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Brexit Populism: To the Brink of Democracy and an Unholy Alliance with the US

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HARTMUT BEHR, AUG 8 2019

With the installation of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the second of the (self-declared) oldest democracies of the world, has, alongside political developments in the United States, reached a tipping point. The political system(s), and most importantly the traditional principle of the division of powers, of both will have to demonstrate their resilience against anti-democratic leaders. If this principle fails to show its working order and effectiveness, then democratic politics and the recognition of the rule of law in the US and the UK are seriously endangered. There can be no doubt that Johnson and his cabinet suffer from democratic illegitimacy: a handful of people, namely the party members of the Conservatives and Conservative Members of Parliament at Westminster, have voted for a new Prime Minister, while the nation's electorate has been ignored. The counterargument that Johnson's legitimacy derives from the mandate of the Conservatives' win in the 2017 general election is, however, an invalid argument as the electorate mandated, and arguable rightly so, a prime minister (Theresa May) who promoted and pursued a very different agenda to Johnson. This is what received a public mandate, not Johnson.

As a consequence, Johnson's premiership resembles a democratically illegitimate *coup d'état* by an elitist minority, now established with power over life-impacting decisions on future generations – namely the outcome of Brexit. New elections to receive a mandate, or not, would be the only democratically acceptable way forward. New elections to receive democratic legitimacy applies to Johnson as this demand similarly would have applied to Gordon Brown's succession of Tony Blair in 2007. But Johnson would not be Johnson if he called for new elections as this would exhibit uncharacteristic honesty and democratic attitudes. As an alternative example in a comparative perspective, the then spiritual brother of Margaret Thatcher, the previous German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1982-1998), launched a similar change of government (although through a confidence vote, not party leadership change), but immediately announced new elections after his toppling of the previous government in 1983.

This points to the question of honesty in politics; and this brings us back to the reference to the US. With Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, the US and the UK, two Western nations that pride themselves as the oldest democracies worldwide, have two supreme political leaders who have a proven record of public naughtiness with regard to their uneven and erratic tempers, their disrespectful language and misbehaviour towards their likewise erratically chosen enemies (often in public through social media), their ignorance or dismissal of their fellow citizens' sentiments and fair-mindedness; and whose behaviour is influenced, if not determined by egomania. Thus, the question arises inevitably: how could it come to this? One might probably have to admit that politicians have always twisted their arguments, even lied, have always pursued bipartisan ideologies, and have always needed a strong ego to sustain and be successful in political competition. This is very likely true. But what causes dismay and disgrace is the blatant and unashamed impertinence with which the Trumps and Johnsons of this world present their divisive ideologies time and again. (It is noteworthy that Trump has been the first well-wisher to Johnson, via Twitter, of course, in his typically gauche language, calling him a 'good man' and a 'very good guy').

But also this has been the case in history, one might say: there have always been nasty politicians, and the inversion of democratic values and political ethics into activist, thoughtless, and aggressive battle-cries is not only what we know from political literature, but also from history. (The analogy to fascism of Trump's stirring-up rants during his rallies, for example, is not (yet) what Johnson does, but one does not need to stretch the imagination too far to

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imagine Johnson acting like this). However, the crucial point is: even if there are historic precedents of politicians acting and speaking like Trump and Johnson, this only raises suspicions of how far down politics has declined the UK and the US to have two supreme leaders who relentlessly violate democratic public goods and political ethics, foremost of which is their complete lack of respect for plurality, equality, law, and honesty.

Likewise, this points to another conclusion. There is no doubt that there are millions of decent people in the UK and the US who are offended and disgusted by the likes of Johnson and Trump. But the fact that such men have risen to the highest leadership raises, too, the question of the moral fabric of societies which create the conditions for them to rise to power. Just one simple question: We would be unlikely to accept a person who constantly lies and cheats in our circle of friends, but society has made it possible that they become installed as national leaders. As potential friends we would not grant them enough credibility to be trustworthy and we would turn around and tell them to leave a dinner party. But what do we do when such people occupy national executives and heavily influence our, and our children's future? The founder of investigative journalism, the US journalist Walter Lippmann, in the 1920s stated that a society which cannot detect lies is not fit for freedom. Hence, are we fit for freedom?

