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'A sharp vision of a digital social-democratic state'

Elizabeth Warren's plan of breaking up big tech isn't left-wing. Evgeny Morozov on a real vision for digital leftist politics

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You used to tell the left to get more radical on big tech. This is a major issue in the US election campaign, especially for the Democrats. Elizabeth Warren, for example, has announced that she will break up large technology companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon if she becomes President. Are those proposals radical enough?

Those proposals happen to be classified under the label “the left”, because they come from candidates who have been classified under that label. But I’m not sure if it’s the case when you actually analyse their political problems. And it also depends on how you define “the left”.

Elizabeth Warren has always defined herself as a strong believer in capitalism — she’s not a socialist. She does not even claim to be a social democrat. So, in that sense, the programme of breaking up big tech, the way it’s presented by her, is really a programme of making comparative markets work.

In the European landscape and the German one, this would be a position advocated by liberal parties. So, it’s not by any means a leftist programme.

So how should a radical left proposal look like?

A proper leftist project might require doing something about the immense power of those firms, and breaking them up might be an option. But it has to be done with some kind of broader political agenda in mind. So once you break them up, what’s next?

And this is where there’s no answer from the left, because there’s no

question. There's no question because somehow there's no coherent, sharp vision of what a digital social-democratic or socialist state should be like. And as long as that question is not resolved, we will end up in this current dilemma.

How could a broad political solution look like concretely?

I will try to outline what other elements might be needed for the act of breaking them up to count as a left agenda and not just as a liberal one. That would involve finding new ways to decommodify social relations.

To me ultimately, for example, the purpose of the welfare state was precisely that. It was to decommodify the provision of services like education and health that we consider essential and fundamental to the development of a certain kind of solidarity in society. And also to the development of a certain kind of proclivity or tendency towards social innovation.

We saw that free education was good because it allowed people to eventually learn in conditions that are not dependent on their birth and dependent on their class. And that will then stimulate progress and so forth. It's clear that this mission wasn't accomplished in full with the welfare state as such, or at least it's being undermined. But there are clearly new types of social relations to be decommodified.

If you look at the overall arch of how capitalist relations have spread from the times when wealthy institutions began proliferating until now, we see that everyday life itself and social relations among individuals — not just between individuals and institutions — became essentially financialised and commodified. And finding ways to decommodify them, which might presuppose decommodifying the infrastructure, would be a good first prerequisite.

For me, breaking up big tech without having this broader vision of what a digital state should be and what kind of new forms of decommodification would apply. Without having that vision, it's not a leftist, let alone a radical programme.

Where do you see the Europeans in this? Have they already lost out in the competition with Silicon Valley and China? Or, is it still possible to create a European style of a just and citizen-based digitalization, focusing on data protection and consumer rights?

All the prerequisites are there. You have very strong service institutions, including those in education and science and technology. They are capable of doing work that is as good or perhaps better than the work done in Silicon Valley and China. And there's an immense

amount of money that already goes to fund innovations through various European projects.

What's missing is an overarching strategy of how to put them together. And I think Europe will have to define what its model should be like. And it's always a competition. You have, of course, the more liberal forces insisting on Europe being defined by this faith in digital single market, right? That's one way to frame it.

But another version would be fantastic. Creating it under current conditions, where we're clearly fighting against a much more powerful enemy would require granting people new forms of rights and then enforcing them.

But it cannot only be limited to finding and inventing new rights. We can enact the right to be forgotten. That's a nice feature to have, it's probably the easiest of the rights to implement because it doesn't directly affect the business models of those firms. In Germany, we have this right to information self-determination. But what does it mean in a world where algorithms determine anything? So, we need that as a good start, but again it has to be informed by a broader decision on what counts as progress in the 21st century and how we get there by means of solidarity and not competition.

A couple of years ago, you wrote that we need to embrace some arguments of the de-growth movement in order to avoid a mass collection of personal data as a threat to democracy. What we see today is a global climate movement also increasingly unhappy with the current model of democracy. Do you still think that we can learn something or that we can come together?

My remark back then was more about the rhetorical strategies more than the political strategies, because I don't consider the environmental movement to be a success.

But maybe that's changing right now?

Yes, but the current kind of outburst of the young people is itself a manifestation of the failure of the older generation to build properly. And in that sense nothing of tangible political substance emerges as far as I can see. It's very useful but it's not a political movement as such. It's a protest movement.

The real example, the real model should be the efforts, as I said, to create a most altruistic social institution. In some countries, in the UK it happened in the 1930s, and in here in Germany, I think, in the 1950s and also elsewhere.

Are you optimistic about the current perspectives to establish such institutions nowadays?

I can tell you why I have some grounds for optimism. And why I have some grounds for pessimism. The grounds for optimism is that I think the emergency of this new digital society — with self-driving cars, smart cities. However surveillance savvy it is under the current conditions and however predatory and financialised it is, it nonetheless points to the possibility of a very different configuration for social and political forces and institutions that might support them eventually.

I think there's a realisation that, even if you are a full believer in the welfare state as it has existed for 60 to 70 years, perhaps there's a better way that the last bureaucratic will be centralised but not lose any of its solidarity, if only you start employing some of those technologies. Whether it's the blockchain or AI or something else.

This points to a direction in which a social-democratic or socialist project might reorient itself if it wants to stop being conservative. Because I think up until now, it has been just their conservative defence of the victories reached 50 or 60 years ago. And that conservative, defensive position has had its uses, but clearly it cannot excite as we see in the election results.

To excite, you need to apply the language and the ideologies and the frames of problems that have been inherited from prior struggles. But you need to apply them to conceptual theory. And this is why I have more excitement now than I had two or three years ago, in part because you have to be really dumb not to take advantage of these forces.

And this is where I get a little bit pessimistic. Because I think it's possible that the intelligence to take advantage of this might not be there.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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