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The relationship between populism and liberal democracy: three new insights

I. Introduction

In recent years, the scholarly attention for populism has increasingly been drawn towards the populist conception of ‘democracy’. This paper will argue that the academic debate has neglected three important aspects of the populist vision on the way ‘democracy’ should be conceived. The striking similarities on this issue of the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) and the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (FPÖ) suggest that a more encompassing understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy, is both necessary and attainable.

This paper consists of three parts. First, I will examine the most recent literature available on the relationship between populism and democracy. As I will argue, the current literature on this topic is not sensitive enough when it comes to defining ‘democracy’, while it neglects important features of the way populist parties delineate this type of government. The most important features of the populist conception of democracy are the extension of the political sphere, the disputed neutrality of the state and a two-fold notion of ‘equality’. The analysis of these particular themes constitutes the second part of this article. I will conclude by making some general remarks of how we could understand this ‘populist democracy’ by conceptualising it within recent transformations visible in Western democracies.

Regarding methodology, the literature on modern day populism can roughly be divided in two main categories. The first category takes a top-down approach, in which scholars conceptualise populism and attempt to develop a definition. This definition of populism is generally geared towards nationalism and anti-elitism. A second grouping covers research from an empirical perspective, often presented in national case studies. It tends to discuss various policy proposals of populist movements and to place these in a comparative perspective. This paper will unite these perspectives by constructing a theoretical reflection on the nature of a

populist democracy based upon a structural analysis of the policy proposals, party programmes and publications from the PVV and the FPÖ and its (former) leaders.

II. Democracy and Populism: An Overview of the Contemporary Academic Debate

The current literature on the relationship between populism and democracy generally interprets both concepts too narrowly. According to the state-of-the-art in the debate, populism seems mainly confined to nationalism and anti-elitism. These are considered prime elements of this phenomenon in standard studies on the topic, such as that of Paul Taggart.¹ Taggart highlights six themes which are according to him prevalent in all modern populist movements. Identification with the heartland i.e. the people is a crucial one. Regarding the populist vision on democracy, he states that populism challenges the institutions of representative politics and gives preference to means of direct democracy. This is also an important conclusion of a classic study compiled by Yves Mény and Yves Surel.²

Cas Mudde argues that populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous groups [the pure people versus the corrupt elite] and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* of the people.³ The populist vision on democracy is allegedly grounded upon three features: plebiscitary politics, a personalisation of power and the primacy of the political.⁴ It is this last aspect that seems most at odds with liberal democracy, since it argues that the will of the people should be exercised regardless its consequences. This paper argues that the primacy of the political extends much further than usually assumed by Mudde and demonstrates the difference between populism and liberal democracy most clearly.

While populism is considered a threat to and the antithesis of democracy it is often not clear what is meant with either concept. Mark Plattner argues that the rise of populism can lead to democratic disorder.⁵ However, regarding the question what defines populism Plattner

¹ P. Taggart, 'Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics' in: Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York 2002) 62-80; P. Taggart, *Populism* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000).

² Y. Mény and Y. Surel, 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism' in: Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 1-17.

³ C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 23.

⁴ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 150-157.

⁵ M.F. Plattner, 'Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy' *Journal of Democracy* vol. 21 no. 1 (2010) 83-90: 90.

article is less outspoken, he conceives populism primarily as a force of cultural homogeneity. Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens state that ‘populism can only survive if it becomes authoritarian and despotic’⁶ Regarding the definition of populism their vision is, again, less lucid. They conclude that populism has a thin-centred ideology in which the people as a homogeneous unity occupy a pivotal position. Similar views can be found with Nadia Urbinati, who connects populism to despotism.⁷ Although neither she does develop a clear definition of populism, Urbinati argues that its differences with democracy lie with the following aspects: for populists debate does not play a role and elections exclusively have a ritualistic meaning. She posits that populism can have a democratising effect, yet only in countries that are not yet ‘democratic’⁸

As we can see, scholars almost exclusively juxtapose ‘democracy’ and ‘populism’⁹ This leads to our final remark. The recent literature, despite coming from a political science angle, is often not clear on the notion of ‘democracy’ and what it stands for. ‘Democracy’ is presented as a monolithic phenomenon, despite the existence of different models in which it can be implemented. We often mistake one of those models, ‘liberal democracy’ for being ‘democracy’ as such, while the liberal element in political thought on democracy is ‘theoretically different and historically distinct from democracy’¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas even claimed that democracy is torn apart by two potentially conflicting elements: the ‘democratic’ emphasis on popular sovereignty and the essentially liberal emphasis on universal human rights.¹¹

Consequently, the tendency in populism studies to juxtapose ‘democracy’ and ‘populism’ is questionable, since democracy is far from a static or undisputed concept. It can, however, be partially explained by pointing to the fact that postwar Western European democracies fall under the, still broad, category of ‘liberal democracies’ Jan-Werner Müller even baptised these political systems ‘restrained democracies’ since these arguably display ‘a distrust of popular sovereignty’ and allow only a limited influence of the *volonté general* on the decision-making

⁶ K. Abts and S. Rummens, ‘Populism versus Democracy’, *Political Studies*, vol. 55 no. 2 (2007) 405-424: 421.

