

Preaching the Same Message: Economic Populism on Both Sides of the Atlantic

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This paper was prepared for the 2020 Scholar Week Program at Olivet Nazarene University. It should be regarded as a “work in progress,” and a preliminary investigation of these issues.

In a lecture delivered at Illinois Wesleyan University three years ago, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and Director-General of the World Health Organization, observed that Americans who maintain that “Washington is the problem,” and Europeans who assert that “Brussels is the problem,” are essentially making the same argument. Since the global financial crisis of the late 2000’s, many discussions of economic policy around the world have centered around the rise of “populist” sentiments. Examples of these developments would include the “Brexit” process in the United Kingdom, the “America First” agenda of the Trump Administration in the United States, and the relative success of “Euroskeptic” parties, at both ends of the ideological spectrum, in last year’s elections for the European Parliament. In these (and other) situations, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas and Marat Shterin (2019, p. 177) have commented that “religion seems to have played a significant role, yet is often overlooked.”

The initial purpose of this paper is to explore the economic manifestations of the shift towards populism and nationalism in the United States and parts of Europe, examining their similarities as well as their differences. Drawing upon survey data and statistical results that have been presented in recent journal articles, there will also be a consideration of the alternative responses of various Christian bodies, to these developments, on both continents, as well as the possible rationale(s) for these differences. This paper will conclude with an argument in favor of the continued relevance of the legacy of “Christian internationalism” to contemporary questions of global political economy.

Jan-Werner Muller (2016, pp. 19-20) has described populism as “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified . . . people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.” While agreeing with this definition, Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig (2019, p. 128) have also maintained that “the populists are quite heterogeneous in their policy proposals,” with

“economic recipes (that) range from extreme-left pro-redistribution platforms to rather conservative ones.” It is the latter group, according to Colantone and Stanig, which has also embraced “economic nationalism, which they specify as an agenda which “combines conservative economic proposals with nationalist stances on international trade and cooperation, as well as on immigration.” Contemporary examples of these platforms, in operation, can be found on both sides of the Atlantic. In a February 13<sup>th</sup> debate on the future of the European Union (EU) that was sponsored by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, both participants were asked for their judgment on the intended meaning of the slogan – “Take back control” – that was adopted by the “Leave” campaign during the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership in the EU. James Kirchick, of the Brookings Institution, offered the opinion that it referred specifically to immigration policy. Anu Bradford, of the Columbia University Law School, replied by suggesting that it meant regulatory sovereignty in a broader sense. (Author’s notes). Both conclusions, however, are consistent with different aspects of the aforementioned paradigm of economic nationalism. In the United States, defenders of the Trump Administration’s policies have used the adjective of “free market nationalism” (which would have been an oxymoron to an earlier generation of conservatives who regarded themselves as “classical liberals”) to describe the combination of internal tax and regulatory reduction with external skepticism, at best, towards the benefits of international trade, immigration, and multilateral institutions. By contrast, in the western portion of continental Europe, Colantone and Stanig (2019, p. 130) have observed that “the three (with the addition of isolationism) key elements of economic nationalism are expressed with different nuances, and mixed in various degrees by different parties,” which span the ideological spectrum. Christel Lamere Ngnambi (in Kerr, ed., 2019, p. 51) has commented on this diversity by stating that “while so-called *right-wing* (emphasis in the original) populisms have emerged more strongly in Europe in recent decades, they have lost their exclusive place in recent years and are competing

with conquering left-wing populisms . . . whose audiences and favourite themes often overlap with those of right-wing versions of populism.” This explanation helps to explain the conclusion of Colantone and Stanig (2019, p. 134), based on their examination of the electoral results in 15 western European nations over 30 years, that “the economic factors behind their success (the populist and antiestablishment parties) also seem to be rather diverse.”

As Colantone and Stanig (2019, p. 145) have pointed out, many observers have stressed the importance of cultural factors, in addition to economic forces, as key elements in the overall explanation of the rise in populist and nationalist sentiments in a number of countries. At the same time, a great deal of polling data has suggested that there is substantial support, among certain segments of the Christian community, for these movements. For example, a number of examinations of public opinion in the United States, especially in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, has confirmed a high level of popularity, among self-identified evangelicals, for the Trump Administration. In Europe, the February 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Weekly Word commentary (<http://www.weeklyword.eu/>) profiled Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, one of the leading figures of the “Euroskeptic right” who also describes himself as a champion and defender of Christianity. The question at hand is as follows: Does contemporary Christian enthusiasm for populist and nationalist causes include the economic portion of that agenda, or are certain groups of believers “going along for the ride,” so to speak, because of their views on cultural matters? In the United States, this question has been investigated by James Guth. Analyzing data from the 2016 American National Election Study, Guth concluded (2019, p. 29) that “despite the massive attention given to opposition to free trade as a populism marker, religious differences are relatively modest and explain little variance. We see only a shadow of the usual pattern, with Evangelicals (capitalized in the original) and biblical literalists more skeptical of free trade (at the 0.001 level of statistical significance), and several other ethnoreligious groups more favorable.”

