FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 01.07.2024 | Jan Zielonka

George Orwell and Europe's new normal

We once believed that disarmament, diplomacy and trade could secure peace. Now, a renewed arms race, sanctions and threats are the order of the day

An image of George Orwell is circulating on 'social media'. He is reading a book, entitled *2024*, and he looks shocked, if not terrified. Is the situation really so bad? Can Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, first published in 1949, be a guide for today?

One might sniff that European integration has not died since Brexit and the ascent to power of sovereigntist politicians such as Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico, in Italy, Hungary and Slovakia, respectively. One might add that the recent elections to the European Parliament gave, once again, a clear majority to the centre-left and centre-right parties. Some might even contend that populist politicians channel the hopes and fears of 'ordinary people' better than liberals.

One cannot, however, deny – and this is where Orwell looms large – that the narrative and practice of politics have dramatically shifted across Europe, no matter who is in power in the various capitals. Liberal norms and behaviours are in decline, and illiberal and nativist alternatives are booming.

Political mindset in disarray

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, parties winning elections in Europe put a premium on liberal values: liberty, tolerance, fairness, inclusiveness, restraint and self-criticism. Not just democracy, but the rule of law and human rights were cherished. Open borders for capital, goods, services and people were considered an opportunity rather than a threat.

Historical and scientific facts were not widely contested and mainstream media refused to air outrageous views, even at the expense of profit and entertainment. Cultural tolerance and religious neutrality were taken as

read. Non-governmental organisations campaigning for social, humanitarian or ecological causes were perceived as allies in sustaining the liberal order. Multilateralism, based on equality, inclusiveness, confidence and co-operation, was considered a means of securing peace and prosperity.

European integration was the jewel of the liberal project. The European Union, the embodiment of integration, was regarded as an effective instrument for handling globalisation, a courageous experiment in transnational democracy, a clever way of stabilising neighbours and a vehicle for strengthening Europe's global position.

Perhaps we never experienced 'the end of history' proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama shortly before the wall fell, but the liberal consensus united the ruling centre-left and centre-right parties across Europe. Today, liberal values are contested or even abandoned — not just by the fringe parties but also by those in the mainstream and their electorates.

'Law and order' is now the priority — not the rule of law.

The new narrative is mainly about the 'national interest', secured borders, protection of 'our' producers and religious roots. Globalisation, multiculturalism, multilateralism and European integration are under fire. Out of vogue are human rights and the rights of members of minority communities. Ecologism, trade unionism and even feminism are now seen as radical, if not militant, movements that ought to be ignored if not tamed by the mainstream.

'Law and order' is now the priority — not the rule of law. Discussions are focused on how to prepare for war rather than peace. Politicians compete for the prize of best tub-thumper rather than best negotiator. Enemies of the state include judges and civil society activists once lionised by liberals. Men in uniforms, and sometimes in cassocks, are regaining importance.

The new narrative is followed up with action. The iron fist of the state is ever more frequently applied — not just against people on the move but against NGOs trying to help them. LGBT+ communities and environmentalists are monitored by security agencies and harassed in various ways. Public broadcasters trying to maintain independence are being fired or sidelined.

I am not talking here about China or Russia but EU Member States — some governed by liberal parties. In Poland, under a government led by the former president of the European Council, the self-proclaimed liberal

Donald Tusk, a new law is being debated that could give soldiers 'a licence to kill' individuals trying to cross the border from Belarus. The fact that the previous Polish government was even worse offers little consolation.

New voices

Is this picture too stark, too black-and-white? After all, liberals from the centre-left and centre-right parties running post-1989 Europe preached one thing and did another. Iraq was invaded in the name of 'freedom' and the zealous pursuit of its purported economic variant (especially in central and eastern Europe) disempowered many ordinary workers.

Today, moreover, not all illiberal politicians are prepared to shoot at potential asylum-seekers — Meloni is a good example, despite the neo-fascist roots of her party. One could also argue that there was always some hidden racism within Europe's electorate, and the main difference is that today, the xenophobes find their voice through 'social media' created by the internet. Some might even attribute renascent nationalism and religious intolerance to liberals' cultural amnesia.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the resurgence of imperialist Russia, because the fear of war makes people close ranks and value security more than anything else. The hybrid war it is waging probably explains why 67 per cent of Poles now support illegal pushbacks at the border. 'Open borders' do not come without a cost: are not imports from states disrespecting labour and safety standards 'killing' our own producers? Does not cheap migrant labour erode domestic workers' rights?

What used to be outrageous and unacceptable some years ago is now a new 'normal'.

These are all legitimate arguments and explanations for the new rhetoric and politics. The transformation itself cannot, however, be gainsaid. Perceptions of what is good and bad, true or false, normal and abnormal have changed. What used to be outrageous and unacceptable some years ago is now a new 'normal'. Which brings us back to Orwell and his demons.

Orwell's future dystopia is not just about the misuse of power and the effects of torture. It is also, if not mainly, about a mental journey from a coherent system of values towards another set entirely. The anonymous repressive authority 'Big Brother' in *1984* does not only want people to behave as they are told; it wants them to think that war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength.

Creating new shapes

We once believed that all human beings ought to enjoy a catalogue of basic human rights. Today, it is suggested that giving these rights to 'migrants' endangers welfare, security and culture. We once believed that people should be free to practise their ethnic, sexual or religious traditions and habits. Today, a model of the family is prescribed, multiculturalism is proclaimed dead and Islam is seen as a threat. We once believed that workers' rights, the green transition and sustainable development were signs of wisdom and modernity. Today, these are painted as ideological slogans bordering on madness.

We once believed that to achieve anything in an interdependent world, we needed to co-operate, if not integrate. Today, the United Nations is ignored and Member States of the EU want to take power back from 'Brussels'. We once believed that disarmament, diplomacy and trade could secure peace. Today, a renewed arms race, economic sanctions and political threats are the order of the day — all in the name of the same 'peace'.

I fear that for illiberals the strategy is, as Orwell put it, one of 'tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing'.

Of course, individuals do not necessarily hold exclusively to one or other of these polar opposites. Yet, Orwell found a word to describe this too: 'doublethink' was the power to retain simultaneously two contradictory beliefs in one's mind and accept both of them. Doublethink often characterises liberals who give in to illiberal temptation, under the pressure of events or the exigencies of power.

One might claim that an inconsequential liberal politician was still better than a convinced illiberal figure. I fear, however, that for illiberals the strategy is, as Orwell put it, one of 'tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing'. This is what the new normal means in European politics.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal



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