

“Political Economy of ‘Authoritarianism’ and of ‘Right Wing Populism’. May, Orban, Szydło, Le Pen, Gauland/AfD ... – the EU in a crisis of legitimation between neoliberal ‘reformers’ and different authoritarian ‘right wing forces’”

Some short remarks as preliminary answers to the five workshop questions

This short paper should give some more drive to the discussion in our workshop. It is based upon the longer and the very long discussion papers which have been already sent and which are also to be found on the workshop blog.

I. What is at stake in this debate and in which terms can the underlying issue be most clearly discussed?

Approaching “Right Wing Populism” and “Authoritarianism” from a perspective of critical political economy requires us to analyse and discuss these issues from the specific perspective of the development of the relations between people in the economic life of the society. The crucial question here is about the aim and the mode of the on-going process of the socialization of labour, with its societal, economic, social ecological and global consequences.

The term “right wing populism” is misleading: We should not focus our discussion on any kind of communication technique directed at ‘the popular masses’, but on the ideology, policy and especially economic policy of such right-wing agents, with their specific “interest policies”, who claim to act in the interest of the “(above all) ordinary people without any alien background”. These forces are opposing the political management, as it is dominant in the EU, as ignoring or counter-acting the interests of “our ordinary people”. They aim at blocking the dominant kind of globalisation, and especially the dominant practices concerning the management of migration and the rules followed concerning the grant of asylum status. They ignore or they openly hurt the real interests of the majorities of populations in the EU, in Europe and in the world. Often they are more or less directly connected to right-wing extremist resp. fascist forces, but this cannot be generalized as such. We want to understand their “nature”, background and successes, in order to understand our societies more adequately and to become able to work more efficiently on left-wing resp. emancipatory and solidarity-oriented political strategies and on developing societal alternatives.

II. What has been the emergence (in social, economic, and cultural terms) of these issues, as indicated and made use of by so-called “right-wing-populism” within the EU and its member states, since the beginning of the years 2000?

In the beginning of the years 2000, three interconnected developments have reached a new stage, in their dimension and in the intensity of controversially acting together:

- Deep global and European changes,
- the EU enlargement processes, the pre-history and the implementation of the Lisbon strategy,
- ongoing changes in societal and social structures, with the effect of intensifying contradictions, especially in European and EU member countries.

This has been connected to increasing pressure on the middle classes in the old EU member states and on the majorities of the populations of the new EU member states. We face

- ongoing liberalization, commercialization and privatization, rising social gaps, rising social disillusion, frustrations, and fears, as well as diminishing possibilities to shape the society in a democratic way
- a crisis of traditional conservatism, of social democracy and, as a result, of political representation.

Both tendencies have provoked a critique of globalization which has not been answered by strong left-wing forces in a political offensive, but by an advance of anti-emancipatory and more or less anti-liberal forces. These forces appeal to all possible society members, but preferably to the “middle classes” which have “something to lose” or are thinking that they would deserve something better – positioning themselves in a sharp contrast to the people getting or needing social benefits, above all to refugees and to migrants.

