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The therapeutic society

Collective problems cannot be solved by the self-optimisation of individuals. It's time for collective action

Read this article in German.

No meat. No car. No flying. Don't talk to right-wingers. Don't look at anyone for more than 20 seconds. Don't ask where they're from. Or: no headscarves, no quotas, no political correctness. Don't talk to the fake news media. Don't give up diesel. Don't bunk off school. We talk about social problems as if they were lifestyle issues. That's no coincidence.

Notwithstanding their differences, all these positions have one thing in common: they seek to solve collective challenges through individual behaviour. Ideally, individuals recognise the urgency of social problems and voluntarily alter their behaviour accordingly. And if they don't, a hefty dose of moral pressure may help to change their minds. It's only if people show themselves stubbornly unwilling that the state is called on to intervene.

If all this reminds you of psychotherapy's promise of salvation, you're not entirely wrong. Therapy promises the resolution of human conflicts through a better understanding of one's own needs (what do I really want?), the realistic management of expectations (what can I achieve?) and a more sensitive (i.e. respectful and constructive) use of language. The internal logic and language of therapy have now made their way from couples therapy, team-building and management seminars onto the societal level.

In the therapeutic society, individuals work on themselves with gusto because they see it as the key to solving social challenges, from gender equality to climate change. But what can work at the micro level is doomed to fail at the level of society as a whole. Firstly because, in a liberal society, everyone has the right to not join in. And secondly because voluntary self-optimisation is an inadequate tool when it comes up against concentrated power and vested interests.

But if therapeutic self-optimisation is not an approach capable of solving

collective problems, why does it find so much support right across the political spectrum? The answer has a lot to do with the fact that we have learned, over decades of neoliberal hegemony, to focus first – and often exclusively – on the individual.

This way, we focus on the individual's microaggressions, their transgressions and violation of environmental rules. To tackle this, 'safe spaces' are set up, the culprits are publicly shamed, language is purified, waste is separated and light bulbs are replaced. Acting independently, we can make the world a little bit better, beginning with our own lifestyle. Or we can dream of an imaginary golden past by firmly rejecting every form of change. But here, too, the political reflex remains at the level of the individual – 'I don't want to!'

What remains hidden from view

The one thing we don't see in this worldview are structures. We ignore conflicts about material distribution, asymmetries of power and class interests – partly because of resignation in the face of the impotence of democracy, and partly because of a narrow ideological perspective. Yet the 'yellow vest' protests in France show what happens when you try to draw up the bill without consulting the people who will ultimately have to pay it.

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To avoid misunderstandings: it's of course laudable when individuals take on responsibility for the whole of society. The epochal challenges of our time will not be solved unless individuals take the initiative. The focus on the individual becomes a problem only if and when we don't see the possibility and need for collective action. It won't do much for the climate if a lot of people (not all) give up steak and summer holidays but the fossil fuel industry blithely continues to build power stations.

At the latest when the rich and powerful are supposed to be held to account, we will no longer succeed without the collective power of the many. What's more: we need the capacity of the democratic state to get things done. It was not for nothing that, throughout history, progressive movements focused on collective action for the common good.

Is it possible that this collective amnesia is merely a coincidence? In any case, it's clear that the way structural distributional issues have been entirely kept out of the discussion has hardly hurt the rich and powerful.

And it's no accident that we are constantly bombarded with messages promoting self-optimisation. Who could be so cynical as to suspect any connection?

A civil war in the progressive camp

Do those in the progressive camp know about this? There's certainly no shortage of (self-) critical voices. The feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser accuses the so-called 'progressive neoliberals' of becoming complicit in spreading neoliberal capitalism through their overemphasis on individual self-fulfilment. The political scientist Mark Lilla recommends leaving postmodern identity issues well alone and concentrating once again on material distribution. But this triggers angry responses suggesting that anyone who makes such arguments wants nothing more than to see women, queers and people of colour disappear once again from the public sphere. More so, that the unwillingness to take individual responsibility jeopardises the survival of the planet. All of this results in a civil war that threatens to tear the progressive camp apart.

However, some people are gradually realising that there's little to be gained by such mudslinging. Under the banner of intersectionality, attempts are made to unify the progressive forces once again. That is indeed the best way forward. But for it to succeed, we also need to examine the unspoken assumptions underpinning the current struggles: not in order to question their emancipatory goals, but the inappropriate means by which they are being pursued. Social (distributional) conflicts cannot be resolved by individual self-optimisation, but only through compromises between social classes. Worse still, anyone who abandons current social compromises, even with the best intentions, undermines the social contract that ensures social stability.

