

Social Media, Political Attitudes, Tribes in Global and Central European Perspectives.

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Central Europe has not escaped the current global trends of political polarization and decline in democratic standards, although the developments are far from uniform across the region. As Freedom House recorded the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom¹, the trend in Central and Eastern Europe has certainly not encouraged optimism: with the notable exceptions of Ukraine, Moldova, Kosovo and North Macedonia which enjoyed better scores this year in the think-tank's Freedom Index, all other countries either stagnated (Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, etc.) or saw their score decrease significantly (that was the case all around the V4)². In the meantime, political debate has continued to polarize in the region, with anti-establishment sentiment on the rise and a multiplication of anti-government demonstrations, sometimes violent and nihilistic, but at other times to condemn corruption (as in the case of Slovakia and Romania), at other times in reaction to what was perceived as power grabs by the central government (Hungary, Serbia, Poland).

In many ways, Central Europe has been not only one of the centers of attention of this double development, but it has also been a trend-setter. This comes as a complete reversal of the 1989-1991 revolutions, which were mostly about catching up with “the West” to be part of it, which implied copying it³. Indeed, in many ways, polarization and illiberal trends seen in Central Europe mostly predated those currently at work in the West, or indeed in other parts of the World. Poland's polarized politics can actually be traced back to the late 2000s, long before it became an astute problem in Western societies, and Viktor Orbán was one of the first to theorize the concept of “illiberal democracy” in its modern variation, certainly linking it to other countries like Singapore, China, India, Turkey, Russia, but also acknowledging the novelty of decoupling liberalism and democracy. Viktor Orbán thus felt, in his seminal speech of July 26 in Băile Tuşnad, that it was important “to state that a democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy. Moreover, it [has] to be expressed, that probably societies founded upon the principle of the liberal way to organize a state will not be able to sustain their world-competitiveness in the following years, and more likely they will suffer a setback, unless they will be able to substantially reform themselves”⁴.

Unfortunately the COVID-19 crisis we have been living in Europe since March 2020 is set to strengthen these trends: preventing the spread of the virus has led governments to take drastic measures that would, in normal times, be understood as frontal attack against basic individual and public liberties (among them, the freedom to come and go, or the rights of parliament, which were trampled all around the world by legislations that gave exceptional decreeing powers to the government). As states have experienced the power, sometimes absolute, that they could hold on individuals, the “return to normal” may well be a limited return *towards* the status quo ante rather than a full roll back to 2019. In the meantime, the financial

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2020>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=nit&year=2020&mapview=trend>

³ See Ivan Krastev & Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, London: Allen Lane, 2019.

⁴ <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>

hardships and uncertainties caused by the waves of lockdowns and economic slumps is already taking its tolls on the psyche of whole categories of the population, in particular small business owners and young people, who both have historically been prone to support radical populist changes in times of crisis. The return of violent political speech, whether in the streets or in politicians' discourse is certainly a sign that things have gotten worse over the past few years, and renewed economic hardships may well convince part of the population to go a step further and use violence as a means to achieve political aims.

In this difficult context, a cool-headed analysis of the situation and the more profound reasons of our democratic crisis are more important than ever. Unfortunately, these often fall into the trap of ideological or party preferences. For example, Steven Levitsky's and Daniel Ziblatt's acclaimed *How Democracies Die* certainly provide a convincing – and important – account of how elites can kill democracies in the long-run rather than in a spectacular, Reichstag-burning type of event⁵. However, they too fall into the trap of name-calling and partisan bias as they accuse Republicans in America of uniformly being at the origin of the current democratic crisis in the country (while this author recognizes that some of the blame must be put on Republicans, it seems that very little introspection has been done on responsibilities of the other side – as President Barack Obama conceded on election night in 2016, recognized that “we screwed up somewhere”⁶).

It may well be that focusing solely on elites and how their power games destroy democracies is too difficult a task for us to remain neutral, but in any case it is not enough to explain the current democratic malaise. After all, in young and established democracies alike, the people (i.e. public opinion expressed in polling and universal suffrage) have a lot to do with the general atmosphere of the democratic process. If that atmosphere is bad, then it is no wonder that politicians on the left or right might feel less constrained by such “petty” things as the rule of law and institutional checks and balances. This short article will therefore try to take a bottom-up look at our democratic crisis, and to explain this popular malaise it will look first at it with a historical perspective, before analyzing how sociological factors are to blame for much of our current political polarization, and finally looking at the role of social media in making us more intolerant. A conclusion will then try to take lessons for liberals as they try to develop methods to overcome the current democratic malaise.