⁷ N. Urbinati, ‘Democracy and Populism’, *Constellations* vol. 5, no 1 (1998) pp. 110-124: 118.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹ This distinction is particularly resilient in political thought and remains to be articulated by scholars in the most recent literature. See for instance: M. Flinders, *Defending Politics. Why Democracy Matters in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ F. Zakaria, ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’, *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1997) 22-43: 23.

¹¹ J. Habermas, ‘Constitutional Democracy. A Paradoxical Unity of Contradictory Principles?’, *Political Theory*, vol. 29, no. 6 (2001) 766-781.

process.¹² Similarly, Martin Conway posits that postwar European democracy is characterised by a 'peculiar mode of mass politics' in which the people are detached from the political course of action.¹³ The tendency to equate liberal democracy with democracy in the literature discussed above can additionally be accounted for by the fact that postwar democratic theory is indebted to Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*.¹⁴ Schumpeter stated that 'there is no such thing as the common good' and posited that democracy is a 'struggle for the people's vote' in which individual freedom should be the prime concern.¹⁵ This elitist view can also be found with other influential theoreticians such as Robert A. Dahl. He puts forward an essentially pluralist notion of democracy, 'polycharchy' which, he acknowledges, 'falls well short of achieving the democratic process'¹⁶

The particular conception of democracy in Western-Europe since 1945 view is tantamount to the one expressed by John Dunn, who claimed that modern day democracy has passed definitely 'from the hands of Equals to the hands of political leaders of the order of egoism'¹⁷ His argument is basically that 'democracy' is a concept to which different meanings can be applied at different times. 'Democracy' does not have a fixed meaning, but thanks to its positive connotation, politicians will endeavour to put forward their understanding of it. Consequently, populist parties, as other parties, will present themselves as democrats and endeavour to monopolise 'democracy' by presenting their conception of the topic as the only one valid.

Liberal democracy is grounded upon three main elements. Firstly, the citizens of liberal democracy are not expected to participate actively in the government of their political community. Instead, they exercise the right to elect representatives who govern in their name. This representative aspect has always left the system vulnerable to criticism on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of representation. A second feature of liberal democracy is the neutrality, or 'impersonality' of the state. Finally, in order to guarantee personal freedom, the

¹² J.W. Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) 128.

¹³ M. Conway, 'Democracy in Postwar Europe. The Triumph of a Political Model', *European History Quarterly* vol. 32, no. 1 (2002) 59-84: 64-68.

¹⁴ For its influence, see for instance: I. Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* ([1944] London: Allen and Ulwin, 1981) 269.

¹⁶ R.A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 223.

¹⁷ J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free. The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic, 2005) 160.

scope of political sphere in society is to be restricted. The state is clearly separated from civil society and not all social meanings carry political significance.¹⁸

As we will see, the validity and viability of all of these elements are questioned by the FPÖ and the PVV. In contemporary literature on the topic, it are primarily direct democracy, anti-elitism and nationalism that are considered key aspects of a 'populist democracy'. While this paper does not dispute these assumptions, it does argue that there are three other aspects that deserve to be considered as constitutive elements of the populist conception of democracy. Based upon an analysis of the official party publications of the PVV and the FPÖ, I posit that the neutrality of the state, a two-fold notion of equality and an extension of the political sphere in society can be considered central elements of a populist democracy. If we incorporate these in an analysis of populism, the differences between liberal democracy and populist democracy can be further elucidated.

III. A Populist Democracy: Three Previously Neglected Characteristics

a. The Neutrality of the State

As we have seen, the impartiality of the state is an important pillar of liberal democracy. According to liberal democratic theory, state, or state funded, institutions are not to reflect politically biased messages. However, the feasibility of this objective has been questioned by populist parties. According to these parties, the neutrality of the state is currently no longer guaranteed. Consequently, Wilders announced that Dutch democracy is in 'its biggest crisis since the days of Thorbecke' [the liberal who designed the current-day Dutch constitution in 1848].¹⁹ Austria, on its turn, is allegedly 'not truly democratic, but late-Absolutist'.²⁰ This 'crisis of democracy' is related to the lack of neutrality of the state, which is on its turn blamed on the position of the 'traditional' political parties in these countries.

As is well known, these parties are the prime target of the PVV and FPÖ, because the elite exert their influence largely through these channels. Whereas the 'traditional' parties are convinced that they embody democratic values and even claim to protect democracy against the threat of populism, the PVV and FPÖ, on the other hand, argue that the decade-long dominance

¹⁸ See for instance: D. Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 56-95.

¹⁹ *Verkiezingsprogramma PVV 2010: Agenda van hoop en optimisme*, 17.

