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The legacy of neoliberalism and the rise of the extreme Right

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The legacy of neoliberalism and the rise of the extreme Right

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Abstract:

The paper directs attention to the rise of the extreme Right in the context of political and social changes within European societies during the last forty years. This brings the legacy of neoliberalism into focus. The author holds that neoliberalism and the rise of the extreme Right are linked in two ways: neoliberalism in itself is an antidemocratic and socially destructive political project, and by undermining social foundations of citizenship, it paved the way for the extreme Right. The latter exploits social fears rooted in societies that ever more drift apart.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, policy, inequality, citizenship, extreme Right.

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The rise of the extreme Right at about the same time in many European countries is frightening. It calls for explanations. Some look to the 1920s and 1930s for parallels; others point to the unique constellation of multiple crises coinciding – the challenges of climate change, migration, a war in central Europe. While I am rather sceptical with regard to premature parallels to the 1920s and 1930s, I don't question at all the seriousness of those multiple challenges and their coincidence. But I would like to add a somewhat different point of view, something that is missing in the German public debate. To explain the rise of the extreme Right, it is not sufficient to focus on the issues of migration and climate change, the issues that the extreme Right addresses with aggression and denial. Aggression and denial are very peculiar reactions, and call themselves for explanations. I therefore suggest to look at political and social changes *within* European societies during the last forty years. The extreme Right, I propose, exploits social fears rooted in societies that ever more drift apart.

This brings the legacy of neoliberal policies since the 1970s into focus. They have been potent drivers of inequality of a special kind. I will argue that the links between neoliberalism and the rise of the extreme Right are twofold. Neoliberalism in itself is an antidemocratic and socially destructive political project. And by undermining the social foundations of citizenship – this is the crucial point that I want to stress – it paved the way for the rise of the extreme Right in Europe in times of crisis. I will consider the political project of neoliberalism and its consequences first, and then turn to the rise of the extreme Right.

Neoliberalism – an antidemocratic and socially destructive political project

I use the term 'neoliberalism' as it is discussed in recent works by historians, as a set of political ideas, goals and actions which promote, nationally and globally, the dominance of markets over politics. It is itself a *political project* (Slobodian, 2019, p. 41) that aims, as Adam Tooze pointedly states, at *depoliticizing* issues of the very unequal distribution of social risks, be they related to work, health or ecology (Tooze, 2021, p. 19f.). Or in other words, neoliberalism seeks by any political and legal means to "insulate markets" (a phrase used by Quinn Slobodian, 2019, p. 12) from democracy, that is first and foremost from politics of redistribution (Chamayou 2019, p. 346f.; Slobodian, 2019, p. 29). The departure from progressive taxation since the 1980s in the US and in countries of Western Europe is a striking sign of its advancement.

But the political project of neoliberalism does not confine itself to shield markets from redistribution. Neoliberal politics create and forcefully interfere in markets. They impose rules of markets on social institutions that for good reasons before followed other logics (universities for instance); they replace public services with services provided by markets that are supposed

to generate profits. And they seek to free capital, the dominant actor in markets, from legal restrictions.

In this political project, the state has to be weak and strong at the same time (Chamayou, 2019, p. 301): weak in representing the interests of the people in and against markets; strong in the capacity to create markets, and to protect those who reap the profits against the interests of the people. Neoliberalism is not liberal in the sense of the 18th century; it is an authoritarian liberalism, as Grégoire Chamayou calls it. Remember that Friedrich v. Hayek, its best known protagonist, came up in support of Pinochet's dictatorship.

Some from the Left argue: neoliberalism is just capitalism. Yes, it is capitalism. But no, it is not 'just capitalism'. It is, to use a phrase from French historian Pierre Rosanvallon, a "grand counter attack" (Rosanvallon, 2013, p. 247), a counter attack against social achievements after WWII. Neoliberal policies attack and undermine social rights. And by attacking and undermining social rights, they attack citizenship.

