

CHAPTER 5

THE LEGACY OF NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RISE OF THE EXTREME RIGHT IN EUROPE

Martin Kronauer

Introduction

The following text is based on my talk at the *laudatio* for Ole Johnny Olsen, May 2024, in Bergen. I extended it and submitted the chapter to the book last fall, prior to important developments pertinent to the subject, particularly the re-election of Trump. I had already considered the possibility of a new kind of ‘despotism’ that might emerge in such a case.

A few months later, we observed how this despotism had evolved at a breathtaking speed: the libertarian radicalisation of neoliberalism, a *coup d'état*, seeking to destroy and plunder federal political institutions, breaking with every principle of checks and balances, giving free rein to the wealthiest person on Earth to dismantle any impediments for his and other tech billionaires’ capacities of profit making.

A new stage of anti-social, capitalist modernisation in the age of digitalisation is in the making. This despotism was brought to political power by a majority (as small as it was) in a democratic election, drawing largely on an electorate composed of working-class and lower-middle-class voters. As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville warned of the possibility of a tyranny of the majority in the United States.

In late 2024, the majority enabled the establishment of a tyranny of billionaires.

It would require writing another piece to discuss how that electoral outcome was made possible, and what impact the US legacy of neoliberalism has had, including the history of deindustrialisation, the combination of financial and housing crises in 2008 and in subsequent years. It would also require another extended analysis to lay out the inner contradictions already visible in the policies of Trump's second term: tariffs that are supposed to strengthen US manufacturing but at the same time impose serious risks on US industries and threaten consumers with price hikes; policies that pretend to be anti-elitist but at the same time delegate unfettered political power to representatives of the most dominant economic elites.

In any case, we are now confronted with a US government and ruling business class that openly aligns itself with all fascist forces in Europe. The question that guided my writing – why and to what extent are European societies susceptible to the extreme right – in this constellation has become even more pressing today. The following considerations might still be helpful, I hope, in search of an answer. I only added some updates without changing the thrust of the arguments.

Outline of argument

The rise of the extreme right at about the same time in many European countries is frightening. It calls for explanation. Some look for parallels to the 1920s and 1930s; others point to the unique constellation of multiple coinciding crises – the challenges of climate change, migration, and a war in central Europe. While I am rather sceptical about drawing 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. 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. These are very peculiar reactions that call for explanations in themselves. I therefore suggest looking at

political and social changes *within* European societies during the last 40 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 anti-democratic 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 anti-democratic 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, 2019:41) that aims, as Adam Tooze pointedly states, at *de-politicising* issues of the very unequal distribution of social risks, be they related to work, health, or ecology (Tooze, 2021:19–20). Or in other words, neoliberalism seeks by any political and legal means to insulate markets (Slobodian, 2019:12) from democracy, that is first and foremost from politics of redistribution (Chamayou, 2019:346–347; Slobodian, 2019:29). The departure from progressive taxation since the 1980s in the US and in the countries of Western Europe is a striking sign of its advancement.

But the political project of neoliberalism does not confine itself to shielding markets from redistribution. Neoliberal politics create and forcefully interfere in markets. They impose rules of markets on social institutions that, for good reason, previously followed other logics (e.g. universities); 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, 2019:301): 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 von Hayek, the best-known protagonist, came up in support of Pinochet's dictatorship.

Some on the left argue that 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, 2013:247, translation by the author) against social achievements after the Second World War. 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, and education, help to make people's lives less dependent on markets which they cannot control. Labour laws, the right to strike, and collective bargaining somewhat balance the uneven distribution of power between capital and labour, employers and employees. It took decades of struggle, often bloody, to conquer those rights from capital. The struggle also transformed the understanding of society. Rosanvallon speaks of a "revolution" (Rosanvallon, 2013:224) 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, conceived society as constituted by the interdependence of its members. Social cohesion, in consequence, was to depend on the institutionalised 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 the Second World War, sees citizenship and the class system in the 20th century at *war* with each other (Marshall, 1992:81). In the decades before the 1970s, citizenship had gained considerable ground (not victory) after only after two world wars, revolutionary outbreaks in central and eastern Europe, and a worldwide crisis of the capitalist economy in between. Nowhere had citizenship prevailed in taking democratic control of the economy. In fact, the extension of social rights signified a historical compromise *within* the class system; it helped to 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, began counterattacks against the growing demands of workers, and 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 World Trade Organization (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 European Union (EU), the dominance of market integration over the integration of fiscal and social policies is a constant source of conflict. At the national level, neoliberal policies always encountered and tried to adapt to different national settings, institutional traditions, and socio-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 privatising and dismantling the public health system. But the strengthening of markets and capital 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 privatisation of public services – both in health care and the school sector” (Strittmater, 2022, translation by the author), followed by huge transfers from the public to the private sector. The Netherlands in 2006 privatised health insurance, with ever-increasing costs for the citizens (Müller, 2024); it also forcefully promoted the ‘flexibilisation’ of labour markets, fostering precarious work. Sometimes, social-democratic governments, not only conservative ones, pushed for market reign over politics.

