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Cult of cruelty

The poison of authoritarianism has penetrated deep into societies. In Austria, too, the far right is in the lead ahead of the national elections

In the German-speaking world, the election season began just in time for the beginning of September. Nerves are on edge. In the regional elections in Thuringia and Saxony, two eastern-German *Bundesländer* (states), the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) won over 30 per cent of the votes and even became the strongest party in Thuringia.

Although this was anticipated, the shockwaves hit hard; their impacts going far beyond those of peripheral elections. The ruling centre-left, three-party coalition in Berlin no longer knows how to help itself and is dragging itself into the last year of its term, while the ultra-right – including barely camouflaged Nazis – has been able to win relative majorities on the local scale and a significant share of support on the national level.

Elections are now also coming up in Austria at the end of this month. Here, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) leads in practically all polls, followed by the conservatives (ÖVP) and the social democrats (SPÖ). In reality, the three parties are neck and neck.

Polarisation and hatred

The postwar order with which we were all once familiar was one of liberal democracy, moderate parties in government (turning from centre-right to centre-left), modest compromises, pluralism, media and artistic freedom and the rule of law. That order is everywhere embroiled in a defensive struggle that is becoming increasingly desperate.

As they achieve such electoral success, the ultra-right parties can no longer be dismissed as fringe phenomena. Not so long ago, the general perception was that they would have to moderate themselves to have a chance of winning majorities or entering governments. No longer.

Indeed, the opposite seems true: these parties have significantly radicalised themselves in recent years. The more they engender polarisation and hatred, the more insanely the escalation screw is turned, the broader their fan base becomes. The polarisation entrepreneurs of 'social media' fuel resentment and bitterness, while the audience has its feedback effect on the party line and rhetoric, in a spiral of narcissistic self-aggrandisement.

Thuringian voters made a party number one whose regional leader, Björn Höcke, openly declares that 'well-tempered cruelty' is needed, for example to drive migrants and refugees out of Germany again. He has been convicted of repeatedly shouting '*Alles für Deutschland*' ('Everything for Germany') — a banned slogan of the NSDAP's (Nazi Party) *Sturmabteilung* (SA).

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In its election manifesto, the Austrian FPÖ demands the homogenisation of the people: cultural and ethnic differentiation and heterogeneity are purportedly bad for the nation. Its candidate for the office of federal chancellor, Herbert Kickl, even considers a plebiscite on the introduction of the death penalty (however incompatible with Austria's membership in the Council of Europe) worthy of consideration.

At its rallies, the party increasingly resorts to violent language. The openly fascist 'identitarian' campaign group, which uses conspiracy theories such as the 'great replacement' (ostensibly of white Christians) to stir up panic, has effectively taken over its apparatus in many places. Top party officials – including state functionaries such as the deputy governor of Salzburg – openly display the 'white supremacy' hand sign. The party leader, Kickl, boasts that he wears the accusation of 'right-wing extremism' like a medal.

The party's leading European politician, Harald Vilimsky, recently described the trio of female presidents of European Union institutions – Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission, Roberta Metsola of the European Parliament and Christine Lagarde of the European Central Bank – as three 'witches', who would be 'made to feel the whip'. And the Vienna regional leader of the FPÖ, Dominik Nepp, wants to deploy the federal army against migrants — not at the borders but in the streets of the capital.

'Rhetoric could not be more anti-democratic and openly National

Socialist,' said an artists' open letter, led by the Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek and the star director Milo Rau, published last week.

When the abnormal gets normalised

The poison of authoritarianism has penetrated deep into our societies. Extremism is loud and dominant, and too many of us have become too accustomed to it, while resistance is often rather defensive and cowered.

The abnormal is far too readily accepted as normal, while some reassure themselves with nice-sounding self-deceptions. The voters for fascist parties have 'legitimate concerns' about 'immigration' — connotatively connected with youth criminality and Islamist violence. They are frustrated with a political system controlled by remote 'elites'. Sections of the working classes have been 'left behind' by globalisation.

These rationalisations are not totally wrong. But by portraying those who vote for extremist parties as doing so for rationally comprehensible reasons, reality is painted in rose-tinted colours.

Alternatively, it is suggested that people simply fall for the misinformation of right-wing agitators. As if these voters were just deluded, dim, infantile people who don't know what they are doing — voting for fascist parties almost by mistake.

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Painful as it may be, it is advisable to face the bitter reality. What if the ultra-right has a dedicated electorate that wants exactly what it gets? Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, two German sociologists, have taken a close look at the milieu in which it resonates, attracting what they call the 'conformist rebel' — on whom we owe important insights to the legendary postwar study of the 'authoritarian personality' by Theodor W. Adorno and others.

Such an individual is defined exclusively opposed to society — not as a member of it. If something goes wrong, he (it primarily is) is quickly offended and blames the state, the 'elite'. A not-unmerited scepticism towards power escalates into destructive opposition. Anti-authoritarian rebelliousness morphs into authoritarianism, the cult of the leader and the desire to torment the weaker.

This type has 'numerous characteristics of the authoritarian personality',

the sociologists write, such as 'authoritarian aggression, power-mongering, destructiveness, cynicism'. A 'paranoid relationship to the outside world', as well as indifference and coldness towards other individuals, is also characteristic, as the researcher Leo Löwenthal noted almost 90 years ago.

If those of this ilk on the political stage lie quite obviously, their audience cheers. Not because it doesn't recognise the lies, but because it admires the brazenness — the followers would like to be like that too.

Feedback loop of horror

The French philosopher and psychoanalyst Cynthia Fleury recently caused a stir with a study on deep-seated bitterness. Through it, she discovers a 'subject in love with resentment' who becomes more and more embittered, is increasingly triggered by authoritarian propaganda and suffers a 'loss of judgement'. She even speaks of an 'embitterment disorder'.

Fleury also knows how to interpret the desire for violent language and obscenity: 'One of the most explicit and audible manifestations of resentment is the obscene use of language … One must strike, hurt the other, and since this cannot be achieved with physical violence, it is a matter of using language as violence … Nowadays, it's almost always possible to "throw up" in social networks.'

In the daydreams of the followers, things are 'tidied up', cleared out of the way and the fantasy of finally 'silencing' the others is aroused.

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In any case, it's time to stop lying to ourselves. We are not dealing with parties that just exaggerate a little or turn up the volume to generate attention. And we are not dealing with generally well-intentioned, just frustrated, people who vote for these parties somehow in error.

As Sigmund Freud noted as early as 1921 in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, agitation fuels a regressive loosening of self-control, with a legitimised loss of superego constraint. The audience for the far right escalates through self-reinforcing acts of psychological affect, developing impulses of cruelty and cowardice while feeling itself exalted.

We are confronted with fascist mass parties grasping for power and with a followership that derives pleasure from the cult of cruelty, a language of contempt and a rhetoric of violence. The followers would not tip over into full-blown fascism without the leaders to agitate them; the leaders would not escalate into full-blown fascism without the followers to encourage them. It is a feedback loop of horror.

Or, to put it more simply: people who could be good people in other circumstances are turning into monsters.

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Robert Misik
Vienna

Robert Misik is a writer and essayist. He publishes in many German-language newspapers and magazines, including *Die Zeit* and *Die Tageszeitung*.