
Intersections of Populism and Neoliberalism: Political Economic Reflections of a Contentious Relationship.

Ulas Sener*¹ and Özlem Albayrak*²

¹University of Potsdam – Allemagne

²Freie Universität Berlin [Berlin] – Allemagne

Résumé

The mainstream view on populism highlights an antagonistic relationship between populist politics and the existing neoliberal political and economic architecture. Accordingly, populism is mostly understood as a counterpart of economic globalization and the democratic political system in advanced capitalist societies. The political economic architecture of the last decades is largely built on an idealized separation of the economic and political realm in order to secure market efficiency. As is widely known, alternative institutions and economic demands, which are not in line with idealized market principles, are prematurely declared as politicized and economically short-sighted, and in recent years increasingly as ‘populist’. In mainstream language, ‘economic populism’ comes categorically with negative connotations, regardless from the far-right or left background. This indifference poses not only analytical problems in the understanding of the highly controversial subject, it raises also important political questions over the future of contemporary capitalism as well as the merits and limits of economic policy, as this paper will address.

First, we will clarify which economic policies, especially regarding fiscal and monetary policy, are distinctly labelled as populist and explain why. This will be contextualized with main pillars of economic proposals put forward by populist politicians or movements, which draw a contradictory and non-monolithic picture. In many cases we find several cleavages in the economic demands, especially coming from right-wing sides, ranging from new protectionism, re-regulation of the economy and the labour market, to redistributive measures and liberal tax policies, as can be seen in the case of Trumps’ ‘trade war’ and the ‘Brexit’ case.

In this regard we will address following questions: Why are certain economic programmes identified as populist and what is problematic with this classification? In which way the populist uprising poses a distinct feature of the neoliberal ‘There is not Alternative’ (TINA) era with recurring economic and political crises? What are the complementing features and reinforcing moments which constitute a structural parallelism between these two political phenomena? Do populist economic narratives pose a time-off for the neoliberal separation between politics and the economy? In the second part we will discuss the hypothesis that the persistent anti-politics character of neoliberalism serves only to deepen the political and legitimacy crisis leading to populist rise, while ironically trying to prevent ‘populist’ interference into the economy. Approaching from this perspective, we will argue that re-politicization is inevitable and the time for explanatory attempts like the de-politicization of economic policy paradigm draws to a close.

*Intervenant

Mots-Clés: populism, neoliberalism, repoliticization, economic policy