of Prime Minister Putin.
- 26 For example, mine and Aleksander Smolar's.
- 27 After *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 9 February 2012
- 28 Eurostat data from April 2012
- 29 Along with others Tony Judt writes that state benefits make it possible to live but do not provide a place in society; see *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on Our Present Discontents* (*Źle się ma kraj*), pp. 34–35
- 30 Hannah Arendt, sensitive to the weak points of democracy, knows what she is talking about when she says that one of the greatest threats to culture in the democratic world – greater than show business and mass culture – is its expulsion from reality. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (*Między czasem minionym a przyszłym. Osiem ćwiczeń z myśli politycznej*), pp. 238–44
- 31 Marquard, *Apologie des Zufälligen* (*Apologia przypadkowości. Studia filozoficzne*), p. 89
- 32 Teatr Polski (The Polish Theatre) in Bydgoszcz; premiere 22 June 2012. In the text I have used fragments of my own articles in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: 'Polskie mniejszości, czyli wolność wywołana na wojnę' ('Polish minorities or freedom called up to war'), 9 January 2010; 'Rewolucja z ludzką twarzą' ('A revolution with a human face'), 20 March 2010; 'Jednostka bierze władzę' ('An individual assumes power'), 28 August 2010; 'Po co, u diabła, ta kultura' ('What the hell do we need culture for?'), 27 November 2010; 'Wymyślony lud i głuche elity' ('The imaginary people and the deaf elites'), 29 January 2011; 'Plugawa mowa, poważna sprawa' ('Vile speech, serious matter'), 9 April 2011; 'Wysiadka z systemu' ('Out of the system'), 28 May 2011; 'Wzbiera gniew' ('The anger's growing'), 17 September 2011; 'Gniew ludu smoleńskiego' ('The anger of the people of Smoleńsk'), 7 April 2012.

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**The Front National  
– caught between  
extremism,  
populism and democracy**

**Michel Wieviorka,  
October 2012**



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# Introduction

Who would have thought in 1972, a period characterised by growth and full employment, that a heterogeneous handful of extreme right-wing groups going by the name of Front National (FN) would go on to become, 40 years later, in 2012, in a period of recession, unemployment and widespread anxiety, a right-wing party capable not only of having a lasting impact on the French political scene but perhaps even of endangering the very existence of the traditional right? The FN's rise to prominence and electoral success, which began in 1983, seemed over in 2007/08, a point at which many observers predicted its terminal decline. Again, who could have predicted the FN's current standing at the time?

The FN's trajectory over the last half century has been far from linear. This is due both to changes in French society as well as to changes within the FN itself – the first being the generational change symbolised by the transition from Le Pen father to Le Pen daughter, Marine, in early 2011. Understanding the enduring presence of the FN as a political force while it itself has undergone great change implies an analysis of France's social, political, economic and cultural evolution: the chaotic exit from the period known as the *Trente Glorieuses* – the post-war years of prosperity stretching from 1945 to 1975 – and, in particular, the transformations triggered by this exit, specifically within the political system itself. This, in turn, requires an in-depth examination of the changes that have enabled the FN to fulfil the expectations of what is itself an evolving electorate: the FN has ebbed and flowed over the past 30 years, and its voter profile has changed. While there are elements of continuity, in particular around the theme of immigration, which remains top of the agenda, there is innovation and change – the reference to the working class, for example. Above all, in recent years, the evolution of the FN owes a considerable debt to the efforts of its leaders to discard the ideologies of the extreme right on which it was founded and to rid itself of the anti-Semitism that was frequently its trade-mark.

Shedding certain components that were once essential to its ideology in order to become a respectable party has involved a political cost for the FN, one that profoundly modifies the political offer it can make: this essay will examine the consequences of this transformation.

But another perspective must be taken into account: the rallying of the traditional right to the ideology of the Front National, including a rallying to its racism and xenophobia. Is a tidal wave of FN support crashing over a country paralysed by crisis a realistic prospect in the medium term? Could a reconfigured political right return to power with the FN at its heart after Hollande's left-wing moment? There is no strong evidence to support this view. Nor is there anything that should prevent us from considering it.

Populism or extremism? In many respects, the sociological history of the Front National originates in these two categories. Today there is a preference toward populism as the defining category, at least in the media. And in those instances it is often a synonym for demagoguery; this categorisation works as an invitation to include the FN in the ideological and political lineage of episodes that are, to some extent, its historical precursors. Thus there are frequent reminders of 'Boulangism' (from the name of General Boulanger whose political career at the end of the 19th century was based on a combination of nationalism and the support of the Bonapartists and monarchists of the period). Closer to our own time, the link to 'Poujadism', a 1950s movement created in part by the context of a waning IV Republic and backed by shopkeepers and artisans, is a strong one. Anti-parliamentarian, xenophobic and anti-Semitic, Poujadism appealed to the lower middle classes as its leader Poujade exposed fiscal abuse and criticised the influential, the well-to-do and the intellectuals. In his youth, Jean Marie Le Pen was a young Poujadist deputy in the National Assembly.

Resorting to the use of the term 'populism' and its variant, 'national-populism' (the latter coined by Pierre-André Taguieff<sup>1</sup>) or 'neo-populism', as used by Erwan Lecoeur<sup>2</sup> in his history of the FN, poses several problems. The first stems from the vagueness of the term: it is not clear whether it is used as a scientific definition, as journalism or as common sense reference. Specialist books and articles that endeavour to confront this problem abound. The second difficulty is that today the use of the word 'populist' is derogatory; from the outset, it indicates a negative value judgement that is somewhat dismissive in tone and, in any event, reinforces a pejorative *a priori* assumption that takes the analysis in a pre-determined direction.

Furthermore, the use of the term populism refers to a history that evokes all at once: the Russian Narodnicki in the period 1840–80, whose appeal to the rural population was an effort to redeem the country through its rural areas and heritage; the People's Party of poor farmers in the southern, midwestern and western United States, who battled against high finance and major firms and pleaded for an end to the gold standard; and the movements and political regimes throughout Latin America from the 1930s to the 1960s. But these actors are

profoundly different from one another. It is dangerous to suggest – in the words of Alexandre Dorna<sup>3</sup> (in his foreword to a special survey in the journal *Amnis*) – a 'federating paradigm'. To locate the FN primarily in the wake of these movements is to run the risk of missing many of the specificities of each of them. And as Annie Collovald<sup>4</sup> stresses, this also leads to minimising other historical antecedents, including fascism, Petainism and Vichy, and the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) – of which their turn to violence, contrary to that of the Narodnicki who veered toward terrorism, can in no way claim to be emancipating or liberating. It amounts to erasing the extreme-right nature of the Front National.

And lastly, populism refers to the idea of the people, a category that is itself muddled and ambivalent, as demonstrated by the acts of the colloquium 'Le Peuple existe-t-il?'<sup>5</sup> over which I myself presided: the people are both a whole, and a part of the whole. They are the nation taken as a whole as well as 'those of modest means' as contrasted with 'the rich and powerful'. The people are capable of the best but also of the worst; they may be the vanguard of democracy and its destroyers; they may behave in pre-democratic or in post-democratic fashion; be active, or passive.

Locating the Front National solely in the category of populism or national-populism on the right leads us to seek a possible social and political counterpart on the left and to examine the (rather recent) experience of the Front de gauche (Left-wing front), a combination of the Communist Party and other actors 'left of the left' under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. This is in no way conducive to understanding the FN and creates a questionable symmetry.

We should, as a concluding thought, bear in mind the particular quality of that segment of the population which, as Sandra Laugier suggests, encourages us to think about what democracy actually is: 'From the point of view of a politics of everyday life, in which individuals have to do their best to express their experience and make their voices heard, the accusation of populism, just like that of elitism, is welcome: it really is through this paradox that the question of democracy is reinvented.'<sup>6</sup>

Should we not instead locate the FN within the history of the extreme right in France? In which case, we should start earlier still and go back to the period of the revolution and counter-revolution as suggested by Michel Winock and Peter Davies.<sup>7</sup> But it is doubtful whether the Front National can be reduced to the extreme right. It does fall within its province, that is for sure; but as we shall see, given the extent to which it has adopted a strategy of respectability and a pursuit of democratic legitimacy – or de-demonisation – this no longer suffices to define it appropriately.

Whatever the case may be, it is in fact possible to give a precise date for the founding of the FN and – although there is some divergence from historical reality – to attribute paternity to Jean-Marie Le Pen, its president until January 2011. Originating in 1972 under the title of National Front for French Unity (FNUF, Front national pour l'unité française), the party began as a heterogeneous collection of movements that Alain Robert, who quarrelled with it on its creation, had brought together. These included monarchists, former Nazi collaborators, traditionalist Catholics, followers of Charles Maurras or 'Maurassiens', former members of the OAS and counter-revolutionaries. It was a fusion of, as noted by the leaders of *Ordre Nouveau* in June 1972, 'small, sectarian, isolated groups, divorced from reality, completely defined by an in-fighting in which personalities and petty grudges took priority over political action'. Upon founding the FN, the leaders of *Ordre Nouveau* broke away from their original movement. In the 1970s the members of this movement included people as varied as François Brigneau, Jean-Pierre Stirbois, Roger Holeindre, Pierre Bousquet, Gérard Longuet, Nazi collaborators like Roland Gaucher and Pierre Bousquet (a former member of the SS Charlemagne division), or further still François Duprat – who went from *Jeune Nation*, an extreme right group created by Pierre Sidos in the wake of the OAS, to *Occident*, the *Fédération des étudiants nationalistes* and *Ordre Nouveau*. It was Duprat who suggested to Jean-Marie Le Pen the phrase 'a million unemployed is a million immigrants too many', before his murder in 1978.

The Front National remained a small group with no social or political foothold until 1983. That year the municipal elections in Dreux were to signal the FN's real take off. For the first time, the party made an electoral breakthrough on the basis of a local alliance with the right-wing RPR. The FN list, represented by Jean-Paul Stirbois – who had already reached 12.6 per cent of the vote in the local elections of 1982 – got 16 per cent of the vote and merged with Jean Hieaux, from the RPR, who became mayor. These electoral beginnings took place in a context of ideological renewal that owed a considerable debt to the *Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne* (GRECE) and the *Club de l'Horloge*, intellectual hubs of the 'New Right' which today we might refer to as 'think tanks'.

From this point on, the FN became a force to be reckoned with, and thereafter each of the elections that punctuate French political life has given rise to questions and discussions concerning its performance. In 1984, it got 10 MEPs; in 1986, as a result of the proportional representation regime (momentarily) introduced by François Mitterrand, it elected 35 MPs to the National Assembly. In 2002, despite the split that occurred in 1998 upon the departure of Bruno Mégret, the party's number two

who went on to create the *Mouvement national républicain*, Jean Marie Le Pen made it through to the second round of the presidential elections with 16.86 per cent of the vote. It was a shock, especially for the left, since this meant the elimination of the socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin. In 2007, on the other hand, Jean Marie Le Pen gathered only 10.44 per cent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election, and the results in the following elections showed a fall and even a decline. But from 2010 this trend was reversed, with the FN polling 11.42 per cent in the regional elections, then obtaining satisfactory results in the local elections in 2011; Marine Le Pen polled 17.90 per cent of the votes for the FN in the 2012 presidential elections.

There are lessons to be learnt from this, as of yet rather basic, information. The first is that, unlike 'Boulangism' or 'Poujadism', the FN has lasted over time, and proved capable of surviving considerable change; both internally (the split in 1998, succession in 2011) as well as in the external political, social and cultural landscape, which has changed considerably over the past 30 years. The second lesson is that the FN differs from other extreme right movements or forms of neo-fascism given its desire to participate in public life, its observance and respect of democratic rules, and by its readiness to reach compromises and work toward agreements. As Jean Marie Le Pen said on 3 November 1972 when he presented the list of FN candidates on prime time 8pm television news, it was a question of abiding by 'democratic methods' and of adopting a moderate stance. This is why numerous analysts prefer to speak of the 'radical right' – though the adjective 'populist' is, nevertheless, often attributed. But as a general rule, populism does not last very long; it tends to be short-lived, a configuration that corresponds to an unusual state of society. This is not the case with the Front National.

Classic political analysis generally oscillates between two sharply contrasting points of view. On the one hand, political action, parties, their leaders and their supporters are understood as politically autonomous processes. They exist within systems that obey a set of well-defined rules. This is particularly true of France where the power of the state exerts a fascination that is perhaps much greater than in other societies. At the other end of this analytical spectrum, political action, parties, etc cannot be understood without reference to the greater society within which they exist, to the demands, the problems, and expectations that define life as a collective and to which they may or may not respond adequately. In this framework, understanding these demands involves examining society itself.

These two standpoints, while not mutually exclusive, are extremely distant from one another. And they yield contrasting explanations for the rise of the FN: one scenario attributes the rise of the FN since the 1980s to a crisis in the political system as a whole, while the other

emphasises a crisis of one of its classical components, the traditional left or right. Tensions of this kind must themselves be explained, and this implies taking into account the nature and dynamics of social transformations as a whole – transformations that were decisive factors in both the early successes of the Front National as well as those of more recent times.

The history of the FN, if only on the basis of the few electoral results outlined earlier, acts as an invitation – and this is another lesson – to constantly switch between the two classic points of view. A ‘dip’ can be identified at one point in the history of the FN – at least in electoral terms – and one can distinguish between the period of early success and that of recent successes. This suggests that we must examine both the transformation of French society, as well as that of its political system, in light of a strong hypothesis; namely, that the years 1972–83 signal the beginning of a major transformation, itself comprising two major phases: the first signalling the end of the post-war boom that began in 1973, and the second, starting in 2008, more specifically defined by globalisation and made worse by the economic and social crisis triggered by the financial crisis. This division is not particularly original; it is similar for example to that of Dominique Reynié’s, who distinguishes three defining moments for the Front National: its origin in the federation of the extreme right; the ‘personal party’ of Jean-Marie Le Pen, admittedly aided and abetted by the strategy of François Mitterrand (who requested that public television channels invite the FN candidate more often, who raised the issue of votes for immigrants and who introduced a limited form of proportional representation in 1986 specifically to split the right-wing vote); and finally the FN that emerged between the years 2002 and 2007 in the crisis and the ‘demise of the Lepenist party’. The ‘third FN’ borne of this last period is one that smacks of a kind of ‘national heritage populism’ – a combination of multiple references to freedom and an accelerated transformation into what it describes as ‘ethnosocialism’, both social and national.<sup>8</sup>

## The end of the *Trente Glorieuses* (post-war boom) and the foundations of the FN

### The major transformation

In 1972, when the FN was created, France was made up of three relatively well-integrated components: an industrial country comprising businesses and relationships of production dominated by Taylorism and characterised by steady growth and a very low rate of unemployment; a secure republican state that ensured a form of solidarity, public services, welfare provision and education; and, finally, a nation that, after decolonisation, still considered itself to be powerful and relevant. After the Second World War, the country had been rebuilt largely thanks to an immigrant work force which was, in the main, unskilled. After Abbé Pierre's famous call to action (1 February 1954), an ambitious social housing policy led to the creation of neighbourhood housing projects that ensured decent homes for the working and middle classes. But the end of the *Trente Glorieuses* was already on the horizon.

The oil crisis of 1973, with its rise in oil prices, marks the turning point. This is the context in which industries began to distance themselves from Taylorism and started to opt for new forms of management and labour organisation. Large numbers of unskilled workers were no longer required in production and working-class strongholds began their historical decline. Unemployment began to rise as did concerns about a 'dualisation' of French society – sometimes referred to as a 'two-speed' society. These paved the way for the difficulties and losses in membership of trade unions that marked the beginning of an extremely difficult phase. The suburbs (*banlieues*) and in particular the 'red suburbs' (*banlieues rouges*) held by the French Communist Party, once at the vanguard of social progress with its mix of lower-middle-class and working-class populations and its genuine capacity for community and political mobilisation, began to change. Immigration played a considerable role in this transformation, particularly given the abrupt transformation of immigration from a phenomenon of employment (a lone immigrant coming to France to work, save money and go back home) to one of settlement, and this as a direct result of the legislation on family re-unification passed in 1976, which gave immigrants the right to bring families

to France and to settle. The dynamic led the lower-middle classes, and generally speaking anyone who could afford it, to abandon council housing (HLM) and council housing areas; some people headed to city centres that were already undergoing a measure of gentrification, others to alternative flats and estates. This marks the beginning of a vicious cycle in many working-class areas, where more and more immigrant families settled while wiping out the dream of a mixed society and, with it, any real dynamic of social and political mobilisation.

The post-war years were years of modernisation and growth instigated by the actions of a relatively interventionist state. These years marked an acceleration of the crisis of already weakened local or regional identities – a crisis that more resources, a rise in tourism, and the purchase of second homes in regions such as the South East would only exacerbate. Reinforcing these existing dynamics was the process of European construction that raised concerns around notions of local and national identities, such as was the case in Alsace.

### The first successes of the Front National

These conditions can be seen to have paved the way for the rise of the FN. Immigrants had previously been expected either to assimilate – especially those belonging to the older population flows coming from Poland, Italy, Spain and Portugal – or to go back home in the case of immigrants from North Africa. From the 1970s onwards the situation became one in which the immigrants, or their children, became French and lived in working-class areas. Racism began its mutation from targeting ‘immigrant workers’ to targeting their children – the *beurs* and *beurettes*, ‘the Arabs’ and, soon after, the Muslims who lived and worked in France. Racism had become ‘differentialist’ to use the specialised vocabulary – but also that of the intellectuals of the ‘New Right’ who contributed to the ideological renewal of the FN. Differentialist racism did not endeavour to victimise immigrants; rather, its stated intention was to show the irreducible cultural and religious differences of the Arabs or the Muslims who were then accused of being incapable of integrating. The Front National developed, as I showed in *La France raciste*,<sup>9</sup> in working-class areas, or started there; areas where ‘poor whites’ had not been able to leave for a socially more rewarding form of housing. It also developed in areas where living in a council estate (HLM) had been expensive and demanded considerable economic sacrifices, all the while people were convinced that ‘they’ (the Arabs, the immigrants) lived well and for free, by taking advantage of the state, welfare benefits or by dealing drugs. It also developed in areas where, paradoxically, there were no immigrants but where the fear of their presence

was considerable, where the economic situation was not particularly bad and where engaging with Europe and the world could be seen as undermining the local balance of forces. This perception of threat – both psychological and physical – did wonders to fuel the resentment, anxiety and hatred that is said to reign in working-class areas, and the anti-social and uncivil behaviour that is all said to make life so difficult. All of these themes reverberated increasingly towards the end of the 1970s.

As France’s industrial base and heritage were disintegrating, so the republican model was beginning to crack; all the more so as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher turned liberal ideologies into the new orthodoxy. But the FN took no great interest in the republican ideal and its crisis; it mainly chose to remain attached to a critique of the welfare state and redistribution.

The ‘first’ incarnation of the Front National was attuned to changes in French society, and on the themes of immigration and the rising sentiment of threat it proposed political solutions that broke away from the traditional categories of the extreme right. The FN had diagnosed changes in North African immigration and spotted the transformation from labour-based migration to one of settlement well before the Hessel report provided a documented analysis of the situation.<sup>10</sup> The FN in fact had grasped the significance of Islam in certain areas long before the publication of Gilles Kepel’s groundbreaking *Les Banlieues de l’islam*.<sup>11</sup> The FN capitalised on fear and hatred, both of which stemmed from the perceived insecurity or sense of vulnerability that the French population had discovered during the course of these first ‘hot summers’: with the ‘rodeos’; other forms of urban violence; and the behaviour of young people simply waiting out a desperate situation, marking time – what François Dubet referred to as ‘hard times’ (*la galère*).<sup>12</sup>

Despite all that, this ‘first FN’ did not break completely with the themes inherited directly from the extreme right. It was anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and receptive to Maurrassien or Pétainist ideologies, to the point even of subscribing to the revisionism of Robert Faurisson, for whom the gas chambers in Auschwitz were an ‘invention of the Jews’. At that time, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s strategy was to create scandal or provoke: an attack on Jewish journalists would be followed by another on AIDS victims (*sidaïques*) – AIDS was described as ‘leprosy (...) in its terminal phase’. Not to mention the dubious anti-Semitic pun on the name of Minister Durafour (to which Le Pen added ‘crématoire’ – as a reference to the gas chambers); as for Auschwitz, it was no more than a ‘detail’ of the Second World War. Furthermore, the FN had not broken with Poujadism, advocating the withdrawal of the state, an end to income tax and the suppression of jobs in the civil service.



From 1983 onwards, the Front National could be seen to be engaged in the political preparation of the sociological transformations at work in France. But it did this without abandoning those groups of support – the shopkeepers and the artisans – who had had a rough time as a result of the modernisation of the post-war years. This was the rumble of mounting anger with no real structure to it, no partisan organisation or local attachment that might have enabled it to be the bearer of hope for those whose frustrations, fears and resentments were expressed. It was a surge with no real political role since, except on the rarest of occasions, it did not give rise to elected office. For the FN the only opportunities to establish itself on a long-term basis in institutions were the European elections, even though it was distinctly anti-European.

The political context of the 1980s was fairly particular. On the one hand, the left, in power from 1981, had lost its ideological impetus fairly rapidly: communism had entered its senile phase from which it was never to recover and the socialists suddenly adopted a politics of austerity in March 1983, which distanced it from a number of working-class aspirations. On the other hand, the right, taken aback by the defeat of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (despite this being what some of its own leaders wanted) was experiencing difficulties in reconstructing itself ideologically and politically. In 1986 François Mitterrand's introduction of partial proportional representation at the general elections oversaw the de facto institutionalisation of the FN, which for a period was able to count on 35 members of parliament. This had the immediate effect of weakening the traditional right.

Thus, the Front National entered the system without having had to break with the radical ideas of a leader who was strongly opposed to the forces of this very system – he frequently denounced the 'gang of four'; by whom he meant the PCF, the PS, the UDF and the RPR, the four traditional political parties. By first managing the tension between the scandals that ensured his visibility in the media on the one hand and his participation in the democratic system of elections on the other; and, second, balancing an extremist stance that risked excluding him from 'normal' political life with a concern for respectability that could have turned the FN into a party for which it could be legitimate to vote. Contrary to what many thought at the time, the FN was not a violent, putschist party but one that wished to succeed through electoral means. Its ideology included elements from the extreme right, but its practices distanced it from that extremism. When acts of violence were committed by extreme right actors, in most instances the party was not directly responsible (though the media and traditional politicians didn't hesitate to attribute them to the FN). Skinhead or neo-Nazi acts of violence tarnished the party's

image and undermined its strategy, even if these acts resulted from its very existence; but they were also the consequence of the FN's quiet mobilisation of skinhead and neo-Nazi groups to provide 'security' during its own demonstrations. Thus, on 1 May 1995, a date which the FN likes to celebrate every year in front of the statue of Joan of Arc in Paris, a young Moroccan was pushed by skinheads and drowned in the Seine. In 1990, when the desecration of tombs in the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras caused a wave of indignation, it was largely attributed to the Front National by the left and others, as well as the media – until one of four neo-Nazi perpetrators admitted to the crime in 1996.



## A new stage

### The destructuring of the French model

In the 1980s and 1990s all of the components of the French model were undergoing deep structural change.

France throughout this period shed the defining feature of an industrialised society, namely a society organised around a structural conflict between employers and the organisations of the working class. One could argue that it even went as far as losing the defining features of a 'society' given the strength of the forces of individualism and the process of globalisation which the French discovered later and with much greater apprehension than citizens in other European countries. All of the republican institutions were in crisis: the state, the education system, welfare provision, conscription and public services. The FN mainly stayed away from social themes, much as it stayed away from the issues pertaining to the Republic and the republican creed. It did not specifically speak to the concerns of workers who were the victims of the end of this industrial era, except to assert that their misfortunes were to be attributed to the immigrants who were wrongfully taking jobs from French people. In no way did it lament the decline of republican institutions. It focused primarily on the nation and on national identity, the cultural and ethnic or racial homogeneity of the social body that was said to be under threat from immigrants or Jews; and it remained profoundly anti-communist.

In the first decade of the new millennium, the great mutations continued apace, replete with negative aspects, but also with some positive and constructive dimensions: for example, the emergence of Green ideas to provide possible solutions to some of the difficulties of the times. Not only did the working-class movement become weaker but the world of the working class disappeared, certainly from the media and the public eye. The 'suburbs' with their local difficulties and violence became ghettos – like the one in Angoulême in Didier Lapeyronnie's *Ghetto urbain*.<sup>13</sup> In October/November, 2005, three weeks of rioting swept over France. Immigration could no longer be reduced to images of a distant past when migrants who had come from other countries in Europe integrated and became assimilated and the 'immigrant workers' from North Africa thought only about going back home; nor could it be

reduced to the images of the 1980s or the 1990s. It was increasingly complex and varied, far beyond the North African origins of the *beurs* and *beurettes* (young Arab men and women) alone – expressions which are completely outdated today.

The French public became aware of a new set of realities that had hitherto been barely perceptible. For example, the fact that migrants frequently wished to transit through France with no intention of settling there, as was demonstrated by the experience of Sangatte, a small town in the Pas-de-Calais right at the entrance to the Channel Tunnel. The migrants at the Red Cross centre, or those wandering nearby (since the closure of Sangatte in December 2002 by Nicolas Sarkozy, who was at the time Minister of the Interior) had only one dream – and that was to go to the United Kingdom and from there perhaps to other shores. In areas that were becoming trans- or supra-national, others wandered around without settling, like ‘ants’, those nomads of an underground economy described by Alain Tarrus.<sup>14</sup> Many of them have become dual nationals and the diasporic dimensions of migratory phenomena have grown considerably.

The geographic and national origins of the migrants are now much more varied and include in particular Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, France is also a country of emigration: almost 1,600,000 of our fellow citizens were listed on the official registers of French citizens abroad on 31 December 2011.

In France the heterogeneity of migrant origins is a basic source of ‘diversity’ – a word that is up for debate since it is often used as a euphemism for the fragmentation of identities. But racial and ethnic differences are not the only differences; these can also be cultural, related to sexuality, to customs, or to religion. Yes, Islam, but also several variants of Protestantism imported from the United States via the Caribbean, Africa or Latin America: Pentecostalism or evangelism, for example. The diversification of diversity itself leads to a diversification of racism: one notes a return to traditional issues around skin colour and being black, for instance, which the ‘differentialist’ analyses of the 1980s considered to be in decline. This issue is itself fragmented, each minority group being liable to be both a victim and a perpetrator of racism. Anti-Semitism has undergone its own transformation and is in decline as the main characteristic of a right-wing, Catholic France, whose nationalism was concerned with the purity of the French people. It is also declining as a perverted expression of a form of left-wing anti-capitalism. As my survey *La Tentation antisémite* shows,<sup>15</sup> contemporary anti-Semitism finds the sources of its revival in the refusal of the very existence of the State of Israel, or of its politics, and has appeared within social groups – in particular of North African immigrant origin – either by

identification with the Palestinian cause, through an anti-Western or anti-American stance, or finally by subscribing to varying degrees of a radical form of Islamism. In almost symmetrical fashion, hatred, or fear of Islam is spreading and can be encountered in all sorts of social circles. Islamophobia is not unknown to Jews in France.

In 2007, the first signs of the financial crisis in the United States, which would affect numerous countries beginning with European ones, began to be felt. Globalisation but also European institutions were sharply criticised; thus reinforcing an anti-European nationalism in all political camps. The French have always been in two minds on this. The spectacle of European debacle, the discussion around Greece and the debate over the possibility of its leaving the Eurozone – all this could only weaken the camp of those supportive of European integration and favour the protectionist and nationalist orientation of the FN. The party was going to be able to use this.

### The difficulties of the established political parties

As the 2012 presidential elections neared, the traditional right had difficulty in maintaining a coherent position. Whereas the left, spurred on by Martine Aubry, was recovering from the shock of Lionel Jospin’s defeat in 2002, the right was torn between two incompatible processes. Some wished to subscribe to the main ideas of the FN, so as to attract its potential electorate, while others, on the contrary, wished to continue to maintain their distance. The Front National was able to play on this tension and its political scores were to a large extent due to the ideological crisis of the traditional right-wing parties.

