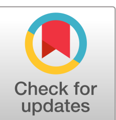

Populism, Neoliberalism and Agrarian Movements in Europe. Understanding Rural Support for Right-Wing Politics and Looking for Progressive Solutions

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Abstract

Right-wing populism has gained ground in Europe in recent years, with the greatest support among rural communities. Yet the European countryside remains largely overlooked in debates on the current political crisis and the ways out of it. This article aims to provide keys for understanding the connection between right-wing populism and the rural world in Europe. Our analysis unfolds around three main ideas. First, we argue that the root cause of the spread of right-wing populism is the fundamental, multidimensional crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism, particularly pronounced in Europe's countryside. Second, we examine what role historical legacies, trajectories of agrarian change, and other national, regional and local specificities play in shaping populist movements in different rural areas in Europe. Finally, we discuss the constraints and possibilities for the emergence of agrarian (populist) movements that may offer progressive alternatives to right-wing populism in the countryside.

Keywords

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

Introduction

Right-wing populism has gained ground in Europe in recent years. Today, every third European government consists of or depends on a populist party (TAP 2017) and one in four Europeans support a populist party (Hann 2019). This is certainly not the first time that far-right movements have taken root here, but this is the most significant iteration since the end of World War II. Contemporary right-wing populism

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has a strong rural constituency, as recent elections and referenda have made evident. For example, the far-right Sweden Democrats became increasingly popular in Swedish rural towns for its anti-immigration, anti-EU political views (Orange 2018); Poland's 'Law and Justice' party and its 'aggressive nationalism and strict Catholicism' receive hearty approval in the Polish countryside (Smith 2015); and French far-right presidential contender Marine Le Pen gained the support of many farmers with her 'buy French act' campaign (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015).

Certainly, contemporary European populism is not strictly a rural phenomenon. Yet in order to understand the rise of right-wing populism in Europe (and beyond) it is necessary to analyse its penetration among rural constituencies. Europe's populists are making inroads in the countryside by tapping into feelings of abandonment and exploiting rural resentment against elites, migrants and ethnic minorities. This rural support for populist parties in Europe has remained largely overlooked in academic debates (with some notable exceptions such as Woods 2005, 2015; Strijker *et al.* 2015; Gonda 2019). Meanwhile, as Paxton (1997, p. 6) reminds us, '[i]t was in the countryside that both Mussolini and Hitler won their first mass following, and it was angry farmers who provided their first mass constituency'. Therefore, the current ruralisation of populist parties should not be ignored.

In this article, we follow 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 alternatives in the form of emancipatory rural politics. This observation is of particular importance, for it suggests that studying the connection between right-wing populism and the rural world constitutes a necessary step to understand the current political crisis and find the way out of it.

Drawing on multiple examples across rural Europe,[1] this article contributes to the studies of populism in three ways. First, it challenges the dominant assumptions about the causes of the contemporary populist surge in Europe (and globally). In mainstream debates, right-wing populism is commonly portrayed as a result of economic or cultural crises that hit Europe during the last decade. We demonstrate that the cause of populism is more fundamental; it relates to the systemic crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism, the impacts of which are especially pronounced in the European countryside. Second, we look beyond the common tendency to endow populism with uniform, clearly defined characteristics that are transferable to different contexts. We show that regional and local rural specificities – such as political history, agrarian structure, and rural culture – play important roles in shaping populist movements and ideas in different countries and regions. And, finally, we argue that top-down initiatives are, on their own, ill-equipped to resolve the political crisis of this moment: resistance and alternatives should come from below. We discuss constraints and possibilities for the emergence of a wide-ranging agrarian (food sovereignty) movement that would go against the logic of neoliberal capitalism and combat the spread of right-wing populism.

Right-wing populism: making sense of a slippery concept

Political scientists argue whether populism is primarily an ideology, a form of political mobilisation, or a discursive frame (Alsanidis 2016; Bonikowski and Gidron

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2016; Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2017). Different takes on this subject make the concept of populism 'vague and malleable [so that] it loses much of its analytic utility' (Bonikowski and Gidron 2013, p. 15). Some scholars even argue that 'the liberal, multi-vocal model of the social sciences and the humanities is no longer a viable option to explain the phenomenon of reactionary populism' (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2018, p. 507). The term populism is also commonly used with negative connotations in political polemic to denounce the opponent, which creates additional tension to its scientific use. In the present study, we neither try to solve the vagueness of populism, nor offer a new approach to understanding this phenomenon. Instead, we follow Bonikowski (2017), who calls for more attention to the contextual factors that define the recent success of populist campaigns.

A historical examination of the movements and parties that have been labelled 'populist' does not render the concept unequivocal (Taggart 2000), but it allows us to establish two basic ideas. First, populism was first used to refer to political movements that took root in the countryside. Indeed, the term originates from *narodnichestvo*, the 1870s political and ideological movement of Russian intelligentsia, who aimed to mobilise *narod* (the common people, at that time, primarily peasants) against elites and create a socialist society based on the principles of the peasant commune (Mamonova 2019). In the 1890s, the term was linked to the US agrarian populist movement that led to the foundation of the People's Party, which mobilised farmers against business elites and the political mainstream. Second, populism has been applied to political movements and parties that are ideologically disparate and often located on opposing ends of the left-right spectrum, from Argentinian Peronism to Mussolini's fascism, from Trump's victory in the US to the recent breakthrough of Vox in Spain.

