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Explaining the Swing to the Right: The Dutch Debate on the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

Merijn Oudenampsen

Introduction

In these last ten years the Netherlands has experienced a dramatic swing to the Right. Long considered the epitome of tolerance and liberalism, the country now finds itself at the forefront of the political revival of nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe. The motor behind this remarkable turnaround is the spectacular rise of right-wing populism since the 1990s, an ascendancy that reached yet a new climax with the 2010 elections, which resulted in a resounding victory for the right-wing populist and anti-Islamist Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders.¹ The election was followed by the formation of a minority government of right-wing Liberals (VVD) and Christian Democrats (CDA), dependent on the strategic support of the PVV to obtain a parliamentary majority. It is generally seen as the most right-wing government in Dutch post-war history.

The newfound status of the Freedom Party as a strategic partner of the government marks a transition towards the incorporation of right-wing populism as a more permanent and accepted feature of the Dutch political landscape. Thus, the Netherlands seems to have joined the club of European countries with large and entrenched right-wing populist parties (Belgium, Denmark, Austria, Italy, France, Hungary). At the same time, right-wing populist discourse has proven itself capable of achieving a

¹ The Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders won 24 seats at the 2010 elections, 16 per cent of the vote. The party was founded in 2006 when its leader, Geert Wilders, left the right-wing Liberal Party (VVD). The PVV won nine seats in the 2006 elections.

² One of the more interesting examples is the hugely popular television show *Ik Hou van Holland* (I love Holland), where Dutch celebrities are asked questions about Dutch society. The show is explicitly inspired by the integration test for foreign immigrants devised by the right-wing populist politician Rita Verdonk when she was still Minister of Immigration and Integration.

much wider resonance, as it is taken up by the mainstream media² and by established political parties. A case in point is the controversial pronouncement of Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the installation of the new government in 2010, stating that his cabinet aimed to 'give the country back to the hardworking Dutchman'.³ Taken together with the recent assertion of the Christian Democrat leader, Maxime Verhagen, that popular fears about immigrants and contaminated foreign vegetables are 'comprehensible' and 'legitimate',⁴ it becomes clear that a certain normalization of populist, nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric has occurred.

Several lines of enquiry have emerged to explain these developments. One way of dealing with the issue of populism is to adopt a nominalist approach, look at the electoral fortunes and practices of political parties that are commonly defined as populist, and classify these according to a certain taxonomy (Ionescu & Gellner 1969, Canovan 1981). Such an approach quickly runs into a series of problems. First of all, the term populism remains contested and unclear (Taggart 2000, Panizza 2005, Arditì 2007). Existing studies of populism typically start out with the observation that the label populism is often used in a pejorative sense and lacks clarity: 'A scientific consensus is thoroughly lacking on any definition of populism' (Canovan 1981: 175). Secondly, populism is not a neatly contained phenomenon. The Dutch political landscape, for example, has been affected in a much broader sense, with almost all political parties moving to the Right and some of them openly adopting right-wing populist discourse. Lacking any exhaustive definition of populism, it becomes difficult and rather arbitrary to draw a line, defining certain parties or figures as populist and others as 'normal' instances of political practice. A third and perhaps even more important problem is that describing the success of populist parties is not the same as explaining it.

Another common strategy is to portray the emergence of right-wing populism in Europe as a reflection of the growing popularity of certain values and attitudes among the general population. These are defined either in terms of adherence to classic right-wing issues (such as immigration, Europe and law and order) or more general sentiments (such as political cynicism, resentment and the desire for a strong leader). This is the dominant approach in the Dutch academic debate, where leading scholars reduce populism to voter behaviour, and thus follow in the footsteps of either the mass culture paradigm or the pluralist behavioural science tradition. The consequence is that the most prominent studies (Houtman et al. 2008, Bovens & Wille 2009) offer a rather one-sided reading of recent political developments in the Netherlands. The emergence of populism is generally accounted for by the impact of all sorts of long-term trends on voter behaviour, whereas politics itself is reduced to a derivative factor. Often, the most important figures and events are not even mentioned. The practical consequence of this omission is that research into voter behaviour in the Netherlands has a hard time explaining political change (Aarts 2005). While in the Dutch case, rapid change

³ Source: NOS Dutch national news, 30 September 2010. <<http://nos.nl/artikel/188117-land-weer-vo-or-hardwerkende-nederlander.html>> [accessed 15 February 2012].

⁴ The statement was part of a controversial speech at a CDA party symposium on populism, 28 June 2011. <www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2011/06/28/toespraak-maxim-verhagen/> [accessed 15 February 2012].

is exactly what needs to be explained: the breakthrough of populism occurred amid a sweeping reversal of political sentiment among the wider population.