The current crisis seen from a historic perspective

It may seem difficult to believe for us mortals who have been used for much of our adult lives to believe in the inevitability of democracy and Fukuyama's End of History, but democratic crisis is not a new phenomenon: indeed, this political regime went through cycles of rise, fall and re-rise ever since it was invented on the dry hills of the Acropolis in the 6th Century BC. Indeed, democracy did not survive the classical age, and philosophical contestation and personality-ridden social polarization are much to blame for the fall of the Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic. In the modern era, democracy has gone through similar crises, usually linked to economic downturn when its efficiency was put in doubt: while the Great Depression almost proved fatal to liberal democracies (in Timothy Snyder's words,

⁵ Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown, 2018

⁶ Ivan Krastev & Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed : A Reckoning*, London: Allen Lane, 2019

“the market had brought disaster, no parliament had an answer, and nation-states seemingly lacked the instruments to protect their citizens from immiseration”⁷), the Long Depression of 1873-1896 brought much polarization in European politics, leading to a rise in political violence and authoritarian tendencies, a large movement of contestation against political liberalism and the emergence of two proto-ideologies that were to come to age between the two world wars and almost entirely destroy Europe.

As different as the late Roman Republic, late 19th Century Europe, the 1930s and our modern times may be, they all share one feature: crisis. Democracy ended in spasms in ancient Athens following military defeat and the annihilation of Athenian hopes of domination over the Hellenic world, with the *coup de grâce* given by Alexander the Great’s father Philip II when Athens became part of the Macedonian proto-empire. The final days of the Roman Republic were associated with another type of crisis, which followed military success and territorial expansion after the Punic Wars: in a much larger political corps and with the army holding so much power over the destinies of the city’s affair, the decline of a Senate crippled by its incessant crises between the patricians and the plebs became almost inevitable. After political crises, power grabs and civil war, Augustus’s victories pacified what had become an Empire and democracy died in the classical world, retaining its bad reputation until the enlightenment.

The modern crises of democracy are much more straightforward in the sense that they were inevitably accompanied by economic crisis: the link between the social despair of impoverished masses and the rise of totalitarianisms in Europe is now pretty much established, and so should the consequences of the European Long Depression on the health of the political corps of the then nascent Western liberal democracy in the 19th Century: between other things the rise of nihilism and political terrorism, but also of exclusive nationalism and proto-communist ideologies have their roots in the social despair produced by this long period of economic and social crisis.

In this sense, the current crisis of democracy in the West is no different from previous crises. Indeed, the crisis of confidence in our institutions and our governance is very linked to the 2008 financial meltdown and its consequences, both moral and social. As Adam Tooze has pointed out in his account of the economic crisis⁸, its origins were in essence Transatlantic, and their effect was felt for years in our societies, which came out changed as a result. Indeed, we should not be surprised that Central and Eastern Europe led the pack, so to speak, in the somehow weakening of democratic discourse and political polarization, as the region was among the first (and the worst) hit in the immediate aftermath of the Wall Street meltdown. The overnight wipe out of life savings and indebtedness caused by mortgages made in Swiss francs (as was the case in Hungary) added much to public despair and anger, a feeling that was amplified by the (not totally unrealistic) perception that bankers and elites seemed to get away with the financial ruin they (or rather the system) had caused, while ordinary citizens were left to tighten their belt for them. Anger turned into outrage during the Euro crisis as Southern European countries (themselves going through intense impoverishment and polarization) required bailing outs that Central Europeans who had just gone through two years of sometimes extreme austerity measures refused to give out – pain is, after all, better applied when shared. A similar process went inside societies, where common folks saw their situation stagnate or worsen and saw other categories of the

⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, London: Random House, 2015, p.17

⁸ Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London: Penguin, 2018

population thrive, at least in their eyes. The result has been a populist explosion, on the left as well as the right that has polarized our political landscape ever since, and as politicians toyed with ways to get out of the crisis, experimenting with and outside of financial austerity, heterodox thinking became more and more widespread, leading in some cases to the rise of authoritarian sentiment, which was itself fueled by perceptions that countries like Russia and China, which were not in the center of the financial storm, seemed to be doing better than democracies. Once they were coupled, polarization and illiberalism became complementary concepts that fed on each other as politics became a zero-sum game with only winners and losers.

