

**242**  
DECEMBER  
2020

## ANXIETY IN THE WEST How to Restore the Ideal of Western Democracy?

**Rob Riemen**, writer and founder of the Nexus Institute

This text collects the author's reflections in the series [CIDOB In Conversation](#).

**The current fear for the fast spreading deadly coronavirus is almost symbolic for another fast spreading virus, which is killing the idea of the liberal democracy – the virus of fascism.**

**Its leaders will adopt the guise of an anti-politician, a new messiah promising to cure society of all its ills, knowing full well how to exploit human weakness, resentment, fear, hatred, xenophobia, greed, the hunger for authority and the obsession with a national-ethnic identity.**

**How to restore the foundation on which liberal democracy – the only form of government which makes it possible that a pluralistic society can live together in freedom and dignity – can flourish again?**

**It is crucial to call things by their name, as that everyone realizes what we are facing. The restoration of the Western liberal democracy depends first and foremost on the choices we make on education, equal opportunities and rights, and cultivating values as reason, truth or justice.**

**Y**ou don't need to be a psychologist to know that anxiety is the dominant human emotion, nor do you need to be a historian to realize that there has never been an era in which people lived without fear. There was always the fear of fate, of the coming of the barbarians, of hunger, poverty, hell, and the eternal fear of death. Nevertheless, in 1947 poet W.H. Auden perfectly summed up the twentieth-century zeitgeist when he published his major prose poem entitled *The Age of Anxiety*. Exactly a year later, Albert Camus published a short essay with essentially the same title, *Le Sicle de la Peur*, which he begins with the following observation: 'The seventeenth century was the era of mathematics, the eighteenth the era of physics, the nineteenth the era of biology, but the twentieth century is the century of fear.' With everything that has happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – world wars, cold war, genocides, holocaust, gulag, atomic bomb – the Auden-generation had many good reasons to consider their age as the 'age of anxiety'.

Thirty years ago, after the fall of the Berlin wall, we all wanted to believe in 'the end of history', the promise of peace and prosperity for the whole world due to the soft power of a global liberal capitalist democracy. That turned out to be a dream with the collapse of Lehman Brothers Bank in 2008 which was the beginning of a global financial crisis that still affects the lives of millions of people. The dream is over. The anxiety is back. Anxiety in all kinds of forms. Social and economic insecurity. Lack of trust in our governing elites: the political class and media.

The justified fear for the destructive consequences of climate change. The dominance of fake news, conspiracy theories, irrationalism and distrust of science. The exponential growth of people suffering from depressions, burn-out and suicide rate (especially among youngsters). And the enormous popularity of the movie *The Joker* in which a character who feels to be ignored and full of resentment becomes pure evil and creates total chaos and aggression, is without any doubt connected to the aggression dominating social media. The current fear for the fast spreading deadly coronavirus is almost symbolic for another fast spreading virus all over the world, which is killing the idea of the liberal democracy – which is the virus of fascism.

What enhances the anxiety is that well-known phenomenon of denial of the threat. What was the first response when that brave medical doctor in Wuhan China discovered the coronavirus? Denial and censorship. If the first response would have been an acknowledgment of the facts and immediate action would have been taken, we would not face the pan-

**The return of fascism as that virus that destroys our liberal democracy as a moral ideal is indeed a most inconvenient truth; it is an embarrassing fact, especially given our recent European history.**

demic which we are facing now. We saw the same phenomenon when half a century ago the Club of Rome presented its report warning us that ongoing industrial growth will destroy planet earth. First – and second and third and fourth – response: denial! This cannot be true. If we would have listen then and taken proper action, the planet and our world would be much different now.

Despite all our scientific and technological progress, on a psychological level it remains difficult for us human beings to deal with inconvenient truths. Recently I saw this confirmed in a brilliant ad from an insurance company at a billboard in New York City which reads: “ ‘It won’t happen to us’ – Is Not an Emergency Plan’. Life is full of inconvenient truths; terrible things can always happen. Although instinctively we prefer to deny; reason demands us to accept the fact – and deal with it.

The return of fascism as that virus that destroys our liberal democracy as a moral ideal is indeed a most inconvenient truth; it is an embarrassing fact, espe-

cially given our recent European history. What is the first response: denial. We keep telling each other: it is not fascism, it is populism – and that must be something completely different, and by the way, everybody is nowadays a populist. In the USA Donald Trump is a populist, Bernie Sanders is a populist, Joe Biden wants to be a populist and when Barack Obama was president he claimed to be the ‘real populist’. In the meantime nobody can tell us, what that it is: populism.

What we are facing is that extremely inconvenient truth of the return of fascism, and this virus is spreading all over Europe, the USA, Brazil... Three questions are important here: how can we know that it is fascism? Where does this virus come from? What’s to be done?

