

Democracy, autocracy, and fascism

by Bart Nooteboom

47. How nazist is present populism?

published 24-10-2012

What are the sources of present rightist populism, in the Netherlands, Denmark, France, and other countries? It has been compared to Nazism. How valid is that? From various work (by John Gray, Rüdiger Safranski and Menno ter Braak) I identify the following characteristics of Nazism:

1. Romantic nationalism, with myths of national character and a glorious past, demanding subordination to national culture.
2. Charismatic, autocratic leadership: the leader gives a pure and unmediated interpretation of the will of the people.
3. Demonology: dark forces threaten 'our' society and culture.
4. Grievance against the ruling elite of 'soft' and 'cosmopolitan' intellectuals that 'denies the problem' and 'fails to take action'.
5. An imminent apocalypse, from outside (our race and culture are destroyed), or from inside (we shall eradicate them all).
6. Racism: the demons form an inferior race.
7. Inevitability of violence against the demons to realise a nationalist utopia.
8. A fascist glorification of violence as an existential kick.

The first five points can be attributed to rightist populist movements, but the last three only to an extremist fringe. However, present populism might shape the conditions for them to spread.

Nationalism is romantic in the desire to be absorbed in a higher, organic unity of the nation, as a safe haven from external threat. The rhetoric is romantic in the primacy of feelings and opinions over facts, and in rebellion against cosmopolitan universals that neglect national and individual identity. In present populism the demonology arises in the rabid condemnation of the Islam: the Apocalypse arises in a 'tsunami' of Islamic immigrants that will destroy our western values.

We underestimate populism if we disregard the validity of some of its views. Earlier in this blog I criticized universals, but I recognized that we cannot do without them. The resistance to universals should not fall into anti-intellectualism. Reasonableness, with respect for facts and arguments is indispensable for democracy. But we should demand that universals be tested, corrected and enriched by the individual, the general by the specific. Politics must be inspired by the people, science by practice, and rules must leave room for the richness, diversity, and unpredictability of insights, opinions, practices and initiatives.

Another, deeper source of populism is an innate instinct towards mistrust of outsiders. Outsiders are identified by clear characteristics of difference, in appearance and lifestyle. This instinct forms a rich vein for populist vampires to sink their teeth into. Particularly if it is attached to deep feelings of religion, race, ethnicity or nation.

So why this populism now? First, present economic and financial crises, with loss of jobs, pensions and property, are attributed to globalised markets that are blamed on the elite that engineered it, for example in European integration. This yields a trigger for retreat into nationalism. Second, problems with integration of Muslim, largely Moroccan immigrants, in several European countries, used to trigger the instinct of xenophobia, yielding the stuff for creating demons and the threat of apocalypse.

127. Beneficial imperfection published 5-1-2014

What do democracy, market and science have in common? They do not achieve grand designs but correct the ones that fail. They are imperfect but redress imperfections: imperfection on the move.

There is perennial grumbling about the imperfection of democracy, with its bumbling politicians, dilettantism, lack of long-term vision, cacophony of contrary voices, inertia, bureaucracy, decisions as watered-down compromise, and yo-yo policies, undoing under one government what the previous one did. Regularly there is a clamour for a strong, leader, a visionary, and occasionally there is envy of dictatorships or charismatic (Berlusconi) or authoritarian (presently Erdogan in Turkey) leaders, who do show vision and strength, and get things done.

As recognized by Alexis de Tocqueville, the purported weaknesses of democracy are in fact its strengths. The point of democracy is not that it achieves perfection but that it manages to timely weed out imperfections. The presumed strengths of dictatorships are in fact their weaknesses. In the long run, dictatorships lose and democracies win.

Consider Stalin, Hitler, Mao, with their grand designs ultimately collapsing in disaster. Democracies won the wars. After the disasters under Mao, China is now doing well economically, but will it sustain its success without yielding more to democracy?

Markets and science are similar to democracy, in their fundamental logic. They also are correction mechanisms of failures. They also do not achieve grand visions by design but allow for a variety of designs from others (here entrepreneurs, scientists) to arise, and then see to it that the ones that fail are weeded out. That also is the logic of evolution.

In markets it is not (or should not be) governments but entrepreneurs that yield ideas for products. With this, the risks of enterprise are privatized. Those risks would be unacceptable to a political system that is geared to be prudent, i.e. to avoid risks. When entrepreneurs fail they go bankrupt. Failures of grand designs by large firms or

governments are hidden for reasons of prestige, and are propped up with subsidies from what does succeed.