Social rights in capitalism, such as mandatory social insurances that provide support in critical junctures of life, rights to housing, health care, education and other social services, help to make people's lives less dependent on markets which they cannot control; labor laws, the rights to strike and collective bargaining somewhat balance the uneven distribution of power between capital and labor, employers and employees. It took decades of struggles, often bloody ones, to conquer those rights from capital. The struggles also transformed the understanding of society. Rosanvallon speaks of a "revolution" (Rosanvallon, 2013, p. 224) in thinking and morals, beginning at the end of the 19th century. Sociology, the young academic discipline that established itself in France at the time, now conceived society as constituted by the *interdependence of its members*. Social cohesion, in consequence, was to depend on the institutionalized recognition of *mutual responsibilities*. Already at the turn of the century, the 'revolution' in thinking and morals aimed at social reforms, not at overthrowing capitalism.

What is so important about social rights, the third pillar of citizenship, besides personal rights and political rights? Social rights are the *precondition* for personal and political rights to work for the people and not just for the privileged few. In short: social rights are not only the backbone of modern welfare states but of democracy as well.

Thomas Humphrey Marshall, the classic thinker about the welfare state, in his famous lecture on 'Citizenship and Social Class', given shortly after WWII, sees citizenship and the class system in the 20th century at *war* with each other (Marshall, 1992, p. 81). Only after two world

wars, revolutionary outbreaks in central and eastern Europe and a worldwide crisis of the capitalist economy in between, citizenship up to the 1970s considerably gained ground, not victory though. Citizenship nowhere prevailed to take democratic control in and of the economy. In fact, the extension of social rights signified a historical compromise *within* the class system, it helped to actually maintain the dominance of capital. But beginning in the 1970s, during a crisis of capital accumulation, even the compromise was called into question. Policies of neoliberalism first in the UK and the US started counter attacks against growing demands of workers, social and ecological movements (Chamayou, 2019). By promoting markets over politics, imposing taboos on redistribution, and undermining social rights, neoliberal policies undermine democracy.

To be sure: neoliberalism is neither a *coherent* set of ideas and actions nor did it progress without resistance. On the global level, even the WTO, once the most prominent neoliberal success story of a legal construction to shield the world market from national politics, has become embattled. On the level of the EU, the dominance of market integration over the integration of fiscal and social policies is a constant source of conflict. And on the national level, neoliberal policies always encountered and tried to adapt to different national settings, institutional traditions, and social-political constellations. The varieties of capitalism and welfare states *still* matter. Germany is in this respect neither France nor the UK, and even Thatcher in the UK did not succeed in privatizing and dismantling the public health system. But the strengthening of markets over social rights began to dominate all over Western Europe. Even countries of the ‘northern’ social model or rather close to it, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, underwent drastic changes with socially destructive consequences. Sweden in the 1990s became a “trailblazer in the privatization of public services – both in health care and the school sector” (Strittmater, 2022), followed by huge transfers from the public to the private sector. The Netherlands in 2006 privatized health insurance, with ever increasing costs for the citizens (Müller, 2024); it also forcefully promoted the ‘flexibilization’ of labor markets, fostering precarious work. Sometimes social democratic governments, not only conservative ones, pushed for markets reigning over politics.

Effects of neoliberal onslaughts on society in Europe

Again I am very much aware that everything that I am going to state is overly simplistic, given the varieties of neoliberal policies and of national differences. But it seems justified to point to some developments which show in various countries of the EU since the 1990s: growing inequalities in terms of income (Beckfield, 2016) and particularly of wealth; the detachment of two opposite social poles from the middle layers of society. The pole on top consists of managers and professionals who operate in financial markets and transnational corporations, with close connections to politics and administrations, freed and freeing itself from responsibilities for local enterprises in terms of job protection, and for society at large in terms of taxation. I call it the “zone of exclusivity” (Kronauer, 2020, p. 44f.), German sociologist Michael Hartmann speaks with regard to the US, the UK, and Germany of the “detached” (die “Abgehobenen”; Hartmann, 2018). At the other extreme emerged a pole consisting of people cut off from essential resources for participating in society, the marginalized in the ‘zone of exclusion’. In between the zones of exclusivity and exclusion, labor market and social “reforms” (Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011) promoted cleavages within the working classes and within the middle layers of society: between people in precarious positions with regard to the labor market, employment, income and social protection, and people with rather stable integration on all those levels. Growing social inequalities overlap with spatial inequalities, inside cities, but also between prospering regions and regions in decline (often old industrial regions). With the weakening of rent protection, the privatization of public housing stocks, and the financialization of real-estate markets, housing became in many European cities again the central issue of a new social question, affecting most people at the lower end of the class and income hierarchy.