Therefore, the dispute over the correct strategy in the struggle for emancipation goes to the heart of our understanding of social democracy. What is social democracy? Is it an emancipatory project driven by the avant-garde, or a machine for producing social compromises? Does it stand firmly on the side of those who are fighting against discrimination and climate change, whatever the cost? Or does it seek to ensure that all, even the sceptics, are included in the socio-ecological transformation? Does it represent the young, educated, metropolitan avant-garde or those in the periphery who are fearful and feel left behind?

If you're tempted at this point to sound the traditional rallying-cry of 'Both!', you should bear in mind that this dispute involves a head-on clash of manifestly different ideologies and interests that cannot simply be erased by formal compromises.

Social democracy doesn't call on the sense of individual responsibility, but to collective action for the joint creation of the common good instead.

The political scientist Carsten Nickel points out that the metropolitan social and cultural trendsetters are increasingly unwilling to engage with the majority population in the peripheral regions to reconcile their divergent social interests. On the contrary: they tend instead to close themselves off, socially and spatially, from those who have been economically or culturally left behind, whom they assume to be racist, sexist and xenophobic. But it's precisely this retreat into the life of one's own tribe that gives rise to social polarisation.

In this polarised setup, morality claims are zero sum games. Every appeal to self-optimisation by one side provokes defiance on the other side. In total, very little changes and the problems of society as a whole remain unresolved. And it's almost tragic that both the social and cultural trendsetters at the centre as well as the still politically and economically dominant majorities at the periphery feel as if they are on the defensive.

The debates taking place in the closed-off echo chambers of the liberal left and the populist right over how to save democracy and the rule of law from the barbarians mirror each other. The political scientist Yascha Mounk sees the asymmetrical strengths of the two camps as the real source of the polarisation between undemocratic liberals (the socio-cultural trendsetting minority) and illiberal democrats (the majority who feel ignored and left behind).

The social democratic role

The 'big tent' political parties, based as they are on the creation of consensus, represent the best remedy against the polarisation that's threatening our democracies. The social democratic parties, in particular, have for over a century continually sought to negotiate a settlement between all the social classes.

Looking ahead, this means securing emancipatory social gains by making distributive concessions in order to win over the sceptics. Looking back, it means continuing to expand and broaden the foundations for the social contract that ensures our social stability. Whenever there's a conflict between the winners and losers of social transformations, it's the role of social democrats to restore social stability by means of a negotiated social compromise.

Recently, though, it has become more difficult for the social democratic

parties to play this role, because they are themselves riven by internal conflicts. On closer examination, however, the different positions are not as irreconcilable as their protagonists' rhetorical fireworks would have us believe.

The oft-cited conflict between cosmopolitans and communitarians, for example, is not at all symmetrical. On the one hand, we find considerable doubts about migration among communitarians alongside high rates of approval for equal marriage rights. Conversely, we see rising concerns about anti-egalitarian attitudes in certain communities, and a willingness to insist on the rule of law, among cosmopolitans. Similarly, worries about cultural recognition and material issues of distribution are not mutually exclusive. For instance, all these social currents are united in their desire to close the gender pay gap, or for the restitution of wide-ranging universal public services.

In the search for a common progressive platform, we find that shared demands are more easily found at the structural than at the symbolic level. For example, cosmopolitans and communitarians quickly find agreement when it comes to tackling distributional issues and asymmetries of power. But it's more difficult to find common ground when it comes to emotions and symbols, because there are substantial differences between people's lifestyles and identities.

In order to end the civil war in the progressive camp, all sides have to show that they don't want to play off the struggles over recognition and distribution against each other, but on the contrary seek to combine them. That it's not a question of diluting emancipatory goals, but of finding the best way to achieve them. If we can show that the painstaking negotiation of social compromises can deliver more than moralistic shouting-matches, then social democracy once again provides the strategic platform on which all emancipatory struggles can join together.

In order to free the therapeutic society from its tunnel vision, social democracy has to show how the fight against sexism, racism and climate change can be won in ways that go beyond self-optimisation and moralising. In contrast to the zero-sum games played out between self-optimisers and refuseniks at the individual level, we can make real progress by solving social problems at the collective level. Social democrats should therefore leave individual self-optimisation to the liberals and instead focus on the negotiation of compromises between social classes over the distribution of power, resources and recognition. This is the only way to create a broad social alliance capable of collective action.

Social democracy doesn't call on the sense of individual responsibility, but to collective action for the joint creation of the common good instead. Who has the responsibility to change society? All of us!



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