
The enemy within: are modern European democracies afraid of introspection?

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Escorted by sensationalist media, modern technologies and politicians who connect to voters at the gut level and amplify the noisiest popular sentiments, many European citizens are disengaging from conventional politics and joining those professing moral outrage against many alleged culprits behind national decline. While this trend is clearly linked to substantial contemporary political and economic problems and insecurities, the inflammatory rhetoric in which it is coached follows a slippery slope to democratic subversion. The road to dealing with challenges starts from our own willingness to demonstrate capacity for reflection and renewal, rigorously in line with the liberal principles and values that warrant our polities the democratic name.

BACKGROUND

If we are to believe what we hear and read on a daily basis, widespread public anxiety and dissatisfaction are choking European (and other) democracies.

Many citizens across the European Union (EU) feel increasingly menaced by foreigners – often identified as East European, Balkan, Syrian or Muslim – supposedly storming their borders to abuse their welfare model, disrespect their culture, spread terror, and render them minorities in their own countries. Growing numbers of Europeans are also angst-ridden by socio-economic distress and uncertainty, by the significant gap between the 'have' and 'have-less' groups within our societies, and are wary of the promise of a better future for themselves and the next generations. Moreover, scores of people are concerned that neoliberal policies and remote internationals – most prominently the European Union, widely accused of being an agent of untamed globalisation – are fostering economic inequality and wearing down their countries' national sovereignty and unity. In addition, plenty among these *Wutbürger* are irritated with the media, seen as the devious mouthpiece of the political establishment in search of manipulating public opinion and defending the *status quo*. And almost everyone is grappling with the perception that they have lost control and the ability to change course in personal and political terms.

None of this is helped by Europe's piling and overlapping troubles, which politicians still struggle to manage – let alone solve. From the financial, economic and euro crises through multiple social, EU institutional problems and Brexit to external shocks and pressures – of which the inflow of refugees and the spate of terrorist attacks across member states are only the latest examples – many liberal democratic leaders have stumbled over the past years in their reactions, so much so that formidable challenges looked on occasion like potentially terminal difficulties. To be sure, democratic governments are used to having to make tough decisions that try to square electoral promises with other mandates acquired in office, as a means of softening blows. However, the constraints (often inherited rather than created) within which today's politicians must try to satisfy one set of principles at the expense of another have become as severe as the problems at hand, especially in the post-Maastricht Europe, where so much of policy-making is denationalised.¹ Seen from this perspective, the reason why the contemporary politics of hard times inspires fear might have as much to do with the apparent lack of a silver bullet as with people's disconnect from their nationally-elected officials' decision-making – which is now ever more depoliticised (that is, based on expertise rather than ideology) and relocated on a wider stage to actors outside the domestic political sphere (notably at the EU level).

At least in part as a result of this present situation in which democratic governments all too often end up having to implement the mandates given to them by the likes of the European Commission, the European Central Bank or the International Monetary Fund rather than the demands of their stressed-out voters, ever more citizens grow unwilling to take part in the sort of conventional politics that is usually seen as necessary to endorse democracy: they vote in fewer numbers and with a weaker sense of partisan consistency, and are increasingly averse to committing themselves to political parties or other traditional institutions (such as trade unions), whether in terms of identification or membership.² Much of this trend has become apparent since the end of the 1980s, though its significance has only more recently begun to crystallise in that the more political parties fail in their capacity to engage the people and secure their trust, and the more democracy is perceived to move beyond popular involvement and control, the longer the shadow cast over the meaning and sustainability of contemporary representative government.

STATE OF PLAY

... non-conventional politics comes to life

Then again, if politics is not what it used to be given this public estrangement, neither is the new world of non-conventional politics. The real or imagined loss of freedom to call the shots on policy-making through institutionalised channels of democratic input has been gradually compensated for over the past few decades with a rise in extra-representative forms of political action – for example, signing petitions, boycotting certain products or participating in demonstrations and single-issue protest movements.³ Yet, such alternative forms of political activism – which flourish with the use of modern technological advances in information and communication processes and seek to carve a new niche for citizens in the democratic equation – go hand in hand with an ever brazen exercise of what has been labelled as the freedom to be angry or even to hate. Today's indignation is expressed, for example, at street protests, on social media or in the vote cast for (new) political entrepreneurs, who are ready to articulate a stigmatising rhetoric that panders to people's anti-austerity and/or anti-elite sentiments as an alternative form of political representation.

