EUROPE 29.10.2018 | Jan Eichhorn

The nationalist cosmopolitan

...sounds like an oxymoron? Many voters don't see it that way – and so don't feel included in the current political debate

Read this article in German.

The left and right as two distinct camps are one of the basic dichotomies around which political analysis and reporting are structured. As overly simplifying as the division may be, this traditional scale remains a useful tool when it comes to identifying political differences. In the current discourse, however, the terminology of 'the Left' and 'the Right' seems to be lacking some crucial contours, and as such another scale has come into vogue: communitarian vs. cosmopolitan. This distinction is most frequently applied when it comes to questions of national identity.

In the German context, the debate about what is called *Leitkultur* (the guiding cultural values of a society), and the extension of the Federal Ministry of the Interior's brief to cover another untranslatable, *Heimat* (everything from 'home(land)' to 'place you grew up'), are just two instances of the renewed interest in 'the nation'. In this discourse, arguments for an open and outward-looking society are usually lined up against pleas for focus on the national space with an emphasis on a more closed society.

As such, the discourse is structured on the premise that open, outward-looking attitudes are in diametrical opposition to inward-looking, closed approaches to how society should look. Consequently, participants are split into cosmopolitans on the one side and communitarians on the other. The cosmopolitans are assumed to be open to the world and to subscribe to a universalist set of values based on fundamental human rights. In contrast, communitarians are said to emphasise the national context and to index the rights of individuals based on their belonging to specific groups. This characterisation acts as an additional dimension alongside the classic left-to-right scale, which it resembles inasmuch as it too is a one-dimensional line with two end points along which attitudes are located.

The only issue with this neat solution is that it isn't particularly representative of society. Anyone looking to segment populations using dimensions is operating on the assumption that the strong values of an open society must be in opposition to trenchant ideas about the national context. Yet the results of our research project, 'Situation Room – What does the Open Society mean to Europeans?' show quite clearly that this is a false precept.

It's not either/or

In a representative study carried out in early 2018, people in Germany were asked to rate the characteristics of more open and more closed models of society. The results are, at first glance, quite surprising: for many respondents, there is no contradiction between attributes of an open society (e.g. protection for minorities, freedom of the press, the right to practice any religion) and several characteristics ascribed to a closed society such as respect for the will of the majority and protection of German culture and traditions. Of course there are some people who only value one or the other; but there many for whom both are of equal importance, or for whom neither are of any concern. As such, a one-dimensional division into open and closed attitudes does not reflect large sections of the population.

Debates about values and societal models, however, are all too frequently predicated on strong opposition between two poles.

When people in Germany are asked whether they value specific attributes of an open society more highly than specific attributes of an inward-looking model, the picture often gets more nuanced. The question, for instance, of whether the free practice of religion is more important than the ideal that everyone in Germany should share a common set of values, throws up interesting results: roughly one third of Germans (35 per cent) accord primacy to religious freedom while another third (30 per cent) place the focus firmly on a homogenous set of societal values. Most importantly, however, is that another third (34 per cent) consider both attributes to be equally important. This last group sees no opposition between both factors.

A similar picture emerges around the question of protecting minorities on the one hand and respecting the interests of the majority on the other. While twice as many people agree with the primacy of the majority (40

per cent) as those who opt for the protection of minorities (21 per cent), another 38 per cent of those surveyed accord both standpoints equal importance. In other words, 59 per cent of respondents are not willing to say that the interests of the majority should stand ahead of protecting minorities.

Beyond artificial contradictions

In a nutshell, the study shows how wrong it is to argue that concerns for the majority opinion are forcibly linked to less protection for minority groups. Another such false dichotomy is to be found in claims that anyone standing in for the rights of minorities is forgetting the interests of the societal majority. These kinds of one-dimensional 'either/or' schematics leave a large group in the middle unaccounted for.

People in this 'middle group' make up a substantial proportion of German society and include supporters of all political parties. While fewer in the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, 10 per cent) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP, 21 per cent), their number rises to 31 per cent among Green voters. But it reaches its highest proportions in the two classic right and left-of-centre parties, the Christian Democratic Party and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU (36 per cent), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD, 40 per cent) respectively.

Debates about values and societal models, however, are all too frequently predicated on strong opposition between two poles, shoehorning participants into the role of full-blooded supporters of an open society on the one hand and trenchant agitators for an inward-looking set of values on the other. The 'middle group', however, isn't simply composed of neutral parties in between these two extremes, but rather of people who have an independent view which combines attributes of both sets of values and sees them as compatible. There is very little to suggest that these people feel in any way included in strongly polarised debates.

The CDU/CSU and SPD above all have a responsibility to try and bridge what only appears to be a gaping chasm; they must speak to those who don't see contradictions and win their support. This will mean shedding one-dimensional concepts of societal values as they are hindrance in taking the opinions of a large part of the population seriously and giving them due political representation.



Jan Eichhorn

Edinburgh

Dr Jan Eichhorn is research director of the non-partisan think tank d|part and coordinates the project 'Situation Room - What does the open society mean to Europeans?' in collaboration with the Open Societies European Policy Institute. He is also Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh.

-