



Jürgen Habermas

For a democratic polarization

An interview with Jürgen Habermas

Accommodate or confront? Either reaction allows rightwing populism to set the political agenda, argues Jürgen Habermas in interview. The Left must regain the initiative and offer a credible response the destructive forces of unbridled capitalism.

Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik: *After 1989, all the talk was of the 'end of history' in democracy and the market economy; today we are experiencing the emergence of a new phenomenon in the form of an authoritarian/populist leadership — from Putin via Erdogan to Donald Trump. Clearly, a new 'authoritarian international' is increasingly succeeding in defining political discourse. Was your exact contemporary Ralf Dahrendorf right in forecasting an authoritarian twenty-first century? Can one — indeed must one — speak of an epochal change?*

Jürgen Habermas: After the transformation of 1989–90, when Fukuyama seized on the slogan of 'post-history', which was originally coined by a ferocious kind of conservatism, his reinterpretation expressed the short-sighted triumphalism of western elites who adhered to a liberal belief in the pre-established harmony of market economy and democracy. Both of these elements inform the dynamic of social modernisation, but are linked to functional imperatives that repeatedly clash. The balance between capitalist growth and what was accepted by the populace as a halfway fair share in the average growth of highly productive economies could be brought about only by a genuinely democratic state. Historically speaking, however, such an equilibrium, one warranting the name of 'capitalist democracy', was the exception rather than the rule. That alone made the idea of a global consolidation of the 'American dream' an illusion.

The new global disorder, the helplessness of the USA and Europe with regard to growing international conflicts, is profoundly unsettling; the humanitarian catastrophes in Syria or South Sudan are unnerving, as are Islamist terror acts. Nevertheless, I can't recognise in the constellation you indicate a uniform tendency towards a new authoritarianism; rather, I see a variety of structural causes and many coincidences. What connects them is nationalism in its various shades, which has now begun to appear in the West. Even before Putin and Erdogan, Russia and Turkey were by no means 'unblemished democracies'. Had the West pursued a somewhat cleverer policy, the course of relations with both countries may have been set differently — and liberal forces in their populaces may have been strengthened.

Aren't we retrospectively over-estimating the West's capabilities here?

Of course, given the sheer variety of its divergent interests, it wouldn't have been easy for 'the West' to choose the right moment to deal rationally with the geo-political aspirations of a relegated Russian superpower, or with the expectations of a tetchy Turkish government as regards European policy. The case of the egomaniac Trump, highly significant for the West over all, is of a different order. With his disastrous election campaign, he has brought to a head a process of polarisation that the Republicans have been running with cold calculation since the 1990s. They are escalating this process so unscrupulously that the 'Grand Old Party' — the party of Abraham Lincoln, don't forget — has utterly lost control. This mobilisation of resentment is giving vent to the social dislocations of a superpower in political and economic decline.

What I do see as problematic, therefore, is not the model of an authoritarian international that you hypothesise, but the shattering of political stability in our western countries as a whole. In any judgment of the retreat of the USA from its role as the global power ever ready to intervene to restore order, one has to keep one's eye on the structural background — which is affecting Europe in similar manner.

The economic globalisation that Washington, with its neoliberal agenda, introduced in the 1970s, has — measured globally against China and the other emergent BRIC countries — caused a relative decline of the West. Our societies must come to terms with this global decline, together with the technology-induced, explosive growth in the complexity of everyday life, at a domestic level. Nationalist reactions are gaining ground in social milieus that have either never or only inadequately benefited from the prosperity gains of the big economies, because the ever-promised 'trickle-down effect' failed to materialise over the decades.

Even if there is no unequivocal tendency towards a new authoritarianism, we are clearly experiencing a massive shift to the Right, indeed a rightwing revolt. The Brexit campaign was the most prominent example of this trend in Europe. As you yourself recently put it, you 'did not reckon with a victory for populism over capitalism in its country of origin'. Every sensible observer cannot but have been struck by the irrational nature not just of the outcome of the referendum but of the campaign too. One thing is clear: Europe is also increasingly being seduced by populism, from Orban and Kaczynski to Le Pen and the Alternative for Germany. Are we are going through a period in which irrational politics becomes the norm in the West? Some parts of the Left are already making the case for reacting to right-wing populism with a left-wing version of the same.

