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What Do People Want? *Unscrambling Populism*

JAN NEDERVEEN PIETERSE, UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Abstract

Should a discussion of populism be concerned with populism, along with revulsion of its various extremisms, or should it rather be concerned with the failure of institutions and the misbehavior of elites in a world in which eight billionaires own as much as half the world population? The former option will yield a totally different and probably somewhat more predictable discussion than the latter, which may include “from bad to worse.” A third option is that different types of market economies yield different types of populism, including pluto-populism. This discussion follows the latter two options.

Keywords: capitalism, pluto-populism, liberal democracy

What do people want? Populism, speaking to people directly, means speaking to what people want, persuasively enough to stir up emotion and support. Several accounts treat populism as essentially a political style of bypassing institutions and elites and addressing people directly, a “performative political style.”¹ Obviously, this style can be used in different ways and for widely different purposes, so populism doesn’t actually tell us much at all. It includes a Gramscian approach of mobilizing popular culture to gain hegemonic clout; “Gramscism of the right” goes way back. This makes sense, but this too just concerns the how, the mechanics of populist

outreach. This is a thin account of populism. Astute is Ernesto Laclau's observation that populism arises from a fracture in power blocs that leads one faction to appeal to "the people" to outflank establishment political elites.² Such appeals, of course, are as old as classical Athens and Rome (appeal to the plebs to swing the Senate).

An early populism is Argentina's Juan Perón, who addressed the "shirtless" of Buenos Aires in a popular style with an egalitarian message. In the Middle East and North Africa, populism also came with egalitarian and socialist connotations—such as Nasser in Egypt, Ben Bella and Bomedienne's Arab socialism in Algeria, early Gaddafi in Libya, and Khomeini in Iran.³ Now, however, notes Laclau, the hegemonic capacity of the old left is no more. "The old left—with its inveterate class-based politics, its productivism and antiquated statism—is dying everywhere."⁴

For populist outreach to succeed requires passing several thresholds:

- *Cultural attunement.* Marine Le Pen changed the name of her party from the Front National to Rassemblement National (National Rally, 2018), to "de-demonize" and soften its image, away from the holocaust trivialization of her father.
- *Media support.* Populism is a struggle for the public platform. Without media support to amplify the platform, populist forces don't break through. Berlusconi and his media power and Murdoch-Fox-Trump come to mind. The role of media in Thailand (Thaksin Shinawatra and later the struggle between the red shirts and the pro-monarchy yellow shirts) and Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood government) comes to mind as well. In Brazil Globo TV hammered on corruption in the Lula and Dilma PT governments and the car wash (Lava Jato) investigation of bribes without bringing up that such bribes have been common in Brazilian governments because the underlying problem is a low threshold for parties to enter parliament, so governability requires compromises that may be facilitated by favors or bribes. Eliminating Lula from the electoral field left it open for the newcomer Jair Bolsonaro.
- *Resonance in public culture.* Christian nationalism does well in Eastern Europe.
- *Timing.* The right-wing Freedom Party of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands did well playing up antagonism to Islam, but when the 2008

crisis came the party had nothing to contribute and its poll numbers plummeted.

- *Audience attunement.* Bring a rural message to a rural, small-town audience. Playing the rural card has worked well for many parties in many countries. However, this works for the umbrella message. In an era of hyperconnectivity, the envelope cannot be pushed too far or urban audiences will not just tune out (as they do in most countries) but rally against it. This is why in the 2016 U.S. elections political micro-targeting via Facebook and Cambridge Analytica data mattered so much. The same methodology was applied in the Brexit referendum in Britain.
- *Emotion leads.* Lead with stories (such as “Make America Great Again”), not with facts or policies.⁵ In societies in which 24/7 information clamors for attention, what leads is emotion, not data.
- *In phase 2, some record of material delivery is required.* However, by then the airwaves have been stirred and have clustered so much that representation and success have become hard to disentangle.