In science, according to Karl Popper's methodology of *falsificationism*, scientists exercise their insights and risk their careers with ideas, ferreting out each other's failures. It is the scientists, not committees or institutions that come up with the occasional successes and the frequent failures.

The point in all three cases, democracy, markets and science, is this. They allow for mistakes but also correct them, evoking criticism, giving voice to failure, and replacing failed visionaries. Dictatorships and economic and scientific planning, by contrast, stifle criticism, hide failure and prop up the failed visionary. As a result, mistakes develop into disasters, while in democracies they are redressed.

Of course, this does not happen automatically. There is a persistent urge to design blueprints, plans and programs top-down. In democracies as well as in markets and science systems, governing elites when given the opportunity will hide mistakes, will silence or divert criticism, seek agreement rather than opposition, collaborate only with collaborators, not critics, building bastions of support. Democracy requires a tenacious maintenance of freedom of speech, a vigilant press, and all the usual institutions of a separation of powers (the judicial, the legislature, and the executive), police monopoly of violence, etc. Markets require that lobbying by established firms be curtailed. Science requires that open dissemination of publications be maintained. And they all require openness to new

153. Response to authoritarianism published 6-7-2014

Western democracies show an inability to restrain uninhibited rampage of markets, excesses of cupidity, extremes of inequality in income and wealth, the political power of money, a culture of narcissism, and self-indulgent populism. This bolsters the self-confidence and acceptance of authoritarian forms of government across the world, presenting themselves as 'bulwarks against Western individualism', as it was recently called in the New York Review of Books¹

In this blog I proposed 'debatable ethics' (item 118). That is relativist, not in the extreme sense that any ethic is as good as any other, but in the sense that it is pluralist. I argued that any system of ethical values and moral guidelines or rules requires debate that allows for arguments from different dimensions of the good life, in an Aristotelian virtue ethics. Does this relativism allow for authoritarianism, with 'growth without democracy and progress without freedom'²?

¹ In an article by Michael Ignatieff, NYRB vol. 61, no. 12, p. 53

² the same reference.

Ethical debate requires open access to the debate, which requires freedom of participation and expression. It also requires truthfulness and fulfilling commitments. That much would still remain of a universal ethic.

This universalism is limited, however, in the recognition that the debate will lead to different ethical/moral systems, depending on different views concerning different dimensions of the good life, or virtues, which are not necessarily commensurable and whose priority, form and viability depend on circumstances of culture, history, education and economy.

Moderate relativism, or pluralism, in ethics is needed to engender an attitude of modesty and restraint in foreign policy, not to impose one's own view by force, as Obama now seems to try to establish. Instead, one should try to prove the attractiveness of one's view, in competition with other views, in the flourishing of one's own society.

Democracy has the potential of resilience against error and excess, as discussed in item 127 of this blog, as a form of 'imperfection on the move', in contrast with the dreams of perfection by authoritarian design that is sooner or later bound to fall into disastrous collapse.

Democracy should now prove its ability to do this, to redress its errors, in a drastic revision of its current state of on the one hand an overreach of the welfare state and bureaucratic design, and on the other hand excesses of market ideology and inequalities of power, income and wealth. Conservatives and progressives should be able to find each other in this.

If democracy fails in this it will itself fall into disastrous collapse and will show itself to be no better than authoritarianism.

I propose that all this requires an answer to current excesses of individualism, called 'singularity' in item 151 of this blog, and that part of that answer lies in the new type of solidarity proposed in item 152. This should restore a sense of reciprocity, collaboration and civic responsibility, with a renewed sense of justice. Will that be convincing enough to disarm authoritarianism?
entrants.

160. History goes on published 25-8-2014

Francis Fukuyama became famous for his claim of the 'end of history'. What he meant was that rivalry between political ideologies is over, with capitalist liberal democracy as the only viable ideology left.

This claim has been much criticized. How about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, with the claim of IS (until recently called ISIS) to establish a fundamentalist, extremist caliphate across the Middle East and further.

How about the rise of authoritarian regimes, as in China, Russia, and Turkey, which allow for capitalist markets but not for liberal freedoms?

How about the paralysis of American politics, with the two parties in deadlock of mutual veto?

How about populist rebellion in Western European democracies?

