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Neoliberal populism: The case of Pim Fortuyn

After Trump and Brexit, a dominant narrative emerged that portrayed the rise of right-wing populism as a backlash to neoliberalism. While it is true that right-wing populism emerged during the heydays of neoliberal globalization in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between the two is more complex than often assumed. In a series of countries, right-wing populism emerged with, rather than against neoliberalism. The particular combination of ‘neoliberal populism’ however, is still underexplored. Studying this political discourse can help us understand the role of neoliberal ideology in the rise of right-wing populism. As a contribution to this end, this article offers an in-depth analysis of the ideological evolution of the Dutch neoliberal populist Pim Fortuyn (1948-2002). It places the development of his ideas against the backdrop of the Dutch neoliberal turn and shows how his populist establishment critique emerged out of a neoliberal polemic against the Dutch corporatist welfare state.

Keywords: populism; neoliberalism; market populism; neoliberal populism; Fortuyn

Intro

The relationship between populism and neoliberalism is often thought to be antagonistic. After Brexit and Trump, a large literature emerged that explained the rise of right-wing populism as a backlash to neoliberal globalization (Bergh and Kärnä, 2021; Colantone et al., 2021; Rodrik, 2021; Smith, 2019). Even Francis Fukuyama (2019) weighed in and agreed ‘with the commonplace judgement that the rise of populism has been triggered by globalization and the consequent massive increase in inequality in many rich countries’. While that might be true of the most recent wave of right-wing populism as exemplified by Brexit and Trumpism, the original emergence of right-wing populism in the 1980s and 1990s attests to a more complex reality.

In a series of Western European countries, right-wing populist parties first emerged as ardent supporters of neoliberalism and (economic) globalization. They were described by leading political scientists such as Hans Georg Betz and Herbert Kitschelt as ‘neoliberal populists’ (Betz, 1994: 108), ‘combining free market appeals with authoritarian and even racist messages’ (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: viii). ‘Theirs was a radical, non-academic, populist neoliberalism,’ Betz wrote, ‘in favor of the lower strata’ (Betz, 1994: 112). More specifically, Betz (1994: 110) pointed to the European influence of a ‘Thatcherist vision of an “enterprise culture” that celebrates individualism, competition, efficiency, entrepreneurship, and selectivity’. The European radical right, he asserted, sought a ‘productivist enterprise culture aimed at improving national competitiveness’ (Betz, 1994: 171). Similarly, Kitschelt and McGann (1995: viii) contended that it was ‘increased international competition’ that gave rise to a broader ‘political populism and anti-state affect’ oriented at ‘partocratic connections of politics and economics’.

In the period from the mid-1980s till the mid-1990s, this ‘neoliberal populism’ was at its zenith. From the mid-1990s onwards, many of these parties moderated their economic platform, and came to focus more single-mindedly on nationalism and anti-immigration (Betz, 2003; McGann and Kitschelt, 2005: 163–164). As David Art (2011: 11) rightly concluded in his book *Inside the Radical Right*, ‘culture has trumped economics as the signature feature of the [populist] radical right’. In the 2000s, populism scholars even became convinced that neoliberalism had in fact, never been important for the rise of populism. Michael Minkenberg argued in an influential paper that ‘market liberalism was never a key component of [radical, MO] right-wing ideology . . . it was a tactical tool to be abandoned as soon as the political winds changed and protectionism and welfare chauvinism seemed more promising’ (Minkenberg, 2000: 173–174). Similarly, Cas Mudde (2007b: 121) asserted in his book on populist radical right parties, that ‘neoliberalism had never been more than a rhetorical veneer over an essentially welfare chauvinist program’.

While neoliberalism was thus sidelined from the field of populism studies, populism has recently become a hot topic of debate in the field of neoliberalism research (Biebricher, 2020; Brandes, 2019; Joppke, 2021; Konings, 2012; Pühringer and Ötsch, 2018; Romani, 2021; Scheiring and Szombati, 2020; Slobodian, 2021; Tuğal, 2022). As the scholars in the field of neoliberalism studies generally make use of an

intellectual history approach, research thus far has generally focused on intellectual networks, think tanks and major economic policy debates. The question how mass publics were won over for a free market agenda, and how neoliberal ideas have been tailored to the general audience has been less of a concern.

This is where populism comes in. Scholars have identified a ‘populist turn’ in the American neoliberal movement in the 1960s and 1970s, when Milton Friedman and James Buchanan developed a populist discourse in their newspaper columns and television documentaries (Brandes, 2019; Burgin, 2012: 191–195; Romani, 2021). Again others have pointed to Reagan and Thatcher as the political authors of this populist turn (Bimes, 2003; Blumenthal, 2008; Hall and Jaques, 1983; Kazin, 1998; Walpen, 2004).

‘Neoliberal populism’, like all forms of populism, rests on an opposition between the ‘true people’ and the estranged elite. The big difference is that in the neoliberal variety, the people are equated with the marketplace and elites with ‘big government’. Studying this particular form of populist discourse can help make sense of the mass appeal of the neoliberal project, but it can also help understand the role of neoliberal ideology in the rise of right-populism, and its implication in recent political upheavals such as Brexit and Trump (Kiely, 2020; Wood and Ausserladscheider, 2021). As Brandes (2019) notes, key elements of Trumpism, such as his promise to ‘drain the swamp’, have clear neoliberal antecedents, while also the Brexit campaign has been associated with ‘neoliberal populism’ (Wood and Ausserladscheider, 2021).

