



# Meeting the challenge of rising authoritarianism

## Frank Hoffer

Today bad news seems to be overwhelming: Duterte, Erdogan, Jinping, Kaczynski, Modi, Orban, Putin, Trump. The list of failing but popular political leaders gets longer by the day - not failing on their own terms of power maximisation, but failing to address the needs and future of the people. Macho leaders united by sympathy for authoritarian nationalism and disrespect for democracy, fairness and global humanitarian values are on the rise. We see a tectonic global shift towards nationalism, male chauvinism, hatred of minorities and plutocratic enrichment. It is bad and has the potential to get even worse.

A lacklustre defence of the status quo by green-left-liberal forces will do nothing to stop the right wing uprising. The *Zeitgeist* calls for change. Pseudo-radical obsessions with purified correct language, or passionately fighting unintended and sometimes subconscious expressions of mainstreamers as micro-aggressions against minority groups, miss the bigger points that are really at stake.

Turning the tide requires a vision for local and global fairness that speaks to people beyond university campuses and gentrified, inner-city comfort zones. It requires simultaneously striving for fundamental change and daily efforts to make life more bearable in an often reckless and unfair world.

Looking backward, we can understand better the importance of maintaining this link between immediate change and long-term vision. Let me explain by comparing two movements for revolutionary change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century: feminism and socialism.

Last year was the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Two intelligent, passionate and charismatic Russian revolutionaries commonly known as Trotsky and Lenin replaced the Marxist orthodoxy of historical materialism with revolutionary voluntarism and consolidated the anti-czarist discontent of the masses into a party dictatorship to build a socialist future. The October revolution resonated with millions of people around the world. The radical part of the international labour movement rallied to its defence and sacrificed convictions, principles, the idea of democratic socialism and many, even, their lives to defend the citadel of anti-fascism and anti-capitalism.

However, with hindsight, we must say that the 'Great October Revolution' failed. The utopian power of the socialist idea did not survive the depressing reality of Stalinist terror, forced collectivisation, economic inefficiencies, environmental degradation and finally

gerontocratic stagnation. Today, the flame of the October revolution has lost its imagination and there is no sign at the moment that it might be resurrected.

### The feminist cultural and social revolution

How does this compare with the other mass movement that led to the most fundamental changes of the last hundred years, feminism? At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were not allowed to vote or make any business decision on their own, and were excluded from higher education and sport. Nearly all leadership positions and most prestigious jobs, from lawyer to doctor to professor, were men's only. Sexual abuse was rarely a matter for discussion, abortion was a crime, and feminists were regarded as the modern equivalent of mediaeval witches. Many forms of gender discrimination persist in many countries, but it is likely that future historians will remember the last 100 years for the most radical changes in gender relations in the history of humanity.

In a permanent revolution of incremental change, there is not one revolutionary moment of regime change, and its fundamental impact only becomes visible in retrospect. Fundamental change is the outcome of a continuous process of transformation, and in this process, progress is always possible but never guaranteed. It is the sum of small and not so small changes that result in a qualitative transformation over time.

Why did I choose the women's movement and not social democracy as the mirror image to the failed transformation through revolutionary power grabbing? The decline of social democracy is nearly universal and cannot be explained by the failure of particular leaders or some country specific situation. There are several reasons. The Soviet Union's implosion and the rise of globalisation have changed the power balance in societies. Global capital mobility and the ability to relocate industrial production easily have altered the balance in favour of capital. To the extent that capital liberated itself from national constraints, including the obligation to pay taxes, redistributive policies are increasingly limited to 'socialism within one class' - in other words, the revenues for social policies have to come from taxing the broad middle class. And a considerable part of this middle class has become hostile to redistributive policies, not least because the rich systematically evade their tax obligations and use their economic power to increase corporate welfare measures.

Social democracy's attempts to convince capital to return to a model of social dialogue fell on deaf ears in this new world of disembedded markets. Following electoral defeats in the 1970s and the West's triumph in the Cold War, social democracy decided if it could not beat them to join them. Accepting the liberation of capital through globalisation as the inevitable condition of modernisation, it became hostage to a logic that contradicted its own values.

### **Technocratic modernisation fails to capture imagination**

Social democracy gave up any passionate vision of real change, reducing the social democratic vision of social justice to education and skills development as the individual path towards social justice.

It seems the labour movement got it wrong and feminism got it right – by fighting for greater gender equality on many fronts, such as access to education, gender neutral language, closing the gender pay gap, demanding equal legal status, fighting sexual abuse, demanding gender quotas and insisting on affirmative action, while not losing sight of the radical programme to transform gender relations throughout society. While the labour movement split into opposing reformist and revolutionary camps, feminism seems to have been able to maintain an overarching unity among very different strands. #MeToo is the latest demonstration of this united mobilising power.

As much as feminism would lose its utopian power by recognising male supremacy, a left cannot flourish by accepting the supremacy of the market over the people's political will.

The structural constraints of global capitalism are a reality which cannot be wished away by anti-capitalist rhetoric. However, there is a fundamental difference between embracing these structural constraints as inevitable, and resisting the subordination of the people to the iron logic of the market. Left wing policies are unimaginable without the transformation of markets from masters to servants of society.

It is just not true that there is no policy space to achieve change. It is not true that it is impossible to use national and international rule-making to govern the market. It is not true that there is no alternative to unfettered capital mobility. It is not true that tax evasion cannot be tackled. It is not easy, but that is not the same as impossible. There are always alternatives, and when progressive ones are not available, reactionary ones tend to be chosen. This is what we are witnessing today. The people are voting against a system that does not deliver for them.

An important reason for the turn to the right has been the double vacuum on the left. Revolutionary radical power grabbing has largely disappeared or continues to exist as nostalgic rhetoric speaking only to the converted. Social democracy has shifted from incremental change

with a transformative vision to repair and maintenance of the existing regime, largely giving up any passionate vision of real change.

In this context, the right wing is managing to construct a narrative that speaks to many people by somehow combining anti-globalisation, justice, racism, identity, corporate greed, plain talking, tradition, family values, islamophobia, and law and order. In short, their message can be summarised in the slogan: 'Frustrated of the world, unite against those weaker and poorer as yourself!' Thus, multi-layered discontent is channelled into mobilising disgruntled supremacists to maintain and partly resurrect a world that resonates with their cultural comfort zone. Love or leave the country is the short cut for this narrow concept of yesterday's majorities' identity politics. Cultural homogeneity trumps economic inequality.

### **We can get it if we really want**

Given this reality, the left needs to develop an alternative narrative focussing on inclusion instead of exclusion and mobilising for changes that liberate societies from the structural straightjacket of unfettered globalisation. The better future needs to be imagined as something achievable – or, in more popular language, 'We can get it, if we really want.'

This requires inspiring visions pursued through incremental radicalism. The challenge is to create pluralistic unity by interpreting our societies through the prisms of social justice, freedom, choice, tolerance and respect. It is about connecting different but compatible desires for a better life in order to translate them into practical policies for positive change. Reining in globalisation, regaining the ability to tax the rich, democratising our societies and economies, and making our own organisations the showcase for genuine democracy, equality and participation are tremendous challenges, but not outside the realm of the possible.

Dictatorial dreamers and cautious realists alike have failed to meet these challenges. Passion and reason are two indispensable ingredients for any progressive movement. Cold reasoning tends to lead to technocratic modernisation and pure passion to authoritarian intolerance. Getting the balance right is the skill of a true radical.

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