In a recent article³ Fukuyama recognized these setbacks but reiterated his claim that in spite of them in the end capitalist liberal democracy will necessarily prevail.

Methodologically this is rather weak. In that way one can defend anything that has not yet happened. The second coming of Christ. Divine miracles. Logically one cannot prove that something will never occur.

So what is the argument, and what the evidence?

Fukuyama claims, plausibly, that IS will not in the long run succeed in its violent destruction of freedom. China, Russia and Turkey will run into the phenomenon that with rising prosperity of the middle classes they will demand freedom, with liberal democracy as the inevitable outcome. That is less self-evident. Middle classes may choose to be bought into loyalty with prosperity and privileges.

Concerning facts, Fukuyama points to revolts against authoritarianism and corruption in Egypt, Ukraine, and Turkey. Yes, but they have all subsided or been sidetracked.

My counterexamples are the street protests in Greece and Spain against the derailment of financial markets and democratic institutions, the protests of the 'Occupy' movement, widespread demonstrations against capitalist globalisation.

Those also seem to have subsided, dissolved, suppressed, or sidetracked. Does that prove that they were misguided, and does it confirm the triumph of capitalist liberal democracy? No, not any more than that the subdued protests in authoritarian states prove their superiority.

I propose that the rise and fall of protests against capitalist liberal democracy demonstrate the 'system tragedy' that I have argued earlier in this blog: the inability of a system that has become perverse to reform itself from inside. Criticism from outside the system falters from the paradox, discussed in item 151 of this blog, that people protest against the results of an ideology of individualism that they have learned to endorse and practise themselves. Ideologically, they stand empty handed.

In preceding items in this blog I have argued how deep, how fundamental, philosophically, the crises of capitalist societies are.

³ Francis Fukuyama, 'At the end of history still stands democracy', the Wall Street Journal, 6th June 2014.

What, then, is my answer to Fukuyama's question what alternative, viable ideology there is, or could be?

In this blog have tried to provide fundamental ideas for that, in a new understanding of equality, individuality, and solidarity (in items 150-152).

Related to that, as an item of practical policy, I advocated the introduction of a Basic Income (154).

Does this amount to a viable and forceful rival ideology? Not yet, surely.

The most fundamental point is a switch from a utilitarian ethics to a virtue ethics, as the basis for a radically different view of markets, with collaboration next to rivalry, with a large measure of reciprocity, and with regard to intrinsic next to extrinsic, purely instrumental utilitarian views of work and enterprise.

That might yield some revised form of capitalist liberal democracy, or some variation upon it, but it would be fundamentally different, perhaps deserving a different name. Let new history begin.

165. Absolute terror

published 24-9-2014

Earlier in this blog, I argued against universalism and absolutism. Here I try to connect that with the current crisis surrounding IS (ISIS, ISIL).

Should terror be fought with universal values, or are those precisely the source of it? Moral universalism leads to nationalism, intolerance, discrimination, missionary zeal, conquest and suppression. It is totalitarian in its absolutist claim to apply always and to everyone. The human being cannot achieve the absolute, and reaching beyond human limitations makes the world inhumane. This applies as much to the presumed universal blessings of Western democracy, capitalism and market, as it does to those of communism, Christian faith and Islam.

But, one may object, terror surely is an absolute evil? Does that not demand an absolute counterweight? What terror is, is often the judgement of a dominant power concerning its rebels. The rebels are inspired by their own absolutisms of faith or ideology.

What is terror? If it is defined as violence against innocent bystanders, then the interventions in Vietnam, Iraq en Afghanistan were terrorist, as earlier colonial interventions by the Netherlands in Indonesia, France in Algeria, Belgium in Congo, Great Britain in India, etc.

If terror is defined as a deliberate targeting of the population, then the use of nerve gas by Italy in Eritrea in the 1930s, the bombardment of Dresden in WWII, and the atom bombs on Japan were terrorist.

The boundary between these two definitions of terror is not sharp. It depends on how much collateral damage one accepts.

In what regard, then, if any, is the terror perpetrated by IS (or ISIS, or ISIL) worse than bombardment with much collateral damage?

Is it perhaps the manner of violence? Is the physical, personal closeness of the knife and sword of IS worse than the distant, impersonal slaughter by bombs? Or is it an affront to our sensibility of civilisation? In its past, the West overcame its own bloodshed by the sword, progressing to bombs, and it is an affront to history, the cultural achievement of the Enlightenment, to be thrown back into barbarism.