These general thresholds hold across many countries, yet the actual packages are context sensitive. Hence, populism is diverse and unscrambling populism is necessary. Many accounts and explanations of populism are of a *regional* nature and are often extrapolated to other countries or globally, as if similar explanations apply. Another problem is that because as a theme populism is concerned with form and style it distracts attention from substance, such as political agendas and infrastructures of power. This article discusses these problems and proposes as a remedy a typology to capture the diversity of populism.

Over recent years, populism has become increasingly prominent as a theme, and media attention and research literature have grown. Meanwhile, other factions of power blocs do not sit still. Like many terms nowadays, populism has become weaponized. A question then is what function populism discourse fulfills. What role does it play in the discursive field? Consider recent headlines:

“Corbyn and Trump versus the Liberal Order” (Philip Stephens, *Financial Times*, September 1, 2017)

“Emerging Powers Can Be Saviours of the Global Liberal Order” (A. Acharya, *Financial Times*, January 19, 2017)

“Populist Swing Alarms Financial Titans” (Gillian Tett, *Financial Times*, January 19, 2018)

Gillian Tett cites a chart about “modern politics” produced by the Bridgewater hedge fund that is, in her words, alarming: “The number crunching revealed that the proportion of votes garnered by populist, anti-establishment candidates in the west, such as US president Donald Trump, France’s Marine le Pen and Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK Labour party, exploded from 7 per cent in 2010 to 35 per cent in 2017.”

Consider the elements that are at play in these and many similar accounts. Using lumping concepts (populism, antiestablishment) enables a numerical representation. Clustering movements and parties under the heading populism yields momentum, hence the idea of a wave or explosion of populism.⁶ Many accounts treat populism as a transnational or global trend. Many discussions cast the other side of the spectrum as “liberal,” as in liberal democracy, liberal values, liberal capitalism, and the international liberal order. In shorthand, this may also be represented as democracy, as in democratic capitalism. Lumping Corbyn and Trump “versus the liberal order” further suggests they represent disorder.

The term “liberal” is a British and American terminology that has the nearly opposite meaning in continental Europe, where liberal political parties are typically right-of-center pro-business parties. Calling Europe “liberal,” as in “liberal Europe,”⁷ or in the headline “Merkel Leads Europe’s Fight for Liberal Values” (*Financial Times* editorial, January 3, 2017), doesn’t make sense outside of Britain. It oddly overlooks that she leads a Christian Democrat party.

Developments in the United States and United Kingdom brought the theme of populism to the foreground. The election of Trump and Brexit have created the impression of a populist wave. It was grouped together with right-wing parties in Europe, authoritarianism in Eastern Europe, political developments in Turkey, the Philippines, and India, and the “pink tide” in Latin America. Also part of recent memory is the Tea Party in the United States. The role of strongmen in several countries, such as Putin, Erdogan, Modi, and Kagame in Rwanda, added to an impression that democracy is waning. The theme of populism features alongside litanies about threats to democracy and capitalism.

“The Global Democratic Recession” (G. Rachman, *Financial Times*, August 7, 2016)

“Democratic Capitalism Is in Peril” (M. Wolf, *Financial Times*, August 3, 2016)

“Trump, Erdogan, Farage: The Attractions of Populism for Politicians, the Dangers for Democracy” (J.-W. Müller, *Guardian*, September 2, 2016)
 “Populism’s Challenge to Democracy” (W. Galston, *Wall Street Journal*, March 17–18, 2018)
 “Democracy at Risk” (*New York Times Book Review* theme, September 16, 2018)

Thus an entire field is defined, a global order with an inside and outside, a center and periphery, a field in which “antiestablishment forces” oppose “the establishment.” In this setting populism becomes a salient, central problem. Populism then functions as a term of boundary policing. The search is on for a definition, demarcation, and sociological account of populism. Meanwhile the very focus on populism, the definition and morphology of populism, places “the establishment” out of view. Concerns that may have generated populism, such as trade pacts and globalization (i.e., the way globalization has been organized), come up, but discussions imply that given the morphology of populism such concerns are best left to the establishment.