Before reacting purely tactically, the puzzle has to be solved as to how it came about that rightwing populism stole the Left's own topics. The last G-20 summit delivered an instructive piece of theatre in this regard. One read of the assembled heads of government's alarm at the 'danger from the Right' that might lead nation states to close their doors, raise the drawbridge and lay waste to globalised markets. In line with this mood is the astonishing change in social and economic policy that one of the participants, the British prime minister Theresa May, announced at the last Conservative party conference, which caused waves of anger as expected in the pro-business media. May had clearly studied the social reasons for Brexit thoroughly; in any case, she is trying to take the wind out of the sails of rightwing populism by reversing the previous party line and setting store by an interventionist 'strong state', in order to combat the marginalisation of the 'abandoned' parts of the population and the increasing divisions in society. Given this ironic reversal of the political

agenda, the Left in Europe must ask itself why rightwing populism is succeeding in winning over the disaffected and disadvantaged for the false path of national isolation.

Socially acceptable globalisation through supranational co-operation

What should a leftwing response to the rightwing challenge look like?

The question is why leftwing parties don't go on the offensive against social inequality by embarking on a co-ordinated and cross-border taming of unregulated markets. The only sensible alternative — both to the status quo of feral financial capitalism and to a *völkisch* or left-nationalist retreat into the supposed sovereignty of long-since hollowed-out nation states — is, I suggest, a supranational form of co-operation that aims to shape a socially acceptable, political reconfiguration of economic globalisation. International treaty regimes are insufficient; aside from their dubious democratic legitimacy, political decisions over questions of redistribution can only be carried out within a stable institutional framework. That leaves only the stony path of institutional deepening and embedding of democratically legitimised co-operation across national borders. The European Union was once such a project — and a political union of the eurozone could still be one. But the hurdles within the domestic decision-making process are rather high for that.

Since Clinton, Blair and Schröder, social democrats have swung over to the prevailing neoliberal line in economic policies because that was, or seemed to be promising politically; in the 'battle for the centre ground', these political parties thought that the only way to win majorities was by adopting a neoliberal course. This meant tolerating long-standing and growing social inequalities. This price — the economic and socio-cultural abandonment of ever-greater parts of the populace — has since become so high that the reaction to it vents itself on the right. And where else? If there is no credible and pro-active perspective, then protest must retreat into expressive, irrational forms.

Even worse than the rightwing populists themselves seems to be the risk of 'contagion' among the established parties throughout Europe. Under pressure from the Right, the new British prime minister has undertaken a hard-line policy of deterring and even expelling foreign workers and migrants; in Austria, the Social Democrat chancellor wants to restrict the right to asylum by emergency decree and, in France, François Hollande has been governing for nearly a year in a state of emergency, to the delight of the Front National. Is Europe strong enough to counter this rightwing revolt, or are republican achievements being irreversibly eroded?

As I see it, domestic politicians mishandled rightwing populism from the start. The mistake of the established parties lies in acknowledging the battlefield that rightwing populism is defining: 'Us' against the system. It hardly matters whether this mistake takes the form of an assimilation or a confrontation with the 'Right'. Take the strident, would-be French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who is outbidding Marine Le Pen with his demands, or the sober-minded German justice minister Heiko Maas, who forcefully confronts (AfD co-founder and spokesman) Alexander Gauland in debate — both strengthen their opponents. Both take them seriously and raise their profile. Here in Germany, all know the studiously ironic grin of (AfD leader) Frauke Petry and the behaviour of the rest of the leadership of her ghastly troupe. Only by ignoring their

interventions can one can pull the ground from under the feet of the rightwing populists.

But this requires willingness to open up a completely different front in domestic politics, by making the aforementioned problem the key issue: how do we regain the political initiative vis-à-vis the destructive forces of unbridled capitalist globalisation? Instead, the political scene is predominantly grey on grey; for example, it is no longer possible to distinguish the leftwing, pro-globalisation agenda of giving political form to a global society growing together economically and digitally, from the neoliberal agenda of political abdication in the face of blackmail by the banks and unregulated markets.