The contradictions and fluctuations of Nicolas Sarkozy were spectacular and revealing of this tension that was particularly visible around issues of national identity, immigration, cultural differences and Islam. In 2003 he was in favour of quotas and undertook to appoint a Muslim *préfet* (a high-ranking civil servant who represents the State at the level of the *département*). In 2006, in *Le Parisien*, he stated: ‘Would someone please tell me why it is acceptable to have positive discrimination for women and disabled persons and why it’s not acceptable for our coloured compatriots.’<sup>16</sup> In 2008 he contemplated the introduction of the word ‘diversity’ into the preamble of the Constitution. At the same time however, in 2007, right in the middle of the campaign for the presidential elections, he announced the creation of a Ministry for National Identity, a theme to which he returned in 2009 by launching a poorly managed and sterile debate. He then, on several occasions, went on to attack multiculturalism, immigration, the Roma and communities in terms that were identical to those used by the FN. An extreme illustration of this tension, which seriously damaged the traditional right, is

given by the minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet. In a book criticising the Front National, she began with an attack on ‘the left-wing intellectuals’ who, in her opinion, wished to ‘have us believe that, between the right and the extreme right, porosity is natural’.<sup>17</sup> A few months later, she was spokesperson for the candidate Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential elections – a candidate whose neo-FN strategy she had to endorse.

The political system in its entirety had great difficulty confronting the crisis, which was financial at the outset, but also economic and social. The sense of living in a ‘post-democracy’ – a democracy in name only, whose practices were in reality in the hands of political leaders, parties, the media, experts and pollsters, pervaded the country. Low levels of electoral turnout are symptomatic of this situation; these aren’t only the hallmark of a marginalisation that affects the economically disadvantaged, or the victims of a system implicitly rigged against young people with low levels of education in declining suburbs, but also against rural France, the elderly, the isolated, visible minorities, etc. It should also be seen as the actions of citizens, particularly young people, who by refusing to vote intended to express a view. Low levels of turnout are politically significant. Journalists, particularly locally embedded ones and electoral analysts, are quick to point out that variables that explain abstention are exactly those that underpin the FN vote. On 21 March 2011 the headlines of the *Nord-Eclair* read ‘Une vague Front national dans le désert des urnes’ (A wave of support for the Front National alongside deserted ballot boxes) and on 29 March 2011 the headlines were even clearer: ‘Le FN de plus en plus haut, la participation de plus en plus basse’ (Support for the FN ever higher as voter turnout tumbles). On 22 March 2011 the headlines of *le Progrès* read ‘Montée du FN et abstention massive’ (Rise of the FN and massive abstention at the polls). Christèle Marchand-Lagier writes:

*We surmise that low turn-out in secondary elections like the European ones in 2004 may go along with a high FN vote at the presidential elections which precede or follow these secondary elections. This does not seem to be the case for the other parties.*<sup>18</sup>

The rise of the Front National is not due to the rise in rates of abstention, but both phenomena originate in sources which are, at least partially, the same.

Thus from 2005 onwards the country’s economic, social and cultural changes, as well as difficulties specific to the political system, opened up a space for the Front National. It was up to the FN to gauge its extent and to find the words that would enable it to capitalise on

the fears, frustrations, resentment or neglect which beset whole sections of the population.

The erosion of the FN’s foundational matrix, combined with the personal decline of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the rise to power of Nicolas Sarkozy (in particular with his election as head of state in 2007 on the basis of a discourse reminiscent of the FN) made it difficult for the FN to rise to the situation. Jean-Marie Le Pen obtained only 10.44 per cent of votes in the 2007 presidential elections (6 points less than in 2002), and his party collapsed at the ensuing legislative elections with only 4.3 per cent of the votes (7 points less than in the previous election). And the municipal and local elections in 2008 seemed to confirm this collapse, which was made worse by the party’s considerable financial difficulties. In a context where the issue of succession was on the cards, departures and disagreements were numerous. These included Jean-Claude Martinez, vice-president, Fernand Le Rachinel, European elected member, and Carl Lang, formerly a close ally of Bruno Mégret.)

## The ‘second Front National’

The succession battle to fill the post of FN president (held by Jean Marie Le Pen since 1972) in 2011 pitted his daughter, Marine Le Pen (who, it has to be said, won without much difficulty), against Bruno Gollnisch. The latter embodied the values of the ‘early FN’, those of the membership base, and was generally seen as the keeper of the party’s ‘identity’. Marine Le Pen now leads a party that could be in the throes of a deep transformation – she could, in the words of the journalists Caroline Monnot and Abel Mestre in their *Enquête sur les réseaux du Front national*,<sup>19</sup> herald the beginning of a ‘new FN’. Marine Le Pen imposed a noticeably different discourse of the Front National, one much more in keeping with the mood of a sizeable portion of the population. The campaign for the local elections in March 2011 was the first opportunity to test the discursive turn effected by the new president; the 2012 presidential campaign brought confirmation that the new turn is here to stay.

### The ‘invisible’ and the ‘forgotten’

On 11 December 2011, during a meeting in Metz, Marine Le Pen reached out to those she called the ‘invisible’ and the ‘forgotten’: ‘Farmers, unemployed, workers, pensioners, those of you who live in rural areas of the country, you are the forgotten, invisible majority, crushed by a financial system gone mad. For the UMP-PS political caste, those worshipers of the “Triple A”, you are triple nothings.’ Beyond the criticism of the financial system and the rating agencies, but also beyond the ritual denunciation of collusion between the UMP and the PS, turning them into a ‘caste’, the speech focused on social themes. These were topical. A few days earlier *Le Monde* had headlined with ‘The mounting anger of the invisible French people’ and pollster François Miquet-Marty’s *Les oubliés de la démocratie* (The forgotten of the Republic)<sup>20</sup> had just come out: the public conversation leant itself to bringing to the fore those ‘r-urban’ or ‘peri-urban’ lower classes who slaved away unnoticed by the media or by political parties.

In the world of politics, this was not exactly a novelty. These themes were everywhere, as highlighted by the online *Rue 89*:<sup>21</sup>

through Sarkozy's reference to the 'status-less', ecologist's José Bové's invoking of the 'voiceless', or that ceaselessly evoked 'silent majority' who identified neither with May '68 nor with 'ordinary French people' so dear to the heart of Chirac's former prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Charles Maurras had once spoken of the 'real nation' as distinct from the 'legal nation' and therefore the Republic which he executed. Similarly there are frequent references to 'la France profonde' or the broad mass of French people who encompass local regions, the countryside, the provinces – that Catholic, peasant France. But Marine Le Pen's speech touched on recent sociological developments; she was bringing together both what an industrial and urban modernity – itself in crisis – had produced, but also what it had left behind. The target is not the France of the old countryside and the rural world, but the France of those who have lost out on modernisation – a process that is itself in decline.

The 'invisibles' of Marine Le Pen are not the spiritual founders of the Nation; nor do they symbolise it. They are defined by society itself and in terms reminiscent of those used by Eva Joly, the 2012 Green presidential candidate, or by Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the Front de Gauche. What defines them is a suffering that goes unrecognised and that is systematically pushed out of the political and media arenas. The 'forgotten' are primarily workers, employees, and those whose precarious situation makes them vulnerable.

Barely half a century ago, the working class was still a respected actor, a central one even, since, as Marx and Engels said, by breaking their chains they would emancipate the whole of humankind. The worker was a key figure in community life and the industrialisation of the post-war years went hand in hand with a housing policy which turned many of the outer suburbs – with their working-class areas, their housing estates and their municipal housing (HLM) – into a desirable place to live for industrial workers. Some of these workers were skilled, others were unskilled, often peasants from rural areas and, above all, immigrants. All of them, whether unionised or not, saw themselves as a part of the same struggle against employers who prevented them from controlling their own means of production and imposed their methods and their forms of organisation and management. Their working-class consciousness was facilitated by their belonging to vast industrial groups, these 'fortresses of labour' that no longer exist nowadays.

In 2010, only one-third of men in employment – or some 5 million individuals – were workers, and approximately 13 per cent of women in employment. Some came close to middle-class status – they owned their houses, something towards which they had made considerable sacrifices, in particular that of leaving the 'suburbs' and the HLM for

private estates located in peri-urban (just beyond the suburbs in areas even more removed from towns) or even rural areas. Two out of every five workers made a living in the service industry, as packers, warehousemen and cleaners. They mostly worked on their own and constituted a disparate, fragmented population. Thirty-six per cent of unskilled workers and 33 per cent of skilled workers who voted in the 2011 local elections voted for the Front National. The men, and even more so the women, who work outside traditional industrial sectors in the service industry, increasingly resemble office workers with low salaries, no career progression, no trade union organisation and poor social insurance. For them, the issue boils down to either voting for the FN or not bothering to vote at all.

Let's consider the figures presented by the demographer Hervé le Bras:<sup>22</sup> opinion polls show that the percentage of workers who voted for the Front National grew from 25 per cent in 2007 to 35 per cent in 2012. This means that they constitute anywhere between a quarter and a fifth of the party's support. This isn't negligible, but it isn't enough to lead to the conclusion that the FN is a working-class party and certainly not enough to conclude that the FN is a workers' party.

Among those who are skilled, many think of themselves as removed from the upper echelons of society – the rich, the elites, the powerful – but they are also at pains to differentiate themselves from the lower reaches of society, which they conceive of as a mix of immigrants who refuse to integrate and prefer to live on social welfare benefits, the poor who take advantage of state assistance, and young people who are nothing more than 'riff raff'. They are neither at the top nor at the bottom; and they have a feeling that nobody listens to them: 'We don't exist, we're not well treated,' said one of them in a press report in *Rue 89*.<sup>23</sup> In a factory in the Eure region, a young worker explained: 'Voting for the FN is voting for a job. A vote for the centre, I mean the PS or the UMP, is a vote for the bosses. As for voting for the extreme left, it's voting for the working-class, but an immigrant working-class (...) I vote for the extreme right and tell myself that I'm probably also voting for the boss, but at least I'm voting for a job.' His criticism of foreigners was that they 'undercut' salaries while certain jobs were earmarked for 'North Africans': like many others, he now voted for the FN.

In a France where a form of ethnicisation is under way, public debate seems to privilege issues around figures like the 'indigènes de la République' (the natives of the Republic) or that of the CRAN (Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France, Representative Council of Black Associations of France), rather than on the figure of the worker whose persona has been downgraded. In a France where considerable space is also allotted to a kind of 'competition of victimhood' and competitive tussles around memory and

memorialisation, could the FN offer workers a chance to counter the forces of discredit, ignorance, neglect or alienation?

### Trade unionism put to the test

The FN does not only find an echo among workers: it actually permeates their organisations from the ground up. Trade unionism is weak and mainly established within the public sector or related organisations; it struggles against the encroachment of FN ideas among activists at grassroots level and sometimes even among its leaders. No trade union is spared.

A few examples: Daniel Durand-Decaudin, a CFDT delegate and social worker, was a candidate for the Front National in the local elections of 2011. In Cysoing, in northern France, Annie Lemahieu, a regional administrator for the trade union Force Ouvrière, represented the FN in the local elections – she was excluded from the trade union; ‘thrown out like trash’ by FO as she put it in *La Voix du Nord*.<sup>24</sup> There are similar cases involving the trade unions SUD, CFTC and CGT.

And what of the stir caused by the Fabien Engelmann affair? This CGT delegate in charge of municipal employees in Nilvange (Moselle region) was a Front National candidate in the local elections in Lorraine. He was suspended, then excluded, by his trade union federation, only to be supported by his local section (with 20 of the 23 members of the trade union voting for him), against the CGT departmental leadership who insisted on his exclusion. His colleagues explained: ‘If Fabien wants to be a candidate for the FN, that’s his problem. Outside the trade union, he can do what he likes.’ At the highest echelons of the CGT, the anxiety is palpable: Bernard Thibault, the general secretary of the organisation, asserts that the FN is pursuing a policy of ‘entryism’. Defended by Maître Collard – who would turn out to become an FN member of the French National Assembly and who refutes any accusations of xenophobia, racism or anti-Semitism – Engelmann stated that ‘putting French people first is not being racist’. He pointed out that only a minority of members ‘share the CGT’s commitment to regularising illegal workers’.

But the fact is that this is the heart of a region devastated by de-industrialisation and a series of ‘restructuring programmes’, a place where the left has come across as powerless. Nilvange is a working-class village. But the left there appears cut off from working-class expectations; and is accused of playing the ‘deregulation card’, allowing neo-liberalism to take root, lowering taxes for the rich and instituting flexibility in employment. More generally speaking, those trade unionists who represent the Front National at the local elections systematically put forward the same argument: trade unionism should

be apolitical. Yet in every single case, we witness exclusions and disciplinary procedures by the trade unions, accompanied by the same statement: ‘Our values are in opposition to those of the FN.’

For those who intend to combine trade unionism and FN representation, there is no doubt about it – their political convictions and trade union involvement are not incompatible. The closer one gets to the grassroots, the more one detects an allegiance to the ideas of the FN taking shape. Denis Pesce, the secretary of the UD-CGT in Moselle, explains that ‘if those ideas are increasingly to be found among our members and activists, it may be a sign that we’ve missed something’. He admitted that he was ‘particularly anxious about the resonance of FN ideas’<sup>25</sup> among the working classes.

This penetration of FN ideas to the very core of trade unionism, including to the core of its most radical components, is sometimes attributed to the crisis of the left, or, in any event, to its impotence. The same Denis Pesce argues that ‘there is no credible successor on the left’. Not only do Marine Le Pen and the FN speak to the ‘forgotten’ and ‘invisible’ workers, they simultaneously attack trade unions. This was the case, for example, when the president of the Front National, on May Day 2012, asserted that trade union leaders were ‘betraying the workers by negotiating behind their backs with the political and economic powers that be’; while Fabien Engelmann and Thierry Gurlot (from the CFTC, and in charge of the FN in the Conseil Régional in Lorraine) carried a banner calling for a ‘national trade unionism’.

Those on the side of the Front National in politics who also want to participate in trade union action call for a stop to mass immigration, but refuse to explicitly attack foreigners who are in work. They support a state with significant regulatory capacity and support public services. Their fervent attachment to the Republic means that they embody a new FN – an FN that is miles away from the anti-statist and ultra-liberal Reaganite ideologies conveyed by Jean Marie Le Pen in the 1980s.

Thus a city employee in Toulouse, also a member of the trade union SUD, was a candidate for the FN: ‘He says he’s against globalisation, just like us,’ croaked one of the union’s leaders. Daniel Durand-Decaudin ‘couldn’t understand that there was an incompatibility between the values of exclusion that are the hallmark the FN and those of solidarity conveyed by the CFDT’, explained Alain Gatti, secretary of the CFDT-Lorraine, who then added: ‘He even spoke to me about a member of his family who was deported to Dachau. And when I reminded him of Jean Marie Le Pen’s remark that the gas chambers were a “detail of history”,<sup>26</sup> he replied that that was Jean Marie and not Marine.’<sup>27</sup>



The strategies for countering the FN in the 1980s and 1990s were often based on a principle of demonisation and appealed to moral, anti-racist values. But with Marine Le Pen, these strategies seem to be ineffective. In the mid-1990s, Bruno Gollnisch, who tended to represent continuity with the 'early FN', had contemplated the creation of a 'Front social sur le travail' (Social Front for employment): FN-Police, FN-RATP, FN-Prisons, etc. But these organisations were disbanded by law at the request of traditional trade unions. In 1997, the Front National presented the Coordination française nationale des travailleurs (the CFNT) and ran for election on industrial tribunals (*prudhommales*) along with the employers' trade union, Fédération nationale entreprises modernes et libertés (FNEML). The CFNT got 18 of their candidates elected and the FNEML eight. Once again, the traditional trade unions succeeded in having the results declared invalid. But things have moved on.

Despite their best efforts to point out that listening to the FN is a mistake, the trade unions, accused by the FN of betrayal and of collusion with the authorities, have difficulty in effectively countering the penetration of FN ideas into the working world. Traditional trade unions have lost their capacity to act as a frame of reference for the working class and the FN has rushed in to fill the gap, with a plea for 'genuinely free trade unions' and not 'the system trade unions'. It is a fact that the capacity for action and mobilisation remains on the side of trade union organisations: this was verified, for example, when the Front National attempted to distribute leaflets in front of the PSA factory in Aulnay in June 2011, denouncing the dangers of relocation, and a coalition of CGT, SUD and NPA militants were able to thwart the operation. But the affliction is real and runs deep.

A Harris Interactive opinion poll of March 2011 showed that 9 per cent of French people who are supportive of trade unions voted for the FN in the local elections compared with 15 per cent for the population as a whole.<sup>28</sup> A study carried out by IFOP revealed that 25 per cent of FO followers and 22 per cent of those in favour of the CGT were preparing to vote Front National at these same local elections.<sup>29</sup>

Trade unionism does remain a barrier to the FN but one that is increasingly fragile and under threat. It has been fundamentally weakened: 'People speak about it openly in the workplace. Should we do nothing and just wait for the results of the first round?' asked a CFDT leader. A newspaper report in *Libération*<sup>30</sup> confirmed this image of a debilitation affecting activists as well as ordinary members: Jean-Michel Gilles, a CGT delegate in the Michelin factories, thought that none of the members who represented the personnel would vote for the FN even if 'the trade unionists do cross that line'. Only to be contradicted by 'Brigitte', a CGT delegate who said she had 'no problem' voting for Le Pen.

Workers were never a politically homogeneous category and research into electoral sociology, like that of Jacques Capdevielle in the early 1970s, demonstrated that they could vote on the right to a very great extent. But, until the 1980s, both trade unionism and communism, or even socialism, provided a structuring principle; they gave meaning and provided a framework that anchored the working world closer to the left than the right. Today trade unionism is in decline; it has lost this framing capacity and the success of the FN is primarily a marker of this decline. Yet despite all that, it is hard to detect any kind of significant contribution of the FN to the world of work organisations. Their leaders don't actively support workers in their struggles, for instance they don't come out in support when factories close. Its presence is more of an ideological excrescence feeding on the failures of traditional trade unionism rather than a concrete contribution.

The FN's avowed plan to create FN trade unions and, more generally, its action in the workplace, meets with no response from the established employers' association, the MEDEF. Its president, Laurence Parisot, along with Rosine Lapresle, published a highly critical book on this issue in 2011<sup>31</sup> and publicly voiced her anxiety concerning the economic programme of the FN during the 2012 presidential elections. But some employer groups may be tempted by the FN's proposals. When the employers' movement 'Ethic' hosted Marine Le Pen she got a standing ovation. But there, too, acquiescence or simply ideological proximity, which are in fact very limited, in no way reveal a successful implantation.

An amusing incident acts as an apt illustration of the contradictions in Front National discourse – torn between its own ideological ardour and economic reality. At the height of the presidential campaign in 2012, Marine Le Pen, in full flight against Islam, dropped a bombshell: according to her, all the meat consumed in the Paris region was 100 per cent halal. Unbeknown to her, Paul Lamoitier, an FN regional representative, was a wholesale butcher. He issued a statement announcing that less than 2.5 per cent meat in the region was halal. And swiftly resigned from the Front National.

### De-demonisation: how far does it go?

The arrival of Marine Le Pen obviously coincided with an intense ideological effort aimed at modernising the FN and at making it a respectable and reputable party, while not losing sight of its core business, which is basically the peddling of hatred and resentment. The result is a palpable tension between endeavouring to tone down the anti-Semitism – and even attempting a rapprochement with the Jewish subculture – embracing a certain degree of modernity (for example by being

more open to women's issues), and purging the party of its most extremist elements, on one hand, while at the same time dealing with deeply ingrained reflexes that serve to illustrate the continued power of old ideas and the stranglehold of the usual demons.

Not only has the 'second FN' begun to turn towards the world of working people and develop a social conscience, but it also seems capable of ridding itself of themes that are inappropriate to the present situation, or which have become burdensome. Inappropriate: this applies in the first instance to the virulent anti-communism of the 'first FN', which, since the collapse of the Soviet Empire, serves no purpose in a globalised world order and in a post-industrial France. Burdensome: because since the election of Marine Le Pen the media speak of a process of 'de-demonisation' that should enable the new Front National – possibly under another name, with another logo, and by developing a strategy of implantation at the local level – to lay claim to democratic respectability: a type of strategy advocated by Bruno Mégret that led to the split in 1998. As a result, opinion polls indicate increasingly distinctly that the French tend to consider the FN to be a political party 'just like any other'.

#### Changing... Old wine in new bottles

This transformation process is an incomplete one. Marine Le Pen has dropped the references to the Second World War and the Jews. Unlike her father, she does not play the anti-Semitic card – she refers to Nazism as an 'abomination', the Shoah as the 'the height of barbarity'; we are far from her father's description of it as a 'detail of history'. In May 2011 she called for applause for the names of journalists easily identifiable as Jewish – Elizabeth Lévy and Eric Zemmour – whereas her father had called for Ivan Levaï, Jean-Pierre Elkabbach and Anne Sinclair, who were also Jewish, to be booed. In November 2011, she met Ron Prossor, the Israeli Ambassador to the UN, who afterwards awkwardly defended himself. She discreetly contacted Jewish personalities like the lawyer Gilles-William Goldnadel with the aim, she said, of putting an end to the 'misunderstanding' around her father's reference to a 'detail of history'. The party's Alexandre Gabriac, France's youngest regional councillor, was expelled for giving a Nazi salute.

The FN also tried to gain a foothold in communities that were not obvious supporters. Rosine Nahounou, of Ivorian origin, was to liaise with the Franco-Ivorian community and Charles Dagnet, the short-lived co-president of the DOM (Département d'Outre Mer), with the Caribbean-origin population. It seems that the ideas of the Front National, just like the anti-Semitic humour of the 'comedian' Dieudonné and certain forms of Islamophobia, can find an audience with groups or individuals who are exasperated with

being lumped in with immigrants when they in fact have been French for a century and a half.

But on 27 January 2012 Marine Le Pen went to Vienna and attended a formal ball organised by the European extreme right and hosted by the Austrian FPÖ's youth wing. And on the eve of the opening of the FN's summer conference, she called for the banning of the Islamic veil, as well as the kippa, in public places. A move which could not fail to antagonise the Jewish community.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the Front National has not entirely abandoned its former sources of inspiration: Petainism, anti-Gaullism, national preference, the re-adoption of the death penalty, the rejection of abortion, and the adoption of pro-life policies. But these themes are simply toned down, muted, at least in public discourse. In private, this may be very different. The old ideology has not disappeared; it is still active among some militants and leaders but is for internal use only. It is sometimes revealed by accident, such as in the case of an FN general secretary in the Hauts de Seine who could not restrain himself and put up a video of David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, on his web site. This discrepancy between the internal discourse of some of the leaders and the public discourse surfaces each time a journalist – whether male or female – enters the world of FN supporters under a false identity (a questionable ethnographic practice since it is based on lies or at least concealment of the truth). Anne Tristan<sup>33</sup> pretended to be unemployed in Marseille. And in February 2012, Claire Checcaglini published *Bienvenue au Front, journal d'une infiltrée*,<sup>34</sup> in which she noted the absence of a moral barrier and explained the discrepancy between the internal and external discourse in terms of fear of the media.

The founding matrix of the party is also still apparent in the FN's obsession with lies and dissimulation, accusations that it incessantly levels at the elite and the state. Thus, during the 2012 presidential election campaign, in a press conference, Marine Le Pen referred to 'the cleverly concealed (immigration) figures, classified, secret figures that sickened civil servants' had handed over to the FN. She added that 'immigration had been deliberately accelerated in a mad process that makes you wonder whether the aim isn't simply to replace the French population with an immigrant one'. All that remained for her to do was top and tail the message with the theme of 'national priority', a euphemistic form of the 'national preference' of the 1980s and 1990s, and the promise to strip foreigners of welfare benefits, to end the *jus solis*, and to impose the repatriation of unemployed foreigners within three months, while maintaining the right to family reunification... in the home country. These 'secret' figures on immigration are in fact well known – they are published in an annual parliamentary report. But no matter! The FN discourse has always included a measure of paranoia on which an



argument that claims to have the force of proof can be based. This discourse functions thanks to a simplistic but extremely efficient mode – namely, what the historian of anti-Semitism Léon Poliakov called the '*causalité diabolique*', which attributes real or imagined misfortunes, difficulties and threats to evil causes that are always hidden. We should add that one of the strengths of populism is not to be worried by its own contradictions. Marine Le Pen, in this realm as in others, exudes self-assurance; she never dwells on her mistakes, even when they amount to lies or brainwashing.

To advance her strategy of respectability, the president of the FN has stepped up the court cases – approximately 50 in two years, usually for insults and libel, making her the victim and not the guilty party, the aim being to normalise the image of the FN. She excludes people, targeting those who stick to an old extreme right line. She has had Stéphane Poncet's blog closed down; Poncet was a cartoonist, a member of the Front National from Villeurbanne, and strenuously denounced the supposed ravages of immigration and Islamisation. He was a candidate at the 2012 general elections for the FN and used the opportunity to sing the praises of the democratic nature of his party: 'The FN is not a sect (...) In the party, we respect procedure, we summon people, they come and express their opinion, there is a disciplinary commission.'<sup>35</sup> Marine Le Pen seeks support from people who themselves enjoy a degree of legitimacy in the public sphere. Thus for the presidential and then the general elections in 2012, she pulled closer to Gilbert Collard and made no secret of the support from Robert Ménard, the former president of *Reporters sans frontières*, as well as the tentative support of that of Yves Bertrand, director of the French intelligence services from 1992 to 2004. In many respects, the old extreme-right is weakened within this 'second FN' and the departure of the traditionalist Catholics, following that of Bernard Anthony, is one of the clearest expressions of this state of affairs. And there is no hiding the fact that France faces increasing difficulties at this point in fulfilling its role as 'the elder daughter of the Church'. The rejuvenation of the party's cadres, a dynamic perceptible in the selection of candidates for the 2012 general elections, could quicken these developments on the road to 'de-demonising'. The majority of the forty-somethings who have backed Marine Le Pen since the early 2000s and all those who have recently joined are eager to have a political career and do not want to be confined to the radicalism of pure protest. They want to win political office.

But Marine Le Pen claims to endorse 'the whole history' of the Front National. She has kept a vocabulary, a way of expressing herself inherited from the original and perhaps from the previous period, that of the hard-line extreme right. For example, she speaks of 'globalisation that is murderous of identities', of a 'moral Chernobyl',

of 'hooligan rule'; she denounces 'the putrid influence of Bernard-Henri Lévy'. She has no hesitation in launching into thundering assertions, doesn't shy away from drama – for instance, when she foretells of 'a gigantic new wave of migration, fleeing the political and economic chaos of Africa, and in particular of the Maghreb'.

As for Jean Marie Le Pen, in no way is he detached from the party, for which he still oversees the finances and of which he remains 'honorary president'. No opportunity is missed to speak out against the 'de-demonising' trend led by his daughter. In April 2011, he protested when Marine Le Pen expelled Alexandre Gabriac, an elected member of the FN who was photographed giving the Nazi salute. On 22 July 2011,<sup>36</sup> he chose to criticise the 'naivety and inaction of the Norwegian government', something which he considered to be 'more serious' than the slaughter in Oslo; events that had just been firmly condemned as 'barbaric and cowardly' in a communiqué from the Front National. In January and then in February 2012 he paid a glowing tribute to Brasillach, the writer and notorious collaborator shot at the Liberation; on 21 January 2012, he admitted to having met Radovan Karadzic when he was wanted by international courts. In fact, the current FN remains torn between radicalism and respectability and in any event does not entirely break with the extremist, anti-Semitic impulses of the 'first FN'.

If the 'second FN' is endeavouring to shed the anti-Semitism of the previous period, it is also because times have changed and this doctrine now mobilises against Islamist or immigrant circles. After all, could some of the Jews in France join the FN campaigns, in particular their Islamophobic aspects, provided the FN put an end to their hatred of Jews? Thus Michel Ciardi, leader of the Union des Français Juifs (Union of French Jews), and a contributor to *Riposte laïque*, an Islamophobic web site, was a member of Marine Le Pen's support committee in 2012. Michel Thooris, who is responsible for Marine Le Pen's security service, was present at the synagogue in the rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth in Paris on the day after the killings in Toulouse.<sup>37</sup> This was obviously not due to chance but the assertion of a desire to draw closer to a part of the Jewish electorate.

Marine Le Pen was even invited to speak on Radio J (an important Jewish radio station) in March 2011 before the invitation was cancelled as a result of pressure from Jewish community organisations. Defending the State of Israel when Hamas is mentioned or when it is reduced to the setting of a conflict between Arabs and Muslims on the one hand and Israeli Jews on the other, along with the obsessive fear of the new anti-Semitism attributed to immigration and to Islam, means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a moral barrier against the FN in certain Jewish circles. There is now an ideological axis along which Jews are forming links with the FN.