But there is still another, more general effect. With the advance of neoliberalism, the meaning of individualization changed. The individualization Ulrich Beck wrote about in his book ‘Risk Society’ from 1986 referred to the weakening of traditional social (particularly class-based) ties and obligations. Individualization in this context meant: people were to some degree *liberated* to have more choices in determining the course of their lives. As a consequence, they also had to face the risks that go with making deliberate choices.

It is important to note that this opening up of opportunities was generated and backed by the extension of social insurance provisions and of social services, in particular in education, and a distribution of incomes and wealth in the three decades after WWII that lifted the boat for all

despite persisting inequalities. Or in other words: it depended on the extension of social rights that strengthened citizenship in its war with the class system.

Individualization in times of neoliberalism, in contrast, means: ever more people are *forced* to take risks and responsibilities in contexts beyond their control, with much less backing by society. Deprived of their political capacities, people count in neoliberalism first and foremost as consumers in a world set up by global players on financial markets and internet oligopolies. This is rather successful. It works quite well for capitalism to attach people to the endless stream of meaningless informations and the universe of commodities.

Class relations and inequalities based on class not only persist, they become even stronger in the ever more market-driven ‘risk society’ of today. But the class *society*, characterized by class-specific communities and their political and cultural representations, disappeared, as François Dubet argues (Dubet, 2008, p. 469). The argument seems to be valid with regard to the political and cultural representations of working classes, not least because social democratic parties have abandoned any reference to wage labor, courting instead a fictitious ‘middle’ of society. But I don’t think that the argument also holds true for the closely-knit communities of the upper class and their political and cultural representations.

Is the era of neoliberalism coming to a close?

We currently observe a recourse to more state interventions in markets under pressures of global risks. Does this indicate that we are approaching or have already reached the end of the era of neoliberalism? At present, I would answer: yes and no. Already in response to the Covid pandemic, central banks and governments departed from neoliberal principles. Adam Tooze, the British historian of the economy, in his book ‘Shutdown’ (‘Die Welt im Lockdown’) takes stock of the unorthodox interventions of central banks buying state bonds, in coordination with an extension of fiscal policies by governments. The purpose of intervention, however, was foremost to prevent the imminent breakdown of the financial markets that had been politically liberalized since the 1970s, the most decisive neoliberal transformation. In the end, the wealthiest 10% and not the (for a short time) much hailed nursing staff in the hospitals benefitted most (Tooze, 2021, p. 171).

Other important political actions during the pandemic, the ad-hoc decisions to financially protect vulnerable professions and businesses, to protect renters from eviction, employees from losing their jobs, demonstrated that politics for the people, and not dictated by markets, *are* actually possible. But this makeshift response was not followed up by lasting measures

afterwards, not in Germany, and as far as I know not in other countries. In Germany, inequality *increased* in the wake of the pandemic, not only in school performance (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021; OECD, 2023).

We observe recourse to more state intervention in markets also under pressures of climate catastrophies and geopolitical shifts. Some European governments and the EU, meanwhile, and for good reasons, embark upon contradictory industrial policies to push for ecological transformation and to reduce economic dependence on foreign powers such as Russia and China.