This chapter, taking the Dutch case as an example, will outline the shortcomings of the reflective approach described above. A more fruitful strategy, I will argue, is to see populism not as the reflection or expression of the opinions of the electorate, but rather as a technique, style or mode of representation that aims to constitute the very political opinions that it claims to represent (Laclau 2005a, Arditì 2007). Besides helping to explain the inner logic of populism itself, the use of a constructivist approach (Bourdieu 1984) can explain rapid change in terms of the influence of events and political action on public opinion and institutional structures.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In the first part of this text I will discuss the origins and problems of the reflective approach used by leading Dutch scholars to explain the emergence of populism in the Netherlands. The second part first develops a constructivist reading of populism. It goes on to introduce the reader to the Dutch political context and the wider elements of Dutch political culture that could explain the profoundness of the changes we have seen in the past decade. Subsequently, an outline of a constructivist reading of the emergence of Dutch populism will be presented, after which I will conclude.

The shortcomings of the reflective approach

The approaches that attempt to explain the emergence of populism through voter behaviour stem from a particular theoretical background. In an essay entitled *The rediscovery of ideology; return of the repressed in media studies*, Stuart Hall (2006) traced a development in social science, which he subdivided into three periods: 1) In most of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, mass culture theory is dominant, 2) In the 1940s, what Hall terms the 'behavioural' and 'scientific tradition' emerges in the United States and swiftly becomes the new global norm and 3) From the 1960s onwards, the behavioural tradition finds itself increasingly challenged by a range of critical social-constructivist perspectives. Much of the epistemological critique of the mass culture debate and the behavioural science tradition, as advanced by Hall and others within this later current (Lukes 1974, Bourdieu 1984), is still of relevance today. The defining Dutch studies on populism continue apace in these old repertoires, where political change is reduced to changes in the opinions of the electorate.

The mass culture debate

The rise of populism in the Netherlands led to a remarkable revival of mass culture theory. Its negative vision of modernization resulting in anomy and uprootedness, and the idea of a high culture, threatened by the growing self-assertion of mass culture and mass man, functioned as an important framework to explain the political developments in the Netherlands from an élite perspective. A good example of the classic mass-culture logic is that of famous Dutch author Menno ter Braak, who in the 1930s used the following argumentation, inspired by Nietzsche, to explain the

rise of fascism: 'It is the ideal of equality that, given the biological and sociological impossibility of equality between people, promotes rancour in society to a power of the first degree; who is not equal to the other, but wishes to be equal nonetheless, is not being told off with reverence to rank or caste, but is awarded a premium!' (Ter Braak 1992/1937: 173, author's translation).

A similar image of the disgruntled masses started to surface with the electoral breakthrough of the right-wing populist party of Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in 2002. Sometimes this took place in a very literal sense: the influential commentator H. J. A. Hofland explained the electoral victory of the LPF with the above quote from Ter Braak.⁵ Another example is the bestselling polemic *The Eternal Return of Fascism* (2010) by the philosopher Rob Riemen, a study portraying right-wing populism as a form of fascism stemming from the cultural degeneration of the masses, on the basis of Ortega y Gasset and other mass culture theorists. But a subtler and more pervasive version of the mass culture thesis is present as well. It is the idea of the electorate as 'spoiled consumers', who vote out of resentment or rancour. Just as democratization for Ter Braak leads to resentment, here it is the rise in prosperity of the masses that leads to a popular revolt by 'spoiled voters'. Resentment returns in the form of a 'jealousy model' (Oosterbaan 2002) or an 'envy system' attributed to the petit bourgeois and nouveau riche that have done well, but feel they deserve even better (van Stokkum 2002). Prominent opinion-makers and social scientists started using this rationale to explain the voters' revolt, such as the well-known economist Heertje and the political scientist De Beus, who stated after the 2002 elections that a combination of Alexis de Tocqueville and disposable income could explain 90 per cent of the populist vote (Banning 2002). The two researchers quoted Emile Durkheim to explain how a rise in prosperity could lead to resentment: 'With increased prosperity desires increase. At the very moment when traditional rules have lost their authority, the richer prize offered [to] these appetites stimulates them and makes them more exigent and impatient of control' (Durkheim 2002/1897: 214).

General critiques of the mass culture framework have been around for some time (Strinati 1995). But in particular, the shortcomings of these attempts to explain the emergence of Dutch right-wing populism according to the mass culture repertoire are threefold. First, the claims are so broadly postulated that they have little explanatory power. Second, there is little empirical basis for these claims: Dutch election research indicates that voters for the party of Pim Fortuyn did not deviate much from the rest of the electorate, either in terms of demographics or in terms of their (supposedly resentful) voting motivations (van Praag 2001, van der Brug 2003, 2004, Bélanger & Aarts 2006). A third problem is of a more general nature: when using social characteristics (e.g. income or education) of the electorate to explain voting behaviour, or processes such as modernization and the mass-commodification of culture, the limitation is that these factors change very gradually over time. As a consequence, rapid changes in voting behaviour cannot be explained (Aarts 2005).

⁵ Oosterbaan, W. 'Het Onbehegen kan weer Ondergronds', *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 November 2002.