### Down with Islam

To reach a wider electorate, the Front National must avoid coming across as radical, for example in the face of Islam. At the same time, it has to respond to the expectations of its electorate, which is, on the whole, Islamophobic: in private, you hear people say, 'In France you don't call your son Mohamed'. Thus, during her campaign in 2012, Marine Le Pen presented herself as someone who wished to help French Muslims free themselves from radical Islam and fanatics. She denounced the Islamisation of French society, describing street prayers – a reality of which she gave a somewhat exaggerated image – as 'a new form of occupation'. She knows how to appeal to the most reactionary ideologue of a certain type of secularism, including the 'Identitaires' (defenders of the true French heritage), who, as an act of provocation, organise '*apéros saucisson-pinard*' (red wine and salami parties). Her strength lies in explicitly attacking only the fanatics, communitarians, etc and not Islam per se – although she never fails to suggest that it is in fact the whole of the religion that is the target.

This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Islam has not always alarmed the French extreme right and one of its most important ideologues, Maurice Bardèche, who died in 1998, even sang its praises. In the past, Islam as a vector of anti-communism, for example, or as an enemy of Israel benefited from a degree of respect in profoundly anti-Semitic circles. It was in fact in the 1990s that the issue of Islam became a priority in the eyes of the FN, which, as we have seen, was reshuffling its cards, particularly concerning its desired relationship with French Jews.

With Marine Le Pen as leader, the argument has evolved considerably. To demonstrate the validity of her party's positions on Islam or immigration, it is no longer or, rather, not only, the Nation that is held up to view, with the list of threats weighing over it. The new argumentation is borrowed from the FN's past enemies – to the extent that the Front National appears as the champion of the Enlightenment. An FN voter explained: 'If, on top of everything, we now have to take into account the opinions of priests, imams or rabbis, that's like returning to the Obscurantism that the Enlightenment rejected!'<sup>38</sup> Thus, the old republican theme of secularism is called upon, to further stigmatise Islam: 'We're being told that some disused army barracks are to be handed over to the "street-prayers" of the Rue Myrha (...) What's more, the Prefecture de Paris has announced that it will bear the financial costs of converting these barracks into a place of worship,' Marine Le Pen waxed indignantly in September 2011. 'But what about the 1905 law? What right does the government have to flout secularism and our laws in this way?'

Similarly, the issue is presented as being one of anti-discrimination when it comes to criticising the time slots that are supposedly reserved for women in some swimming pools (in fact, this practice is almost non-existent) or halal food in school canteens. In its efforts to denounce – erroneously, as mentioned above – the widespread consumption of halal meat in the Parisian region, the FN claims to be acting on behalf of two associations. One is for consumer protection (the trade description of the goods sold is said to be fraudulent), the other for the protection of the environment (against cruelty toward pets). The debate, triggered as the presidential election campaign was in full swing, was therefore presented as an issue of public health and animal protection. The case was elaborated in the name of modernity, of consumer rights and environmental protection; it in no way explicitly targeted Islam, but a form of creeping Islamisation undermining, not traditional, national values, the nation or even race, but modernity. Nobody was fooled, of course. Yet this rhetorical style gives the FN considerable power by setting it up as neither reactionary nor nostalgic, nor as a nationalism hell-bent on the simple and outright rejection of Islam. In fact the FN appears to fit into a modern, very progressive category: an emancipatory discourse. The modernity of Marine Le Pen contributes to her having a certain impact on young people: a young, divorced woman, who is careful when speaking about abortion and does not appear to be homophobic, could become more a lot more popular than her father. His obsessions about the Second World War or the Algerian War are not what young people are concerned about, especially those with a low level of education and no qualifications.

To better combat Islam and immigration, the president of the Front National has distanced herself from her earlier discourse. She now appeals to the Republic and its values, which are said to be threatened by immigrants or Muslims. But her electorate gets it – she champions secularism primarily to combat Islam. When she attacks 'religious proselytisers' her target is imams, not priests. The fact remains that the FN has now become the defender of secularism. The latter was designed to ensure the separation of Church and State at a time when Islam did not exist in France. While the problem facing the traditional political forces today is to invent secular possibilities of integration for Islam, the FN discourse mobilises secularism in a bid to prevent any such developments.

### A new relationship to the state and to society

The economic and social crisis, but also the realisation that its electorate is now in part settled in peri-urban areas where there is a – sometimes serious – lack of public services such as schools, nurseries, social centres and medical centres, mean that, in this respect as well,

the Front National is removing itself from the mould of the party's traditional grand narratives. Henceforth, the state is called upon, in particular to ensure neighbourhood public services. We are very far from 'Poujadism', which defended small shopkeepers and artisans on a basis that was extremely hostile to the state; for all that, these social groups do not exclude that part of the FN that is hostile to mass markets and attacks Europe. We should also point out that Jean Marie Le Pen has himself evolved considerably since the 1980s; for example, while he got carried away with Ronald Reagan's ultra-liberal outlook, he went on, 20 years later, to describe himself as 'socially on the left and economically on the right'.

The theme of 'proximity' (what others might refer to as 'community') is itself a break with the discourse of Jean Marie Le Pen. We can observe this not only in economic and social affairs but also in cultural matters, as illustrated by the speech delivered by Marine Le Pen in Corsica during the presidential election campaign. In it she claimed to 'understand' Corsican nationalism, since the Corsicans 'like all French people' have been 'witnesses to the disappearance of the values which created France and those which created Corsica'. According to her, the island (the Ile de Beauté in French) resists the 'globalised culture which scorns the customs and traditions of our lands'.<sup>39</sup> The president of the Front National is therefore capable of abandoning the Jacobinism of her father to defend Corsican identity, which is said to be threatened by Europe and massive immigration.

The 'first FN' readily attacked 'useless civil servants' and 'state interventionism'. Jean Marie Le Pen argued for a withdrawal of the State, income tax to be abolished and 200,000 civil service jobs to be cut. He described himself as campaigning against 'fiscalism' and 'statism'. Marine Le Pen, on the other hand, considers the State to be 'an essential component of the soul of France'; she condemns 'giving in to money', the financial markets and millionaires 'who dismantle our industry and thus make millions of men and women in our country unemployed, vulnerable and impoverished'. She turns towards the civil servants and has no hesitation in referring to the teachers – using the traditional republican and left-wing description – as the foot-soldiers of the Republic.<sup>40</sup> She insists on putting an end to the 'misunderstanding' between the FN and teachers by stating: 'We did not know how to speak to you, how to find the right words and understand how attached you are to the general interest (...) For a long time, we thought mistakenly that you were complicit in or passive in the face of the destruction of our schools.'<sup>41</sup> And not all teachers resist the siren call of the FN. Some give in because they feel they are overwhelmed by administrative red tape, poorly paid, losing their social status and are not respected either by their pupils, the pupils' families or the administration on whom they depend.

The 'second FN' owes absolutely nothing to the ideologies of the American and British neo-conservatives, to liberalism or neo-liberalism, and Marine Le Pen goes as far as to assert that she has a 'Gaullist conception of politics' – which, there too, puts her at a distance from her father's positions. By defending free trade and liberalism, Europe, she says, has 'forced us to do away with State administrations and services in all spheres of public life such as the post office, the courts, the secondary schools, maternity units and hospitals'<sup>42</sup> – she wants to bring them back. The denouncing of bloated administrations has been abandoned and replaced by a discourse that panders to an electorate still imbued with a culture of the left. This new mix of statist nationalism and avowed republicanism clears the path for individuals or movements that focus on identity or separatism to move closer to the FN: for example, former UMP senator-mayor of the city of Nice, Jacques Peyrat, or essayist Paul-Marie Coûteaux – alliances that are not to the liking of everyone in the Front National party machinery. Coûteaux, for example, describes himself as representing 'orphaned Gaullists and scattered separatists'. This is not quite to be found in the original cast of the FN but is much closer to the orientations embodied by Jean-Pierre Chevènement (some of his old friends have also moved towards the Front National).

Finally, moving with the times, the 'second FN' has relinquished the heavy machismo of the previous period and has stopped ignoring women in its endeavour to grow its electorate. Having a woman president – a modern woman, a lawyer – and, perhaps above all, its cautious stance on abortion and open and tolerant one on homosexuality, denote a cultural open-mindedness that is particularly appealing to women between the ages of 35 and 49 who are more exposed to social and economic difficulties than others (declining purchasing power, debt, etc). Here too, we can see a structural tension with those parts of the FN whose discourse towards women remains dominated by pro-life positions and family values. The fact remains that the arrival of Marine Le Pen at the head of the party has meant a perceptible feminisation, both in terms of the candidates standing for election (280 women out of 571 candidates at the general elections in 2012) and in terms of its electoral results. There are now as many women as men voting for the FN (whereas in 2007, the figures stood at 7 per cent for women compared to 10.5 per cent for men).

This is how in its very discourse the Front National has taken into account the general evolution of French society. Its first electoral successes were made on the backs of attacks on immigration, along with a display of extreme-right nationalism that was racist, anti-Semitic, and at times neo-Nazi, and by playing on people's fears. Since 2010, it has begun to outline a strategy to 'de-demonise' its image, to distance itself

from extreme-right ideas, and to play a central role in the recomposition of the right to which it aspires, a bit like the Movimento Sociale Italiano, the MSI, a fascist party which, under the impetus of Gianfranco Fini, has become a respectable right-wing party. But the price of this strategy is the abandoning of its hell-fire radicalism, and therefore its capacity to challenge the political system from without.

## ...and after

A part of the Front National electorate is constantly evolving. The geography of the electoral results as it is regularly analysed by researchers as reliable as Pascal Perrineau, Dominique Reynié, Hervé Le Bras, Jacques Lévy and Jérôme Fourquet is invaluable here.

The Front National discourse is a nationalist discourse but, special cases apart, this is a party that has not really been able to build a sizeable local base. The way in which it is understood and perceived varies, according to place, to social and cultural categories, and in keeping with a set of local political and economic circumstances that are themselves subject to change. Thus, we observe considerable shifts in the provenance of the electorate whereas overall results, at national level, remain fairly constant.

### The Front National vote

The FN vote is diverse. In some cases, the predominant explanatory factor is the feeling of, or the threat of, disintegration, which hangs over local social ties. Where these ties have not yet disintegrated but where they are particularly threatened, support for the FN is highest. This was the case early on in eastern France. Though this rural area was untouched by the arrival of migrant workers, people there felt anxious about local or regional identities and voted massively for the FN. The FN also scores highly in constituencies where one encounters neither despair nor anger nor any major problems of insecurity, where the standard of living is equal to or above that of the national average, and where there is a desire quite simply to preserve a way of life and to keep immigration at a distance. It can also flourish against a background of growing isolation of individuals and absence of community life, like in the villages of the Haute Marne described in a newspaper report in *Rue 89*. In the words of the FN mayor: 'The people in Brachay get together on the 14th July and at the Christmas party, that's all. Otherwise they work in their gardens. When they see what is happening on television, they are afraid of being attacked at night. They lock themselves in. In the winter it's obvious; people have three bolts drawn on their doors by 7pm.'<sup>43</sup> In Blécourt, a neighbouring village, the

Front National vote is lower because there are community activities and an active local events committee. The report notes: 'If this committee were to disappear, it could swing the vote. Blécourt would then have to deal with that notoriously explosive mix: pensioners, poorly integrated younger couples and an absence of community ties.' The importance of this remark cannot be overstated. If, on the other hand, the FN vote has declined in some villages and, in particular, in some 'suburban areas' – a point to which we shall return – it is also as a result of the capacity of these areas to revive community life, which had been either lacklustre or had disappeared altogether.

Rural areas bring together very different groups of people against a background of economic difficulties, fear, resentment, and a feeling of abandonment and neglect: small farmers who stand by as the local police station (*gendarmerie*), the local school, the local shops and the local post office all disappear. But also embittered newcomers from towns and suburbs, local people who bear witness to the disintegration of local ties, and powerless elected officials. It is also a world where environmental protection issues are often perceived as an aggressive form of modernisation imposed from the outside by the town and urbanites. The FN has a good understanding of the anxieties of these rural residents on these issues; they know that they often still like shooting and fishing and that the proposals of the Green Party or even of the left add to their worries.

In other cases, the predominant factor is the fear – or the reality – of insecurity, lack of physical safety. The media bear a considerable responsibility here. What they say or show at a national level – which can be extremely sensationalist – provides a lens through which local residents interpret an event linked to issues of security – one that leads to an increase in their fear.

When modernisation has been implemented on a vast scale this does not necessarily stabilise things; the situations evolve, as does the local population. Moreover, since the previous vote for the Front National had no effect, part of the FN electorate turn their backs on it and go on to something else. Whole areas can thus see FN figures decline, possibly to the benefit of more mainstream candidates or parties, on the left or the right.

During the 2012 presidential elections, in urban working-class areas, insofar as people voted, François Hollande took the lead, whereas in small *communes* with similar or higher levels of income the tendency was to vote for Marine Le Pen.

Another phenomenon of considerable magnitude has come into play: the recent arrival in rural or peri-urban areas far from the city centres (but far from the 'declining suburbs') of households who have made considerable sacrifices to leave their council estates (HLM);

typically they will have bought a house on a private estate, own two cars to get to work given the lack of suitable public transport, and devote a sizeable budget to petrol. They are either far from any public service or can bear witness to their disappearance; they are also far from shops and doctors and have no desire or ability to set up community activities or participate in local associations. They generally have difficulties in making ends meet. Their local elected officials have no budgets and have barely survived the reform of local authorities implemented under Nicolas Sarkozy. These people often have the impression that, unlike them, immigrants are well treated and use and take advantage of resources offered by public authorities. These newcomers are often workers who, by coming to live in rural areas, shape this new category, the peri-urban FN electorate. Bernard Schwengler observed this very early in his article 'L'ouvrier caché'.<sup>44</sup> The official FN party line makes sense to them: whether on the question of defending public services in rural areas, or freedom for motorists, or challenging the rising price of petrol – all of this is vital for them.

Dreux, the town where the FN was first successful, is a symbolic example. In the 2011 local elections, the Front National vote moved from the working-class areas to the surrounding villages. Journalists' reports described the new electorate. They were said to be tired of immigration and of the hoodie-wearing youth who made their lives hell and were allowed to roam freely. They were the exasperated: exasperated by immigrants who got priority welfare from the family allowances office (CAF, Caisse d'Allocations Familiales), came first in hospitals and were, it was rumoured, never punished for speeding offences – a long-standing, recurrent theme. Their dominant sentiment was essentially of counting for nothing. If, to top things off, the UMP were to select a 'minority' candidate, the FN would clean up. Among this electorate resentment was heightened by the conviction that the elites were working on two fronts: privileges, advantages and a system of favours for themselves on the one hand. And protecting immigrants on the other.

The example of Les Mureaux recounted in the pages of *Rue 89* in May 2012 confirms this analysis. This *commune* in a distant suburb of Paris was, from the outset, shaped by the arrival of rural workers from the provinces, or countries like Spain and Portugal, attracted by the Renault-Flins factories. In the 1960s Moroccans arrived in their thousands. Then came the oil crisis. Unemployment, fear and shame took hold in the council flats (HLM). The racial mix vanished: the black families who continued to arrive were concentrated in split-level flats for large families while the Portuguese, Italians and the 'native' French (*Français de souche*), who probably voted FN in the 1980s and 1990s, left town and headed for out-of-town private estates and their surrounding villages – and voted even more massively for the FN. At the same time,



town councils were trying hard to attract new young residents from Paris – people who had no particular reason to identify with the FN. In the past, naturalised immigrants or their children possibly voted *£*FN as a safeguard against violence. North Africans may have been among them in an endeavour to differentiate themselves from blacks; the FN's attacks on Islam have lost part of its electorate here.

More generally speaking, the decline of the FN vote in many suburban areas is in large part due to changes in the composition of the local population: the arrival of new immigrants or the naturalisation of the slightly older immigrants from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, or of their children who have decided to become French nationals; all play a role.

In places where immigration from North Africa is longstanding but where the native French population remains (possibly because they cannot afford to move elsewhere), the FN vote can run high. Thus, in Cavailon in the Vaucluse, Marine Le Pen obtained 31.38 per cent of the vote against a background of rejection of and disappointment with Nicolas Sarkozy as well as exasperation towards migrants – ‘They are racist with us and push us into being racist with them,’ said a local resident, interviewed by *Libération*.<sup>45</sup> The pervasive sentiment of insecurity is generated by the pervasive sentiment that people feel as though they have been invaded: ‘Just look at these women with their headscarves and their skirts to the ground, and the men with their skull-caps!’ a retired carpenter retorted to the journalist. The mix of populations vaunted by town planners and social housing managers is a myth. A 54-year-old invalid explained: ‘This is a sink estate – we are no longer at home here. They have taken over the whole area. If the rents were cheaper elsewhere, we would leave.’

Another article in *Libération*, this time in Villers-Cotterêts, described a recent ‘change’ in this small town in Aisne where ‘first they built council housing (HLM)... Then the school-teacher’s house was sold by the town council to be converted into a mosque. Then the walls were covered with graffiti, the dustbins were set on fire and young people began to hang around in the streets... the Savoyard restaurant has become a kebab shop and the pork butcher’s (*charcuterie*) has become a halal butcher.’<sup>46</sup> The result is that 26.35 per cent of the votes went to Marine Le Pen.

In these situations, the success of the FN usually owes nothing or hardly anything to any form of local presence of the party and everything to the national discourse relayed by the media. Nobody knows the Front National candidates, who may sometimes even be barely credible. A rather sad example is that of Sandra Kaz, in the Nord, an FN candidate in the 2011 local elections, described in the press as being a ‘Goth’ and presented as an ‘escort girl’, which she denied: she got 36 per cent

of the vote. A few months later, we learned that she had committed suicide. A press statement from the Nord-Flandre FN was headed ‘Hounded to death by the media’.<sup>47</sup>

In Thoissey (Ain), where many people voted for the Front National at the local elections in 2011, a ‘longstanding’ resident stated: ‘This vote, it’s the newcomers in the housing estates. They come from Lyon. They’ve seen a lot of problems. As for us, we couldn’t vote for someone we don’t know.’<sup>48</sup> In Anglefort, which is not far away, the mayor corroborated this analysis: ‘When you make a big effort in your *commune*, as I have done, and you only get 86 votes out of 300, it makes you think ... Either people did not vote or else they voted for people they do not know. The FN candidate got 303 votes in a *canton* where he has never even set foot.’<sup>49</sup> The incomprehension when confronted with Front National candidates with no local base can be considerable, as Didier Louis, a socialist councillor who lost his seat, asserted: ‘I still don’t understand what happened. The FN got 20.22 per cent in Hiersac, a suburb of Angoulême – yes that hurt me – it is also a blow for democracy. Nobody knows this woman and she did not speak at a single meeting. It’s a vote of rejection at national level – it’s not a local vote. I can’t see any other explanation, particularly as the *canton* has no more difficulties than others elsewhere. Here, 85 per cent of the people own their accommodation.’<sup>50</sup>

The FN vote is also a form of rejection for the local elected officials who do make real, material efforts and feel despised, scorned and disowned by this vote. But is it not the case that they are frequently powerless, incapable of giving someone a job or granting council accommodation, whereas the FN makes a great many promises?

Not all working-class areas have stopped voting for the Front National. In some cases, the party benefits from a social vote directly linked to the economic crisis and de-industrialisation. When the mines and the factories have closed and working-class families have no jobs and are left to their own resources, when unemployment is widespread and poverty very palpable, against a background of disintegration – sometimes even corruption – of the local authorities in power, the traditional political markers disappear. The way is open for the Front National as we see in Sylvain Crépon’s book, *Enquête au cœur du nouveau FN*.<sup>51</sup> In this type of situation the crisis is located not so much on the right as on the left; it is powerless where it was often hegemonic. This is where the key to the political analysis is to be found. Marine Le Pen realised this when she established herself in Hénin-Beaumont, a mining town in the Pas-de-Calais economically blighted by unemployment, where she played the local card by participating in the town council.

Over and above specific situations, since the arrival of Marine Le Pen at its head the Front National has succeeded in finding the right

tone when speaking to those of modest means – those with low incomes who have difficulty in making ends meet and for whom the slightest rise in the cost of living can become dramatic, such as when it comes to the reimbursement of medical expenses.

The theme of ‘diversity’ that came to the fore in the 2000s and led to the political presence of elected members of diverse origins has had contradictory effects on the FN vote. In situations where the dominant feature is the disintegration of former social ties or the impact of the economic and social crisis, ‘diversity’ is violently rejected. Constituents who vote on the left prefer to vote for the Front National rather than for a candidate of immigrant origin. How can ‘diversity’ or the associated theme of multiculturalism be made acceptable to young people of French origin who say they are exasperated by the way in which migrants behave and are convinced that immigrants are communitarian (*communautaristes*), inward-looking and violent when in groups?

Conversely, if working-class ‘suburbs’ abandoned the FN at the 2012 elections, this may also be linked to the awareness of their residents that ‘diversity’ has now become an integral part of society, in any event at the local level, without necessarily leading to the worst imaginable horrors – communitarianism (*communautarisme*), violence and terrorism.

The sources of the FN vote are multiple and may reinforce each other or combine. Thus, in *départements* like the Vaucluse or the Gard, where the FN scores were among the highest in the 2012 elections, there is a combination of a severe situation of economic crisis with an impression of loss of, or threat to, local identities. These have been weakened, not only by the general modernisation of the country but also, and more specifically, by tourism and the rise in second homes. The Gard is a particularly poor *département*; since the closing of Cacharel, there is no longer any major industrial group. Unemployment is close to 15 per cent and delinquency appears to be dramatic, or, in any event, is experienced as such. According to *Rue 89*<sup>52</sup> in Nîmes the streets are deserted, except during special events like the Feria; there is nothing to do and the choice lies between chronic delinquency and boredom.

In all cases, the media play a decisive role by providing various publics with images, representations, arguments and ideas and by analysing the slightest gesture and declaration of the FN, priority going to those of its leader. There is a fundamental link between the necessarily charismatic nature of the leadership of a party like the Front National and the role of the media. This is explained well by Dominique Reynié: populist rhetoric is ‘brutal, simplistic, a caricature. It is a permanent show. This is why it is a bonus for communication.’<sup>53</sup> The paradox or the contradictions are also there: if you want to be present in the media, apart from during

the major electoral periods, you have to create a scandal, appear as a challenge to the political system, and develop an electoral strategy; you have to be respectable. Marine Le Pen is working on this. She has become respectable, in any event in the eyes of *Elle* magazine who invited her to its presidential elections event on 5 April 2012. The FN attracts people of modest means, those who have lost out or who are anxious about change, but also the ‘forty-something year olds’ who tend to be established in life, managers or self-employed. Furthermore, the FN’s communication strategy includes updated use of social networks and the web.

### Immigration, insecurity, elites: the traditional themes are to the fore

The ‘second FN’ has changed its discourse considerably, apparently reducing the tension between its two fundamental approaches: respectability and break-ups provoking scandals. However, this tension has not disappeared and the party is far from having abandoned the rhetoric of hatred and resentment, the original stamp of its belonging to the extreme right. This is as true at national as at local level.

Immigration is one topic on which it can always rely. Thus, migrants are said to be not only a threat to national identity but also to be untouchable and perhaps even protected: ‘If they are caught speeding, the police do nothing but if I park in front of the town hall at 22h00 at night I get a fine’ is the type of complaint that is frequently heard. They are said to insult the ‘French’ and to benefit from all sorts of advantages and priority treatments: ‘The North Africans (in Marseille) call you a ham sandwich and the council housing is for them,’ said a young woman. Priority to nationals for hiring and access to housing remains a strongly asserted demand. As is also access to higher education: has Sciences Po not perhaps opened the gates to a form of discrimination that penalises French nationals by developing an intake policy for school-leavers who come from establishments in educational priority areas (ZEP)? From this point of view, the state looks after the immigrants, who on top of that are also drug dealers and illegal or undocumented workers. They are still often perceived as ‘Arabs’ – ‘We created the Front to combat communism, the newcomers are driven by anti-Arabism,’ explained Ronald Perdone, the leader of the FN in Marseille from 1972 to 2007, to *Le Monde*.<sup>54</sup> But from now on they are also primarily seen as Muslims.

In the 1970s, Islam was not something dreaded by the extreme right, imbued as it still was by a colonial past where this religion had often been instrumentalised by the colonisers. At the beginning of the 1980s, in France Islam was used by the management in firms to weaken trade unionism; for example, workers were granted the right



to pray at their place of work. Since then, in the imagination of the French, the children of the ‘immigrant workers’ have become ‘Muslims’ and the FN considers immigration from a religious point of view, not only a national, social and cultural one.

Insecurity is equally referred to constantly – in this respect, there is nothing new since the 1980s and, in particular, the 1990s. It is even said to reign in football since ‘In the small clubs and the training clubs,’ according to Marine Le Pen, there are ‘young white children who are sometimes ill-treated because they are white’. This theme is an extension of Jean Marie Le Pen’s, aimed at the French team a few months before the World Cup in 1998 – a team with too many coloured players for his taste who, ‘coming from abroad’, would not be able to sing *La Marseillaise*. Thus, on 10 September 2011, campaigning for the presidential elections in 2012 in Nice, Marine Le Pen said she was in favour of ‘a presumption of legitimate self-defence for the police’ and, as an example, quoted the former mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, well-known for his ‘zero tolerance’ policies.

Similarly, the traditional criticism of the elites, including the intellectuals and, above all, the politicians, is well suited to the discourse of the ‘second FN’. The condemnation of the political system remains a constant, except that the ‘UMPS’, an amalgam of the right (the UMP) and the left (the PS), which exists today only in Front National discourse, replaces the ‘gang of four’ (PCE, PS, RPR and UDF). Its candidates, the ‘Siamese-twins’ Sarkozy/Hollande are ‘two representatives of the UMPS system who stage a mock fight’. Today, like yesterday, the left are ‘racketeers, corrupt, thieves’, ‘these well-to-do middle-class trendies who dare to claim to represent the people whereas they are constantly stabbing them in the back’; the right is ‘wallowing in immorality and permanent deceit’, declared Marine Le Pen in Palavas-les-Flots where she held a meeting.<sup>55</sup> This can be put differently: the FN flourishes where the traditional political parties fail or have problems, especially when these parties are in office. In the first instance, the FN distinctly benefited from the difficulties of the left when it was in power, giving rise to what Pascal Perrineau has termed ‘Left-wing LePenism’, the move of some voters from communism to the extreme right. More recently it has taken advantage of the shortcomings of the right that, in 2007, had robbed it of part of its electorate by poaching on its ideological grounds. We perhaps have here an explanation of the downturn in the FN’s results during the 2012 presidential elections in Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, as well as in certain parts of Alsace or in the coastal areas. This is suggested by Jérôme Fourquet in his hypothesis of a return to the fold of the conservative and radicalised right under Nicolas Sarkozy after the years of Chirac, whose positions did not suit them.<sup>56</sup>

The FN has nothing to gain from the left, and vice versa, whereas with the right, the relations are more complex. In 1983, the FN became a force which had to be taken into consideration as a result of its alliance with the traditional right in Dreux. At the regional elections in 1998, local agreements with the FN enabled key figures from the traditional right to become president of their region, including Charles Million (in the Rhône-Alpes), Jacques Blanc (in Languedoc-Roussillon), Jean-Pierre Soisson (in Burgundy) and Charles Baur (in Picardy). The temptation of agreements of this type resurfaces each time that the FN is placed in a position to arbitrate in an election. A subject leading to an important discussion within the UMP at the 2012 general elections was whether or not to move closer to the FN as the minister Nadine Murano would have liked. Discussions of this sort could weaken the traditional right and open the way to a major reshuffle, in which the Front National could find a space located within the system and no longer at the margins – a calculation that many of its cadres and leaders are contemplating.

Similarly, corruption, clientelism or quite simply the wasting of public money, presented as an aberration, are also frequently referred to: ‘Are there not other priorities for the *Conseil général du Rhône* than a *Musée des Confluences* estimated originally to cost 62 million euros which has now risen to 262 millions?’ exclaimed, François de Laborie, an FN candidate in Irigny for the 2011 local elections.<sup>57</sup>

It must therefore be recognised that the Front National today is no longer the FN of yesteryear; but there is a degree of continuity. There is still a very real tension between its vocation for oratorical jousting and its desire to accede to political representation, which may legitimate the resort to the description of ‘populist’. It is indeed a typical feature of populist movements to claim to have changed while remaining the same; similarly in this type of organisation a typical trait is to function in myth mode, by which I mean the imaginary resolution, in discourse, of elements that in real life are contradictory. The populism of the FN has no specifically political perspective; it can only hope for the disintegration of the traditional right and a reconstitution that would set it at the centre of a new right. This seems unlikely because this would imply a legitimacy and a respectability sufficiently established

to put an end to the radicalism and the scandals on the basis of which the FN has been constructed. This explains why the FN is sometimes accused of being ‘post-political’, the expression of an ill afflicting several European societies: for example, the philosopher, Chantal Mouffe, asserts that its existence is the reflection of the incapacity of traditional democratic parties to create contrasted identities on the basis of distinct alternatives.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the FN is caught in the grip of a paradox: how to remain a populist force, necessarily endowed with

a charismatic leader while, at the same time, becoming an institution-alised party? How can it remain the bearer of a minority culture, at times tending to paranoia, how can it maintain its position at the margin of the political system, make provocative remarks, evoke hell-fire and brimstone and, at the same time, represent the core of a legitimate and respectable right to be constructed?