Parts of British and American society appear to be sleepwalking into Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*: amusing themselves so to not realise their loss of freedom. And there is a sheer endless number of trivial daily amusements in the modern, image-flooded, technological world. So, we have to be on our toes and relentlessly vigilant to master the challenge of our times: namely to work for the cultivation of public mores which would not allow the likes of Trump and Johnson to hijack politics. Such mores, i.e., foremost respect for plurality, equality, law, and honesty, would link the public mandate of leadership with esteem and decency which it has lost. Some may say that this was never the case, however, we should not forget about the differences between, for instance Jimmy Carter or John McCain and Donald Trump, or Boris Johnson's record of dishonesty and amateurishness as Mayor of London and before. Loud activism seems to render politics ill-founded and desultory. But we as people should not accept this. We deserve better. But we have to get involved and make our disagreements and discomfort heard. We need to detect and unveil the twists and tweaks of their politics; and we must use all legal means to fight for our freedom and future which is threatened by egocentric and ill-prepared demagogues whose only skills are outrage and noisy political behaviour. However, to not sleepwalk like Huxley's protagonists and not amusing ourselves to death (i.e., losing freedom) without noticing it, we need a further awareness because Trump's and Johnson's lies are creating deeper labyrinths. Their language is 'gaslighting', i.e. psychologically manipulative and distorting our perception of reality, reminding us of the eponymous 1944-movie with Ingrid Bergmann. To not have our political perception of what is 'honest' and 'dishonest', 'democratic' and 'undemocratic', 'respectful' and 'disrespectful' destroyed and inverted, and to not get used to regard politics as *per se* evil and selfish, but to uphold certain standards of public life and mandate, we must cultivate our awareness and sharpness observing and critically commenting on politics; and not only amusing ourselves while drifting into the dystopia of a brave new world.

Coming back to Lippmann's warning: It emphasises another indispensable condition for freedom to detect lies, namely to the value of education. Education is here understood not as specialised education in a particular subject, discipline, or profession, but as the cultivation of general knowledge and of political and ethical judgement, parallel to the German concept of "*Bildung*". In other words, this skill of political judgment and knowledge would theoretically allow every individual to scrutinise the knowledge claims made by politicians. It would allow to check those claims for evidence, consistency, and factual truth. It would thus detect lies or "gaslighting". This is a crucial target for primary, secondary, and HE in order to build and save democracy; and every democracy that really wants to be one should aspire this critical skill in its people. Many conclusions for the educational system and the national curriculum follow-on from this which to develop I do not have time here. But critical issues touch upon questions of student fees, elitism, social mobility through education, and curriculum development. The neo-liberalisation and the development of education into a market commodity seem detrimental to Lippmann's plea and the conditions of its realization. Indeed, and this is last point I wish to make, there is seems to be a silent, but ever stronger and harmful complicity between the neo-liberalisation of education and authoritarian government – that is authoritarian precisely as it abolishes a critical civil society.

This aspect becomes visible through the application of a Foucauldian perspective on the relation between power and knowledge and would suggest that knowledge is organised in such a way that it produces a certain kind of society to

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make a certain kind of power organisation and execution possible. When applying this to the power of capitalist market ideology, then knowledge would be organised so that it produces a non-reflective, non-critical consumer: in large, a consumer society which does not critically explore politics, government, elections, public morality, the limits of law and ethics, but is complacent in superficial happiness, with money-making, and consumerism. Such critique of modern, industrial society is not new – we know such critique since the 1960s with Herbert Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* – but such critique receives novel topicality through the current overwhelming degree of political disenchantment and retreat into the private sphere. In this vein, it would be important research to study comparatively the structure, content, and historical developments of national curricula in the UK, the US, and elsewhere in order to determine and assess this 'soft skill', so-to-speak, of democracy and the future of democratic society.

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