For lack of a better term, we use *populism* to refer to 'the deliberate political act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogenised voice, i.e., "us, the people", against an "adversarial them" for tactical or strategic political purposes' (Borras 2019, p. 3). From this perspective, populism is not so much an ideology as a political style and strategy. This more flexible definition encompasses various types of populism, of which right-wing and left-wing forms are the most common. These two ideologically opposed political movements target broadly similar issues and adversaries, which makes the distinction between them somewhat problematic (Fassin 2017; Borras 2019). Wodak and Nugara (2017, p. 165) suggest the following distinction: 'right-wing populism presents itself as serving the interests of an imagined homogenous people *inside* a nation state, whereas left-wing populism or other parties employing some populist rhetorical strategies have an inclusive position, look *outwards* and emphasise diversity or even cosmopolitanism'.

Populism in its essence 'represents an important dimension of democracy' (Mouffe 2018, p. 39). It places ultimate authority in 'the people' (*demos*), allowing their views to be represented authentically through elected representatives. This so-called 'rule by the people' is the fundamental principle of 'popular sovereignty' in democratic societies (Mouffe 2016; Yudin and Matveyev 2017). Indeed, populists arise when politics of the ruling elite do no longer resonate with the will of people. Left-wing populist movements may positively impact representative democracy by enhancing the plurality of the political arena and elevating equality, liberty and fraternity as paramount social

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and political values (Mouffe 2016). The problem, however, is when populism takes the far-right forms. By representing the interests of ‘the people’, right-wing populists discriminate against certain sub-sections of the population and exacerbate existing inequalities and social tensions. In such way, they ‘betray the democratic ideals they claim to endorse’ (Espejo 2017, p. 607).

Right-wing populism is often labelled as neo-fascism in political debates (see for example Lynch 2019). However, while there are some resemblances between twentieth century-fascism and present-day right-wing populist parties, these are two different movements. Fascism mounted a ferocious critique against liberal democracy, meanwhile right-wing populism claims to uphold it (Traverso 2019). And whereas fascism was oriented toward the future, European right-wing populists are oriented toward the past ‘or, in fact, toward an idealised idea of the past’ (Rydgren 2018, p. 6). According to the study of contemporary political parties by Inglehart and Norris (2016), the majority of right-wing populists aim to restore the status quo in their countries and return ‘the national glory’ presumably lost due to the activities of ‘others’ – migrants, minorities, women, cosmopolitan elites, supranational organisations like the EU, and so on. Right-wing politics have a strong tendency toward authoritarianism and favour nationalist interests over cosmopolitanism, protectionism over cooperation across borders, xenophobia over multiculturalism, and traditional over progressive values (Inglehart and Norris 2016). These broad characteristics are not evident in every country, nor are they necessarily evident in their entirety. Yet they allow us to identify right-wing movements and analyse them in the European countryside.

The crisis of neoliberalism

Scholars tend to be divided between those that place primacy on cultural factors as drivers of the rise right-wing populism (Mols and Jetten 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016) and those that privilege economic factors (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Gürel *et al*. 2019). According to the former, the growing popularity of right-wing populism should be understood as a reaction against the spread of progressive values such as multiculturalism, laicism, and cosmopolitanism, exacerbated by the fears of losing national identity due to the migrant crisis. According to the latter, populist support stems from the increasing, widespread economic insecurity and social deprivation experienced by vulnerable social strata.[2]

Indeed, the Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing Eurozone Crisis generated economic distress, aggravated economic inequalities, and increased competition over welfare benefits. All of this has made many people receptive to the protectionist appeals of populists. However, this does not explain why right-wing populism is not particularly strong in Portugal – the country hit heavily by the 2008 crisis (Löwy 2014). Meanwhile, Poland, with one of the fastest growing economies in Europe, became paralysed by right-wing populism (Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016). In short, we cannot establish a narrow, mechanistic causation link between economic conditions and political allegiances.

Likewise, cultural factors cannot provide a comprehensive explanation for the current political crisis. Certainly, there is ample evidence that people’s feelings of

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resentment (Fassin 2017), indignation (Franquesa 2016), and of being ‘left behind by progressive tides of cultural change which they do not share’ (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 5) can act as crucial triggers of support for populist movements. In this context, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism became the area where rage and anger can be instrumentalised into vocal opposition and have been adeptly leveraged by European populists to generate mass support (Balfour 2017). However, whereas it is becoming increasingly clear that political allegiances can hardly be apprehended without understanding subjective attitudes – what Lordon (2016) calls ‘political affects’ – it seems equally obvious that these sentiments are not unaffected by rising levels of economic inequality, insecurity and disenfranchisement. We thus think that if we are to understand the spread of right-wing populism it is necessary to go beyond the dichotomy between cultural and economic factors and find deeper systemic triggers.