The behaviouralist tradition

Arguably, the dominant reading of the emergence of Dutch populism is provided by a series of studies inspired by the American behaviouralist and pluralist tradition. In these studies, populism is addressed through a quantitative analysis of changing voting behaviour (Achterberg & Houtman 2006, van der Waal et al. 2007, 2010, Houtman et al. 2008) and unequal political participation (Bovens & Wille 2009). The rise of populism is attributed to the emergence of a new political cleavage between highly educated 'culturally progressive' and lower educated 'culturally conservative' voters. Two studies in particular have received large amounts of attention in the Dutch debate. There is the study for the Dutch national research council (NWO) by Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille, entitled *Diplomademocracy* (2009) and the work of the Rotterdam sociologists Dick Houtman and Peter Achterberg, of which the book *Farewell to the Leftist Working Class* (2008) is the most well-known.

Though it presented itself as empirically grounded, according to critics like Hall, the behaviouralist and pluralist tradition 'was predicated on a very specific set of political and ideological presuppositions' (Hall 2006: 127). The two most important of these presuppositions were 1) the assumption of the end of ideology and 2) a mimetic or reflective idea of representation: politics functions – and should function – as a neutral reflection of the policy preferences of the population, seen as rational autonomous individuals. This framework, as became clear in the political turmoil of the 1960s, severely impinged on the ability of behavioural science to explain change and dissent. As I will show, similar problems occur using this approach in the present Dutch context, with very particular political implications.

In *Diplomademocracy* (Bovens & Wille 2009), the influential report of the Dutch research council (NWO), we find the assumptions mentioned above almost literally reproduced.⁶ The report presents a narrative on the emergence of populism that has grown to become the most authoritative explanation in Dutch public opinion. The rise of populism is presented as a rebellion of the lower educated against the political over-representation of the higher educated, who dominate both civil society and political parties. This over-representation is seen as exceedingly problematic, since higher-educated and lower-educated constituencies have different interests and concerns, and therefore different policy preferences. Higher-educated people are cosmopolitans, we are told, whereas the lower educated are nationalists (ibid.: 85). This is not due to their ideas but follows from their purported rational interests: higher-educated people reap the benefits from globalization, and the lower educated bear its costs. The lower educated, according to data cited by the DPES (Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies), are more concerned about crime and immigration, whereas other survey data show they tend to be more negative about the European

⁶ The study uses a reference to an article by Converse from 1964 to declare that in the present Dutch situation 'the role of ideology or belief systems as a common yardstick for masses and elites has lost much of its importance' (Bovens & Wille 2009: 71). And the study is an explicit defence of a weak version of mimetic representation (ibid.: 9).

Union (EU).⁷ Because the political process does not sufficiently represent the interests of the lower educated, widespread disenchantment with politics has occurred, which has led to a populist revolt in the last decade, 'the "revolt" of Fortuyn and the subsequent rise of populist parties in the first decade of the 21st century is a manifestation of a sudden eruption of resentment against the rise of diploma democracy' (ibid.: 88).

The emergence of right-wing populist parties is therefore seen as a 'healthy correction' to the over-representation of the higher educated, bringing the grievances of the lower educated back into the political process (ibid.: 86). Established political parties are recommended to adopt the agenda of right-wing populist parties in moderate form or risk the danger of anti-democratic mass movements, with reference to the doom scenario of the 1930s (Bovens & Wille 2011: 114).

This account is deeply problematic. The political dominance of the higher educated is not something new and there are no clear indications that the gap in participation is growing (Hakhverdian et al. 2011). In fact, as the authors of *Diplomademocracy* are forced to admit, the dominance of the higher educated has been the norm since the second half of the twentieth century (2009: 58). Similar things can be said about the political cleavage between highly educated 'culturally progressive' voters and lower-educated 'culturally conservative' voters: the cleavage has been there since the 1970s (Thomassen et al. 2000). Furthermore, while surveys reveal a correlation between the right-wing populist vote and anti-immigrant sentiments, they also show that attitudes towards multiculturalism and minorities have been remarkably constant (Uitermark 2010). *Diplomademocracy* provides no explanation of why dissatisfaction suddenly erupted in 2002, given that in 1998, under exactly the same government and with almost identical policies, confidence was at an all-time high (Aarts 2005).⁸ The only logical conclusion would seem to be that Fortuyn actively fuelled discontent (van der Brug 2003, 2004, Bélanger & Aarts 2006), but that of course contradicts the pluralist conception of reflective representation, where things need to happen first among the electorate, and only then have an impact in the political field.

A further inconsistency is that the opinions of the lower educated are misrepresented, by ascribing them political meanings and interests which are not present in the data discussed. For example, the Dutch vote against the EU constitution is seen as an illustration of the revolt of lower-educated nationalists: 'the example of European unification illustrates how in a diploma democracy the "educated" opinions are included and the "non-educated" opinions are sometimes excluded from the participatory and political representative arenas' (Bovens & Wille 2009). Nonetheless, according to the exit polls cited in the study, 51 per cent of the higher educated voted against the constitution, showing that higher-educated opinions were equally excluded (ibid.).

⁷ The report cites a 2006 Eurobarometer poll: '43% of the least educated think their country has not benefited from the EU (41% thinks it did), as opposed to 25% of the university educated (67% is positive)' (ibid.: 77).