This paper seeks to further our understanding of this combination through a case study of the ideological trajectory of the Dutch right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn (1948-2002). Fortuyn made global headlines when he rose to prominence in the 2002 Dutch election campaign, and when he was grimly assassinated nine days before the actual vote. After his death and the demise of his party LPF, his ideological legacy lived on. Fortuyn is widely considered to be the founder of the Dutch right-wing populist current. More relevant for our purposes here, is that Fortuyn is known as a ‘neoliberal populist’ (Art, 2011; De Lange, 2007; Pauwels, 2014) whose writings amounted to ‘a comprehensive and coherent neo-liberal attack on Dutch society and economy’ (Mudde, 2007a: 214). Fortuyn is also a thankful subject for research, since he had a decade-long career as a right-wing pundit and commentator before becoming a politician. He published dozens of books and pamphlets laying out his socio-economic views, and his bestselling election manifesto (Fortuyn, 2002b) is basically a synthesis of that work. In

this way, Fortuyn's intellectual trajectory offers us a privileged vantage point to examine how neoliberalism and populism can combine and shape one another.

With that in mind, it is surprising that no serious analysis of Fortuyn's socio-economics views has been published in English to date (for a very succinct treatment, see De Lange, 2007). Scholars have tended to focus on his views on multiculturalism and immigration (Akkerman, 2005; Art, 2011; Kessel, 2021) and have reduced the LPF to an 'anti-immigration party'. The only existing study of Fortuyn's socio-economic ideas is *The Spirit of Pim*, an elegant intellectual biography (in Dutch) by the sociologist Dick Pels (2003). It has as its only drawback that it individualizes Fortuyn's intellectual trajectory and neglects to position that in the economic debates of the time.

Using an intellectual history approach, this paper gives an overview of Fortuyn's ideological trajectory and situates Fortuyn's ideas in the major Dutch socio-economic debates of the 1990s. In what way did neoliberalism and populism combine in Fortuyn's thinking? I argue that Fortuyn's populism was first a product of his neoliberal views, and only later became enmeshed in questions of Islam and immigration. Against Mudde and Minkenberg, I contend that neoliberalism in the Dutch case was far more than a 'tactical tool' or 'rhetorical veneer' in the rise of Dutch right-wing populism. Secondly, I show that Fortuyn's populism emerged with, rather than against economic globalization.

The structure of the paper is as follows. It proceeds with a short historical overview of neoliberal populism. Then the paper introduces Pim Fortuyn and explains why his neoliberal agenda is relevant. Finally, the main body of the paper will trace the evolution of Fortuyn's views from his conversion to the free market at the end of the 1980s, to his populist anti-establishment critique in the 1990s.

The genesis of neoliberal populism

Populism is commonly defined as a 'thin ideology' that portrays society as divided between two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007b: 23; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 6). Populism involves an adulation of the 'common sense' of the people. As Albertazzi and McDonnell (2007: 3) argue, populism 'pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive)

the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice.’ As a thin ideology, populism does not provide a full program for social change, but rather attaches itself to other ‘thick’ ideologies, such as conservatism, liberalism, the radical right, or in our case, neoliberalism. Important is that ‘the people’ in populist discourse is never equivalent to the entire political community. There are always groups that are excluded from it – starting with the establishment of course, but also other ‘unpopular’ elements, such as immigrants or the unemployed. This pars pro toto logic finds expression in populist references to the True Finns, the Real America, the Austrian Heimat and the more general idea of a ‘heartland’ (Canovan 1981, Laclau 2005, Taggart 2000). The populist leader then, is the spokesperson and direct embodiment of ‘the people’.

At first sight, ‘neoliberal populism’ appears to be counterintuitive. Neoliberalism is generally considered an elite phenomenon, favoring a highly technocratic approach to politics (Davies, 2016). It first emerged in the 1930s as an economic philosophy that sought to curtail the influence of ‘the masses’ on economic decision making by depoliticizing economic policy-making (Burgin, 2012; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Slobodian, 2018). Populism in contrast, favors an anti-establishment politics that derides elites and speaks in the name of ‘the masses’ that neoliberal thinkers have long sought to contain. It is obvious though, that as much as any political project, neoliberalism will need to win over the mass public for its arguments. And in many countries, it has achieved just that, as free market economics has proven electorally viable, even popular under leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Scholars have observed a fundamental change in sentiment in the global neoliberal movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The American economist Milton Friedman, described by historian Angus Burgin (2012: 192) as a ‘genuine and emphatic populist,’ took the lead in introducing a more populist language (Burgin, 2012: 193; Romani, 2021: 931). In his classic *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1962) still adopted a minoritarian position. He conceded that free market economics was decidedly unpopular with the American people. However, this was not a natural state of affairs. Friedman blamed progressive intellectuals for having inculcated the American people with egalitarian views. It was the progressive populism of the New Deal that depicted the market as a site of entrenched elite power and the government as a democratizing force. In the book, Friedman deftly turned the argument around. He

argued that the marketplace was inherently more democratic than the political sphere: 'Each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it; he does not have to see what color the majority wants and then, if he is in the minority, submit' (Friedman, 1962: 15).