Effects of neoliberal onslaughts on European society

Despite the varieties of neoliberal policies and national differences, it seems justified to point to some developments in various countries of the EU since the 1980s: growing inequalities in terms of income (Beckfield, 2016; Piketty, 2020:41, 52), and particularly of wealth; the detachment of two opposite social poles from the middle layers of society. The pole at the top comprises managers and professionals who operate in financial markets and transnational corporations, with close connections to politics and administration, and is both freed from and freeing itself of responsibilities to local enterprises in terms of job protection and to society at large in terms of taxation. I call it the “zone of exclusivity” (Kronauer, 2020:44–45). German sociologist Michael Hartmann speaks with regard to the US, France, 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 of participation in society – the marginalised in the “zone of exclusion”. In between the zones of exclusivity and exclusion, labour-market and social “reforms” (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011) promoted cleavages within the working classes and within the middle layers of society: between people in precarious positions with regard to the labour 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 prosperous regions and regions in decline (often old-industrial regions). With the weakening of rent protections, the privatisation of public housing stocks, and the financialisation of real-estate markets, in many European cities, housing again became the central issue of a new social question, affecting people at the lower end of the class and income hierarchy most.

But there is still another, more general effect. With the advance of neoliberalism, the meaning of individualisation changed. The individualisation Ulrich Beck wrote about in his book *Risk Society* (1986) referred to the weakening of traditional social (particularly class-based) ties and obligations. With the extension of social insurance provisions and social services, particularly in education, and a distribution of income and wealth in the three decades after the Second World War that lifted the boat for all. Despite persisting inequalities, people were to some degree *liberated* and *liberated themselves* to have more choices in determining the course of their lives. As a consequence, they also had to face the risks that came with making deliberate choices. Or to state it in Marshall's terms: the opening up of individual opportunities was backed by the strengthening of social rights in the war with the class system.

Individualisation in times of neoliberalism, in contrast, means that 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, in neoliberalism, people count 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 information and the universe of commodities.

Class relations and inequalities based on class not only persist, but they become even more entrenched in the ever more market-driven 'risk society' of today. But the class *society*, characterised by class-specific communities and their political and cultural representations, disappeared, as François Dubet argues (Dubet, 2008:469). This might apply to working-class communities and representations, and social-

democratic parties, by abandoning any reference to wage labour and courting a fictitious ‘middle’ of society, contributed to this effect. But I don’t think that it holds true for the close-knit communities of the upper class (see Crouch, 1999:425).

Is the era of neoliberalism drawing to a close?

We currently observe a recourse to more state interventions in markets under pressure from 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-19 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 the intervention, however, was foremost to prevent the imminent breakdown of the financial markets that had been politically liberalised since the 1970s, the most decisive neoliberal transformation. In the end, the wealthiest 10 per cent, and not the (for a short time) much-hailed nursing staff in the hospitals, benefitted most (Tooze, 2021:171).

Other important political actions during the pandemic, such as the ad-hoc decisions to protect vulnerable professions and businesses financially, to protect renters from eviction, and to prevent 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, not in Germany, and as far as I know, not in other countries. In Germany, inequality *increased* in the wake of the pandemic, and not only in school performance (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021; OECD, 2023).

We observe contradictory recourse to more state intervention in markets in response to climate catastrophe and geopolitical shifts. Some, not all, European governments and the EU embark on highly embattled industrial policies to push for ecological transformation.

Attempts to reduce economic dependence on foreign powers, such as Russia, China, and, most recently, the USA, are full of internal contradictions for countries with export-driven economies and capital enmeshed in global supply chains. With the re-election of Trump, the world is entering a new stage of actual and potential trade wars, a sharp departure from free-trade principles, but at the same time, a war waged against European attempts to impose regulations on the oligopolies of the US-dominated digital economy.

