Right-Wing Populism in Rural Europe. 
Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This special issue aims to understand the rise of right-wing populism in the European countryside, as well as the forms of resistance and the alternatives being built against it. In this short introduction, we briefly present the main objectives and conceptual position of the special issue and introduce its articles. Each article is discussed here based on its contribution to one of the following themes: (1) analysis of the existing socio-economic system and power relations that gave rise to right-wing populism in rural Europe; (2) critical examination of the major assumptions about rural support for populist movements; (3) problematic overlap between politics and rhetoric of right-wing populist parties and left-wing (green) parties and agrarian movements; (4) agrarian populism and food sovereignty movement as progressive alternatives to right-wing politics in the European countryside.

Key words

agrarian populism, European countryside, food sovereignty, right-wing populism

Introduction: aims and objectives of the special issue

In recent years, right-wing populism has emerged as an electoral force in Europe. Despite the absence of clear-cut geographic patterns in the spread of populist votes, recent studies have suggested that rural, suburban and peripheral areas tend to be more prone to the influence of populism (Scoones et al. 2018; Dreszer-Smalec 2019). Thus, and just to name a few examples: a large proportion of French farmers voted for far-right leader Marine Le Pen in the last presidential elections (Bruneau et al. 2018), Dutch far-right parties wholeheartedly supported recent farmers’ protests with regressive agendas (van der Ploeg 2020), and rural areas and small towns in Poland constitute the main electoral base of the ruling right-wing party Law and Justice (Stanley and Cześniak 2019).

Does this imply that contemporary European populism is a rural phenomenon? Certainly not. Yet it is certain that right-wing populism has encountered fertile ground
in the European countryside. Populists leaders and parties have been tapping into widespread feelings of victimisation and disenfranchisement among rural Europeans and exploiting their resentment against urban elites, the political establishment, migrants and ethnic minorities. The current surge of populism has called into question the entire model upon which European economic growth has been based: open markets, international migration, economic integration and globalisation (Dreszer-Smalec 2019).

This special issue has emerged after the international conference on ‘Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World’ organised by the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) in The Hague in March 2018. ERPI is a scholar-activist community that aims at understanding, resisting and building alternatives to regressive populist politics in rural areas around the world. As part of this broader effort, this special issue aims to understand the rise of right-wing populism in the European countryside, as well as the existing forms of resistance and the alternatives being built against it. It follows the impetus of recent publications such as Strijker et al. (2015) and, especially, Scoones et al. (2018), who argue that the countryside not only provides the breeding ground for regressive political forces, but may also offer progressive solutions in the form of emancipatory rural politics.

Right-wing populism is analysed here from various perspectives: as a political movement, a discursive frame, and a mobilising strategy that ‘depict politics as a struggle between “the people” and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged “Others”, at home or abroad or both’ (Scoones et al. 2018). Our initiative is the result of a balanced effort to understand both the demand and supply sides of rural populism, revealing its drivers, its main actors, their strategies and the counter-movements in formation. Left-wing progressive agrarian populism – in form of the food sovereignty movement – is critically examined here as a potential alternative to right-wing politics in different contexts across Europe.

We follow Greven (2016) who argued that European populism does not come with uniform, clearly defined characteristics: it takes different forms depending on nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture. This special issue depicts rural populism in various geographical areas across the east-west and north-south divides, encompassing the centre-periphery cleavage. It includes articles on Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, and the Basque Country, together with a contribution from the guest editors’ discussing the common features and tendencies across (and beyond) the European region.

Taken in conjunction, the articles in this special issue contribute to our understanding of right-wing populism in four different ways. First, they critically examine the existing socio-economic system and power relations in the countryside that gave rise to right-wing populism. Second, they challenge the major assumptions about rural support for populist movements. Third, they examine the troubling overlap between the politics and rhetoric of right-wing populist parties and left-wing (green) parties and agrarian movements. Finally, they discuss the food sovereignty movement as a progressive alternative which could win over right-wing supporters. Below we briefly explain these ideas while introducing each article.
The existing socio-economic system and power relations that gave rise to right-wing populism

In their framing article, Mamonova and Franquesa explain rural support for populist movements in Europe as ultimately resulting from the fundamental crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal structures of accumulation have accelerated processes of deindustrialisation and de-agrarianisation in many rural regions, thereby contributing to growing levels of unemployment and out-migration. Furthermore, state withdrawal from social provisioning has caused an economic and infrastructural decline, thus strengthening the pervasive feeling of being ‘left behind’ among rural residents. In agricultural regions, the neoliberal model of development has resulted in the expansion of large industrial agribusiness at the expense of small- and medium-scale family farming. As a result, the number of European smallholder farmers has shrunken by one third during the last decade. These dramatic transformations have triggered widespread rural dissatisfaction and resentment, which were ardently manipulated by populist campaigns.

