

# Global Issues

## Capitalism, Labour and the Global Populist Radical Right

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Populist radical-right movements with nationalist, xenophobic and authoritarian tendencies have been rising rapidly around the world since the 1980s (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2017). In recent years, however, there has been a revived interest in the dynamics of right-wing populism around the world. Although the rise of many radical right-wing populists in the Global South such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil also played an important role in this resurgence of academic and public interest, arguably the most critical turning point was the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States in 2016. Similar to the way economists name economic crises – that is, calling it an “East Asian crisis” or “Latin American crisis” when it hits East Asia or Latin America but a “global crisis” when it hits the United States and other developed countries in the Global North – this recent populist revival has been widely referred to as “global populism” since his election.

The emergent literature on global populism has been turning our attention once again to various social, economic and political dynamics that help radical right-wing populist mobilisation. Because this most recent wave of populist expansion is also taking place in a period when the leading capitalist countries in the Global North are facing deep economic problems, more attention is being paid to how capitalism and crisis affect populist mobilisation with an eye to the class composition of populist support. Paradoxically, however, many critical theorists who theorise the relationship between “global populism” and the dynamics of “global capitalism” have tended to overgeneralise the experience of the United States and many Western European countries in the early twenty-first century (Judis, 2016; Rodrik, 2018; Fraser, 2019; Mackert, 2019). Most existing critical scholarship seems to assume a flat view of global capitalism and global populism without seriously taking into account the uneven development of historical capitalism across space and time.

Experience of the Global North in the early twenty-first century provides only a partial view of the “economics of populism”. From this angle, right-wing populism would appear to be a reaction by declining working and middle classes against the destructive dynamics of neo-liberal globalisation, self-regulating markets and financialisation of the economy (Judis, 2016; Rodrik, 2018; Fraser, 2019; Mackert, 2019). Donald Trump is viewed as a radical right-wing populist leader who attacks neo-liberalism from the far right and attracts white working-class votes by promising to restore American manufacturing to fix the skewed distribution of jobs and income that was produced by neo-liberal economics and financialisation over the prior decades (Judis, 2016; Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado, 2017; Fraser, 2019). In the literature, similar explanations are also used by a wide spectrum of social and political scientists to account for the rise of many European right-wing populists such as Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France, the People’s Party in Denmark and the Freedom Party of Austria (Judis, 2016; Rodrik, 2018). According to these explanations, which echo Karl Polanyi’s (1944) analysis, members of the white working class who have been

unmade and marginalised during the financial neo-liberal globalisation process in previous decades are the main force behind this radical right-wing populist tide.

It is undeniable that defensive movements by the working class, which has been losing its rights, privileges and employment opportunities due to rapid commodification of land, labour and money, have historically been an important source of economic nationalism and right-wing populism as well as socialism, social democracy and left-wing populism. A closer look, however, will reveal several limitations regarding the generalisability of these explanations. First, this view does not take into account the extremely different geo-economic contexts and different class bases of populist movements in the Global North and the Global South in the early twenty-first century. In many emerging markets of the Global South, such as in Modi's India or Erdoğan's Turkey, right-wing populist leaders have not been reacting against neo-liberal globalisation but instead they have relentlessly been promoting them. Unlike what we see in the Global North, the class base of right-wing populist support in these regions is not the working and middle classes who are losing their rights and privileges during neo-liberal globalisation processes but the social classes who benefit from these neo-liberal policies. Put differently, these are not social groups that are being unmade, but classes in formation and development who believe they have a better future under these populist leaders. In Modi's India, these groups not only include the majority of capitalists and members of the rising traditional middle class who are very enthusiastic about the rise of India, but also the so-called "neo-middle classes" who recently managed to escape from poverty and became urban dwellers. While these neo-middle classes do not earn much, as Jaffrelot (2015) puts it, they "at least they have a job and they have some hope for a brighter future". In Erdoğan's Turkey, the AKP also receives its votes not from the declining middle or working classes but from a new emergent faction of the bourgeoisie, a new rising middle class and a new working-class population who had been marginalised during the earlier developmentalist era. These groups see themselves as rising groups with a bright future under Erdoğan's "new Turkey". In both countries, and many other emerging markets in the Global South, we see a mix of neo-liberal and populist/pragmatic redistribution policies.

This brings us to a second problem. When right-wing populism is depicted as a reaction against neo-liberalism in the Global North, it is often forgotten that many of these populist movements (or their predecessors) were also the pioneers of neo-liberalism in the 1980–1990 era. Consequently, far from being a response against Polanyi's self-regulating markets, these radical right-wing populists were a main force of self-regulation and commodification of land, labour and money as is the case with contemporary India or Turkey. As such, they were also the political forces which exhibited the most radical opposition to developmentalism, welfare states and protective social security nets that existed in some parts of the Global North after World War 2.

