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Who is "the people"?

Participation between collective rage and constructive involvement

Current usage of the word "populist" in the German and European media is beginning to obscure the alarming rise of xenophobia and authoritarian tendencies across the continent. In the face of which, Claus Leggewie argues that it's high time for rhetorical anti-fascism to take a practical turn. This means meeting an urgent need for democratic participation to be extended beyond (but never used against) political parties and parliaments.

1

To label Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and its like-minded European counterparts "populists" is gradually to trivialize the true nature of these parties. Populists traditionally feed upon the opposition between the "big nobs" and "the people", on the alienation of the wider population from career politicians, top managers and opinion leaders. Such antielitist movements came into existence in the nineteenth century. In America and Russia respectively, the People's Party and Narodniks mobilized against the powerful and the people's representatives who pursued politics as a profession. Then came the Peronists and Chavistas in South America, followed by tax rebels like Mogens Glistrup, who attracted protest votes in 1970s Scandinavia and who considered the welfare state too expensive. And, lastly, there came the sceptics who consider both the euro and the EU (that is, the Brussels bureaucrats) to be fundamentally flawed and mistrust The Beltway (Washington DC).



In January 2015, the lights were turned off over the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin as part of a [counterdemonstration against Pegida](#). Photo: Andreas Augstein. Source: [Wikimedia](#)

Inherent to the groupings of people united against the powers that be was always the exclusion of people who apparently did not belong — from the Know Nothings in the United States who railed against Catholic immigrants and Asians to today's indiscriminate haters of Islam who fear for the Christian West even if they have never set foot in a place of worship themselves, or are simply hooligans. Along these lines, nationalist populists distinguish themselves from social reformers, which in today's America means: xenophobic supporters of Donald Trump who want to chuck out Muslims and Mexicans, as distinct from supporters of Bernie Sanders who make the case for social justice independent of skin colour and religion. Not that such clear distinctions can always be made so easily: the French Parti de gauche comes across as being almost as nationalistic as Marine Le Pen's Front national; while populists of all colours are united in opposition to free trade (and "America"). Further commonalities become apparent in paranoid blanket suspicion of "corrupt politicians" and the "lying media"; "Women's Libbers" and "faggots" too feature in the vocabulary of hate among men with weak egos.

Feelings of social injustice are directed to the wrong address and, in a manner akin to the classic search for scapegoats, become xenophobia: it is in this regard that the populists stand at a critical juncture. The emergence of AfD shows how a liberalism that is critical of both tax regulations and Europe can drift into a tribal authoritarian nationalism as, in lieu of sceptical professors, dubious political entrepreneurs take up the reins and invest in the anger on the streets with a view to accruing political capital. "The people" is then no longer a diffuse crowd of angry citizens waving banners but imagines itself to be a homogenous national community in which all things foreign have no place. A considerable number of leading politicians who have banded together in the right-wing coalitions of the European Parliament already find themselves upon the slippery slope of racism and anti-Semitism. Their shared solution is Islamophobia and the aspiration of regaining sovereignty through the withdrawal of nation-states from the EU. There is a tendency among right-wing intellectuals to speak of "the great population exchange" (Renaud Camus), a position that attracts an increasingly favourable response since the mass migration of 2015, including in eastern Europe where there are in fact hardly any refugees. The *democratic* slogan *Wir sind das Volk* ("We are the people") is turning into an *ethnocratic* *Wir sind ein Volk* ("We are a people") — a people that remains static and does not allow for naturalization under any circumstances.

There are several exemplary instances of autocrats giving drastic expression to the transition from the liberal and diverse *demos*, which is both passionate about and independent in its ability to make rational decisions, to an authoritarian and homogenous *ethnos*, that is, the body of the people shaped by other feelings and often resentment: Kaczynski's PiS puts the people above the law, Pegida speakers demand that the "betrayal of the people" Merkel be resisted, president Erdogan proposes blood tests as the basis for determining who belongs to the Turkish people, Trump voters wish to see off a black president once and for all.