Two ways of destroying democracy

With the advancement of neoliberalism, two particular political threats to democracy have emerged. The first threat consists of 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 disregard democratic institutions. The second and related threat consists of the emergence of parties and movements of the extreme right that flourish on the social destruction that neoliberal policies have produced.

With Berlusconi in Italy, Trump in the US, Johnson in the UK, and Kurz in Austria, a new type of politician entered the stage in the US and Western Europe who virtually *embody* in their characters neoliberal attitudes, combined 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 privatise public infrastructure, and to cut taxes. But they did not call into question the institutions of representative democracy in their countries as Trump does, and even Johnson did in his attempt to sidestep one of the oldest parliaments in history.

In the US, a new type of despotism is determined to fundamentally remake the country. It combines the reckless personalisation and privatisation of politics (the Trump system) with the further privatisation and capitalisation of the public sphere by the new ruling class in command of the productive forces of digital capitalism. Quinn Slobodian, in his book *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World without Democracy* (*Kapitalismus ohne Demokratie*) (2025), points to the further radicalisation of the neoliberal project, represented by exemplary figures such as ‘tech billionaires’ (Rushkoff, 2022;¹ Krugman, 2024) Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. They seek to forestall the powers of potential democratic interference by carving out ever more privatised (i.e. capitalised spaces, including outer space). It already has gloomy ramifications for Europe as well.

The second threat, in some respects similar, in others different, is in the rise of extreme-right parties in Europe. They gain ground with a programmatic melange of aggressive fights against migration, often combined with demands for social policies exclusively for the ‘natives’. Also common is a fierce opposition to policies addressing climate change. 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 itself.

Who does the extreme right attract? 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, people with less formal education; workers are overrepresented compared to their share in the population; and the extreme right comes up stronger in regions with declining population and economic fortunes, than in prosperous regions, and more in rural areas than in cities.

1 Douglas Rushkoff provides an excellent analysis of the ‘mindset’ of the ‘tech billionaires’ (2022 in English, 2025 in German).

This is not to say, however, that extreme right parties are just collecting the losers of social change (in reality, the worst off, the unemployed and poor, more often abstain from voting than 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 characterisation of fascism, the "extremism of the center" (Lipset, 1963:129) of voters from the middle class. And the regional divide is only a gradual one. In the recent federal election in Germany, the extreme-right party (Alternative for Germany, AfD) came in second place even in the overall prosperous states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. Fear of social decline rather than the actual experience of personal decline might have affected voters, even well-paid and socially insured industrial workers. 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 restrictions introduced to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How can we account for the rise of the extreme right in Europe?

Is it just a manifestation of attitudes that have existed for a long time in significant parts of the population, which have largely remained under the political surface but are now coming 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 per cent) held xenophobic and anti-democratic views. I don't know about such surveys in other countries, but I can imagine that Germany in this respect is not a singular case. A question, however, still remains: why does the extreme right acquire such momentum right now? And why does it seem to attract more people? How fixed are the attitudes to which it appeals anyway?

A similar and related explanation for the rise of the extreme right points to a 'culture war' in which the extreme 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 globalised economy, and celebrating an urban lifestyle with diversity and wokeness – as against the values and worldviews 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. Sociologist Steffen Mau and colleagues (Mau et al. 2023) question the existence of such polarising cultural frontiers, at least for Germany. The authors found in their survey, and by drawing on already published empirical studies, a broad middle ground, not polarisation, in the perception of the issues hotly debated in public. They conclude that media and opinion leaders of all kinds use the issues as trigger points to *produce* polarisation. 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., 2023:349, translation by the author), people with the least social and economic resources to adapt. What kind of changes are involved? Zygmunt Bauman, in his last essay titled “Strangers at Our Door” (“*Die Angst vor den anderen*”) (2016), provides us with a further clue for analysis. And here I come back to the central argument stated at the beginning.

Neoliberalism, the social crisis of citizenship, and the rise of the extreme right

Bauman argues, with reference to the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Miroslav Hroch, that nationalism and ethnicity are substitutes for

means of integration in a disintegrating society (Bauman, 2016:64). I want to modify the argument somewhat to link what I have said so far about neoliberalism to the rise of the extreme right. Like Adam Tooze, I have characterised neoliberalism as a political project to de-politicise issues of inequality, that is, to shield capital from the demands of the 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 politics, based on nationalism and ethnic purity. The extreme right, in its anti-democratic way, wants to reestablish the dominance of politics – politics in this case understood by Carl Schmitt ([1932] 2002:26) as the power to define and persecute the enemy.