Polarization as Social Tribalism

Polarization is itself often understood in a very basic, two-way function, related to the way in which we have historically looked at our electoral landscape, with defined right and left, and therefore an extreme-right and an extreme-left. However, this binary approach is often misleading: after a long period of stability, the notions of right and left are now once again fluctuant, to the extent that roles can now seem reversed: according to the postwar idea of left and right, the defining feature in our political systems more often than not came to be associated with ideas about the role of the state in politics and economics: whoever was in favor of a larger state (in particular the welfare state) was on the left, whoever was for a smaller state (or rather, a focus on purely regalian functions of the state) was on the right. While this dichotomy still holds some truth, one can see that it fails to explain the positioning of many “populist”, or new parties: if France’s Rassemblement national is on the far-right, how can we explain the fact that its presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen, had one of the most stasis socio-economic programs in the 2017 presidential elections? Or why Law and Justice in Poland has taken much of its popularity (at least until the row over the Supreme Court in late 2020) from its social programming and efforts to expand social welfare?

In reality, our changing political landscapes are now less defined by ideological polarization, as the -isms and other ideologies that defined 20th century politics continue to fade away, but rather by social polarization, which itself could actually be re-defined as extreme atomization. In fact, the two-party polarization that we have seen develop in the United States, but also in Britain or Poland (among others) actually hides a much more complex dynamic that is pitting different parts of the country against each other (and by definition, these different parts of the country do come together to co-operate against what they see as the greater danger of their interests). What French pollster Jérôme Fourquet calls the “Archipelization” of society⁹ is an admission both of the more plural nature of the French (and, by extension, Western) public, and their increasing estrangement from each other.

We will get back to the estrangement question, but it is worth at this point looking at how parts of the Western social “archipelago” have come to redefine our political party systems, and much of our political debates. Although this “Great Class Shift”¹⁰ is certainly not as complex as Fourquet’s archipelago, we can nevertheless discern four classes that have changed political discourse and cleavages over the past ten years. At the origin of everything is the emergence of the Creative Class as a significant force in the electoral system in the

⁹ Jérôme Fourquet, *L’Archipel Français: naissance d’une nation multiple et divisée*, Paris : Seuil, 2019

¹⁰ Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Class Structures are Redefining Western Politics*, London: Routledge, 2019

2000s, which redefined the center-left and its system of values. Urban, professional and flexible, the Creative Class¹¹ is a new social tribe that emerged with the digital revolution and mass higher education in the 1990s, with the rise of “knowledge economy”. Originally a small grouping of “bourgeois bohemian” individuals living in city centers and regenerated areas in the industrial inner cities of major conurbations, the creatives have seen their ranks grow during the 2000s, to a point where their ideas have taken over much of the “mainstream” media in most Western societies and political discourse during the Obama years. The Creatives fortunes depends on the development of ideas, which then are transformed into bankable products, and they therefore value a way of life that helps them come up with new ideas, first and foremost flexibility (as an idea can come any time), and diversity, as it is the confrontation of many ideas, styles and ways of life that provide the intellectual stimulus for new concepts and ideas to emerge. In central Europe, representatives of this Creative Class have included the Civic Coalition in Poland, the Union to Save Romania or Attīstibaī Par in Latvia.

The rise and, in many ways, intellectual dominance of the Creative Class in the late 2000s and early 2010s has not come without backlash. The first reaction to the social and economic (“double”) liberalism supported by the Creatives came from the Provincial (actually Provincial and Suburban) Middle Class. Originally the dominant class for much of the post-war years in the West (and to a certain extent in post-Communist Europe after the structural adjustments of the 1990s), the middle class remains the numerically most dominant class of them all, although its trajectory is definitely one of relative decline. The Provincial Middle Class is the model of a relatively affluent “middle” in our Western Societies, with the cliché of the suburban, detached or semi-detached home with a married couple and two or three children, a house equipped with modern appliances and the car, which serves both as an indispensable way to go around in peripheral areas, and as a social marker. The middle class in much of the West reacted very defensively against the new ideas proposed by the Creative Class, not so much on the economic front (both classes share a common liberalism in this matter), but on the social and cultural front: more traditional, the Provincial Middle Class resents the constant contestation of tradition (and at least cultural markers of religion) by Creatives, regulations on cars and the environment, and have come to reject diversity and immigration, as they have come to feel that their society has been changing too fast for them to adapt. One has seen the reaction of the middle class in the United States as a major driver of the Tea Party and the revival of conservatism in the American Midwest and parts of central Canada, thereby paving the way for the election of Donald Trump in 2016, which is more a symptom than a cause of the high level of polarization in American (and, increasingly, European) societies.

