Crises and Popular Dissent

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Crises and Popular Dissent: The Divided West

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the people and the planet – one world

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Preface

This book analyses the crisis-ridden period of the first 20 years of this century. It discusses the internal divisions and external challenges of liberalism and argues the case for a revival of progressive politics and policies in the United States and Europe, particularly Britain. These have been hard years of international conflict, recession, polarised politics and the blight of Covid-19. We may or may not be past 'peak populism' but what has emerged from it in many parts of the world is a hegemony of the political right and much uncertainty on the left. Yet, this may change, partly due to 'the wake up' call of populism and the rethinking it has provoked.

Populism itself, specifically left populism, but more particularly the related but distinct tradition of progressivism offer ideas and policies that could revive radical reform including in relation to the environment, climate change and human and planetary well-being. The legacy of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s is still strong if severely contested, and must be defended and built on, as must the ideas and vision of younger activists. 'Old left' ideology, though still relevant, is not enough; a new left must find renewed energy and direction. Otherwise there is a risk of an era of deepening illiberalism, inequality and further ecological degradation. Three related themes are developed throughout the book: liberalism – hegemony and crisis; the populist challenge to liberalism; and constructing a progressive future whilst combating reactionary nationalism? The relationships between these themes is central to understanding the key political and social developments of a conflict-ridden and anxious period and of finding a way out of it.

Chapter 1 introduces the core themes of the book as described above and defines key supporting concepts, concluding with my own perspective and a vote of confidence in the potential of activist youth as a main carrier of progressive change. Chapter 2 provides an overview of populism, vital because the outbreak of populist sentiment and movements substantially contributed to the events and developments that have so far set the political and cultural agenda of the new millennium, disrupting post–Cold War liberal hegemony. Two contrasting views of populism are compared: Cas Mudde's sharply critical account of populism and Chantal Mouffe's support for left and opposition to right populism. In the latter part of the chapter, I develop my perspective that 'cultural populism' is 'semi-autonomous' from political populism. Chapter 3 critically examines the core values of liberalism, commenting on its weaknesses and enduring qualities with reference to its historical development. The roots of liberal society lie in the

European Enlightenment emerging in the early seventeenth century and gaining momentum in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of industrial and socio-political revolution. Yet, contradictions within liberalism have contributed to its difficulties, including a tendency of liberal politicians to embroil their countries in overseas wars and latterly lacking either the will or imagination to innovate radically in ideas and policy. As I write the American Capitol building in Washington has been invaded by supporters of President Trump. Those who believe in democracy would be wise not to take it for granted nor to assume that it is beyond improvement.

Chapter 4 analyses why Britain voted for Brexit in 2016 and America for Trump. The underlying trends explaining these dramatic and, for many, unexpected events go back several decades: neoliberalism, globalisation and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment intertwined with right-wing populism. In the first 20 years of the millennium, a flood of books, mainly written by liberals, warned of serious threats to but also of flaws within liberal democracy. Deep divisions between neoliberals and progressive liberals are discussed, as are perhaps equally damaging disagreements among progressive liberals that weakened opposition to Brexit and Trump. The equality agenda is basic and necessary, but it must accommodate the changes brought about by the social movements that seek a wide margin of identity and lifestyle freedom, bread, certainly, but also roses.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 examine the above themes in relation to, respectively, the United States, Europe and Britain. These chapters are the geo-political 'spine' of the book. Liberalism is further discussed in terms of two related ideologies or narratives, progressive liberalism and neoliberalism. The latter is seen as a Trojan horse within liberalism, an ideology of extreme competition and capital accumulation in tension with the more humanist and socially interventionist tradition of progressive liberalism, including the regulation (but not destruction) of markets. These two ideologies by no means cover the whole of liberalism which as a way of thinking and acting penetrated almost every aspect of Western culture and gradually much of the rest of the world. Indeed, the process of global modernisation is, for better and worse, largely a liberal one although it has provoked a variety of reactions around the world, many defining their own ideologies and identities, liberal or otherwise. Conservatism, in the sense of support for traditional values and institutions that does not always sit comfortably with its modern identification with capitalism, and socialism's foundation in collective values and a strong state, continue to challenge liberal hegemony both in the West and elsewhere. However, both these ideologies now largely embrace the freedoms won mainly by the social movements mentioned above, sometimes referred to as social liberalism although this term does not convey the tough political struggles involved in achieving them. An important aspect of the sections on liberalism is an analysis of social democracy as an ideology and political practice that combines elements of progressive liberalism and socialism; both traditions can claim a sustained commitment to democratic and social progress that could provide a renewed basis for collaboration. However, whilst belief in human rights extends beyond liberalism, including many socialists and some conservatively minded people, it is particularly embedded within the liberal tradition.