Not only outcomes count, in suffering, blood and death, but also motives. Terror seems more acceptable when it aims to curtail aggression, or terror (as now regarding IS), or to enforce peace (as formerly in Kosovo). Or when it arises from compassion with victims, as now concerning IS. However, IS will claim that it also acts from compassion and protection against injustice, suppression and violence regarding Sunnites.

I propose that the horror is deepest when terror is based on some absolute, in religion or ideology, transcending humanity, devoid of all reasonableness, limit and moderation. Devoid of human virtue. That arose before, in the holocaust, the Pol Pot regime and Rwanda, and now in IS.

But wait. The Enlightenment produced its own absolute, that of reason, replacing the absolute of God. That yielded the rational choice of economics, which yielded markets, resulting in an absolutist market ideology. Now, markets do not seek terror, violence against the population. Nevertheless, it does produce violence. Is it a sufficient excuse that this effect is not intended? In philosophy this is an issue of debate. The claim that violence was not intended may be a sop, turning a blind eye, masking intention.

My conclusion is this. While Enlightenment thought and market capitalism are absolutist, in contrast to IS the terror of bombarding IS is based on debate, in press and parliament, in a weighing of pros and cons, with an ear for opposition. It is a case of the debatable ethics that I plead for in this blog.

The tragedy of bombing IS is that without doubt it will call forth the next wave of extremism and terrorism, but a point was reached where nevertheless action had to be taken.

The worst tragedy is that the very absolutism of the worst terror also forms its attraction. Especially to some young people, attracted by the transcendence of the absolute, rising above the mortal self, the lure of the pure, and the unconditional, in a flight from the

nihilism and shallow materialism of Western society, and from the compromise and hypocrisy of adulthood. They flee from the absolute of markets, back to the absolute of God, dropping democracy and destroying freedom and reasonableness.

181. In the face of terrorism published 18-1-2015

In the face of present terrorism in the name of the Islam, what should we do?

We should try to understand what entices young muslims to fundamentalist terror. I think there are several reasons. Most fundamentally, perhaps, it is normal for young people to pine for the absolute as a goal in life. I recall that when I was in puberty I decided I did not want to become an adult because adults seemed to me to betray life, in giving in to compromises on ideals, ambition, honesty, strength of character, a sense of purpose, in short on the meaning of life. I prayed to God to be elected to a mission in life in which I could reach for him without compromise.

Theistic religion, in Christianity and elsewhere, has inspired marvels of beauty, in music, art and architecture, compassion and drives for peace and justice, and has brought solace to countless people. It has also wrought calamities of war and terror.

Western society had its share in religious fundamentalism and terror. Recall the Inquisition, crusades, and the terror that in the 16th century Anabaptists wrought in Munster, Germany, killing thousands, whoever did not conform to their fervour and dogmatism.

Terror has also been inspired outside religion, in ideologies of race and revolution in the name of humanity. As I argued elsewhere in this blog, like theistic religion these ideologies arise from an urge to rise above human fragility and mortality, in a reach for the absolute and dreams of immortality.

Western society liberated itself from religious grip in the Enlightenment, but did not thereby rid itself of the lure of the absolute. Both the Enlightenment and Romanticism gave it a renewed impulse. The first in a striving for absolutism in the true and the good, in rationality and ethics. The second in the romantic dream of transcendence of the self in a larger whole of nation, race or historical necessity. This produced horrors of war, holocaust and colonialism.

On the rebound from those horrors, subsequent development of western society, in capitalist democracies, yielded a flourishing of science together with a loss of magic, anonymity in impersonal systems, excesses of postmodern relativism, and nihilistic despair of the possibility to achieve old certainties. The absolute was shed at the price of nihilism.

Outside religious societies, as in the Islam, viewed the resulting loss of meaning and values with increasing disdain. Hatred was fuelled by outrage, and perhaps a sense of

frustration, against what was seen as western arrogance in claims of economic and cultural superiority, economic imperialism, double standards in the treatment of authoritarian states, and neglect of ethnic and religious minorities and their economic and political perspectives. Conservative Islamic religious authorities saw a chance to divert internal political criticism to hatred of the west and religious zeal and fundamentalism.

Young muslims, enticed to the fervour of the absolute, for fulfilling a higher mission of life, and Nietzschean will to power, perhaps, together with religious indoctrination and a sense of being left behind in economic and political perspectives, were ready for extremism, and started imitating and prodding each other to violence.