⁸ In fact, in April 2001, a new and very strict immigration law was introduced by the social democrat Secretary of State for Immigration, Job Cohen, complicating the reading of the Fortuyn vote as an appeal for a stricter immigration policy. Ironically, Job Cohen would later become the major figure-head of the multiculturalist tendency in Dutch politics, constantly criticized by the populist right, who at the same time built on his restrictive immigration policy.

Furthermore, opposition to EU unification cannot be simply explained as a form of nationalism. It is informed by a host of different issues, with loss of democratic voice being one of the more prominent concerns, as focus-group research commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows (Plasschaert Quality in Research 2005). This diversity is forcibly reduced into a framework of lower-educated nationalism versus higher-educated cosmopolitanism. It is also, by definition, not in the 'rational interest' of the lower educated to be nationalist: to question that view it suffices to think of the 350,000 workers in the key transportation sector (truck drivers, airport workers, dockworkers) that constitute almost literally the hands and feet of globalization, or the 400,000 workers in the tourist industry.

The pluralist conception of reflective representation leads to a description of the emergence of populism as the neutral reflection of long-term opinion changes among the electorate. These changes in opinion are portrayed as the spontaneous consequence of large, anonymous processes such as globalization, immigration and European unification. The reflective approach thus creates a distorted view of the rise of populism, a world in which political events, the media and political actors themselves have no influence on public opinion. The result is that the emergence of populism is naturalized, leading to the logical conclusion that if established parties want to remain representative they need to accept and accommodate the agenda of the populist Right.

Much of the analysis in *Diplomademocracy* is inspired by the work of the sociologists Houtman et al. (2008). Their research singles out cultural voting as the cause of the emergence of right-wing populism. The authors build on the framework of Lipset's classic study *Working Class Authoritarianism* that aimed to explain why workers vote against their economic interests by arguing that workers vote for the Right because of their conservative cultural values. Houtman and Achterberg claim cultural voting has further increased since then (hence the title of their book), and has led to the emergence of right-wing populism. But the problem of using such an explanatory framework in the Netherlands is that cultural voting has been the norm all along (Nieuwbeerta 1995). The authors admit so themselves:

In the Netherlands, the relation between class position and voting behaviour was negligible, due to the influence of pillarisation. Within the pillarised relations, catholic workers, for example, would identify more with their Catholic employers than with their co-workers of other religions, as a consequence they would vote for the KVP (Catholic Party) rather than for the SDAP (Socialist), CPN (Communist), or PvdA (Social-Democrat). But why has it remained that way? Why has depillarisation and secularization in the Netherlands not lead to the emergence of a typical pattern of lower classes voting for the left and a middle class that votes for the right? In those other countries the arrival of a new cultural polarisation on authoritarianism has eroded the familiar pattern of lower classes voting for the left and middle classes voting for the right; in the Netherlands the same new polarisation has gradually taken over the 'buffering' role of confessional polarisation from the time of pillarisation. Despite depillarisation, lower educated Dutch as much as before, vote in contradiction with their class-based economic interests. (Houtman & Achterberg 2010: 21, author's translation)

What has replaced the old structures of pillarization,⁹ in their view, is a new post-confessional culture with a new political cleavage: the opposition to authoritarianism between progressive and conservative cultural values (effectively Inglehart's post-materialism of the New Left versus Reagan's and Thatcher's conservatism of the New Right). This cleavage, with a delayed effect of 30 years, has led to the emergence of the New Right in the Netherlands: '[T]hat in the Netherlands the electoral breakthrough of the New Right only took place in 2002, shouldn't distract us from the fact that already from 1970 on, a new polarisation has taken place in the population, where above all immigration, integration and the multicultural society became the centre of the public and political debate' (ibid.: 31).

As a consequence of the pluralist preconceptions used in these studies, the rapid emergence of right-wing populism is necessarily reduced to long-term changes in voter opinions. What produces these changes in opinion is, however, clouded from view. It is rather surprising that, from behavioural science, a widely accepted reading of the emergence of Dutch populism has been produced that cannot explain rapid change, and in which the most important political actors and developments never even appear. On top of that, very little effort is being made to describe what populism is, how it functions or how it has managed to gain popular appeal. Populism seems to have no agency of its own.

Towards a constructivist reading of Dutch populism

In this second section, I will attempt to show how a constructivist perspective might address some of the shortcomings of the reflective approach: First of all, by showing that there is something inherent to the logic of populism that can only be explained through social construction. Secondly, a constructivist understanding of the nature of the Dutch consensus model can help to explain structural and rapid change as it has, in effect, happened before, in the 1960s. Thirdly, applying these insights helps to explain the breakthrough and success of right-wing populism.

Populism and the construction of the people

The label populism is often used in a derogatory sense, as an insult, meaning demagoguery, simplicity, irrationality, loud-mouthing, etc. These common-sense notions of populism critique it for being an almost too literal expression of popular concerns and desires: making promises that are unrealistic, using language from the street that is not considered politically correct, etc. Hidden within these notions we find again a mimetic idea of populism, as a literal reflection of popular desires. It rhymes with how populist movements present themselves, as the ones that 'listen to the people' and 'say what the people think'. Informed by a similar perspective, there is the idea

⁹ Pillarization refers to the religious and political segregation of Dutch society into four pillars: Protestant, Catholic, Socialist and Liberal (see next section for further explanation).

that populism somehow enacts a direct democratic form of politics (Taguieff 1995, Akkerman 2004).