In this study, we argue that the root cause of right-wing populism in Europe (and the world) is the fundamental crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism. The last four decades are characterised by the spread of neoliberalism in different variations around the world (Beckert 2019). Based on the ideas of laissez-faire economic liberalism and free market capitalism, neoliberalism provides legitimacy to political authority and extends market relations and competition in all spheres of life (Beckert 2019). It involves policies associated with privatisation, free trade, austerity, and reduction in government spending. Globalisation and European integration also follow the logic of neoliberalism by creating a single market and facilitating international migration flows. If earlier, neoliberalism was seen as a market-based solution to socio-economic problems, now it is criticised for exacerbating inequalities (Beckert 2019), commodification of nature (Harvey 2005), limiting the power of democracies (Iber 2018) and eroding ‘the social bonds and solidarities upon which individuals depended, leaving people to fend for themselves as “companies of one” in an increasingly insecure world’ (Kymlicka 2013, p. 99). We argue that in order to understand the rural support for populist parties and leaders, we need to understand the crisis of the neoliberal order and how it affects the European countryside. The impact of neoliberalism varies from country to country, from the core to periphery areas, depending on regional and local specificities, such as historical legacies, trajectory of agrarian change, geographical characteristics, and so on (to be discussed in the next section). Below we discuss three main failures of neoliberalism that can be observed to varying degrees across the European countryside.

The first is that the rise of right-wing populism is in direct relationship with the economic impoverishment, social polarisation, and widespread disenfranchisement caused by decades of neoliberal economic policies and consequent erosion of the welfare state. Austerity economics – as a neoliberal solution to the financial crisis – has squeezed both the middle class and the working poor (Picketty 2014; Milanovic 2016). In rural Europe, the crisis of neoliberal social structures of accumulation sped up the processes of deindustrialisation and de-agraianisation, leading to worrying levels of unemployment in many rural towns and villages (Shucksmith and Brown 2016; Brooks forthcoming). The state withdrawal from the provision and management of public spaces caused economic and infrastructural decline in remote rural areas, cultivating the feeling of ‘left behind’ among their inhabitants (Volonteurope 2016). In agricultural regions, neoliberal capitalism has caused what Harvey (2004)

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calls 'accumulation by dispossession' – concentration of land and property by large agro companies at the expense of small-scale farmers.

During the last ten years, over 100,000 small-scale farms have disappeared in in Germany, 300,000 in Bulgaria, 600,000 in Poland, and 900,000 in Romania (European Commission 2018). In total, the number of full-time farmers across the EU fell by over a third in just the past decade, representing almost five million jobs (Eurovia 2017). The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) primarily supports larger companies oriented toward boosting yields and industrial production, while small-scale farmers have been pushed to the margins, if not entirely obviated (Eurovia 2017). Free-trade agreements such as CETA (Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement) have a similar logic and effect (McGregor 2016). Such neoliberal policies have generated discontent and frustration among many rural Europeans. These feelings are ardently used by right-wing populists to bolster popular support. For example, Polish Self-Deference (Samooborona) – a populist movement and, later, a political party – argued that the CAP and other EU policies were destroying the Polish agricultural sector by benefitting national and international elites at the expense of small-scale food producers. CAP criticism has also been central to rural support for far-right parties such as the French Front National (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015) and the Hungarian Fidesz (Lubarda forthcoming).

Our second argument is that the crisis of neoliberalism is directly linked to the crisis of representative democracies, more precisely, representative democracies in the 'post-political' situation. According to Mouffe (2016), 'the post-political situation has led to the disappearance from political discourse of the idea that there is an alternative to neoliberal globalisation'. The centre-right and centre-left parties – those that determine European politics since the end of the Cold war – established 'consensus at the centre' under the neoliberal hegemony and offer hardly any alternatives to citizens through elections (Mouffe 2016; Streeck 2016). Consequently, many people have come to believe that their governments represent the interests of markets and transnational corporations, while citizens' voice is unheard. The recent rise of what Bello (2019, p. 3) calls 'angry movements contemptuous of liberal democratic ideals and practices' is a reaction to the frustration generated by a neoliberal governance that promotes a post-political, consensus-of-the-centre form of politics (Kalb and Halmai 2011).

The crisis of representative democracy is further exacerbated by people's mistrust towards the EU institutions and falling support for European integration. The societal dissatisfaction with the EU became particularly strong after the 2008 crisis and the imposition of austerity measures and structural reforms that had poor economic performance. Many Europeans have come to 'perceive the European Union as more and more remote (read technocratic) and national governments as less and less responsive to their concerns – often as a result of EU mandates' (Schmidt 2015, p. 7).

European populists present themselves as the real champions of true democracy – as a new kind of party or movement that takes the worries and interests of 'the common man' into account and dares to speak up against national political elites and 'unelected bureaucrats in Brussels' (Betz and Johnson 2004; The Economist 2017). Their appeals find a fertile ground in the countryside, where people have been feeling politically 'overlooked' and 'forgotten' for decades. Indeed, in many countries,

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politicians used to ignore the interests of rural population for a variety of reasons, including the relatively low electoral weight of rural constituencies (just 28 per cent of the EU-28 population) and entrenched stereotypes about rural constituents' supposed apolitical character (Woods 2015). With the rise of populism, the 'power has leaked to the countryside', where rural people have revolted against the hegemony of urban elites and neoliberal values (Beckett 2016). The populist shift to the rural electorate is well observed in the recent 'ruralisation' of the Front National in France (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015) and the 'stand up for our farmers!' call by the Dutch populist party Forum voor Democratie (Eppink 2019).