## The areas of predilection of the closed society

### The Front National should not be exaggerated

The Front National is not the most powerful party of its type in Europe, at least if we consider its electoral results. The Swiss People's Party (UDC) with up to 30 per cent of the vote, the FPÖ-BZÖ (Freedom Party of Austria – Alliance for the Future of Austria) with 29 per cent, the Progress Party (FRP) in Norway with 23 per cent, while not forgetting the Northern League in Italy or the Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in Flanders/Belgium, all obtained far higher results. The FN has never really come to power, with the exception of the few towns it succeeded in running, like Saint-Gilles in the Gard from 1989 to 1992 or, especially following the municipal elections in 1995, Vitrolles, Orange and, the biggest of all, Toulon, with Jean-Jacques Le Chevallier.<sup>59</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, while it did make a good recovery at the local elections in 2011, then at the general elections in 2012, the Front National is no more powerful today than it was in the years of glory of the 'first FN' and, in the event it were, it is not spectacularly more so. The score of 17.90 per cent polled by Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections of 2012, for example, is lower than that of the combined votes for her father and Bruno Mégret in 2002, 16.86 per cent and 2.34 per cent respectively. It is true that if one considers the number of votes and not the percentage polled, the FN has risen from 5,471,739 votes in 2002 (the total score of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret) to 6,421,773 in 2012, which is a considerable rise but which must be assessed while bearing in mind the rise in the number of voters on the register (over 4,833,853 people between 2002 and 2012). At the local elections the FN vote declined, losing more than 100,000 votes; it fell from 1,490,315 votes to 1,379,902 votes. In 2011, at the end of the second round of voting, it had obtained only two seats, one in Carpentras and one in Brignoles, where, moreover, the result was declared invalid. Scores of this type primarily reveal the failure of the traditional parties and especially of those on the right. Therefore the idea that there is a link between the renewal – very real – of the issues they discuss and a new stage in the rise in power of the FN – which is less obvious – has to be set in context.

In 2002, Pascal Perrineau, analysing the geographical distribution of the FN, found that the map had not changed much since the first successes of the party: he observed, 'We find this LePenist France to the east of a line drawn from Le Havre to Perpignan with two spurs – one running along the valley of the Garonne, and the other in the interior of Normandy and particularly in the Orne.'<sup>60</sup> He also noted that its electorate remained predominantly male, 'linking the world of the shop and trade with that of the workshop', with progress made among farmers. Ten years later he noted that the FN had made appreciable inroads in the *départements* of the centre and the west of France, in the Eure, Orne, Loiret, Loir-et-Cher, the Cher and the Sarthe. He also observed that 28 per cent of small craftsmen, trades people and managers of firms and 22 per cent of the 25–34 years age group had voted for Marine Le Pen at the first round of the presidential elections: 'So she has recovered a demographic and sociological dynamic which the Front National had lost.'<sup>61</sup> In 2012 the FN is henceforth present almost everywhere in France.

### The upsurge of the peri-urban vote

But, at the 2012 elections the advance of the Front National was not without its contrasts. It declined appreciably in major cities: in Paris, and even in almost all of the Ile-de-France, in Lyons, Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Nancy, Lille, Bordeaux and Marseille. It also lost ground in many of the outlying suburbs, achieving its highest scores in the peri-urban areas, 40 or 50 kilometres from city centres. In Marseille, for example, a report in *Le Monde* stated that 'the city is no longer the stronghold it once was, "the heart of the national right" as Jean-Marie Le Pen used to say. The Front National, which was for a long time the top party in Marseille, is no longer the organisation it was in the 1990s with nine local offices bringing together hundreds of militants. Today, the Front consists of some cadres but very few militants.'<sup>62</sup> Analyses that, like ours, stress the importance of the advances made by Marine Le Pen in rural areas between 2007 and 2012 also have to be qualified: in 2007, Frédéric Nihous, the candidate for 'Chasse, pêche, nature et traditions', obtained 420,645 votes, almost entirely in rural areas. In 2012 he did not stand again, preferring to support Nicolas Sarkozy, and a considerable share of his electorate transferred to Marine Le Pen.

The electoral geography of the Front National is equally mobile, moving with the voters and thus implementing a new type of segregation. The country is being broken up into rural areas or peri-urban areas far from the centre where people are anxious, to some extent marginalised and more inclined to vote FN. Then there are urban areas, possibly suburbs where people are more capable of making their voices heard and of achieving their aims by getting themselves

represented by traditional political forces. The result is that these areas are criticised or condemned by the FN as being the ‘favourite areas of residence’ for the ‘well-to-do middle-class trendies’.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Nonna Mayer considered that ‘the France which votes FN, the most receptive to issues of security and xenophobia, is the France of the major cities where there are concentrations of immigrants and where over-rapid urbanisation has destroyed the social fabric and caused delinquency to rise’. She insisted on ‘the correlation between the FN vote and the rate of urbanisation; the rate of insecurity and the proportion of foreigners or of former colonial residents in the population’.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps, had the analysis been made at a lower level, for example at that of a *département*, this blanket evaluation would have been qualified to some extent. This is suggested by Pascal Buléon and Jérôme Fourquet, who point out, very early on, that ‘up to 50 kilometres from the city centre of a labour market area, or of a *département*, the vote for Le Pen rises with the distance. We are in an area which is the exact opposite of the geography of urban France.’<sup>64</sup>

The fact remains that what we are witnessing today is the opposite of what Nonna Mayer described. As Jérôme Fourquet explains with the support of figures and maps, there is ‘an above-average vote and a very considerable upsurge of the FN in peri-urban areas’.<sup>65</sup> Urbanisation, ‘this mix of density and diversity’ in the words of Hervé Le Bras and Jacques Lévy, once again with maps in support, appears as an ‘extra defence’ against the FN whose space ‘is made of numerous but interstitial strands interlacing in a network which is the reverse of the major highways of communication’.<sup>66</sup> By endorsing their vote, the Front National brings together those who have lost out or who are opposed to the open society, usually on the outskirts of towns, in peri-urban areas that are sometimes 30–70 kilometres from the major cities and where approximately one-third of the electorate live. This spatial observation corresponds very closely to another that is more directly social; the higher the level of qualification, the lower the vote for the FN. A fair number of the FN electorate have been either projected into or maintained on the edges of urban modernity or live as if they were threatened by this kind of fate. Like the FN, they want a closed, rather intolerant society, adorned in the rags of a homogeneous, mythical nation; they are totally incapable of conflictualising their difficulties, their fears or their frustrations in any other way. In the last resort, their only remaining hope is to express their extreme discontent.

The possibility of the FN losing its appeal in the future, as Jérôme Fourquet suggests, undoubtedly depends on the capacity of the advocates of the ‘open’ society to mobilise on the social and cultural level but also to implement local, regional, national and European policies that would leave less room for the ‘closed’ society, evoked by Pascal

Perrineau as far back as 2001.<sup>67</sup> Loss of appeal is also paradoxically due to the FN itself and its failure to wholly ‘de-demonise’ by shedding its erstwhile obsessions. Indeed, the Front National can exist only by combining a process of ‘demonising’ and ‘de-demonising’, thus creating a tension which is vital to it, between radicalism and alienation on one hand, and on the other the respectable and legitimate participation in democratic interplay. If the right were to be reconstituted to include the FN, this would necessarily signify a break in this tension with two ensuing risks for the FN, only one of which would be a mortal blow for democracy. The first, which is the least likely but the greatest cause for concern, would be that this rupture would lead to a rise in the extreme right tendencies that the FN is endeavouring to shed. This would be the prelude, not to a populist movement but to a fascist one. The second would be its institutionalisation on a massive scale. This would enable the political personnel, who it has begun to organise and who are extremely impatient to get into office, to exercise responsibilities and accede to power. The Front National would then no longer be the populist and radical force that it has been to date, but a respectable, institutionalised party.

But let’s leave fictional politics there. A complete break in the founding tension of the FN is unlikely in the near future and we have not yet heard the last of it.

# Notes

- 1 Taguieff, 'La rhétorique du national-populisme'
- 2 Lecoeur, *Un néo-populisme à la française. Trente ans de Front national*
- 3 Dorna, 'Avant-propos: Le populisme, une notion peuplée d'histoires particulières en quête d'un paradigme fédérateur'
- 4 Collovald, 'Le "national-populisme" ou le fascisme disparu'
- 5 Wieviorka's publication, *Le Peuple existe-t-il?*, draws from a colloquium with the same title, which took place in November 2011 as part of 'Les Entretiens d'Auxerre'
- 6 Laugier, 'Vertus ordinaires des cultures populaires', p. 61
- 7 Winock, *Histoire de l'extrême droite en France*; and Peter Davies, *The Extreme Right in France, 1789 to the Present. From de Maistre to Le Pen*
- 8 Reynié, 'Le tournant ethno-socialiste du Front national'
- 9 Wieviorka, *La France raciste*
- 10 Hessel, *Immigrations, le devoir d'insertion: rapport du Groupe de travail Immigration*
- 11 Kepel, *Les Banlieues de l'islam: naissance d'une religion en France*
- 12 Dubet, *La Galère: jeunes en survie*
- 13 Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto urbain. Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui*
- 14 Tarrius, dans *La Mondialisation par le bas. Les nouveaux nomades de l'économie souterraine*
- 15 Wieviorka, *La Tentation antisémite: haine des juifs dans la France d'aujourd'hui*
- 16 *Le Parisien*, 20 October 2006
- 17 Kosciusko-Morizet, *Le front antinational*, p. 9
- 18 Marchand-Lagier, 'Abstention et vote Front National en PACA: approches sociodémographique et politique de deux faits électoraux durables'
- 19 Monnot et Mestre, *Enquête sur les réseaux du Front national*
- 20 Miquet-Marty, *Les oubliés de la démocratie*
- 21 *Rue 89*, 19 December 2011
- 22 Hervé le Bras, *Huffington Post*, 24 January 2012
- 23 *Rue 89*, 18 September 2011

- 24 *La Voix du Nord*, 12 March 2011
- 25 *Le Monde*, 22 February 2012
- 26 A remark that Jean Marie Le Pen made about the gas chambers
- 27 *Libération*, 28 March 2001
- 28 Harris Interactive, *Vote au 1er tour des élections cantonales de mars 2011 selon la proximité syndicale*, Sondage Harris Interactive pour Liaisons sociales, available at : <http://www.harrisinteractive.fr/news/2011/22032011.asp>
- 29 *Aujourd'hui*, 10 February 2011
- 30 *Libération*, 12 March 2012
- 31 Parisot et Lapresle, *Un piège bleu Marine*
- 32 *Le Monde*, 21 September 2012
- 33 Tristan, *Au Front!*
- 34 Checaglini, *Bienvenue au Front, journal d'une infiltrée*
- 35 *Le Figaro*, 23 June 2012
- 36 The day on which Anders Behring Breivik killed 78 people
- 37 On 19 March 2012, Mohamed Merah killed three Jewish children and one Jewish adult at the entrance to a Jewish school in Toulouse
- 38 *Le Point*, 29 June 2012
- 39 *Libération*, 17 March 2012
- 40 In French, 'instituteurs hussards noirs de la République'. Hussard noir was the nickname given to teachers in the Third Republic. It was Charles Péguy who popularised the term in a poem entitled 'L'Argent' in 1913: 'Nos jeunes maîtres étaient beaux comme des hussards noirs. Sveltes; sévères; sanglés. Sérieux, et un peu tremblants de leur précoce, de leur soudaine omnipotence.'
- 41 Le Pen, *Comment redresser l'école de la république?*
- 42 Le Pen, Discours lors du Congrès de Tours des 15 et 16 janvier 2011
- 43 *Rue 89*, 4 April 2012
- 44 Schwengler, 'L'ouvrier caché: le paradoxe du vote rural d'extrême droite dans la France du Nord-Est'
- 45 *Libération*, 24 April 2012
- 46 Ibid
- 47 Press release by Eric Dillies, Chargé de mission, FN Nord-Flandres, November 2011
- 48 *Le Progrès*, 22 March 2011
- 49 Ibid
- 50 *Sud Ouest*, 22 March 2011
- 51 Crépon, *Enquête au cœur du nouveau FN*
- 52 *Rue 89*, 6 June 2012
- 53 Reynié, *Populismes: la pente fatale*
- 54 *Le Monde*, 9 June 2012
- 55 *Le Monde*, 17 March 2012
- 56 Fourquet, *Le sens des cartes. Analyse sur la géographie des votes à la présidentielle*
- 57 *le Progrès*, 25 February 2011
- 58 Mouffe, 'La "fin du politique" et le défi du populisme de droite'
- 59 For two years, the journalist Michel Samson attended the sessions of the Toulon City Council and, as a result, wrote a remarkable book – in the words of its title, *Le Front national aux affaires: deux ans d'enquête sur la vie municipale à Toulon*, the first about the Front National in office
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- 61 *Le Figaro*, 24 April 2012
- 62 *Le Monde*, 9 June 2012
- 63 Mayer, *Ces Français qui votent FN*
- 64 Buléon et Fourquet, 'Vote Front National 1984–2002, géographies et interprétations successives: une équation politique'
- 65 Fourquet, *Le sens des cartes. Analyse sur la géographie des votes à la présidentielle*
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**Populism in Germany:  
a history of its mentalities,  
myths and symbols**

**Herfried Münkler,  
October 2012**

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# Introduction

Unlike most European countries, Germany has not seen, at least until now, the development of a lasting populist party. Right-wing populist party formations, such as the prominent example of the Schill party in Hamburg, were successful for only short periods of time before dissolving again.<sup>1</sup> Other parties remain in the range of one-tenth of a per cent of the electoral vote, but draw attention through spectacular and conflict-provoking actions, such as Pro NRW's display of caricatures of Mohammed. Nevertheless, political parties represented in parliament do show populist affinities and tendencies that, given a corresponding opportunity, can appear more or less strongly. These are, however, short-lived, tactical manoeuvres in the struggle for votes and are generally foiled by corresponding scandals. For example, the temporary federal minister Jürgen W. Möllemann's attempt to open the Free Democratic Party (FDP) to right-wing populist topics failed politically even before Möllemann's suicide. Left-wing populism exists in parallel in Germany, but plays an even more marginal role than right-wing populism.<sup>2</sup>

## Inclusion of populist streams

Despite the absence of a populist party in Germany, there are still corresponding sentiments and resentments to be found in the population that could indeed be integrated into the existing party spectrum. This corresponds to the operating principles of parliamentary democracy, since populist tendencies that are not taken up or attended to for a long time can turn into political apathy or rejection. Those established parties that organise populist campaigns with respective slogans aim to integrate populist sentiments into the political system, which can result in preventing the establishment of genuinely populist parties. The German populism expert, Karin Priester, has rightly pointed out that *populist* movements emerge in correspondence with the actions of established political elites.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, Germany has so far been successful in practising a strategy of including relevant topics while excluding right-wing populist parties. However, this poses the risk of secondary tactics turning into strategic directives or *populist*

sentiments gaining such dynamism that they overpower those who evoke them. Such risks evolve not only from opportunistic structures of voting sentiments, but also from the calculus of the political class that turns what used to be an instrument for gaining votes into the aim and means of their own politics.

### Exclusion of populist parties

This has not happened in Germany and the risk of such a development is limited in the German party spectrum. This is because the threshold for parliament is high (the 5 per cent clause). This has also to do with German history, in particular with the warning posed by the outcome of the Weimar Republic, and the advancement of anti-republican and anti-democratic parties. The terror of history still weighs heavily on the shoulders of most Germans, so they are immune to falling prey to right-wing populist temptations. This also applies to some extent to left-wing populism, against which the state bankruptcy of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) can be held as a cautionary example. Thus, advantages that an established party can draw from populist slogans are almost always thwarted with a reproach of populism, and if a section of the electorate comes to the conclusion that this reproach is justified, the increase in votes achieved with populist rhetoric is quickly countered by a considerable loss of votes elsewhere. The possibility of stigmatising populist positions, by referencing the Weimar Republic, the rise of National Socialism, and also the history of the GDR, puts a stop to 'populist temptations' in Germany. At the same time, right-wing populist newcomers are excluded from the political spectrum by referencing the end of the Weimar Republic or the Nazi-era. The appeal to build a political career on the basis of (right-wing) populist slogans is therefore very limited.

In reference to the four-phase model of populist movements<sup>4</sup> proposed by Karin Priester, right-wing populism in Germany has not yet gone beyond a *latency phase*, in which the 'silent majority' shows a mood of openness to populist slogans. Only the critique of the euro and the bureaucratic politics in Brussels has reached the *malaise phase*, in which it is expected that someone turns up to shred the net of whitewash and lies, and to speak out in 'open and honest words'. In Germany, right-wing populism is far from the *accumulation phase* it has reached in many European countries. It could achieve this only via the topic of 'Europe and the euro'. For now, it seems out of the question that Germany would arrive at the *participation phase*, in which populist parties (not established parties that canvass votes with a populist disposition) are involved in the formation of government on a national level.

Populism is most prominently a strategy of communication and rhetoric, but it is not fully contained in such a definition, in that a certain amount of content must also be communicated. As the following hypothesis argues, the more politically vigorous the content, the more it can connect to trusted myths and symbols, thereby playing on mental expectations. They transform from political one-offs into projects as soon as they can draw on or utilise identities shaped by the history of ideas or mentalities. This is foremost the case if they succeed in activating and tapping into the ensemble of enemy images and stereotypes contained in a nation's collective memory. As a result, a lesser role is played by arguments, rather than cultural memories and political myths, which generate collective feeling. This is the reason why the following account of populism in Germany returns historically to the 15th and 16th centuries when humanists and reformists created initial foundations for a collective German identity, or the identification with this self-image. From there onwards the account will pass through historical stages of increased virulence of populist politics until the present, when it is concerned with populist stances on asylum and migration, European integration and the euro crisis. To begin with, we need to ask what is meant by populism or how and where elements of populism can be traced and identified in political configurations and trends.

## What is populism? Elements, features and traces

To prevent a common misunderstanding: the political right by no means holds a monopoly on the populist disposition; it can also be found on the political left. As it is, populism is older than the left–right distinction that emerged in the French Revolution. This surely means that the populist disposition not only can be found in democratic constitutional orders, but is also an outward orientation from political elites towards ‘the people’, which is observable in oligarchic or autocratic systems.<sup>5</sup> The only prerequisite is that ‘the people’ gain political weight, or have it granted by the political elites. The orientation towards ‘the people’ cannot consist only of idle blandishments and insubstantial promises, but must also include urgent appeals for political support in the struggle for power. How deeply populism takes root is not consistent, and so it is advisable to talk of different forms of populism, or ‘populisms’. A comparative perspective reveals that different levels of impact are not consistent with the respective constitutional types, in such a way that oligarchies only flatter ‘the people’, whereas democracies take on the task of political support.

### ‘The people’ as political allies

Populist tendencies were taken up in the power struggles of oligarchic families in the Greek *poleis* of the 7th and 6th centuries BC as much as in the conflicts of Northern Italian cities during the 14th and 15th centuries (AD). In search of allies against the respective opponents or rivals, the middle or lower classes became a factor in the struggle for obtaining superiority in urban and rural settlements. From the oligarchic family’s point of view, these classes were seen at least in part as potential allies, as much as other supporters – the only difference between their allies was that ‘the people’ were located in the vicinity of their own city, in contrast to other ruling or exiled families who lived in other cities. As much as other aristocratic families of neighbouring cities were promised support in their battle against inner and outer ‘enemies’, so too were ‘the people’ lured with promised rewards if the battle for power were to be won with their help. At the same time, however, those oligarchs also speculated about how they might honour those promises

within the narrowest possible limits, or completely avoid such obligations altogether. Some oligarchic families speculated on how this would be possible with 'the people' in the same way as with allies from other cities, so that they saw no considerable difference between inner and outer supporters. Other oligarchs were altogether doubtful: they wanted to keep 'the people' off the political platform because they feared they would not leave quickly after having done their part.

Finally, charismatic political, and successful, military leaders appeared in ancient Greece and in late medieval and early modern Italy. They were sometimes able to rely on the support of the middle and lower classes against the large noble families; to use this support to seize power; and to subsequently retain it permanently, supported by the armed entourage. In this way, tyranny emerged not without populist bias in ancient Greece and late medieval Italy.<sup>6</sup> Tyrants remained in power as long as they could rely on the support of parts of 'the people'. This was the case when they could assert their unique position of being able to protect 'the people' from the oppression and exploitation by oligarchic families. This, however, did not result in formalising and institutionalising 'the people's' permanent participation in power, as was the case of the path to democracy, but remained instead on the basis of promises and occasional privileges. The populist disposition can open the path to democracy, in the sense of the people's institutional participation in the exercise of power, but it does not necessarily do so. In ancient Greece, this was the case in some cities, and this development of populist tactical manoeuvring of some aristocratic families towards democracy had global historical consequences.<sup>7</sup>

Stemming from the premise of the systems outlined above, political elitism is the opposite or counter-model of populism. While populist-acting elites make 'the people' the audience of their political aims and promises, elitist political elites categorically refrain from this. The area of reference of their slogans and imaginations remains limited to their own kind and 'the people' are not a relevant factor. Note that both cases concern elites, and often opponents and competitors are equally powerful and rich. What separates them is the political *dispositif* on which they base the contest for power, and thus, in most cases, the elite party has lost the battle against the populist party.<sup>8</sup> This has initiated a learning process that has caused a diminishment of elitist elites and an increase in numbers of populist-acting elites. Historians and political theorists who have observed and described this development have acted as catalysts and multipliers of this learning process. As a consequence, populist practices have come to be a recipe for success in the battle for political power and remain so today.

Political dispositions can take on a life of their own. When this happens, populist actors can emerge as democratic parties.

What previously was a tactical promise to mobilise the support of 'the people' turns into a political programme connecting leadership and followers. The populist *dispositif* does not disappear with the vanishing of the institutionalisation of the democratic order; it liaises instead with demagogy and tribunary. And yet, in classical Athens, demagogy did not have the pejorative tone that the term obtained in Europe in the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> In the literal sense, a demagogue was a leader of 'the people' and, as long as political questions were decided upon in the popular assembly, this leadership of 'the people' fulfilled the role of a political party, competing with the aristocratic families for power through speeches that were both argumentatively calculating and emotionally rousing. As long as no payments and privileges were given in exchange for their participation in the political consultation process, the demagogues' role as leaders of 'the people' also included ensuring the middle and lower classes participated in the popular assembly. In this way, the prospect of decisions in favour of 'the people' and corresponding benefits played a significant role. In those parts of his *Politeia* when Plato speaks about the fact that democratic politicians are in every respect *Zuckerbäcker*, or 'confectioners', that supply 'the people' with sweets, he means that they felt compelled to employ populist-oriented projects to keep 'the people' on board. In this case, populist politics consisted of giving 'the people' benefits and caring for their material improvement with respective expenditures. Plato was an opponent of democracy, because he deemed it incapable of occasionally putting 'the people' on a diet. From his elitist standpoint, this was indispensable, not least for reasons of 'public health'.<sup>10</sup>

### The unity of 'the people' as a political concern

Unlike in the period that was about turning populist promises into democratic institutions, 'the people' is not a coherent political entity in institutionalised democracy (if it ever has been). Instead, increasingly disparate interests and values become salient, leading to a division into different political factions. The *plebs* are part of the *populous*, but not identical with it. And, even previously, the Athenian *demos* was a powerful group among the citizens, but was barely a party. After a while, this division into interest groups and clienteles led to the weakening of the political power of 'the people', which is why its leaders tried to preserve the unity of 'the people' as a political power factor by means of slogans and a politics across classes. It is a third variation of populism, which can be read as a counter-model of clientelism. While clientelism dissolves the 'unity of the people' along social dividing lines, populism aims at retaining or at least invoking this unity; and, with this in mind, turns to the masses of the simple people and calls

upon their commonalities, and claims that those are larger than their differences. This is the reason for populism's notorious blind spot when it comes to the varied interests and social positions among 'the people'. It attempts to hold together what no longer belongs together as a result of socio-political developments. Populist politics pursued under these conditions has to pretend that there are no social differences between or opposing interests within 'the people'; and claim that, where they do exist, such differences are politically marginal. Populism succeeds best in doing so when working with enemy images and stereotypes and counteracting more precise analyses with an appeal to 'common sense'. Consequently, populism has a tendency of dramatising external conflicts and differences towards 'the others' in order to cover up differences within. We encounter this form of populism in European democracies in the 20th and the early 21st centuries.<sup>11</sup>

### Protagonists of populism

Politicians are by no means the only ones equipped with the populist *dispositif*: so too are journalists and authors, literates, and political intellectuals in democracies actively shaped by the media. While politicians usually aim at collecting votes in elections and gaining approval in the course of campaigns, journalists make use of the populist *dispositif*, to increase market shares of their papers. Political intellectuals want to draw attention to their cause, and frequently increase the circulation of their books and also their income. A glimpse of the motivational situations in handling the populist *dispositif* reveals just how difficult an empirical analysis of populism is. It not only displays divergent variations depending on prevailing circumstances, but is also employed by changing actors with dissimilar goals and intentions.

With the above-mentioned journalists and authors, new forms of populist interference also come into play. Politicians mostly work with instruments of propaganda, delivering speeches, condensing their messages into slogans, and producing posters or video clips; literates and authors, however, have more complex means at their disposal, in which the political message does not have to appear immediately. Those populist views that are spread through narrative, argumentative or statistical means exhibit a mechanism of time delay, compared to political agitation; the agitative speech in a political assembly works immediately and can inflame passions. It is the classic instrument of political campaigns. After a while, populist slogans lose their pervasive character. They cease to stir or agitate, and campaigns put in motion around a populist theme gradually fade. Populist politics is under time pressure: it must achieve envisioned results within a limited timeframe or it fizzles without effect.

This is different in the case of narratives and symbols used by authors and intellectuals: they need time to take full effect, and that does not disappear so quickly, instead settling down in the long-term collective memory of a society. The populist agitation employed by politicians creates surface effects; the placing of populist thoughts in essay writing and literature, however, goes deeper: it targets mentalities and cognitive structures by creating self-images of a society or a political group, and by generating formative notions of identity. Instead of current effects, it brings about structural forms that fundamentally alter the political infrastructure of a community. The expression of those narratives prompts further narratives that reflect the populist *dispositif* without it surfacing as such. The use of notions of otherness already suffices for the purpose of generating identity. Through these a pattern of self and other is installed that leaves foreigners in a precarious position.<sup>12</sup> Populist campaigns can connect to these mental and cognitive structures. They take what is latently and permanently in place and make it virulent and acute. A thorough analysis of populist campaigns cannot do without looking at the structural predisposition of a population for populist views. Besides the collective memory, it is the political culture of a country that populist campaigns draw on to have a vigorous effect on the political system.

### The ideological parasite of populism

Herein lies a problem that is larger than it may seem at first glance: mental and cognitive structures, on which populist campaigns are based, usually operate under a different name. They are nationalist, chauvinist, imperialist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic or racist. The respective populism takes them up; they are the host in which it embeds itself. The populist *dispositif* aims at activating structures that are not populist by nature. In the strict sense, populism is only the political sharpening of mental and cognitive predispositions that have developed around imaginations of collective identity and alterity. Populism harvests fields it has not cultivated; it preferably moves in the fields of nationalism and xenophobia, because it can harvest most quickly and efficaciously the entire arsenal of foreign-foe constructions. Since populism itself is a 'thin ideology',<sup>13</sup> it relies on superimposing itself on 'thicker ideologies' that serve as host ideologies, or on forging hybrid ideologies that differ from country to country and period to period.

