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'If we want to change anything in Europe, we have to start in Berlin'

Germany's left-wing politician Katja Kipping on new progressive majorities, austerity and the post-Covid-19 society

Read this interview in German.

You have published your new book *Neue linke Mehrheiten. Eine Einladung von Katja Kipping* [New left wing majorities. An invitation from Katja Kipping]. It was published shortly before the ban on gatherings and the beginning of physical distancing. Is the debate now only taking place online?

> I was still able to hold the launch in the TAZ [Tageszeitung, a German newspaper] café together with SPD Secretary General Lars Klingbeil and Robert Misik. Then I was looking forward to various events at the book fair, but unfortunately they have now been cancelled. In short: Yes, now a lot will be discussed online, for instance via "live chats" but also in writing. Of course the coronavirus has once again acutely raised other questions. But the more we deal with the routes that lead out of the crisis and what sort of society we want post-corona, the more urgently we need to discuss the questions that I raise in my book.

Precisely in relation to this urgency, one part of the book struck me in particular: "Also the best alternatives do not grow particularly well out of the rubble." In many countries, such as in Great Britain, there are intense discussions going on as to whether there can be a way back to the old normal or what the new "normal" might be. How can one promote a new "normal" in the face of the economic devastation wreaked by the coronavirus? Are we not further frightening people with that?

> Here it depends how we introduce it. Next to the acute social and economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis, I find the following question to be crucial: How do have to embark on a course now so

that our society is more crisis-resilient? More crisis-resilient means protecting oneself against possible additional pandemics but also against other crises such as climate change or the crisis in social solidarity. And resilience to crises also means for me that, if big companies now receive state aid, that cannot be without any conditions. Instead, the state's influence must be used for a socio-ecological transformation. How could that look like? I sketch out a few approaches in the book – for example in the direction of an inclusive economy.

However, a question remains for me. A socio-ecological transformation, that's wonderful of course. But in the face of the big changes that people are facing at the moment: Are you, in your view, ready to go along with these changes or is there not rather a risk of a conservative backlash? Very much along the lines of: We want to have everything like it was before. So no further changes!

Both could happen. There are now already groups mobilising which are based on the worst conspiracy theories, such as "Widerstand 2020" [2020 Resistance] in Germany. There is currently this fight about what society should look like and this will of course go on after the coronavirus. It is an open debate. How that turns out is something we also decide with our input. But what I am already experiencing right now is that the coronavirus is making something very clear to us, namely how quickly fundamental changes can come. It clearly shows how quickly someone can be left with nothing from one day to the next. Among other things that leads to more and more people craving welfare protection. In Germany for example, that has led to mass petitions for a no strings attached basic income. Now that is a very far-reaching step, for which there has not, hitherto, been a majority in any of the progressive parties. But that shows that such a change makes far-reaching alternatives suddenly conceivable and fills people with enthusiasm.

Some of the ideas in your book are inspired by developments in and discussions with the Labour Party in recent years. But now we have seen: Corbyn has stepped down and a candidate, in the form of Keir Starmer, has emerged, who is more representative of the mainstream. The same thing has happened in the US. It was not Bernie Sanders but Joe Biden who ended up being the candidate for President. What does that mean for the broader context of a potential change in politics?

We had a good exchange with Jeremy Corbyn's entourage and it made a big impression on me what the gras roots movement *Momentum* has built up with a new form of mobilisation. We have also learnt and applied it within *Die Linke* [Germany's left party]. I think that

Corbyn was facing a huge dilemma in 2019, namely that the prevailing question in the election campaign was: Where do you stand on Brexit? The answer to that, which was perhaps inevitable, turned out to be very ambivalent because that is how the British electoral system is built. By contrast, there were topics on which Labour was strong, such as the issue of socio-ecologcal system change or the Green New Deal. For example, in this context they also raised the question of ownership. But that wasn't decisive in the election campaign.

That is why we have to differentiate. What are societal strategies? What kind of change in society is necessary? What is the crucial question in a volatile election campaign situation? My forecast, at least before the coronavirus, was that the question that will dominate in Germany will be: What comes after the Grand Coalition? What comes after Angela Merkel? It may happen that this question is only answered in a superficial way and that it is only about individuals. Then we will maybe have new faces in the end but the same old paths. Or we go more deeply into the question: What comes after the Grand Coalition in terms of programme and content? My book is also promoting the idea to all progressive parties that they have to face up to the debate about content and ask: What comes after the Grand Coalition in terms of content? That has significance well beyond Germany. That has been brought home to us once again right now.

Because if one wants to set another course in the EU, it really does matter which government leads one of the strongest economies in the EU. Allow me to illustrate that by revisiting the past. Imagine this for a moment: When the left-wing Tsipras government was in power in Greece, Schäuble, who implemented tough austerity measures, would have not been Finance Minister in Germany but would have been a progressive Finance Minister. It might have been someone who did not rely on austerity but on a socio-ecological investment programme. That brings it home: If we want to change something in Europe, we have to start in Berlin.

This leads us straight to the next question. A core element of Corbyn's election programme was the end of austerity policy – in a country that had been making huge savings for ten years. But now we are observing how Boris Johnson here and Donald Trump in the US are freely spending the state's money. What does that mean for a potential left-wing majority in the future?