Our third argument concerns the positive relation between neoliberalism and right-wing populism. Right-wing populists often present themselves as opponents of neoliberal practices and governance and propose palliative measures (Betz and Johnson 2004). Yet we argue that, in the post-2008 historical conjuncture, particularly critical for the reproduction of capitalist hegemony, right-wing populism functions as a way to preserve and maintain neoliberal capitalism 'in the name of the people' (Borras 2019). This argument mirrors Stuart Hall's interpretation of the rise of Thatcherism, which he characterises as a politico-ideological project that promotes 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 1985). According to Hall, Thatcherism was aimed at a systematic rejection and reversal of the post-1945 welfare consensus and the creation of a 'new historic bloc' which could unite certain sections of the dominant and dominated classes. By using populist rhetoric coupled with British nationalism, Thatcherism allowed to 'construct the people into a populist political project: with, not against, the power bloc', thereby, preserving the existing order and capitalist hegemony (Hall 1988, p. 49). Thus, Thatcher's 'swing to the Right' [was] not a reflection of the crisis: it [was] itself a *response* to the crisis' (Hall 1979, p. 15).

The contemporary 'swing to the Right' in Europe (and globally) follows a similar logic: it is not an attack against neoliberalism, but a tool to reconfigure its hegemony in a moment where, to put it in the late Neil Smith's prescient words, neoliberalism is 'dominant but dead' (Smith 2008). In order to bring neoliberal capitalism back to life, populist parties resort to nationalism, which allows them to displace 'experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement onto the imagined nation as a community of fate' (Kalb 2011, p. 1). Using xenophobic rhetoric, they blame 'Others' – primarily migrants and ethnic minorities – for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from 'Us'. However, while right-wing populism is anti-liberal in terms of identity politics (e.g., multiculturalism, abortion rights, minority rights, religious freedom), it is very liberal in its economic policies (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2018). Populists become the protectors of a national identity with which the masses can identify, while simultaneously negotiating better global terms for the elite. They sell what Bayart calls 'liberalism for the rich and nationalism for the poor' (2017, p. 16).

Although this may not be evident when right-wing populist movements and parties are in the opposition, numerous examples suggest that this is what happens once they reach the government. For instance, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was very critical of the previous government's neoliberal policy in the countryside. Yet although his agricultural policy has brought back some modest support to the rural poor, its core remains neoliberal and supports large-scale producers (Gürel *et al.* 2019). Likewise, the new right-wing Italian government continues the agricultural

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policy of its predecessor and promotes 'Made in Italy' food – the idea, which initially draws on local biodiversity, quality, ties with the territory, peasantness. However, the policy benefits mostly multinational corporations and supermarket chains. Iocco, Lo Cascio, and Perrotta (2018) demonstrate that only large agro companies are able to obtain certificates to prove 'ethical and fair' production of 'Made in Italy' food, while small-scale farmers do not have financial resources and, therefore, excluded from the 'Made in Italy' project.

The impact of regional and local rural specificities on populist manifestations

As Greven (2016, p. 4) rightly notes, 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'. We argue that the regional and local specificities of rural areas contribute to the shape populist movements and politics take in different countries and regions. Therefore, in order to understand the varieties of right-wing populism in Europe, we need to understand the specificities of its countryside – its historical legacies, understandings of the peasantry and rurality, and specific class and political configurations.

The socialist past of Eastern and Central Europe is essential to the East-West divide, and, consequently, in the distinct populist manifestations in different countries of Europe. In the countryside, the history of socialist collective farming and communist ideology has drastically influenced the trajectories of agrarian change and rural development. Indeed, after the collapse of the command economy in 1989 and the EU accession of new member states in the early 2000s, Eastern and Central Europe endured a prolonged period of 'catching-up with the West' through neoliberal reforms, which included a radical reorganisation of agricultural systems. However, the post-socialist states were unable to mimic their Western counterparts. The agrarian structure of some countries became characterised by the prevalence of small-scale farms, such as in Romania, where the post-socialist land restitution reform resulted in the highest land fragmentation in Europe. In Poland, small farms remain the dominant form of agricultural production due to the failure of the collectivisation campaign to create large collective farms. In countries where the collectivisation succeeded to transform the agrarian structure, such as in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria, large-scale and corporate farm structures became dominant (see Guiomar *et al.* 2018 on farms typology in contemporary Europe). Yet despite all these differences, these countries have one thing in common: the virtual absence of medium-sized family farms, the main characteristic of Western European agriculture and the basic policy objectives of the CAP (Blacksell 2010). The CAP – as a largely uniform policy – was unable to address the differences between the western and post-socialist farm structures, which resulted in disregard for the needs of small-scale food producers in Eastern and Central Europe (Pe'er *et al.* 2017). This provoked dissatisfaction with the CAP among many post-socialist smallholders, who became sceptical about the benefits from their country's EU membership.

