The liberal delusion

It's illusory to think that moral outrage will stop right-wing populists. In reality, it only makes them stronger

Read this article in German.

There's this prevalent idea that we have to take a firm stand against right-wing populism. Yet all the anti-populist hashtags, public un-invites, and goodwill gigs of recent years have done nothing to halt its rise. Clearly, we need a more effective strategy, and the path to finding it begins by asking a simple question: whose values are actually being defended here?

For as long as it is part of cultural class warfare, the fight against the far right will never be won. The frontline runs between middle-class groupings, which is why – even in these times of extreme inequality – the debate focusses on questions of morals and identity, not wealth distribution.

For much of recorded human history, questions about who we are and where we are going have been the domain of priests and philosophers. Today, however, it is academics and creatives who are providing answers.

According to sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, these winners in today's post-industrial knowledge economy share values of cosmopolitanism, openness, and diversity, with a strong focus on the self and its needs. These values have become society's yardstick and holy grail. In other words, people with academic degrees decide which lifestyles are considered valuable and which are not.

Many people, however, are unable to keep up in this permanent struggle for visibility, respect, and success, yearning instead for more protection, recognition, and belonging. It is primarily small-business owners, white-collar staff, and skilled workers – i.e. the backbone of the traditional middle class – who feel drawn towards communitarianism, toward a more homogenous society in which the values of duty and solidarity are reinstated.

In order to create such communities, however, there needs to be a clear

idea of who's part of it and who isn't. In political terms, this means responding to the liberal agenda of opening up societies, of removing borders and deregulating the economy with demands to close the frontiers and re-establish the primacy of national identity.

The revolt of the old middle classes

Right-wing populists have taken on the leading role in this rebellion against liberalism. They were the first to find a way to express the feelings of insult and insecurity plaguing the old middle classes. And it is the members of these old middle classes who vote in higher numbers than the precariat, who are disenchanted with politics and more unlikely to cast a ballot. This solves the riddle of why voters of hard-right parties are not statistically poorer or less educated than the average.

The new middle classes, meanwhile, are in no mood to simply surrender the sway they hold over societal values and objectives. They respond to this attack on their cultural hegemony with cultural means and drawing a firewall between 'decent people' on one side and misogynist, xenophobic, racist authoritarians on the other. Using 'virtue signalling', they assign their cosmopolitan lifestyle a higher value than that of their opponents. The latter experience #noplatform, #refugeeswelcome or #metoo as cavalry charges pressed by culture class-warriors on their high horses.

Why is this class civil war between factions of the middle classes being fought over culture, though? In today's post-industrial economy, it's education and creativity which are decisive factors in living a successful life – more so than ever. Thanks to its cultural capital, the creative class is upwardly mobile while the former middle classes tumble down the social hierarchy.

People who discern a threat to their way of living retreat ever more into tribalism.

The fallen are now rebelling against this feeling of cultural downgrading. But because the new middle class owes its success to its cosmopolitan lifestyle, it is not prepared to accept any limitations to its moral authority. The culture war which has erupted between the cosmopolitans and the communitarians will decide who sets the tone in tomorrow's politics, media, arts, and academia. The fact that the battles are being fought over cultural hegemony explains why political rifts are currently opening up along questions such as sexuality, identity, and language rather than wealth distribution.

Fights about moral issues and identity are a typical feature of the neoliberal age: many citizens have lost confidence in the state's ability and, indeed, will to shape society. Change is now only possible on a grand scale if enough individuals see a need to change their behaviour.

Viewed from this perspective, resistance to rational movements such as the struggle to halt climate change or normative demands such as equality between the sexes can only be irrational (or just plain evil). As such, political disagreements between citizens become moral rear-guard actions against advancing barbarians who are therefore excluded from public debate: the battle cries are 'No right to speak for old white men!' or 'By giving them airtime, the media is making the far-right socially acceptable!'

The paradox of liberal righteousness

The brutality – and the tragedy – of this cultural confrontation is that both sides are scared that society will crumble. This fear makes them all the more aggressive against those who they consider to be the enemies of all that is good and true. People who discern a threat to their way of living retreat ever more into tribalism.