And so the ranting begins, pitting 'ordinary people' against the 'other': the self-interested mainstream politicians, the smug and faceless Brussels bureaucrats, the globalisers, the non-patriots, the greedy corporations, the lazy southerners, the dictating lenders, the corrupt 'young' member states, the undocumented workers from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, the terrorist migrants from North Africa and the Middle East, the undeserving rich hiding their wealth offshore, the crony capitalism, and the unfettered liberalism, to name but a few of the many perceived enemies often invoked.

Before you know it, the language and practice of fundamental rights is betrayed, non-Christian refugees are warded off with razor wire fences, arson attacks are carried out on asylum centres and on Eastern European business establishments abroad, EU membership is renounced in a referendum and carefully guarded from aspiring countries, illiberal democracies claiming to protect the nation state from external and internal threats are announced, the sense of unity and readiness for collective action fizzles, and populist parties and demagogues of diverse ideological colours outdo the establishment at the ballot box or inspire it in national parliaments, because, if nothing else, it is suddenly possible – as well as apparently acceptable – to do so.

PROSPECTS

Does it matter?

What is one to make of this new political age? Is the Western democratic model and well-being really threatened from 'outside' and by 'them'? Is this unscripted bluntness an exercise of free speech or a fundamentally destabilising momentum? Are politicians putting oil on fire or responsibly setting off alarm bells? Is our moralising finger pointing in the right direction or have we inexcusably omitted to critically evaluate ourselves first? And what might all this portend for the future?

Despite chilling comparisons of the situation now with that of the 1930s, the usual message is that we should be concerned but ultimately we need not worry. Mature democracies can sustain a fair amount of dissent, discontent and disinterest, which may simply reflect higher standards and modernised ways of political participation. Domestic politics are undoubtedly susceptible at present to outside-in patterns and developments but contemporary European populists on the left and right sides of the spectrum have so far only succeeded in putting spanners in the works of

mainstream politicians rather than determining actual policy outcomes.⁴ Both the establishment and its challengers are today fundamentally democratic (at least in understanding democracy as popular sovereignty and majority rule), and – at any rate – the democratic ideal is by now hegemonic, we are told.

Yet, is a fearful, parochial and scapegoating democracy that assigns blame first and foremost on 'others' really on solid ground and worthy of its name?

Scholars of political culture argue that the fate of political systems hinges upon people's attitudes to it, and in this school of thought, self-expression values – including emphasis on personal and political liberty, civilian protest activities, tolerance of the liberty of others, a sense of subjective well-being echoed in life-satisfaction, and interpersonal trust – have the strongest effects on a society's democratic quality. According to Welzel and Inglehart (2005)⁵, this is because democracy is not simply a matter of institutional engineering but a normative construction that places individual liberty over collective discipline, human diversity over group conformity and civic autonomy over state authority. Unless support for democracy is coupled with these specific values above any others, it is all but essentially hollow. Put differently, without a strong liberal core that reflects an intrinsic preference for political institutions that guarantee human choice, democracy is but a fragile shell and overt system support is little more than lip service to a lofty concept.

The World Value Survey shows that Western democracies have indeed become steadily more liberal on many social issues in recent decades, as well as more assertive in political terms with regard to popular rights and freedoms. At the same time, an undercurrent of intolerance, dissatisfaction, mistrust, and authoritarian predilections appears to be shaping up both in opposition and as a backlash against some of the components of the self-expression trend.

Perhaps the gradual liberalisation of our societies has been taken now as some sort of 'moral licencing' to resort to, in this case, illiberalism, after engaging in repeated acts of inclusion and openness over many years.⁶ Whatever the mechanics of this backpedalling, to the extent that we are starting to speak out of both sides of the mouth with respect to some of these values that form the bedrock of our democracies, the enemy 'within' can become even more dangerous than the enemy 'out there'. It is in this sense that joining the prejudiced drumbeat of warnings about external threats can amount to internal sabotage, undermining our confidence in the very values that are the building blocks of our European democratic societies.

Anyone up for therapy?

This is not to conceal or underestimate the complexity and difficulties of this time and age. These are genuine, undeniable and unavoidable and, as such, need to be effectively addressed at all levels. At the heart of the fears animating citizens, media coverage or the populists' campaign trails are actual issues, such as economic and social inequality, the loss of future perspective especially among the younger generations, the Europeanisation and internationalisation of national decision-making beyond the traditional *demos*, and some of the challenges of multiculturalism and immigration. These touch on what ails the people but to adequately confront such problems – something which populists promise but fail to deliver – taking a good look in the mirror at 'us' might be every bit as important as combating 'them'.

