

Growth of the far Right in Europe

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In recent months the rise of the far Right has made the front page of the political pages of European newspapers, following the victory of Right/far Right coalitions in the last legislative elections in Sweden and Italy.

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Sweden is an exemplary country for social democracy, which has dominated the country's political life for almost a century. Yet the Right and the extreme Right won the elections of September 11th 2022; the "Swedish Democrats" party became the second biggest party in the country after the Social Democrats, with 20% of the vote. This party was founded in 1988 by neo-Nazis; since then it has slightly moderated its positions, but it remaining scarred by this past and its current position is above all anti-immigration.

In Italy, the coalition of one right-wing party and two far-right parties won the elections of September 25th 2022. Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the "Brothers of Italy", a neo-fascist party, became Prime Minister .

These latest electoral victories are not isolated phenomena. In Poland, as in Hungary, far-right populist parties have been in power for years, and in other European countries the far Right is on the rise. For example, Vox in Spain got 15% of the votes during the legislative elections of 2019 and the polls show them clearly gaining, and in France Marine Le Pen, the candidate of Rassemblement National (National Rally), got 23% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election of April 2022, and 31% in the second round.

And the growth of the far Right is not limited to Europe. In other parts of the world, we see leaders emerging, like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Donald Trump in the United States, who bear a strong resemblance to far-right leaders in Europe.

21st century movements different from 20th

When we think of Italian fascism or German Nazism of the 1920s and 1930s, we see parties that built violent militias, rejected democracy, attacked above all the labour movement and relied on a bourgeoisie which wanted to restore order in a continent marked by revolutionary waves.

Current European far-right movements are very far from the fascism and Nazism of the interwar period; but they are also different from the far Right which rebuilt itself after the 2nd World War. Those nostalgic for fascism rebuilt parties: the MSI in Italy, the NPD in Germany, the National Front in France. They all had the same characteristics. They opposed immigration, but they were equally

hostile to communism, unions and the labour movement in general; and they were reactionary on a whole range of issues: women's rights, homosexuality, etc.

Contemporary far-right parties have different positions on many issues, but they agree on two of them: an obsession with immigration, often linked to a hatred of Islam, and a defence of the nation against the elites and the institutions that represent them, in particular the European Union. For the rest, there is no constant thread. Some parties are morally conservative, anti-feminist, anti-homosexual and anti-abortion - in Poland, Hungary and Spain. Others, in France and the Netherlands for example, rely on using the rights of women or homosexuals to attack Islam. Some support Putin's Russia - Orban in Hungary or Matteo Salvini in Italy. Others are pro-Ukrainian, like the Polish PiS or Giorgia Meloni in Italy. Climate change is also a controversial issue. Some of them deny its human causes; others don't; it's the same with the Covid-19 vaccination campaigns. The question of social rights also divides them: in France, Marine Le Pen defends them and demands the return of retirement at 60, while Eric Zemmour defends businesses and neoliberalism.

Neoliberal globalisation is the source

Several decades ago, the world entered a phase of neoliberal globalisation, which has led to many transformations, some of which are at the root of the rise of the far Right. Three of them are particularly important.

The first is the growth of inequality and the transformation of work. European countries, Using the Gini index which measures equality, European countries are among the most equal. But globalisation has facilitated an ever greater concentration of wealth in the hands of a very small number of individuals; and the elites are perceived as a world apart, disconnected from the daily life of the vast majority of the population.

Neoliberalism and globalisation have led to a profound transformation of work: many industrial jobs have disappeared due to relocation, and for those which remain, like those in the tertiary sector, precariousness has increased and worker collectives have fragmented. These developments have combined with the existence of a safety net to protect the poorest. This has led to downward pressure on wages and a feeling among the working class and the middle strata of being downgraded.

The second is the weakening of the capacities of states and traditional institutions in the face of the power of the markets. This is a development that can be found in most regions of the world, but it is particularly marked in Europe: the existence of the European Union moves citizens even further away from where decisions are made. In the decades following the Second World War, world trade was very limited. The main European states in Europe had the opportunity to developing a particular sector of economic activity and political life was organised on the basis of a clear Right / Left division. Today, the "governing" parties of the Centre-Right or Centre-Left, such as the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, have similar policies. And they are both losing their traditional voters. We are witnessing, throughout Europe, a fragmentation of the political scene and a breakthrough of the extreme Right which, in many countries, outvotes the traditional right-wing parties.

The third transformation comes from "metropolisation" which is one of the consequences of globalisation. It is about the adaptation of large cities to the needs of the neoliberal economy, the intensification of trade and financial flows and the linking of economies on a global scale. Faced with the weakening of the economic role of states, a hierarchical network of big cities emerges which resembles an archipelago dominating the world economy. But metropolisation has as its corollary

the decline of rural areas and medium-sized towns, which are very numerous in Europe. They are seeing public services and the life of their town centres disappear.

The challenge of the working classes and rural areas

The breakthrough of the extreme Right can only be understood by confronting these three transformations. The extreme Right breaks through among the working classes and in rural areas and small towns because of a feeling - which is often a reality - of downgrading and abandonment in the face of a state that does not protect them and serves the elite.

All the studies show the importance of the popular classes in the extreme Right electorate. Two examples: the Democrats of Sweden scored 8% among those with higher education and 25% among those with a lower level of education; in France, the Rassemblement National got the votes of nearly half of workers but only 15% of executives.

The break between the big cities and the rest is also striking. In France, almost all the big cities, are led by the Left, with the extreme Right scoring very poorly there, while scoring well in small towns and rural areas. In many countries the cities are often to the Left of the rest of the country

These realities force leftist forces and social movements into a strategic discussion. The governing Left, whether democrat in the United States, social democrat or ecologist in Europe, has favoured "societal" issues - the rights of women, LGBTQ communities, anti-racism - rather than the social issues (wages, pensions, working conditions). In the last period, it was ready to sacrifice these in the name of the necessities of the economy, in a phase of globalisation. Faced with this situation, part of the Left explains that it is necessary to subordinate societal questions, in particular on immigration, to focus on social questions and try, through this orientation, to win back the working classes who have turned to the far Right.

But a new generation of political movements and social movements, in Europe as in the rest of the world, wants to defend all of these demands - social issues of course, but also climate and environmental justice, the rights of immigrants, women and minorities LGBTIQ+ and anti-racism!

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P.S.

- This paper was written for the South African magazine Amandla! the 17th of November.
- Christophe Aguiton is a former trade unionist and today is active in social movements.