Chapters 7 and 8 are closely integrated and build a case for a new phase of reform in British democracy. Chapter 7 briefly reviews the history and more fully the current state of populism in Britain and how it might affect the perspectives and policies of Britain's main political parties. It also presents my differences as well as common ground with Chantal Mouffe's analysis of left populism and my preference for the term progressivism as the descriptor of a proposed movement for radical democracy and social equality. Chapter 7 also more widely reviews British politics post-Brexit and looks at possible directions of development. Chapter 8, drawing mainly on examples from Britain, argues for a revival of progressivism through an infusion of radical democratic policy which would introduce participatory democracy into the country's main institutional systems. A major move to radical reform requires that progressive liberals, left populists and social democrats build on their shared beliefs, make common progressive cause and, equally importantly, integrate many of the ideas of younger activists, including Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Black Lives Matter (BLM). The label given to this collaborative approach to values, organisation and policy, matters less than that it does in fact happen and that its practical implications for liberty and equality are clearly spelled out. The name 'Progressive Alliance' or one similar could be adopted to draw together and signal to the public the direction of its reforming intent. Without such a robust initiative, the turn to the authoritarian right in parts of Europe and internationally, even if it is now faltering slightly, may yet mould society in its own hierarchical and controlling image. In the United States, the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 election is no guarantee of a period of dynamic progressive reform but the prospect of Joe Biden's presidency is incomparably better than the alternative. The desire for a more genuinely democratic, fairer and safer world has not been quenched, the countermovement to reactionary times may come soon enough…

In most of Europe, the prospects for reform appear less immediately promising than in the United States (see p. 106). However, in Britain a possible scenario for the construction of a progressive majority was suggested by the shock Liberal-Democratic by-election victory of June 17, 2021, in Chesham and Amersham that turned a Conservative majority of over 16,000 into a Liberal-Democratic one of over 8,000 in a 25% swing. The Labour vote, down from 12.9 to 1.6 percent, had substantially shifted in a tactical move to the Liberal Democrats as preferable to the Conservatives. Previously, tactical voting had variously assisted Labour, Liberal-Democratic and Green Party candidates into power in elections at different geo-political levels – national, regional and local. But the scale of this result in a solidly middle-class, long-time Conservative constituency highlights the vulnerability of other 'blue wall' Conservative constituencies in the home counties and the South-East, many with much smaller majorities. However, one 'brick' out of the wall is no guarantee that many more will follow. But it does suggest that a strategy of co-operation – whether formal or informal, through alliance or tactical voting – might be the most reliable route to power for left of centre parties, none of which currently look likely to win if they continue to split the progressive vote. Such a development would intensify the trend to party re-alignment discussed in several chapters, with 'bricks' or parties of different colours dislodging and

replacing each other in a new if somewhat fluid formation. An accumulation of data on voting behaviour by age, education and class, the former two not crudely reducible to the third, supports that a reshaping of the electoral landscape with a partial rejigging of Tory blue and red, green and orange is an immanent possibility. A recast progressivism could emerge from these developments rooted in an integration of local activism and a vision of renewal at the national level of the kind indicated in chapters 7 and 8. The techno-social revolution underlying potential political realignment is discussed in chapter 2 (pp. 32–42).

Chapter 9 considers socio-political issues relating to environmental damage, climate change and human and planetary health and well-being. These are the most crucial issues discussed in the book – in a period when several other matters of major import have occurred. Covid-19 and its social effects are analysed in the wider context of humans relationship to nature. Looking ahead, more pre-planned resource mobilisation to achieve collective goals, including to reduce poverty and improve the general standard of health and planetary well-being, should figure prominently in any progressive project. The cost of being prepared could pay for itself by reducing the severity of the next crisis as well as strengthening a sense of fairness and community. Substantial international cooperation is necessary in preparing for pan-global threats, given that the existential challenges facing humanity do not observe national boundaries. We, as a species, must do better and must do differently. Chapter 10, the Conclusion, includes my reflections on matters raised throughout the book, and invites readers to consider and form their own conclusions – always, of course, subject to change.

Organisationally, the book moves through three introductory conceptual and theoretical chapters, a spine of four geo-political chapters, and the remaining three focus, respectively, on participatory democracy; Covid-19, the environment and climate change; and reviewing interactively the issues raised in the book. References are at the back of the book. Internet and some lengthy newspaper references are given there to avoid cluttering the text. In-text the key to references is the name of the relevant author(s) or institution.

I would like to thank a trio of individuals who have supported me, differently but outstandingly, in this project. The in-house back-up came mainly from Helen Beddow whose subject knowledge was helpful beyond any expectation and whose technical expertise was equally appreciated. I'm also glad to thank several other members of the Emerald team who were extremely helpful. My partner Dorrie Chetty was 'there' to provide practical and emotional support when she was busy enough herself. I cannot thank her enough, but I will try! My 'old mate' Jim Pey provided stimulating critique and discussion as well as some very useful material. A good friend. Beyond this 'trinity', family and friends have watched me wrestling with the tough and taxing issues of the early twenty-first century, variously with tolerance and bemusement. Writing takes 'time out of time' which is 'a big ask'. So, I hope they find the results of my work readable and interesting and, occasionally, amusing – a sentiment I extend to others who engage with it.