A number of critical questions follow: Do we need to revise cultural norms and concepts like tolerance, secularism and solidarity in keeping with times in which multiculturalism and interdependencies are a fact of life? Do we need to reform the functioning of modern democracies by renewing the political shape of our national and post-national institutions to follow the scope of problems we face around the clock? Do we need to reconsider national democracy as the point of reference for organising political life when the problems we face are highly complex and their resolution relies on nothing short of supra-national coordination and cooperation? Do we need to review the feasibility and utility of mediation and party political representation in the age of globalisation and new technologies that radically affect political life? Do we need to reassess the manner in which we run our economies and social affairs or the way in which we frame immigration policy? Do we need to forget about the 'business as usual' approach and press ahead with the creation of a supra-national type of state among a core of like-minded countries?⁷ Do we need a political IBM Watson-like tech platform⁸ to help us deal with unsolvable problems and make sense of our increasingly complex democratic circumstances? Do we need to smartly unpack our democratic model to cope more easily with modernity or should we rather keep trying to pack up reality to make it fit our concept of democracy?

Answering these and other questions means finding out what we should or are willing to put on the line to defend the values and ideas that underpin our democratic systems, while keeping popular frustration at bay and standing up to populist leaders' empty claims.

To be sure, considerable research efforts and widespread discussions about, for example, changes to national electoral systems, the role and powers of national assemblies, local or regional government, and the European Parliament, and direct forms of popular participation in elections and decision-making, including in the EU, have already been devoted to the search for a better quality of democracy, and have led to sometimes substantial institutional reform processes across Europe. However, these endeavours have so far tended to worship at the same shrine of popular democracy and economic orthodoxy that are now in shambles, have thought to reproduce national democracy – its failures notwithstanding – at the European level, have steered clear of thrusting sacred concepts (like national sovereignty) into the spotlight by running tactical and rhetorical circles around sensitive decisions, have arguably made insufficient use of IT in an ever more technologically-savvy society, and, ultimately, did not manage to fix the dilemmas of our polities. New thinking is therefore necessary and it must go beyond politico-institutional engineering to tackle questions like the ones above.

Perhaps the conclusion will be that nothing short of wholesale – almost revolutionary – reform is required at national and/or EU level. Or maybe it will just help us to stay the course with only minor tweaks to the current sweeping meanders. Either way, rather than jumping on the left- and right-wing populists' bandwagon – which so far has proven at best undignified and at worst paralysing – this reflection process has to be set in train. Without a shared ambition to undertake a potentially uncomfortable soul-searching to clearly establish our red lines – the attitudes, values and concepts that are up for compromise and the ones that are sacred – and to identify and own up to the faults and limitations in our existing models and means, we risk to become as unpredictable and vulnerable as our surroundings. If democratic governments managed so far not just to survive but to thrive through history's epic challenges (like economic depression, war or authoritarianism) it is because they underwent extraordinary changes in terms of institutions, ideas and scope to respond to altered circumstances. Once again, at present, adaptability seems to have become the operational word. Yet, in the inevitable process of finding the 21st century-appropriate ways to translate our democratic goals into practice – within national contexts and through continued European cooperation – it is essential to uphold a true stronghold of inflexibility around our polities' liberal core.

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- 1 See Mair, Peter (2010), "The political crisis", *EUI Review*, pp.20-21.
 - 2 Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the void. The hollowing of Western democracy*, London: Verso.
 - 3 Peters, Yvette (2016), "Hollower democracy? Studying the consequences of a changing demos" in Muller-Rommel, Ferdinand and Casal Bertoa, Fernando (ed.), *Party politics and democracy in Europe: Essays in honour of Peter Mair*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 197-213.
 - 4 Balfour Rosa *et al.* (2016), "Europe's troublemakers: the populist challenge to foreign policy", *EPC Report*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
 - 5 Welzel, Christian and Inglehart, Ronald (2005), *Modernisation, cultural change and democracy: the human development sequence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 - 6 See Gladwell, Malcolm, *Revisionist History Podcast*, revisionisthistory.com.
 - 7 See, for example, the different potential scenarios or options discussed in Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Zuleeg, Fabian (2016), "EU@60 – Countering a regressive and illiberal Europe", *Input Paper* prepared for EPC Strategic Council and 20th Anniversary Conference, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
 - 8 See <http://www.ibm.com/watson/>, last accessed on 27/09/2016.

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