Political contrasts therefore need to be made recognisable again, including the contrast between the 'liberal' open-mindedness of the Left — in a political and cultural sense — and the nativist drivel of rightwing critiques of unfettered economic globalization. In a word: political polarisation again needs to crystallise *between* the established parties on substantive issues. Parties that give rightwing populists attention rather than contempt should not expect civil society to disdain rightwing slogans and violence. Therefore, I regard the greater danger to be a very different polarisation towards which the hard-core of the opposition *within* the CDU seems to be tending when it comes to what happens after Merkel. It sees in Alexander Gauland the pivotal figure of the (national conservative) Dregger wing of the old Hesse CDU, in other words its own flesh and blood, and toys with the idea of winning back lost voters through a coalition with the Alternative for Germany.

A breeding ground for a new fascism

Even verbally, much seems to be giving way these days: politicians are increasingly denounced as 'enemies of the people' and openly abused; Alexander Gauland calls Angela Merkel a 'dictatorial chancellor'. Along the same lines is the gradual rehabilitation of Nazi jargon: Frauke Petry wants to return the concept of völkisch to everyday speech, (the AfD politician) Björn Höcke refers to 'degenerate politics', and a CDU MP from Saxony reverts to classic Nazi diction about ethnic cleansing — and all of this without consequence.

The only lesson democratic parties should draw as regards dealing with people who use such language is: stop pussyfooting around with these 'concerned citizens' and dismiss them curtly for what they are — the breeding ground for a new fascism. Instead of which, we are still witnessing the comic ritual, well-practised in the old FRG, of a compulsive balancing-act: every time 'right-wing extremism' is mentioned, one feels obliged to point hastily to a corresponding 'left-wing extremism', as if to avoid embarrassment.

How do you explain the receptivity to the AfD's rightwing populism in eastern Germany and the sheer number of far-Right crimes there?

Of course, one should be under no illusions about the electoral success of the AfD in western parts of Germany, for example Baden-Württemberg — even if the aggression of (the AfD politician) Jörg Meuthen towards the liberal-left legacy of the '68 generation suggests not so much rightwing extremism as a leftover from the old Federal Republic. In the west, the rightwing prejudices of AfD voters seem mainly to be filtered through a conservative milieu that had no chance to develop in the former GDR. The west also has to answer for those right-wing radicals who, immediately after 1990, moved from the old FRG to

the east in their droves, bringing with them the necessary organisational talents. However, judging by the familiar statistical data, an *unfiltered* susceptibility to diffuse authoritarian prejudices and 'old continuities' is definitely greater in eastern Germany. Insofar as this potential emerged from people who were not non-voters anyway, it remained more or less inconspicuous until the recent refugee policy, which acted as a catalyst: until then, these voters had either been attracted by the selective view and national goodwill of the eastern CDU or to a large extent absorbed by the Left Party. Up to a point, that may have served a positive purpose. But it is better for a democratic body politic when questionable political mind-sets are not swept under the carpet for good.

On the other hand, the west — in other words the former government of West Germany, which defined the mode of reunification and the reconstruction and that now bears political responsibility for the consequences — might even end up as the villain in terms of how history judges these facts. Whereas the population of the former West Germany had, under good economic conditions, the chance, in public discussions lasting over decades, to free itself from the legacy of the Nazi period and from contaminated mind-sets and elites continuing in office, the population of the former GDR had no opportunity after 1990 to make their *own* mistakes and be *forced* to learn from facing the Nazi past.

In Germany, the AfD has placed the above all the CDU/CSU into strategic turmoil. Politicians from the CDU and CSU recently drafted a formal appeal for a 'core' national culture to preserve the inherited cultural framework, in order to prevent 'patriotism being taken over by the wrong people.' The appeal stated that: 'Germany has a right to stipulate what should be self-evident' and called for promotion of 'rootedness in a homeland one has come to love and a lived experience of patriotism'. In the old FRG, with the growing acceptance of democracy, the Basic Law increasingly acted as the 'core' culture; its recognition became the standard for successful integration. Are we experiencing today the transference of this constitutional-patriotic core culture into a new mainstream German culture consisting of habit and custom, such as the duty to shake hands on greeting somebody?