Does the recourse to more state intervention in markets also signal a turnaround with regard to social citizenship, a move to strengthen social rights again? The answer will depend on the powers that fight for it. In Germany, the introduction of a statutory minimum wage in 2015, after trade unions campaigned for it, was a countering measure against the promotion of the low-wage sector ten years earlier by the social democratic-green Schröder government. But currently, expenditures for much needed social and infrastructure policies are again called into question with the argument of budgetary restrictions. Up to the present, the legacy of neoliberalism, the economic dominance of financial markets (including shadow banks), the institutionalized budgetary constraints in the ECU, though recently softened somewhat, and the taboo of tax progression, is still in place. It still protects those who benefit most from inequality in the distribution of wealth and social risks. Adam Tooze (2024) in a recently delivered talk sharply criticizes the German debt break, anchored in the constitution, as deliberate antidemocratic policy that plays in the hands of the extreme Right.

Two ways of destroying democracy

What does all this mean for the prospects of democracy? With the advancement of neoliberalism, two particular *political* threats for democracy have emerged. The first threat consists in the political project of neoliberalism itself, to insulate capitalism from democracy and to impose the dominance of markets over politics. It has brought to power a set of politicians who openly disregarded democratic institutions. The second and related threat consists in the emergence of parties and movements of the extreme Right that flourish on the social destructions that neoliberal policies have produced.

With Berlusconi in Italy, Trump in the US, Johnson in the UK, Kurz in Austria, a new type of politicians entered the stage in the US and Western Europe who virtually *embody* in their characters neoliberal attitudes, with a cynical approach towards democratic institutions.

Ownership of private mass media or close connections to such media provided them with tools of power formerly unheard of. They turned politics into deal-making and gambling, into shows to entertain and deceive the public, into bending rules and laws to one's own benefit. Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US, the 'vanguard' of political neoliberalism so to speak, recklessly pursued what they considered to be their mission; they were determined to break the powers of trade unions, to privatize public infrastructure, and to cut taxes. But they did not call into question the institutions of representative democracy in their country as Trump does and even Johnson did in his attempt to sidestep one of the oldest parliaments in history. Quinn Slobodian in his most recent book 'Crack-up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World without Democracy' ('Kapitalismus ohne Demokratie') points to the threat of a further radicalization of the neoliberal project, represented by such exemplary figures of contemporary capitalism as Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. They seek to forestall the powers of potential democratic interference by carving out ever more privatized, i.e. capitalized spaces, including outer space. In the US, a new type of *despotism* soon might deeply remake the country, combining the reckless personalization and privatization of politics (the system Trump) with the further privatization and capitalization of the public sphere (the system promoted by Musk and other 'tech billionaires', Krugman, 2024). It would have gloomy ramifications for Europe as well.

The second threat, in some respects similar, in others different, shows in the rise of parties of the extreme Right in Europe. They gain ground with a programmatic mélange of aggressive fights against migration, combined quite often with demands for social policies exclusively for the 'natives' (Wilders; Le Pen; Höcke). Also common is a fierce opposition to policies addressing climate change. And directed against the EU, right-wing nationalism promises to 'take control again' and to brush up national pride: 'make America great again' resonates in similar slogans of the Right in Europe. But despite commonalities in goals with regard to migration, climate policies, and nationalism, there is a remarkable ideological difference between the extreme Right in the US and in Europe: the former is strongly anti-state, the latter wants a strong state, but exclusively for oneself.

Who is attracted by the extreme Right, who votes for it? There are plenty of variations in national contexts and manifestations of the extreme Right and its supporters. But there is also a common pattern: more men than women are among the voters, more people with lower than with higher formal education; workers are overrepresented compared to their share in the population; the extreme Right comes up stronger in regions and districts with declining

population and declining economic fortunes, than in prosperous regions and districts; in rural areas more than in cities.