Mamonova and Franquesa also observe that the crisis of neoliberal capitalism is directly linked to the crisis of representative democracies. The mainstream European parties established the so-called ‘consensus of the centre’, premised on the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalisation. Understandably, a growing number of European citizens has come to perceive politics as increasingly technocratic, opaque, and distant from the people. In such circumstances, the claim of right-wing populists to represent the interests of ordinary people is wholeheartedly welcomed, especially in the countryside, where people have been feeling politically ‘overlooked’ and ‘forgotten’ for decades.

In their article on rural Italy, Iocco, Lo Cascio and Perrotta discuss how the neoliberal food regime has failed to benefit the majority, instead facilitating the accumulation by the ‘one per cent’. The article points out that the neoliberal turn in the governance of agriculture has resulted in the ‘supermaketisation’ and the ‘defamilisation’ of the Italian farming sector, which led in turn to a rapid rate of socio-economic differentiation among farmers and the ‘foreignisation’ of labour, filled with seasonal migrant farmworkers enduring substandard working and living conditions. The authors analyse the political discourse of the right-wing Lega party around agriculture, food and migrant farm labour. They conclude that despite its criticism of the previous centre-left government, the Lega has largely maintained the same agricultural policy, but dressing it with a nativist discourse – for example, concerning the ‘Made in Italy’ food. Thus, rather than solving existing problems, right-wing populists reframe them through xenophobic, nativist themes that place the blame on migrants, ‘unfair’ international competition and EU agricultural policies.

In her study of farmers protest movements and alternative food networks in Poland, Bilewicz criticises the modernisation paradigm, which dominates the public sphere and domestic agricultural policy. This paradigm depicts smallholders as ‘backward’ and ‘inefficient’ and calls for further reduction in the number of small-scale farms in favour of large-scale industrial agribusiness. Bilewicz demonstrates that post-socialist transformations in Eastern Europe – just as deindustrialisation and deagrarianisation
in Western Europe – have produced winners as well as losers. Even though Poland has become one of the world’s booming economies, small- and medium-size farmers experience serious financial difficulties and a sense of loss of status, which triggered a series of farmers protests in the period 2012–2018 across the country. Bilewicz examines these protests in parallel to emerging urban-driven alternative food networks and cooperatives, analysing the commonalities, discrepancies and misunderstandingings between the two movements.

**Challenging the major assumptions about rural supporters of populist movements**

Right-wing populists portray themselves as the spokespersons for the disaffected farmers and hardworking people of the countryside. Yet although there is ample evidence that farmers are likely to express conservative, traditionalist and even nationalist sentiments, the articles in this issue demonstrate that right-wing politics should not be necessarily associated with farmers.

In their study of Roma oppression in a rural town of Eastern Slovakia, Škobla and Filčák show that nationalist tendencies are intimately intertwined with post-communist transformations. The restructuring of the local economy involved shutting down former socialist agricultural cooperatives and food-processing factories – which were the key providers of employment for the Roma minority – leading to the marginalisation and impoverishment of the whole region. In this context, middle- and working-class Slovaks, unable to fight against neoliberal capitalism, found in the Roma population a suitable scapegoat to alleviate their class insecurities and anxieties. Xenophobic attitudes and policies thus obscured the key role of the invisible forces of market capitalism and globalisation in creating the region’s socio-economic and environmental problems.

In her article on the Brexit referendum, Brooks argues that the rural-urban divide falls short in explaining the large support that the Leave position enjoyed in the English countryside. Instead, historical legacies are more decisive than rurality itself in explaining the popular perceptions and experiences underpinning support for Brexit. Brooks critically assesses mainstream assumptions around the Leave vote. Left-wing politicians tend to adopt an economic inequality perspective, which sees Brexit supporters as the left-behind victims of post-industrial economic decline. The right and centre-right understand the Leave vote as a societal retro backlash against post-materialist values (primarily, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism). While the author concedes that each of these explanations has its merit, she convincingly argues for the need of more nuanced, historically informed analysis. Brooks demonstrates that there is a connection between Brexit and the countryside protests of the late 1990s. Emerged in reaction to a hunting ban, these protests aimed to defend an idiosyncratic and class-inflected ‘rural way of life’ as the paragon of national identity. For Brooks, the main driver for the Leave vote in rural England (and not Britain) rests on the pervasive coupling of ethnic populism and a national identity rooted in rural imagery that has historically protected the interests of the rural elites.
Overlap between right-wing populism and left-wing (green) parties and agrarian movements