The particularity of populist representation is however that it does not passively express popular demands; it is actively involved with the social construction of the subject that it represents (Laclau 2005a). Though there is no academic consensus on an exact definition of the word populism, there seems to be a general agreement that populism is a politics that appeals to the people, and opposes itself to the establishment (Canovan 1981, Taggart 2000, Laclau 2005b). This appeal to the people involves the image of a pure and undivided people, an essence, as in the True Finns, the Real America, Joe the Plumber, or the Dutch Henk and Ingrid. The result is that 'the people' in populist rhetoric 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 ethnic or religious minorities, are excluded. This division of the political community into different components is precisely where the essence of populism lies, according to Ernesto Laclau (2005b) in his book *On Populist Reason*:

[A]n institutional discourse is one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community . . . The opposite takes place in the case of populism: a frontier of exclusion divides society in two camps. The 'people', in that case, is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality. (81)

The same typically populist mechanism is at work in the appeal to virtual categories such as 'Henk and Ingrid' (a hypothetical couple invented by Wilders, the Dutch version of 'the average Joe'), 'the man on the street', 'ordinary people' and a core of hard-working, law-abiding and tax-paying people. They are symbolic elements that function as a stand-in for the community as a whole and are articulated in opposition to other elements (e.g. the left/liberal elite, Muslim migrants or the deserving poor) that are excluded from political legitimacy. An illustration of this front dynamic within Dutch populism is the 'Two Netherlands' speech of Geert Wilders at the Budget Review of 2009:

The realm of Balkenende is a kingdom of two Netherlands . . . On the one hand our elite, with their so-called ideals. Of a multicultural society, the mega-high taxes, the lunatic climate hysteria, the unstoppable islamisation, of the Brussels superstate and senseless development aid . . . It is the left-wing canal elite and its smug friends. The other Netherlands consists of the people that have to pay the bill, literally and figuratively. Who are being threatened and robbed. Who are suffering from the havoc caused by the street-terrorists. Who are toiling under the height of the taxes and desire a more social Netherlands. These are the people that have built up our country.¹⁰

¹⁰ Source: <www.pvv.nl> [accessed 15 February 2012].

Society is divided into two camps: the Netherlands of the left-wing élite and that of the 'ordinary' hard-working taxpaying citizens, the people. It is the 'plebs' – a relatively excluded and undervalued part of the community – that are declared to be the only legitimate 'populus'. The split that is produced between the élite and the people through this technique is what Laclau calls the 'internal frontier'.

What we can conclude from a reading of Laclau's work is that populism does not reflect or express the will of the people – because the will of the people is too heterogeneous to fit the populist presentation of the people-as-one. It symbolically constitutes 'the people' and the will of the people, and constructs an internal frontier primarily through negative identification: by placing certain groups outside the community, the 'constitutive outside'. 'The people' is formed by the disqualification of certain groups, by determining what it is not. Being opposed to the figure of the 'estranged élite', and to the Other (the enemy) – in the Dutch case usually Muslims (terrorists), or immigrants – provides a clear identity for an otherwise formless and very heterogeneous electorate that shares no clear ideology or policy preference in the positive sense.

In what follows, I will use these insights to explain how Dutch populism was able to construct an internal frontier on the basis of a series of dramatic events. However, let us first turn to the institutional context of the Netherlands.

The Dutch consensus model

Often described as a consociational democracy, the Netherlands has a tradition of consensus democracy commonly associated with dialogue and deliberation. It seems difficult to relate the present situation to that image. However, conflict and polarization are not something utterly alien to Dutch political history; there are similarities between the present period and that of the 1960s, when the New Left protest movements actively contested the existing institutional consensus. Examining that period might clarify how the present political situation came into existence.

Both in the Netherlands and internationally, Lijphart's (1968) classic work *The Politics of Accommodation* is the most famous analysis of the Dutch political system. Lijphart describes the birth of Dutch pillarization at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the downfall of this governmental logic in the 1960s with the arrival of the protest movements of the New Left. From 1917 to 1967, Dutch society is generally described as divided into three or four subgroups, the so-called *zuilen* (pillars): Protestant, Catholic, Socialist and Liberal.¹¹ The pillars functioned as societal subsystems, with their own political parties, newspapers, schools, trade unions, sports clubs and so forth. Though these pillars segregated Dutch society, overarching élite accommodation at the top connected them (thus providing the metaphorical roof uniting the pillars in a common structure). Due to the fragmented nature of the political field, where political power depended on the formation of changing multi-party coalitions, a political culture of moderation, consensus and pragmatism developed.

¹¹ There is disagreement about the exact status of the Liberal current, which is alternatively described as a 'universal pillar' (Schendelen 1984). In 1977, following rapid secularization, the Protestant and Catholic currents merged to become the Christian Democrat Party (CDA).