²⁰ *Wahlprogramm FPÖ 2002: Wir gestalten Österreich mit Sicherheit* (Vienna 2002) 25.

of these 'traditional' parties has led to an undemocratic political constellation. The distinction between elite and the people is thus mirrored in the antithesis between 'old and new' politics: 'the real battle is between the political parties that make up the existing system and the ones that want to reform this system'.²¹ The FPÖ and the PVV have baptised themselves 'movements' to stress the contrast with these 'traditional parties'. The PVV even has Wilders himself as its only member: 'I don't believe in the old party structures in which you first have to wash the car of the chairman for twenty years before you can achieve something. That leads to political prostitution'.²²

As a result, populists argue that the contemporary system is not so much a democracy, but a *partitocrazia*, a 'particratic oligarchy' or a system of *Parteienallmacht*.²³ This system allegedly does not allow room for dissent views. Populist parties are ostensibly held for antidemocratic radicals, whilst they claim merely to represent views that are not considered favourable by the traditional parties. The traditional political parties are thus accused of having far too much power. They have allegedly become so institutionalised that the political debate is determined by power politics of political parties instead of original ideas.²⁴

However, in the populist view the deeper rooted problem regarding the *partitocrazia* is neither its elitism, as is often asserted in the literature, nor the allegation that it is not susceptible to dissent opinions. The worst effect of this system lies in the fact that the neutrality of the state is disputed. Wilders explicitly stated that the elite have taken control of the state.²⁵ The PVV and FPÖ maintain that all institutions which are state-funded should carry a neutral message and be liable to democratic control. This demonstrates that in their perspective, even when state institutions reflect the dominant political discourse, i.e. that of the 'traditional' parties, this cannot be equated to neutrality, because these state institutions in that case still carry a political agenda.

This leads populists to doubt the neutrality of state institutions and to the argument that democratic, meaning popular, control over these institutions should be reinstated. These allegations of the lack of state neutrality embrace spheres usually not considered strictly political ó a theme to which shall be returned below. For instance, the *Centraal Plan Bureau*, the main

²¹ Wilders, *Klare Wijn* (The Hague, 2005) 1.

²² Interview with Geert Wilders: 'Ik heb de feiten en de kiezers aan mijn kant', *de Volkskrant*, July 4th 2009.

²³ Wilders, *Klare Wijn*; *Das Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreich* (Wenen 2004) 7.

²⁴ Wilders, *Klare Wijn*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

economic think tank of the Dutch government, is allegedly politically biased, because it is led by a member of the social democrats and collaborates with some environmental club that adopts the ideas of the charlatan Al Gore²⁶ Likewise, the FPÖ asserts that traditional parties exert a disproportionate and undemocratic influence over society, since many important positions, from headmasters of schools to leading positions at the Central Bank, are divided between the parties on the condition of party membership: the *Proporzdemokratie*.²⁷ The FPÖ fears in particular for the independence of the *Finanzsenat*, which controls government spending, since it is staffed with party members of the traditional parties.²⁸

Similarly, the objectivity and neutrality of the judiciary is questioned.²⁹ Even before Wilders faced trial on accusation of hate speech and discrimination, his movement accused the judiciary of a left-wing agenda. He believes that his process was politically motivated, which is not surprising since one of his party's arguments is that judges are part of the elite. Wilders argues that the feelings of natural justice of the average citizen and the judgements of the judiciary are two worlds apart – an argument that can also be found with his Austrian counterparts.³⁰ The gap between elite and people in the political arena is thus mirrored in judicial rulings. These are no longer neutral, but allegedly reflect the outlook of the elite – the same elite who are accused of planning a conspiracy against the common people.³¹ Magistrates are progressive liberals in toga who deliver too lenient punishments. Based on the assumption of a politically biased judiciary, the FPÖ pleads for more objective procedures for the appointment of members of the Supreme Court. The PVV goes even further and stresses the importance of elected judges and police officers.

Another ostensibly partisan state institution is the monarchy. It is not merely because the party favours direct election of state representatives that the PVV is sceptical towards the monarchy. Again, the ostensible lack of state neutrality is a main reason for criticism on the House of Orange, since the PVV accuses the royalty of being part of the left-wing intelligentsia. Wilders came into conflict with Queen Beatrix on numerous occasions, most famously in 2009, when the Queen in her annual Christmas speech made an appeal on people to be tolerant towards

²⁶ *Presentatie Geert Wilders Agenda van hoop en optimisme* (The Hague 2010).

²⁷ Haider, *Die Freiheit*, 126-131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-26; *Parteiprogramm FPÖ*, 17.

²⁹ *Wahlprogramm FPÖ 2002. Wir gestalten Österreich mit Sicherheit* (Vienna 2002) 26.

³⁰ See for example: Wilders, *Klare Wijn*, 4; 47; *Handbuch für F-Politik. Ein Leitfaden für Führungsfunktionären und Mantelträger der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreich* (Vienna 2005) 100.

