

## **Conférence du 06/03/2017 : Rogers Burbaker**

*On the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, Rogers Brubaker, Professor of Sociology and UCLA Foundation Chair at the University of California in Los Angeles, held a conference at the Université Libre de Bruxelles about “the nationalist-populist moment in Europe”. This conference took place during the seminar “Religion, Politics and Populism in Europe” organized by the IEE pôle Jean Monnet, the CEVIPOL and Arc en Valeur.*

During the conference, Rogers Brubaker presented the **particularity** of the **populist discourse** in **Northern and Western Europe**, differentiating it from the American and Eastern European populist movements, and insisting on the **civilizational aspect** of this populist movement in this region.

To understand national-populists discourses, R. Brubaker first mobilized the vertical (“the people” vs “the elite”) and horizontal (“insiders” vs “outsiders”) dimensions regarding the polarized opposition between “us” and “them” in national populism described by Pierre-André Taguieff. Both dimensions are common to all national populisms. However the national-populism from Northern and Western Europe (Netherlands, France, Belgium, Austria and Scandinavia) represents a distinctive and novel cluster which describes the opposition between “self” and “others” in broader civilizational terms corresponding to the preoccupation to Islam and then, by opposition to Islam, the definition of a European identitarian Christianity: There is therefore a shift from nationalism to civilizationism. As R. Brubaker explained, there are similarities throughout the regions like the repositioning of populist parties: They frame their anti-Muslim discourse in “liberal” terms. The idea is that the European Christian countries are threatened in their liberal achievements (gay rights, gender equality, ...) by Islam. The paradox that R. Brubaker is pointing out is the highlighting of a “Christian” identity in the most secularized region of the world. This distinctive configuration from Northern and Western European form of national populism crystallized first, according to R. Brubaker, in the Netherlands with the Pim Fortuyn List. For a better understanding of the particularity of Northern and Western Europe, R. Brubaker also explained the specificities of Christianity and Liberalism in the region.

At the end of the conference, R. Brubaker compared the populist parties of Northern and Western Europe, of Eastern Europe and the Trump campaign in the US. If the populist discourse in those three regions is usually analysed as a unique phenomenon, R. Brubaker argues that all three populisms are substantially different:

- In Europe, Western and Northern countries populist discourse is deeply islamophobic. Islam is understood as a threatening civilization inside Europe. Against this supposedly obscurantist civilization, populist parties oppose a “liberal” European culture.
- In Eastern Europe, both Islam and liberal values are rejected. The rejection of Islam is to be understood in the context of the “refugees crisis” and the reactivation of an old imaginary of Eastern countries as a Christian “bulwark” against Islam. As for liberal

values, they are seen as a threat for the nation integrity, reminding us of the communist past of these countries.

- On the other side, in the United States, islamophobia is more “superficial”. This religion is more rejected for security reasons as it is associated with “foreigners” and “migrants” coming from an unsafe zone, thus islamophobia is part of a nationalist discourse rather than a civilizationist one: Muslims are seen as an outside threat.

For all three populisms, R. Brubaker does highlight one similarity, the constant reference of religion as a culture: In Western and Northern Europe, religion is only used to address the Judeo-Christian civilization, in the US, religion impregnates American nationalism, and in Eastern Europe, religion is seen as an identity marker rather than a faith.

Directly following the conference, **three theoretical questions** were asked regarding the national-populist wave and its repercussion on society.

- The first question emphasized the fact that nationalist parties did use the cultural substance of religion as early as the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, and posed the question of the effects of such use on religion. R. Brubaker agreed on the overall statement and went further by saying that we can trace back the use of religion as far as the XVI<sup>th</sup> century for the Dutch nationalism and the English nationalism.
- The second question dealt about the concept of “culturalization of religion” and asked if it was a source of inequalities between communities. To this question, R. Brubaker explained that in the secular Western and Northern European countries, Christianity is empowered as a common identity and culture for Europe. There is then a culturalization of religion, which also allows minority religious practices to be restricted. To answer the question, R. Brubaker said that, in fact, this “culturalization of religion” could lead to inequalities between communities.
- The third question asked if a parallel could be made between populism and autocracy. R. Brubaker validated this parallel but affirmed that populism was more correlated to a “degradation of democracy” than just autocracy.

A **set of questions** then came from the **audience**, touching various topics in relation with the current events. R. Brubaker was asked about the link between racism and the national-populist parties, a link of which he has diminished the importance saying that those parties have turned mainstream, and if there is a racist core, not all supporters of populist parties are “racists”. R. Brubaker was then asked if there wasn't a contradictory convergence of the values that the European Union promote and the new liberal values of the national-populist parties, an affirmation that R. Brubaker confirmed, however he added that it wasn't contradictory: nationalist parties criticize the European Union as political structure not as a set of values, so therefore their critics are not in contradiction. A third question noted the fact that in the on-going French elections, François Fillon seems to have a more conservative program than Marine le Pen in many

societal issues, for instance regarding the reactions of both candidates to the French presidency concerning the anti-same-sex-marriage demonstrations (Manif pour Tous).

*To conclude, the conference and the understanding of Rogers Brubaker regarding “the nationalist-populist moment in Europe” gave new dimensions to national-populism emphasizing the civilizational aspect and specificities of the national-populist discourse in Northern and Western Europe. R. Brubaker’s arguments offered also some reflexion materials about the idea of a “Christian heritage” in Western-Northern Europe, the “culturalization of religion” and the use of this religion in the populist discourses.*