Radicalised Conservatism is Becoming the Major Threat to Western, Liberal Democracy

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The emergence of right-wing political movements with authoritarian tendencies is arguably the greatest challenge and threat against our current, democratic system of governance, which is based on political liberalism. The manifestations of this development are seen clearly in the news every day. What is less clear is what means are available for the defense against this development, and how they are to be used.

Any discussion of this topic must begin with a clear understanding of the opponent. In this article I shall use a recent book by Natascha Strobl, *Radicalised Conservatism* [1] as the starting point. Ms. Strobl is a recognized expert on this topic and she appears frequently in Austrian media in this role.

Major Attitudes

In her book Natascha Strobl analyzes the radicalised conservatism from a liberal point of view. Her account of its outstanding features can be summarized in terms of the following major attitudes:

(1) **Disruption.** Striving to discredit and to disturb the workings of the political and the social system in society, ranging from the electoral system to the welfare system.

(2) **Divisiveness,** also called *polarization* which serves to split a society and create a sharp boundary between 'us' and 'them'.

(3) **Deviation** from commonly accepted standards for public behavior, for example by calling names and by making outrageous statements.

(4) **Disinformation,** by the dissemination of misleading statements, outright lies, and large quantities of 'noise' (ie. irrelevant information), as well as by favoring conspiracy theories. All these methods serve to reduce the effective availability of reliable facts and meaningful debate.

(5) **Distrust:** The widespread occurrence of contradictory statements as well as the disruption of normal government procedures contribute to a reduction of trust in the society.

(6) **Dominance:** Establishing dominance behavior as the new normal, instead of the consensus-seeking and compromise-seeking paradigm that we are used to.

Notes:

The track record of Donald Trump in U.S. politics contains many examples of these attitudes. Taken together, one of their effects is that the political system gravitates in the direction of *autocracy* where one single person dominates the government, instead of the distribution of power in a democratic system.

From the point of view of its instigators, these characteristic attitudes serve a purpose that is radically different from that of traditional conservatism. The goals of conservatism, as we know it, have been to be reticent with respect to changes in society, and to protect the inherited status and the property rights of individuals, as well as the rights of corporations. But the goal of radical conservatism is quite the opposite, namely, to dismantle the present political and social order so that it can be replaced by an authoritarian one. At the same time, the present rule-based system will be replaced by an environment where arbitraryness prevails, and where cunning and power are decisive.

A Kind of Conservatism, or Converted Conservatives?

The term 'radicalised conservatism' has not been used broadly and it is therefore open to interpretation: is it intended to signify one variety of conservatism, or the attitudes of people that have migrated from conservatism to something different? The latter interpretation seems more likely since the described attitudes differ so much from the traditional conservative thinking.

Besides its relations to conservatism, radical conservatism has obvious similarities with populism, and arguably with neofascism as well.

One may agree more or less with Strobl's account, but she has certainly captured the current developments in a concise way. It will be used as the starting point for a discussion of how the challenge of radicalised conservatism shall be met.

Enabling Trends

Has the emergence of radicalized conservatism been caused by the agency of certain individuals or groups, or shall it be explained by global factors such as new technology or lack of security? This is impossible to say, and it depends on what one means by 'a cause', but at least one can identify more than one single cause in this case.

It may be more useful to identify, if possible, a number of factors that have contributed to the emergence of radicalized conservatism, or RC. Such explanations can only be supported by plausibility and common sense, since strict verification will be out of reach.

First of all, one can observe that the attitudes of RC as described above seem to be mutually reinforcing ones. For example, disinformation breeds distrust, which

in turn would contribute to a shift from consensus-seeking to dominance-seeking behavior. This means that once these features of RC have established themselves in a society, there is a danger that they will become more and more entrenched.

There are also some current trends that are not part of this vicious circle, but which feed into it so as to reinforce it further. The *integration of entertainment and crime* is one example. This particular development has a long history, both in literature and in movies, but it has reached new heights in recent years with the use of rap music for articulating conflicts between criminal gangs. In general, it is plausible that the integration of entertainment and crime contributes to an increased acceptance of behavior patterns from the criminal world, if not of crime itself.

The on-going *market-orientation* means that more and more aspects of life are considered as a 'market' where 'customers' are given a choice between several alternatives, supposedly in everyone's interest. This leads to a need for everyone to advertise themselves and what they have to offer and, in particular, to compete for as much attention to yourself as possible. Several of the attitudes that were mentioned above are useful for getting attention, including 'deviation' and 'dominance'. This may contribute to an increasing use of these attitudes.

Another current trend is the *fragmentation of text* into short pieces. This trend may have started with the use of slides for overhead projectors, which were replaced by similar powerpoint slides, but it has continued with the use of comment fields in many on-line contexts, and finally with the Twitter service and its recent successor which is (ominously) just called 'X'.

Finally, the fragmentation of text is concurrent with the *shortening of the attention span,* in my opinion at least. An increasing stream of attention-searching messages may contribute to the same effect. Fragmentation of text and messages may well contribute to disinformation since a certain length of text is often required, both for conveying correct information, and for correcting incorrect claims.