An analysis of a country's populist dispositions cannot avoid also taking into account political myths and symbols, narratives of national identity, and collective fears of the 'other' and their adapting political virulence. This turns populism into a diffuse and washed-out term; the same can be said of terms that are frequently difficult to

operationalise in the social sciences: to work with them is like nailing jelly to a wall. In working with populism as a concept, one must be aware that one is dealing not with something precise, but rather with an ambiguous terminology whose boundaries have not been established along the lines of *disegno* but through *sfumato*.<sup>14</sup> But if one can't nail jelly to a wall, one can still describe the traces that have been left.<sup>15</sup>

### **The strengthening of democracy as consequence of populist campaigns**

Usually, populism is portrayed negatively through the lens of its claims of universal validity. A political science evaluation of the costs and benefits of populism should not overlook the fact that populist campaigns could also have democracy-affirming effects. The example of the transformation of a populist-acting faction of aristocracy into a pro-democratic party has been mentioned before in view of ancient Greece and northern Italy in the late Middle Ages. However, populist campaigns can also contribute to revitalising democratic mechanisms in functioning democracies: for instance, if, in accordance with the imperatives of self-interest and self-preservation, the political class seals itself off from the expectations and demands for participation of the population and rules with the help of technocrats and experts. Populist campaigns are – not always, but often; not throughout, but occasionally – a reminder that ‘the people’ are the principal of order and the members of the political class just its agents.<sup>16</sup> Populist protests are often considered irritating and irrational, and that is also true from the perspective of experts and technocrats. But democracy is not a system that operates solely to the standards of expert knowledge. In such cases, it loses its essential democratic characteristics. A democracy without occasional populist campaigns is in danger of erosion and decay.



## Creating a German national identity in humanism and reformation

The German national identity has been shaped in its defining character by the debates of the 15th and 16th centuries between German and Italian humanists about Germania's civilisation by the Romans, and the resulting entrenched obligation of gratitude of the Germans towards the Italians.<sup>17</sup> An anti-Roman and respectively anti-Italian sentiment grew out of these debates, found its way into religious political disputes over the reformation – not least in the writings of Martin Luther – and contributed to the success of the reformation in Germany. After all, some of the Germans' national myths that have later been updated, depending on political demands, and deployed in political struggles, originated in this period.<sup>18</sup> In the current debate on the euro crisis, at least where it is pursued in a populist way, one can observe the return of narratives that played a central role in the controversies of German and Italian humanists and in the reformatory verdict on the greed for money of the Roman Curia; once again, Germans are expected to compensate for debts that others have created by financing an idle and luxurious life, and once again Romans in the south are said to utilise every trick in the book to gain hard-earned German money.

### **Germanics as source of identity populism**

A milestone in the elaborate politics of ideas surrounding the national identity ascribed to Germans is the rediscovery of Germania by the Roman historian Tacitus, which became the most prominent proof of the collective German character.<sup>19</sup> In a humanistic manner, earlier inhabitants of the area north of the Alps and east of the Rhine, who Tacitus, following Caesar, labelled with the umbrella term 'Germanic', were equated with today's German inhabitants of the area. Consequently, Tacitus' remarks on the Germanians could be read as a glimpse into the ethnological beginnings of the Germans. Humanists disregarded that Tacitus aimed at holding up a critical mirror to his Roman contemporaries, and thus stylised and also idealised the way of life and behaviour of the Germanians.<sup>20</sup> The text was read as an exact account

of the Germanians, who were thought of as the 'old Germans'. In cases where Tacitus remarked on the puritan and nature-loving Germanians, and on their aversion to mixing with other ethnic groups, this was declared as the model that Germans had to be guided by in order to retain their identity. It is typical for populism to translate the conditional 'if' into an unconditional imperative. In this way *identity-centred populism* emerges, and together with *protest populism* constitute the two main lines of populist thinking.<sup>21</sup>

### Roman influences as a threat to German culture

Under these circumstances, it was only consistent to see the Roman influence on Germanians as a fatal threat to the German identity and its political-cultural right to independence. One can find early signs of anti-civilisation dispositions therein, which found expression in the dualising of 'profound culture' and 'shallow civilisation' at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Along these lines, the First World War was seen as a defence of German culture against French civilisation. The fratricidal war between Thomas and Heinrich Mann reveals that not all Germans wanted to follow this populist juxtaposition of 'cultural profundity' and 'frivolous civility'.<sup>22</sup> The latter criticised the imperious authoritarian state in Germany and defended Roman intellectuality, while Thomas Mann in his 'war writings' backed what he called the 'power protected inner self', by which he meant the protection of a profound culture by a bellicose power state – a position which he profoundly criticised in his *Doctor Faustus*, following the experience of National Socialism. It is not by chance that he chose the magician and polymath Johann Faust as a reference, Faust being a mythical figure dating back to the 16th century who, since Goethe's treatment of the subject matter, has evolved as an anchor point for a German sense of cultural superiority towards their European neighbours. The fact that Faustus was to Thomas Mann a musician and composer and not a magician and polymath, as he was to Goethe, is owed to an additional anchor point in a national sense of cultural superiority of German middle-class intellectuals, namely the rebranding of music as a specifically 'German art'. This certainly refers to developments in the 18th and 19th centuries and not to the Early Modern Age, when Italian hegemony in the field of music was beyond dispute in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

Admittedly, the culture-civilisation controversy is not directly concerned with populist politics, but it has, above all, through the mediating agency of the education system, conditioned mental and cognitive structures that could serve as the conceptual infrastructure of populist campaigns. This was desirable when political feelings of inferiority that

had arisen from belated nation state building, or were related to the fact that Germany did not play a part in the concert of political powers until the foundation of the Reich in 1871, had to be compensated for with pretensions of cultural superiority. Concomitantly, this suggests that populist campaigns not only appeal to the *petite bourgeoisie* and the lower classes, but that they can also embrace the well-educated and established classes, and, can even originate there.<sup>24</sup>

More than Johann Faust, who was nationalised as myth and vernacularised in German political consciousness only much later,<sup>25</sup> the figure of Hermann-Arminius played a role in the Early Modern period. A man under whose leadership a Germanic tribal group attacked and destroyed three Roman legions in rough terrain in 9 AD, Arminius, chieftain of the Cherusci, of whom only his Latin name has survived, was Germanised as Hermann, and soon after celebrated as the 'first German'.<sup>26</sup> As such, he is honoured even today in the Valhalla near Regensburg, and in the Old National Gallery in Berlin. The focus of national identity on the figure of Arminius and the Battle of Teutoburg Forest gave rise to a bellicose character trait in the political self-consciousness of Germans, forming the counterpart to cultural identity constructions. The epitome of military resistance against a vastly superior opponent, Hermann-Arminius became the symbol for the battle against 'a world of enemies'. He was used to humiliating those who wanted to surrender in light of existing power relations and who banked more on political negotiations than on military decisions. As Faust was used as a populist myth to characterise the educated middle-class, so Hermann-Arminius rose to become the leitmotif of the populist-bridled militarism of 19th-century nationalist-minded circles.

At the same time, Arminius evolved into a resource for the populism of resentments, because the Italians, as humanist Ulrich von Hutten lamented, had stifled the lore of his deeds, and hence put the Germans behind in the 'race of the nations'.<sup>27</sup> They had, Hutten continued, launched an attack on German pride.<sup>28</sup> What mattered was not only prevailing in the battlefield – one also had to spread news of these victories. Thereby, Hutten serviced the resentment that the modesty and restraint of the Germans can be utilised to the advantage of their enemies and opponents. Thus, the battle of weapons was now to be continued as a battle of words and scripts. One who took up this battle in word and script was, in Hutten's view, Martin Luther, whom he therefore placed alongside war hero Arminius. Luther himself also repeatedly mentioned his affinity with Hermann, who, like himself, was 'a Harzlander', and of whom he was therefore 'sincerely fond'. The anti-Roman sentiment had thus turned into an open battle against Rome, even though it was henceforth not directed against the Rome of the emperors, but that of the popes.

### Financing Roman decadence

The extravagant rituals and lifestyles of the popes required the mobilisation of ever larger sums of money from the Latin Christian community, which increasingly affected Germany. This provoked discontent and annoyance, and thus Chancellor Martin Mayr bemoaned the increasing flows of finance that poured over the Alps into Italy, in the *Gravamina nationis Germaniae* sent periodically to the Roman Curia. Humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) replied by seizing on Tacitus' description of Germania's civilisational backwardness and contrasting it with what was, by then, an advanced level of development in Germany. From this *olim-nunc* scheme he deduced that Germany owed much to the civilising influence of Rome and Italy and that there was thus no reason for complaints; on the contrary, Germans should gratefully pay for the blessings of civilisation granted to them by Rome.<sup>29</sup>

This was a colonialist response that was hardly met with approval by the German humanists. They now turned the tables by portraying Rome's civilising influence as an attack on Germanic customs and ways of life, by result of which decadence and promiscuity, lies and deception, malice and disloyalty had reached their country. There was no reason at all for gratitude; in fact, there were many reasons to reject such influences. Luther also repeatedly spoke of the corruption of morals that had accompanied the entry of the 'Papists' and begged his 'virtuous Germans' not to let themselves be infected by the 'Romanists'. Nor did he shy away from denouncing the obscene sexual practices of the Spanish. Anti-Roman turned into anti-Spanish sentiments after Luther identified Emperor Karl V as Spanish. Similar allegations were later spread under the banner of the 'black legend' and were politically utilised in the Netherlands' struggle for freedom against the Spanish crown.<sup>30</sup>

Luther's coupling of German salvation with the flow of money from Germany, which funded pontifical luxury in Rome, was a down-right populist stroke. Most notably, by practising the selling of indulgences, the 'Roman papists' were said to have developed a technique by which they could squeeze money out of the Germans and, at the same time, defraud them of the salvation of their souls. Roman infamy was said to consist of defrauding the Germans twice: first of their money and then of their souls' salvation.<sup>31</sup> These and other invectives contributed to the success of the reformation, as they mobilised the endorsement of even those who had little use for the complex theological question of vindication. At the same time, the debate breached the narrow confines of learned humanism and included a broad social stratum. Intellectual nationalism turned into a national opinion of broad circles, and was thereby fuelled by widespread anti-Roman sentiment.

There has, for a considerable time, been a rampant concern in Germany that the pressing debts of southern Europeans in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, being mutualised by euro rescue funds and the European Central Bank will eventually leave the German taxpayer liable. This echoes once again the debate on the financing of Roman pleasure-seeking frivolity by the upright Germans in the Reformation era. These are the same mentalities brought to life by populist verbalisations. Even though a firmly anti-European party has not emerged in Germany thus far, the sentiment for it exists among the population. At present, only the tabloid press eagerly employs this sentiment.

## Anti-Napoleon propaganda and national symbols

The populist *dispositif* utilises popular symbols; it is reliant upon them to assert its propositions and claims as self-evident. This notion of 'taking something for granted' is one of the features of populism.<sup>32</sup> Populism does not get involved with high-minded argument, and parliamentary deliberation is not its intent anyhow. It rather appeals to 'common sense' and suggests that actually everyone should see things its way. Thus, political consent is not acquired by argument but is always already implicit. Political symbols are manifestations and also claims of this consent. Thereby, one has to distinguish between *conservative* symbols of preservation and *rebellious* symbols of protest and change. In Germany, the former are represented by the personifications of the Länder and regions, such as Bavaria, Borussia, or Hussia, that were usually called into play in association with the ruling dynasty and its respective symbolic economy, through which allegiance to ruler and fatherland could be demanded. These are symbols of reciprocal benevolence and care as well as loyalty and commitment, and, where these symbols were erected as memorials in public space, this reciprocal benevolence and loyalty was engraved as a 'political manual' on those monuments' pedestals.

### Preservatory and defensive populism

Contractually arranged mutual obligations are no stamping ground for populisms; a weak form of populism can certainly arise here, however, if the ruler, through bestowals of benevolence, has built a stock of loyalty obligations to claim as the occasion arises. This stock of loyalty often only serves to consolidate the reciprocal relationship between ruler and population beyond any doubt. State-led populism, in the form of acts of benevolence that exceed the traditional obligations of the ruler, serves the creation of a loyalty reserve that the dynasty has access to in politically difficult times. This form of weak or latent populism existed in Germany until the revolutionary termination of monarchies and dynasties in the year 1918, and it had gained importance after alternative forms of political order had become attractive following the French Revolution. The popularity of rulers was meant to prevent revolts and rebellions, and it was increased by populist performances.

The techniques of ‘populism on the cheap’ had not entirely vanished after the fall of the kings and dukes in November 1918, but were carried on by the prime ministers of the Federal States in a form corresponding with their habitus. As fathers (and mothers) of their federal states they are concerned about their children’s wellbeing, and hence embark on a journey across the country once a year to hear of people’s worries and hardships, and, if necessary, take remedial action; and, at inaugurations of buildings and institutions, they draw attention to themselves with quasi-sovereign pomp, as if they have given their ‘trusted subjects’ all this at their own expense. The populist *dispositif* of princely rule has entered the repertoire of the democratic order as a technique of staging a nurturing ‘fatherliness’ or ‘motherliness’.<sup>33</sup>

Alongside this ‘conservative populism’ and its symbols stands a symbolic order geared towards change or aggressive defence (to be distinguished from mere preservation). Populisms located here have a much stronger dynamic than those of the ruling dynasties. First, conditions have to be radically altered, so that they can stay as they are thereafter. Among intellectuals and writers of the Weimar Republic, there was talk of a ‘conservative revolution’,<sup>34</sup> and inherent within any aggressive populism is something of this amalgam of willingness to change and orientation towards preservation. This political disposition can initially be identified in the anti-Napoleon propaganda steered primarily by intellectuals and literates at the beginning of the 19th century. It is hallmarked by ideas and symbols through which something was to be created that was simultaneously claimed to have existed long before: the German people. But it was not unified in one state – it was under foreign rule and politically torn, and therefore had to become conscious and knowledgeable of itself. The battle against Napoleon and the French was the occasion in which this was bound to happen. The creation of German political agency is predicated on an anti-French feeling up until the mid-20th century, which to some extent reduced anti-Roman sentiment, but also carried it forward. This feeling found expression in the term ‘hereditary enmity’. Only in the 1960s did Konrad Adenauer, first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, and French president Charles de Gaulle, succeed in ending this hereditary enmity with a number of highly symbolic acts, replacing it with the German–French friendship. Populism’s resource of enmity was transformed into one of friendship, albeit one which has to be ritually renewed with populist folklore, even today, to retain the necessary level of commitment and to remain politically evident. Aggressively mobilised populisms have to be settled and ‘buried’, as it were, with ritual practices. Only in this way do they lose their virulence.

## The reign of Napoleon and xenophobia

From the era of anti-Napoleonic propaganda, a disposition of xenophobia has remained, at least as a sceptical distance towards ‘others’: they are often perceived as intruders who appear unbidden and make themselves at home without invitation. In Germany, that which is foreign is rarely considered enriching, and instead is often thought of as a challenge to one’s own identity and a threat to hard-earned prosperity. This *dispositif* has repeatedly been used as a resource for populist politics. Besides, the ascendancy of romanticism as a political–cultural movement<sup>35</sup> took place in the wake of the battle against Napoleon, and romanticism especially generated an abundance of symbols and narratives that serve populist politics well as communicative tools and identifying marks. Pragmatically, the rule of Napoleon and the French in Germany might have drawn to a close with the Wars of Liberation in 1813–14, but they left distinct marks on the German mentality and collective memory of this decade. Historical memory may have faded, but the fear of being threatened remained.

The intrusion of Napoleon in German history was certainly a ground-breaking event, and historian Thomas Nipperdey did not by chance begin his history of Germany in the 19th and 20th centuries with the much-quoted formula ‘In the beginning was Napoleon’.<sup>36</sup> There had been previous forays into German territory and the related destruction and devastation, of which the ruin of the Heidelberg castle remains an impressive symbol; those, however, only ravaged tracts of land and did not overthrow Germany’s political order. This was precisely the case in the wake of the Napoleonic victories: the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was declared as terminated, German imperial rule was over, and Napoleon crowned himself. Even though the empire had not been a European power since 1648, it still retained a symbolic presence, whose end was experienced as a deep historical break. This was manifested even more clearly when the states of the Rhenish Confederation, with Napoleon as protector, took the place of the Reich. The Rhine turned into the axis of his rule over Germany.

The controversy on how to appraise the Napoleonic changes, argued out among German intellectuals, developed into a downright trauma. While for some the new legal system of *code civile* and effective administration were signs of progress compared to the entangled order of the Old Reich, which was shaped more by tradition than by rationality, others emphasised the loss of territory on the left bank of the Rhine, the ongoing intrusions into the interior situation of the German states, and, most importantly, their lack of independence in foreign affairs. The former constituted a group of admirers of Napoleon to which Goethe and Hegel belonged; the latter antagonised Napoleon, and, among them, the philosopher Fichte and the poets Kleist and Arndt

played a leading role. These conflicts of opinion were paradigmatic for opposing views on Napoleon among the German population, which were in turn understood as an expression of Germany's inner turmoil. The distinct need for consensus and the German aversion to a conflict-based structuring of democracy is also a result of the memory of these clashes and their fashioning into a fate weighing on the Germans, which, so it is imagined, time and again, turns Germany into the plaything of external powers. This has been and remains an important starting point of populist politics and its slogans propagating consensus and unity as the highest of values. Thus is enforced a consensus that complies highly with populist ideas.

With the end of Napoleonic rule over Germany and the integration of the regained territories on the left bank of the Rhine into the reinvigorated Prussia, a new symbol or ensemble of myths of German identity developed in Rhenish romanticism. In poems and songs, the Rhine was reaffirmed as 'Germany's stream, not Germany's border' and everyone was called upon to participate in the *Wacht am Rhein*.<sup>37</sup> The Rhine romanticism, previously 'discovered' by English travellers, was 'Germanised' and endowed with a range of additional invested meanings; ranking among them were poems invoking beauty as the Rhine's demonic fate (*Die Loreley*), but also the restoration and safeguarding of castle ruins and derelict churches on the Middle Rhine. The *Rheingold*, narrated by the Heidelberg group of romantic writers and subsequently taken up in Richard Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, as well as the completion of the Cologne Cathedral that was interrupted in the late Middle Ages, became symbols of the restoration and completion of the Reich. In this way, a plethora of set pieces arose, which were able to serve populist politics as emotional amplifiers. The section of the Rhine between Mainz and Cologne became the treasure box of German identity, and Bonn would not have become temporary capital of West Germany after 1949 had it not been situated along the Rhine.<sup>38</sup>

## 4

# Populism in foreign policy: Wilhelm II and the path to the First World War

Otto von Bismarck, initially Prussian ministerial president and then Chancellor of the German Reich, was a champion in spreading populist slogans. From his declaration that the important issues of the time would be decided not by speeches, but by blood and iron; and his coining of the phrase 'Germans fear God and nothing else in the world', it is clear that he understood well how to combine historical myths and political symbols in such a way as to reach broad circles of the population and mobilise support for his politics. Bismarck, who had to obtain majorities in parliament, did so not least by using populist means to create feelings in the population that put pressure on members of parliament. This 'governmental populism' was an all-new style of government, and, until then, people had known of populism only as the popularity politics of the rulers, or as protest populism. Bismarck certainly had a good sense of the risks of populist utterances and limited them largely to conflicts on the domestic front. He practised a calmly calculated foreign policy and carefully avoided raising expectations with populist slogans that he would not be able to fulfil later, or that would force his hand politically. This refers to the dilemmas of populist politics: to raise expectations that gather momentum beyond one's control. Particularly in foreign policy this can be like 'riding the back of a tiger'.

### **The unfulfilled wish for international standing**

This wise distance from a populist-charged foreign policy ended at the dawn of the Wilhelminian period; Wilhelm II repeatedly interfered in the foreign policy of the German Reich with utterances that sought the applause of certain circles. Time and again, Wilhelm reclaimed respect for the German world standing – for that which Chancellor of the Reich Georg von Bülow had once with a deeply populist slogan called 'a place in the sun'.<sup>39</sup> Thereby arose a conflict with Great Britain, a global power in relative decline, while the US and Germany were economically in the ascendant. The British would presumably have come to accept a certain shifting of power, as they did in the case of the US, if this had happened



quietly, instead of being vociferously demanded on the part of Germany. Wilhelm's populist utterances about naval power and international standing turned the increased significance of the German Reich in opposition to the British Empire into a question of prestige – one of the currencies of international politics – and hence provoked repeated objections and, eventually, the opposition of the British. In response, an anti-British attitude developed in Germany that centred on the British refusal to grant the Germans their newly acquired position in the world. This sentiment, in turn, became the starting point for populisms of diverse provenance that stretched from resentment about falling short or lagging behind the British world power to indignation about English snobbishness. In parts of the lower middle class – the primary recipient of populist politics – England replaced France in the role of the main enemy before the First World War. That this enmity – and it came from both sides – was increasingly spurred on by populist utterances from politicians on both sides, and a corresponding attitude of the press,<sup>40</sup> contributed to the catastrophe of the outbreak of war.

### Enemies all around

Under the influence of populist exaggerated utterances, a fundamental shock to German liberalism's focus on foreign policy took place. Until then, it included a pronounced Anglophilia, with Britain held up as exemplar of parliamentary order and the protecting power of international trade. From a liberal standpoint, Great Britain's antipode was tsarist Russia, which was considered a stronghold of societal backwardness and reactionary politics. In the great game between Britain and Russia, German liberals were firmly on Great Britain's side, whereas Prussian conservatives openly showed sympathy for Russia. This changed with the economic and political rise of Germany, which brought imperial rivals – the great naval power and the great land power – increasingly closer. After France and Russia had already concluded a de facto defence alliance against Germany, 1907 brought about the British–Russian settlement that ended German hopes to play both powers off against each other. The development of international power blocs led to German obsessions of being encircled that finally resulted in the slogan 'enemies all around'. Initially, this was anything but a populist project, as the feeling of political isolation and military encirclement above all evoked worries and fears; but, by countering the observation 'enemies all around' with the defiant wording 'the more danger, the more honour', the threatening development was confronted with a heroic disposition that could be exploited for populist purposes. The Pan-German League and the Fatherland Party made full use of this before and during the First World War.<sup>41</sup>

With the obsession of encirclement, a special role was granted to the conflict with the British, precisely because, for a long time (for some, until the British declaration of war against the German Reich in August 1914) the Liberals and large parts of the educated middle-class saw Great Britain as a potential ally in the pursuit of a new world order. Two factors played a pivotal role in German–British alienation, and both were highly volatile for populisms. One was the construction of the German High Seas Fleet that led to the German–British arms race.<sup>42</sup> The other one was the British protectionism against German products that became dangerous competition for the birthplace of industrialisation. The battle fleet was an immensely popular project among the German bourgeoisie, first because it was the only nationwide armed service, since the ground forces were divided into the armies of Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria, Württemberg and so forth; and, second, because it offered career prospects for bourgeois officers that did not exist in this form in ground forces still dominated by the aristocracy. Finally, the construction of the battle fleet was, after all, an old project of the German national movement, whose realisation had failed repeatedly in the 19th century. Wilhelm II's decision to construct a battle fleet might essentially have been prompted by his desire for recognition from his British cousins (Wilhelm was Queen Victoria's grandson), but it was also a populist decision in that the battle fleet was a symbol of German 'international standing', and thereby a claim to equal status with the British. The German claim to 'international standing' had already effectively been alleged on a lesser, symbolic, but profoundly serious level, namely that of production and world trade, which is why the British felt compelled to play down the quality of German products in order to stand up to their competition. They enforced that they had to be assigned with the phrase 'Made in Germany' in order to classify them as inferior compared to British goods.<sup>43</sup> Not without bitterness, the British people had to acknowledge that the opposite of what was intended happened, and that the sign of devaluation turned into one of special quality. The discriminatory labelling, whose implementation revealed once again Britain's hegemonic position in international trade, and the subsequent triumph of German products, became another starting point for populisms in Germany, through which previous indignities changed into arrogance and presumptuousness. The recent uses of slogans such as '*Export(vize)weltmeister Deutschland*'<sup>44</sup> are economic populist labels used to gain political support for foreign trade. At the same time, they service the self-confidence and pride of a nation that no longer plays a role politically on a global scale, but has compensated for losses in the field of politics with gains in the economic terrain.



Here, another dimension of populism not addressed so far becomes visible: the socio-psychological element that, in the case of treating resentments, can be referred to as the mental hygiene of collective sentiments, or as the ‘contamination’ of collective inner life through arrogance and prejudices. This has most notably been the case in the disputes with England. The war essay *Händler und Helden* by the Berlin-based economic historian Werner Sombart is one of the focal points of the psycho-social disputes with the British.<sup>45</sup> It contrasts the ‘shopkeeper-like’ actions of the British, particularly during war, by letting troops from the colonies fight for them in European war zones, with the noble-heroic actions of the Germans, who were fighting for their cause themselves, and did not let others bleed or die. Sombart’s reasoning was deeply populist, turning the mass deaths on the fronts into a measure of patriotic commitment in which the British lost out, at least morally. They were, despite being in a position to win the war in military terms, nonetheless the moral losers.

In the antecedents of the First World War, the emperor had triggered foreign policy dissonances and resentments with a range of populist comments. After he had coined the catchphrase ‘yellow peril’, by which he referred to the provocation of Europe by China,<sup>46</sup> he declared in the *Hunnenrede* (Hun speech) – which he gave on the occasion of the embarkation of German marines to defeat the Chinese Boxer Rebellion – that German soldiers should enter China as the Huns under their king, Etzel, had once done, so that even in a thousand years no Chinese person would even dare to look askance at a German. Such sayings contributed to global political resentment of the Germans, and when the German military in the First World War advanced with great severity against Belgian civilians,<sup>47</sup> the British referred to the Germans as ‘Huns’ or ‘barbarians’. Even the Krüger Dispatch, Kaiser Wilhelm’s declaration of solidarity with the Boer insurgents in South Africa, was characterised by populist resentments rather than foreign policy foresight. Nowhere is populism more dangerous than in external policy, where its effects stray and quickly turn into the opposite of what was intended. In the Wilhelmian era preceding the First World War, such populisms dominated German foreign policy – not necessarily in the practical alignment of German politics, but nevertheless in its communication. They created a picture of the neighbouring countries that by no means corresponded to the actual politics of the Reich, and placed its foreign policy under internal pressures of expectations, which could not be met. As a consequence, Berlin took greater risks in July 1914 than were actually in Germany’s interest.

Wilhelm’s main populist coup enabling political truce was certainly his speech at the outset of the First World War, in which he proclaimed to no longer know any parties, only Germans.<sup>48</sup>

He thereby served a need for a sense of community and a shared identity among many Germans that found expression in an imagined *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) hardened by war. The idea that a society can be converted into a community once more, which became a permanent essential element of the ‘ideas of 1914’,<sup>49</sup> originated here. It was the basis for populist strategies that were developed during the war, but did not take full effect until the Weimar Republic.

## Populist elements in National Socialist politics and ideology

Today, in retrospect, 12 years of National Socialist rule in Germany are primarily associated with racial ideology and the policy of extermination of European Jews. This, however, is a retrospective view, whereas National Socialism for contemporaries of the 1930s, under the agony of the Weimar Republic, represented itself entirely differently: it was perceived as overcoming political oppositions and social class differences. How dominant this perception was is revealed by the way in which opponents of National Socialism on the political left denounced these claims as ideological lies and political deceptions. Premonitions of the Nazi's racism were the exception. A change of thinking started only with the Nuremberg Laws and the boycott schemes against 'Jewish' shops, medical practices and law firms. This blindness to the anti-Semitism of the Nazis was not because they kept quiet about their racism (in fact they aired it openly), but was due to the fact that the racist element of Nazi ideology found little resonance politically, unlike the ideas of creating or restoring a *Volksgemeinschaft*. Naturally, connections between racism and *Volksgemeinschaft* existed, but initially they did not play a role in common perception. Thus, even opponents of National Socialism saw the challenge it represented in the dangerous appeal of a new *Volksgemeinschaft*. The *Volksgemeinschaft* was a pronounced populist project that especially appealed to the *petite bourgeoisie*, the traditional audience of populism.<sup>50</sup>

### The order of Versailles

The other great expectations, affiliated with Hitler and his ascendancy, were the revision of the order of Versailles, the demolition of the security policy encircling Germany established by the Treaty of Versailles, the end to reparation payments, and Germany's political resurgence.<sup>51</sup> This process was less about the tangible interests of 'the people' that revolved around the severe economic crisis of the early 1930s and the high level of unemployment in Germany, and more about honour and recognition, in which individuals participated by

identifying with the collective German subject. It is precisely in cases where the effects of populist politics cannot be measured in the short term, but are reflected in general mood shifts, where a populist-based propaganda strategy is most serious. The restoration of national grandeur as promised by Hitler was dramatised by persistently talking of 'Germany's humiliation' in the Treaty of Versailles and its associated disgrace and defilement, and by asserting that all of this was a result of the feeble and cowardly demeanour of republican politicians in the Weimar Republic. The prospect of an end to 'adherence to Versailles' was popular not only in conservative and right-wing circles, but extended far into the political centre and beyond, even to left-wing circles. The populist reinterpretation of these resentments contributed immensely to Hitler's and his party's ascendancy, and the achievements that Hitler was soon able to celebrate in this regard added considerably to the strengthening of his reputation among the population, and to the consolidation of his political position in Germany. The German Armed Forces and its respective officer corps – as the single power factor that could still become dangerous for Hitler – became politically paralysed by foreign policy successes and the resonance they found in the population. These successes really existed and benefited from French–British constraint during the occupation of the Rhineland, the invasion of several battalions of the Wehrmacht in the demilitarised zone in Western Germany. At least as effective as the results was their populist preparation and follow-up, which was designed to raise and display the Führer's charisma.

