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Against the polarisation of society

Why progressive parties sometimes need to be conservative to stop the populist revolts

Read this interview in German.

In your new book, 'Die Vertrauensformel' [The Trust Formula], you argue that the so-called populist revolts cannot be stopped through social policy. What are your objections to social policy then?

> In the current situation, when the public debate is revolving around migration policy in particular, social policy just can't get traction with voters. Social policy can only win voters back from right-wing populists if it's the key issue in the public debate and if it's recognised as the clear core issue for the Social Democrats or Christian Democrats. Neither is the case at the moment. That's why it's currently futile to talk about social policy.

Your response to these difficulites is the 'trust formula' and a so-called 'bürgerlicher Kompromiss' [a centre-ground compromise]. What exactly do you mean by that?

> It's a two-step model. First it's about properly dealing with and clearing away the migration issue. But that only works if you can bind together the conservative forces in the conservative parties, i.e. in Germany above all Horst Seehofer or Alexander Dobrindt in the Christian Social Union (CSU) and Jens Spahn in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). We need to find a migration policy which is firmly anchored in the conservative wings of the CDU/CSU as well as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) because only then do these forces hold still. And only then can the migration issue be fully cleared away. After that, in a second step, you can raise issues of social policy and argue about that. That's good for the SPD and CDU/CSU because they have very high levels of expertise in this area.

So in your view a political response does not only have a lot to do with reason but also with emotions and empathy?

That's right. In western democracies, we're seeing that real circumstances – i.e. economic data or refugee figures or laws – have absolutely no influence on election results. Voters don't react to political decisions but to the political communication of these decisions. And the current communication efforts – both from the CDU/CSU and the SPD – look like they are aggressively and not empathetically dealing with the concerns and needs of a larger and larger conservative layer of the population. But empathy is necessary in order to stop the conservative electorate from flocking to the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

If it's about winning back voters sceptical towards globalisation: how can these so-called 'Rückzugsräume' [spaces to retreat into] from globalisation be concretely set up?

The most important thing here is a strong state. Politicians must communicate a strong state which cannot only cope with fears of personal economic decline but above all with fears of personal cultural decline. The people who are running to the AfD are less afraid of being perceived as second class *employees* than of being perceived as second class *citizens*. The SPD is on a very bad path here because it's increasingly taking on green positions on migration policy. That leads to people saying: Anyone who's conservative and skeptical of globalisation – i.e multiculturalism, marriage for everyone and so on – stands outside the democratic debate. But we need to win them back by offering them symbolic conservative projects: integration laws with strong conservative emphases, family legislation, in which very traditional role models of man and wife can find their place.

When parties try to change their positions on cultural issues we often hear the same argument: it's not worth running after the right. Voters vote for what's authentic. Is that convincing for you?

That argument is complete rubbish and has only emerged from the interests of progressive forces who supposedly want to put a stop to a shift in a conservative direction. From research we see very clearly that a conservative orientation of the people's parties always works if they can deliver what they say that they will deliver. In Germany, that was the case with the compromise on asylum policy in 1992-93 for example. In that case, the mainstream parties positioned themselves as conservative and have changed the laws accordingly.

It was also the case in Spring 2015 when Schäuble and Gabriel said: if the Greeks don't do what we want, then we will throw them out of the eurozone. That was communicated exactly like that in public and the AfD came a cropper. The CSU currently has the problem that it

constantly announces something but cannot deliver it because the progressive Chancellor Merkel almost always goes against it. So the voters always vote for the one who can stick to what they promise. And that's how the mainstream parties should act in an ideal situation. If they announce something conservative and deliver something conservative, then that hits the right-wing populists very, very hard.

But we are seeing throughout Europe that it's precisely the progressive parties that are faced with a dilemma on the issue. If they move, they lose their hard core supporters and if they don't move, they go further towards becoming insignificant. Do you see a third way for progressive parties?

Yes, very clearly. The SPD must absolutely do everything so that the migration issue and diversity policy issues – e.g. gender policy, European policy – are taken out of the political discourse because this is exactly what splits their progressive and conservative camps. The progressives go to the Greens and the conservatives go to the AfD or to a conservative regional association of the CDU. That means, when the migration issue comes up, the SPD must do everything to deal with it immediately. If the CDU/CSU want to head into a conservative direction, then the SPD must absolutely avoid a progressive position that keeps the issue in the debate for a long time.

After the elections in Hessen and Bavaria, the slogan that seems to hit home, in particular in German journalism is: 'It's all green'. Do the mainstream parties have to follow the model of the Greens and their successes?

That is nonsense and also totally contradicts the information that we have. It is ridiculous that the leading German media now celebrate the Greens or suggest to the CSU that they should move closer to the Greens. The CSU has, *de facto*, lost 200,000 voters to the Greens. But they have lost 500,000 people to the 'Freie Wähler' (former CDU/CSU voters/party members who have left those parties but share similar thinking to them), to the FDP and to the AfD, i.e. to the parties with conservative political manifestoes. In the last election Bavaria slipped a long way right.

The progressive camp, meaning The Left Party, SPD and the Greens have lost. That's very important! So this polarisation does a lot of damage to the left wing camp. It can perhaps be useful for a few individual parties in the left-wing camp. We are seeing throughout western Europe that the rise of right-wing populists has structurally weakened the left-wing camp massively. Because, through this

polarisation, the left-wing camp loses all the conservative voters to right-wing populists. And they are of course only able to form coalitions with the conservatives and the liberals. That means, if now the SPD and the Greens say: hey, then we'll just focus on the progressives, that leads to the middle-class, conservative camp reaching a structural majority of 60 to 70 per cent. We can now observe exactly that in the whole of western Europe.

You yourself have taught in the United States in the past few months. How can we here in Germany prevent Europe from heading towards the polarised situation in the US? It's basically impossible to simply detach oneself from all social media. What would your recommendation be in this area?

Let's put it this way. We are currently in the same position as the US was fifteen years ago. Back then in the early 1990s, there was a kind of crossroads. Should we rather fight over economic issues or over cultural issues and identity politics? It eventually became about identity politics. That was exactly the same situation, the right-wing gained a boost from the Republicans and the progressives from the Democrats. Just as it is now with us for AfD and the Greens. The fact that the Greens and the AfD are now winning votes at the same time must set off all the alarm bells. That basically means: we are heading on a path towards a polarisation that made Trump's America and Brexit in the UK possible. We must absolutely get away from arguing about identity politics. Instead of that we have to focus on social, economic and finance policy. There the SPD must absolutely make its contribution. In no circumstances should the SPD fuel polarisation in cultural matters.

This interview was conducted byMichael Bröning.



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