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How to debate a populist

Looking back at Europe's years of turmoil in the 1960s can teach us what's wrong with today's culture of debate

In many Western countries today, social and political divisions have widened to the point that attempting to bridge them seems futile. Yet one might have believed the same thing in the 1960s, an era at least as conflicted as ours. And yet those divisions were ultimately overcome. The difference was the discourse.

In the 1960s, memories of the horrors of World War II still hung heavy over Europe. In Germany, the still-fragile democratic order was shaken by radicalism on both the left (communists) and the right (nationalists), which reflected external challenges, such as the Cold War, and internal pressures, including the first post-war recession and rising unemployment. In 1968, student protests erupted in cities across Europe, as well as in the United States, reflecting opposition not only to the Vietnam War, but also – and increasingly – to the 'establishment' as such.

Much like today, people with opposing viewpoints in the 1960s struggled to communicate with one another. Yet there was a civility to that era's public debate that is nowhere to be found today. It was understood, at least by some, that refusing to engage would only reinforce the 'us versus them' mentality that fuels radicalism.

Consider the public confrontation between Ralf Dahrendorf, a member of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the radical left-wing student leader Rudi Dutschke outside a FDP conference in Freiburg. Dutschke tried to 'unmask' Dahrendorf – the liberal establishment intellectual – as exploitative and undemocratic; Dahrendorf countered that Dutschke's revolutionary rhetoric was naive, more hot air than substance, and ultimately dangerous. As vehemently as they disagreed, however, they gave each other the chance to make their arguments about revolution, liberty, and democracy.

How to debate a right-winger

This approach could also be seen with regard to right-wing radicals, such as the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), formed by several right-wing groups in 1964. In 1967, the NPD was making headway with the electorate. So, in a largely forgotten but astonishing public debate, 2,000 people gathered at the University of Hamburg to hear a panel discussion on 'radicalism in a democracy.'

That panel included NPD leader Adolf von Thadden; the publisher of the liberal weekly *Die Zeit,* Gerd Bucerius*;* the conservative author Rudolf Krämer-Bodoni; the East German lawyer and politician Friedrich Karl Kaul; and, again, Dahrendorf. The discussion was moderated by Fritz Bauer, a former exile who served as a prosecutor in the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, held from 1963 to 1965.

The debate began with Thadden detailing his political views, offering an unapologetic assessment of Germany's role in WWII, and explaining the rise of the NPD. Dahrendorf, a sociology professor, followed with an analysis of the NPD's diverse membership, which included old Nazis, disillusioned identity seekers, and opportunistic anti-modernists.

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Dahrendorf then declared that, while he understood what Thadden opposed, he was less clear about what the NPD leader advocated. Did he even support democracy? Bucerius later challenged Thadden more directly, asking if he would have supported the attempted coup against Adolf Hitler in 1944. Bauer then interjected that Thadden's sister had been a member of the resistance. Thadden himself, however, avoided providing a direct answer, suggesting that he would not have fought alongside his sister.

Nonetheless, Dahrendorf was adamant that the NPD's fate should be decided by the voters, rather than the courts, which had declared the Communist Party illegal. Kaul reiterated this idea in a passionate statement (which had undoubtedly been agreed in advance by East German leaders) about the exclusion of West Germany's Communists from the debate. Other panellists agreed. A liberal democracy, Dahrendorf concluded, cannot exclude radicals on one side, while tolerating those on the other.

How to debate today

It is hard to imagine today's mainstream politicians and public intellectuals engaging publicly in such profound and mutually respectful debates with today's radicals and upstarts, whether populists, economic nationalists, Eurosceptics, or something else. Those on the far left and the far right certainly are not engaging one another in this manner. Each side would rather preach to its own audience, accessible within media bubbles where there is little demand for genuine discussion of opposing views.

Many establishment leaders nowadays – the so-called elites who are the standard-bearers of the liberal democratic order – seem to believe that the risks of engaging with radical figures are too great: more exposure could mean more legitimacy. But this stance is itself highly risky, not least because it has translated into a wilful blindness to the social changes that have fuelled extremist ideologies – an approach that comes across to many as arrogant. Recall US Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's flippant assertion that half of her rival Donald Trump's supporters comprised a 'basket of deplorables.'

One cannot simply wish away extremists. Letting radical movements run their course, as some have suggested, is both reckless and dangerous, given the amount of damage they can do before they fail. To fulfil their responsibility as stewards of the public good, cultural and political 'elites' must eschew elitism and find formats and formulas that enable more constructive engagement among diverse groups, including – as difficult as it may be – radical and populist movements.

In the Hamburg debate, Dahrendorf rightly proclaimed that extremists' success was a measure of democratic elites' failings. Like the NPD in the 1960s, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) owes its success in last September's federal election to the refusal of the country's political, economic, and academic elites to engage constructively with the public, much less with those the public believed were willing to address their concerns.

Defenders of liberal democracy must debate the populists not to change the populists' minds, but to make the public understand what each party really stands *for*, not simply against. Yes, this could mean giving populists more airtime, and it risks normalising extreme views. But the threats associated with an aggressively polarised public sphere – one that extremists have proved adept at exploiting – are much greater.

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