In the 1980s, for instance, the Progress parties in Denmark and Norway were among the first radical right-wing populist parties in Europe to advance and to propagate a neo-liberal programme (Betz, 1994: 110). Likewise, under the leadership of Jörg Haider and the ideological/strategic guidance of Andreas Mölzer, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) became successful in the electoral sphere in the late 1980s, mostly due to their radical neo-liberal programme which defended "fundamental liberalism" (Betz, 1994: 112). Scandinavian and Austrian right-wing populists were hardly exceptions. On the contrary, in the 1980s many radical right-wing populist parties – including the Swedish New Democracy Party, the French Front National, the Swiss Automobile Party and the Italian Lega Nord – featured strong elements of neo-liberalism in their programmes.

These parties' political-economic agenda ultimately affected their class base. Unlike today, in the 1980s these right-wing radical populist parties did not have strong working-class support. In the 1986 elections, for instance, the Freedom Party of Austria received only 10 per cent of blue-

collar workers' votes but by 1999, as they moved from promoting neo-liberal globalisation to being its "critics", they started to receive 47 per cent of blue-collar workers' votes. However, they never actually completely broke with neo-liberalism. In 2018, they were a coalition partner in the government that implemented the twelve-hour work day in Austria. A similar pattern was prevalent throughout Western Europe (Betz, 1994; Judis, 2016). Most of these parties were textbook examples of petty-bourgeois parties, which drew overwhelming support from merchant traders, small businesses and small farmers from the countryside. If they attracted some limited working-class votes in the late 1980s, these were often first-generation workers with strong individualistic tendencies and extremely weak ties to organised labour and labour movements (Betz, 1994: 167).

The key process that helped some of these radical populist right-wing parties to recruit working-class votes in many regions of the Global North was the implementation of neo-liberal globalisation policies by mainstream centre-right (and sometimes left) establishment parties, which required the radical populist right parties to distinguish themselves in the field of politics. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from mainstream parties, the radical populist right parties started to capitalise on ethnic, religious, national and even gender-based boundaries that historically divided the working class along different socio-historical lines. By playing one part of the working class against others, and often by promising a redistribution through denying rights and liberties to various sections, they started to mobilise one section of the working class against other sections. They also skilfully exploited the divide between the organised and unorganised sections of the working class. Put differently, inter-elite competition between different factions of the ruling elite went hand in hand with competition and rivalry between different sections of the working class. Every economic, political and social crisis the ruling mainstream elites faced made the messages delivered by right-wing populists more credible and attractive.

These stark differences between right-wing populist parties of the Global North in the 1980s and the early twenty-first century (as well as contemporary right-wing populist movements in the Global North and Global South) help us to appreciate that radical right-wing populism has a more dynamic and relational nature than has been widely recognised. In the early 1980s, right-wing populists were reacting against the developmentalist agenda and the welfare states, and they were promoters of neo-liberal globalisation. In the early twenty-first century, right-wing populists added strong elements of critique of neo-liberalism, globalisation and financialisation into their programmes in the Global North, and managed to synthesise and promote neo-liberal globalisation with pragmatic redistribution policies in the Global South. Right-wing populists were able to use not only the crisis of neo-liberalism in the early twenty-first century as an opportunity to mobilise the masses but also the crisis of developmentalism in the 1970s and 1980s. In short, right-wing populism has always had a highly relational, eclectic and pragmatic ideological/programmatic content, which aimed at attracting masses in the electoral sphere by representing an elitist opposition with a popular outlook to the existing establishment parties. The systemic logic of this relational and highly pragmatic eclecticism helps us understand right-wing populists' chameleon-like ability to adapt in extremely different temporal and spatial contexts.

This is precisely why, if we want to discover the dynamics of global populism instead of overgeneralising the experience of the United States or much of Western Europe in the early twenty-first century, a better research strategy is to expand the temporal and spatial horizon of our analysis and to reconsider different manifestations of populism in the rest of the world from the 1970s to the present as an interconnected, dynamic and transforming whole. Analyses that emerge out of this strategy will contribute to the existing debates by radically changing the nature of the questions we ask about how nationalist populists relate to workers and different classes in general. Instead of asking which political-economic contexts produce populism or which social classes

support populism, we must turn our attention to how the uneven development of capitalism across space and time, how economic booms and bursts, how making and unmaking of different classes over space and time change the forms and relevance of populist and other alternative forms of politics in a hierarchically organised global political-economic landscape.

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