Similar inquiries have been explored by Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead, with respect to the 2016 “Brexit” referendum in the United Kingdom. Their conclusion, based on survey research that was conducted right before this vote was taken, was that self-identified evangelicals, in England, were less likely to support the “Leave” position in the referendum than those who described themselves as members of the Church of England, taking into account that there is some overlap between the two groups. (2018, pp. 209-212; Anglican evangelicals were also more likely than Anglicans, in general, to support the “Remain” position.) Smith and Woodhead attribute this difference to the observation (2018, p. 211-212) that English evangelicals “appear to be considerably more internationalist than Anglicans in their outlook, which is remarkable given their age profile,” meaning that they lean towards the older end of the age spectrum: a group of voters who were more likely to support the Leave position, according to Thomas Sampson (2017, p. 176), who also maintains that the primary motivating factors for “Leave” voters were non-economic in nature; in other words, they voted for “Brexit” in spite of the net economic advantages associated with Britain’s membership in the European Union. (2017, pp. 178-179). Sampson goes on to observe that “in this sense, support for Brexit is a distinct phenomenon from opposition to trade with China among manufacturing workers in the United States.” Having said that, the question still “remains” (no pun intended) with respect to why American evangelicals were more favorably disposed to support a certain kind of “populist” economic agenda than British (or, at least, English) evangelicals. After considering a potential explanation that is primarily based on an assessment of economic self-interest, Smith and Woodhead (2018, p. 214) opt for an alternative view that is rooted in “historical differences between evangelicals in the two countries” on the basis of several factors: socio-economic status, ethnic composition, and political affiliations. In particular, they argue that “for a variety of reasons . . . the culture and ethos of English evangelicalism is more ecumenical and internationalist.”

In continental Europe, the relationship between different Christian traditions, and the economic manifestations of populist thought, is more difficult to discern. Employing a gardening metaphor, Christel Lamere Ngnambi (in Kerr, ed., pp. 75-76) has asserted that “left-wing populism can grow on a *Christian* (emphasis in the original) trellis. But when it comes to Europe, the advantage created by using Christian references in party discourse undoubtedly belongs to right-wing populism.” Ngnambi explains this divergence by concluding that the former is more closely identified with a “socialist” (or social democratic) approach to economic issues, while the latter is “with nativism or related ideologies” that are fundamentally cultural in nature, even though these views may have economic implications in a manner that is similar, for example, to the controversies over immigration in both the United States and the United Kingdom. It should also be noted that alternative representations of Christianity in Europe have long-standing differences in their collective levels of enthusiasm for the “European project” of deepening integration, on economic (and other) issues, that is represented by the institutions and policies of the European Union. Brent Nelsen and James Guth (2015, p. 341) have argued that while “the Catholic-majority states and the mixed states of Germany and the Netherlands – certainly most of the elites, and larger swaths of their populations – have adopted a vision of an ‘ever-closer union’ . . . the Protestant-majority countries, both inside and outside the EU (the latter sub-group now including the United Kingdom), simply do not accept the federalist assumption” which underlies this vision.

So how does one interpret all of this information, especially as it relates to the “going along for the ride” question that was posed earlier in this paper? More precisely, how *should* one read “the signs of the times,” with respect to these developments? Starting with the first question, here are three preliminary thoughts regarding general patterns:

- 1) Economic nationalists are more united in their views on *transnational* economic policy issues, such as trade, than on purely domestic questions, like redistributive policies.

- 2) Within the “populist” camp, there are more “variations on the general theme” in Europe than in the United States.
- 3) The United Kingdom may represent a special case, in terms of the issues that have been previously presented, with characteristics that differentiate itself from both the United States and continental Europe.

What do these ideas imply, regarding a potential answer to the previously posed “going along for the ride” question? One provisional conclusion might be that Christians, from both evangelical and non-evangelical traditions, who are drawn to “populist” causes are more *likely* to choose a “right-wing” manifestation of this trend, *primarily* (but not exclusively) for cultural reasons. In the United States, James Guth (2019, p. 32) has concluded that “the pervasive populism of white Evangelical laity (as measured by the Populist Syndrome index) not only helps explain their support for President Trump, but suggests powerful barriers to influence by ‘cosmopolitan internationalist’ Evangelical elites, who want to turn the community in a different direction.” At the same time, Guth argues (2019, p. 30), as was referenced earlier, that economic variables carry significantly less weight than non-economic factors. A complicating factor, when it comes to these kind of determinations, is that certain issues, such as immigration and climate disruption, contain a combination of economic and non-economic elements. Even considerations of international trade, which might initially be regarded as being purely economic in nature, are infused by cultural considerations, given the current trends towards nationalism, as well as the association that is often made between trade controversies and political conflicts with certain trading partners (read: China). The situation in Continental Europe represents even more difficult challenges of discernment. The different populist factions in Europe are united by their disdain for the European Union and what it represents, but not necessarily for the same reasons.

Some groups see the EU as an instrument of liberalization, especially with respect to economic integration, while others view it as a means of centralization, particularly with regard to its political institutions of pooled sovereignty. In recent years, these nations have also dealt with additional issues that are particular to the European continent, such as the sovereign debt crisis within the euro area and the subsequent implementation of “austerity” policies in return for financial assistance. Trade, especially within the European single market, also does not carry with it the same level of controversy that it does elsewhere.

This calendar year represents the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War. For most of this time period, a significant number of the world’s nations, especially since the end of the Cold War 30 years ago, that increasingly embraced an approach to international economics that emphasized the development of closer ties between countries; building bridges instead of walls, if you will. The development of an institutional framework to facilitate these networks was justified in both economic and political terms. The economic argument maintained that although trade restrictions may benefit certain sectors of the economy in the short run, they eventually reduce everyone's welfare, especially when they are met with retaliation. The political argument held that the interest of each country is best served by cooperation with other nations, especially those who share similar values, including active participation and leadership in multi-lateral institutions. The surge in “populist” sentiment, on both sides of the Atlantic, represents a major challenge to these ideas. Before Christians, in any of these societies, jump on this proverbial bandwagon with both feet, it might do well to consider the argument – not just with respect to private acts of compassion, but in terms of public policy and institutions – that the answer to the question from the Biblical account of the Good Samaritan - "Who is my neighbor?" - should not be limited to members of one's own community or nation.

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