While this was still an anti-majoritarian argument, Friedman combined it with a more populist critique. State provision meant that paternalistic elites decided what was good for the people. 'A free economy,' Friedman (1962: 15) wrote, 'gives people what they want instead of what a particular group thinks they ought to want'. With the Goldwater campaign of 1964, Friedman honed his populism, eulogizing the self-reliant 'ordinary man', crushed by an alliance between self-serving administrative elites and private groups (Romani, 2021: 938). Friedman took special care to distance himself from big business, that he portrayed as constantly lobbying Washington in search of special privileges at the cost of both consumers and taxpayers (Burgin, 2012: 194). Instead, it was the small businessman who Friedman believed to be the principal subject of his free market worldview.

As Brandes and Romani show, Friedman's populism came to full fruition with the book and PBS-documentary series *Free to Choose* (1980). The tax revolts of the 1970s had bolstered Friedman's confidence in the popularity of free market economics. He now came to praise the common sense of the people that is so essential to populism. He argued that the traditional American values of 'individual responsibility, equality of opportunity and personal freedom' had been perverted by intellectuals and Washington elites, while the values of the public at large 'have remained healthy' (Romani, 2021: 940). In the influential *Free to Choose* PBS-documentary, the abstract notion of the free market was repeatedly visualized as a local neighborhood market, while the government was depicted using massive, intimidating buildings of major administrative centers. Brandes (2019: 74) finds the documentary shot through with a 'market populist notion in which government is always "up there," while the market represents us, the (average, small) people "down here".'

Politically, 'neoliberal populism' entered the global stage with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Reagan's turn to a neoliberal populism roughly coincided with that of Friedman. Reagan was first catapulted on the national stage during the Goldwater campaign, with his speech *A Time for Choosing*. Drawing on Hayek and Friedman, Reagan lambasted the Democratic Party for pushing the country 'down the

road [to serfdom MO] under the banners of Marx, Lenin and Stalin' (Bimes, 2003: 66). He attacked a long litany of social programs and criticized the 'little intellectual elite', the 'do-gooders', and 'government planners' who constructed a welfare state that stripped citizens of their freedom.

In *The Populist Persuasion*, historian Michael Kazin (1998: 264) noted how Reagan 'captured the language of the New Deal and earlier populists of the left' and repurposed it. Progressive populism had been built on an opposition between 'the people' and the 'special interests', with the latter category referring to economic trusts and financiers. Reagan reworked 'special interests' to refer to an alliance of liberal elites, trade unions and minority groups (in particular the Afro-American population and alternative youth), with a shared interest in expanding the state. At the same time, Reagan stripped 'the people' of its former class connotation, and used it to refer to a 'Middle America' heartland of ordinary, tax paying and self-governing citizens, who 'should not have to transfer anymore of their just rewards to the Goliath state' (Kazin, 1998: 263). At the other end of the pond, Thatcher developed a similar 'populist idiom', as famously analyzed by Stuart Hall. 'Thatcherite populism', Hall (1983: 29) wrote, combined 'the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism'. It 'used the language of the people unified behind a reforming drive to turn the tide of "creeping collectivism"', brought about by 'corporatist state intervention'.

Finally, in *One Market under God*, Thomas Frank recounts how neoliberal populism became mainstream in the 1990s, as the *New Economy* ushered in a new wave of free market enthusiasm. Coining the term 'market populism', Frank documented the rise of a new market faith which held that 'markets expressed the popular will more articulately and more meaningfully than did mere elections' (2000: xiv). One of the core tenants of the faith was that ICT and globalization were revolutionizing and democratizing the business world, empowering consumers and destroying traditional hierarchies at the workplace (Frank, 2000: 59). As a result, anything that stood in the way of the market, be it trade unions or government regulation, was depicted as a form of elitism. The principal exponents of this new faith were not so much politicians or economists, but rather business guru's and management theorists writing for magazines such as *Fortune*, *Businessweek* and *Wired*.

What then, is the shared ground between neoliberalism and populism? What brings them together? (Joppke, 2021; Pühringer and Ötsch, 2018; Tuğal, 2022; Weyland, 1999) Both ideologies share an aversion to intermediary institutions, such as trade unions, employers' organizations, and organized civil society. These are seen as cartels and self-interested elite groups, that accrue special favors to the detriment of the general interest. Instead, both favor direct relationships to address people's needs, either through the market mechanism or the quasi-personal relationship with the populist leader. Another point of commonality is that both are prone to adopt an anti-establishment position. The neoliberals, because they see political parties and government bureaucracies as self-serving institutions, led by perverse incentives that favor powerful interest groups, while populists tend to see the elite as one homogeneous entity. Because both ideologies believe there to be entrenched political elites, they favor radical measures to break open the political system, either by reforming state institutions or by reforming the electoral system itself.

Introducing Pim Fortuyn

Before we turn to a closer analysis of Fortuyn's ideas, a brief introduction is in order. Pim Fortuyn, son from a family of conservative Catholic entrepreneurs, first acquired renown as a leftist sociologist at the University of Groningen. At the end of the 1980s however, he radically changed tack and was swept up in the enthusiasm for neoliberal reform. He left academia and reinvented himself as a free-lance consultant and controversial right-wing commentator. In 1992, he became a columnist for the right-wing weekly *Elsevier*, and a sought-after public speaker in small business circles. He published a dozen pamphlets and books on a wide range of topics and served as a frequent guest on Dutch television talkshows. While initially, Fortuyn wrote mostly on economic questions, from the mid-nineties he shifted focus to the cultural issues of national identity, Islam and immigration. As Cas Mudde (2007a: 210) noted, Fortuyn increasingly 'became the voice of a right-wing opposition', outside of the mainstream parties.