Resistance against Radicalized Conservatism

Radicalized conservatism is of course antithetical to liberalism in general, and in particular to the paraliberal perspective as described in [2] . All the RC attitudes that were listed above are distinctly at odds with paraliberal principles, except maybe for the deviation from commonly accepted standards. It is important, therefore, to consider how to resist the rise of RC.

If Natascha Strobl's analysis, as summarized here can be taken as a starting point, then the first question will be how some of those attitudes can be counteracted in the public discourse. Among them, Disruption and Distrust would seem to require some reforms in branches of government, combined with improvements in their public relations. This is difficult, but it should not be impossible, and it

would be needed for other reasons also.

However, the Disinformation item can probably be addressed more directly. There are already a number of initiatives for preventing 'fake news', and it should be possible to do even more in that respect.

In principle, all the major attitudes ought to be resisted, but it is also possible that resisting one or two of them will counteract the others as well. If there seems to be a vicious circle where these attitudes reinforce one another, then it could be that breaking that circle at one or two points would cause the collapse of its feedback loop.

It would also be interesting to consider enabling trends, such as the three enabling trends that were mentioned above. Unfortunately, these are global trends in our society and it would be very difficult to reversethem. However, the possibility of *restrictions on advertising* is interesting in this context. Restrictions on the volume and the intensity of advertising could help reduce the strength of attention-grabbing and other kinds of disinformation, but there may also be some entirely different reasons for restricting advertising, namely, to reduce non-essential consumption and its impact on the climate.

In a similar way, restrictions on the glorification of crime that occurs due to the interactions between criminal and entertainment environments could be proposed for several reasons, and not only for resisting the trend towards radical conservatism.

The Importance of Media

One factor stands out as *the resource* that radical conservatives are using to achieve their objectives, namely, the contemporary media. This includes Internet-based media whereby an activist can reach their audience directly, but it also includes commercial media such as television, and even newspapers and magazines.

The use of media for propagating radical-conservative attitudes is complemented by the recruitment of influencers that can provide messages that are fed to the media for the best possible dissemination.

Therefore, a liberal state that wishes to defend its mode of governance must address the question of its policies with respect to media. This is a difficult topic from a liberal point of view, since the freedom of the press is a centerpiece of liberal thinking. Just as there is a concept of an "invisible hand" in the economic sphere, the belief has been that a free press will react to "fake news" and other irregularities, and its readers will select their sources accordingly. This may well have been true for the press in democratic countries, and with only minor exceptions, but the same thinking has been extended to modern media, such as commercial television, and to social media. Responsible media usually react to fake news in its own way, but with limited success, apparently. This is at the roots of

the problems that we see today.

The Necessary Reform of Internet and Social Media

However, the role of media in the rise of radicalized conservatism need not be thought of as being intentional, since the intrinsic character of these media can also serve as an explanation, in particular for the problem of Disinformation. Therefore, both the structure of Internet-based media and the use of those media by promoters of radicalized conservatism must be addressed together. I propose that a major reform of the major Internet-based services (and maybe of the Internet itself) will be necessary and can not be avoided.

The *lack of effective accountability* for messaging on the Internet is one part of the problem, and it is a question that must be addressed in a systematic way. However, Internet is used for a variety of purposes, and any approach for improved accountability must take this variety into account.

Broadly speaking, Internet-based exchange of information between individuals ranges from 'communication' between two individuals (by electronic mail, for example) to 'dissemination' of messages to a very large audience. In order to consider how these services can be provided in a responsible way, it is useful to review how the same services were organized, and regulated before the advent of today's information technology. Briefly, there was a clear distinction between 'communication' and 'dissemination' which occurred because of the difference in technology, but which also led to separate sets of rules. In principle, communication was considered as confidential, and also today: the contents of a letter are supposed to stay between the sender and the recipient, unless one of them make the contents available to others.

Dissemination was based on the printing technology, and it was viewed in an entirely different way. Once something had been printed, it was considered as publicly available, and as irrevocable. In our country, like in many others, everything that came out of a printing press had to be deposited, with one or a few copies, for archival purposes and in designated libraries where everyone had a right to go and see them. There were some minor exceptions to this, but the principle was clear.

Moreover, accountability was paramount for how dissemination was treated by society. Normally, every printed document should contain a mention of who were the author(s). In the case of newspapers containing a number of articles by different authors, it was not necessary to specify the author of each article, but on the other hand any copy of a newspaper must specify an editor-in-chief who was legally responsible for its contents. These rules were a necessary requirement for a free press, without any censure: everyone was free to publish whatever they wanted without the need for an approval in advance, but if the published materials

were to break a law (for defamation, for example), it was clear who would be taken to court for it.

I have expressed this in past tense since, although all of this still applies for all that is printed (with minor exceptions), but there are no similar rules for material that is published on the Internet. The difference is quite substantial. For example, although Sweden has a legal arrangement whereby an Internet-based journal can obtain the same rights as a paper-based one with respect to the integrity of its journalists, for example, there is still no mechanism for archiving even these journals for their posterior interest, nor of course for anything else that is published on the Internet.