Indeed, Euroscepticism has different drivers in Eastern and Western Europe. Due to the unequal distribution of power and resources within the EU, post-socialist

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countries experience the 'provinciality complex'. They are often portrayed as 'less advanced [...] imaginary provinces of the EU', and their political and economic interests are often sacrificed in favour of Western Europe (Klumbyte 2011, p. 872). In such circumstances, the EU is perceived as the threat to national sovereignty and development. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, Euroscepticism is mobilised primarily around immigration issues. Right-wing populists 'frame Islam as the new totalitarian threat facing Europe' (Shroufi 2015, p. 37; Traverso 2019).

The role that the socialist past and disaffection with the post-1989 transition plays in explaining the differences in populist manifestations among Eastern and Western Europeans can hardly be overestimated (Minkenberg 2009; Bar-on 2018). But we need to consider deeper historical legacies, too. As Szikra and Szelewa (2010, p. 81) rightly point out, the differences in political development began 'not with state socialism but much earlier, at least around the First World War when these countries began to develop as independent nation-states'. In the interwar period, 'peasant populism' was 'the dominant ideology' in most Central and Eastern European countries, in which the majority of the population were peasants (Canovan 1981). Since millions of peasants had acquired the right to vote in these countries, peasant parties rose and formed governments in Bulgaria and Poland in 1920, in Romania in 1928, and held power in coalition governments in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Beyond all national differences, peasant political movements were opposed to capitalism and socialism, opting for a third, morally superior way – 'the vision of democratic society based on small family property, widespread cooperation and respect for traditional rural values' – and advocating direct democratic instruments (Canovan 1981, p. 112). This political movement was known as the Green Uprising.

In contrast, during the twentieth century, agrarian populism was rather marginal in Western Europe (with the partial exception of Scandinavia). This was largely because the urban-rural cleavage was less pronounced there than in Eastern Europe. The agrarian populist parties that emerged were either short-lived (such as the Dutch Farmers' Party) or subsumed into broader political movements and parties that claimed to represent the interests of the working class, not urban or rural dwellers *per se* (de Lange and Rooduijn 2015). In this respect, the South of Western Europe is of particular interest: emancipatory ideologies were particularly strong in this countryside partly due to the large presence of landless peasants. The pivotal role that rural Southern France played in the consolidation of French socialism in the late twentieth century (Judt 1976), the widespread support for anarchism in (rural and urban) Mediterranean Spain before and during the Civil War (Jackson 1955), and the rich history of peasant revolt in central Italy (Hobsbawm 1971) are all significant examples of this phenomenon. Although modified, these socialist and anti-capitalist trajectories continue to play a part in contemporary politics, as evidenced in the strength of the anti-globalisation movement in rural France, the radicality of the *Andalusian Sindicato de Obreros del Campo,*[3] and the relatively low support that right-wing populist leaders (from Berlusconi to Salvini) harvest in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna. Similarly, the marked leftist slant of agrarian organisations in the Basque Country cannot be separated from the history of Basque struggle for self-determination (Calvario *et al.* forthcoming). This situation drastically contrasts with the twentieth century political trajectory of the English countryside, where the rather rare episodes of rural protest

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(most of them by elites against the loss of their rights, such as hunting) have tended to reinforce Tory hegemony (Woods 2005). These conservative rural politics are crucial in explaining rural support for Brexit (Brooks forthcoming). Such continuities suggest that, if we are to make sense of the variations within European right-wing populism and their varied degrees of success, we need to engage in a fine-grained analysis attentive to national and subnational specificities.

In this sense, it is equally important that we consider the changing economic and cultural role of agriculture and the countryside in different parts of Europe. In Western Europe, capitalist development and industrialisation caused a dramatic outflow of rural labour, changing the rural landscape and social perceptions of the rural. Today, only four percent of the working-age Western European population is employed in agriculture.[4] Meanwhile, farming continues to be the primary activity of rural residents in post-socialist EU member states. For example, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Poland have about 15–20 percent of their labour force employed in agriculture, while the majority of rural Eastern Europeans are engaged in small-scale (peasant-like) food production in household plots (Blacksell 2010; Smith and Jehlicka 2013). The preservation of smallholder farming enables 'the national folk culture to be retained and allow[s] valuable historical and cultural landscapes to be maintained' (Rodionova 2004, p. 72). This, in turn, is used by Eastern and Central European populists who commonly engage with narratives and symbols derived from folk culture and appeal to rural communities as 'the true protectors of their nation's culture and heritage' (Lyman 2016).

Analogous processes are taking place in Western Europe despite the erosion of folk (peasant) culture and traditions. Political internationalisation and globalisation have generated increasing insecurity about the national identity among many Europeans and, consequently, growing societal interest in national culture and traditions (Arts and Halman 2005). The construction and promotion of a 'traditional food culture' (mostly driven by urban consumers) has become one particularly dynamic field of struggle put at the service of a series of often-conflicting processes, from national identity-building (exemplified by the 'British food renaissance') to local rural development (think of 'heritage foods'), even as it has provided profit opportunities for the increasingly globalised tourist and agro-food sectors (Woods 2005; Grasseni 2011).

