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The case for a radical, liberal left

The democratic left should rely on the power of the word — the power of quiet reflection but also of dialogue, including arguing and listening

Today, democracy is threatened almost everywhere by the spirit of illiberalism, anti-pluralism and an authoritarian far right. This has a number of sources. They include a growing climate of pessimism and fear of decline – displacing the feeling of progress associated with the postwar decades in western Europe – as well as counter-reactions to progressive cultural changes over time, such as those associated with tolerance and anti-discrimination.

Also at work, however, has been a dumbing down of discourse. To borrow a phrase from Jürgen Habermas, in a 'structural transformation of the public sphere' straightforward propaganda has been conveyed through 'social media' and the internet in general, the headline culture of the tabloids and media sensationalism.

Right-wing extremism operates via exaggeration, simplification and the conjuring up of imagined enemies. Although it is beholden to its rich patrons, it stylises itself as the advocate of regular guys against 'those up there', the 'elites' and politicians: all are portrayed as bought, corrupt, incompetent, aloof, 'against the people', indeed agents of a 'system'.

There is, though, a kernel of good in this — the longing for something completely different, for a politics that is not satisfied with the mere administration of what exists and the management of details. It is a kind of revolt in perverse forms, the desire for a real change in the system.

Black and white

Hence the contention that broad sections of the moderate left have left these rebellious energies to the extreme right. This criticism is sometimes accompanied by a plea for 'left-wing' populism. What this is supposed to be is however often not so clear.

The British-Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau, who died a few years ago, was regarded as one of the smartest advocates of left-wing populism. For Laclau, the left had to appeal to the underprivileged — as a resistant 'we', against the 'they', the established, the rich, the winners, those who created the system to their advantage.

Others associate left-wing populism simply with more radicalism or easily understandable demands. In this vein, such demands should be couched in powerful, resonant language, which does not get lost in lifeless exchanges – 'on the one hand' … 'on the other hand' – among progressives in government.

Depressing simplifications, allied to pseudo-Leninist grandstanding, don't lead to success.

Many such arguments not only sound plausible but have a lot going for them. Yet, left-wing populism very often leads into a dead end, where a regressive left presents its arguments with a sledgehammer to a world divided into black and white, good and evil.

Such Manicheanism ignores the ambiguities of reality and the complexity of every issue. Nor do these depressing simplifications, allied to pseudo-Leninist grandstanding, even lead to success. Among the quite heterogeneous potential electorate of left-wing parties, an unreasoning pitch scares off at least as many as it might attract — particularly among those not ideologically committed to the left side of the political spectrum but amenable to being convinced.

The power of the word

What is sometimes called left liberalism in continental Europe has always been a counter-reaction to a left that thought it could conduct conflicts in a modern world in the guise of a lost past. But, as with left-wing populism, it too has its pitfalls.

Left liberalism easily loses itself in such moderation that it no longer achieves anything at all. Worse, it often simply capitulates to 'realities', to acceptance of contemporary capitalism. And very often it is reasonable to the point of boredom. If it cannot arouse any passions due to its *Realpolitik*, the hard left can present a certain 'unrealism' as essential in the fight against violence, injustice and social and economic inequality.

But left liberalism still has one major advantage over (verbally) radical left-wing populism. The dumbing down of discourse – the petulance, the worn phrases, the omnipresent propaganda – that goes hand in hand with right-wing extremism really gets on many people's nerves. Trying to

compete with the far-right populists on this terrain is the road to nowhere.

The democratic left should rely on the power of the word — the power of quiet reflection and deliberation but also the power of dialogue, which includes arguing and contradicting as well as listening. 'The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing,' Sigmund Freud once suggested in a legendary formula.

There is no other good way to improve our societies than – to paraphrase Immanuel Kant – to use our own reason, in public, and to bring the power of the word to bear against the clamour.

Some might counter that it is romantic, even naïve, to rely on the quiet back-and-forth of reason, on what Habermas called the 'unforced force of the better argument'. Then we should all become more romantic. Because, on the contrary, there is no other good way to improve our societies than – to paraphrase Immanuel Kant – to use our own reason, in public, and to bring the power of the word to bear against the clamour.

The ideal path would probably be something like a 'radical left liberalism'. This would avoid not only the authoritarian temptations of a backward-looking left but also the trap of a moderation no longer capable of formulating any ambitious goals.

A 'revolutionary reformism', one might say. Radical in substantive vision but reasonable in spirit and tone.

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