

In the Dawn of a New Barbaric Era

Written by Burak Cop

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BURAK COP, NOV 23 2016

Those readers who turned to page A8 of their New York Times on September 20th came to face the news about German PM Merkel telling how “the voters in Berlin dealt her party another stinging loss in the second regional vote”. The article based this outcome on the verdict that “her decision, last year to allow hundreds of thousands of migrants to enter the country has set off aftershocks that continue to upend politics in Germany and beyond”.

Merkel’s party, CDU had also lost the election at Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. The major actor on the rise at the expense of CDU was the far right, anti-immigrant and populist AfD.

The German Chancellor did in fact acknowledge that her decision to welcome refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries caused the protest votes, but also pointed to “the emergence of a post-facts world”. She articulated this contention as “people are not necessarily interested in facts, they are just following their feelings”.

What is so intriguing is that, it was as if Merkel had already read the cover story of the Economist of September 10th which was titled “Post-truth politics in the age of social media”. Indeed, the Economist is making an astute proclamation that although what it calls “dishonesty” (or may be even put more crudely as outright lies) have always found a place in the dynamics of political arena, in our present age it has definitely gotten out of hand.

Again, according to The Economist, post-truth politics is advancing in many parts of the world: as in the case of Trump’s race for the presidency in the USA and the Brexit shock. The article claims for the latter that Britons “voted to leave the European Union on the basis of a campaign of blatant misinformation”. These recent developments more or less define the post-truth world as not a “modish myth” but “a shift towards politics in which feelings trump facts more freely and with less resistance than used to be the case”.

Not based on solid facts or evidence, these post-truth arguments that aim to create “this sounds so true” feeling in target segments of citizens are supported and strengthened by social media. People follow, and huddle together, with those that profess similar ideas and beliefs. Facebook, according to the article, designs algorithms to populate the users with news of similar content to the material they have previously “liked”, thus allowing people to have access to content that support their personal views and preferences. A group of Indiana University researchers have found that fact-based and false information is being displayed on Facebook with equal frequency.

The post-truth discourse is a strong indicator of the rise of populist-authoritarian rightwing politics. This new trend in politics seems to be flirting with fascism and racism at times, and thus with its economic background does look to resemble the rise of the infamous political regimes of the 1930s. Let us remember the fact that on the eve of the WWII there was no democratic regime in effect left in the European continent apart from a few countries.

The rise of capitalism and the increasing dominance of industrial capital enabled the work force and land to be converted into disposable assets in many European countries during the 19th century, where they were protected from being traded freely in the preceding centuries. This dramatic shift in the means of production had a traumatic impact on the Western societies and the resulting effect was insurmountable inequalities in income distribution and wealth. A startling fact was that the total asset value of private sector capital in Germany, France and Britain amounted to 6 to 7 times of the total national income of these countries prior to 1914. Similarly, in the USA the top 10

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% of the wealthiest comprised 40 to 50 % of the total national income in the same period (Piketty 2014). These inequalities prevalent in the society, giving rise to fascism and the start of the two world wars, as expressed by Karl Polanyi meant that the civilization of the 19th century had come to an end (Polanyi 2001).

The rise of fascism, according to Polanyi, can be explained as the attempt of the masses to safeguard their interests against annihilation. It is true that the political reaction of the European societies against the destructive forces of the market economy was unwise and led to brutally executed atrocities. However, these harsh realities did not change the fact that in essence the motive was self-preservation. In fact, it may not prove to be off target to proclaim presently that the rise of several versions of reactionary politics in the 21st century (such as the election of Trump as US President lately) is based on the foolish and unwise self-preservation initiatives of the societies.

In the face of this reality it will prove to be a rather futile effort to try to disprove every single lie and correct every single manufactured fact. The main explanation can be put forth as the readiness of the masses to follow self-appointed, bogus prophets and let us also remember that since the late 70s the economic globalization has shaken the very foundation of the societies deeply.

Thomas Piketty has shown that the existing inequality of fortunes have been in a similar state of decay in the beginning of the 20th century. The dramatic gap between the total value of private fortunes and the national income in the industrialized countries had somewhat been controlled with the increasing strength of the welfare state after 1945. However, Piketty puts forth the case that “private fortunes in the early twenty-first century seem to be on the verge of returning to five or six years of national income in both Britain and France” (Piketty 2014, 25-26).

This bluntly means that, as we advance through the 21st century, the private fortunes have reverted to the high levels of the First World War era figures. Similarly, the current income inequality in the US is as grave as in the 1920s (Piketty, 2014).

The findings of Branko Milanovic who has analysed the inequality of income distribution on a global scale between 1988 and 2008 also support Piketty’s views. According to Milanovic, those who have benefited from the neoliberal policies of globalization are those who comprise the top 5 % of the wealthiest population on a worldwide scale and the working classes of the Emerging Market countries such as China. On the other side of the coin, he claims that the working classes of the Western World (such as the Trump voters) and of the underdeveloped countries appear as the losers of the globalization (Milanovic 2016).

Following this theme, Turkish economist Korkut Boratav points to the rise of the “populist alliance” between the working classes and the reactionary bourgeoisie factions of the Western societies that threatens the traditional center-right and center-left parties. Boratav describes the seemingly unstoppable rise of the extreme right in Western Europe and their coming to power in Poland and Hungary, the Brexit incident and the Trump phenomenon as the successful examples of populist alliances.

When in prison in 1915, Rosa Luxemburg had written a pamphlet, where she said that humanity has come to a point where they should make a choice between barbarism (the end of civilization) and socialism. It seems that we have arrived at a similar point of preference after a century as to where humanity should turn to.

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