All these processes are linked to changes in the social composition and political outlook of the European countryside. In this respect, it is worth mentioning two contradictory yet partially overlapping forces that, in recent decades, have created new forms of uneven development in the European countryside, especially in the West. On the one hand, the countryside is increasingly perceived as a place of residence and outdoor recreation, where service industries – most notably tourism – overshadow agrarian activities in terms of gross domestic value and employment (Brooks forthcoming). This is linked, for instance, to the spread of rural gentrification, which displaces agricultural activities and triggers social conflicts between rural residents and urban newcomers (Solana-Solana 2010; Mamonova and Sutherland 2015). On the other hand, large tracts of the Western European countryside are being impoverished and peripheralised. These are the big losers of neoliberal globalisation, subsisting in the shadow of the winners – from valued, gentrified rural spaces to, especially, thriving metropolitan centres (Franquesa 2018). This has political consequences. Thus,

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for the French case, Guilluy (2014) shows that these left-aside spaces are at the centre of new class alliances and antagonisms, as well as of new forms of populist politics. With growing support for the Front National, they are also the breeding ground of political movements that challenge easy categorisation, from the *bonnets rouges*[5] to the *gilets jaunes*.[6] These contradictory processes' concurrence is giving rise to a new, differentiated regional geography that corresponds to a variety of class configurations and variegated rural-urban cleavages, once again suggesting the need to refine our analytical lens.

Agrarian populism as a progressive alternative to right-wing populism

As Mouffe (2018, p. 24) argued, 'instead of rejecting populism, we should reclaim it [...] by fostering a progressive version of it, which puts the interest of the common man and woman first, ahead of the priorities of a wealthy global elite whose interests and priorities have dominated for far too long'. Left-wing progressive movements and parties – similarly to right-wing populists – address the concerns of the ordinary people, but they do not scapegoat immigrants and minorities, and, therefore, represent a more 'democratic' and 'humanist' version of populism (Mouffe 2018). These progressive movements have the potential to offer solutions to the crisis of neoliberalism by bringing peoples' demands into the 'consensus-of-the-centre' politics and, thereby, weakening the power of right-wing populists. However, many left-wing politicians fail to gain support among rural communities, and their electorate mainly consists of the cosmopolitan urban middle class. Vertical, urban-centred left parties are unable (and often seem unwilling) to reach the rural populations and change the status quo (Hillebrand 2014; Franquesa 2019). Contesting the neoliberal hegemony requires building a different type of frontier.

Agrarian populism has recently been discussed as an ideology with the potential to mobilise rural groups against right-wing movements and generate bottom-up progressive solutions to the globalised crisis of neoliberal capitalism in the countryside (see Borras 2019 on progressive agrarian populism). Similar to right-wing populism, agrarian populism aggregates class and group interests into a homogenised voice of 'the people' against a constructed 'other', often 'the elite'. However, agrarian populism is a progressive, socially-inclusive, democratic, anti-capitalist movement that aims to rescue 'agrarian communities from capitalist penetration for the purpose of advancing a "peasant way" toward a more socialist kind of development' (Borras 2018, p. 2). Agrarian populism is the primary ideology of La Via Campesina and other transnational agrarian movements popular in the Global South (Borras and Edelman 2016). Their main goal is to promote food sovereignty – i.e., 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyeleni 2007). According to Borras (2018, p. 15), agrarian populism in form of the food sovereignty movement has the potential to 'erode right-wing populist agitation' as it offers a more promising progressive alternative to the neoliberal agricultural model (for more discussion on food sovereignty, see Edelman *et al*. 2014; Alonso-Fradejas *et al*. 2015; Shattuck *et al*. 2015).

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Despite agrarian populism's deep roots in Europe, its contemporary configurations – including food sovereignty movements – are not very popular in the countryside (Higgins 2015). Below we discuss several factors that limit the emergence and spread of progressive agrarian populism in rural Europe.

Years of neoliberal capitalism have carved the European society around the three main neoliberal ideologies – individualism, competition and consumption (Kymlicka 2013; Beckert 2019). According to Hillebrand (2014), the European consumerism contributes to the success of right-wing parties and limits the possibility for progressive alternatives to neoliberalism. Indeed, many voters for right-wing parties 'do not want a different kind of society, but to participate properly in the existing one: as full-fledged consumers, or full-fledged citizens of a consumerist capitalist society' (Hillebrand 2014, p. 8). Consumerism became a dominant part of the rural life as well, especially in the countries of Northern and Western Europe – the phenomenon referred by Marsden (1999) as 'consumption countryside'. There, rural economy became increasingly driven by consumption-based demands rather than by productive land use. This change drastically affected political and social life in the countryside and transformed many people from citizens to consumers, thereby, limiting their political engagement (Lockie 2009). Likewise, the individualisation of Europe's rural society is often discussed as the obstacle to collective action and as one of the reasons for rural support for right-wing populism (see Nielsen 2017 on relations between individualisation and the far-right movements in the countryside).

Furthermore, pessimism and feelings of despair and helplessness negatively affect the propensity for collective action in the countryside. While smallholders feel 'abandoned' and 'forgotten' (Eurovia 2017), many farmers found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of 'scale enlargement, technologically driven intensification and tightening of the dependency relations with the food industries, banks and retail chains' (van der Ploeg 2013, p. 128). This is reflected in the increased rates of farmers' suicide across Europe (Klingelschmidt *et al.* 2018). Anger, pessimism, and low self-esteem feed right-wing populist parties and hinder the emergence of progressive solutions (Scoones *et al.* 2018). Mamonova's (2018) research in rural Ukraine reveals: a decline in pessimistic views about the future positively influences the smallholders' self-esteem and mobilises people to undertake proactive actions to defend their way of life. Likewise, Franquesa (2019) shows that the moral 'fight for dignity' plays an important role in the formation of political subjectivities of Catalan rural dwellers and unites various rural and urban groups in popular democratic (agrarian) populist movements.

