



Lecture: **All Politics is Domestic Politics!?**

On Monday 16 March 2012, **René Cuperus**, Senior Research Fellow at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation (think-tank for Dutch social democracy), held his lecture ‘All Politics is Domestic Politics!?’ in the 2011-2012 SID-NL Lecture Series, ‘The State in a Globalizing World’.

**Summary**

René Cuperus focused in his research mainly on the pan-European Revolt of Populism. According to him, this revolt represents the increasing polarisation between the so-called ‘cosmopolitan’ higher educated academic professionals and the ‘national-communitarian’ less educated. It is about the divide between those who feel connected to the new world of globalisation, European integration, and the meritocratic knowledge based economy, and those who feel threatened by these new world developments. He argued that this divide is undermining the state in a globalising world in an existential and dangerous way.

New Social Polarisation

Despite all the anti-populist irritation towards fact-free politics, in the real world we have to deal with fact-free insecurities. No expert exactly knows the outcome of the euro crisis. No expert predicted the Arab Spring or the financial crisis. Cuperus stated that society, economy and politics are part of an unprecedented turmoil of transition and transformation. He then pointed out that the processes of reform and adaptation to the new global world order do not have the same effect on everybody. They result in a redistribution of opportunities for participation and success. The level of education in particular, pre-determines individuals’ life-chances and their confidence in politics and public institutions. According to Cuperus, it is this fairly harsh division between winners and losers, which is one of the main causes for the overall populist revolt against globalisation, international development and mainstream politics.

The Dialectics of Globalisation

Cuperus then argued that the revolt of populism has everything to do with what he calls the dialectics of globalisation. Strong social forces produce their own counter forces. On the one hand the world grows more together, becomes more ‘familiar’ and interconnected. On the other hand, ‘domestically’, globalisation implies that by the forces of the global economy and by labour migration, national societies become more diverse and more fragmented. He argued that there is a massive level of unease in many Western countries. Trust in institutions and politics is at a record low and there are crises in voter confidence and political representation. The ever-growing pan-European presence of right-wing and left-wing populist movements remains an alarming reminder of the general unease in the population and the crisis of confidence which besets the established political scene.

The overall discourse of adaptation and competitive adjustment has a strong bias against the lower middle class and non-academic professionals. This bias is one of the root causes for populist resentment and revolt. The ideology of global, cosmopolitan citizenship threatens to downgrade those who cannot connect internationally. In that way, cosmopolitanism, as a matter of fact, produces second-class citizens. Cuperus stressed that this puts democracy at stake in the long run.

In the context of the contemporary globalisation process, cosmopolitanism threatens to become the neoliberal ideology of international business and expat interests, instead of the philosophy of cultural universalism, the global open mind. Instead of paying homage to cultural openness and curiosity, it tends to become the accompanying song of cultural standardisation and global commercialisation. According to Cuperus, the alarming warning should be: those who arrange the world for cosmopolitans only, and assume that everyone wants to be and can be a world citizen, run the risk of huge resistance, such as the contemporary revolt of populism. We are experiencing a shift right across the board. The post-war ideal of European unification, the post-war welfare state model and the post-Holocaust tolerance for the foreigner; they all seem to be eroding. The overall process of internationalisation (globalisation, immigration, European integration) is producing a gap of trust and representation between elites and the population at large around questions of cultural and national identity.

#### The End of Globalisation?

Cuperus then discussed the great danger involved in carelessly arguing away the nation state and national identity. Especially in a time when the nation state is for many the last straw of identification to cling to, a beacon of trust in a world in flux. We encounter here one of the main causes of the Populist crisis: the self-abolition of the nation state by the global elites.

Cuperus then built upon the work of Harvard-economist Dani Rodrik (*The Globalization Paradox, 2011*). Rodrik's research points out that the conventional academic wisdom, that the revolution in transport and communications has made the world flat and made state borders invisible and irrelevant, is a myth. The global financial crisis, followed by government bailouts, has destroyed this myth completely. In order to render globalisation more effective, fairer and more sustainable, we need to end the radical and destructive phase of hyper-globalisation. Cuperus argued, in line with Rodrik, that democracy, national determination, and economic globalisation cannot be pursued simultaneously. Instead, democracy and national determination should trump hyper-globalisation. Cuperus stated that democratic global governance is a chimera. The great diversity that marks our current world renders hyper-globalisation incompatible with democracy. However, according to Cuperus, this does not mean the end of globalisation.



#### The Nation State in a 'Moderately Globalising' World

Cuperus proposed a better globalisation whereby a thin layer of international rules would leave substantial room for manoeuvre by national governments. Today's challenges cannot be met by institutions that do not (yet) exist. Cuperus argued for a new Bretton Woods System of moderate globalisation. Here, countries would be able to follow their own,

possibly divergent paths of development. He further argued that there is an urgent need for the rehabilitation of the nation state as a forum for restoration of trust, as an anchor in uncertain times. The nation state should form a source of social cohesion between the less and the better educated, between the migrant and non-migrant population of the globalised nation states. He stressed that in order to fight the dangerous populist cleavage, it is important to restore the divide between left and right in politics. This should encompass alternative scenarios to adapt to the new world trends. Cuperus finally stated that we must be tough on populism and tough on the causes of populism. A restoration of trust between politicians and citizens will have to take place first and foremost at the national level – the only tested legitimate arena for democracy. In that sense of the word: all democratic politics is domestic politics.



### Discussion

Hans Bruning, Executive Director of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), remarked that in the countries in which the NIMD works to build constitutions and multiparty democracies, such as Bolivia, Burundi and Egypt, politics is above all about national issues. He argued that we should see the divide between populism and cosmopolitanism foremost as a typical European and Northern American problem. He further argued that in current populist Europe we are fighting each other too much. Instead, we should focus on working together to find a way to bridge the gap between globalisation and the nation state.

Then members of the audience asked questions. René Grotenhuis, president of SID-NL and executive director of Cordaid, remarked that one of the key roles of the state is to protect its citizens, and not only in a military sense. He then asked Cuperus how he sees this protector role when it comes to economic issues. Cuperus replied that when one talks about hyper-globalisation and non-hyper-globalisation, one really also talks about protectionism. Hyper-globalisation aims to create a completely free trade world without limitations. Here, Cuperus referred back to Dani Rodrik's book. He stated that he agrees with Rodrik that some level of protectionism is necessary, especially concerning the third world. Cuperus argued that when globalisation is destroying national social arrangements, a country should protect itself from globalisation. Joop Hazenberg, writer of the recently published book *De Machteloze Staat* (The Powerless State) concluded the debate. He commented that the focus on the negative aspects of globalisation paints a rather pessimistic picture. He then asked, are we going back to the Middle Ages? Back to the age of city states where people organise themselves on a more local level? Cuperus argued that it is the narrative of the elite that is accentuating the negative. This negative discourse is undermining the trust and leadership of the elites of Europe. For Cuperus, the nation state is national democracy. How to create post-national democracy remains one of the open questions in the globalisation debate. He further commented that his lecture was indeed somewhat pessimistic, but that this was in part meant as a provocation: in order to solve globalisation issues, we have to think about these open questions.