We assumed, clearly over-hastily, that Angela Merkel's CDU had left the backwards-looking debate of the 1990s behind it. Refugee policy has brought to the surface an internal opposition that combines the descendants of the national-conservative wing of the old western CDU/CSU with the converts of the eastern CDU. Their appeal marks the seam at which the CDU would split apart as a party if forced to decide between conducting the integration of refugees according to constitutional standards, on the one hand, and according to the ideas of the national majority culture on the other. The democratic constitution of a pluralistic society provides cultural rights for minorities so that they have the opportunity to practice their culture within the limits of the law. The obligation upon immigrants of a different background to subordinate themselves to an inclusive majority culture is therefore incompatible with a constitutional integration policy. This demands the differentiation between a traditional majority culture rooted in the country, and a political culture equally accessible to all citizens.

However, this political culture also includes the historical context of the country, which influences how citizens understand themselves and interpret constitutional principles. Civil society must expect of the immigrant citizens that they grow into this political culture, without being able to enforce it

legally. The report published in *Der Spiegel* by Navid Kermani, a German of Iranian origin, about his visit to the former concentration camp at Auschwitz is a moving and illuminating example: in the language-mix of visitors from many countries, he opted to join the silent group of the Germans, the descendants of the perpetrator generation. At any rate, it was not the German language of the group that moved him to do so.

Given that political culture does not remain static in a living democratic culture of debate, naturalized citizens as much as those of longstanding German descent have the right to bring their voice to bear on the process of developing and changing this common political culture. The defining power of these voices is best exemplified by the successful writers, film directors, actors, journalists and scientists from the families of former Turkish 'guest workers'. Attempts to legally conserve a national core culture are not only unconstitutional but also unrealistic.

The Chancellor's career as a political poster child

In Die Zeit of 7 July, you criticized, from the perspective of an 'engaged newspaper reader', a 'certain conformity of the Press', without which Merkel's 'policy of lulling everybody to sleep' would not have worked. Clearly, since Merkel's refugee policy, we are experiencing a new polarisation. Do you think this offers a chance of finally thinking in political alternatives?

On the contrary, given the fixation on the Alternative for Germany, I fear a further levelling of the differences between the parties. When I spoke about the policy of lulling people to sleep, I was referring to Europe. Regarding the future of the European Union, nothing has changed since Brexit. For example, you read virtually nothing about the new escalation of the conflict between finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble and the IMF, which has quit the aid programme for Greece. Without an initiative that changes the crippling policy of austerity, the readiness inside Europe for co-operation will equally fail to develop in other policy areas.

After Brexit, in an interview with *Die Welt*, Wolfgang Schäuble publicly recanted on his forward-looking proposal for a pro-active core Europe that he and (CDU politician) Karl Lamers had drafted at the start of the 1990s. Angela Merkel, who has gained the reputation both as a pleasantly rational, pragmatic politician as well as a short-sighted, power-driven opportunist, surprised me with her constructive refugee policy. Her latest trip to Africa shows that she does have the capacity and willingness to act in a strategic and far-reaching manner. But what does it mean when — and this has been the case since 2010 — her policy on Europe is determined by the narrow perspective of national economic selfishness. She seems to think only in terms of national interest in the very policy area where it is incumbent on our government to provide the impulse for building and developing the EU. Merkel's short-sighted austerity policy, which sticks rigidly to the status quo, has prevented the necessary progress and has hugely deepened the splits within Europe.

You have long demanded a trans-nationalisation of democracy, in other words the strengthening of the EU, in order to compensate for nation states' loss of control in a highly interdependent global society. Yet the longing for a retreat into the cocoon of the nation state is clearly growing. Given the current state of the EU and its institutions, do you see even the remotest realistic chance of fighting back against this re-nationalisation?

The negotiations over Brexit will certainly bring this issue back onto the agenda. I do still endorse the internal differentiation between a political euro-union that works ever closer together (keyword: core Europe) and a periphery of member-states that prefer to wait things out and that can join the core at any time. There are so many political reasons and economic facts that speak for this that I think politicians would do better to believe in people's ability to learn, rather than to justify their abandonment of political intervention by fatalistically referring to unalterable systemic forces. With her withdrawal from nuclear energy and her path-breaking refugee policy, Angela Merkel's career offers two remarkable counter-examples to the notion that no room exists for political manoeuvre.

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