According to Lijphart, the key to keeping the system operable was the pacification of ideological differences, with a given set of techniques to maintain consensus: 1) a businesslike approach to politics: politics means governing, and is pragmatic and focused on results; 2) tolerance: the majority does not impose its interests, but strives to meet the concerns of minorities. Non-negotiable disagreement is resolved by agreeing to disagree; 3) summit diplomacy among the élites: the most important decisions are made in summits, behind closed doors if possible; 4) proportionality between the pillars: when distributing resources, subsidies are divided equally among factions; 5) depoliticization: depoliticizing and neutralizing ideological antagonism; 6) secrecy: during the negotiation and decision-making process, the public limelight is shunned; 7) the government's right to govern: in exchange for a docile position of the opposition, the government takes its interests into account.

This fairly paternalistic regime encountered a crisis in the 1960s under the pressure of the protest movements of the New Left. The result was that consensus started to give way to conflict, with a different set of techniques becoming prevalent (Daalder 1987): 1) exposure of the ideology of the establishment; 2) contestation and conflict; 3) appeal to the base; 4) polarization as a means to form an exclusive majority, on the basis of one's own programme; 5) politicization; 6) publicity; 7) dualism.

Critics of Lijphart pointed out that due to his insistence on a pluralist consensus based on generally accepted social norms (whereby deviance becomes anomy), he was not able to explain the breakdown of the consensus model into the polarized politics of the 1960s (Fennema 1976, Stuurman 1983).¹² This could be remedied by giving the model a constructivist Gramscian twist, replacing the pluralist conception of consensus by a Gramscian idea of consensus organized as hegemony. Stemming from Lijphart's own theory, there seems to be nothing natural about a consensus, as it is maintained by a series of political techniques. The benefit of a Gramscian idea of a constructed consensus is that it allows for the possibility that it might break down: periods of hegemony, of consensus and relative stability, are followed in a wave-like movement by periods of hegemonic crisis, conflict and turmoil (Gramsci 1971). The breakdown of the pillarization system in the 1960s could be described in terms of what Gramsci called an 'organic crisis': a deep hegemonic crisis, whereby the old consensus breaks down and the relation between the electorate and its traditional forms of political representation starts to slide, a process whereby, according to Gramsci, 'the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe'. 'In this interregnum', he added, 'a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (ibid.: 276).

The crisis in the 1960s ushered in a 15-year period of conflict and polarization which ended at the end of the 1970s, when it gave way to another period of consensus and depoliticization: the no-nonsense politics of the 1980s. In the new consensus, many of the progressive demands of the protest movements of the 1960s were accommodated.

¹² In a typical pluralist move, Lijphart describes the end of ideology as one of the main reasons for the downfall of the four pillars. While the main contention towards pillarization had an explicit ideological form – the political radicalism of the New Left – ideology did not disappear, it simply changed shape.

The legalization of abortion, soft drugs, euthanasia and prostitution became part of a progressive hegemony (Kennedy 2005), the cornerstone of the tolerant and liberal image of the Netherlands abroad. Of vital importance in terms of labour relations were the Wassenaar agreements of 1982,¹³ the centrepiece of what became known and celebrated as the Dutch *poldermodel*. At this point, Lijphart was convinced that the old pacification politics had returned, this time for good (Lijphart 1989). But at the end of the 1990s, the meteoric rise of the charismatic right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn¹⁴ and his dramatic assassination effectively undermined that consensus, heralding a new period of polarization.

The emergence of right-wing populism has occurred in a crisis of a similar nature and magnitude as that of the 1960s, with almost the entire political field experiencing major instability. The CDA, the dominant political power in the country since the Second World War, saw half of its electorate flee in the elections of 2010.¹⁵ The party has been in crisis ever since. The Social Democrats (PvdA) face similar ordeals. Other parties are ideologically adrift. The right-wing Liberal Party has turned towards neo-conservatism. The Green Left (GroenLinks) is moving in a liberal direction, while the Socialist Party – once a marginal Maoist protest party and now classically social democratic – currently wins as many seats in the polls as the Christian Democrat and Social Democrat Parties taken together.¹⁶ It is within this context of crisis and polarization that the ‘morbid symptom’ of right-wing populism manifests itself.

The rules of the conflict model, as formulated by Daalder, seem to be back in operation, this time centred on the ‘unmasking of the multicultural ideology of the establishment’. Concurrently, the polarizing formation in 2010 of the most right-wing government in Dutch post-war history can fittingly be described as ‘polarization as a means to form an exclusive majority’. Once the new government installed itself it became increasingly clear that the rules of the old consensus politics no longer applied. According to the official opening statement, the government aimed to ‘give the country back to the hard-working Dutch people’. It was an echo of Fortuyn. The prime minister

¹³ A historic agreement between employers and trade unions to restrain wage growth in exchange for working time reduction, which increased the competitiveness of the Dutch economy in the years that followed. Though originally referring to labour relations, the *poldermodel* was soon in use as a more general term; it became a latter-day variant of the consensus model of Lijphart.