³¹ *Vorwort Heinz-Christian Strache, Bundesparteiobmann, Handbuch für Freiheitlichen Politik.*

cultural differences. Wilders perceived this as a personal attack and stated that the Queen had chosen the side of the 'multicultural idealists'³² In other words: while the monarchy should be part of a neutral state, it allegedly advocates politically coloured messages for which it cannot be held up to democratic control.

Another case of a state institution that is not neutral but purportedly reflects the values of the establishment is the state media. Traditionally in Western Europe, the state has exerted influence over state broadcasting services and interfered with the media.³³ According to the PVV and the FPÖ this involvement has, again, not had a neutral character. Both the PVV and the FPÖ argue that the state broadcasting service is staffed according to the *Proporz*-ideal and that citizens get biased information from an institution which is paid for by the tax payer and thus supposed to be neutral.³⁴ The establishment allegedly utilised state media to propagate its world views to ordinary citizens. Haider was particularly worried about the 'repressive tolerance' purportedly propagated on state television, because according to him 'Democracy is about debate, who does not want a debate, is no democrat'³⁵

The PVV also argues that state television broadcasting is far from neutral. The Dutch government funds broadcast associations, of which all but one are aligned along confessional or political colour. The state media are accordingly accused that they 'excel in warning against the PVV. Every night left wing people are invited by left wing associations to share their politically correct views ó all on the cost of the tax payers.'³⁶ The PVV wants to abolish this system: the state television channels should be only used by the neutral association.³⁷

There are numerous other examples of state institutions which neutrality is disputed and to name one other instance: the state funded Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute can no longer be considered neutral since it adopts theories of climate change. In short, the populists of the PVV and the FPÖ dispute a central claim of liberal democracy: state neutrality is an illusion, because the same political parties have been able to exert political influence for a significant period of time. These parties have allegedly occupied the liberal state, which has subsequently come to reflect the discourse dominant in these parties. State institutions consequently no longer

³² M. Fennema, *Geert Wilders. Tvenaarsleerling* (Amsterdam: LJ Veen, 2010) 145.

³³ See, for example: M. Chapman, *Comparative Media History. An introduction: 1789 to the Present* (Cambridge 2005) 180.

³⁴ Haider, *Die Freiheit die ich meine*, 64-65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54;75.

³⁶ *Agenda van hoop en optimisme*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

convey a neutral message. While this claim is not easy to refute in a post-modern age, the populist assessment of liberal democracy is obviously characterised by a paradox. Although the neutrality of the state is disputed, the populists claim that this neutrality can be reinstated if only the voice of the people is more clearly and directly heard in the political process and the power of traditional parties is broken.

b. Two notions of equality as the prerequisite of democracy

The aspiration to neutralise state institutions and establish popular control of or rather over all state-funded institutions reveals another element of populist the populist conception of democracy. It demonstrates that accountability is an essential concept for understanding the populist vision on this form of government. This emphasis on accountability implies that equality rather than liberty is first and foremost the way in which democracy is conceived. In liberal democracy, as we have seen, protection of individual rights is one of the prime objectives. The prominence of equality for populists, on the other hand, goes much further than mere anti-elitism or the cancellation of divisions in society, whether religious, cultural or linguistic.

Political thought since Rousseau has been preoccupied with the question how liberty and equality can be reconciled in a democratic society. According to liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, an emphasis on equality could lead to less individual freedom. Although the latter expected that people would eventually favour equality over liberty, he warned against this tendency to value equality higher. Liberals have argued that individual freedom should be protected to prevent the levelling effects of an egalitarian society and the ever imminent threat of the tyranny of the majority. It is this individual liberty, or freedom which populist parties claim to protect. Yet, a closer look at their programmes suggests that a populist democracy is instead built upon two distinct, yet connected, notions of equality: a radical political conception of equality and an exclusive cultural notion of equality

First of all, the political and radical notion of equality entails that citizens should have the ability and the right to hold every representative of the state up to democratic meaning popular, control. Hereby it intends to narrow the gap between rulers and ruled. It reveals that a populist democracy is not merely one which emphasises the importance of direct democracy to extend the influence of the common man. It instead ventures to overcome unequal political power relations.

This leads to the question where this conception of equality stems from. Populists carry a deep faith in the capabilities of people to make political decisions. This trust in the political abilities of the average voter implies that the typical citizen actually aspires political engagement. But populist politicians all point to a gap between elite and the people. The distance between elected and electors in a liberal democracy leads to public apathy towards politics. It is precisely this apathy that populist parties consider a hindrance to the functioning of democracy.

This apathy is partly attributed to the extensive institutionalisation of democracy and the complexity of the *Rechtsstaat*. Haider claimed that democratic states tend to develop so many rules that the accessibility of citizens to their rights is compromised.³⁸ Wilders acknowledged that liberal democracy is necessarily characterised by a gap between the political class and citizens.³⁹ As we have seen, this gap is indeed deeply entrenched in liberal democratic theory. Partially, however, public indifference is attributed to a deliberate strategy of the elite.⁴⁰ Populists claim that citizens have a moral imperative to participate in politics, but that their participation is jeopardised by the elite. The gap between elite and people should be narrowed, and this can only be achieved by improving the possibilities that citizens have to control state functionaries and subject them to popular control – either direct or via parliament. State representatives are entrusted with certain privileges that are considered normal in liberal democracies, but are considered inherently undemocratic in a populist democracy. This is the radical notion of political equality.