Fortuyn entered Dutch politics in August 2001 (Mudde, 2007a). He ran for leader of *Leefbaar Nederland* (LN), a new, ideologically amorphous party founded by local parties that sought to democratize Dutch politics. Fortuyn was elected leader of LN in

November 2001, and the party soon soared in the polls from a mere 2 percent to 17 percent of the vote. The Dutch political climate was strongly affected by the 9/11 Twin Tower attacks and Fortuyn, as one of the country's foremost Islam critics, quickly became a media phenomenon. He clashed with the LN leadership over his controversial views on Islam and immigration. In February 2002, Fortuyn was ousted from the party, after calling Islam 'a backward religion' and pleading for the removal of the first article of the Dutch constitution (which prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, political, race or sexual orientation) in a prominent newspaper interview.

He quickly proceeded to found his own party, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). The new party soared in the polls, while LN dwindled. Fortuyn published his unofficial election manifesto *The Disasters of Eight Years Purple* in March 2002, an unforgiving attack on the legacy of the coalition governments of the time.¹ It became an unlikely bestseller. Through his charismatic media performances and controversial newspaper interviews, Fortuyn kept making headlines. Anti-racist activists began protesting Fortuyn's campaign events. Dutch politicians and newspaper columnists added fire to the flames, warning for the advent of a Dutch Mussolini. On May 6, 2002, shortly before the elections, Fortuyn was fatally shot by an animal rights activist while on the campaign trail. The country was in deep shock. Nine days later, when the elections were held, Fortuyn's orphaned party won 26 seats, or 17 percent of the vote – a historic breakthrough known as 'the Fortuyn revolt' (Oudenampsen, 2021).

The rise of Fortuyn has rightly been described as a 'watershed in Dutch politics', the moment that right-wing populism became a permanent fixture on the Dutch political scene (Bennis and Renout, 2002). After the elections, the LPF was invited to join a center right-government coalition with the Christian democrats (CDA) and the right-wing liberals (VVD). Once in government, the party quickly succumbed to internal strife and was practically eradicated in the elections that followed. The legacy of Fortuyn, however, lived on. Later right-wing populist leaders such as Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet claimed Fortuyn's mantle and courted his voters.

Understandably, Fortuyn is generally remembered for his flamboyant political style and his controversial views on Islam and immigration. One week before the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, Fortuyn (2001b) had called for a 'cold war against Islam'. And in an earlier book, Fortuyn (1997) had warned against the 'Islamization' of Dutch society. In the shifting world order after 9/11, Fortuyn writings on Islam provided a

compelling narrative of a global confrontation between the ‘enlightened’ West and a ‘backward’ Islam. He believed that a renewed Dutch nationalism was needed to ward off the looming threat that Muslim immigration posed to Dutch values, in particular women’s emancipation and gay rights. As a result, the LPF has often been studied by scholars as an ‘anti-immigration party’ (Akkerman, 2005; Fennema and Van der Brug, 2006; Van Heerden et al., 2014; Van Spanje, 2011), while his economic views have largely been ignored.

Yet Fortuyn’s economic agenda was front and center in his political program. Fortuyn’s bestselling election manifesto, *The Disasters of Eight Years Purple* (2002), focuses primarily on socio-economic issues and is best described as a neoliberal pamphlet. The book of almost two hundred pages was a synthesis of Fortuyn’s writings over the course of the 1990s and was presented on the cover as a ‘ruthless analysis of the public sector’. In the eyes of Fortuyn, the Dutch market-led reforms of the 1990s had been far too limited in scope. An entrenched corporatist elite had stifled progress and kept innovative outsiders at bay (Lucardie and Voerman, 2002; Mudde, 2007a). In a world defined by globalization and fierce competition, this was a policy that the Netherlands could hardly afford.

In the manifesto, Fortuyn asserted that the Dutch welfare state ‘had given birth to a monster’ (Fortuyn, 2002b: 103). The unemployed were ‘a dead weight in society’, with ‘a big mouth’ (Fortuyn, 2002b: 104). Since unemployment was mostly a problem of mentality, he proposed to solve the problem by lowering benefits, abolishing rent subsidies and limiting disability benefits. Fortuyn proposed to do away with open-ended contracts and introduce a more flexible labor market, inspired by the American model. The Dutch worker had to become an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Fortuyn, 2002b: 149). The neoliberal agenda was also front and center in the 2002 and 2003 party platforms of the LPF (2002, 2003), which pleaded for marketization of healthcare and education, large tax cuts, curtailment of disability benefits, and the wholesale elimination of housing subsidies and family allowances. In newspaper interviews, Fortuyn (2001a) stated that ‘the poor should learn to care for themselves’, that the welfare state took people’s soul, and that he considered it his calling to proclaim that ‘not only Dutch politics is hopeless, but that also many citizens are’.