So, what now? The challenge is to acquire or develop a new sense of the meaning of life that is pluralistic and tolerant of different forms. That entails shedding the lure of the absolute, to value difference, and to accept imperfection on the move, as I have argued for in this blog. I plead for a search for transcendence that is horizontal, in the other human being, not vertical, in God, and immanent, in life, not in immortality. Can we do that, or is the lure of the absolute too strong to subdue or divert?

How far can freedom of expression go while maintaining tolerance? Where is the limit? Note that it is primarily up to the one to be tolerated, not the one who tolerates, to judge whether toleration occurs. If he/she is too sensitive to criticism or satire, that should be a matter of debate, not some foregone conclusion.

If people abandoned the absolute, they would be more open to pluralism, less sensitive to opposition, and might even value it.

227. The cultural roots of ISIS success published 18-11-2015

How can ISIS be so successful in its utter evil, attracting ever new young recruits to it?

Doubtless, the cause lies, in part, in frustration of young Muslims, also in developed Western countries, from poverty and discrimination, mobilized for indoctrination by fundamentalist Islamist zealots. But why are the latter successful in their indoctrination?

I think the deeper cause is twofold. First, the fact that in the loss of religion, secular, liberal, democratic, capitalist societies lack clear spiritual values that yield an inspiration transcending hedonistic values of consumption. ISIS competes with a stark, absolutist, transcendent, compelling, easily grasped imperative, with a clear split between the good and the bad; the faithful and the infidels. Second, ISIS offers the perspective of heroism and exuberance in risk and violence, where Nietzschean masters relish the rush of power over slaves. This combination of sense making in higher purpose and the rush of violence seems unbeatable. I expand a bit on both.

In a recent review in the New York Review of Books, Michael Ignatieff discussed a thesis by Michael Waltzer that in history secular revolutions have been followed by

religious counter-revolutions.¹ Examples given by Walzer are Algeria, India, and Israel. Ignatieff concludes that the secularists ‘failed to create a powerful and convincing political culture that would offer what religious faith still offers ... , i.e. a spiritual home.’ Salafist Islam in Algeria, Hindu fundamentalism in India, and biblical fundamentalism in Israel.

There are counterexamples, where secular revolutions did not engender fundamentalist religious counter-revolutions: France, America, Russia, and China come to mind. However, what they did offer was a secular transcendent ideology as an alternative to theistic religion: French civic virtue in ‘laïcité’, American exceptionalism, and Russian and Chinese communism. Also non-theistic ideology can yield a sense of transcendence, which is religious in the sense of offering connection to something higher than the self.

Why, then, do some young people turn away from Western societies, lured by ISIS? Has the inspirational value of Western societies been eroded? By what? I suspect that it lies in the excrescence of neo-liberal market ideology, supported by economic theory that claims to be value-free. But that is precisely the problem: loss of values other than hedonism, efficiency and economic growth. It does carry the value of liberty, but mostly in the negative sense of freedom from interference, which turns into a license to exploit other people and nature, for those who gather financial and positional power. There is a lack of the positive freedom of access to resources, justice and competencies, which has been eroded in ‘reforms’ for the sake of markets. That hurts the lesser educated, the old and weak, and outsiders who are discriminated, and lacks a spirit of transcendence.

Second, the lure of heroic violence and subjugation has been nourished, I think, by a hotbed of thought fed by Nietzsche’s rejection of the ‘slave mentality’ of Christian compassion and his celebration of the ‘will to power’. In the wake of that, a shift has been going on from ethics to aesthetics, where the self or life is to be constructed as a work of art (Foucault, Onfray), stepping out of the symbolic order, in the ecstatic joy of ‘real’ life (Lacan). Some of the texts (e.g. in Onfray’s ‘sculpting he self’) are redolent of fascism.

I have been struggling with that in this blog. On the one hand I have been advocating a Levinassian philosophy of the other, and on the other hand I have tried to carve out space for a flourishing life for the creative individual. I have tried to show that they are not antithetical, that regard for the other is a source of a flourishing life. I have arrived at an ethic of reasonableness, of discourse between diverse views, with notions of truth as ‘warranted assertibility’, and ‘debatable ethics’. It is a modest view of ‘imperfection on the move’.