### **How can we know that it is fascism?**

Next to the phenomenon of the inconvenient truth, the main reason why our societies find it difficult to recognize that it is fascism is based on an ignorance, especially among academics, politicians and pundits, of what thinkers and artists like Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, Primo Levi, Benedetto Croce and Erich Fromm – who all of them lived through the fascist era of the twentieth century – taught us: there is no ideology behind fascism and therefore it is a mistake trying to define it. Fascism will never return in black uniforms and all the fascists will inevitably deny that they are fascists, but the characteristics of the fascist spirit will not have changed.

Fascism can be recognized as the bastard child of a democracy that has lost its spirit, and it presents itself as an ethnic religion. Its leader will adopt the guise of an anti-politician, a new messiah promising to cure society of all its ills, knowing full well how to exploit human weakness, resentment, fear, hatred, xenophobia, greed, and the hunger for authority and the obsession with a national-ethnic identity out of fear of freedom, accepting your own responsibilities.

The fascist mindset will cultivate the politics of lies, it will always claim to protect democracy, expressing the will of the people, protecting freedom. Fascism is an anti-democratic spirit that uses the letter of democracy to destroy the spirit of democracy that cultivates the dignity and freedom of every human being. The free press will therefore be decried as ‘the enemy of the people’. Art, intellectual endeavor and the life of the mind will be despised. Independent judges will be declared suspect and replaced by party mem-

bers. Endless propaganda will be used to manipulate the habits and opinions of the people. Racist rhetoric and the divisiveness of the ongoing politics of fear and hatred will, bit by bit, more and more, incite an eventually unstoppable violence in that society and in the rest of the world.

### Where does this virus of fascism come from?

How is it possible that only decades after a second world war, less than half a century after Spain became a democracy again, and only thirty years after the collapse of the communist regimes in Central Europe; the specter, the virus of fascism is invading Europe (and the USA) again? An important observation of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard gives us a first clue. Mid 19<sup>th</sup> century he made the following note: 'I feel like a poor lodger who has a little room in the attic of a huge building that is still being expanded and remodeled and with horror thinks he detects that the foundation is crumbling.'

Is that is what is happening now? Is the foundation of our liberal democracy crumbling? Many people will say "no" as the general idea is that as long as our democratic institutions function, we still may face challenges that instill fear

and anxiety, but eventually all will be fine. Basically this was the pitch of Vice President Joe Biden: 'elect me as President and I will make sure that the democratic institutions in the USA will function again – and a bright future without anxiety is waiting for you, folks.'

But with all due respect to President Elect Joe Biden, history tells us that he is too optimistic. It was a good friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the German novelist and Nobel Prize Laureate Thomas Mann, who warned the Americans not to make this mistake. It is February 1938. Thomas Mann arrives in America, originally to go on a lecture tour, which unexpectedly coincide with the beginning of his exile years in the US. The title of his lecture to be delivered in town halls from coast to coast, often for an audience of 2000 to 5000 people, is *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. Mann starts with making the excuse why he, coming from fascist Europe, wants to lecture America, the country of Lincoln, Whitman and President Roosevelt, about democracy. Yet, he told his audience, 'I come from the same town where Hitler comes from, Munich. With my own eyes I have seen the rise of a fascist movement coming to power all over Europe. And with this experience I learned something that I want you to know as well! According to its literal

definition, democracy is a matter of institutions, of the freedom to vote, freedom of expression, the will of the people... But please don't make the mistake: these institutions are not the essence of democracy. Its essence is a spiritual and moral ideal. True democracy is a form of government and of society that is inspired more than any other by the sense and consciousness of the dignity of humankind. True democracy demands a social conscience; it needs to be a social democracy if it is to fight against the excesses of capitalism and of amoral liberalism, against social inequality and injustice. Such a democracy will cultivate the greatness of man as it finds its expression in art and science, in a passion for truth, the creation of beauty and the idea of justice. Where the spirit of democracy is absent, where it exists in name only, the same will eventually happen as has happened in fascist Europe: it will become a mass democracy.'

Thomas Mann had watched the spirit of democracy vanish in a mass society in which stupidity, kitsch, vulgarity and the basest of human instincts dominated, where demagogues were welcomed, along with

### Fascism can be recognized as the bastard child of a democracy that has lost its spirit, and it presents itself as an ethnic religion.

their lies and their politics of resentment. He had watched the incitement of anger and fear, of xenophobia, witnessed a need for scapegoats and a hatred of the life of the mind. In a mass society democracy dies, while fascism, the anti-democratic spirit, takes over. To prevent fascism from coming to America, people needed to realize that: 'the purpose of true democracy is to elevate humankind, to teach it to think, to set it free – its aim, in a word, is education, an education in nobility of spirit.