These economic views were not a sideshow, they were constitutive to Fortuyn’s populism. His populist critique of the Dutch establishment as a self-serving and

insulated cartel, evolved out of a neoliberal indictment of the Dutch corporatist welfare state. The remainder of this paper aims to examine this coincidence in greater detail, by placing the evolution of Fortuyn's views against the background of the Dutch neoliberal turn.

Fortuyn's conversion to the free market

Fortuyn began his storied career as an assistant professor at the University of Groningen in 1972 (Pels, 2003: 69–88). His appointment was a direct result of student demands for more teachings in Marxist theory. Fortuyn soon discovered he was more of a Keynesian social democrat than a Marxist. He wrote his PhD on Dutch postwar socio-economic policy, which he defended successfully in 1980. He became an active member of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and was an admirer of its charismatic leftist leader, Joop den Uyl.

In the 1980s however, the tide was turning and subsequent center-right coalition governments led by the Christian democrat Ruud Lubbers enacted a series of market-led reforms. Cuts in the public sector were combined with steep reductions in benefits and public sector wages, amid a broader policy shift towards privatization, deregulation, liberalization and flexibilization (Oudenampsen, 2020; Oudenampsen and Mellink, 2021). This comprised the Dutch neoliberal turn, but unlike Thatcher and Reagan, Lubbers communicated the policy shift in a thoroughly depoliticized rhetoric, framing it as a 'no-nonsense' policy. Meanwhile, the Dutch trade unions and social democrats were forced to watch from the sidelines, as the government unilaterally imposed a change in economic policy (Wolinetz, 1989).

At the end of the 1980s, Den Uyl had passed away and Dutch social democracy was in a deep crisis. The same was true of Fortuyn's academic career. His future in Groningen was in doubt, since his 'theoretical sociology' program group was eliminated as a result of government cuts to education. Fortuyn decided to end his academic career and to become a free-lance consultant. As Dick Pels convincingly shows in his intellectual biography, Fortuyn's ideological development closely mirrored his personal trajectory. 'Fortuyn privatizes himself', Pels (2003: 119) writes, and 'switches to a neoliberal ideology'.

In 1987, Fortuyn had been seconded by his university to the city of Rotterdam. There he led an expert committee that authored a report on the market-led renewal of the troubled port city, hit by deindustrialization and mass unemployment. At the city's expense, Fortuyn stayed at the Rotterdam Hilton Hotel. In his autobiography, Fortuyn writes how he enjoyed hanging out with the business members in the expert committee. He made lasting friendships and learned to 'drink the better wines and appreciate the pleasures of salmon and caviar' (Fortuyn, 2002a: 305).

Fortuyn (2002a: 307) describes a 'eureka moment' in April 1987, while 'licking an ice cream' in the center of Rotterdam: he decided to switch to the private sector. On the Hilton letterhead, Fortuyn wrote his letter of resignation to the University of Groningen. He then joined a select group of freelance consultants who oversaw the ongoing marketization drive. Fortuyn advised the government on technology policy, cross-border regional co-operation, marketization of healthcare and flexibilization of the academic labor market. Soon, his income soared. 'Now I can afford a chauffeur-driven car and I'll get one right away,' Fortuyn (2002a: 303) concluded in 1988. He exchanged his jeans and denim jacket for tailored suits and brightly colored silken ties.

By the time Fortuyn joined in, the process of market-led reform suffered a serious setback. Tired of austerity and concerned about eroding electoral support, the Christian democrats swerved left again in 1989 and formed a government with the social democrats. Many on the right feared that the momentum for neoliberal reform had dissipated. In a much-discussed campaign speech, social democrat leader Wim Kok had proclaimed that after ten years of neoliberal policy 'the pendulum had swung too far' (Mellink and Oudenampsen, 2022: 185). As far as he was concerned, 'the time of nonsense [...] was over'. Kok criticized the 'authoritarian governing style' of the 1980s and promised a restoration of consensus politics, involving the trade unions once more in policymaking.

In that same year, the former head of the largest Dutch employer's federation and upcoming minister of Economic Affairs Koos Andriessen (1989) delivered the lecture titled 'Privatization, only the beginning'. He argued that privatization up to that point had only focused on 'the tip of the iceberg'. The real aim should be to reconstruct the state in such a way that it would become as efficient as the private sector. In the 1980s, Andriessen pointed out, multinational companies had undergone a management revolution: they had restricted themselves to their 'core business', while outsourcing

and subcontracting all other activities. Thus, they had been able to reduce the size of their headquarters by up to forty percent. According to Andriessen, the Dutch state had to re-organize itself like a modern enterprise. This agenda, promoted by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, faced a lot of resistance from both civil servants, trade unions and social democrats. Wim Kok declared in parliament that ‘in me, the sacred fire for privatization does not burn as intensely as in the previous government’ (Krop, 2019: 292).

On the right, disappointment with Lubbers prevailed. ‘If only we had a Margaret Thatcher in Dutch politics,’ wrote the neoliberal economist Eduard Bomhoff (later the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport for Fortuyn’s party) in his column in the Dutch newspaper of note, *NRC Handelsblad* (Bomhoff, 1990). Thatcher had fought and defeated the British trade unions, while Lubbers mistook consensus for a policy goal. The leading journalist Marc Chavannes concurred. ‘Thatcher's lessons had been ignored in the Netherlands’, Chavannes (1990) explained, ‘because we conveniently imagine that she is a malcoiffed lady in a country full of strange types who seem to have walked out of a television series.’ A Thatcherite spirit in the Netherlands was not so crazy after all. ‘How do we get rid of late-corporatist structures,’ Chavannes asked, ‘which are expressions of a fattened harmony model that threatens the prosperity and well-being of the Dutch people?’ This criticism of the now revived Dutch poldermodel resonated widely.