### The populist production of Hitler

It is a delicate task to analyse the interplay of charisma and populism:<sup>52</sup> charisma is certainly not the result of populist politics, but independent of it in its origins. However, a constituency's belief in charisma is reinforced by stagings and proceedings that are populist in their basic structure. While charisma itself creates detachment and distance by which the charismatic person is separated from their entourage, its populist revision adapts so that transcendences do not become too large and above all not insurmountable. The secret of political charisma is the simultaneity of two opposing effects: the creation of an infinitely vast distance and the imagination of an almost equally great proximity. Using Hitler as an example allows the study of an abundance of populist identities, from the opera visitor and Wagner connoisseur, to the friend of children or the rambler at the *Obersalzberg*, which moved the charismatic man closer to the common man without letting him appear as an everyman. Also, Hitler's self-description as a simple private of the First World War served as a means to prevent the distance between the

Führer and his followers from growing overly wide, whereas the Iron Cross First Class worn on his chest revealed that he was not just 'any' private of the First World War. The widespread wording 'If the Führer had known', that was used to address the regime's shortcomings and deficiencies, is an expression of the populist configuration of the 'Führer-image'.<sup>53</sup>

The distinction between money 'making' and 'grabbing' was also populist, with its unmistakably anti-Semitic undertone included in the original party programme of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP).<sup>54</sup> The nationalisation of the means of production was not elevated to a political goal, as in socialism, but instead banking and the credit service sector, especially exchange and speculation, took centre stage. This was markedly popular in the context of wartime profiteers, inflation and the collapse of the stock market. Adding to this was the assumption that this capital was not nationally bound, but was 'straying' internationally, serving mostly speculative purposes. National Socialism, on the other hand – or so was promised – would take action against this by permitting only those forms of capital expenditure that served the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. In particular, the permanent prefix Volk-, upon which the regime prided itself, from the *Volkswagen* (people's car) to the *Volkskühlschrank* (people's fridge), became the labelling of a welfare state populism that was portrayed as upholding the promises made. These forms of populism became the collection points of social envy that were afterwards diverted to the group of (wealthy) Jews in Germany. Anti-Semitism in National Socialist Germany developed populist features, not as racial hatred, but as channelled social envy.<sup>55</sup>

### Elitism as counterweight to populism

The populist side of National Socialism certainly faced a distinct elitist side that ensured that populist elements did not gain the upper hand and that National Socialist politics consequently became dependent on the population's expectations and sentiments. The SS represented the most severe expression of this elitism as it evolved into the personification of distance from the population. The staging of this elitism was served not only by the black uniform<sup>56</sup> but also by the secrecy that surrounded this organisation within the Nazi regime. An ongoing terror emanated from the unpredictability associated with this secrecy. The terror prevented any close familiarity of the population with the NSDAP's chapters and section leaders, which might otherwise have emerged by means of populist elements. National Socialism in Germany was a dual state – to take up a term of Ernst Fraenkel<sup>57</sup> – of populism and elitism.

## Anti-communism as populism: the German Federal Republic between 1949 and 1969

### Populism in the German Democratic Republic

The Socialist Unity Party (SED) rule in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) also worked in many respects as a combination of populist and elitist elements, whereby it should certainly be noted that, with the transition from the Ulbricht to the Honnecker era, populist elements gained considerably in importance and upstaged the elitist dimension. This was tantamount to the decrease of totalitarian elements in the party's rule, whose political disciplinary function was to be compensated for by a better supply of consumer goods to the population. Acceptance and approval were to take the place of fear and terror so as to strengthen the regime and allow for a limited liberalisation within. This was temporarily the case, but because of rising expectations of the populations, it led to a national debt that ultimately shattered the SED regime.<sup>59</sup> The project of the SED to compensate the lack of participatory-democratic structures and rejection of political alternatives with a populist politics 'from above' thereby failed. That is not to say that 'populism from above', or 'governmental populism', is principally doomed to fail. But such a form of exertion of power relies on having access to resources that tend to be unlimited in order to be able to pacify 'the people' permanently. It is doubtful that this is possible on a permanent basis, in view of the principle of rising expectations. Top-down populism, as a substitute for democratic decision-making power and empowerment, is rather a form of political transition than a sustainable political model.

### Wealth as a resource of populism

The supply of goods to the population was also pivotal for the stabilisation of the Federal Republic in Western Germany, although in this case, on the basis of a market-based system, it was not the responsibility of the political leadership but the people, who had to ensure it with their own diligence and skill. Politics was responsible only for the structuring of basic conditions to ensure that those who delivered benefited.

The market-based economy of the Federal Republic was essentially a system based on individual incentives that did not depend on populist elements. Those came into play only with the social dimension, by which market malfunctions and individual calamities were to be absorbed, and provisions for old age and illness were to be ensured. Politically, these elements were in fact exploitable only during their implementation; they then transitioned into features of the system and became virtually taken for granted. No party could politically profit from their operation. The welfare state generated legitimacy and support for the overall political order, but not – at least not in the longer term – for one of the elected political parties entrusted to govern. The social market economy is in principle an order averse to populism.

That certainly does not mean that its defence of alternative political models could not also have taken place in populist forms. The party that primarily represented the political implementation of this order in the period of origin of the Federal Republic, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), has substantially profited politically from the success of the social market economy. The immensely popular Minister of Economics, Ludwig Erhard, became the symbol of the economic miracle, and his demeanour as well as his habitus conveyed to the population the confidence that the new prosperity would be not only a temporary interlude, but a permanent condition – if Erhard and his party were left in power.<sup>59</sup> Erhard himself strove hard to reinforce these expectations, by writing books and brochures (among others, the programmatic book *Wohlstand für alle*) in which he connected the wonder of the new prosperity to the order he had enforced and, above all, to monetary reform and the abolition of the state rationing of scarce goods.<sup>60</sup> He was anxious to exploit the economic miracle represented by him in a populist way. This lasted as long as prosperity increased and unemployment decreased, but as early as the next large crisis of the mid-1960s Erhard's popularity sank and he lost the chancellorship that he had recently taken over from Adenauer.

What was adopted from this period in the German collective mentality and political memory, and what constitutes a considerable resource of populist slogans and policies, is the idea that a stable currency is the basic foundation of prosperity. An expression of this was the rise of the German Central Bank as the guardian of monetary stability to become *the* political institution that, alongside the Federal Constitutional Court, enjoyed, and still enjoys, the population's trust. The expectations, as well as the reservations about the euro and the European Central Bank, have their origins therein. The Germans (or at least large parts of the German population) deeply mistrust an economic order and politics that does not follow the imperatives of monetary stability. This is the weakness of the European common

currency, the euro, repeatedly attacked with relevant slogans. Time will tell if the common currency can stand up to these expectations and their populist exploitation in the long run.

### Anti-communism and discrediting political alternatives to the Christian Democratic Union

Anti-communism was the most important resource of populism in the political culture of the early Federal Republic of Germany. More than anyone, Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, repeatedly drew on this resource in order to retain power.<sup>61</sup> The populist utilisation of anti-communist sentiment in the West is thereby to be understood in two different ways. Initially, it was about a political dispute with the Soviet Military Administration (SMA) and the SED in the part of Germany occupied by Soviet troops, in which measures of expropriation and political oppression were at the centre. The competition of systems between capitalism and socialism was reframed in such a way that it became a choice between freedom and oppression. This was certainly more about political propaganda than about populist strategies. The competing systems and their propagandistic accompaniments became genuinely populist elements only where Soviet politics and the GDR regime (which, to deny its political legitimacy, was for a long time labelled SBZ, or Soviet Occupation Zone) served as the basis for denouncing alternatives to the politics of integration with the West and the CDU-driven social market economy as controlled remotely by Moscow, and leading inevitably to a SBZ order. Adenauer was a master of this style of politics, which was eventually supported emphatically by the newspaper *Bild*, the most widely read tabloid in Germany. The message read: 'those who flirt with alternatives to Adenauer's politics run the risk of playing the game of the communists and Moscow's power politics.' This found exemplary expression in the CDU election poster of 1957, which shows a Soviet soldier peeking over a ridge with a plethora of lines and colour bars running towards him, inscribed with the slogan 'all roads of socialism lead to Moscow'.<sup>62</sup> This was directed against the 'democratic socialism' favoured by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) at the time.

### Anti-intellectualism

Affiliated with this politics of populist exploitation of anti-communism was a tangible anti-intellectualism, in which the traditional distance of the *petite bourgeoisie* from the intellectual *Mundwerksburschen* (a term coined by Arnold Gehlen meaning something like 'the chattering classes')<sup>63</sup> became more pointed. The politicising intellectuals who

usually stood politically to the left of the CDU were presented as a group that was politically dangerous because of their ivory tower, know-it-all manner. The anti-intellectual sentiment of large parts of the population was made politically fruitful in this way. The point was to politically paralyse the potential contradictions and criticisms that became increasingly noticeable. A climax of this form of populism was reached when Erhard called intellectuals and authors who had criticised him 'pipsqueaks'.<sup>64</sup> The tensions between populism and elitism were used by parts of the political elite to direct anti-elitist resentments, preferably of lower-middle-class circles, into the preferred channels, where they were not able to harm the social elite but instead targeted a group with an occasionally elitist way of life and that was irrelevant in terms of its political power: the intellectuals. The potential explosiveness of populist aspirations was thus defused with political means. By playing with a populism that one thought one could control, a populism that could have become politically dangerous was rendered harmless. This politics ultimately resulted in the conflicts of 1968, in which a fast-growing number of students or academically informed movements resisted against this populist *dispositif*, and initiated a new development stage in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>65</sup> Anti-communism and anti-intellectualism hence became less important, and where they were asserted again with campaigns these did not yield the same effects as in the 1950s and 1960s.

While the 1968 movement was utterly un-populist, and in its ostentatious elitism downright anti-populist, a number of left-wing movements showing populist features evolved subsequently. First and foremost, the *K-Gruppen* (K groups) are worth mentioning. These political splinter groups labelled themselves communist, but did not, in so doing, refer to the Soviet Union, but to Maoist China, North Korea and Albania. They departed from a Marxist class-based analysis by emphasising the 'people' as opposed to the 'ruling clique', and followed antagonistic conceptions of society, typical of populism: within it exist only 'those below' and 'those above'.<sup>66</sup> The populism of the *K-Gruppen*, manifested in slogans such as 'to serve the people', resulted in a rigid antagonism, which no longer had anything to do with the dialectical class analysis of the Marxist tradition. Technically, there should be no words to waste on these groups, all of whom had disappeared by the early 1990s, and which did not play a politically relevant role before then, but had rather belonged to the folklore of the left-wing scene. But since 2008–09, similar antagonistic ideas have gained relevance with the rise of the Occupy movement. Their worldview is also largely Manichaeic in style – that is, the vast majority, 'the good', stand opposite a small group, 'the evil', which is, however, refined and malicious and has managed to gain world domination.

Those ideas of the occupation of public spaces, blockades, or sabotage actions,<sup>67</sup> gathered under the slogan of 'insurrection',<sup>68</sup> amount to a 'symbolic' act of resistance of rebellious elites who have taken up the battle against financial capital and its sinister mechanisms in the name and interest of 'the people'. The Occupy movement, as well as Attac, are of course international movements that have offshoots in Germany. They do not represent a national specificity but instead stand for the 'internationalisation' of populism.

The peace and the green movements of the 1980s, which fundamentally transformed the country's political circumstances, had a much greater political relevance in the history of the Federal German Republic than the *K-Gruppen*. The preservation of peace and the protection of nature are not populist, but are instead genuinely political goals that are of honourable value. The populist aspect of the peace and the environmental movement consisted of the way it propelled the re-intentionalisation of politics, which involved a strong instinct towards voluntarism. Typical, therefore, was the disinterest in functional interconnections and the associated paradoxical effects of political interventions. Where one disputed with them, it soon led to ideas of intrigues and conspiracies, in models in which intentions, namely those of the opposition, were again the decisive factors. Generally, the intentionalist political perception of populism is closely linked to conspiracy theories. A peace debate that is cleared of all paradoxes of political action, and in which only 'pure disposition' is considered expedient, was also populist in this sense. The Manichaeism of this position was underlined by the apocalyptic scenarios that would arise in the case that those with the 'pure disposition' failed.

This was different in the case of the manifold and fissured environmental movements, from which the German Green party (*Die Grünen*) emerged.<sup>69</sup> For a long time it was split into two factions, the fundamentalists (*Fundis*) and the political realists (*Realos*), and neither leant towards a populist politics: the *Fundis* because their political project amounted to a fundamental reorganisation of society in which many would have to accept losses in prosperity; the *Realos*, because they settled for the required political compromises and thus limited the scope of populist politics. This, however, did not keep both factions from occasionally presenting their favoured politics through populist gestures. But in this way they were no different from all the other parties in the political spectrum of the Federal Republic.

## ‘We are the people’. ‘We are one people’: German reunification

The slogan ‘we are the people’ that sprang out of the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig was certainly not intended as a populist slogan; democratic rights and opportunities of participation were genuinely claimed from a regime that admittedly used the term *Volk* on every occasion, but that governed ‘the people’ in an elitist-authoritarian way, and treated them paternally at best. By claiming to be ‘the people’ (which became more plausible with the growing number of protesters week after week), the protesters took the regime that pretended to be ‘a people’s democracy’ at its word and revoked its legitimacy to act in the name of ‘the people’. It was about a polemic intensification in the fight for the representation of ‘the people’: the latter against the People’s Police.<sup>70</sup>

As Honnecker’s overthrow and the shock to the SED rule could not improve the escalating economic situation, the unification of both German states was demanded soon after the fall of the Berlin wall. However, this could not be readily accomplished given the still-existing military bloc and the different economic systems of both German states; every step towards German unification depended on the approval of the Victorious Powers of the Second World War, and soon it became clear that the process of unification would impose immense financial burdens on the Germans of the Federal Republic.<sup>71</sup> The slogan ‘we are one people’ was an intervention by parts of the GDR population that urged this process to be sped up. It was national-patriotic rather than populist, and it was foremost a reminder to West Germany from the East, urging them to drive the unification process forward, after the SED regime had collapsed and the Wall had come down. In this situation, the slogan of Chancellor Helmut Kohl was more populist, as he spoke of ‘green pastures’ that were to arise in the acceding territory once unification had been accomplished. These words might have made a crucial contribution to the majority the CDU won in the following elections. In a sense, Kohl played the part of Plato’s ‘confectioner’, who promises sweets and does not address the difficulties and problems that are to be solved. A case can be made that the Chancellor was deeply convinced that his predictions would soon come true. He seems to have



vastly underestimated the lean period that had to be covered on the path to 'green pastures'. German social democracy did not underestimate this 'lean period', which is why it repeatedly pointed to the problems and costs of rapid unification. Voters in the areas of the former GDR did not appreciate this 'realistic' assessment. It was overlooked for an extended period during the elections because it did not lend itself to the populist *dispositif*.

### Distributive populism

The politics of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) that had come out of the SED, however, can be labelled populist. It capitalised politically on the discrepancy of expectations and actual conditions, including the deficits in the East, noticeable in wages and pensions. One can speak of a 'distributive populism' that was first and foremost concerned with those that were close to the old regime and that were now disadvantaged or could not cope with the new circumstances (any more). The electoral successes of the PDS in the newly formed German states resulted from a populist reformulation of problems that appeared in the process of unification, and in the mistakes that were made in the process. At the same time, the PDS was actively involved at the municipal and regional level in finding solutions to these problems, and this limited severely its options to play with the populist *dispositif*. At least on the municipal level, the party soon played the part of the 'trouble-shooter' instead of the populist.<sup>72</sup>



## Covert and hidden populism in unified Germany

The euphoria of unification was soon to be followed by xenophobic riots and arson attacks in, not only East, but also West Germany. At times these gave rise to the concern that a return to aggressive German nationalism could be expected; and that this nationalism was not immediately ready to shy away from the violent persecution of strangers or those perceived as alien. That it did not come as far as it was then feared is also a consequence of the fact that none of the established parties incorporated xenophobic resentments in their political programmes, thereby maintaining them as socially and politically acceptable. At the same time, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), which came across as severely xenophobic, remained politically on the margins. The fact that it could not capitalise on its entry into some of the parliaments of the newly formed Federal States was also a consequence of its political isolation; nowhere could it fulfil the role of a majority party or even a coalition partner, and so it had no other option than to remain a political outsider causing scandals.

### **The successful exclusion of right-wing populism**

That is not to say that there is no political potential in Germany for a xenophobic politics. That it exists and, in parts, reaches deeply into bourgeois circles became apparent in the debates following the publication of Thilo Sarrazin's book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*. Even if Sarrazin's assumptions are not openly xenophobic, responses to them still made apparent that they could be understood in this way and still meet with approval. But xenophobia referring to asylum seekers and migrants of the second and third generations could not be translated into a populist politics capable of gaining 10–15 per cent of the potential vote, as is the case in neighbouring European states.

But why could no right-wing populist party establish itself in Germany in the way that these parties had in other European countries, where fear of ethnic-nationalist and religious-confessional 'foreign infiltration', and anxiety of migrants and asylum seekers are central political themes? A first reason is the consensus operating in the political community, according to which a right-wing political party – even if its

presence was a prerequisite for eventual government formation – is out of the question. Both as a majority party and even more so as a coalition partner.<sup>73</sup> Hence, it is clear from the outset that such a party would have difficulty in gaining real political influence. And this would clearly limit the interest of potential candidates to run. It also pointed out to potential voters that votes for this party would be politically wasted votes. Thus far, the isolation of right-wing populists has made an impact. Secondly, this isolation was complemented by a public discussion, in which the history of the Weimar Republic was invoked again and again as a cautionary tale with a final phase characterised by the crushing of the political centre by those parties that had campaigned on populist slogans. The end of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazi party apparently still strike a strong note of warning in the collective memory, so that a vigorous hint is sufficient to blunt any right-wing populist dispositions in the voters on the one hand, and to block the temptation that probably exists among members of the political class to score points with right-wing populist topics, on the other. Currently, it does not look as though xenophobia and fear of foreign infiltration could come into play in politics in any significant way.

### No populist foreign policy

A further apprehension – noticeable after German unification – was that Germany's now re-established central position between East and West would lead to a renewal of geopolitical constellations, in which a superiority complex combined with a fear of encirclement could give rise to a populist foreign policy through which boasting and unpredictability could upset Europe's recently established new order.<sup>74</sup> There has, however, been no question of this over the past 20 years. Quite the contrary: German foreign policy has, time and again, bowed to the service of Europe, thereby repeatedly yielding to the French. Germany's central position in Europe was not perceived as a threat but instead as a form of increased security and it was used to vigorously cash in on the peace dividend. Populist influence on foreign policy did not exist. The firm integration of the Federal Republic into NATO and the European Union has certainly contributed to that. When this integration was questioned, the questioning came from the left-wing populists rather than the right-wing populists.

### Populist potential of the euro crisis

For now, the only relevant playground for populists is fiscal and monetary policy; this is the nesting place for increased anxieties since the introduction of the euro. It would be wrong to claim that every critic

of a possible European fiscal union is a populist: this dispute is, primarily, a factual-political controversy about Germany's long-term interests and about the plausibility of establishing and asserting Europe-wide budgetary regulation.

It is also true, however, that scepticism regarding budgetary discipline in, and fiscal union with, the Mediterranean countries is more easily charged with populism than the more general discussion for a way forward beyond the common European currency towards a common European financial and economic policy.

The clientelism around budgets in some southern European countries and the perceived opulence of the local political class is a problem within the EU – and it is increasingly met with opposition and indignation by the Germans, who are notoriously the biggest net contributor to the Union. In Germany, the populist exploitation of these themes initially emanated from the tabloid press, until it became the tool of several politicians and of their parties. Meanwhile, fears and worries over the future of the euro merged with old stereotypes about the exploitation of the Germans by the southerners, who indulged in their *dolce far niente*, while in Germany one had to work long and hard to finance the luxury habits of the South. This remains a caricatural escalation as long as Germany is not isolated within the EU and the Berlin–Paris axis operates. But the political isolation of Germany within the EU could certainly result in an outburst of anti-European populism in Germany that would plunge the EU into a dangerous crisis.

A final question: How likely is it that established parties in Germany will draw on the populist *dispositif* more frequently in the future without becoming populist themselves? Karin Priester has pointed out that populism increasingly appears in crises of representation,<sup>75</sup> and, at the very least, the two catch-all parties in Germany, the CDU and the SPD, stand in such a crisis – the SPD more so than the CDU.<sup>76</sup> The classic commitment of voters to 'their' party has eroded, the percentage of swing voters and undecideds are increasing, and in constellations in which the electoral outcome depends on the degree of voter mobilisation, the temptation to draw on populist topics is strong: in its most harmless variant as distributive populism, and in the most dangerous as identity populism. The former will certainly be the case and is noticeable already regarding demographic change and future pension payments; identity populism, however, is a no-go for catch-all parties as long as the warning of Weimar continues to exist in the German collective memory and can be politically activated. For smaller parties choosing populism is not a viable option: it is unlikely for the Green party given its political alignment, and the FDP faced a political split when it flirted with this direction. As for

catch-all parties that have played with identity populism, in particular, they had to expect significant reputation costs: in the crisis of representation, these parties will search for salvation in a strengthened clientelism rather than in an offensive populism.

# Notes

- 1 See Hartleb, 'Auf- und Abstieg der Hamburger Schill-Partei' and Decker, *Der neue Rechtspopulismus*
- 2 See Moreau and Neu, *Die PDS zwischen Linksextremismus und Linkspopulismus*
- 3 Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus. Annäherungen an ein Chamäleon*, p. 237f
- 4 Ibid, pp. 230ff
- 5 Studies on populism differ in this question: while some see the beginnings of populism in the 19th century and from then onwards observe cycles of populism (for example Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, pp. 230ff), others see it as dating back much further (see for example Pombeni, 'Das Problem des Populismus im Rahmen der europäischen Geschichte').
- 6 On that point, for Greece, see Berve, *Die Tyrannis bei den Griechen*, pp. 164ff and 373ff; with regard to Italy, Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, pp. 27ff, is still relevant.
- 7 See Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen*, pp. 91–143
- 8 In his theory of elitism, Vilfredo Pareto distinguishes between those elites that cut themselves off and increase in number only on their own terms, and those that are anxious to convert the most capable elements from the actual or potential counter-elites to their column. The development of democracy was not only a transformation of elites but also a transformation of political systems.
- 9 See Canfora, *Politische Philologie. Altertumswissenschaften und moderne Staatsideologien*, pp. 45–60
- 10 Platon, *Der Staat/Politeia*, pp. 189ff
- 11 Consequently, the classic Manichaeic scheme of populism from above and below, of (good) people and (manipulating) elites, is duplicated by a distinction in both poles to give a four-sided juxtaposition: manipulating elites have migrated to the margins, and the good people have been aligned with the threatening people, immigrants of the underclass. See Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, p. 235f
- 12 Social sciences and cultural studies in Germany have concentrated intently on the self–other distinction over recent years; see for example Egnér (ed.), *Das Eigene und das Fremde. Angst und Faszination*; Bielefeld (ed.), *Das Eigene und das Fremde. Neuer Rassismus in der Alten Welt?*; Janz (ed.), *Faszination und Schrecken des Fremden*; for a theoretical engagement with the 'Other' see Münkler (ed.), *Furcht und Faszination. Facetten der Fremdheit*
- 13 See Stanley, 'The thin ideology of populism'; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*
- 14 In research on populism, two camps are opposed accordingly: the faction of those who warn about stretching the term populism and strive after a precise definition, and those that work with a broad definition of populism and draw differentiations within it by distinguishing different types and hybridisations.

- 15 Along these lines see Diehl, 'Die Komplexität des Populismus. Ein Plädoyer für ein mehrdimensionales und graduelles Konzept'
- 16 See Schmitter, 'A balance sheet of the vices and virtues of "populism"; Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, pp. 50–71; and also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective to Democracy?*
- 17 For more details see Münkler, Grünberger and Meyer, *Nationenbildung. Die Nationalisierung Europas im Diskurs humanistischer Intellektueller*, pp. 163ff
- 18 For more details see Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*
- 19 See Canfora, 'Tacitus und die Wiederentdeckung der alten Germanen'; and also Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book. Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich*
- 20 On the invention of *Germania* see Flach, 'Der taciteische Zugang zu der Welt der Germanen'
- 21 On the distinction of identity and protest populism, see Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, p. 64
- 22 Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*; on the conflict between Heinrich and Thomas Mann about civilisation and culture see Koopmann, *Thomas Mann – Heinrich Mann. Die ungleichen Brüder*, pp. 270ff
- 23 On the nationalisation of music see contributions in Danuser and Münkler (eds), *Deutsche Meister – böse Geister? Nationale Selbstfindung in der Musik*
- 24 On the role of the middle classes in populisms see Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, p. 17f
- 25 Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, pp. 109ff
- 26 Ibid, pp. 165ff
- 27 Hirschi, *Wettkampf der Nationen. Konstruktionen einer deutschen Ehrgemeinschaft an der Wende von Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*
- 28 On that point, for more details see Münkler, Grünberger and Meyer, *Nationenbildung*, pp. 263ff
- 29 Ibid, pp. 210ff
- 30 See Pollmann, 'Eine natürliche Feindschaft: Ursprung und Funktion der schwarzen Legende über Spanien in den Niederlanden, 1560–1581'
- 31 See Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, pp. 188ff
- 32 See Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, p. 67f
- 33 See Münkler, 'Vater Staat'
- 34 Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932. Ein Handbuch*
- 35 Safransky, *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre*
- 36 Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte. Bd. 1: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat 1800–1860*
- 37 See Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, pp. 389ff
- 38 Symbols and myths are resources of populist politics, most notably if it concerns 'identity populism', but they are not a populist *dispositif*.
- 39 On the politics of 'free trade' pursued by Bülow see Hildebrandt, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler*, pp. 190–248; Bülow expressed his foreign policy by saying that Germany had to decide whether it wanted to be a rock or a hard place; see van Laak, *Über alles in der Welt. Deutscher Imperialismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, pp. 73ff
- 40 See Brechtken, 'Kaiser, Kampfschiffe und politische Kultur: Britannias Bild von Wilhelms Deutschland' and also Rose, "'The writers, not the sailors...': Großbritannien, die Hochseeflotte und die Revolution der Staatenwelt'
- 41 On this see Dülffer and Holl (eds), *Bereit zum Krieg. Kriegsmentalität im Wilhelminischen Deutschland*
- 42 See Massie, *Dreadnought. Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*
- 43 Umbach, 'Made in Germany'
- 44 Editor's note: for many years, Germany called itself the 'export world champion' and this new title, 'export (vice) world champion', refers to the recent ascendancy of China.
- 45 Sombart, *Händler und Helden. Patriotische Betrachtungen*
- 46 Gollwitzer, *Die gelbe Gefahr. Geschichte eines Schlagworts*
- 47 See Horn and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*
- 48 See Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of Modern Ages*
- 49 See Verhey, *Der 'Geist von 1914' und die Erfindung der Volksgemeinschaft*
- 50 On this point especially see Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein. Deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933–1945*, pp. 196ff
- 51 On the first years of Hitler's rule see Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 309–90
- 52 See Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, pp. 72–91
- 53 For more details see Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth. Image and Reality in the Third Reich*
- 54 In *Rechter und linker Populismus* (pp. 183f and 209) Karin Priester has pointed out the relevance of money as a topic in left-wing as well as right-wing populism. By distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' money, the problem of having to make programmatic statements on the restructuring of the economic and societal order is avoided, which begs the question of the different social classes and their interests. By suggesting that one could make up for everything by liquidating all 'bad money', every group of society potentially has the possibility to see themselves as a profiteer. This fundamental feature can also be revealed in National Socialism.
- 55 This aspect of National Socialism has recently been exposed, most notably by Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*
- 56 See Diehl, *Macht-Mythos-Utopie. Die Körperbilder der SS-Männer*
- 57 See Fraenkel, *Der Doppelstaat*
- 58 On the history of the GDR see Schröder, *Der SED-Staat. Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft. 1949–1990*, pp. 199ff
- 59 On the image of Erhard and on the association of the economic miracle with his name see Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, pp. 457ff; on illustrations of the economic miracle see Wolfrum, *Die 50er Jahre. Kalter Krieg und Wirtschaftswunder*

- 60 See Mierzejewski, *Ludwig Erhard. Der Wegbereiter der sozialen Marktwirtschaft*, pp. 191ff
- 61 Conze, *Die Suche nach Sicherheit. Eine Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1949 bis in die Gegenwart*, pp. 109ff
- 62 On the significance of political posters for populist politics see Wasmund, *Politische Plakate aus dem Nachkriegsdeutschland. Zwischen Kapitulation und Staatsgründung*
- 63 Anti-intellectualism, alongside anti-institutionalism, anti-liberalism and anti-elitism, are trademarks of populism. This shows that populism is mainly a reactive movement.
- 64 Mierzejewski, *Ludwig Erhard*, p. 306. Erhard's sentence reads: 'Da hört der Dichter auf, da fängt der ganz kleine Pinscher an, der in dümmster Weise kläfft.'
- 65 See Conze, *Die Suche nach Sicherheit*, pp. 331ff
- 66 See Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, pp. 211ff
- 67 For forms of resistance the text *L'insurrection qui vient*, written by an 'Invisible Committee' (Anonym), is insightful. This text has been translated into German.
- 68 The broad attention the pamphlet by Hessel, *Empört Euch!*, has attracted is connected to this gesture of indignation.
- 69 See Raschke, *Die Grünen. Wie sie wurden, was sie sind*; and Volmer, *Die Grünen*
- 70 See Kowalczyk, *Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR*, pp. 307ff
- 71 See Ritter, *Wir sind das Volk! Wir sind ein Volk! Geschichte der deutschen Einigung*; and Rödter, *Deutschland einig Vaterland. Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung*
- 72 See Neugebauer and Stöss, *Die PDS. Geschichte. Organisation. Wähler. Konkurrenten*; and Spier, Butzlaff, Micus and Walter (eds), *Die Linkspartei. Zeitgemäße Idee oder Bündnis ohne Zukunft?*
- 73 The development of the CDU-led Hamburg Senate, which was possible only by incorporating the Schill party in government, was an exception.
- 74 On the old and new 'central position' of Germany see Münkler, *Mitte und Maß. Der Kampf um die richtige Ordnung*, pp. 174ff
- 75 Priester, *Rechter und linker Populismus*, pp. 237ff
- 76 See Walter, *Im Herbst der Volksparteien? Eine kleine Geschichte von Aufstieg und Rückgang politischer Massenintegration*

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# Seasons of Italian populism

Gianni Riotta,  
October 2012

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## The Leopard's imprint on the roots of Italian populism

'Populism', like 'nationalism' or 'terrorism', is one of those terms in politics that each of us thinks we fully understand, but seems to elude us when we try to clearly define it. Let us start with *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* classic definition: 'Populism: a political program or movement that champions the common person, usually by favourable contrast with an elite. Populism usually combines elements of the left and right, opposing large business and financial interests but also frequently being hostile to established socialist and labour parties.'