This conception of political equality logically leads to the conclusion that all positions in the democratic system should be subjected to increased popular control. This view is epitomised by the statement –in the new free republic, the election principle takes prevalence over the appointment principle–⁴¹ If ultimate sovereignty lies with the people, the people should be allowed to increase democratic, meaning popular, control over government, MPs and civil servants. The FPÖ even wishes to introduce a system according to which all elected representatives can be impeached after a referendum.⁴²

³⁸ Haider, *Die Freiheit*, 19.

³⁹ G. Wilders, *Nieuw-Realistische Visie. Modern Onbehagen* (The Hague 2006) 5.

⁴⁰ Vorwort von Hilmar Kabas, Präsident des FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut, *Handbuch für Freiheitlichen Politik* (Vienna 2004).

⁴¹ *Wahlprogramm 2008. Wir für Euch* (Vienna 2008) 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

We have seen that in the academic literature, populism is thought to be inherently anti-institutional. However, the objective to enforce equality and narrow the ostensible gap between elite and people, does not inevitably take an anti-institutional direction. The national parliament, as embodiment of the popular will, is considered an important platform to increase accountability. The concentration of powers in the hands of the parliament works in different ways. First of all, the parties fulminate against other political institutions of representative democracy that prevent the popular will from being heard, most notably the Senate. In Austria, the Senate should become a true representation of the different *Länder* and thus strengthen the federal character of the state. The parliament's role should be enhanced in order to increase democratic control over government functionaries. For instance, the members of parliament should receive the right to elect ministers and impeach government members.⁴³ In the Netherlands, the Senate, which traditionally has the role of a *chambre de réflexion*, should be abolished. This would automatically strengthen the position of the Second Chamber.⁴⁴

Secondly, the populist notion of equality is exclusive. We have touched upon the populist understanding of 'people' as the common people in relation to the elite, but this cannot be detached from their interpretation of the people as 'the whole people' the *Volk*. If we study populism from this angle, the emphasis it places on equality is further elucidated. The parties believe in equality not merely because it sees unequal political power relations as undemocratic, but also because equality fosters national cohesion. The PVV and FPÖ share a mono-cultural conception of the people. This relation between populism and nationalism has been made frequently before.⁴⁵ However, it is often ignored in scholarly literature that it is absolutely fundamental to the democratic outlook of populist parties that this cultural nation is the only possible source from which democratic government can stem.

Democracy according to populists is grounded upon the supposed ultimate expression of this equality: the cultural ties that supposedly connect citizens and thereby constitute a 'people'. It is thus a cultural equality, which is by nature exclusive in character. This stance also explains the populist aversion towards European Integration and multiculturalism. When the FPÖ states that 'the freedom and independence of Austria are under threat' it first of all means that a loss of

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ *Agenda voor hoop en optimisme*, 17-19.

⁴⁵ See for example: G. Hermet, 'Populisme et Nationalisme' *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire* vol. 56 no. 4, pp. 34-47.

national sovereignty leads to less democratic control ó since democratic control can only be enforced by a culturally homogeneous people.⁴⁶ The Grand Coalition has sold the *Heimat* to a corrupt bureaucracy in Brussels⁴⁷ This sale⁴⁷ in their eyes seriously restricts the democratic opportunities of citizens to decide over their own destiny and run their own affairs.⁴⁸ To the consequences for the populist vision on multiculturalism shall be returned briefly below.

c. *The Extension of the Political Sphere and a Shared World View*

Apart from the neutrality of state institutions and two notions of equality, there is a third element in populist thought that has been largely neglected previously: the extension of the political sphere in society and the necessity of a shared world view⁴⁸ in that society that comes along with this extension. This feature is closely connected to the elements mentioned before. The extension of the political sphere is closely related to the politicisation of state institutions that are no longer considered neutral, whereas the believed necessity of a shared world view is related to the populist conception of equality.

To start with the former, we should bear in mind that our discussion of state neutrality has already revealed that populist parties have more a all-embracing conception of the political sphere than is common to political parties in liberal democracies. Key areas of the state such as the judiciary and state media are suspected of being influenced by the outlook of political parties. This almost all-embracing notion of the political sphere distinguishes populist parties from other political parties and makes them perform somewhat uneasily within the framework of liberal democracy, which attempts to limit the political sphere in society to leave enough room for personal liberty.

In a populist democracy the political domain extends into spheres not considered political⁴⁸ in a liberal democracy: media, judiciary, culture and education are allegedly no longer largely impartial and non-political institutions. Even the labour unions should be held up to popular control: if it acts like a *Nebenregierung* it should also be susceptible to the same electoral process as the regular government. The FPÖ therefore calls for the general election by universal suffrage ó which obviously includes non-trade union members ó of the trade union

⁴⁶ *Wahlprogramm 2008*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Handbuch für Freiheitlichen Politik*, 20. See also: *Agenda voor Hoop en Optimisme*, 1.

