



ERPI 2018 Conference: “Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World”, International Institute for Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, 17-18 March 2018

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“It’s hard to start on an uplifting note”, that is how Murat Arsel of the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS) began his introductory speech to the conference. And indeed, the political perspective for many looks terrible: Authoritarian leaders and populist demagogues are eroding democracy in many countries all over the world, from India to Hungary, from Poland to the Philippines, and from Turkey to the USA. Since the conference, sadly, Italy has become the newest addition to the list. Chauvinistic nationalism, racism, homophobia, misogyny – these are the ideological components of a right-wing populism that is surging in many countries.

The conference “Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World” was an attempt to address these worrisome, if not enraging, political tendencies. The organizers have decided to link authoritarian populism to the multiple struggles and upheavals that concern rural people and the agrarian question. Why is it that authoritarian populist politics gather so much support in the countryside? How does it connect to the political economy of neoliberal globalization? Where are pockets of resistance, such as grass root networks organizing against the far-right?

More than 250 people from 60 countries – two fifths of them activists from NGOs, the rest academics – thought that the topic was important and came to the Dutch capital. The rooms of the ISS provided a welcoming space for exchange and debate. Furthermore, debate was a central aspect of this meeting, and the power point origins typical for academic conferences were replaced by lively discussion. The idea of the organizers was to distribute conference papers beforehand, so that every participant would have the chance to read and comment on a bunch of articles from her or his own working group. This format proved to be relatively successful, although it was a bit unusual and left me, at least, a bit confused.

Through its high-profile organizing committee, the conference managed to attract some of the “big names” in critical agrarian studies, with pundits like Ruth Hall, Marc Edelman, Ian Scoones, and Saturnino “Jun” Borrás. Among the panelists were Indian intellectual Achin Vanaik, who presented his new book on the “Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism”; Zack Exley, who has organized for the Bernie Sanders campaign in the US; Raj Patel, who just released his book “The History of the World in 7 Cheap Things”, written together with Jason Moore; and more activists, artists, and scholars from countries like Turkey, Myanmar, Ghana or Indonesia.



An obstacle to a straightforward conversation was soon discovered in the different theoretical and political outlooks. What do we mean when we talk about “Authoritarian Populism” (in the following: AP)? Stuart Hall coined the term in the 1980s, originally as a theoretical framework to understand Thatcherism in the UK. Why not talk of “fascism” instead, given the violent nature of many right-wing movements? Is it adequate to use AP as a term in context of the far periphery of the world economy, such as in Zimbabwe? Why spend so much time discussing words and concepts, instead of actual political processes?

Many of the stories we heard over the two days were not exactly heartening. Progressive people who care about issues like human rights, labor struggles, environmental justice, and resilient local communities, are on the retreat in many countries. Yet, there was no air of frustration in these rooms. On the contrary, it was great to meet so many people who cared about just transformation and saw the rural world as a crucial starting point to these changes. The numerous encounters with people inside and outside academia, from developed and developing countries, were truly enriching. Certainly, right-wing populism will not suddenly vanish. But there seems to be many scholar-activists internationally who are critical, courageous, and ready to form new alliances. I hope the debate on meaningful alternatives to the right-wing turn will continue far beyond the conference and inspire many people.