A shared collective identity and common ideology, which could unite different rural groups and classes, are necessary bases for agrarian populist movements. However, the universal peasant identity – promoted by agrarian populist and food sovereignty movements – is not welcomed everywhere in Europe. In her study of Polish farmers, De Master (2013) argued that the legacies of collectivisation and distrust of social movements associated with grand 'universal' schemes result in the rejection of a 'universal' peasant identity promoted by La Via Campesina. The same is valid for some other post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe (see Mamonova 2018 on Ukraine). There, the (peasant-like) smallholders do not perceive their mode of production as an alternative to neoliberal agriculture, and, therefore, do not respond to

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the revolutionary appeals of transnational agrarian movements to impose the 'peasant way' as a more sustainable kind of development (De Master 2013; Mamonova 2018). In Western Europe, the majority of farmers have lost their peasant roots and associate the 'peasant way of life' mainly with the pre-industrial past.

It seems necessary to bear in mind that borrowed frameworks should not contradict existing practices and ideas, but support and reinforce locally specific solutions. Thus, for example, in post-socialist Europe, the rights to culturally appropriate food and a self-defined food system – both central to food sovereignty ideas – have existed for centuries. These rights are deeply rooted in a longstanding tradition of food self-provisioning; because they are taken for granted, these represent a 'quiet' form of food sovereignty (Smith and Jehlicka 2013; Visser *et al.* 2015). In this context, it is important to create societal recognition of and mobilisation around these rights – to render the quiet loud – by trumpeting the existing, culturally specific practices of food production and consumption *before* introducing new/alien solutions. Another example can be found in the multiple overlaps and possible convergences between food sovereignty and the activities of organic agriculture, slow food, and back-to-the-land movements. Yet it is necessary to prevent the reactionary appropriation of these nodes of encounter.

Indeed, European right-wing populists have appropriated many themes of agrarian populist movements. For example, in Italy, the far-right Lega Nord Party and neofascist movement Forza Nuova often use the left-wing idea of 'Made in Italy' food in their rhetoric and programmes. However, they formulate it in very nationalist and exclusionary terms, emphasising the word 'Italy' in its label (Iocco *et al.* 2018). In Austria, Heinz-Christian Strache – the vice-chancellor of Austria and leader of its radical-right Freedom Party – argues that 'environmental protection is homeland protection'. In this way, he explains his party's simultaneous support for environmental sustainability goals at the national level and its denial of global environmental problems, such as climate change (Forchtner 2018). These overlaps and ideological plagiarism blur the line between agrarian progressive and right-wing ideas, which, in turn, makes many rural activists fall into traps of right-wing populists, thereby, limiting prospects for emancipatory rural politics.

European 'rural reawakening' and politics of agrarian movements

Despite the aforementioned constrains to rural mobilisation and political engagement, Europe is now experiencing what Woods (2005) called 'rural reawakening' – an increase in rural mobilisation and activism in response to neoliberal policy reforms, globalisation, and extensive social change in the countryside. A number of examples support Woods's argument, from the 1999 'dismantling' of a McDonalds in France in the context of 'anti-globalisation' campaigns (Bruneau 2015) to the 'milk rebels' fighting the agricultural establishment in Austria in 2009 (Seifert 2015). More recent mobilisation was directed against the European CAP and international trade agreements, such as tractor rallies in France and Slovakia for fairer farm subsidies and taxes (Trompiz and Pennetier 2018; Gotev 2019) and Belgium farmers' protests against the EU-Canada trade pact (Rankin 2016). These instances of resistance could

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be viewed as part of global agrarian movement. However, farmers' discourses and protests often remain within the neoliberal development framework, and can thus end up supporting, rather than undermining, right-wing populism (see Bilewicz forthcoming, on farmers' protests in Poland).

Progressive mantras and ideas – such as food sovereignty, agrarian justice and sustainable development – are more popular among European urban consumers and activists than rural populations. In her study of food discourse in Poland, Bilewicz (forthcoming) revealed critical misunderstanding between urban consumers – members of alternative food networks – and smallholder farmers. While most urban consumers support food relocalisation, ecology and social justice, farmers speak about defending national land ownership and traditions. These discrepancies result in hostility and distrust between consumers and farmers instead of an alliance that could benefit both groups (Bilewicz forthcoming). Luckily, there are also examples of fruitful collaboration between urban and rural dwellers, such as *Fuori Mercato* (Outside the market) – an Italian rural-urban network, which aims at building alternative, self-managed food chains operating outside of the supermarket-dominated circuits (Iocco *et al.* 2018). *Fuori Mercato* has emerged in response to the recent socio-economic (migrant) crisis in Southern Italy and promotes the so-called 'collective peasantinism' – collective acquisition (primarily renting) and democratic self-management of land and other means of production by small-scale farmers and migrant workers (Iocco *et al.* 2018). *Fuori Mercato* is largely inspired by the ideas of agrarian populism and food sovereignty, but contrary to the food sovereignty movement that focuses on 'peasant', this collective initiative centres 'labour' in its mobilisation practices.