I will elaborate on this argument a bit more. We know from international comparative studies how important institutions are for the wellbeing and the social and 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 – wellbeing and social and 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 & Janmaat, 2011). In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 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* (2009), make the same point with regard to health. They emphasise that more egalitarian societies generate lower levels of social fear. This is not only beneficial for health, they argue, but also for social contracts 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” (2011), provide evidence that speaks against such conditionality (Green & Janmaat, 2011:183–186).

If we take seriously the findings just outlined, it becomes obvious that neoliberal politics attack the very institutions on which wellbeing and social and political participation depend. They undermine the basic sense of security in society on which trust can be built – trust in others, trust in one’s capacity to participate and have an impact in social life, 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. Markets rules cannot replace institutions of mutual responsibilities without putting society at risk of disintegration.

This is how neoliberal onslaughts were the breeding ground for the extreme right. The extreme right exploits social fears, including fears of status decline,² of social insignificance. 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 not conforming to one’s worldview 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 concern 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 perceived as a stranger. Fear is among the emotions most susceptible to right-wing

2 A recently published study comparing 11 European countries established evidence that intergenerational status decline had a significant impact on voting for parties of the extreme right (Jacobs & Kayser, 2025).

propaganda and manipulation, as Illouz (2023) and Nussbaum (2019) demonstrate.

However, the extreme right in Europe today presents itself in a new guise. Anton Jäger, in a contribution to *The New York Times*, convincingly argues that it does not progress, like in the 1920s and 1930s, by politically mobilising for an imminent civil war against a strong working-class left (which no longer exists), but rather through the de-politicisation 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” (Jäger, 2023). This recalls 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, 1990:164).

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 labour movement and its organisations, 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 sides with the extreme right. Major companies in considerable numbers sponsored advertisements against it in widely read bourgeois newspapers (Die Zeit, 2024a, 2024b). To be sure, there are many complaints raised by organised industry, with regard to bureaucracy, compliance regulations in supply chains, and so forth (Süddeutsche Zeitung 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 labour from abroad. And the way back to combustion engines as a promising strategy for the automobile industry is already blocked by competitors from China and the US. However, capital

is opportunistic. If popular support brings the extreme right into positions of political power, capital will not resist but use its influence to make the most 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 catastrophes and resisting migration. Climate change 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 significantly 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 (war, poverty, discrimination) were eliminated – and we are further away from such a condition than ever – migration would continue. And importantly: highly developed capitalist countries depend on it.

It is obvious that neither of these two pressing global issues is easy to address. But it is also 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 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 that play out in politics. Who should be held most responsible for the reduction of CO₂ emissions in a country in which the wealthiest 10 per cent account for almost six times as many emissions as the lower half of the population (these are figures for Germany)? In which neighbourhoods 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 accommodation and aid?

Concluding remarks

I have sketched, with a rather broad brush, I admit, how the drama unfolded: how the politics of de-politicising issues of inequality to protect capital against the demands of the people have laid the groundwork for the rise of the extreme right, filling the void with their politics based on nationalism and ethnic purity. What follows from this insight? It might well be that the politics of de-politicisation have already been 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 in Europe who do not want to live in xenophobic societies and in authoritarian states, where the separation between government, jurisdiction, and the media is torn down like in Orbán's Hungary, a regime that the extreme right in Europe wants to emulate. The fact that the Trump government favours the Orbán regime because of its despotism and because it wants to destroy the EU could even stimulate the opposition.

It might still be possible to direct people's attention to what has already materialised of the right-wing programmes 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, and flourishing corruption. And it might still be possible to mobilise 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 families and neighbourhoods. But mobilised they must be to take action. Such mobilisation requires ridding people of any illusions about the seriousness of the extreme right, and to make them realise that nothing less than their own political and democratic existence is at stake.

Are the so-called parties of the centre in Europe actually ready to mobilise? The last election cycle suggests that they had hoped to win over followers from the extreme right by adopting their positions,

particularly those on migration, a strategy that historically has never worked. The recent federal election in Germany is a case in point. A guest essay in *The New York Times* appeared in December 2023 with the lead “Europe may be headed for something unthinkable”. The “unthinkable” that the author warned against “is the convergence of the center right and the far right in Europe” (Kundnani, 2023). Such convergence has gained momentum since, and not much time has been left to mobilise against it.

But it needs even more to get at the roots of the drama. It needs to bring inequality back on the political agenda 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 catastrophe and migration. And it needs to finally confront those who, decades before the rise of the extreme right, have taken inequality off the political agenda.

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