This is not to say, however, that the parties of the extreme Right are just collecting the losers of social change (actually, the worst off, the unemployed and poor, more often abstain from voting than to participate in it). The leading figures of right-wing parties have, with very few exceptions, academic backgrounds. They represent and attract, to use Seymour Lipset's famous characterization of fascism, the "extremism of the center" (Lipset, 1963, p. 129), of voters from the middle class. And the regional divide is only a gradual one. In the last election in the West German state of Hesse, the party of the extreme Right came up in second place, ahead of the Greens and the social democratic party (SPD). Hesse once was a stronghold of the SPD and is by no means a declining region. Fear of social decline rather than the actual experience of personal decline might have affected voters, even well-paid and social-insured industrial workers. But as recent studies indicate, the 'extremism of the center', in this respect similar to the extreme Right in the US, also has roots in a libertarian rejection of all kinds of rules imposed by state authorities, such as the rules during the Covid pandemic.

How can we account for the rise of the extreme Right?

Is it just a manifestation of attitudes that already existed for a long time in significant parts of the population, which has so far largely remained under the political surface, and now comes to the fore? This might well be an important aspect of the explanation. Surveys looking on a regular basis into social and political attitudes of the German population, for instance, found evidence that time and again a considerable share of respondents (about 15%) held xenophobic and antidemocratic views. I don't know about such surveys in other countries, but can imagine that Germany in this respect is not a singular case. A question, however, still remains: Why does the extreme Right acquire such a momentum right now? And why does it seem to attract ever more people? How strongly fixed are the attitudes to which it appeals anyway?

A similar and related explanation for the rise of the extreme Right points to a 'cultural war' in which the Right is rather successful. According to this explanation, the cultural struggles are framed in terms of the values and world views of 'cosmopolitans' – academically educated liberals, benefitting from the globalized economy, and celebrating an urban lifestyle with diversity and wokeness – as against the values and world views of family-oriented 'locals' with conservative attitudes towards gender and morals, often invoked by the extreme Right as the 'hard working' people. On the surface, conflicts about gendering language, inclusion, and migration might point in that direction. A recently published book by sociologist Steffen Mau

and colleagues questions the existence of such polarizing cultural frontiers, at least for Germany. The authors found in their own survey, and by drawing upon already published empirical studies, a broad middle ground, not polarization, in the perception of the issues hotly debated in public. They conclude that media and opinion leaders of all kinds use the issues as triggerpoints to *produce* polarization. This is an important finding. It indicates that the cultural battles – in Germany and maybe also in other European countries – might not emerge so much out of fixed antagonistic values and attitudes; the battlefield itself might instead be set up by political and economic interests, including the marketing interests of social media. But this again leads me to a further question: Why do the triggers work? Mau and his colleagues give us a hint: most responsive to triggers of anger are those whom they describe as “exhausted by change” (“Veränderungerschöpfung”, Mau et al., 2024, p. 349), people with the least social and economic resources to adapt. What kind of changes are involved?

Zygmunt Bauman in his last essay with the title ‘Strangers at our door’, provides us with a further clue for analysis. And here I come back to the central argument stated at the beginning. Bauman argues, with reference to the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Miroslav Hroch: nationalism and ethnicity are substitutes for means of integration in a disintegrating society (Bauman, 2016, p. 64). I want to modify the argument somewhat to link what I have said so far about neoliberalism to the rise of the extreme Right. With Adam Tooze, I have characterized neoliberalism as a political project to depoliticize issues of inequality, i.e. to shield capital from the demands of people. It undermines social rights and social citizenship, and thereby the very institutional base of social cohesion in democratic societies. Neoliberalism, in other words, is a driving force of disintegration. This has far-reaching political consequences: by promoting, globally and nationally, the dominance of markets over politics, neoliberal policies have already produced a political void that the extreme Right seeks to fill with its own politics, based on nationalism and ethnic purity. The extreme Right in their own, antidemocratic way, wants to re-establish the dominance of politics – politics in this case understood with Carl Schmitt as the power of the state to define and persecute its enemies.

