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The revolt against reason

Western Europe experiences a massive loss of trust in the entire political system. Its depth is displayed in the revolts against Covid-19 and science

The diagnosis of a 'split' in society is commonplace today — societies are shaken by discord and divisions are intensifying. The claims differ in details but on some basic assumptions, there is usually agreement.

First, there are increasingly testy disputes, largely along a traditional left-right axis but sometimes deviating from it. 'Culture wars' break out over gender issues, racism and anti-racism, immigration and who belongs to the 'us' — even lifestyles. Pundits talk about societies breaking into hostile 'tribes'.

There is also a degree of unanimity in the analyses about alienation from the conventional political system — anger that 'they are not interested in us at all' — especially in underprivileged segments of the population, including the old working classes but also the marginalised lower middle class and the 'underclass'.

Those who are victims of growing insecurity feel that they can no longer rely on solidarity: 'You can't count on anyone anymore.' Many people say 'I just look out for myself now' in a depressed, negative individualism. These social milieux are then particularly appealing to right-wing populists and extremists who proclaim: 'Yes, no one listens to you — but I am your voice.'

Representing the 'left behind'

This is a particular challenge for progressive political parties: the social democrats, the Labour Party, the American Democrats, the vast majority of traditional labour and left-wing movements. On the one hand, left-wing parties have a great deal of sympathy with popular revolts against ruling elites and systems of chronic injustice — indeed, for many decades of their existence, they were the bearers of them. Yet, on the other hand, in the eyes of many who turn away in disappointment, they themselves

are part of that detested 'elite'. Even if they — the parties — see themselves as part of the solution, many of their potential voters see them as part of the problem.

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This is by no means to say that the supporters of right-wing, anti-system parties are primarily part of a working-class that has become politically homeless — but they do also come from this group. Those who are under economic pressure, who struggle with job insecurity, who are confronted with stagnating wages and who generally see themselves as 'losers' of economic transformations easily feel politically unheard, no longer represented, disrespected and left behind as innocent victims of injustice. I have analysed all this in my book *The False Friends of the Ordinary People*, including how right-wing populists appeal successfully to the traditional 'values' of the working classes.

The left-wing and progressive parties have, of course, already recognised the problem and are responding to it in a wide variety of ways: shifting to the left, managing a gradual course correction, or dissolving into hopeless debates about strategy. The fact that the German social democrats went into the recent *Bundestag* election campaign with the slogan 'Respect' is due to this diagnosis, and at least it led to the SPD regaining first place and the chancellorship.

It is remarkable that, while different countries on different continents have strikingly different political cultures and traditions, these discourses and rhetorics are astonishingly similar. The structural transformation of debate in the public sphere — through the internet, blogs, and 'social media' — of course contributes massively here and yet this is often dramatically underestimated.

Scepticism and conspiracy

These days, however, the diagnosis of 'polarisation' is being invoked almost daily in a specific context. That is the anti-virus regime, with the disputes over lockdowns, rejection of vaccination, denial of the pandemic or its danger and the rise of conspiracy theories. This, too, is global, but there are nonetheless notable national differences.

In the United States, opposition to measures to contain Covid-19 is a common slogan of the radical right under its front figure, the former

president, Donald Trump. In other countries, this is less pronounced.

Scepticism and rejection of modern medicine — and thus of vaccination — also varies widely. Portugal has a vaccination rate of around 90 per cent and Denmark 87 per cent but, of the traditionally 'western European' countries, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have the lowest rates. They stagnated for a long time at just around 65 per cent.

These countries have far-right and right-wing populist parties mobilising against vaccination. The same groups which score points on the 'culture war' issues — claiming to be the voice of the common people, the 'regular guy' — are now saying: the elites, the government, want to poison you with a vaccine. They are establishing enforced vaccination, a 'corona dictatorship'. They are bought by Big Pharma, street mobsters of sinister world rulers. And they are exploiting an invented — or exaggerated — disease to destroy freedom and bully the common people.

There is evidently a massive loss of trust in the entire political system so that many no longer believe anyone perceived in any way to be part of an imaginary 'establishment'.

Given its obvious madness, the astonishing thing is that a not insignificant part of their followers buy into all this craziness. Those who believe the whole radical nonsense are rather few. But a much larger group have doubts about medical science and are less willing to believe the experts than people who pontificate on the internet. What's happening here?

There is evidently a massive loss of trust in the entire political system, so that many no longer believe anyone perceived in any way to be part of an imaginary 'establishment'. How alienated and frustrated must they be if they simply don't believe anything anymore and, on the contrary, are willing to take at face value what they read in some weird group on Telegram or WhatsApp?

Putting the pieces together

Rebellion has traditionally connoted emancipation. But this is a revolt against reason.

Especially in the German-speaking countries, where enlightenment rationalism took less deep roots — romanticism with its anti-rationalism rather more — hostility to science is probably even more widespread than in other cultures. The Nazi movement and its totalitarianism, too — with its penchant for the occult and the obscure as well as its contempt for reason — may have left deeper traces in this respect than one might think.

Progressive and left-wing parties have always been in the traditional stream of the enlightenment, acting as educational movements. But they too have seen simplifications and conspiratorial ideas among their followers: in 1890 Ferdinand Kronawetter described anti-Semitism as 'the socialism of the stupid guys' (*der Socialismus der dummen Kerle*).

Also, the environmental movement, considered by many to be 'alternative' and somehow a product of the rebellious 'counter culture' of the 1960s, has its questionable traditions. It upholds the 'natural' and the 'feeling', life in 'balance with nature', and has a scepticism of the rationality of science and technology. Natural healing methods, homoeopathy, alternative medicine, and obscurantism of all sorts are quite popular here and are opposed to 'orthodox medicine', which primarily wants to cram chemicals into people.

Anyhow, if we want to understand current, extremely weird and yet still unclear events, then we should start to bring these elements together. The alienation from the system of politics caused massive annoyance even before the pandemic and is now making the fight against the pandemic difficult. There is an exasperation with the system on the part of people who — often rightly — no longer feel represented or even noticed by it.

The popularity of right-wing populism and extremism is certainly a revolt with legitimate aspects but in perverse forms. The depth of this loss of trust is also evident in anti-rationalist revolts against management of the pandemic and even against medical science.

Those who fall into the clutches of such an ideology and an entire system of misinformation come to believe ever more absurd things. They remodel themselves, so to speak, and fall into a dynamic of self-radicalisation — which can very soon become truly dangerous.

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