Today, as in the past, populists appeal to 'the street' and the 'everyman' against 'technocrats' and the 'financial industry'. Whether from a left-wing or right-wing tradition, they discuss issues only in terms of 'us' against 'them', simplifying problems to a mere 'good'-versus-'bad' as in a Disney cartoon. At their best, populist slogans embody the anger, frustration and the disappointment of the middle and lower classes. At their worst, they inspire extreme racism and open the way towards authoritarianism and anti-democratic movements.

In the history of the 20th century, in no other country have the populist DNA, tactics, strategy, culture, project and vision been so recognisable as in Italy: the population has had to weather a pre-fascist period, 20 years of dictatorship under Benito Mussolini, the so-called First Republic (1945–89) dominated by Christian Democracy and its allies, a Second Republic (1994–2011) polarised between the centre-right party of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and the twice dominant centre-left party of the economist Romano Prodi. Finally, heavy traces of populism can be detected in the hostility generated by the reformist agenda of Mario Monti's technocratic government since 2011.

'Don't ever forget that we, Italians, invented fascism. It has been exported to Spain, Portugal, Greece, Germany, the Balkans and Central Europe and even to Scandinavia and Great Britain, yet we were the ones to invent it,' was often repeated by Vittorio Foa (1910–2008), an anti-fascist partisan, one of the founding fathers of the Italian Constitution and Secretary of Italy's major labour union, CGIL. Mussolini was always politically aware of this fact in his meetings with Adolf Hitler.

Despite their differences in military power, the Führer acknowledged until the very end his debt to the Duce for introducing fascism, including by saving Mussolini after his arrest in 1943. Thus, if we study what political scientists in the 1970s called – potentially exaggerating – ‘the Italian case’, it allows us to piece together the genome of populism (as in a laboratory) and its ambiguous relationship with fascism so that we can recognise its characteristics in other cultures and countries.

Semiologist and writer Umberto Eco in one of his conferences<sup>1</sup> speaks about ‘Ur Fascism’, the origins and foundations of what makes up the DNA of fascists. There is a clear although not complete ideological overlap in Italy between fascism and populism. The movement founded by Mussolini used populist elements, but fascism does not equate to populism and vice versa. For example, populists do not always share fascism’s respect for traditions, which Eco considers fundamental to totalitarian ideologies. As discussed later, populists seem to prefer to break from tradition using slogans such as ‘Basta!’ (Enough!), ‘Cambiamo Tutto’ (Let’s change everything) and ‘Mandiamo a casa i vecchi’ (Send home the political old guard), slogans that have appeared on political party websites in the recent Italian electoral campaigns. Another difference is the parties’ views of technology. Fascists considered aviation to be essential to maintain and increase their power, while for some contemporary populist movements the web today can miraculously end social and cultural inequality.

Thus, a comparison between fascism (not even in its original form of Ur described by Eco) and populism will not reveal the individual roots of Italian populism. We should instead seek them earlier in history in the formation of Italy as a nation. At that point, Italy had been united only by culture and the Italian language, even though it was spoken by less than 2 per cent of the population (as most spoke local dialects) at the time of Italy’s Unification in 1861.

A nation with scarce, or not so deeply rooted, common relationships, common institutions and traditions – often divided into long-time rival cities (as in the case of Tuscany, where municipalities fought against each other for centuries) – finds it hard to recognise values and national interests, in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term. Civic and social fragmentation easily leads to identifying one’s self with the ‘us’ against ‘them’ idea, which can be a cause for celebration when it remains only a part of folklore, such as in the ‘fight’ between city wards in Siena’s Palio horserace, or in the various football clubs’ derby matches when two teams from the same cities are playing. Yet, when it opposes ‘the people/us’ with the ‘governing class/them’, it can embitter public discourse in a democracy.

Civil loyalty does not go to the elected representatives of the people any more, or to the professionals guiding economic activities,

or to those who, in line with their institutional role, guide the country, city, region, school, justice or media. No, loyalty goes to the family members who can ensure support during difficult times, to the head of the political party, or to a friend who offers a ‘recommendation’ – thanks to which many Italians find a job, outstripping candidates who are more qualified but less ‘connected’ to power. Loyalty goes to lobbies that offer isolated citizens a lever for social dynamics and self-promotion.<sup>2</sup> Group solidarity and not social honesty has been, for many years, a common Italian disease and the 2008 economic crisis has only accentuated the metastasis; it has not ended it.

If we were to date the birth of populism (as defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) in the political history of modern Italy, it would date back to the Parthenopaeian Republic in 1799 (also known as the Neapolitan Republic). Under this Republic, democratic Jacobins inspired by the French Revolution established a democratic government in cities of the Republic and proposed reforms to the people. These reforms were always opposed by the monarchist regime of the Bourbons – the most obtuse in Europe. Parthenopaeian patriots, who included Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel – the first woman in charge of a newspaper in Europe, the *Monitore Napoletano* – were part of the Enlightenment (in the way we mean it today, as a noble but also naive movement). They were convinced that illustrating the benefits of freedom and progress to the people would mean that centuries of feudalism, ignorance and oppression would end as a result of the truth of ‘the Enlightened’.

More politically astute than them was Cardinal Fabrizio Dionigi Ruffo, of the Dukes of Bagnara and Baranello Ruffo, who guided the so-called ‘sanfedista’ movement against the Jacobin government with an army of 25,000 poor farmers called ‘The army of the Holy Faith’, which included the lower-class Parthenopaeians, the poor districts, and even a woman. Cleverly playing the populist card for the first time in the history of modern Italy, Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo halted the Republic’s reforms and then was able to prevent them with a communication strategy that has repeated itself for two centuries in Italy:

- 1 A group of intellectuals with little popularity propose a progressive political platform that citizens view as abstract and far from their real interests;
- 2 Enemies of reforms direct the population’s anger towards the elite, suggesting the idea that ‘The bad situation you are experiencing today is better than any good that will come in the future’;
- 3 The elite are not able to communicate with more ignorant citizens; and
- 4 The continuation of the status quo damages progress.

A perfect illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the classic novel *The Leopard* by Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. In a rage, the huntsman Don Ciccio Tumeo tells the protagonist – the old and disappointed Prince of Salina – that he did not vote for Sicily to join the Italian monarchy under the House of Savoy (after the arrival of Giuseppe Garibaldi), because at least the Bourbon Kings gave them alms when they sent letters begging for money during the winter. They were poor, but had hope that the divine King could help with alms from above. For Tumeo, receiving regal alms for one's family was better than the right protected by a common social contract for everyone to earn a salary in the marketplace.

Vincenzo Cuoco, who had been close to Italian patriots, narrates with a sense of bitterness the end of the Parthenopaeian Republic in his political realist essay published in 1801, entitled *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*. When Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel mounted the gallows, the population she had tried to emancipate from poverty insulted her by singing loudly in front of the executioner in Neapolitan dialect: 'A signora donna Lionora ca parlava 'ncoppa o Tiatro, mò abballa miezzo o' Mercato...' (Lady Eleonora, who spoke about politics on the stage of a theatre, now dangles, hanging from the gallows in the middle of the market square). This represents the model for populism, which we see from the market square and repeated on television and the Internet where the 'people' prefer to remain behind the times. They hate those who speak to them about emancipation and in the past were happy to see them hanged from a rope, or in contemporary times, slandered on the web.

The last words of noblewoman Eleonora were taken from a Latin verse of the poet Virgil: 'Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit',<sup>3</sup> which translates to 'Perhaps someday it will be pleasant to have remembered even these things'. The difference between this patriotic Latin idiom and the Neapolitan song of the common people in the market square offers an analogous discrepancy we continue to find today in Italian populism, between the English used by technocratic elites and the Italian the populists speak on television, which contains dialectical inflexions of the northern, Roman or southern regions.

When the Risorgimento succeeded in unifying Italy and the first attempts at national unity began, from 1861 to 1922 (with the exception of the First World War from 1915 to 1918), the forces of populism persisted. Every attempt to rationalise and modernise the country was mocked, contested and scorned by local movements who denounced free masons, atheists and the Jacobins discussing the future. Indeed, in his *Essays from Prison* Antonio Gramsci would from time to time meditate over the endemic weakness of the Italian democratic culture. Like the Republicans in Naples in 1799, the ruling and innovative class have

not been able to connect and engage with the common people. As a result, the common people have been excluded and are easily susceptible to populist propaganda. In the end, the people themselves are the ones to pay the price of an oppressive status quo.

Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) mastered the use of new instruments of mass communication, from radio to cinema, to ingrain deeply and forever the seeds of populism into Italian political culture. Born in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, anti-clerical and socialist Mussolini changed his position on the First World War from one of classic socialist pacifism to nationalist interventionism. In addition, his newspaper *Il popolo d'Italia* was quick to use classical populist rhetoric in this new situation after the war. 'They' (the industrialists, bankers and cosmopolitan socialists) 'mutilated' the Italian victory in the war and cheated the democratic process. As a result, they alienated the population from the rights they had achieved by sacrificing their lives and by winning the war on 4 November 1918. Nobel prize-winning writer Luigi Pirandello foreshadows the inadequacy of the Italian monarchic democracy in his 1913 masterpiece novel *I vecchi e i giovani* (The Old and the Young). In the novel, he describes leaders who do not represent the real interests of the people. He discusses a situation where people's hopes stemming from Italy's unification during the Risorgimento are lost due to the corruption, inadequacy and indifference of parliament and political schemes in Rome that are blind to the needs of the public. Mussolini proposed a 'trencherocracy' – a 'democracy of the trenches' – represented by a generation of Italians that had shed their blood for three years, against the politicians' 'democracy'. Mussolini's propaganda worked well and during 20 years in power he would never leave the 'Us/Them' rhetoric. Even during the final months of his political life, during the 1943–45 Republic of Salò, he would continue to use youth propaganda regarding Italy's perpetual 'betrayal': if the country lies in tragedy it is because someone has betrayed people's good faith. For instance, in 1918 they betrayed the homeland and in 1943 they betrayed the Duce and German allies in favour of the Freemasons, Jews and Anglo-Americans.

In the end, the connection between fascism and populism remains tenuous if used to interpret contemporary Italian politics. A recent volume by historian Roberto Vivarelli, *History of the Origins of Fascism. Italy from the Great War to the March on Rome*,<sup>4</sup> which received rave reviews in the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* from Ernesto Galli della Loggia,<sup>5</sup> discusses the rise of fascism from 1919 to 1922 and compares it with the socialists' attempt to take control of the State. While the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) and the Communist party since 1921 believed in a socialist revolution in Italy similar to how it came about in the USSR, the fascists were able to link together the country's widespread

nationalism with the need for law and order. Fascists were able to assert their power by calling for stability – viewed as essential for the support of the middle class – but also by agitating the more militant groups using the violent fascist squads (Blackshirts) and populist slogans of the ‘Great Proletarian’ Italy, who were reacting to American and English imperialism. Similar to how economies controlled by oligarchies serve to increase the anger of the unemployed, the ‘Masonic–Judaic plutocracies’ of London and Washington fuelled the nation’s anger.

As we will see, linking a person with the masses and the individual with the street will remain a subversive feature of the far right, including the neo-fascist party attached to the Duce’s legacy even once democracy had come.



## Giannini and the adventure of the Ordinary Man

It is worthwhile examining how the populist virus immediately infected the Republican democracy starting from the south of Italy as soon as the war ended. The Sicilian Independence Movement of Andrea Finocchiaro Aprile, Antonino Varvaro, Antonio Canepa and other naive, enthusiastic or cynical leaders is often remembered for its relations with the armed squads of bandit Salvatore Giuliano, for the funds it obtained from the Sicilian aristocrats, and for its ambiguous relationship with the Allies' secret services. But if the Sicilian Independence Movement gained 8.7 per cent of the votes and four representatives in Sicily in the elections of the 1946 constituent assembly, it is because the rhetoric of the 'liberamioci dell'Italia (free ourselves from Italy) movement and the fascination of becoming star number 49 on the American flag<sup>6</sup> by joining the United States convinced many of the electors, including intellectuals and members of the popular classes. This was a populist vote that did not engage in democratic debate and focused on an 'us (Sicilians) against them (Italians)', and it soon spread from the short-lived support of the Independence Movement (which disbanded in 1951) to all of southern Italy. Populist rhetoric in the south of Italy continued from this period to the regional elections in Sicily in autumn 2012, including the resounding success of Silvio Berlusconi's coalition in the 2001 elections when the centre-right parties obtained 61 out of the 61 available seats in Sicily for the Chamber of Deputies – an unprecedented triumph unlikely to be repeated.

The ship owner Achille Lauro then imported populist ideas from Sicily to Naples. He was the editor of the newspaper *Roma* and president of the local football team (as we will see, the link between football and Italian politics is very strong – for example Lauro; Berlusconi; the relationship between the DC (Christian Democracy Party) leader Giulio Andreotti and the Rome football team; the relationship between the senator of the People's Party Vittorio Cecchi Gori and the Fiorentina football team; and the entrepreneur and current president of the Palermo football team Maurizio Zamparini, who is meditating on whether he will participate in elections in Sicily). Lauro, who was mayor of Rome from 1952 to 1957 and again in 1961 and who was a Member of Parliament in four legislatures, was a reiteration of the populist scheme created by

Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo in 1799. He claimed that if a big city was poor and could not manage to escape from the lack of development of the post-war period, the communists and the North were to blame. With methods that were later used in Argentina by the populism of Juan and Evita Peron, Lauro – known as ‘the Commander’ – gave shoes to street children and the poor children of the Spanish district in exchange for their parents’ votes; he mocked attempts to initiate reforms and any technocratic solution; and permitted housing to be built without establishing any urban planning regulations. In his 1963 masterpiece *Hands over the City*, film director Francesco Rosi dramatically shows examples of populist politics in cities, such as politicians sanctioning the building of public works to keep people ‘happy’ and to garner approval without taking into account economic and social growth or development. Unfortunately, this is similar to what was seen in 1799.

The social alienation that separatists of the Sicilian Independence Movement in Sicily and the ‘Commander’ Lauro in Naples were able to exploit to gather local support was then exploited at a national level by Guglielmo Giannini’s ‘Front of the Ordinary Man’. Any discussion on populism in Italy after the Second World War must include a careful analysis of Giannini and his politics, from his use of spectacular imagery to propaganda recalling the ‘ordinary man’ of the street against the privileged in parliament representing reforms and democracy. Before the war, Giannini (1891–1960) was a playwright, collaborated on screenplays and was even a songwriter. Brought up in Naples, he was influenced by and did not forget the city’s theatre performances, politics and folklore.

In 1942, his son Mario died in the war. Giannini’s pain manifested itself in political resentment. If an entire generation suffered during the Second World War, it was the fault of arrogant and greedy choices made by politicians who under either a dictatorship or a democracy did not consider people’s needs but only their own interests. This was the same resentment Mussolini had stimulated after the First World War. As a result, the Front of the Ordinary Man was established to ‘destroy the cult of personality’ present in politics. Giannini’s weekly publication *Ordinary Man* achieved a circulation of 800,000 copies in a country with 45 million inhabitants and a high rate of illiteracy. The publication’s symbol was a steel press crushing a man dressed as a white-collar worker and screaming with pain.

During the elections of the Italian Constituent Assembly (1946), the Sicilian Independence Movement gained slightly less than 9 per cent and Giannini’s Front of the Ordinary Man replicated their success when his party received 5.3 per cent of the national vote and gained 30 seats in parliament, including a seat for Giannini himself. In the north of Italy, popular opinion supported the large parties (the Christian Democracy Party, the Communist Party, the

Socialist Party, the Republican Party, the Social-Democratic Party and the Liberal Party) that would become responsible for drafting the new Italian Constitution. Giannini appealed to those in the centre-south of Italy who remained so disheartened by 20 years of dictatorship that they no longer believed in democracy. Giannini’s supporters were disappointed by all politicians (and not just fascists), whom they viewed as equal in their self-interestedness before and after the Liberation.

In places where partisan forces fought during the war between 1943 and 1945, democracy was firmly rooted in the country and the populist Ordinary Man movement hardly spread. However, in places where there had been no civil war and that were ruled by the ambiguous monarchic government of Marshall Pietro Badoglio (supported by King Vittorio Emanuele III), the populist ideas of ‘Everyone go home’ were welcomed. Lacking ideological roots, Giannini first joined forces with Christian Democracy, then associated with the new fascists of the Italian Social Movement, and finally attempted to partner with the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti. Electors were confused by these political shifts and slowly abandoned Giannini. In a certain sense, Giannini was consistent in his opportunistic changing of tactics, in lacking principles, and in always searching for explicit approval from the people. For instance, a big inscription from a cartoon in his newspaper read ‘Down with everyone’. Nevertheless, the new parties like MSI and DC as well as the communists soon learnt the populist tactics of negative propaganda. For example, communists set themselves against the DC and the DC took on social groups that prevented the formation of a government. By 1948, Giannini’s Front of the Ordinary Man’s support was already down to 3.8 per cent of the popular vote. The movement disbanded before the 1953 elections when the DC tried, in vain, to obtain an absolute majority.

Of all the post-war populist movements, Guglielmo Giannini’s (1891–1960) Front of the Ordinary Man (*Qualunquismo*) was by far the most effective forerunner. His weekly publication made use of relentless puns and twisted the names of his political rivals to mock them and avoid discussing their ideas. The progressive jurist Piero Calamandrei became ‘Caccamandrei’ (poo-mandrei); the surname of historian Salvatorelli turned into ‘Servitorelli’ (servile-torelli); Vinciguerra became ‘Perdiguerra’ (lose-the-war instead of win-the-war); premier Ferruccio Parri became ‘Fessuccio (Fool-uccio) Parri’; the slogan of the Resistance, ‘Vento del Nord’ (Wind of the North), was vulgarly ridiculed as ‘Rutto del Nord’ (Burp of the North), in the manner of the variety theatre shows that Giannini had attended when he was young. The same technique survives today: the communist press publishes its own satirical column ‘Fool of the day’ in the official and

famous anti-Berlusconi paper *Il Fatto*, distorting rivals' names through its main writer, Marco Travaglio (who used this same style when he wrote for conservative publications). Caricaturing opponents as a way of avoiding their ideas is a tradition that will never disappear from Italian populism, a Grand Guignol cherished by a minority of the public but which dangerously poisons public opinion.

Through his corrosive satirising of his opponents, Giannini inaugurated another feature of Italian populism: the simplification of problems. With its stagnant economy and unemployment remaining high in the post-war period, Italy – after 20 years of dictatorship, military defeat, destroyed cities and infrastructures, and one and a half years of civil war – was reeling. And politicians were seen as the only culprits for not pressing the right button for a perfect 'reset' of these problems. Instead of the men in government, Giannini suggested that a simple 'accountant', what we might call a 'manager', should govern the country for one year, without the possibility for re-election: 'For a good government, you just need a good manager who will start on the 1st of January and leave on the 31st of December. And in no way be re-electable.' The 'crowd', a term which the 'Qualunquisti' (those who identified with *l'Uomo Qualunque*) held dear, must not be managed with a political vision; it must only be governed by a manager, as if it were a block of flats or a small business.

This rhetoric has trickled down through the ages: the populist debate against 'The Caste' – the corrupt and inefficient managing class – oversimplifies, in fact glosses over, the country's very real problems: a lack of innovation, crippling public debt, failing schools and universities, a system of businesses that are too small and family-run and a shortage of credible international players, with a few exceptions such as Eni and Fiat. Lagging productivity, organised crime, a debilitating North/South gap, the digital divide (to name just a few) are never depicted as Italy's troubles: the evil is in the 'Caste', the wastefulness and costliness of politics. If only, the lament goes, we could 'send them all home' (them being the corrupt politicians), Italy would experience a re-birth. Silvio Berlusconi, who won the 1994 elections and became prime minister (and in the European elections of that same year took one-third of the vote), presented himself as just that manager: the one who would be capable of solving all these problems not as a 'politician' (a word he would never use, not even after two decades in parliament) but as a manager and businessman. In 1994 post-industrial Italy, Giannini's 'accountant' had become a big business 'entrepreneur'. But the populist techniques, and their successes in the national political elections of 1994, 2001 and 2008 and in countless local administrative elections, remained unchanged.

Another surviving element of Giannini's Qualunquismo is the liberal-friendly propaganda and the hatred towards the multinational and developed industrial world. Giannini preached 'The Word' of superficial *laissez faire*; in his opinion the strings that 'politics' imposes on the 'economy' hinder the country's development. But this generic liberalism was accompanied by tiresome propaganda against the fat-cat companies – the 'masters of steam', the industrialists who then dominated the big groups of the Turin–Milan–Genoa metropolitan triangle. The Lega Nord Party, a northern movement founded by Umberto Bossi, was the most direct heir of this populist seam mined by Giannini. For the Lega too, economics needed 'freeing', and even Bossi (referred to in the Lombardi dialect as 'il Senatùr', the Senator) with his typical popular witticisms, was initially inspired by liberal ideas that seemed to poo-poo the rules imposed by the politics of a 'Roma ladrona' (thieving Rome) on the North, a North that was Italy's goose with the golden eggs (as a famous Lega Lombarda poster described it). At the same time, however, Bossi, his newspaper and his radio stations were strongly critical, making extremely barbed political polemics against the big industrialists, especially Turin's Fiat Group, which was accused of prospering on political connivance to the damage of small family-run enterprises so close to the Lega.

The last element of Giannini's Qualunquismo that has survived to our time is the use of stylistic elements gathered from variety shows, frivolous movies, gossip weeklies, even sport commentary twisted into political debate, turning everything into a grotesque 'us against them' match. This is a light, lively, captivating formula for political discussion, which, when taken from Giannini's weekly format and projected into our era's mass communication network of TV talk shows and web blogs, takes on a new, explosive, viral, dimension. Berlusconi's 20 years of political presence and the counter-propaganda of his more radical rivals would see oversimplification become the norm and annihilate the possibility of any serious debate in Italy. If the fans of the former prime minister celebrated his 'taking the field' in politics in a typical sportsman's style, anti-Berlusconians would use the football jargon 'we was robbed', just like the fans who attribute their defeat to the corrupt referee, rather than their own shortcomings. The presence of female candidates characterised by flamboyant (and scant) styles of dress were frequent in Berlusconi's political line-ups, especially in the last legislature, and accentuated a phenomenon that would have provoked Giannini's pen: right-wing populist representatives like Member of Parliament Daniela Santanchè raising a middle finger to protesters, and radical anti-Berlusconi activists using vulgar photographs of female rivals.

In conclusion, Guglielmo Giannini devised the entire matrix on which all later Italian populism relied, and all of his successors, on the right or on the left, are indebted to him.

## Soft populism and cultural hegemony: the years of the Christian Democracy

Of the major political parties from the First Republic, the Republican Party led by Ugo La Malfa was perhaps the only party immune from the symptoms of populism. It was even ridiculed in Italian variety shows of that time for its serious and rigorous approach (the impersonations of La Malfa by comedian Alighiero Noschese on television became particularly well known). Palmiro Togliatti's – and, later, Enrico Berlinguer's – PCI (Italian Communist Party) introduced itself to voters, and especially to intellectuals whom it was able to inspire for a long period of time, as the successor to the model theories and traditions of the Risorgimento. It was able to connect itself with the symbolic elections of 1948 and even to General Giuseppe Garibaldi. Populism became negatively depicted in propaganda as it became associated with crypto-fascism and Giannini's failures.

In reality, Togliatti – a cold and rational man who had survived Stalin's purges in Moscow, knew very well that the popular classes were very susceptible to simple and direct propaganda. As a result, the first Christian Democrat Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, a Catholic and anti-fascist who had laboriously negotiated the peace treaty with the Allies after the war, had a song dedicated to him which said: 'e vattene e vattene schifoso cancelliere, se non ti squagli subito con calci nel sedere...' (leave, leave, you lousy chancellor, or you will quickly disappear with us kicking you in the butt). Togliatti announced that he wanted to kick De Gasperi out of politics with spiked boots. Additionally, corrupt Christian Democrats were referred to as 'big forks' and were depicted in electoral posters as having long and robust cutlery so they could easily steal from all Italians.

Christian Democracy gained support in a more polished way through news programmes on TV and the Rai public television network. They were led by people who were able to create a cultural hegemony. Rai's variety shows, cultural and journalism programmes, led by men like Ettore Bernabei, Emilio Rossi, Fabiano Fabiani and Albino Longhi, had a pro-government angle and never used heavy populist tones. On the other hand, the first TV debates mediated by

the anchorman Jader Jacobelli gave Italians the opportunity to see their political leaders debate live on TV and brought the public closer to political issues for the first time (even though these debates were never as influential as the face-to-face debates of the American candidates for the White House). Unlike in the past where only party followers would listen to their leader at a party meeting in a piazza, political debates on television now made it possible for everyone to listen to all parties from their own living room.

The role of the populist, which would return with a vengeance in TV talk shows from the 1990s onwards, was played by the journalist Romolo Mangione, who became a favourite with the Italian television audience for his aggressive questions and reactions to answers.