¹⁴ At the end of the 1990s, the charismatic media figure of Pim Fortuyn emerged as a political force in his own right. Fortuyn was able to gain widespread appeal on the basis of a populist platform that attacked state bureaucracy and immigration policy, while promoting entrepreneurship and aiming for a reassertion of Dutch national culture. Fortuyn was murdered by an animal-rights activist on 6 May 2002, nine days before the parliamentary elections, resulting in a national furor. In the elections that followed, the party of Fortuyn (LPF) won 26 seats (17% of the vote) out of nowhere, and was made part of the subsequent right-wing coalition government, Balkenende I. The party, a motley collection of nouveau riche businessmen, quickly fell apart due to internal strife and plain amateurism. But the political space created on the Right, and the political ideas of Fortuyn – which came to be accepted as legitimate after his murder – would remain available to subsequent populist right-wing parties to exploit.

¹⁵ The elections of 2010 saw the CDA implode from 41 seats to 21. Many of these votes went to the Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders, which went from nine to 24 seats and became the third biggest party.

¹⁶ From the weekly poll of peil.nl on 19 February 2012. <www.peil.nl/?3453> [accessed 20 February 2012].

went on to promise policies that those on the Right 'could lick their fingers too'. The austerity measures that followed have been implemented with atypical hostility towards the stricken sectors. All this is in flagrant contradiction of the consensus rules of proportionality and depoliticization. The consensus model of Lijphart also provides a clue for the wavering and accommodating attitude of the established parties and the opposition: instead of containment or counter-polarization there is a painstaking attempt to return to consensus through a politics of pacification and inclusion.

The breakthrough and success of right-wing populism

An important ingredient of Dutch consensus culture is moderation and thus prevention of antagonism (Lijphart 1968). Through the techniques mentioned before, some opinions and interests are included in the existing consensus, while those deemed to be too radical or divisive are excluded from the public sphere. Anti-immigrant sentiment was generally repressed and stigmatized in the Dutch public sphere, and it only became generally acceptable to voice concerns about immigration after Fortuyn.¹⁷ Therefore, when Fortuyn started to become a successful media figure he had to deal with a political élite and a media establishment that were largely hostile to his views. He had to articulate and win a position in the political field that simply did not exist before.

The dramatic outcome of the 2002 elections, when the party of Pim Fortuyn was elected to power, is one of the recurring puzzles when explaining the rise of populism. It is generally portrayed in the Netherlands as a consequence of a long-lasting popular dissatisfaction with politics, resulting from a lack of attention to popular concerns around migration, integration and a multicultural society (Koopmans et al. 2005). However, in 1998, voter satisfaction with politics was still at an all-time high (Bélanger & Aarts 2006). In four years, with a similar coalition and similar policies, this changed into almost general dissatisfaction. The logical conclusion is that Pim Fortuyn himself must have played a defining role in articulating and fermenting this dissatisfaction. An important and underexplored ingredient for his success, besides his commonly cited charisma, is political innovation.

Fortuyn managed to create an altogether new form of right-wing political ideology. By critiquing Muslims for their supposedly 'backward' culture, not for their ethnic background or for being immigrants per se, Fortuyn formulated a new immigration critique that explicitly distanced itself from the traditional extreme right. From 2002 onwards, the Dutch integration debate changed from being about minorities to being about Muslims (Uitermark 2010). At the same time, Fortuyn started mobilizing the people against the consensus model as such: 'It is the culture of the polder model that we oppose. A closed culture that declares outsiders to be irrelevant and does not accept new interests . . . We want to give the country back to the people' (Wansink 2002). On the basis of a post-9/11 clash of civilizations imaginary, Pim Fortuyn was able to create

¹⁷ Janmaat, the right-wing populist politician who from 1982 to 1998 served as the expression of extreme right anti-immigrant sentiment in Dutch politics, was publically ostracized and ridiculed for his views. His party never gained more than 2 to 3 per cent of the vote. When asked what made him different from Janmaat, Fortuyn said that 'everybody that is in, will stay in. I don't want to take people's civil rights away' (Wansink 2002).

an opposition between an enlightened nationalist Dutch identity, which prided itself on the emancipation of homosexuals and women, and the threat of an encroaching Islam that he described as a 'backward culture'. But perhaps even more importantly, he created an internal opposition, between the normal Dutch people to whom he promised to return the country, and the existing élites with their political correctness, multicultural relativism and technocratic *poldermodel*. This double frontier, the people on one side and the backward Islam and multicultural élite of the *poldermodel* on the other, would provide the basis for the politics of the populist Right in the years that followed, in particular that of Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders.¹⁸

A second important ingredient to explain the success of right-wing populism is the cataclysmic effect of media events (Dayan & Katz 1992, Couldry et al. 2010). Two months before his murder and afraid of the death threats he had received in the run-up to the elections (he was at that moment still a very controversial figure), Pim Fortuyn declared on television that if something were to happen to him, the Dutch political élite would be responsible for helping to create the climate of 'demonization' that would have made it possible. When Fortuyn was indeed murdered, on 6 May 2002, it was blamed on 'the left-wing establishment' ('the bullet came from the Left', as the saying went), in particular the politicians and opinion-makers who had reputedly demonized Fortuyn for his views on immigration. The murder had a profound impact. It led to the election victory of Pim Fortuyn's party in the week after but it had important discursive effects as well. From that moment on, demonization became an effective code word for the populist Right to ward off criticism. The political élite and media establishment started accepting the ideas of the New Right as a legitimate political discourse in the Dutch public sphere. Yet another consequence was that the opposition Fortuyn created between the people and the multiculturalist élite became entrenched in the collective imaginary. From that moment on, this became the central antagonism in the Dutch public debate (Uitermark 2010). When the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh¹⁹ was brutally assassinated in 2004 by a young Dutch Islamic fundamentalist for making