⁴⁸ *Wahlprogramm 2008*, 1.

bosses and leaders of employers' organisations who make up the social partnership.⁴⁹ This is illustrative of the way populist parties endeavour to politicise every public institution. The line of reasoning here runs as follows: if it decides over the lives of citizens, it should be controlled as directly as possible by those citizens.

But the extension of the political sphere does not stop with trade unions, judiciary and media. It is closely related to the wish to increase both political and cultural equality in society. According to the FPÖ and the PVV schooling is critical in this respect. Through education society should advocate the common values on which this society is based upon. The 'defence of democracy' allegedly commences at primary schools where 'the heroic history of our fatherland should get more attention.'⁵⁰ Like the PVV, the FPÖ values the role of education highly in the process of building a common 'democratic' worldview. Much more energy should therefore be devoted to political *Bildung*, which should start from 5th grade onwards. Austrian schools should place emphasis on Austrian culture and history.⁵¹ The ultimate goal of youth politics is to have 'enlightened and independent citizens' not affected by the 'propaganda' of the current political constellation.⁵²

Apart from education, the arts are loaded with political significance to establish a collective moral framework in society. The populists hold that art should be popular, national art and that this is currently endangered. National culture should be strengthened and utilised to bolster political and cultural equality. Art should in the populist view thus not be considered an independent way of expressing emotions or societal critique, but as a political institution. It should consequently display political messages as articulated by the 'people'. Artists, who often depend on state subsidies, are alleged to be influenced by the political views of the traditional parties and thus only create 'subversionist art with a socialist outlook'. Haider quotes Jürgen Habermas to lend credence to his claim that modern art is merely critique of society and that culture and society are increasingly disjointed, with a high brow, government funded, art telling conservative people they are backward.⁵³ Along the same line of politicising the arts, Wilders dismissed professional art as a 'left wing hobby' and proposed the scrapping of art subsidies.

⁴⁹ *Wahlprogramm* 2002, 26.

⁵⁰ Wilders, *Nieuw-realistische Visie*, 2.

⁵¹ *Parteiprogramm*, 17.

⁵² *Wahlprogramm* 2008, 12.

⁵³ *Wahlprogramm* 2002, 18; Haider, *Die Freiheit die ich meine*, 54.

The politicisation of media, education and art, with the ostensible aim of democratising these spheres of society, demonstrates that, while populist parties generally list freedom of speech as the single most important democratic right,⁵⁴ and criticise the traditional consensus model heavily on one hand, they simultaneously believe in the absolute necessity of a shared *Weltanschauung* for the proper functioning democracy on the other hand. The ostensible current lack of a shared belief system is blamed upon the elite and traditional parties and their cultural relativism and ‘dictatorship of tolerance’.

The analysis of Wilders and Haider on this issue again shows striking similarities. They both state that May 1968 was the advent of a new age in which cultural relativism and a lack of respect for authorities destroyed community bonds. Particularly Haider had an elaborate vision on this topic. He stated that modern man faces a paradoxical situation. Although he is able to reap the fruits of all the freedoms and liberties that society has to offer, he does not know what to do with all those freedoms.⁵⁵ Society lacks an ultimate goal as a binding element and is thus likely to fall apart. The *Toleranzdiktatur* that is currently propagated by the traditional parties leads to anarchy and should be abandoned, since it does not lead to a commonly accepted and shared worldview.⁵⁶

Similarly, Wilders quotes philosophers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Pierre Manent to assert that the abundance of liberties in modern societies assures we take these liberties for granted.⁵⁷ In the tradition of Isaiah Berlin, he distinguishes positive from negative freedom.⁵⁸ Whereas the latter centres on the absence of interference in individual choices, the former concerns realisation of needs and self-mastery.⁵⁹ Wilders argues that the balance in modern societies is tipped too much towards negative freedoms and that we should attempt to define a positive conception of freedom as well. Not surprisingly, the guarantee of negative freedom by the state is often considered an important characteristic of liberal democracy.⁶⁰ Wilders’ assumption leads to his argument that constitutional rights should only be admitted to those who pledge to adhere to the values that are embodied in the democratic constitution, because ‘history

⁵⁴ Wilders, *Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring* (The Hague 2005); *Wahlprogramm 2006* (Vienna 2006) 1.

⁵⁵ Haider, *Die Freiheit* 9-17; Wilders, *Nieuw-realistische visie*, 2

⁵⁶ *Wahlprogramm 2006*, 1.

⁵⁷ Wilders, *Klare Wijn*.

⁵⁸ Wilders, *Nieuw-Realistische Visie*, 2.

⁵⁹ I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in: I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) 119-167.