Is this enticing, inspirational, transcendent enough to appeal to the human spirit that cries out for the vertical transcendence of theistic religion? I proposed a transcendence that is immanent, within life, and horizontal, from people to people, and is enticing in furthering a flourishing life in the best use of one’s talents, to contribute to the hereafter of what one leaves behind at death. Is this enough? Is it strong enough to resist current evil?

I think that it could be, in the Nietzschean ethic of power in the form of transcendence, transformation, reaching for the sublime even while knowing that it will never be quite achieved. That can be exhilarating. It avoids the atavistic regression to power in the form of violence that is found in ISIS.

236. The problem of multiculturalism published 3-1-2016

Finkelkrautⁱⁱ argued, and I sympathize with this, that a state should be based not on cultural affinity but on the law, consent, and plebiscite, able to combine multiple cultures.

That would plead for tolerance of different cultures in a society. But that has brought mutual indifference, which has led to isolation of cultural or ethnic minorities in ghetto's.

Also, one cannot so easily separate laws from culture. Laws are laden with culture and corresponding ideology. Liberalism, for example.

Furthermore, like it or not, present nationalist populism demonstrates how people are emotionally, viscerally attached to cultural affinity, raising doubts whether a state or community (such as the EU) is viable without it.

The central question then is how much overlap there is between different cultures, as a basis for living together.

Let us assume culture is made up of a constellation of features, both more fundamental, deeply rooted, foundational (faith, ideology) and more derived (dress, food, art). I define ideology as ideas and ideals concerning the human being and its relation to society. There are underlying philosophical views, often implicit, tacit, concerning the true, the good, and the beautiful. I will untangle the features of culture in more detail in the following item in this blog.

Then there are three positions with respect to multiculturalism:

1. *Universalism*: some fundamental features are absolute, applying always and everywhere. They are the basis for universal human rights, for example. That was the dream of the Enlightenment. Here, multiculturalism is no great problem.
2. *Particularism*: the features are systemic, connected, forming a distinct 'collective spirit' ('Volksgeist, going back to Herder, 1774), rooted in history and location. Individual identity is moulded by the collective spirit, adopted tacitly, taken for granted, not easily amenable to criticism and inter-cultural debate. Here, multiculturalism cannot exist.
3. *Postmodern eclecticism*: any features from any cultures can be mixed at will. This started with a mix of styles in architecture and art and spread to mixes of cultural features such as dress, food, music, dance, slang ... Here again multiculturalism is no problem.

I go along with none of these.

The problem with universalism is that every culture proclaims some of its own features to be the universal ones, and that what the salient features are may change.

The problem with particularism is that it locks people up in their culture, without ability to wrest oneself free, thus denying individual identity and responsibility. And it leads to a re-emergence of nationalism.

While particularism exaggerates the coherence of cultural features, the problem with postmodernism is that it neglects them. Surface features of style are rooted in deeper features of faith, ethics, etc. Culture contains narratives, and one cannot simply take out one element without loss of meaning. The whole depends on the parts but the parts also depend on the whole. Postmodernism breeds superficiality, mixing styles of consumption without touching upon deeper sources of sensemaking (religion, ideology, etc.). Yet in discourse between them, cultural narratives can change, or so I propose.

There is diversity within culture: not every individual shares all the features equally. There can be no individual identity without contrast. On the other hand, different cultures have more or less overlap, sharing features, also more basic ones, and overlapping narratives. That yields some bridgehead for connections.

Slavoj Žižekⁱⁱⁱ noted that if cultures are distinct, one views other cultures from the perspective of one's own, adopted tacitly, taken for granted, not seen to be prejudiced. Tolerance then is condescending, and can become repressive.

The perversity of this is that there is a hidden bias, hiding implicit claims of superiority. Under the guise of allowing for cultural difference, minorities are in fact discriminated. Explicit intolerance is more honest, in not hiding such claims.

In order to succeed, then, multiculturalism must become reflexive, aware of the difference from which it relates to a multicultural world.

Žižek's conclusion, and I agree, is that one should own up that politics is antagonistic. That is democracy. It requires a choice of position, not an equalisation of positions. One should shed the political correctness of pretended equality and frankly and openly engage in defending and promoting one's own, partisan position, not pretending to be loftily lifted beyond it.

From being reflexive, aware of the parochiality of one's view of differences, one should open up to debate between such views. One should stick to one's views tenaciously, while facing those of others, remaining open to opposition, as a basis for changing one's views.