I will elaborate this argument a bit more. We know from international comparative studies how important institutions are for the well-being, the social, and the political participation of people. More egalitarian countries, with stronger provisions of social welfare and social protection, with trustworthy political institutions, have positive effects in all three dimensions – well-being, social as well as political participation. They also score higher in dimensions that reflect degrees of social cohesion – social trust, political trust, tolerance, perceived tensions between rich and poor, young and old, different ethnic groups (Böhnke, 2010; Böhnke, 2011; Green and Janmaat,

2011). The OECD in 2015 published a report with the telling title ‘In it together. Why less inequality benefits all’. From an epidemiological perspective, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their famous book ‘The Spirit Level. Why more equal societies always do better’, published in 2009, make the same point with regard to health. They emphasize that more egalitarian societies generate lower levels of social fear. This is not only beneficial for health, they argue, but also for social contacts and trust.

Is ethnic homogeneity a precondition for societies being more egalitarian? Andy Green and Jan Germen Janmaat in their comparative study ‘Regimes of social cohesion’ from 2011 provide evidence that speaks against such conditionality (Green and Janmaat, 2011, p. 183-186).

If we take seriously the findings just outlined – and I don’t see any reason why we should not – it becomes obvious that neoliberal politics attack the very institutions on which the quality of well-being, social, and political participation depends. They undermine the basic sense of *security* in society on which trust can build – trust in others, trust in one’s capability to participate and have an impact in social life, and shared trust with others in social and political institutions. As drivers of inequality, they are at the same time a driving force of social disintegration. Rules of markets cannot replace institutions of mutual responsibilities without putting society at risk of disintegrating.

This is how neoliberal onslaughts prepared the breeding ground for the extreme Right. The extreme Right exploits social fears, including fears of status decline, of not counting anymore. It pretends to provide people with a community that they can rely on and identify with, and that shields them from external threats – the fictitious community of the ethnically pure nation. And it seeks to elevate the self-esteem of the members of this fictitious community by degrading others, the non-members, be they construed as non-conforming to one’s own world views and values, or as outright aliens. The external threats that the extreme Right promises to eliminate are climate change and migration – the former by denying its existence, the latter by force and oppression. Eliminating these external threats is supposed to protect against internal threats – against competitors for jobs, housing, and income, and against otherwise necessary changes in one’s everyday life due to concerns for the environment.

We know the pattern from followers of fascism: social fears, rooted in social conditions beyond one’s control, seek relief in denial and aggression, the latter directed against personal incorporations of the hated political ‘system’, but most of all against everyone exposed as a stranger. Fear belongs to those emotions and might be the strongest among them that are most

susceptible to right-wing propaganda and manipulation, as Illouz (2023) and Nussbaum (2019) demonstrate.

The extreme Right in Europe of today presents itself, however, in new guise, as Anton Jäger in a contribution to the New York Times convincingly argues. It does not progress, as in the 1920s and 1930s, by politically mobilizing for an imminent civil war against a strong working-class left (which no longer exists), but rather on the *depoliticization* of people. And “rather than expand outward”, the “main desire” of the extreme Right, he writes, “is to shield Europe from the rest of the world”. In geopolitical terms, “the goal is adaptation to decline, not its reversal”. This reminds us of Eric Hobsbawm’s dictum “the characteristic nationalist movements of the late twentieth century are essentially negative...Time and again they seem to be reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world” (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 164).

I want to add another aspect to Jäger’s argument regarding the difference between the rise of the extreme Right in Germany in the 1930s and today. In the 1930s, major factions of German capitalists came out in open support of the Nazis. They thought they could use Hitler to smash the labor movement and its organizations, and still keep control of him, his party and his followers. In Germany today, there is no serious challenge to capitalism, and no need for big capital to take side with the extreme Right. Major companies in considerable numbers sponsored advertisements against it in widely read bourgeois newspapers (Die Zeit a; b, 2024). To be sure, there are many complaints raised by organised industry, with regard to bureaucracy, compliance regulations in supply chains and so forth (SZ online, 2024). A particularly critical issue remains the ecological transformation, its speed, financial backing by public investment, and the costs of energy. But so far, the extreme Right does not seem to be very attractive to an export-oriented industry in need of qualified labor from abroad. And the way back to combustion engines as promising strategy for the automobile industry is already blocked by competitors from China and the US. However, capital is opportunistic. If popular support would bring the extreme Right in positions of political power, capital will not resist but use its influence to make the best out of it. The decisive political task, therefore, is to stem the tide of popular support.