As Borras has noted, there is often an awkward and somewhat troubling overlap between right-wing and left-wing (progressive) populist parties and agrarian movements. Although ideologically opposed, both camps similarly aggregate different class and group interests into a homogenised voice of ‘the people’ against a constructed ‘other’ (Borras 2020). Several articles in this special issue analyse this overlap, trying to elucidate the key lines of distinction. Such distinction is especially problematic in the European context, where right-wing politicians have increasingly been adopting rhetoric drawn from agrarian movements while expressing their support for small-scale peasant farming, the localisation of agri-food system, and sustainable development.

In his study of the discursive overlap between right-wing populist and green parties in Hungary, Lubarda shows how right-wing, nativist discourses make increasing use of themes around agriculture, rural development and land. These discourses are central in the populists’ speculative promises to emancipate the people from malevolent ‘outsiders’ – migrants, ethnic minorities and the Western influences that endanger Hungarian traditional livelihoods and ‘true’ national values. Lubarda examines the political discourses and strategies of two right-wing populist parties – Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz and oppositional Jobbik – and compares them to the green party LMP, which has recently shifted towards centre-right politics. He argues that the boundaries between right-wing populists and green parties with agrarian populist profile are blurry and malleable, and they tend to metamorphose into one another. Yet despite this warning, Lubarda is hopeful towards the possibility for a green-brown coalition that could lead to democratisation and greater justice in rural areas.

Alarcón Ferrari analyses a similar nativist, exclusionary focus on land and agriculture in the political programme of the far-right Sweden Democrats party. He argues that the rural support that Swedish populists garnered did not only rest on their anti-migrant campaign, but also on their appropriation of claims for guaranteeing ‘independence in terms of food provisioning’ and ‘the right of all inhabitants to land and water resources’. These are classic objectives of progressive agrarian movements, yet in the hands of the Sweden Democrats they are subtly reframed in nationalist terms that exclude migrants. Alarcón Ferrari contrasts such an exclusionary approach with the inclusionary rural development approach advocated by the Swedish Rural Network and Rural Sweden. These progressive organisations understand migrants as ‘new Swedes’ and aim at integrating them in rural economy. However, technological development and the mechanisation of forestry and agriculture become major obstacles for the realisation of such an inclusionary rural development in Sweden.

Agrarian populism and food sovereignty as sustainable alternatives to right-wing populism

Scoones et al. (2018) and Borras (2020) argue that progressive agrarian populism – in the form of the food sovereignty movement – has the potential to ‘radicalize
the discourse, erode right-wing populist agitation, and advance a more promising progressive alternative’ (Borras 2020, p. 17). This special issue examines this argument, addressing the obstacles and exploring the possibilities for the European food sovereignty movement to generate progressive alternatives to right-wing populism.

Calvário, Desmarais and Azkarraga present a success story in the Basque Country. Based on their study of EHNE-Bizkaia – a small farmers’ union and member of Vía Campesina – the authors argue that the ‘solidarity from below’ approach is key in constructing class-conscious left-wing political practices able to counterforce right-wing populism. This approach stimulates rural engagement in politics that are based on multi-class alliances, intersectionality and internationalism. It also involves constructing non-exclusionary notions of sovereignty, thus rejecting all forms of ethno-nationalism. However, Calvário, Desmarais and Azkarraga acknowledge that socio-economic conditions – such as moderate immigration pressure and relatively mild effects of the recent economic crisis – and historical legacies – fundamentally, the Basque struggle for self-determination – are key to the success of EHNE-Bizkaia.

The food sovereignty movement faces a more challenging task in the post-socialist European countryside, as demonstrated by Hajdu and Mamonova in their analysis of Eco Ruralis in Romania. The authors reveal that communist-era legacies influence societal attitudes towards capitalism and socialism, hampering the spread of the anti-capitalist ideology of food sovereignty in rural Romania. Besides that, Hajdu and Mamonova disclose a critical mismatch between the progressive (yet abstract) ideas of Eco Ruralis and the everyday worries and needs of ordinary villagers. The authors conclude that the concept of ‘food sovereignty’ should not be universally applied everywhere. Instead, they argue in favour of other sustainable practices (such as propagation and distribution of local seed varieties in Romania) that may be more culturally appropriate and could regenerate a sense of belonging and restore local identities, which are important elements in combatting the nationalist, xenophobic sentiments in the countryside.

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