First of all we have to recognise that Boris Johnson and all the Brexiteers have succeeded in creating the impression that all the evil things, for example welfare cuts, come down to the EU. And yes, the EU has called on states to save again and again, for example in the public health service – and this austerity has done enormous damage.

At the same time, we need to recognise that it was precisely Boris Johnson's party in Great Britain, which stood for privatisation in the public health service, which has financially starved it to death. The Tories did not need the 'evil' EU for that. It is a manoeuvre to draw attention away from their own political failings.

There is a crucial difference between a left-wing, progressive response and the politics of Trump or Johnson. The right wing populists will offer an authoritarian answer in the end, which leads us further into the crisis because it will not deal with the true causes. They do not believe in universal rights to welfare and this failure is one of the reasons for our current wretched state of affairs. By contrast, progressive forces deal with the causes of crises. Because we have understood that, if we want a crisis-resilient society, then we need to back another kind of economy. The Trumps and Johnsons of this world have an aversion to these fundamental changes as the devil does to holy water. As a result, they generate the impression that, if they only tighten up the borders and perform in a particularly authoritarian way, they can seal themselves off from all the crises. I find, as we see very clearly with the coronavirus, that this authoritarian tightening up of the borders does not protect countries against crises.

As to the question of how we can get through crises in a different way, I would like to bring up a quote again from the book. It says there: 'We need a debate about how the public is strengthened, the market is pushed back and the state and the economy are democratised.' At the moment it seems to me that many conservatives are strengthening the state, partly pushing back the market. But the issue of democratisation is not on the agenda, which represents a threat of sliding into authoritarianism. How real is this threat and what can progressives do against it?

The threat is real. But it also existed before the coronavirus. In the book, I describe three potential paths of development. The first is a coalition of the populist right and parts of the neoliberals, who are standing up for an authoritarian form of capitalism. The second path would be a slight modernisation of neoliberalism and capitalism. This variant is represented in France by Macron and I see it represented in Germany by the combination Schwarz-Grün [Black-Green]. Then there is the third path of a – as I call it in the book – socio-economic sea change. We can also call it a socio-ecological transformation or system change. Only new left-wing majorities can stand for that. There are a few approaches to that internationally. For example, there is a coalition of cities standing in solidarity with each other. The Mayor Ada Colau is trying to put something like that in place at the

communal level in Barcelona. Even the social-democratic government in Portugal, which is tolerated by the Left, is showing that another direction is possible. That is really encouraging.

But there needs to be a profound democratisation process so that the market and state can be framed in a progressive way. Democracy must not end at the factory gate or at the office door. What we need now is a lot more impetus towards a business world with more democracy. So if the state helps companies, that help must be accompanied by the obligation to extend the existing co-determination, to strengthen the co-determination rights of works councils and generally to tread a path of more economic democracy.

A similar thought came to me in an article by Mariana Mazzucato in the *Guardian*, when she said that, now in this crisis, we have to reshape and change capitalism. Do you currently see positive examples where these forms of conditionality for state aid are used in a progressive manner?

In Germany so far unfortunately not. Here the government has not yet decided to tie conditions to state aid. That concerns me a lot. But there is a positive example that we can learn from, Denmark. It was clearly laid out there: There are conditions, namely, no state aid for companies with headquarters in tax havens, no state aid for companies that are still distributing dividends. These are proposals we should learn from in all European countries. To that extent we should take up the Danish example, although we should not stop there but develop it further.

In Great Britain there was an intense debate about whether one should use state aid precisely in the area of transport to take society in the direction of a Green New Deal. Would you agree with that approach?

Definitely, it is a captivating debate. But it also has a social component. In Germany, Lufthansa is calling for state aid. The UFO trade union, so those affected, has said that they do not want unconditional state aid. Instead, this support should first be tied to social guarantees, an extension of co-determination, but also with the obligation to do something for the improvement of climate protection. This example shows that one can now think together with trade unions as to how, in the area of transport, a simultaneous change of direction to a welfare-based and sustainable economy can be initiated.

The last question, which will become interesting in connection with the often discussed state aid, concerns how one deals with the financial

consequences of the coronavirus. In the euro crisis, the "Schwabian housewife" narrative has meant that many people were convinced of the following: If the state spends a lot then it must save after that. What narrative can the left-wing majorities set against that if, at some point later on, the question will be: Who actually pays for this crisis?

Tough distributional conflucts lie ahead of us because the debt brake in Germany is not cancelled but just on hold. That means that an obligation for repayment plans is still there. If the government changes back into debt brake mode after the coronavirus, then there is a threat of swathes of cuts in culture, education, welfare and also in environmental protection. We must also attack the debt brake to stop that. And we must, as progressive forces, be clear on one fact: economies do not operate like a private household. One can really imagine that as with a bath tub. Only the amount that has previously flowed in can flow out. By contrast, economies are a circuit. If there is a lower quantity of water, i.e. an economic dip, then one has to pump in more so that the circulation works well and all areas are well provided for. This image makes it clear: Precisely in times of crisis it is worth steering a path away from saving and towards investing money.

This interview was conducted by Christos Katsioulis.



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