However, look closely and the picture unravels. There is no wave of populism. Yes, some surface manifestations look alike, yet the genealogies, political economies, and contexts of the movements and parties are profoundly different. By highlighting surface similarities, the populism discussion is actually distracting and misleading.

Populism by several accounts refers to a political style (critique of elites, bypassing institutions, direct appeal to people) while the agendas range widely. Focus on morphology leads to a broad clustering of populism, across left and right, while a focus on agendas leads to steep differentiation. One approach concerns style, the other concerns substance.

There should be clear demarcations between right-wing and left-wing populism. During recent years, right- and left-wing forces share criticism of trade pacts and “globalization.” But while the right wing attacks immigrants, minorities, and foreign countries (“China”), the left (such as Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, the Sanders campaign) attacks corporations, banks, institutions, and police brutality. Right-wing policies look to deregulation, tax cuts, tariffs, and renegotiating trade pacts (difficult because corporations are interwoven in global value chains), while left-wing policies focus on reregulation of banks and corporations, corporate tax increases, and social support and investment policies. In other words, the profiles are fundamentally different.

Unscrambling Populism

Explaining populism in general, by reference to a general explanation such as economic causes or a macro theory (such as world-systems theory),⁸ usually falls short. Efforts to explain populism in general usually capture a problematic in a particular region and then make side observations about trends elsewhere that don't quite add up.

One way of unscrambling populism is to differentiate between varieties of capitalism. A basic typology is liberal market economies, coordinated market economies, and state-led market economies, each of which involves markedly different relations between state, market, and society. Hence, in each setting populist outreach fulfills different functions. Varieties of capitalism refer to institutions of regulation that coordinate economic activities in market economies. All market economies are mixed with diverse strands; the heading refers to the *dominant* mode of coordination. For instance, the United Kingdom is a hybrid formation with dominant liberal regulation, yet with a relatively strong public sector such as the National Health Service. Varieties of capitalism are not exhaustive descriptions; they characterize the dominant mode of coordination of economic activities.

The difference between the liberal market economies of the United States and United Kingdom and coordinated market economies in Nordic Europe is marked. In the United States and United Kingdom, the agenda of populist movements is broad—it includes jobs, deindustrialization, regional uneven development, immigration, inequality, trade pacts, globalization and international competition (“China”), and white nationalism; in the United Kingdom, add the European Union. But in Nordic Europe the agenda of populist parties is simply immigration and Islam. The difference is that liberal market economies leave everything on the table; corporations come first, the overall public sphere is right-wing, and people are far more exposed and insecure than in coordinated market economies. In this setting, populism is to some extent a fairly minor variant, a quirk, different in style and degree but not in substance. The difference between neoliberalism (Reagan, “It’s Morning in America Again”) and neoliberal populism (Trump, “Make America Great Again”) is in some respects minor.

In Western Europe, populist parties typically focus on immigration. Social democracy is a national social contract and immigration has been its Achilles’

heel all along. Deindustrialization, austerity, and welfare cuts reinforce this, as does the spillover of wars and conflicts in the Middle East. More comers are to share a pie that has shrunk with austerity measures. The cultural tissue of the social contract has become brittle amid accelerated globalization. But other than immigration and Islam, populist parties bring nothing to the table, no economic program to speak of. In France, the Netherlands, and Germany they lost, while in Austria, the Czech Republic, and Italy they inched forward (2018). These parties should be called and often are called anti-immigrant parties (such as Progress in Norway).

In Eastern Europe, the prevailing political discourse is nationalism, which is no wonder given histories of occupation (Germany, Austria, Soviet Union) and postcommunism. Nationalism comes with authoritarian leanings and cultural strands (“Christian values”) in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In Hungary it also comes with crony capitalism. Governments in Hungary and Poland reject immigration and Islam and rail against “Brussels.” Calling this populism barely adds value; the keynote is authoritarian nationalism.