If Donald Trump owes much of his 2016 victory to the support of the middle class in the swing states of Florida, Michigan and Pennsylvania (among others), much has (rightly) been written about the role of the White Working Class in his victories in the Rust Belt, which have provided him with a solid electoral base during his whole presidency. But, from Youngstown Ohio to the French rust-belt of North-Eastern France (a bastion of the Le Pen vote) to Eastern Germany and the old industrial towns in Eastern Poland and Southern Romania, the New Minority (consisting of working class people and other elements of the non-university educated middle class that is currently undergoing a spectacular process of pauperization all over the West) has been the main talking point for many pundits and

¹¹ The term was originally coined by Richard Florida. See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class – Revisited*, New York: basic books, 2014

observers of our political lives, in the sense that their political re-awakening (which follows a long period of estrangement from the left) has completely taken the Creatives aback: the losers of globalization and liberalization of the past twenty years, the forgotten masses of postindustrial peripheries were now the poster children (and indeed the driving base) of the populist revolt against the elites. The historic penchant of the working classes to rough-talks and direct action against the establishment (inherited from difficult conditions and in many cases the memories of social struggles at the factory), once channeled by politicians who appropriated their codes and style, soon became a sort of bogeyman for the establishment, and more particularly for the creative class, as the agenda of the New Minority clashed completely with theirs, may it be on the economy, diversity or social values.

The working classes ended up *not* being the only headache for the Creative Class, as young graduates, who emerged early after the 2008 crisis as the main victims of the financial meltdown and the austerity that followed, came to join the ranks of the dissatisfied. They thereby fueled another political rebellion, this time on the left. In fact, the populist left, which includes parties like Podemos (Spain) and the Five Star Movement (Italy), and is incarnated by personalities such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn in the Anglosphere, was fueled by the rising dissatisfaction of Millennial (and now the more radical Zillennial) graduates who not only came into the job market with more collectivist, justicialist and environmentalist ideas than their forefathers, but also a mounting dissatisfaction at seeing that their diploma (which had been sold to them as a highway to success) were not as valuable as they thought, leading them to perform often repetitive tasks in open spaces as “little office soldiers of the Microsoft suite”¹². Millennial woke “socialism” may not in itself be what most on the right portray as proto-communism, but its focus on social justice, equality and the environment has clashed with the values of autonomy, individual responsibility and materialism upheld by other classes, thus creating another political pole, liberal in social matters, tolerant of races and gender but not of dissenting opinions, and more collectivist (rather than statist) in economic matters.

The rise of these social “classes” and their crystallization as poles of attractions for public opinion as they became clienteles of parties and political entrepreneurs in need of certainties and support to legitimize their ideas and jostling for power has led to the current polarization, with four political poles instead of two, which at times adds some (but not a lot of) flexibility to our current systems. This polarization has been made more visible by the fact that these social classes, much like those of early 20th Century England, are now increasingly living apart from each other, with elites colonizing the urban centers and regenerated urban spaces in the inner cities, Provincial and Suburban Middle Classes staying in their suburbs and small towns, while the working classes are left to their own devices on the peripheries of the national spaces and the millennials try to build new “woke” creative centers in cheaper areas that they hope will become the next Silicon Valley (one could think in America of parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado, or Atlanta, Georgia which played a big role in the evolution of the US electoral map in 2020).

The role of social media in self-radicalization

¹² Jean-Laurent Cassely, *La Révolte des Premiers de la Classe : métiers à la con, quête de sens et reconversions urbaines*, Paris : 2017, Arkhê

As if this social polarization was not enough, social media has also played a part in the increasing social segregation (some even call it “secession”) we have lived over the past ten years. Originally thought by liberals to be a tool to liberate the masses from state propaganda and disinformation (which indeed it turned out to be in the Arab Spring revolutions of the early 2010s, or in the Revolution of Dignity of 2014 in Ukraine), social media subsequently showed us that it was a double-edged sword, as the multiplication of information sources and the ability for anyone to broadcast and share news at any time has led to a saturation of news for the public, and the creation of preference bubbles that have in turned brought individuals to entrench their visions of the world and become less prone to compromise.

In many ways, social media are today’s equivalent of the Gutenberg Bible in the late 15th and early 16th Century: by democratizing access to information previously available only to an initiated caste of scribes, it has diversified possible readings or events (and even, sometimes, perceptions of events). In addition, social media has put us in touch with people who may live very near our residence, or sometimes hundreds of kilometers away, but with whom we share absolutely common interests and opinions. This has facilitated tribalization: at the same time as our neighborhoods have become more monolithic, our social networks have brought us closer and closer to people with whom we have everything, some would say too much in common. The effects on our psychology have been gigantic, as logics of tribalization and exclusion have kicked in: whoever does not fit in our socio-intellectual mold can now easily be branded as “deviant”, and excluded from the virtual or actual community (a phenomenon we are seeing at work on all sides of the political spectrum).