⁶⁰ Held, *Models of Democracy*, 78.

shows that plurality of opinions can only exist if it is confined within mutual trust in shared norms and values⁶¹

It is in this area, the political commitment of citizens and the necessity of a shared value system, that some of the visions on multiculturalism are articulated. Unfortunately, this study does not leave us enough room to investigate the populist outlook on this issue in greater depth. We also have to bear in mind that for populist parties, democracy only has legitimacy as long as it is based on the popular sovereignty of a culturally homogeneous 'people'. Based on the assertion that constitutional grants should only be granted to those who pledge allegiance to this constitution, the parties are all in favour of a forced adoption of 'Western' values by migrants. They consequently propose to let immigrants sign a contract, in which they pledge to respect the culture of the respective countries. The FPÖ additionally proposed to let immigrants take a 'democracy test' in which they could prove their adherence to democratic Austrian procedures. It is finally interesting to note that these parties, which are usually situated on the conservative side of the political continuum, increasingly claim the progressive agenda when it comes to defining democracy. The parties claim to be staunch defenders of women's rights and the PVV also stands up for the rights of homosexuals: 'It is therefore time to choose for the defence of core components of our culture: the freedom of homosexuals and the equal rights of men and women.'⁶²

The populist conception democracy is thus grounded upon a political equality in which the distance between rulers and ruled is as narrow as possible, a cultural equality which legitimises democracy as a system of government among equals and a shared moral framework in which these forms of equality are ideally guaranteed through the adoption of the same norms by all members of the political community. Populist parties consequently hold that a democratic society based upon equality of its members can only sustain if this equality is enforced by the adoption of shared core values: 'Freedom can only exist if there are shared free and fundamental rights'⁶³

⁶¹ Wilders, *Nieuw-Realistische Visie*, 5.

⁶² *Agenda voor hoop en optimisme*, 33.

⁶³ *Das Parteiprogramm der Freiheitliche Partei Österreich*, 4.

IV. Conclusion

This paper concludes by answering the question how we can understand the particular kind of democracy that the populist movements studied here advocate and by making some suggestions for further research. It may be noteworthy to recall that populist movements not merely consider themselves deeply democratic, but that they even state that whilst they are democratic, the existing political order fails to uphold democratic values and norms.

The populist vision on what democracy is should be briefly summarised at this place. This paper has not countered the dominant vision in the academic debate on a populist democracy, which highlights direct democracy, anti-elitism and nationalism as its main characteristics. It has, however, strived to demonstrate that current literature has overlooked three important other aspects of the populist conception of democracy. The manifestoes, programmes and publications of the main Austrian and Dutch populist parties imply that a more embracing notion of the populist conception of democracy is necessary. The analysis of the publications of the PVV and FPÖ has revealed that the current conception of a populist democracy should be enhanced by incorporating the extension of the political sphere ó including a shared *Weltanschauung* ostensibly indispensable for the functioning of democracy ó, the questioning of state neutrality, and a two-fold notion of equality.

To start with the latter, this study has disclosed that populist parties praise equality as the defining element of democracy. The prominence of equality does not solely entail the overcoming of divisions in society, as has often been asserted in literature, but has a more politically radical side: a populist democracy asserts that in order to close the gap between elite and people, the division between rulers and ruled should ultimately be cancelled ó or at least made as narrow as possible. Accordingly, control over political representatives and institutions should be significantly enhanced. A populist democracy is thus not merely an anti-elitist democracy, but a democracy in which everyone can hold everyone else up to democratic control. This requires a reversal of the unequal political power relations which are intrinsic to liberal democracy. Simultaneously, populism, as we have demonstrated here, has an culturally exclusive notion of equality. This matters here, since it stands in close relation to their outlook on democracy: popular sovereignty is the *sine qua non* of democracy.

The fact that the people are conceived as a homogeneous cultural unit leads to the second assertion: populism places much emphasis on the importance of a shared value system among the

population. This is critical to the understanding of populism, which sees itself as a crucial actor in addressing the lack of a common order in an individualised society. Concurrently, it extends the political sphere to parts of society that liberal democracy has left 'unpoliticised'. Examples include education, the arts and the judiciary.

The politicisation of these institutions signifies the third aspect of the populist outlook on democracy. It criticises the promise of state neutrality that liberal democracies allegedly fail to fulfil. The FPÖ and the PVV are convinced that the dominance of traditional political parties has led to an undemocratic political constellation in which the dividing line between by nature biased political parties and the supposed-to-be neutral state has become blurred. The pervasion of these institutions by the 'traditional' political parties and their 'allegedly elitist and, often, Left wing' values, has ostensibly led to diminishing opportunities for citizens to make well-informed decisions independently. By politicising state (funded) institutions such as state broadcasting associations and the judiciary, populism questions their objectivity, legitimacy and accuses them of spreading biased and elitist messages. The only way to realise the democratic necessity of state neutrality is therefore to break the power of these 'traditional' parties by increasing means of popular control over state representatives and institutions. This leads us back to increased political equality 'which demonstrates that the three aspects of a populist democracy are closely intertwined.