In Mediterranean Europe the main concern of Syriza, Podemos, and the Five Star Movement is governance reform with a view to problems of clientelism and corruption. The second agenda is austerity and the European Union; third is immigration and refugee flows. They are left-wing parties, and calling them populist is a misdirection. Lega Nord, however, is a right-wing party that is not just against immigrants and the EU but also seeks to reduce disbursements to the south, the Mezzogiorno, the opposite agenda of the Five Star Movement, which has become the weaker part of the governing coalition.

In Latin America, the “pink tide” has often been called populist.⁹ From the point of view of the financial sector, populism means instability, slow growth, or, worse, a policy shift toward social priorities and government restrictions on the financial sector. The financial sector has long arduously watched populist trends in Latin America, but the tide has receded in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile and is crumbling in Venezuela.¹⁰ Yet political risk is up at a time of major corruption investigations.¹¹ Brazil has extractive (among the highest Gini index in the world) as well as developmental strands (as in Cardoso and PT governments). The financial sector applauds the rise of Jair Bolsonaro, supported by the “Bible, beef and bullet” lobbies.¹² Bolsonaro represents a break with Latin American populism that generally carries a socially progressive meaning.

Erdogan and the AKP in Turkey again belong to an entirely different configuration. The backdrop is the rural-urban gulf between the Muslim countryside of Anatolia and urban secular-military coalitions that have governed Turkey for decades, as part of modernization drives that go back to Atatürk in the 1920s. AKP bridged that gulf with Islam, a Muslim bourgeoisie and rural migrants in the cities as bridges, paired with social policies (as well as liberalization) and nationalism. The AKP marks a shift from secular nationalism to Muslim nationalism, along with “looking East” toward the Middle East in foreign and economic policies.

The Duterte government in the Philippines also has a distinctive background. The Philippines has typically been ruled by parties led by large landholding families. Land reform, long a major concern, is no longer even on the agenda.¹³ Duterte’s war on drugs shifts the agenda from political economy to security and strengthens the security forces (as in Brazil) while doing nothing to transform the political economy. An overview of agendas of forces labeled populist (Table 1) shows the diversity of settings and hence agendas.

It is interesting to note where populism does *not* play a part. Even though populism is portrayed as a wave or explosion, it actually figures only in few countries. In most of these it won only by tiny margins—Trump won by a few states and slim numbers (and did not win the popular vote), Brexit passed by a few percentage points, Erdogan’s referendum to expand his power was rejected in eleven of Turkey’s twelve largest cities, and so forth.

Populism refers to *outreach* to people—outreach because a power bloc fractures, a leadership is new, or a regime is insecure and seeks relegitimation.

TABLE 1 *Agendas of Forces Called “Populist”*

Market economies	Examples	Agendas
Liberal	US, UK	Broad: economic, social, jobs, inequality
Coordinated	Nordic Europe	Narrow: immigration, Islam
	Mediterranean Europe	Governance reform, EU, immigration
State-led authoritarian conservative	Turkey, AKP	From secular to Muslim nationalism
	Hungary, Poland	Christian nationalism, immigration, EU
Authoritarian extractive	Philippines, Duterte	Strengthen security forces, war on drugs
Developmental	Latin America	Social progressive (Chavez, Kirchner, Lula, Ecuador, Uruguay)

As a phenomenon populism presupposes instability or transformation. Such conditions don't exist in, say, Northeast Asia, Canada, Cambodia, or Vietnam.

Other ways to settle rifts in power blocs are military coups (Egypt, Thailand, Zimbabwe), judicial interventions (South Korea, South Africa, Brazil, Peru), and, of course, electoral processes (South Africa, Argentina, Malaysia, etc.). Table 2 lists examples of state-led market economies that are *not populist*; leaders have risen through established party channels—such as Likud in Israel, BJP in India, Putin in Russia—yet are strongmen, their profile and agenda are nationalist, and they are often clustered with populism. In most state-led market economies populist movements barely exist besides a right-wing nationalist fringe, as in Russia, China, and Kazakhstan. A fringe because the overall public sphere is nationalist already. The BJP in India is an authoritarian conservative party that is close to corporate forces such as the Ambani brothers and Reliance. The Wahhabi clergy in Saudi Arabia is an elite faction; sponsoring a Sunni alliance against Iran is another elite project.