¹⁸ Rita Verdonk attacked élite cultural relativism in the televised founding speech of her party Proud of the Netherlands: 'There is a strong "let's do away with us" current, that for years has been trying to make us believe that our culture does not exist and that finds our norms and values inferior to other cultures . . . We have been a hospitable people for centuries. But that we, the Dutch, have to make place in our own country and have to adapt ourselves to new cultures. To that I say: enough! There are borders.' Likewise, in his election programme of 2010–15, Geert Wilders promises to defend the interests of the common people (Henk and Ingrid) against Moslem immigrants (Fatima and Mohammed) and the cultural élite of the Amsterdam Canal Belt (PVV 2010).

¹⁹ After the self-inflicted breakdown of the LPF in 2002, many assumed that things would soon return to normal. But in 2003 another political media celebrity was catapulted onto the public stage: Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Circumcized by her Somalian Islamic family when she was five and mistreated by a traditionalist upbringing, Hirsi Ali fled to the Netherlands in 1992. She joined the right-wing Liberal party (VVD) and was elected to Parliament in the 2003 elections. Her controversial anti-Islamism made her the most central figure in the public debate (Uitermark 2010: 80). In 2004, she started work on an anti-Islamic film entitled *Submission* together with Theo van Gogh, a filmmaker, controversial columnist and élitist *enfant terrible*. The 11-minute video pamphlet was aired in August 2004 on Dutch public television and led to widespread controversy. Six weeks later, Theo van Gogh was shot and stabbed to death on the streets of Amsterdam by the Dutch-Moroccan Islamic extremist Mohammed Bouyeri. In van Gogh's body, Bouyeri implanted a dagger with further death threats; Ayaan Hirsi Ali was one of the main addressees. The murder of van Gogh sent shockwaves through the country and it quickly became seen as the Dutch 9/11 (Demmers & Mehendale 2010).

the anti-Islam film *Submission*, this opposition was cemented even further in Dutch public consciousness (Buruma 2006, Hajer & Uitermark 2007). Due to unrelenting polemics by right-wing populists such as Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders,²⁰ this internal frontier has continued to be at the centre of Dutch politics, and forms the basis of the restructuring of the Dutch political field at the moment.

Conclusion

There are important differences between approaches that consider populism merely as an expression of the long-term changes taking place in society and among the electorate, and a constructivist reading of populism that looks at how populism helps constitute the very identities that it represents. The aim of this article has been to critique the dominant reading of the emergence of populism in the Netherlands and to show that rapid change cannot be explained by a reflective approach. The existing political situation should be seen as both the culmination and consolidation of a ten-year period in which a discourse centred on national identity, Islam, law and order, terrorism and immigration came to dominate the Dutch public debate. This would not have been possible but for the dramatic impact of cataclysmic media events such as 9/11 and the subsequent political assassinations of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. Effectively building on these events and the political antagonisms these created, right-wing populist politicians such as Pim Fortuyn, Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders, together with the broader current of New Right opinion-makers surrounding them, were able to articulate a new nationalist and anti-Islamic politics. They created a discourse that successfully framed the political debate in terms of a new double opposition: an enlightened tolerant Dutch culture (and in broader terms the Judeo-Christian West) was opposed to an encroaching backward Islam; and an assertive, nationalist and popular New Right was opposed to an out-of-touch multiculturalist left-wing élite.

If we are to develop a deeper understanding of the changes sweeping over Europe, we cannot limit ourselves to a nominalist or reflective reading of populism; we have to understand the wider context, the deeper structures and the inner logics explaining the success of right-wing populism. This implies a need to revisit thoroughly some of the old debates surrounding mass communication, audience reception and political ideology.

²⁰ In the tense climate following the murder of van Gogh, two right-leaning politicians in the VVD rose to prominence and would soon come to compete over the legacy of Fortuyn. Rita Verdonk, a former prison director, made a name for herself as the tough-handed Minister of Immigration and Integration from 2003 to 2006. After a failed attempt to become leader of the VVD in 2007, Verdonk started her own party, the right-wing nationalist *Trots op Nederland* (Proud of the Netherlands). The party quickly dwindled in the polls and Verdonk left the political scene after a humiliating defeat in the 2010 elections. Geert Wilders had a longstanding career in the VVD and collaborated closely with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose anti-Islamism he shared. In 2004 he moved to the Right and forced a break with the more moderate leadership of the VVD. By now a public figure due to his outspoken anti-Islamism and the death threats he received, Wilders left the VVD in September 2004 and continued as a one-man faction. In 2006, Wilders founded the anti-Islamist Freedom Party (PVV).

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