As Mitch McConnell, head of the Republican majority in the US senate, sardonically put it after Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed as Supreme Court judge in spite of allegations of sexual misconduct against him: 'It's been a great political gift to us. The tactics have energized our base. I want to thank the mob because they've done the one thing we were having trouble doing, which was energizing the base.'

In other words, an attack from outside strengthens the solidarity of the in-group, a solidarity which members of the group strengthen through stating and restating their beliefs. It's this mechanism which explains the current trend for 'taking a stand'. In the 'fight against the far right', however, drawing moral boundaries is counterproductive as they strengthen the cohesion of right-wing populist groups.

There's a second reason why 'taking a stand against the far right' isn't effective. In this era of Trump, society has been reordered. While, previously, identity served primarily for minority groups as a rallying call, the identitarian movement has been successful in convincing the societal majority that it too is a minority under threat: White Americans, 'Biological Germans' (*Biodeutsche*), 'True Finns'. This works in a way not so different to Hindu nationalists, Salafists, or fundamentalist Buddhists.

The Obama style minority alliances are now facing an opponent immune

to the cosmopolitans' attempts to convert them to the cause. They exploit feelings of insult and insecurity to call progressive achievements into question and undermine the institutions of liberal democracy.

We need a real political shift

For anyone attempting to save social democracy from this existential threat, the lesson is urgent: trying to draw a moral and linguistic *cordon sanitaire* around right-wing populists does not work – and indeed only serves to make them stronger.

It is high time that progressive forces snap out of their moral panic and initiate a real political shift. Instead of staying catatonically fixed on the authoritarian extremists, democratic politics must shore up the centre; doing so means taking ordinary people's concerns seriously rather than insulting them.

Against the moralistic fury of the middle classes, we must erect a model of political thinking which sees change as the productive result of societal struggles.

Those who, in view of the epoch-making shifts of globalisation, automation, climate change, and mass migration, are left feeling insecure are by no means automatically neo-Nazis. Far-sighted policy would address this feeling of insecurity and return to citizens some degree of control over their lives and their communities.

Concretely, this means offering more job security and an improved social safety net, means a return to the state's provision of public utilities, and means limiting and managing migration. It also means a consistent implementation of the rule of law and a spirited fight against criminality.

It doesn't, however, mean turning back the clock on the emancipatory achievements of recent decades. The goal is to defend the open society based on solidarity between groups. In this society, all citizens, regardless of their background or their orientation, must enjoy access to the same opportunities.

This obligation makes it impossible, for social democrats in particular, to play the cosmopolitan and communitarian parts of their lifeworld off against each other. What happens to social democratic parties unable to keep up this electoral alliance between liberal middle class and workers can be seen in Germany. The left-wing 'collective movement' (*Sammlungsbewegung*) by the name of 'Aufstehen' ('Stand up') makes a play for closed-shop solidarity while the #unteilbar hashtag brings together those who prefer their solidarity without frontiers. #unteilbar is

also a movement that brought a quarter million people to the streets of Berlin.

The strength of big-tent parties

In the current European context, post-social democratic parties are springing up around these two poles, and, in the long run, this disintegration of the cosmopolitan and communitarian elements on the left threatens to sap the energy of the progressive side.

Democracy only has a future if the middle classes understand that, in a pluralistic society, their views on how people should live can only be pluralistic. This is an insight with which, after so many years of claiming – without objections – that their values were universal, the degree-holding classes have particular difficulty.

Now, however, a new political force is feeding of this hubris, and converting popular anger over the 'globalist elites' into political capital. The neoliberal idea that societal problems can only be solved by individuals making changes to their behaviour has reached the end of the road. As a matter of fact, moralising categories (right/wrong, good/bad) make the search for workable compromises more difficult, so rather than arguing about language and values, we must go back to discussing strategies and politics.

Against the moralistic fury of the middle classes, we must erect a model of political thinking which sees change as the productive result of societal struggles. Yet these arguments cannot be won if societies dissipate into tribes. The genuine strength of big-tent parties is to build alliances between groups of citizens with varying identities which produce consensus, and struggles for recognition and redistribution can be combined as long as their agendas are aware of their impact on different classes. This means going beyond symbolic token politics and modifying structural conditions so that everyone can enjoy equal opportunities. Historically, it has been the role of social democracy to bring together these struggles: its political future, too, lies in renewing this alliance.



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