Looking across the overviews, crosscutting trends emerge. One is the *return to nationalism*—“economic nationalism” (Trump, Bannon, Brexit). Publics in the European Union, United States, and Southeast Asia generally rejected transcontinental trade pacts, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; renegotiating the terms of globalization is a general concern and is not distinctive for populism. But populist parties *redefine the nation* in narrow terms—as in white nationalism (“we want our country back”), attacking multiculturalism, or pursuing ethnic domination. Ethnic mobilization has been a tool of political entrepreneurs since time immemorial. Third, in rejecting “globalization,” populist parties turn to provincialism.

TABLE 2 *State-Led Market Economies That Are Not Populist*

State-led market economies	Examples	Agendas
Authoritarian conservative	Israel, Likud	Jewish nationalism and market
	Saudi Arabia	Wahhabi and Sunni alliance
	India, BJP	From secular to Hindu nationalism
Developmental		Hindu nationalism and market
Authoritarian extractive	Russia	Superpower nostalgia
	Egypt, Thailand, Zimbabwe	Military government

Is populism anti-pluralist?¹⁴ Since it claims a rank order of difference and status for the “majority” (the people), it is rather *majoritarian* and hierarchical. In several cases, the net effect is ethnocracy, as in Israel. In Turkey, it places Turks above Kurds and Alevites; in India, Hindus above Muslims, dalits, and Adivasis; in the United States, Anglos above Hispanics and minorities; in European countries, populist parties target immigrants and Muslims.

Reviewing the typologies, key situations where populists have risen are the United States and United Kingdom. The short story is all bets were on the market and corporations so the 2008 market crash was also a social paradigm crisis. Coordinated market economies face protests against immigration and Islam, which in combination with economic dissatisfaction produces dissent, but they are not “divided democracies” the way liberal market economies are. State-led market economies of a developmental kind (China, Singapore) don’t face populist surges because development involves a broad social commitment. State-led market economies of an extractive kind do not allow popular forces to come forward. In authoritarian conservative market economies such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf emirates, and Iran, populism barely exists; at most there are populist episodes (such as Ahmadinejad). In authoritarian conservative countries, to the extent that populism exists it is variations on the old theme of ethnic nationalism. Turkey is an exception; the AKP introduced the rise of Muslim Anatolia, a shift from secular to Muslim nationalism, a reorganization of society. Overall, this indicates that in fact populist takeovers are quite scarce.

A related question is this: is what matters the strength of populist forces or rather the weakness of established political parties or regimes? An undercurrent in many expressions of populism is the failure of established parties. In Latin America, “Traditional parties are breaking down, outsiders are forcing change and popular anger threatens to rewrite the constitution.”¹⁵ Other examples are the Congress party in India and the establishment parties of landholding elites in the Philippines.

The Trees or the Forest?

Should the focus be on outlier movements and parties, or should it rather be on the wider field that has generated the movements as well as the discourse of opprobrium? Decentering populism means looking at the entire field from

a wide-angle perspective. Populism, then, is a symptom and the focus should rather be on the disease.

The empirics are plain: eight billionaires own as much as half the world population (2017). Inequality has been increasing across the world, most steeply in liberal market economies. According to Oxfam International (2018), the “richest 1 percent bagged 82 percent of wealth created last year—poorest half of humanity got nothing.” Is this the liberal order? Apparently, some think that disorder might be a better option.

Among variants of populism, the United States and United Kingdom stand out. These metropolitan societies have long driven and shaped the world economy. Institutions in the United Kingdom and United States have tilted toward right-wing priorities since the 1980s, since Margaret Thatcher (“there is no alternative”; “society does not exist”) and Ronald Reagan (“government is the problem”). They spearheaded wide-ranging transformations with the Washington consensus, structural adjustment, the IMF, and the World Bank. Wall Street and the City of London led the process of financialization. From the point of view of the financial sector, growth is paramount, redistribution isn’t profitable, and supply-side economics is the norm.