Outline of the Structure of Reformed Internet Media

The following are some tentative ideas about how communication could be organized in a reformed Internet. The intention is merely to introduce a basic conceptual framework, and it would certainly require several extensions before it could meet all actual needs.

The first step would be to introduce a distinction between *messages, notes,* and *publications,* and to require that all communication software should respect and enforce the rules that apply to each of these categories. The rules for 'messages' should apply for information that is sent to a single recipient or a small number of them, and the authorized software should ensure its confidentiality, like in the services of the classical post office. However, it should also protect against anonymous mail and fake senders, by requiring that the sender must log into the service using a secure ID system before a message can be sent. A similar log-in would of course be required from the recipient(s).

Publications, on the other hand, should be thought of as free-standing articles, booklets or books that are made available to the general public, possibly after some payment, but not necessarily. Publications would be issued by a *publisher* which could be an enterprise or a single individual, and they would then be distributed by a *clearinghouse.* In order to access publication, one would log into one's *reading software* which requests the publication from the appropriate clearinghouse, and presents it to the user.

The purpose of the clearinghouse is not merely to forward a publication once, and maybe charge for it. It shall also keep track of which instances of the reading software have received the publication, so that it can provide information about updates and auxiliary information for the publication in question. Moreover, importantly, it shall administrate debates about the publication, so that each recipient of the publication can also be aware of objections to its contents, including factual objections but also other kinds of dispute.

Objections and auxiliary information may appear as additional publications,

but in many cases they will merely need a few lines of text. This is the reason for introducing 'notes' as a third kind of communication objects. These notes should be considered to be attached to the publication that they refer to, and they should not be available for reading outside that context.

The task of the clearinghouse should be fairly clear. With respect to the publisher, it would be reasonable introduce the notion of a *publishing permit* and to require that every publisher must have such a permit in order to be admitted to the proposed framework. The only requirement for obtaing a publishing permit should be that one understands and implements the rules of how the system works. The publishing permit should in no way restrict what can be published.

The main purpose of the proposed framework is (1) to make sure that incorrect information in the media environment can be counteracted by contrary information and arguments that are sent to all those that have received the original publication, and (2) to make sure that 'notes' are tightly connected to an original publication, rather than being free-floating, twitter-like messages. It would have to be extended in a number of ways: to account for other media formats, such as sound, images and video, for example. Also, the design of an adequate system for internal communication in limited groups would be very difficult in view of current reports about how such groups can serve as venues for mobbing as well as for 'fake news' and conspiracy theories.

Government Intervention of Public Media

In the opening chapter in my book on the paraliberal view [2] I describe it by contrasting it with (what I call) the ortholiberal view. The difference is that the paraliberal view recognizes that values are important for society (and not only for the individual); it claims that a nation-state needs a degree of consensus on certain *society-founding values;* and it proposes therefore that a liberal state has both a right and an obligation to promote those values, once they have been agreed upon by its citizens. The contrary, ortholiberal view holds that the choice of values is a personal matter, and that while the state of course has the task of deciding laws, it must not be proactive with respect to any values that have not already been accepted as laws.

A possible argument in support of the ortholiberal position is that the paraliberal position would lead to the risk of entering a "slippery slope" where the state can take more and more control of public opinion. The answer from the paraliberal side is that there is also a complementary risk, namely, if the liberal state abstains from defending its own values then it will open the gates for non-liberal ideologies, with all their detrimental properties. The paraliberal position therefore states that it is an important task for the state to find the right balance between these two dangers, and to set up adequate protection against both of them.

This argument is particularly relevant for the topic of the present article, ie. how to protect a liberal state against the influence of radical conservatism. It should be kept in mind when considering the sketch of a framework for the media on the Internet, since even this simple outline can lead to questions about whether it would imperil important liberal principles. Those questions will become more poignant when more details are added to the proposal. They must be taken seriously, but keeping in mind that we will be dealing with a trade-off, and that no ideal solution is likely to be found.

Conlusions

Radicalized conservatism has gained ground in recent years, due to active promotion by some states and some special interest groups, together with natural circumstances (such as new technology) that have facilitated its growth. This is now a major threat to liberal democracy as currently practiced in the 'Western' world, and it must be treated as such. It is contrary to the liberal view of how a good society shall be built, that is, a society where trust and open-mindedness prevail, together with respect for knowledge, for alternative opinions, and for the dignity of fellow human beings.

The defense of liberalism is of outmost importance, therefore, but it must be combined with an open mind about the principles of that same liberalism. Some of its basic tenets, such as the freedom of speech, have arguably been stretched beyond their original intentions, in recent years. This has led to an erosion of other important principles, such as the reduced reliance on solid knowlege for decision-making, both by individuals and (sometimes) by governments. The defense of liberalism must therefore be combined with an active debate about liberalism itself, including its foundational aspects.

References

[1] Natascha Strobl:
    in German (original): *Radikalizierter Konservatismus,* 2021
    in English: *Radicalised Conservatism,* 2021

[2] Erik Sandewall: *Values and Liberalism,* 2023
    http://www.argumentochfakta.se/manuskript/01/values-liberalism-03.pdf