Such positions are no longer far from the "proof of Aryan descent" that the Nazis sought, and some populists' obsession with identity means that they are well on the way to returning to twentieth-century fascism. Apart from the cult of the leader and a strong state ruled by a single unified party, this is characterized by a wish to strictly exclude from the relevant territory people who are considered to be foreign. And it is not only refugees who now belong to the foreigners but also those who help them and the supposed dreamers who

wish to create a passable and peaceful multicultural society. We are currently witnessing declarations of hostility *en masse* — Carl Schmitt, the "Crown Jurist of the Third Reich" and champion of identitarian democracy, and other conservative revolutionaries are back in vogue.

In resistance against the "great exchange", which is in truth an expression of angst prompted by the societal complexities of the modern world, overburdened party functionaries "slip into" increasingly racist digressions — only to realize that aggressive rhetoric brings with it certain dividends. Should it lead to murder and manslaughter, they can always distance themselves accordingly. Potential supporters are thus able to recognize where all this is leading: whosoever makes political decisions on the basis of an angst-ridden sense of common identity can expect to foster neither economic opportunities nor cross-border solidarity nor the human capacity to cooperate and learn. In fact, it is almost inevitable that what results is ethno-religious civil war invoked by the nationalists even as they themselves actively stage it.

2

The momentum that populists and nationalists have leant extra-parliamentary movements and resulting mobilization of voters is suspect. The participatory revolution that has taken place since the 1960s, and reached eastern Europe too in the 1980s, was never intended in this way! However, there is supposedly no alternative to neoliberal finance capitalism, an outlook that has blocked political engagement and participation; the results can be seen just as much in the manifestations of "Germany's dark side" (as German president Joachim Gauck put it) as in the success of Donald Trump, Marine LePen and other European nationalists, not to mention the rise of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn or of Syriza, Nuit Debout and Podemos.

Between the post-democratic attacks and angry citizens' raw resentment, the democratic Left is helpless. It can deliver informed commentaries on growing social inequality; it dreams here and there of a huge bust-up that will spell the monster's demise. But there is little in the way of substance as far as democratic politics goes. Yet, according to recent elections and polls, it remains the case in Germany that at least four-fifths of Germans are not inclined toward conservative revolution. And even in Austria, at least half the electorate remains unconvinced by the Freedom Party.

Can these political novices be depended upon to blame their own while their arguments fall apart, as happened previously to other passing right-wing crazes? Certainly not. In France and the Netherlands, in Austria and Hungary, probably in Poland and Norway too, right-wing parties have been so well established for so long that their self-destruction cannot be depended upon. Rhetorical anti-fascism must become practical, the oft-invoked civil society must decisively politicize itself and democratic participation has to be extended too beyond (but never used against) political parties and parliaments. In view of which, there is a need for political experimentation.

The suggestion that Patrizia Nanz and I **have advanced previously** is "consultative" in nature and involves the establishment of a network of "future councils". This means the permanent presence of an institution in a community or urban quarter that identifies important future-oriented questions and works out proposals for solutions accordingly. Up to 15 people chosen at random may belong to a future council; the selection should be representative of the local population and reflect in particular its generational dynamics. Those who

take part meet regularly and, like juries, receive a modest allowance to cover expenses. During a standard two-year term of office at the future council, an individual is supported by a voluntary or professional team of facilitators, who also play a part in the council's administration. Future councils are created from below but are firmly anchored in local authority bylaws; it is the duty of municipal councillors and magistrates to thoroughly acquaint themselves with the future council's submissions and to incorporate these into decision-making processes.

Beginning at the local level, a network of analogous future councils can expand its reach to the state, federal and European level. The network would naturally draw upon existing opportunities in a country that is in itself encouraging of participation: the founding of citizen initiatives, participation in planning procedures, the taking of public decisions, involvement in planning groups and future workshops and much more besides.

