

Liberal Democracies in Crisis

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Openness, patience and firmness of purpose: in the fight for modern liberal democracy, this triad is our only hope.

With Donald Trump, an openly racist, sexist and unscrupulous populist has emerged as the victor in the race to the White House ? unscathed by all the scandals, lies and empty promises, no matter how absurd. Hate and insults were his stylistic methods as he rode the anti-elitist mood. His lack of political experience was to become the unique selling point of the Trump brand as he positioned himself as the popular choice. ?We are the movement; the establishment is up there, out of reach.?

This dangerous message is nothing new. It was this mood ? in Italy, Germany and Spain ? which sent 20th century Europe to the brink of the abyss. Then too, those who held the democratic system in contempt moved away from the margins and into the mainstream, penetrating to the very heart of middle-class society. The great Social Democrat Julius Leber described, full of despair, how the democratic forces of the Weimar Republic failed to find a language to resist the violence of the words and symbols of its enemies. The Jewish author Stefan Zweig sensed the impending decline of European modernism long before hate plunged the world into all-out war.

In today?s Europe, too, there is profound mistrust of the political system. And once again, the far right is massing: UKIP in Great Britain, Le Pen in France, the FPÖ in Austria, Jobbik in Hungary, PiS in Poland and the AfD in Germany. What unites them all is their rejection of democratic processes; they all promise a return to a world of certainty, a less complex world, a world in which the nation, male power and order are still secure. But a free world will never be free from uncertainty. It will never be free from change or from challenges, both internal and external ? but this is denounced by those on the far right. Their message is simple: no parliamentary waffle, no weighing up of complex legal issues, no negotiating any

compromises within our own society or with other countries. Instead, let's build walls to keep out the others and those who are different. Let's go back to male power, back to old-style marriage and the traditional model of the family, back to segregation of black and white, back to a strong nation and an empire. The new-era old-style tsar in the East led the way. Pussy Riot ? sent to a labour camp. Homosexuality ? driven underground. International rules - for us, might is right. The proponents of this far-right internationalism gathered for a family photograph in Crimea back in spring 2014, when members of the French, British, Greek and Hungarian right acted as the Kremlin's international ?election observers? during the farcical referendum which paved the way for the illegal annexation of Crimea.

Diversity, difference, lifestyle choice ? none of them has any place in this anti-modernist world. Negotiation as a way of resolving differences, interest in other cultures, even the courage to embrace uncertainty ? all are rejected. Truth, standards and values no longer apply. The cement that binds Western liberal society together is crumbling, sending us into a tailspin and threatening to deprive our society of its internal cohesion.

There are many reasons why this is happening. The rise of populism on both sides of the Atlantic is the outcome of a development which has been described as the fraying of modern liberal democracy. Our society is in a state of flux. The democratic system can no longer deliver on its promise of prosperity. Modernism's narrative of progress has lost credibility. People are losing faith in religion, and trusted role models are breaking down. The promise of continuous economic advancement has proved to be undeliverable. Buffeted by the growing pace of change and a life permanently lived online, people are drifting towards ever greater individualisation. The social media create inward-looking echo chambers which simply replicate and reinforce people's own beliefs. The lack of orientation and a sense of relentless isolation are the consequences.

This shattering of old certainties is reinforced by the global refugee movements. The lack of willingness on the part of many European countries to offer shelter to those in need puts additional pressure on Germany. Many people are worried. *Why is it down to us and no one else? How many more will come? What is being demanded of us, of our society and economy?*

Until now, the EU has responded to crises by drawing closer together. But the vote for Brexit has raised the question of whether reversing the process might be a possibility. For the first time, there is a question mark over the survival of the EU itself. People have forgotten that European integration originally began as a peace project in response to two world wars.

So Trump's election must be a wake-up call ? for everyone, on both sides of the Atlantic. Populism and therefore Trump's victory could well serve as a model for other politicians of his ilk across the democratic world, inciting populists, nationalists and racists in Europe too. If Marine Le Pen were elected as French President next year and the AfD became the third largest party in the Bundestag, the European project could genuinely start to wobble.

So what is to be done? There is no going back to the old world's supposed certainties. Many of our Green political projects hold great appeal for the upper middle class ? but they barely reflect the realities of many people's lives. *You shop at the discount shop? Enjoy a steak? Still a smoker? Your car is your pride and joy? Worried about your changing neighbourhood? Your son is gay and that's hard for you to deal with?* The world has grown more complex. We must take people's insecurities seriously and rebuild their trust in the ability of politics to provide solutions. Let's address the urgent questions ? even the ugly ones. Let's face up to the fact that these questions are being asked. Let's cope with the contradictions and be willing to listen and allow space for doubt. **This will not shatter our belief in openness, patience and firmness of purpose. In the fight for our modern liberal democracy, this triad is our only hope.**

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