By one account, “the populist right sweeps aside the left: The traditional left is nowhere to be seen.”¹⁶ But pro-market bias and the emphasis on growth have marginalized left-wing politics all along since the 1980s, also in the Third Way of New Labour and New Democrats. Disdain for the left has become normal in the public sphere, especially in the United States and United Kingdom. The center cannot hold, yet alternatives are cast aside and populism is a new bogey—even though it has been fomented to bulldoze aside moderate alternative positions.

After four decades of supply-side economics (growth, corporations first), demand-side economics (growth and redistribution) is no longer part of the mainstream American agenda, is often rebranded as “hard left” in the United Kingdom, while austerity outflanked redistribution in Europe.¹⁷ In the course of four decades governance gaps have grown ever wider—in finance, big tech, tax evasion, climate change, and global public goods. Forty years on the search is for institutional buffers against the massive erosion that has been ongoing. Reining in financialization, progressive taxation, a wealth tax, curbing tax evasion, and crony capitalism are among the priorities. According to Wolfgang Münchau, this is “the liberal elite’s Marie Antoinette moment—if you want

to fight extremism, solve the problem. . . . The correct response is to stop insulting voters and to rein in the financial sector and income inequality.”¹⁸

In the United States and United Kingdom the rupture with past trends that populism represents is most marked and salient. Populism is one among many stress signals. In the United States four decades of median wage stagnation, steadily growing social inequality, economic insecurity and poverty, poor infrastructure, unaffordable health care, and higher education make for dark undercurrents, deaths of despair, an opioid crisis, mounting gun violence, domestic abuse, and so forth. A world of deindustrialization without a safety net. Wages for low-skilled work are unlikely to rise, the cost of higher education is ever rising, and student debt (\$1.5 trillion) has reached unsustainable levels.

That the agenda of populism is broadest in the United States and United Kingdom suggests the issue isn't populism per se but rather the shape that liberal market economies are in. Is then the key issue the morphology of populism, or the career of liberal market economies after four decades of radical liberalization?

While discussions zero in on populism, arguably the actual battlefield is the institutions. On this score when in government populists have nothing to contribute; they just add to crony capitalism, just like authoritarian and military governments in developing countries. Yet a lot of attention goes to populism, as if torpedoing populism would somehow fix the conundrum. It is in particular liberal forces that rail against populism, in the name of liberal democracy, liberal capitalism, the liberal order, and so on. Yet in advanced economies, these same liberal forces have caused the conundrum we are in.

The political counterpart of liberal market economies is *liberal democracy*. In liberal democracies, the emphasis on individual rights leaves social rights behind. Whether the issue is labor rights, globalization, trade, media, tech, or governance, markets and corporations come first.¹⁹ Genuine political choice is barely available; that markets and corporations come first is a bipartisan principle.

Arguably, in relation to overriding forces that are at work since the 1980s (restructuring, government debt, austerity, cutting corporate taxes, tax evasion, financial speculation) the morphology of parties and movements (populist, liberal, authoritarian, military) matters relatively little. The differences,

though they seem major, up close are marginal from a wider angle. In many countries the majority of people are being squeezed and are looking for a way out, without much hope. In liberal democracies this situation is business as usual. These are the regimes that have brought about institutional erosion; yet according to establishment pundits, we should zero in on and target the symptom, so the threat can be identified and contained or rolled back.

Here the diagnosis itself is a symptom of the disease. Whom does discourse serve? What is the sociology of populism knowledge? Bridgewater is a \$160 billion hedge fund. The *Financial Times* and *Wall Street Journal* are newspapers for the financial sector. Similar accounts figure in the *Economist*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *New York Times*. Populism can serve to distract the attention, misdirect the focus, while in the process institutions further tilt sharp right, as in the case of the Trump administration.