It would be desirable to see these diverse approaches comprise a kind of "fourth power" alongside legislative, executive and judiciary branches of government, such that participation does not remain subject to the ups and downs of engagement and thus peter out, and institutions become more sustainable and focused initiatives. Further, participative procedures are often dominated by special interests and those directly affected by the matter at hand — which is why we suggest random selection, in order to overcome the drawbacks of social selection and prompt voices to be aired that would otherwise scarcely articulate themselves. One antidote to the fixation of current politics on the present, a fixation displayed by citizen initiatives too, is the capacity of the future councils to take a deep breath. They would not deal with this or that bypass or overhead power line but, for example, with a sustainable mobility concept, and ultimately with the question of how we wish to live in ten, twenty and more years in a democratic community. Thus instead of merely being the subject of occasional sermons, "future generations" actually become central to today's politics.

Thus the practical anti-populism of the future council becomes visible: the new Right fosters fear of the future, they close their eyes to the world and seek defences within the status quo. To combat this brew of resentment, paranoia and appetite for angst is the most important task for democrats. They are contributing constructively to shaping the energy transition after the 2015 Paris climate change conference and campaigning for a sustainable refugee policy. Future councils certainly cannot provide emergency shelter but they can combat an acute housing shortage and propose spatial planning concepts for every eventuality.

3

Social democratic parties often become the victims of authoritarian advances: the distress of the French Socialists is apparent to all; in Austria too, also a red heartland, there is a particularly stormy climate — like the Scandinavian social democrats, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) must contend with aggressive competition from the Right. In Central and Eastern Europe things seem to have turned utterly sour, and even if the Italian social democrats are a little better positioned, it changes nothing about the downward trend that their comrades are experiencing elsewhere. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) itself, stable up until now, is currently having a bumpy ride of it.

Even those who are not party followers must be concerned about these developments. In the 1970s, European social democracy lost sight of the new social movements in its management of the global economic crisis, extra-parliamentary eco-pacifists (Ökopaxe) founded green parties. Amid the neoliberal zeitgeist of the 1990s, a section of organized labour was lost to the populist parties of the Left, the service-sector proletariat no longer votes. The case of Austria shows that, among the latter, a third split has emerged: authoritarian nationalists feel left behind and betrayed by state parties. Solidarity, a cornerstone of the international socialist movement, is only valid for fellow countrymen. "Germany first" is the slogan of AfD, Donald Trump proclaims with *America first!* the defence of the white man.

The good news is that the SPD has considered all of this self-critically and with a praiseworthy awareness of the problems; the not-such-good news is that they have hardly come up with any answers beyond those long since already known — educational equality, pension security, higher capital gains tax. Imprisoned in a grand coalition, German social democracy, like its Austrian equivalent, has concentrated too narrowly on repairing the welfare state, a thankless task. And elsewhere, as in France, Spain, Poland and Greece, it has been made responsible for socio-political acts of cruelty. While corrections to a finance capitalism that has become dysfunctional must strike deeper, it is doubtful whether social democracy possesses the requisite will and, above all, power to succeed in this respect. The financial transaction tax has already been blocked by a finance lobby whose monstrous traits the Panama Papers have documented from every angle.

Have socialists and social democrats visibly expressed their outrage? No, and therefore an ambivalent feeling of social injustice lingers and ends in the erosion of solidarity. Populists do not declare guilty those who cause and benefit from social inequality, but instead indiscriminately make scapegoats of immigrants, globalization *per se* and an entire religion, like the anti-Semites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made scapegoats of the Jews. Anti-Semitism, explained August Bebel during his time, is the socialism of fools. Should the Left wish to avoid their supporters clinging on to a narrow-minded nationalism that searches (in vain) behind high walls for protection above all against foreigners, it must draw up a new social contract that includes foreigners and responds to concerns for the natural environment.