There lies the value of freedom of expression: being frank in expressing one's views, while allowing for the possibility that they are wrong, or biased, or even blind, and for

that reason welcoming opposition. Contesting the value or validity of other cultures, while allowing for them to contest one's own. As Erasmus said: fire is kindled by striking flintstones together.

Admittedly, there is a problem of 'incommensurability', the difficulty of comparing perspectives. But one should not give in to this problem too easily. Cultures share features, more or less, even though with different senses attached. There is always potential for some mutual understanding, using the force of metaphor, imaginative switches of perspective. Literature and art can help. And even if this fails, one should manage to grant the possibility that the other is right. And come to some pact of non-aggression.

But again, here still re-appears the joker in the pack. I am saying this from the perspective of my culture, struggling to maintain an ethic of open debate, an afterglow of the Enlightenment, even against all odds. So, is there anyone out here who wants to contest this? And then, is it too much to ask for arguments?

242. What response to fascism? published.24-1-2016

Simon Critchley opened my eyes to a terrible insight^{iv}. He claims that the whole of Western thought, from Judaism, Christianity, and all through the Enlightenment, and in liberalism, has been an audacious saga, hubris, of a subject that is self-identifying, self-possessing, self-constituting, self-legislating, constituted by reflection, in sovereign freedom of reason, with spirit superior to the body and reality. That was also Kant's ethical project: separation of freedom, in the ethical will, from causal necessity.

In contrast with liberalism, Hitler's fascism saw the 'elemental rootedness of the human being, identity of the self and the body, sensitive to the urgings of the blood and appeals to heredity. .. Man's essence lies no longer in freedom but in bondage, with appeals to sincerity and authority'.^v There is a straightforward link from rootedness to nationalism.

Now I also see more clearly the affinity between Nazism and Heidegger, in the embodiment and rootedness of the self, existing and developing by action in the world.

Much of it also lies in present postmodern philosophy and its modifications. If rootedness, in the body, history, and location, has philosophical justification as well as a deep emotional appeal to people, how can we proceed without falling back into the maws of fascism? It will no longer do to simply condemn the urges as irrational or counterproductive. That is precisely the liberal, Enlightenment view that is up for change.

Now, fascism entails more than just the rootedness. It also entails the rule by a charismatic leader who acts as the voice of the people, without need for intervening democratic procedure, and disdain for the 'elite' of elected and appointed officials. More ominously, it also entails, I think, a glorification of the existential kick of violence.^{vi}

We witness populist right wing parties appealing to these urges. They have felt well these urges among the population, with fear of foreigners fanned by waves of terrorism and refugees.

I think that underlying this is something more basic. I propose that this lies in an instinct for ‘parochial altruism’ that I discussed in item 205 of this blog. To recall: humans (and several other kinds of animal) have an instinctive, probably genetically embodied, drive to extend altruism within the group, accompanied by suspicion towards outsiders.

Authoritarian leaders exploit these urges of rootedness and parochial altruism to reinforce and maintain their positions of power. Part of that is the classic stratagem of diverting internal discontent by attributing all wrongs to outsiders (preferable recognizable in a different appearance and conduct) and the apparent failure, the inevitable imperfection, of representative democracy. If only all the power goes to the leader as the voice of the people, who cannot be wrong, society would be perfect.

So, is there a way out that takes into account the combined forces of biological, instinctive and political forces, answers to the philosophical arguments, and does not fall into fascism?

I don’t think we can go back to the illusions, the dreams of liberalism. I have no final solution, between liberalism and fascism. Is there a transformed liberalism that deals with the problems?

My hunch, developed in his blog, is that we may develop a combination of existential rootedness and an ethic of the self as opening itself to the other. Heidegger plus Levinas, so to speak. With a renewed love of the other, to relieve the phantom pain of Christianity cut off. The persistent drive of this blog is to explore that.

ⁱ Michael Ignatieff, ‘The religious specter haunting revolution’, *The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Gallimard, 1987.

ⁱⁱⁱ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism. Or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’, *New Left Review*, September-October 1997.

^{iv} Simon Critchley, *The problem with Levinas*, Oxford U. Press, 2015. Concerning my quote in this piece, Critchley was inspired by an essay on Hitlerism by Emmanuel Levinas.

^v Critchley, p. 35

^{vi} The term ‘fascism’ is derived from the Roman ‘fasces’, a bundle of sticks with a hatchet, carried in procession ahead of the magistrate, to be used for corporal punishment or decapitation at his command. It was a symbol for the Spanish fascists under Franco.