In the United States, much of what is deemed populism involves dark money at work (Mayer 2016). The Tea Party was funded by the Koch brothers. Contemporary populism in the United States refers to market populism.²⁰ The Trump campaign was good for the ratings of CNN. “CNN had a problem. Trump fixed it.”²¹ Further, add the *National Enquirer* and Murdoch-Trump connections. In all, the campaign received some \$5 billion free airtime. The polarization-industrial complex with information cocoons of the two-party system thrives. Hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer funded Breitbart News, the alt-right, and Cambridge Analytica that helped Trump’s campaign harvest 8.7 million Facebook profiles. Thus, a subtext of the rise of populist forces in liberal market economies is rogue finance at work (which has been enabled by deregulation of the financial sector in the 1980s).

In recent years, the conversation has turned to the threat that populism poses to democracy. But how does this compare to the steady erosion of institutions over decades of liberal democracy (deregulation, liberalization, antigovernment government), particularly in the United States? In liberal democracies, populism has been able to spread precisely because of the steady self-immolation of liberal democracy. One diagnosis is “sophisticated state failure,” that is, “to have a functioning state in which nothing gets done.”²² However, it’s not that nothing gets done but that what gets done often makes things worse (governance gaps, corporate monopolies, social inequality). Also this diagnosis doesn’t say *why* “nothing gets done” and misreads the crisis that is afoot.

A New Centrism

On a world scale there is a long-term shift from the Atlantic economy to the Pacific economy (just as in the sixteenth century the Mediterranean world was overtaken by the Atlantic turn). Another shift is that after four decades of supply-side economics, the center no longer holds. Brexit and the election of Trump indicate this order is unraveling.

At one level populism is an expression of a waning order, hence the cracks in the power bloc. At another level, populism functions as a new boundary marker. Fukuyama's claim that after the end of the Cold War liberal democracy is the only political ideology left standing makes a comeback, now as a civilized counterpoint to populism. In this new centrism, the Atlantic order resumes its place as world order.²³ The subtext of populism as it functions in many discussions is the *relegitimation* of a waning order.

Now this world order makes a comeback as provincialism. In Britain as well as the United States the rural vote takes the lead.²⁴ Cities in the United States are responsible for 85 percent of economic growth, but the rural vote leads, courtesy of the Electoral College, GOP gerrymandering, and voter suppression. Provincialism is embedded in the American bubble (national sports-cast such as the World Series, national network news is like provincial news), and in the guise of populism it returns to the stage as aggressive provincialism with a vindictive streak.

In government American populism takes the form of pluto-populism with huge, permanent regressive tax cuts.²⁵ The Trump administration is "a field day for America's one per cent" with the biggest winners on Wall Street, the fossil fuel industry, and defense.²⁶ Aggressive provincialism may team up with stable plutocracy, a combination of institutional degradation, rising inequality and a divided democracy. How stable this is, is a different question.

Populism is a distraction for several reasons. First, in most cases the heading adds no value. Second, as a theme populism diverts the attention from substance to style. Populism discussions tend to be long on morphology and short on content. Forms of populism are fluid and media-chameleonic and often spectacular in a media-genic era, but it's the substance that matters. The heading creates a misleading impression of transnational cohesion.

It is not likely that liberal democracy can address inequality. In the United States, a likely outcome over time is stable plutocracy, that is, the

institutionalization of what has been in place already, with aggressive provincialism as companion. Issues in the EU are of an entirely different order. Because of aging populations, immigration and multiculturalism are the way forward. Without Britain, the EU may be able to put in place a stronger social charter, in combination with innovations such as a digitally planned labor market. Social and Christian democracies may be able to generate a social compromise that will make this possible over time.

Populism refers to attempts to rebalance state, market, society relations. In the process, populism sheds light on what people want in different political economies. It does so distorted and filtered through the lens of whichever faction of power blocs stages populist outreach. In right-wing populism, outreach is allegedly to the advantage of society but actually in the interests of financial and corporate interests. Populism is different from political campaigning only by degree.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse is Duncan and Suzanne Mellichamp Distinguished Professor of Global Studies and Sociology at University of California, Santa Barbara. He specializes in globalization, development studies, and cultural studies. He is the author/editor of twenty-five books. He was previously at Malaysia National University (Distinguished Chair), Maastricht University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, and University of Amsterdam. He edits book series with Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan.

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