It is undeniable that social networks have not only brought us closer to some of our fellow human beings; they have also driven us apart. The fact that we increasingly function in socio-intellectual isolation reinforces our certainties about what we consider normal, and makes any divergent behavior abnormal, and therefore to be destroyed. And since the fault lines often correspond, as a result of individual experience, to the social and identity cleavages we have just discussed, the result is an ever widening gap between the different components of our society. Individual class members are therefore more and more approaching politics as a zero-sum game for the control of resources that have become rare, and for the cultural destinies of the country. If un-reverted, this zero-sum game may in turn lead to more social stress, and ultimately civil strife and either civil war or a further drive towards authoritarianism, which will be sold as the best way to preserve social peace (and indeed, it was already sold as such in the ancient times, with the concept of the philosopher-king and that of emperor who somehow knew better than factions representing segments of society that could no longer talk to each other)

Conclusion: Lessons for liberals

Reading this short contribution may entice the reader to pessimism, and it is true that the history of the past ten years across the West, as well as the anticipation of the effects of Coronavirus on our socio-economic fabric over the medium and long-term certainly do not encourage optimism. However, it should not be taken as an apocalyptic prophecy, but rather as a wake-up call. It is still time for societies in North America and Europe (West and East, North and South) to extract themselves from this current vicious circle, but to do this, much soul-searching will need to be accomplished, including in today’s elites.

The somehow easiest part will be to engage in a debate, and regulate social media: it is becoming increasingly clear that Twitter, Facebook and other tech giants have acquired a size and responsibilities in terms of speech regulation that they alone cannot withhold without a gigantic prize to pay for society at large. Already, calls for regulation and even anti-trust action to rein in the power of the social media giants have taken form, both on the left and the right. It seems natural that these debates lead in turn to a much larger discussion about media freedom in society, as we will have to learn to discuss (or sometimes not discuss) our political opinions on social media with people with whom we fundamentally disagree.

But making our societies more coherent again will also mean learning to live *together* again, and not only side by side. The results of the US Presidential elections (or indeed, the Polish presidential elections) have shown spectacularly that, even in difficult years like 2020, the cleavages that run through our societies are here to stay, with little hope for political debates to lead to landslide rejections of the values of one group or the other. In fact, those values are strongly held by people because they correspond to their personal experience (and not misperception), which is often magnified (and radicalized) by the use of social media. Learning to live with our differences, just as protestants and Catholics learnt to live with each other in their states after the exhausting Wars of Religion, will require a lot of efforts on all sides – and will sometimes include agreeing to live apart from each other in order to avoid confrontation, while we search for new ways to bring ourselves together.

Which leads to the future of liberalism – which originally emerged from the demand of toleration (and then secularization) of religious discourse. Over the past twenty years, the rise of the creative class and a millennial “woke” has led to a new, fresh approach to liberalism that had been in the making in (mostly American) universities for years: social liberalism, with welcome accents being put on the rights of minorities and social justice. However, it is now becoming painfully clear that this rise has been so far limited to certain sectors of society, and that the social liberal vision of politics has also provoked reactions in sectors of society that, rightly or wrongly, have not only weakened our social fabrics, but also our democracies. As the divorce between liberalism and both conservatism and social-democracy has led to a weakening of the liberal ideology, many liberals have found themselves critiques of mass democracy and the “dictatorship of the uneducated”, in ways that we had not seen since Ortega y Gasset, or even the 19th Century.

How do we reconcile the promise of liberalism and individual autonomy with the realities that our societies are not uniformly liberal, and indeed can at times be illiberal? This is certainly a challenge for liberals around Europe, as they often find themselves in minorities in the political debate. Ultimately, winning back enough confidence from voters to slay the dragons of mistrust and authoritarianism will require compromise, both on the role of the state (as demand for intervention is growing), and on societal issues (where great victories were made in the 2000-2010s and need consolidating). This will be a hard thing for any liberal to do, but signs of moderation and respects for rival views (which are ultimately trademarks of enlightenment liberalism) may well be advantages to win the political debate, rather than hindrances.

In the mid 19th Century, then Conservative Party leader Benjamin Disraeli invented “One-nation conservatism”, a form of paternalistic, but also compassionate conservatism, to win over parts of the working class and make his party’s appeal (traditionally limited to the British landowning class) more relevant to the rise of new social actors and the mass politics. The experiment may be of use for liberals if they want to build a new coalition to beat

authoritarianism. In this way “one-nation liberalism” may sound like an interesting political program.