Fortuyn joined the chorus of disappointed free marketeers, and turned his fire on the new consensus politics. ‘Why my plea to remove the wonderfully warm consensus blanket from our little Dutch bed?’ wrote Fortuyn (1991: 8) on the opening pages of his first neoliberal pamphlet *Without Civil Servants: The State as Enterprise*. ‘Our country is faced with the heavy task to drastically modernize itself. Globalization of culture and economy require a different management of the economy and society, which is enforced by the free movement of people, money and goods, after 1993 in the European Community.’

While referring to the policy papers of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Fortuyn (1991: 27) argued that ministries could evolve into ‘centers of strategic policy preparation and decision making’, with around five hundred civil servants instead of the more typical ten thousand. The implementation could then be subcontracted and outsourced to either local governments, NGO’s or market actors (Fortuyn, 1991: 27;

Pels, 2003: 143). All permanent public sector contracts were to be prohibited and exchanged for flexible contracts. This necessary modernization project however, was obstructed by public sector unions and entrenched Dutch elites who tried to conserve the corporatist institutions of yesteryear. Fortuyn (1994: 113) pleaded for a 'Dutch Margaret Thatcher', for 'our own Iron Lady to convince the public sector unions it is time for sweeping changes.'

Up to this point, the Dutch neoliberal turn had largely been a technocratic affair. Fortuyn was the first to provide it with a populist impulse. In the first half of the 1990s, Fortuyn published a series of popular pamphlets, in which he proposed a frontal free market assault on corporatism and bureaucracy in the Netherlands. In these years, he developed a neoliberal populism, based on a new vision of both the people and the elite.

Calculating citizens, insulated elites

In an influential critique of the Dutch neoliberal turn, the leading Dutch sociologist Cees Schuyt (1991) had warned that the 'calculating state', threatened to produce 'calculating citizens', who responded to state retrenchment with indifference to public norms and abuse of unemployment benefits. Dutch citizens increasingly behaved like the homo-oeconomicus from the economic models of policymakers, and the result wasn't pretty. Fortuyn responded by writing a homage to the calculating citizen. In his first real populist pamphlet *To the people of the Netherlands*, Fortuyn (1992) hailed the 'calculating citizen' as the product of the emancipation and individualization of the lower classes.

He neatly turned Schuyt's argument around: the fact that calculating citizens abused social subsidies, merely meant that the Dutch corporatist welfare state was defunct. Emancipated, calculating citizens were no longer in thrall to paternalistic elites, they followed their self-interest and largely governed themselves in loose networks. The terms 'network society' and 'information society' had only just been coined by the Dutch communication scholar Jan van Dijk (1991). It referred to a post-industrial society in which transport and communication technology facilitated the rise of networks as the predominant organizational form. For Fortuyn, the rise of a network society meant that the era of mass democracy and mass parties was over.

As Fortuyn observed, the popular base of political parties and institutions had either eroded or disappeared altogether. Meanwhile, Dutch elites kept on governing like nothing had changed and blocked the necessary renewal. Whereas emancipation implied the ability to choose one's own path, the corporatist elites in both public and private sector imposed uniformity and inflexibility. The single largest problem was the patronizing power of the government to declare collective labor agreements generally binding. In the early 1990s, neoliberal economists such as Eduard Bomhoff and Gerrit Zalm had embarked on a campaign against collective labor agreements (Mellink and Oudenampsen, 2022: 191). Fortuyn made it a central plank of his program. By making these agreements binding, corporatist elites imposed centralized salary scales and conditions of employment, while companies and employees were better off negotiating the value of work individually. Fortuyn proposed to prohibit centralized bargaining and permanent contracts; new labor contracts would have a maximum duration of five years. The Dutch worker was to become what Fortuyn (1995: 161) described as 'an entrepreneur of the self'. This made both employers and employees more flexible, led to lower wages at the bottom of the labor market, and strengthened the competitiveness of the Netherlands, while 'taking into consideration our competitors in Asia and Eastern Europe' (Fortuyn, 1994: 78).

He attested to inspiration from the American debate on the end of work, initiated by Silicon Valley business gurus on the pages of *Fortune Magazine*. Fortuyn was particularly inspired by the consultant William Bridges (1994), who prophesized the end of the traditional nine to five job in his book *Jobshift*; all workers would become freelance entrepreneurs of sorts. Fortuyn railed against the disabled and unemployed, and threatened 'a revolt of the workers' against the welfare state, with workers meaning tax-paying entrepreneurs. 'Entrepreneurs are the sourdough of economy of nation. Without them the country comes to nothing. [...] Drive away the entrepreneurs and the degeneration sets in.' (Fortuyn, 1994: 177) Meanwhile, the welfare state could be abolished and replaced with a negative income tax, as proposed by Milton Friedman. This would mean 'breaking open the lower end of entrepreneurship by eliminating licensing conditions and professional standards' (Fortuyn, 1994: 139-140). It meant the generalization of the figure of the entrepreneur across Dutch society.