I argued that the extreme Right tries to exploit social fears, denying climate change and resisting migration. Climate catastrophies will not disappear by denial, nor will migration disappear by building fortresses within and around Europe. Whereas climate change should be stopped or at least slowed down in large measure as soon as possible to avoid further environmental and

human disasters, migration is different by its very nature. People have changed their habitats throughout the history of mankind. This is one of the ways by which the human species survives. Even if the causes of forced migration (wars, poverty, discrimination) were eliminated – and we are further away from such a condition than ever – migration would continue. And not to forget: highly developed capitalist countries depend on it.

It is obvious that neither of these two global issues is easy to address. But it is as obvious that they cannot be properly addressed at all in societies that drift apart, that get ever more unequal (Kronauer, 2020). This is not possible already for the simple reason that questions of justice, and even more of injustice, are involved – justice and injustice not as academic questions in philosophical seminars, but as everyday life questions which play out in politics. Who should be most responsible for the reduction of CO₂ emissions in a country in which the wealthiest 10% account for almost six times as many emissions as the lower half of the population (these are figures for Germany)? In which neighborhoods are migrants going to live, which schools are their kids going to attend, how should integration be supported, when a city is highly segregated? When cities and towns are left alone and overburdened with the tasks of providing accomodation and aid?

Concluding remarks

I have sketched, with a rather broad brush, I admit, how the drama unfolded: how politics of depoliticizing issues of inequality in order to protect capital against demands of the people, have prepared the ground for the rise of the extreme Right, filling the void with their own politics based on nationalism and ethnic purity. What follows from this insight? It might well be that the politics of depoliticization were already so effective, that the majorities of a population are not even aware of the political rise of the extreme Right and its political and social implications. But this is not necessarily so. Maybe there are still majorities of people who don't want to live in a xenophobic society and in an authoritarian state, where the separation between government, jurisdiction, and the media is torn down. Orban's Hungary represents a regime that the extreme Right in Europe wants to emulate. Maybe it is still possible to direct those people's attention to what has already materialized of the right-wing programs in too many European countries: racist attacks, direct and indirect censorship, cronies of the ruling party placed in central positions within the jurisdiction and the media, flourishing corruption. And maybe it is still possible to mobilize those people to take action against the extreme Right, in the polling booth, at the workplace, on the streets, in trade unions, in sports clubs, in family and neighborhood. But mobilized they must be to take action. Such mobilization requires to rid

people of any illusions about the seriousness of the extreme Right, and to make them realize that nothing less is at stake than their own political and democratic existence.

Are the so-called parties of the center in Europe actually ready to mobilize? It looks more as if they hoped to win over followers from the extreme Right by adopting their positions, particularly those about migration, a strategy that never worked in history. A guest essay in the New York Times from last December appeared with the lead ‘Europe may be headed for something unthinkable’ (Kundnani, 2023). The ‘unthinkable’, that the author warns against, “is the convergence of the center right and the far right in Europe”. Such convergence is already in the making, not only with right-wing parties in governments as in Italy, Finland and the Netherlands, but also in Sweden, France, Germany, Austria, and it is not far to finalize. Not much time has been left to mobilize against it. In the Nordic countries, at least the outcomes of the European elections have been encouraging.

But it needs even more to get at the roots of the drama. It needs to bring inequality back on the political agenda again to keep the prospect of more egalitarian societies in Europe alive – the prospect of societies based on shared responsibilities, ready and able to extend their responsibilities to the global issues of climate change and migration. And it needs to finally confront those who already decades before the rise of the extreme Right have taken inequality off the political agenda.

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