This is to go beyond the received notion of intergenerational equity. The Left conceives of this as equality of opportunity for disadvantaged children, equal status for women and the prevention of poverty in old age — topics that are easily forgotten in a dog-eat-dog-society. But can it be permitted for future generations to carry the costs of preserving the achievements of the welfare state? Social democracy must consolidate itself at both a European and a global level against this prospect and combine the social policy of the nation-state with sustainable development. Decarbonization, that is, the gradual reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to zero agreed upon in December 2015 in Paris, amounts to more than technical environmental protection and socio-ecological modernization; it is a huge transformation of our habits as regards a range of issues, from production and consumption through mobility to spatial planning.

Too often, all of the political parties of the industrial era have expressed such change exclusively in terms of job losses and the relinquishment of conveniences, and thus forgone opportunities to bring about just such a revolution. It is "just" (or better still: solidaric) to leave behind a world to our

children and children's children that, at the least, does not put them at a disadvantage: this would mean limiting global warming to two degrees. Under industrialism, planetary boundaries went unrecognized, now they are returning with a vengeance.

Of course it is also solidaric to support employees in emission-intensive sectors so that they are able to adapt accordingly, though this certainly must not lead to the perpetual postponement of the phasing out of fossil fuels or the reorganization of old emission-intensive industries. Interestingly, most companies are receptive to green capitalism, they are waiting for a clear political signal. Social democracy is still far too strongly focussed on the large corporations (and cities and unions) of the fossil-industrial complex. Not only must the flow of coal into the energy mix be terminated by 2025, the combustion engine cannot survive in private transport beyond 2030.

That is an exciting conversion programme, not least for German industry that only appears to be performing quite splendidly. The costs of such a programme are to be carried through the years, and won't be covered by petty cash alone. The finance practices recently publicized by "John Doe" show that there is currently an absurdly high level of surplus liquidity, while tax flight is running public coffers dry. A solidaric finance sector must make funds available that draw not least on a global carbon tax. Another source is to be found in the great fortunes that are currently inherited by individuals without having any considerable effect on the general well being of future generations, or the securing of their living conditions; in fact those individuals inheriting such fortunes merely acquire new privileges for themselves and exacerbate social divisions. Inheritance tax must retain a generational component.

These proposals for redistribution already show how closely the topic of "energy and transportation transition" is tied to questions of justice; and thus the concrete benefits of solidarity in the context of "One World" become clear. In which respect, a second strength of social democracy makes itself felt that characterized the German foreign policy and developmental cooperation pursued by Willy Brandt and Erhard Eppler right up until Frank-Walter Steinmeier. For the politics of global sustainability, in contrast to authoritarian nationalists from Putin to Trump, demand inter- and supranational cooperation: indeed, as regards intention and effects this amounts to nothing other than a contemporary policy of peace.

The Paris climate agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals agreed upon in New York and the United Nation's 2030 Agenda are milestones that can be compared with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. For many governments and in the context of international politics, these are things of little current importance: war, terror, failed states, violence and flight, the drifting apart of the European Union too — all appear to displace the Sustainable Development Goals. This can be expected to exacerbate all of these crises, should the natural resources that support human life be endangered or even destroyed. In the event of which, there can be neither peace among peoples nor social progress.

A foreign and development policy executed from the perspective of the future has to be the driver here: an ambitious climate protection programme and the implementation of Agenda 2030 will reinforce cooperation between states. That is the entrepreneurial project of our time, the meaningful work that can be carried out as a matter of course and paves the way for a fulfilling life. Whether it is the SPD that tackles this has yet to be seen, but it is this that

would be the genuine alternative for Germany and Europe.

Conclusion

Watch out nationalists: you are *not* the people, neither can you steal the venerable slogan of democratic revolutions from 1776 to 1989! Civil society needs to watch out too: commit yourselves to future generations! As for the political elite: here is a chance, perhaps the last, to counter the loss of legitimacy among political parties, parliaments and governments! The consultative does not imply a competitive but a complementary process. And a necessary one too.

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