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Escape from reality

The German left retreats from X. Yet those who seek political exchange only where it is comfortable will eventually lose their influence in society

When the German Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party announced at the start of the week that they were withdrawing from Platform X, there was a great commotion. Some hailed the move as a necessary distancing from an increasingly toxic platform. Others mocked what they saw as a retreat from the public sphere. Yet many figures from the German left, such as Sören Pellmann, co-leader of the Left Party, former Green Party leader Ricarda Lang and SPD health policy spokesperson Karl Lauterbach, are happily continuing to post anyway.

Of course, X has deteriorated significantly since Elon Musk's takeover. The platform is more aggressive, more chaotic and, quite simply, harder to bear overall. Armies of bots, ideological cheerleaders and the omnipresent constant agitation make political debates more exhausting. But democracy is, after all, exhausting. The political public sphere does not consist solely of pleasant conversations with people who share one's own views. Those who seek political exchange only where it is comfortable will eventually lose touch with social reality.

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More interesting than the debate about Musk's short-message platform is the attitude revealed by this withdrawal. For X is merely *one* symptom of a larger problem: parts of the progressive milieu are increasingly losing the ability to tolerate social reality in all its contradictions. And those who withdraw from spaces of conflict leave them to others — only to later be surprised by their growing influence.

The problem extends far beyond social media and particularly affects the centre-left spectrum. European social democracy has been in a deep crisis for years. The SPD is currently hovering between 12 and 14 per cent in the polls. In Central Europe, social democratic parties have completely

disappeared from parliaments in many places. And in Western Europe, too, the outlook is very bleak in some quarters. In France, the Socialists have been in freefall for years. In the last presidential elections, the PS candidate Anne Hidalgo achieved a historically poor result of under two per cent. In the Netherlands, they only managed fourth place in the October 2025 general election — despite the Labour Party standing jointly with the Greens and later even merging into a single party. And even in the UK, Labour has come under massive pressure despite being in government and years of a shitshow from the Conservatives, and must brace for a 'bloodbath' in the current regional elections.

What is striking here is not only the decline itself, but the surprisingly low willingness to engage in fundamental self-reflection. Of course, there have been and continue to be adjustments to party platforms and changes in personnel. Yet the bigger question often remains unaddressed: why does a political camp lose its appeal to the majority of society over the course of years?

The answer certainly does not lie solely in individual missteps or election campaigns. The problem may be more fundamental. Parts of the progressive milieu have developed a difficult relationship with social reality. In many quarters, moral certainty is increasingly replacing the ability to tolerate ambivalence. People and political conflicts are increasingly being sorted into clear categories: progressive or reactionary, democratic or dangerous, supportive or unsupportive. Anything that does not fit into this framework is irritating and is reflexively rejected. Yet social reality is often more contradictory than we would sometimes like it to be.

Taking real social conflicts seriously

Some time ago, *Der Spiegel* profiled a far-right AfD politician from Leipzig who helps Syrian families in her block of flats with official correspondence and tutors children. At the same time, she described her own negative experiences with migration, which she said had led her to the AfD politically. It is precisely such cases that often no longer fit into the political worldview. Yet most people are neither one-dimensional nor do they function like ideological avatars, especially not when they go to the ballot box.

A look at voter shifts paints a similar picture. In the last federal election, for example, just under a million votes shifted directly from the SPD, the Greens or the Left Party to the AfD. This contradicts the notion of clearly distinct political camps. Evidently, many people perceive political and social developments as more complex, contradictory and fluid than

moral categorisations suggest. Similar trends can also be observed outside Europe: US President Trump achieved record gains among minority groups, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, in his last election victory. For many, this is certainly counterintuitive at first glance.

Yet it seems to be becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate precisely these ambivalences. Certain perceptions must not be legitimate, certain experiences incomprehensible, certain concerns irrational. Yet not every observation that is critical of migration is racist. Not every scepticism towards social change is automatically reactionary. This capacity for differentiation, however, seems to be increasingly lost. Instead of initially observing social developments with an open mind, they are pre-sorted along moral lines. Anyone who attempts to differentiate is quickly suspected of siding with the wrong camp.

This is not merely a cultural problem, but increasingly a political one as well. Democratic politics thrives on the ability to self-correct. However, anyone wishing to build political majorities must be willing to understand why people think, vote or feel differently from those in their own circle. Not in order to endorse every position, but to be able to perceive social realities in the first place.

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Social democracy, in particular, has historically been successful because it took real social conflicts seriously. It was not a movement of moral homogeneity, but a political force capable of bringing together different interests, social classes and life realities. Today, however, part of the progressive spectrum increasingly resembles a closed religious community that perceives dissent as a threat rather than a prerequisite for political insight.

Interestingly, this is a point that social democracy shares with journalism. Trust in traditional media has also fallen noticeably in recent times. Many people no longer feel represented by them; a significant proportion even feel ‘no longer taken seriously or acknowledged’. What offers hope here is the widespread willingness to change course. *Zeit* editor-in-chief Giovanni di Lorenzo recently made a remarkable statement on the *Hotel Matze* podcast: journalism requires ‘a willingness to look, regardless of our own preferences’. Elsewhere, he spoke of the ‘openness to having one’s own prejudices refuted’. This is precisely where a democratic virtue lies that is increasingly at risk of disappearing: the willingness to question one’s own basic assumptions and, if necessary, to adjust them. For this always entails the possibility of being wrong. Perhaps this is exactly what

explains why genuine self-criticism has become so rare today. Yet political movements that are no longer willing to correct themselves will eventually lose their ability to learn.

Retreating into homogeneous digital biotopes is the wrong approach. The same logic is evident in the growing outrage directed at journalists, YouTubers or podcasters who dare to speak to political opponents as well. Democratic debate thrives on conflict and debate, not on refusal to engage. That is not a stance, but a form of capitulation.

The crisis of European social democracy is therefore not merely a programmatic or strategic crisis. It is also a crisis of a sense of reality. A political movement that can no longer tolerate social ambivalence – whether on X or elsewhere – gradually loses the ability to win over majorities. One simply leaves the field to the others. However, it is essential to fight for public opinion and to venture out of one's echo chambers and social bubbles in order to win over broad sections of society.



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