Although the DC refrained from using the more pronounced language of populism in public service radio and television programmes, it did use strong populist rhetoric in political gatherings in small towns, in debates with journalists and with some leaders close to labour unions. During the campaign won in 1948, posters depicted the Cossack cavalry allowing their horses to drink the water from the fountains of Saint Peter's square in Rome to represent what would happen if the social-communist front won. Twenty years later, progressive leader Carlo Donat Cattin from Piedmont (close to the CISL labour union of Turin) became famous for preferring to go to the barber for a haircut rather than swearing in with the other deputies. In 1974, the Secretary of the DC, Amintore Fanfani, used populist tones when administering a referendum to vote against an established law permitting divorce when he announced during his speeches in the south of Italy that if the State allowed divorce, wives would start to betray their husbands and married men would be seen as cuckolds. Despite Fanfani's threats, divorce laws were not struck down and even Sicily, which considered itself a machismo culture, voted with a majority in favour of the law drafted by parliamentarians Antonio Baslini and Loris Fortuna. Fanfani's failure to prevent divorce shows that DC's political strengths and the support it managed to raise between 1946 and 1994 (the year it was dissolved) were rooted in other interests and values.

The Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, Italian Social Movement), a neo-fascist group, chose as its symbol an Italian flag depicted as a flame burning on a gravestone (an image referring to loyalty to Italy and the tomb of Mussolini). Its populist elements were rooted in the memory of Italy's past. In his essay 'Il corpo del Duce' (The Duce's Body), historian Sergio Luzzatto perfectly identifies the obsession with the fascist leader's physical body, which even during the post-war period continued to unite the populism of the MSI. A leader whose physical presence occupies the scene is often central in Italian populism.

The identity of such a leader changes with the times and the philosophical ideas of the different political movements, ranging among friendly with Giannini; militant with Mussolini; persuasive and like an entrepreneur from Lombardy with Berlusconi; and dishevelled, humorous and capable of fun performances with Beppe Grillo and his 5 Star Movement. Nevertheless, the rallied followers must always see a leader on the political stage 'in flesh and blood' who mobilises them against the aristocratic elites, seen as hostile to the population.

The MSI used the Italian population's distress at being forced to leave Dalmatia and the cities of Fiume and Pola, annexed to Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia after the Second World War, to rekindle the post-unitary Risorgimento-style populism of the 'unredeemed lands'. The party used propaganda to reinforce this message, hiding the fact that the real cause of that tragic diaspora was the decision by Mussolini in 1940 to enter the War. For years the MSI followed the Allies' decisions regarding the fate of the Adriatic port of Trieste, which in the end was assigned to Italy. It attacked the diplomatic efforts of national governments to settle the fate of Trieste and later the agreements for the division of the region between Zone A with Italian influence and Zone B with Yugoslavian influence. In doing so, it hoped to spread a wave of resentment to strengthen its support at elections.

It is more difficult to discuss, even before examining current times, the populist influences on the social and youth movements of 1968 in Italy. The student's movement, which soon broadened to include workers and labour unions in the so-called 'hot' autumn of 1969, originated from a call for a libertarian and social emancipation from a generation who had achieved public education for all as a result of reforms in the 1960s but saw the traditional elites still maintaining their control over white collar and professional jobs. After an initial period of peaceful meetings, a more militant and tense period characterised by frequent clashes with the police or with rival right-wing groups followed. This was when leaders with clear populist roots appeared (for example, Mario Capanna in Milan) and used Giannini's populist techniques: mocking opponents (see, for example, the 1971 campaign against the election of Christian Democrat Amintore Fanfani to the presidency of the Republic); hyper-simplifying problems using the idea of the working class and the slogan 'Potere a chi lavora' (Power to those who work); and establishing a cult of personality of its representatives. In the political debate following the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan in 1969, a populist campaign inspired by the public's anger over the attack appointed Luigi Calabresi as police chief. Calabresi was subsequently killed in 1972 by a group of individuals from the Lotta Continua movement, which had long persecuted him using its daily newspaper of the same name with cartoons, false reconstructions of events and personal attacks.

## In-depth examination of Mani Pulite to Berlusconi, to the rise of Beppe Grillo

The First Republic saw the DC and its allies in control of the government from 1948 to 1994, but their power would eventually fade for various historical reasons. The end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire meant that Italy was no longer forced to remain stable in order to maintain the balance of power in the Mediterranean between Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Having to increase Italy's public debt to hide the country's loss of productivity (+6.5 per cent more than the average of industrial countries between 1970 and 1979, but only +0.4 per cent between 2000 and 2009<sup>7</sup>); decline in innovation; and inflexible labour market, the country could not continue as it had done before with the last DC government to remedy its economic problems by increasing public expenditure. Additionally, the introduction of the euro and the requirements of the Maastricht Treaty prevented Italy from its practice of devaluing the lira to make Italian products more competitive for international export. Finally, because the same political class remained in power for so long, this led to serious corruption and malfeasance, including bribes being made from businesses to political parties. Eventually, this prompted a judicial investigation into political corruption named Mani Pulite (Clean Hands).

At this point in the autumn of 1993, the centre-left party was led by former communist parliamentarian Achille Occhetto, who changed the name of his party from the Italian Communist Party to the Democratic Party of the Left. However, the traditional left-wing members of the ex-Italian Communist party decided to split from the new-centre left party and support the ex-labour union leader Fausto Bertinotti, who founded the Communist Refoundation Party. In the upcoming 1994 elections, the results seemed to be already set. The Mani Pulite investigation and the breakup of the historical Christian Democracy, PCI and the Socialist Party (ruined by investigations into its leader Bettino Craxi – whose political reform agenda had been opposed by corporate interests but was shelved due to corruption) seemed to open the way for the victory of the centre-left, who presented



themselves as a national unified party that was able to win local elections in important cities in the North as in the South: Turin, Genoa, Venice, Rome, Palermo, Catania and Naples (leaving only Milan to the centre-right Lega Nord party).

The break-up of the historic parties was, however, insufficient to convince voters that the left was mature enough to take on the leadership of the country, especially if led by a former PCI member like Occhetto. In those years, an expert in politics, Giuliano Urbani, worried by the vacuum that was, in his view, opening up in the moderate and conservative area, asked Fiat's president, Gianni Agnelli, to run for prime minister. Agnelli replied that this wasn't his role and suggested that Urbani ask the founder of Mediaset, Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi, a property developer in Milan and creator of private television channels with Mediaset and Canale 5 (thanks to the political support obtained from his friend Bettino Craxi) had for some time been aware of polls that noted his popularity with the public, thanks in part to the victories achieved by his football team, AC Milan. Berlusconi delegated the work of building the party to people from his Publitalia advertising company – people who were perfectly acquainted with the mood and spirit of Italy's economic elite in the cities and provinces – and entrusted his right-hand man, Marcello Dell'Utri, with the creation of a group of candidates. Many came directly from the ranks of Publitalia management and were to have political success: Enzo Ghigo, President of the Piedmont region; Giancarlo Galan, President of the Veneto region; Gianfranco Micciché, leader in Sicily and a Member of Parliament in Rome.

The political party took the name of Forza Italia, from the chants of football fans at the national games, and for a long time Berlusconi strived to convince political journalists to refer to his political candidates as 'Azzurri' (the light blues), just like the players of the Italian national football team. In his speech announcing his 'taking the field' with his political candidacy, Berlusconi did not choose the tones of populist resentment. He merely defined the left as immature; he talked about Italy as the beloved country; he was, in other words, a soft Berlusconi. The combination of distrust for the left, the effectiveness of his political campaign – which for the first time saw the use of polls and focus groups entrusted to survey expert Gianni Pilo – and Berlusconi's persuasive ability led to a twofold victory that spring in the political elections for the parliament and the presidency of the Council of Ministers, and the European elections. Simultaneously, AC Milan won the Champions League.

However, as soon as he came to power, Berlusconi allowed his most populist collaborators (although they held different values and differed in educational and class background) to influence the political scene. First, they tried to force the then president of the Republic, the

moderate Catholic Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, to follow their political agenda, consequently getting Scalfaro to abandon the historic independence of the presidency. Then, they passed a law that the public viewed as a political pardon that wiped the slate clean for detested politicians involved in the country's bribery scandals. Lastly, Berlusconi did not prevent a conflict of interests between his TV network and his influence over state TV. As a result, he fostered animosity even through his media empire, which had been important in his rise to popularity.

The power of the populist masquerade that followed the 1994 victory led Umberto Bossi – another great figure of Italian populism – to fear that Berlusconi could steal his northern electorate, thereby removing the Lega Nord's very lifeline. Berlusconi's first government went into crisis and, after an interim government led by former banker Lamberto Dini, the elections were won by Professor Romano Prodi, an independent economist, a Catholic and a reformer who had led the public company Iri and had been a minister in a Christian Democratic government. Prodi's hopes of reform lasted a little over two years – but a series of governments guided by Massimo D'Alema and Giuliano Amato and the candidacy for the election of Francesco Rutelli again paved the way for Berlusconi in 2001. The public was disappointed in the left and, although its enthusiasm for Berlusconi was not what it was in 1994, when many had hoped for a new type of politics, it decided to vote for him again.

At this point, the polarisation between the Berlusconi right and the anti-Berlusconi left created a situation in which no moderate, from any camp, could take the stage. TV talk shows hosted by Michele Santoro, a popular left-wing anchorman, and the attacks on Berlusconi no longer led to a tense debate on the national economy, but rather to an extension of the violent conflicts between politicians – almost always the same ones – who, like actors in a Western, took verbal pot-shots at each other during the shows, only to go back to polite discussion when the cameras were off.

Politics was reduced to an exchange of scathing remarks on TV shows, with not a shred of reasoning to contribute to any proposals; this attitude infected the newspapers who took each other on like gladiators, from pro- or anti-Berlusconi camps, with the best journalists on the right and on the left fighting it out in articles that, although brilliant in form, were devoid of substance. Lost in this yah-boo carnival, the country did not realise that this was the last possible chance for economic reforms, the reduction of the public debt (almost 2,000 billion euros) and for a shared reform of pensions and welfare. This was also the last possible opportunity to attract capital from abroad before the financial crisis of 2008 would shake the economy to its core and, as a consequence, would unleash a European debt crisis that would dash any hopes of rapid growth.

In the 2006 elections, Romano Prodi, back in politics after presiding over the European Commission, managed to repeat his success in 1996, but with a narrow majority at the Senate. In the meantime, the populist rebellion raged on, lowering the level of debate further, since now they didn't just limit themselves to puns on surnames, as in Giannini's time, but included gossip on personal life, private habits and family. The two sides reciprocally accused each other of populism. The left accused Berlusconi of gaining votes through his sole control of TV channels Rai and Mediaset and covered him with insults, disparaging his Nabob-like lifestyle and his court-like circle of friends, actors and colleagues. The right replied through newspapers owned by Berlusconi's family (to comply with anti-trust regulations Berlusconi gave his brother Paolo control of the newspaper *Il Giornale*, founded by Indro Montanelli, and his wife Veronica Lario part of the ownership of the newspaper *Il Foglio*, founded by Giuliano Ferrara) and TV channels, tarring rivals with innuendo and gossip.

The emergence and increasing use of the Internet and the birth of gossip sites online – whose ownership were, unlike TV and newspapers, not transparent due to a gap in anti-trust laws – allowed anonymous writers to harass their rivals through a crescendo of slander, insinuations, paparazzi photos and obscenities, which the press would often reproduce in ways that lowered the level of debate to a degree of squalor never before reached in the history of the Italian Republic.

The background noise of a debate reduced to a fight between gladiators in the arena, often paid for by their political sponsors, was deafening for many Italians. And when Romano Prodi was forced to resign and Italians went back to vote in 2008, Berlusconi's third victory revealed itself to be a hollow one. The economic crisis that burst with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in the autumn of that same year demanded increases in rigour, austerity and reforms that would really transform the lifestyle and work habits of Italians, as they had emerged from 1945 onwards. But the two-way propaganda of the populists – on one side, arguing that everything would go well with Berlusconi in government in Rome, and, on the other side, arguing that removing Berlusconi from Palazzo Chigi (and sending him to prison, for the more radical individuals) would be enough – deprived the voters of a rational debate. Hypnotised by the 'Berlusconi Yes/No' issue, the voters lost sight of the important issues that had to be addressed to reduce Italy's fragility during the debt crisis (despite the 9,000 billion euros of private wealth): the relationship between Italian GDP and excessive debt; and concerns about the spread between Italian and German bonds, even under the euro currency. Every proposal – the building or not of a bridge on the Messina Strait connecting Sicily to Italy; the reform of the pensions as analysed by Roberto

Maroni, minister of the Lega Party; the laws on immigration proposed by Lega's leader Bossi and by the leader of Alleanza Nazionale (the party which inherited the old Movimento Sociale Italiano after finally renouncing fascism); Gianfranco Fini's mediocre law on the TV sector attributed to Minister Maurizio Gasparri; the reform of education by Minister Gelmini; the attempt by Minister Giulio Tremonti to stop the overflow of public expenditure and start some sort of economic reform – everything was put into the grinding machine of the Berlusconi movement, ending as either a pass or a fail according to one's personal affiliation.

To worsen the situation, Berlusconi confronted scandals concerning his private life during his third term in government, after a violent divorce from his wife Veronica. More and more embarrassing details emerged regarding Berlusconi's private life including from photographs and phone tapings of his private parties in his Lombardy villa or his vacation house in Sardinia. These revelations sullied the reputation of the prime minister who, potentially in a misguided attempt to ameliorate the situation, behaved more and more bizarrely in international meetings. His behaviour was described as carefree by newspapers sympathetic to him and embarrassing by his rivals. He shouted 'Mr Obama, Mr Obama' at the newly elected American president in a meeting; used the word 'tanned' to describe the young African American President; played 'hide and seek' with stern German Chancellor Angela Merkel; and allowed newspapers owned by his publishing house to insult Merkel with unmentionable epithets attributed to him.

Because of the need to campaign politically and the scandals, Berlusconi's campaign team reacted with the same harshness used by his opponents. The populist fight degenerated and spoiled the atmosphere in Italy. If we were not facing the worst economic crisis since 1929, the face-to-face fight could in the end have started a cycle of political renewal. But while Europe and the large economic institutions urged the country to start necessary reforms, youth unemployment rose, especially with young men and women in the South, and thousands of small- and medium-sized companies faced difficulties because of a decrease in demand for exports and a tough economic market. In the end, the political class concerned itself only with internal conflicts and allowed the country to plunge into recession.

Berlusconi's extended hold on power had by now caused the public to become heavily disenchanted with his leadership – for example, with his government's incapacity to deal with the economic crisis. In turn, this led the left wing to start a movement that critics defined as persecutory but that contained all the features of a populist uprising. As with every other traditional populist movement, even the harshest wing of Berlusconi's opposition could claim sound reasons for starting the movement: corruption in Italy was rampant; the political class's



arrogance had really alienated many citizens; and the prime minister's behaviour or that of many of his cronies and personal friends, collaborators and companions was not appropriate for a leader of a G8 country that had been a founding member of the European Union. In a time of crisis, a certain political aplomb is necessary and losing it does not bring the 'Naked King' closer to citizens, who are rather disgusted by politicians' overindulgent conduct, viewed as reckless and damaging rather than acceptable civilised behaviour.

However, even though it achieved some strategic success, the one-sidedness with which the radical, anti-Berlusconi wing – spearheaded by the newspaper *Il Fatto*, edited by the former director of l'Unità, Antonio Padellaro, and with its leading journalist, Marco Travaglio – lashed out against its rivals ended up deeply harming people's trust in politics. As many observers accused this movement of populism, so too did the director of the newspaper *La Repubblica*, Enzo Mario – encouraged by the founder of the newspaper, Eugenio Scalfari – who defined anti-Berlusconi radicals as 'fascists'. Pierluigi Bersani, secretary of the Democratic Party – who is ahead in the polls to win as prime minister in the spring of 2013 – explicitly accuses the followers of Beppe Grillo and his 5 Star Movement of being 'web fascists'.

If *Il Fatto* uses the style of right- and left-wing populism, including mocking rivals, pitting 'Us versus Them' and simplifying problems (in this case attributed to the 'Caste' of the political managing class), Beppe Grillo and the 5 Star Movement borrow directly from Giannini's repertoire. They use political controversy to transform political rallies into shows, a genre in which Silvio Berlusconi – especially when in front of a camera – excelled at. Grillo, with a high school diploma in Accountancy (which brings us back to Guglielmo Giannini, who believed that the country needed only a simple accountant to lead it), was a comedian who had great success. He worked for both the public television channel Rai and Silvio Berlusconi's private network Mediaset, as well as in the movie industry and in theatres. After first taking a political approach on environmental issues (Grillo believes that genetic engineering and particularly GM food is harmful), the former actor entered politics on the issues of corruption and complaints against the managing class. His blog, presented to the American public in an interview for *The New Yorker* and included by Forbes in their list of the most popular websites, draws the attention of thousands of citizens, including many from the younger generations, by denouncing their rivals in a typically sarcastic, populist tone.

The hyper-simplification of problems is brilliantly conveyed by the ex-comedian, because on stage (one of his first performances was called 'Vaffa Day' (F\*\*k off Day), from a common, everyday Italian swear-word) he can reduce any economic difficulty into a witticism, a slogan

or a joke. As a matter of fact, Berlusconi, who recognised his comic talent as a television tycoon, loved to open every political meeting with a joke, even exporting this habit to G8 and G20 meetings, to the scarce amusement of the other leaders. Grillo's online economic programme, for example, in one of its first appearances, required 'the elimination of the Chinese boxes', which meant the complex system of reciprocal control by which Italian companies are governed (often with minority shares) by astute financiers; a crony capitalism, where what counts more is the ability to weave one's own network of relationships, not one's productive or innovative capacity. This has caused serious damage to the Italian market, and for a long time people tried in vain to limit its harmful effects. Reforming 'the Chinese boxes' means remodelling Italian capitalism and its property structure, a necessary reform that involves deep economic, juridical, financial, labour union and social interventions. Solving it with the line 'abolish Chinese boxes' has, of course, an immediate appeal for the public, especially for the more naive, young or angry. The risk, however, is that it will scarcely be effective in the real world, where legions of attorneys and managers will slow down the speed of the reforms.

Beppe Grillo also requires candidates to be untainted, requiring, for example, that they have never been criminally convicted (because he was convicted for a tragic car accident where two of his friends and their 9-year-old son died, he says he will never become a candidate). One by one he chooses their biographies via the web. At one point in his journey, Grillo met Gianroberto Casaleggio, an entrepreneur and expert in communication strategies and the Internet. The comedian, who used to break computer screens to amuse his audience, became a digital leader and managed his campaign from the web. In 2012 he won the elections for the mayorship of Parma with the 5 Star Movement. Afterwards, in a classic case of populist leadership, he made a physical display by announcing he would swim across the Strait of Messina from Reggio Calabria to Sicily before the local administrative elections. Grillo had already given a sort of public interview on the beach, with flippers and diving mask, speaking with other swimmers. This time the leader's body is a joke, a game, a witty allusion – but the populist paradigm is used in full.

The 2013 pre-electoral surveys ensure Beppe Grillo a maximum of 20 per cent of the vote, a result that has no precedent for a newly born political force, other than that of Berlusconi's 'Forza Italia'. With the party founded by the ex-Public Prosecutor of the Mani Pulite Inquiry, Antonio di Pietro – Italia dei Valori – and with the Sel left-wing movement of Puglia's president, Nichi Vendola, the forces against the current status quo could even (on paper) reach an absolute majority, although Vendola seems more inclined to a centre-left

alliance with Pierluigi Bersani's Democratic Party. These are a patchwork of forces and it would be a mistake to homogenise them all into a form of digital and post-industrial neo-populism. Yet all of them feature the classic elements of populism and all of them flirt with populist issues in their propaganda: Di Pietro himself, who remembers his past as a worker, emigrant and policeman, loves to be caught by photographers driving a tractor while looking after his farm.

The bestseller *La Casta* (The Caste) by Gianantonio Stella and Sergio Rizzo, two journalists from Milan's newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, helps set the stage for these opposition forces. The press report was made to expose the privileges of political leaders such as the restaurants inside the Chambers of Deputies and at the Senate (both first-rate but extremely low priced because they are subsidised by the State) or the famous 'blue cars', the official state cars for public officials. *The Caste* became very popular with the public because it was able to tap into public opinion's disgust towards politicians. The work triggers a series of similar works and even inspires the creation of an entire publishing house, Chiare Lettere, dedicated to these pieces. The term 'Caste', which derives from the social divisions of traditional India, has become synonymous with political corruption. In the end, unfortunately, the term has grouped in (and here is one of the 'low points' of populism) Members of Parliament and administrators who are scrupulous in their work with those who have been habitually corrupted. To tar everyone with the same brush is a well-known populist strategy, used previously by Giannini and today by populist leaders hoping to finally assault the parliament of the hated Caste in the spring of 2013.

## From political populism to economic populism: the crisis of the euro and of Italy

The two opposing alignments of Italian populism – Berlusconi's right-wing television networks and newspapers and the anti-Berlusconi left-wing newspapers, websites and talk shows – finally found a mutual enemy in Professor Mario Monti's technocratic government at the end of 2011. Monti had come to power to resolve Italy's debt crisis, which had increased 'the spread' with German bonds and was threatening to bring Italy to the verge of a euro default similar to that of Greece and Spain. Guided by Monti, a former European Commissioner and Rector of Milan's Bocconi University, the government is made up of a number of prestigious individuals. For instance, university professors like the former Rector of Polytechnic University of Turin Francesco Profumo; welfare expert Elsa Fornero; the attorney Paola Severino; civil servant Anna Maria Cancellieri; former banker Corrado Passera; former university professor and Head of the Treasury Vittorio Grilli; former Rector of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart Lorenzo Ornaghi; and expert and driving force of the Sant'Egidio Community Andrea Riccardi. The Monti government is a source of rage for populists like the bullfighter's red muleta is for the bull. Populists cannot resist attacking the combination of bankers and intellectuals in the new government. For those studying populism, it is really fascinating how those that were once fighting each other in the name of Silvio Berlusconi are today writing the same headlines against the Monti government using identical tones, attitude and fervour against tax increases; compliance with economic measures asked for by the European Union and the Central European Bank (whose president, the Italian Mario Draghi, the second of the 'Super Marios', fights to reduce the public debt and is also subject to fierce and common criticisms made by yesterday's rivals); and less popular reforms.

Prime Minister Monti had already discussed his concern with the ongoing wave of populism in a meeting two years ago at the Ambrosetti

Forum (a traditional appointment of the managing class on Lake Como in Cernobbio). Today, he is aware of the risks that the spread of populism will pose in many European countries during the economic crisis. These risks are amplified in the second half of 2012, when Italian populism on both the right and left wings seems to be changing its tone and attitude. Up to this moment, populism has been 'political' because it focused on the public's intolerance towards the 'Caste' and political corruption, and its proponents were split by the polarising figure of Silvio Berlusconi. Today, in an economic crisis and persisting unemployment, it has become an 'economic populism': one that is intolerant towards the managing class in parliament, banks, finance, companies and labour unions, and that cannot create employment and affluence. Especially in the South and the islands – Sicily and Sardinia – benefit cuts in the public sector and the removal of subsidies to companies that had survived only thanks to national or European support generate discontent, as we see in the protests of workers from the mines of the Sulcis and Alcoa and Gesip companies. Blue-collar workers and others who are losing their jobs protest as often as they can, at times clashing with the police or occupying various locations to garner public attention. If an adequate solution is not found at both the political and economic level, there is a risk that public discontent will degenerate.

In this atmosphere and in the context of the long political tradition of Italian populism, the 2013 parliamentary elections and the following election for the new Head of State – to succeed the president of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano – are expected to be historic and transformative, similar to the ones in 1948, 1953 and 1994. It was indeed Giorgio Napolitano, ex PCI leader and the first left-wing politician who started talks with the USA during an important mission in the 1970s, who tried to guide the country out of the depths of the economic crisis and the political paralysis left by the last Berlusconi-led government. Through his institutional powers, Napolitano helped to bring about the Monti government (Napolitano had also appointed Monti senator for life just before the launch of the new Cabinet). As a result, Napolitano reinstated Italy with sufficient stability and credibility before its European partners. In addition, Napolitano asked for a new electoral law. The current one was passed in extremis to allow Berlusconi to win the 2006 elections, even though he subsequently lost those elections by a small margin to Prodi. The law is of such poor quality that its author (a Member of Parliament from the Lega Party) defined it as 'una porcata' (rubbish). Because of his push to change the electoral law, Napolitano again faces populist rage against him, and in the last phases of his presidency he has become the object of a tough and hostile campaign. As in the case with the Monti government, the two wings of Italian populism previously representing diverging opinions have

joined together to fight the president at the Quirinal Palace. It's the old formula generated by Guglielmo Giannini that we saw when first thinking about these issues: the origins of populism are neither 'right' nor 'left'; the entrenched feelings of resentment it draws upon concentrate on the present; these feelings invoke a past where things were better and a difficult future; and the movement always associates deplorable characters with gentlemen such as President Napolitano.

I do not quote these current events to provide my viewpoint on these ongoing political debates, but rather to share with the reader the surprising influence of modernity on the political actor and the relevance of Guglielmo Giannini's conceptual mechanism that still functions perfectly in the Italy of the 21st century, from Berlusconi's press to Grillo and journalists like Travaglio.

The 2013 vote will determine up to which point the 'political' populism of the last 10 years and the economic populism caused by the 2008 crisis have taken root in Italian society. If Beppe Grillo's movement and related groups achieve two-digit results, potentially reaching close to 20 per cent of the vote, then Guglielmo Giannini's dream, which had been broken by the harsh reality of the beginning of the Cold War, will come true two generations later. What effects this result will have on Italian politics is hard to predict. Traditionally, alternative movements – from the PCI to the MSI in the post-war period, to the radicals of Marco Pannella and the New Left in 1976 and 1979, up to Bossi's Northern League in the early 1990s – sooner or later lose their most defining features when they enter parliamentary life and its procedures. Although these parties continue to advance their goals, they have to propose them in the normal democratic process. Will it be this way for Grillo and his followers? What's certain is that the idea of 'mandare tutti a casa' (sending everyone home) and wiping the slate of the current situation clean is misleading. Soon, Grillo and the other populists will realise how difficult it is to reform a country with such an ancient culture as Italy, whose economic growth is interconnected with the fragile global economy of the 21st century. Today's ruling parties have postponed much needed reforms for a very long time. For the delay and idleness that ruling parties have assumed in handling the crisis and for their failure to modernise the country, an array of dozens of new alternative parliamentarians would provide a harsh and well-deserved lesson.

The risk, however, is that a sudden change of the political alliances that come to power will damage the classes that the populists say they want to help: young people, temporary workers, the unemployed and the elderly. Their economic future and prosperity is indeed dependent on the growth of Italy, which unfortunately seems to be a country that no longer knows how to grow after the economic boom experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. New economic wellbeing will not come about because of any anti-corruption law – regardless of how

tough it is – but through innovation, research, productivity, fiscal rigour and the capacity of the Italian system to attract funds from abroad, even in the South. However, international investors do not trust a country dominated by impetuous and demagogic leaders.

Or, it is possible that the common sense of the Italian population will triumph and renew the political class in a profound way, as in 1948 when it kept the country a Western democracy but still gave a voice to the poorer classes tied to left-wing politics. To do so, however, Italians must not excessively facilitate methods, leaders and a culture that quash democracy. Rather, they must support ways to uphold it. This surely will be an important year and one that should be followed closely.

# Notes

- 1 Umberto Eco, 'Eternal fascism', 1995; see [http://digilander.libero.it/education/dati\\_box/STO\\_3/fascismo\\_eco2.pdf](http://digilander.libero.it/education/dati_box/STO_3/fascismo_eco2.pdf)
- 2 This is the thesis of the 'amoral familism' of Italy's south, the roots of populism and of scarce civic tradition, by expert Edward C. Banfield in his 1958 book *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Italian translation: *Le basi morali di una società arretrata*, 1976), which Robert Putnam quoted in *Bowling Alone, the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). My critical responses to both positions are in my 2011 book *The Things I Learned (Le cose che ho imparato. Storie, incontri ed esperienze che mi hanno insegnato a vivere)*, published by Mondadori.
- 3 Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, 203
- 4 Roberto Vivarelli, *History of the Origins of Fascism. Italy from the Great War to the March on Rome*, Il Mulino, 1991
- 5 *Il Corriere della Sera*, 9 October 2012
- 6 At that time Alaska and Hawaii were still not part of the United States, so the stars on the American flag numbered only 48.
- 7 Source: Cnel, 2012

Populism has often been referred to as a 'chameleon ideology' – it draws its strength from contextualised resentment and contextualised hopes and its roots run deep into mythologised national histories. This new volume, part of Counterpoint's 'Reluctant Radicals' series, comprises a set of essays by leading journalists, academics and writers that detail how populism has emerged and developed in ten countries across Europe.

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ISBN 978-1-909499-06-5  
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