Although fairly coherent, the populist conception of democracy, like the liberal one for that matter, is obviously also characterised by several contradictions. For instance, how does the emphasis on a common *Weltanschauung* relate to the 'neutralisation' of the state and the 'independence of mind' which the parties all claim to endorse? This contradiction unveils the nature of the populist conception of politics. Populism argues that this common worldview should be stimulated to protect a democracy based on popular sovereignty, because it carries great faith in the capabilities of people to make the right decisions. The utopian element of populism lies in the fact that it believes that once all citizens form their visions independently, they will stop being an imagined community and rationally think and act as one indivisible people.

It is thus clear that this view on democracy stands in sharp contrast to the liberal conception of democracy, dominant in contemporary Western Europe. An important promise of that model of democracy 'state neutrality' is criticised, since it is believed to be incompatible

with the large role assigned to political parties in this system. Other aspects of liberal democracy – its emphasis on individual liberty, its representative character, its pluralism and its limitation of the political sphere – are questioned too, but on more fundamental grounds. These aspects are not questioned because these would not be realistically attainable, but because these are all to a greater or lesser degree considered undemocratic. An Ideal Type of a populist democracy would consequently run as follows: according to populists, democracy can solely be based upon the popular sovereignty of a culturally homogeneous people with a shared collective outlook on moral and ethical issues and it aims to realise almost horizontal political power relations that are articulated in a heavily politicised civil society not clearly separated from the state.

Now that these three aspects have all been highlighted, suggestions could be made for further research to the topic. An obvious option should be to enhance the number of case studies, since this research was only built upon two populist parties. Another suggestion for further research to comprehend the populist vision on democracy could be to study our current type of democracy more critically. We should pose the question whether the populist conception of democracy – and its electoral success – is somehow way related to the state of our form of government. It should be stressed that –liberal democracy– is solely an Ideal Type that serves to classify democracies in Western Europe. An Ideal Type that never can and never has exist(ed) in reality. In reference to Austria, for instance, an esteemed historian remarked that its postwar political system –by no means amounted to a classical liberal-democratic system–⁶⁴

Our particular type of liberal democracy has been assessed by several scholars. Their assessment of the current transformation of liberal democracy partially elucidates the critique that populist parties have on the system. Margareth Canovan, for instance, states that our democracy is in a sense already populist.⁶⁵ Democracy is made up of two core elements, which she labels –redemptive– and –pragmatic–. The –redemptive– element in our democracy is the *vox populi*: the voice of the sovereign people, whereas the –pragmatic– element is a form of government with intrinsic institutions. She posits that belief in redemption through action of the sovereign people is vital for the functioning of the –pragmatic– democracy and –if it is not present

⁶⁴ O. Rathkoldb, *Die paradoxe Republik. Österreich 1945 bis 2005* (Vienna: Paul Zoslnay Verlag, 2005).

⁶⁵ M. Canovan, –Trust the People! Populism and the two Faces of Democracy– *Political Studies* vol. 47 no.1, pp.2-16: 7.

within the mainstream political system it may well reassert itself in the form of a populist challenge⁶⁶

Secondly, the lack of ideology and leadership cult often attributed to populism seems to reflect a trend in liberal democracy in general, rather than being an exclusive trait of populism itself.⁶⁷ Bernard Manin argues that we are currently witnessing the rise of an ‘audience democracy’⁶⁸ Its main feature is the passive reaction of voters to issues raised by politicians. It is thus not party ideology that counts in election time, but the way politicians are able to let public opinion split in their advantage. As we can see, the ostensible lack of ideology, like the prominence of one political leader, is thus not an exclusively populist phenomenon. It is also not clear what is cause and what is effect in this regard: does the focus on personalities pave the way for populism or does the electoral success of populism force other parties to adopt similar methods? In the case of France, Fieschi has argued by taking an institutionalist approach that it has been the personalisation of French politics that stimulated the breakthrough of the *Front National*, rather than the other way around.⁶⁹

A final aspect of the populist view on democracy that further research could have been outlined by two Dutch political scientists who published a study about the state of Dutch democracy: *Diplomademocratie* (Diploma democracy).⁷⁰ In this work, they revealed that Dutch politics, as well as state media, labour unions and government agencies, have increasingly become dominated by academics over the past decades. Dutch democracy, which is supposed to represent all Dutch people equally, is thus controlled by people with the highest degrees. They posited that this constellation is in fact closer to the Platonic ideal of a meritocracy than to actual democracy and suggested that research in other Western European countries would produce similar results. They demonstrated that this over-representation of academics has increased in recent years, which throws light on the anti-elitism of populist parties.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁷ For the lack of ideology, see for instance: Taggart, *Populism*, 2. Compare with Mudde, who does conceive populism as a political ideology.

⁶⁸ B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ C. Fieschi, *Fascism, Populism and the French Fifth Republic. In the Shadow of Democracy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰ M. Bovens and A. Wille, *Diplomademocratie. Over de spanning tussen democratie en meritocratie* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2011).

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