The Italian *Fuori Mercato* is not the only example of grassroots movements that aim at engaging migrants in sustainable agricultural and rural initiatives. In his study of the Village Action Movement in Sweden, Alarcón Ferrari (2018) reveals how the movement employs the social justice and environmental protection themes to create job opportunities for migrants in agriculture and forestry. However, a successful economic integration of migrants is difficult in rural Sweden largely because of a high level of farm mechanisation and use of modern technologies (such as smart agriculture), which do not require unskilled manual labour. Today, only small-scale 'social farming' initiatives may offer an opportunity for engaging migrants in farming, such as in Ireland (see Clarke 2019 on Syrian migrants in Irish agriculture).

Thus, there are a number of bottom-up initiatives in rural Europe that are inspired by food sovereignty, social justice and agrarian populism, however, they are small-scale, focus on narrow 'bread-and-butter' issues and remain within national borders. Indeed, Woods (2015, p. 36) argued that 'rural activists in the Global North largely failed to develop and mobilise transnational networks of solidarity and collective action'. This is a serious shortcoming in the current political conjuncture. As we have argued earlier, the cause of right-wing populism is the failure of globalised neoliberal capitalism, therefore, resistance and alternatives cannot be limited to cosmetic changes and stay within the borders of a single country. In order to transform the entire system, agrarian movement must be organised at the level of Europe as a whole. Building of a broad horizon of change will require a proliferation of bottom-up initiatives enhancing solidarity, reducing inequality, strengthening progressive collective identities, and promoting political participation in rural Europe.

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The first attempt to mobilise rural groups across the European continent and push forward a progressive anti-capitalist agenda was done in 2019 in Berlin. Then, thousands of farmers and food activists from around Europe took to the streets of the German capital calling for 'Agricultural Revolution'. They demanded a reorganisation of the EU farming policy toward a more sustainable model placing food producers – not multinational corporations and supermarket chains – at the centre of the European food and decision-making system. Although their demands were not met (a few months later, the EU Agricultural Committee approved the CAP new strategy that has less focus on environmental and social sustainability, see ARC 2020 [2019]), the Berlin protest opened a new chapter in the story of European rural mobilisation and resistance.

Conclusion

In this article we investigated the relationship between right-wing populism and the rural world in Europe. Contemporary populism is not an exclusively rural phenomenon, yet it found fertile ground in many corners of the European countryside. Hard-wired, mainstream (and often historically inaccurate) assumptions – the idea that European rural populations are naturally conservative and thus easy prey for right-wing populists, or that the countryside is a natural fit for this kind of politics – have made it easy to assume that right-wing populism is natural to rural areas. That idea is intellectually suspicious and politically defeatist, yet it is often unchallenged. We hold the conviction that facing right-wing populism requires understanding the specific circumstances that explain its success (or lack thereof) in rural Europe if we are to take meaningful steps toward building progressive alternatives.

Drawing on multiple cases and examples across the continent, this article offered several themes for understanding the spread of right-wing populism in the European countryside. In the first place, we have argued that the root cause of the rise of right-wing populism is the fundamental crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism. Decades of neoliberal policies and a severe economic crisis have degraded the democratic political sphere and impoverished rural (and urban) dwellers, fuelling feelings of abandonment and resentment that right-wing populists have exploited through their exclusionary, nationalist, and authoritarian rhetoric and style. Second, we have warned against the common tendency to endow right-wing populism with uniform, clearly defined characteristics, arguing for the need for more fine-grained analysis. Thus, we have shown how national and regional socio-historical specificities play a key role in shaping populist movements and ideas. Finally, we discussed whether agrarian populism can provide a progressive solution to the ongoing political crisis in Europe. We examined constraints and possibilities for the emergence of a wide-ranging agrarian (food sovereignty) movement that would go against the logic of neoliberal capitalism and combat the spread of right-wing populism. Although the European food sovereignty movement is still in its early formative stage and misses organisational and ideological coherence of its counterparts in the Global South, it could become the social force that would challenge the neoliberal order and satisfy villagers' aspirations for socio-economic justice and democratic decision-making.

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Notes

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1 The authors have been working with different scholars from the European team of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI Europe) during 2018–2019. The present analysis is largely based on conversations and research interactions with these scholars coupled with secondary literature review.
2 For empirical examinations of the limitations of this binary distinction, see Brooks (this special issue) and Bilewicz (this special issue).
3 *The Sindicato de Obreros del Campo* (Union of Rural Workers) – a libertarian and anarchist movement, established in Antequera (Southern Spain) in 1976. It aims to defend the interests of rural workers, in particular, landless workers.
4 Data from European Commission (2018) report on the EU farm structures.
5 The *bonnets rouges* (red caps) – a series of (mostly rural) protests in 2013 against a new highway tax in Brittany, France. Red-cap-wearing demonstrators argued that the tax was harmful to Breton agriculture.
6 The *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) – a French populist, grassroots political movement for economic justice in 2018. Yellow-vest-wearing protesters were primarily residents of poor rural and outer-urban areas of France.

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