III. What is the current state of these problems within the EU and in its member states?

The societal and social problems which have emerged and above all increased more or less in the years 2000 have been further reinforced by the ways of how the ruling powers have reacted to the crisis as it has broken out in 2008. This concerns especially the management of the Euro and EU crises, which has included the strategy EU2020 and the EMU “improvement”. The underlying societal and social problems have even been further exacerbated by the wars, conflicts and huge disintegration problems in the EU neighbourhood, in turn reinforced by the specific EU neighbourhood policies. The most tragic and crassest consequences have been the enormous migration and mass escape of people evicted by violence and hoping for a provisional stay or long term residence in the EU. Immigration and islamophobia, racism, anti-liberal EU criticism and a “Euroscepticism” which has been more or less strongly advocated and propagated have been growing in strength and in many cases they have been influencing specific policies of member states and of the EU. Efforts of coping with ecological and global problems have been marginalised in the very same process. The repertoire of the “more moderate fundamentalist right-wing and authoritarian forces” with regard to a more narrowly conceived economic policy is, however, not only in no way compatible with any claims for a protection of “ordinary people”. It is also rather strongly ambivalent with regard to their demands for an authoritarian state, as it includes key elements which clearly weaken the capacity to act of the respective states: the prevention of state economic intervention, the introduction of tax cutbacks, especially in favour of the rich and richer, a reduction in the size and the capabilities of the state apparatus, the privatisation of public companies and of state and communal functions, as well as demands for significantly cutting subsidies for any dimension of culture. But these “populist” forces at the same time put forward additional demands for state subsidies in various economic and social areas, for state protection of the health service and for benefits for those who “really” need them, for families, for “security” and especially for reinforcing the police. Accordingly, their programs and their propaganda efforts combine the economic aims of neo-liberal deregulation with the mobilization of feelings of anti-globalisation and antimodernisation, on the one hand, and of income redistribution in favour of higher income groups, with social demagoguery, and with elements of a selective welfare state

protection, on the other hand. Deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation are supposed to strengthen the position of their respective national economies in global competition. At the same time, the respective “own” state should be protected against other states by additional regulation. Global competition by low-salary countries is being made use of in finding a justification for protectionism. Therefore, the “right-wing populists” do, in fact, try to put into practice a contradictory strategy, in order to address an extremely differentiated voter spectrum with strongly divergent interests.

This makes it even more complicated to discuss common European emancipatory and solidarity-oriented strategies. And the matter is being made even more difficult by the fact that different “right-wing populist” forces do, in fact, have very different positions concerning the dissolution or continued existence of the European Monetary Union and the European Union.

IV. Which political conclusions can be drawn from all this?

The central challenge for the left-wing forces is and will be to search for possibilities to act politically in an effective way, defending the real liberty and equality of all concerned. This starts with initiatives which will be feasible on the local level, within the municipality, constituting the left as an attractive and living force, capable of helping the weakest, of working on specific projects concerning the everyday life of “ordinary people”, of effectively dealing with any kind of threat emerging from anti-emancipatory forces – by organising communication and co-operation of people and groups on specific problems and pursuing emancipatory aims, while at the same time building and strengthening solidarity. This should be connected with a radical left critique of the forms and the modes of the on-going globalisation processes, of the really existing European Union and its agencies, especially addressing those based within their respective “own” country. And this should be connected with short- und middle term alternative proposals and with political demands aiming at improving the social situation of the socially weak, as well as the effective social security of the middle classes. The specific ways of living accessible in everyday life – and with them the free access to the commons – should be put into the centre of left-wing strategy.

But all of this must be connected with a process of radical self-criticism and with the clarification of the fact, that the dissolution of the EU would be used to their advantage by powerful capitalist oligarchies, as they are based on the TNCs, and would, therefore, further exacerbate the societal, social, ecological and global problems, as they have emerged.

V. Questions for further research

Five questions - which are closely interrelated – are to be addressed more especially by further research:

The *first* and central question is a very complex one and has been accompanying us now for years already: why is the left so weak?

The *second* question should be about the different agencies – who is doing what, and why, and with which consequences for the political conditions of the different – neoliberal, “right-wing populist” and fundamentalist – agencies?

The *third* question simply has to be: What does all this mean for the political conditions of left-wing agencies? How can we improve the own political economy and the economic policy of the left-wing forces?

The *fourth* question should be about the consequences to be drawn from our analyses for the different scenarios of societal development more or less directly derived from economic developments and therefore also from the economic policies as they have been pursued.

The debate connected with these questions challenges us, finally, to address a *fifth* question: i.e. to advance towards a deeper analysis and a more comprehensive discussion of the “political economy of ‘security’”. Because, ultimately, very important EU leading politicians and state rulers want to organise a new consensus within the EU by basing it on issues of security.