Whereas in his leftist days, Fortuyn's worldview was based on an opposition between the productive working class and exploitative capital, by now he had

developed what Pels calls a 'neoliberal class theory' (Pels, 2003: 167–168). On one side stood the entrepreneurs large and small, Fortuyn's productive class; on the other, a parasitic group of corporatist elites and welfare recipients. Fortuyn proudly presented himself as 'natural spokesperson of the entrepreneurial Netherlands' (Pels, 2003: 124). From his 1992 pamphlet *To the people of the Netherlands* onwards, Fortuyn employed a clear populist language, addressing himself to 'calculating citizens' as 'the people' of the Netherlands, while presenting himself as their redeemer. The title of the 1992 book was an obvious reference to the 18th century Dutch Patriot Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol, who had written an eponymous populist pamphlet in 1781 to denounce the corrupt Dutch *ancien regime*.

The most enduring part of Fortuyn's populism however, was his critique of Dutch elites. Due to the decline of the mass democracy, institutions had become 'incestuous administrations', in which elites shared jobs with one another through their personal networks. In *To the people of the Netherlands*, Fortuyn (1992: 53) called this elite 'Our Kind of People' (*Ons Soort Mensen*), a class of career politicians, who had Dutch politics and corporatist institutions in an iron grip. The expression was taken from Bram Peper, the mayor of Rotterdam and a leading social democrat. In a private conversation with Fortuyn at the end of the 1980s, Peper purportedly told Fortuyn that he would never become part of 'our kind of people', the ones 'that really mattered' (Fortuyn, 1992: 53; Pels, 2003: 170–171).

For Fortuyn, the problem of this paternalistic caste was that they blocked innovation: 'Our country has been held for decades already, in the iron grip of a thin upper layer, which hinders radical interventions in social security, public administration, but also in the corporatist economy and the way in which large and vital companies are managed.' (Fortuyn, 1994: 28) In his eyes, all major political parties belonged to this cartel or 'partocracy', but especially social democrats received his scorn. 'Voters of the Netherlands,' Fortuyn (1991: 22) proclaimed, 'unite and wipe them out, these representatives of a no longer existing working class!'

Fortuyn's market populism

The culmination point of Fortuyn's neoliberal populism is to be found in his aforementioned election manifesto *The Disasters of Eight Years Purple* (2002). The book

was a heavy-handed critique of the so-called 'purple' cabinets. These coalitions of social democrats (PvdA, red) and right-wing liberals (VVD, blue) governed the country from 1994 till 2002, forming the Dutch equivalent of the Third Way. The 1990s and the purple coalitions have often been described as the highpoint of neoliberal globalization in the Netherlands. According to a still common nationalist narrative, the right-wing populism of Fortuyn emerged in opposition to that trend (Brink, 2020; Goodhart, 2017). In reality, the purple coalitions were not nearly neoliberal enough for Fortuyn.

While Fortuyn's neoliberalism had up to that point largely focused on the domain of labor relations and the public sector, now consumption entered the narrative. Fortuyn began the manifesto with a comparison between state and market. In a market environment, Fortuyn (2002b: 8) asserted, since the consumer gets to choose. The New Economy would only strengthen the influence of the consumer. Thanks to the blessings of information technology, mass products could henceforth be tailored to personal preferences. Drawing on American management gurus who championed ICT, globalization and mass-customization, Fortuyn (2002b: 9) wrote enthusiastically about mass-customization as the 'democratization and individualization of economic life'. It promised a future in which 'the highly individual automobile is at our footsteps', and 'everyone [could] afford tailor-made clothing'. At the same time, on the work floor, the traditional industrial hierarchies were giving way to the horizontal networks of the New Economy.

While the business world was adapting smoothly to the new spirit of the age, the public sector was still living in the industrial age with its anonymous, large-scale production. 'The consumer-citizen is only paid lip service to', Fortuyn (Fortuyn, 2002b: 9) complained. 'There is no democracy, unless one sees democracy as marking a box red once every four years', he wrote, echoing American 'market populism'. Citizens had no say in the products the government provided them. All this was exacerbated by the tripartite polder model, 'a kind of *musyawarah* system in which people talk to each other until they more or less agree and responsibilities have evaporated' (Fortuyn, 2002b: 17). This system was kept running by a small incestuous elite of insiders, who immediately recognized each other as 'Our Kind of People' (Fortuyn, 2002b: 136).

Fortuyn wanted to curtail the power of corporatist elites in favor of the citizen-consumer, who needn't be paternalized anymore, but was finally free to choose. He worked this out most extensively for the Dutch healthcare system, where he proposed

to make the Dutch patient more of a consumer, by making him or her responsible for expenses through an individual contribution, and by introducing insurances with different levels of service provision. Fortuyn proposed to end professional cartels and 'break open the sector and make it amenable to competition' by liberalizing wages and prohibiting centralized labor agreements. This would mean more wage polarization between the lower and higher end of workers in the Dutch health care sector. In concrete terms, Fortuyn proposed more inequality between citizens based on their insurances and premium contributions and between medical personnel through greater salary differences.

