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The fairy tale of the illiberal left

The debate about identity politics is not about silencing critical voices, but about demanding fundamental rights

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If you believe some American commentators – and certain European newspaper reports – then you might conclude that an illiberal revolution is taking place in the US. No, not the final authoritarian swing of the Trumpists, but a left movement that supposedly bans free speech throughout the country, reduces people to the colour of their skin and national origin in the name of identity politics, and rigorously carries out ideologically motivated purges in culture, the media and universities.

This picture is misleading in two respects. It is always possible to find a few juicy anecdotes about the excesses of anti-racist leftists, but the 'cancel culture' that now purportedly dominates all discourse and is driven by a neo-Protestant zeal remains a marginal phenomenon. On the other hand, the criticism of what is commonly referred to as '<link regionen global artikel detail revolution-ohne-blutvergiessen-4564>identity politics' is based on a misunderstanding. It is not at all about locking people into a would-be prison of identity, but rather, about demanding fundamental rights.

Liberal observers in the broadest sense see the open society under threat in the US, with the threats apparently coming from the right as well as left. Trump and his supporters are bad, but the intolerant leftists on campus are also quite <link regionen nordamerika artikel detail schuld-und-suehne-4501>terrible – one hears this or the like over and over again. What accounts for this 'compulsive symmetrisation', as Jürgen Habermas called it? It allows journalists, professors, and politicians to automatically present themselves as the 'reasonable centre. Those who go against both of the perceived extremes cannot really go wrong – even if they have no real political content, or even ideals, to offer. It's kind of a philosophically trivial version of the Third Way.

The supposed downfall of the West

In fact, this results in a false equivalence. Yes, liberal democracy in the US really is being threatened. But – to cite an example from my immediate university surroundings – not by people who are expected to blithely ignore the racism of former President Woodrow Wilson (who was also once President of Princeton). Rather, it is endangered by an incumbent President, about whom it was long said, even among liberals, that he would be contained by the established American institutions with its system of checks and balances. After all, the country is not Hungary or Turkey. Yet many of these institutions, such as the Department of Justice, have proven subservient to Trump.

We can certainly find examples of hasty accusations of racism and intolerant activists who refuse to hear arguments. But with all due respect, these are isolated cases. It is not cheap anti-intellectualism (according to the motto that philosophy does not interest anyone anyway) to point out that in a country with around 4,500 universities and colleges, 'business' and 'healthcare professions' are still the most popular courses of study. And it is hardly likely that these would be taught by any intolerant leftists.

Many of those who complain about their alleged 'cancellation' are in essence demanding that their critics should be silenced.

In the US in particular, the 'downfall of the West' happens on a regular basis. The current debates, which are supposedly determining the future of the free society, took place at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, after the right introduced 'political correctness' as a polemical catchword in its defence of white men in the educational canon. However, as early as the 1950s – hardly a heyday of progressive thinking – conservatives in the US were complaining that the universities were dominated by left-wing extremists. And then as now, the de facto conclusion is that there is an actual need for affirmative action in order to ensure rights.

As in other countries, empirically it is hardly plausible to claim that there is less freedom of expression in the US today than in earlier times. Quite the contrary: thanks to the often demonised Twitter, more voices are joining in conversation today than ever before (although admittedly the tone of that conversation is sometimes much harsher than in an era when certain elites had discourse all to themselves in affable bonhomie). What has changed nowadays is that opposition is often encountered in

situations where formerly, either no one dared to articulate it or it simply could not reach a large audience.

It’s not about endless group therapy

Many of those who complain about their alleged ‘cancellation’ are in essence demanding that their critics should be silenced. One notable example is when the popular historian Niall Ferguson, a great champion of free speech, threatened the writer Pankaj Mishra with a lawsuit for defamation in response to a negative book review. Those who declare themselves to be liberal say that, as in a debating club, the main thing is to hear all arguments. In principle there is nothing wrong with that. But sometimes the issue is about who has access to the club and which person who is shunned as soon as they open their mouth. If you don’t want to talk about power, usually you first have to have it firmly in your own hands.

And what of the much derided identity politics, which supposedly always distracts from the really important issue, namely redistribution? The growing support for Black Lives Matter has shown that it was never about the subtle ramifications of identity that were supposedly incomprehensible to outsiders, but about the effective demand for basic rights. Everyone could see on a mobile phone video what it means to be treated not only cruelly by state authorities – but with a leer that says, ‘I know nothing can happen to us as the police.’

In order to understand certain forms of injustice, one must first name the specifics of histories and contemporary situations; this is actually a rather trivial insight. But it is precisely this banality that is denied by activists opposed to identity politics: they think that in order to prove yourself to be truly liberal, you always immediately focus on what is supposedly general and unifying. However, politics in the first person is not the endpoint of an injustice argument, but it is an essential beginning. Or, as the philosopher Thomas McCarthy once put it: the victims must have the first word, but that doesn’t mean they have the final say.

The idea that all this fuss over identity is just a distraction from the actual hard material challenges is politically naive. BLM and #MeToo are not about endless group therapy, but about the just distribution of basic rights – such as the right not to be shot by the police or harassed by powerful men. And conversely, movements that demanded <link rubriken soziale-demokratie artikel die-wut-der-kulturkrieger-4544>material justice have always created cultural identity or tried to understand the specific situation of workers. In short, identity politics versus interest-driven policies is a false dichotomy. The sooner

this is overcome, focussing on both substantive ideals and detailed political ideas, the better.



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