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The rise of right-wing nationalism

Donald Trump may have lost the US elections. But the conditions that brought authoritarians like him to power still persist

The introductory chapter in Anne Applebaum's book Twilight of Democracy describes a new year's party Applebaum and her husband organised in 1999. It took place in their house in the Polish countryside and gathered many of the country's leading liberals and conservatives. The spirits were high, the future was bright — a highway towards freedom and open markets.

Two decades later, that dream has shrivelled like a dried apple. Poland is ruled by the right-wing nationalists of the Law and Justice Party and liberals of the Applebaum brand are their anathema. Half of the friends at the 1999 party no longer talk to her or her husband. The book is a melancholic ode to a lost world and an attempt to understand what happened to it.

Twilight of Democracy is well written and interesting in the parts that deal with friendships lost. Yet it is surprising that one of the world's most renowned intellectuals can get away with an analysis so weak when it comes to explaining the rise of populism and authoritarianism.

Centrist utopia

Applebaum became famous with her books about the gulag and life behind the 'iron curtain'. She has worked for liberal and conservative newspapers such as the Economist and the Spectator and has lived in Poland for many years. Politically, she is close to the Republicans in the United States — before their embrace of Donald Trump. She is part of the political establishment which believed that the 'end of history' had arrived after the wall came down — with deregulating 'Reaganomics' and enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization key building blocks in its centrist utopia.

In the book, Applebaum tries to understand why today's political

reaction against this old establishment — her friends — is so powerful. I know too little about central Europe to assess her description of developments there but in the parts dealing with western Europe and the US the analysis is banal and ideologically blind.

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Applebaum is appalled by the 'extreme left' which does not wholeheartedly trust such well-known forces for good as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency. Every movement or actor critical of the status quo contributes to 'polarisation' and is an enemy of democracy; to not believe in American ideals is to be a 'cynic'. In Applebaum's idealised narrative of the US there are no illegal wars, poverty or corruption or flaws in its increasingly distorted capitalism.

Why, then, did some of Applebaum's friends betray the idea of democracy? Her answer, in brief, is that they made the wrong personal choice. As the political scientist Ivan Krastev notes in a review of the book for Foreign Policy, conflicts in Applebaum's world are only a matter of values — never of interests or power.

Underlying factors

Applebaum's only material explanation for the weakening of democracy is 'social media', where propaganda spreads and people are radicalised. True, such mechanisms are powerful and often underestimated. But the logic of Twitter and Facebook confirms Applebaum's own way of seeing the world: the moral and emotional stories of our time are reinforced and these platforms become the perfect scapegoat to avoid thinking about other, underlying factors.

In his new book, Anti-System Politics, the British political scientist Jonathan Hopkin tries to understand the same political development as Applebaum but with a different set of tools.

Hopkins studies what makes system-critical political parties — on both the left and the right — grow.

He starts from Karl Polanyi and Polanyi's belief that capitalism carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. The market always wants more and, as it chews up larger and larger chunks of society through the extension of commodification, democracy weakens. Eventually this leads to backlash.

Hopkin recognises that an important breakthrough for system-critical parties in Europe came after the financial crisis — the economic and social earthquake often downplayed in a public discourse obsessed with 'social media', 'culture wars' and 'immigration'.

The difference between these two explanatory models — the moral and the material — becomes clear when one compares how Applebaum and Hopkin view political development in a country such as Spain.

According to Applebaum, the success of the right-wing nationalist party Vox is mainly due to dissatisfaction with Catalan separatists and inspiration from Trump's digital campaigns. Hopkin instead identifies a process in which the 2008 financial crisis brought material deterioration for large groups of voters, leading to a loss of confidence in established parties.

Strong counterweights

When the wall came down, the conviction of people in Applebaum's circle — as among liberals generally and many social democrats — was that more markets would lead to more democracy. But the truth is that capitalism needs strong counterweights.

During the postwar period, these existed in western Europe and the US: political parties with mass memberships, powerful trade unions and welfare states of varying degrees of universality. In recent decades, these mechanisms have weakened. And the assumption turned out to be wrong: more markets did not mean more democracy — au contraire.

Democracy is not just the right to vote. What matters in the long run is justice and justice can only be achieved through changes in the material conditions of people's lives.

Today we see how capital can change partners, promiscuously mating with authoritarian forces rather than liberal democrats. Politicians such as Trump and Viktor Orbán in Hungary do not care about freedom and civil liberties: their goal is power for its own sake and to protect personal business interests and crony capitalists.

What united the liberals and conservatives at Applebaum's party was the memory of a common enemy, communism. In recent years, authoritarianism has become the great unifier. Everyone hates Trump, from Cindy McCain (widow of the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, John) to Noam Chomsky.

I have myself become politically radicalised in recent years. In the 90s I

might have supported a coalition with Anne Applebaum — although not with her good friend Boris Johnson. But I cannot comprehend how those who today swear by the ideals of democracy — even equality — cannot see what has happened since then.

Democracy is not just the right to vote. What matters in the long run is justice and justice can only be achieved through changes in the material conditions of people's lives. The real dividing line in politics cannot be between 'evil' and 'good', moral and immoral. What is needed to save democracy is to create new counterweights to today's capitalism — which undermines it.

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