Fortuyn interspersed this market populist program with a seemingly nostalgic longing for smallness in the public sector, what he called 'the human scale'. His critique of large-scale government services, and his proposals for smaller schools, regional hospitals and work close to home have often been seen as nostalgic and traditionalist. But the LPF-leader saw this as part of a comprehensive technological modernization program inspired by Silicon Valley management gurus (Fortuyn, 2002b: 120). Through modern ICT, it could happen that 'you will be operated by a local neurosurgeon in [the Frisian town of MO] Sneek, but a specialist from Rotterdam watches behind his screen and joins in on the operation with digital lasers if need be, and can call in his even more experienced colleague from Walter Reed Hospital in Washington to assist.' (Fortuyn, 2002b: 38). Similarly, work close to home would be possible thanks to newly established information technology pavilions, in which employees were in permanent digital contact with their colleagues elsewhere. Fortuyn a combined fifties nostalgia with globalization utopia's and Zoom prophecies.

But most of all, Fortuyn's striving for 'the human scale' was a barely disguised plea for more inequality. In his eyes, tailoring labor contracts to the individual meant paying the true market price. It would herald the end of an 'artificial' equality that the government maintained through subsidies, minimum wages and sectoral collective bargaining. The same logic applied to the consumer in the public sector. Fortuyn complained in *The Disasters of Eight Years Purple* that he received the same care as his cleaning lady, while paying much more taxes. Once he had demanded his own private room from a Dutch hospital director for this very reason, but he had been laughed at. Fortuyn (2002b: 19) compared the situation to 'the insurance company that replaces your crashed and expensively insured Jaguar with a Fiat Uno and says: here you are'.

While Fortuyn invoked the freedom of the 'citizen-consumer' as motivation behind his program, he often fell back on a crude determinism, referring to technology, the laws of late capitalist globalization and the need to compete. Only on the cultural terrain did Fortuyn come to oppose globalization, particularly the freedom of movement it entailed. On this issue, he spoke out against further immigration and threatened to close the Dutch borders, while promising a strict regime of integration into the Dutch dominant culture for the immigrants already present in the Netherlands. It was this cultural agenda that later led leading commentators such as the British journalist David Goodhart (2017: 50) to think of Fortuyn's right-wing populism as a counterreaction to globalization. But Fortuyn, like many radical right-wing populists in the 1990s, stood for a combination of economic openness and cultural closure. He would have been a good example of the European radical right portrayed by Kitschelt and Betz, except that Fortuyn was less authoritarian than his continental counterparts. And he was a late arrival, who had not entered politics by the time Kitschelt and Betz wrote their classic books on the European radical right.

Conclusion

The Dutch right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn is a prominent example of a 'neoliberal populist'. His neoliberalism wasn't simply a tactical tool to be abandoned at a later point, it was an essential part of his program and worldview. Like Friedman, Reagan and Thatcher, Fortuyn identified 'the people' with entrepreneurs and the market, and elites with the state. In the Anglo-American case however, there is a harkening back to an original freedom of the American and British people that had been progressively curtailed. While for Fortuyn, the Dutch 'calculating citizen', 'entrepreneur' and 'citizen-consumer' is a much more recent product of emancipation from Dutch pillarized society and mass politics. In Fortuyn's populism then, it is not simply the case that the sovereign people is deprived of its freedom by elites and dangerous others, since that very freedom has only recently been discovered. This is perhaps due to the fact that market liberalism has never had much of a popular base in the Netherlands, as a result of the historical strength of Christian democracy.

We find in Fortuyn's writings all of the shared characteristics of neoliberalism and populism: the distaste for intermediary institutions, the anti-establishment position

and the desire for radical change. Especially corporatism has a central role in Fortuyn's discourse. That Dutch corporatism was revived in Dutch Third Way politics in the 1990s, made it more of a target for right-wing agitation than in the Anglo-American context, where it had been abandoned wholesale in the 1980s. Corporatism and Dutch consensus politics pulled the right-wing parties to the center, and softened the impact of the Dutch neoliberal turn. This opened space on the right in the 1990s for a populist critique and made it easier to paint the Dutch elite as a single, homogenous self-serving caste. What this analysis suggests, is that 'neoliberal populism' is not an ideological formation that is stable over time, but a situational and conjunctural phenomenon.

It is obvious from Fortuyn's writing that his populism emerged with, rather than against neoliberal globalization. As we have seen, Fortuyn explains his entire project of 'modernization' as an attempt to make the Netherlands globalization-proof. Kitschelt and McGann (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 6) link the rise of the radical right to 'a period of increased international competition', resulting in increased opposition between those employees that see themselves as most exposed to international competition and hence develop an interest in pro-market policies, and those in relatively sheltered sectors that continue to favor redistributive policies. The first half of the 1990s, with the Maastricht Treaty and the creation of the WTO, is a clear example of such a period. On the one hand, Fortuyn continuously invokes the threat of globalization and competition. On the other hand, Fortuyn believes being exposed to continuous competition, as 'an entrepreneur of the self', is a positive value in and of itself, the end goal of the project of emancipation.

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¹ The official election manifesto of the LPF was written in haste by Fortuyn's assistant Mat Herben, and only comprises seven pages in total. It's basically a summary of Fortuyn's book *The Disasters of Eight Years Purple*. De Lange's analysis (De Lange, 2007) of the LPF is based on this text.