A similar argument has been made in 1943 in Europe. While the struggle against totalitarianism is raging in all its intensity, the Jewish philosopher Simone Weil is asked by Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement to write down her thoughts on how European civilization is to be regenerated after the war. Her efforts result in a long essay, titled 'L'Enracinement'. In this manifesto for a new civilization, she states: 'An educational method which is not inspired by the conception of a certain form of human perfection is not worth very much. When it is a matter of educating a whole people, this conception should be that of a civilization. It must not be sought in the past, which only contains imperfect models; far less still in our dreams of the future, which are necessarily as mediocre as we ourselves are, and consequently vastly inferior to the past. The inspiration for such an educa-

tion must be sought, like the method itself, among the truths eternally inscribed in the nature of things. [...] Four obstacles above all separate us from a form of civilization likely to be worth something: our false conception of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice; our idolization of money; and our lack of religious inspiration.'

It was another Frenchman, André Malraux, a philosopher and writer, who during the Spanish civil war fought on the side of the Republicans, in May 1976 in a speech for the French parliament, could not

**Instead of serious political and intellectual discussion about the way forward, the way to create a better, more decent society together, there is nothing other than political tribalism, expressed in tweets, slogans and propaganda, nothing but image-building through framing.**

help to observe cynically: 'The most powerful civilization humanity has ever seen, our civilization, is capable of destroying the earth, but incapable of educating young people spiritually.' Keeping in mind what Thomas Mann, Simone Weil and André Malraux taught us about what should and what can only be the foundation of a liberal democracy, let's have a look at the facts of our current society. What are our interests, our choices, our values?

Instead of elevating people, it is facilitating an ongoing dumbing down by mass media and a massive dysfunctional education system which at its best is a pure utilitarian, vocational training how to make money. The knowledge of the universitas, the real liberal education – which my friend the cultural philosopher George Steiner so brilliantly characterized as: 'a homecoming to your better self', has been destroyed for both economic reasons (on the right) and political reasons (on the left).

Instead of equal opportunities and equal rights, there is growing inequality and increasing exclusion.

Instead of cultivating such universal moral and spiritual values as reason, truth, beauty and justice, our commercial culture engages our basest instincts and promotes only its own interests and values: productivity, efficiency, utility and aggressive materialism.

Instead of compassion there is resentment, racism, fear and hatred.

Instead of a quest for quality, there is a demand for quantity, and everything is measured in numerical terms to determine its 'usefulness'.

Instead of serious political and intellectual discussion about the way forward, the way to create a better, more decent society together, there is nothing other than political tribalism, expressed in tweets, slogans and propaganda, nothing but image-building through framing.

Instead of the love of wisdom, there is an obsession with data and information.

Having dismissed as unimportant a liberal education that would provide us with the wisdom and courage to help us to become free, to elevate ourselves beyond our fears, instincts and worst desires, to liberate ourselves from the stupid, pathetic, frustrated sides of ourselves in order to live in truth, to create beauty, to do justice and have compassion, we choose instead to exclude from education everything except science, technology and business.

The foundation of our liberal democracy is not so much crumbling, it is already gone – and with it we cannot be surprised about the rise of anxiety and the escape for its fear by the mass into the new fascist movements.

### **What's to be done?**

How to restore the foundation on which our liberal democracy – which is the only form of government which makes it possible that a pluralistic society can live together in freedom and in dignity – can flourish again? A few practical and one principal suggestions can lead the way. First, being practical. President Franklin Roosevelt was right: 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.'

Second: It is crucial that we do call things by their name, as that everyone realizes what we are facing. Not using the F-word because 'fascism has become such a contaminated word', is just as foolish as giving up the term 'democracy', which is after all by far the most abused word in modern history.

Third: Some scientists, many economists and even more politicians and businesspeople want us to believe that there is a new Holy Trinity that will solve all social issues – Science-Technology-Money. This ideology – as it is an ideology, grounded on the assumption that with more scientific research, more

technological development, more economic growth presented as the new foundation on which our whole society has to be based and organized by, that that will create a paradise on earth, is as much a lie as that all totalitarian politics are based on a lie. Because the presupposition of this ideology is that we human beings are a kind of machines, robots, only focused on materialism. But the dignity of man is based on something else, something that never can even be touched by science, technology and money. The Roman philosopher Cicero has said it best: The essence of our life; the only way to make and live our life meaningful is through this: *cultura animi, philosophia est* – the cultivation of the human soul, is the quest for wisdom.

In this phrase, that captures the original meaning of our word ‘culture’, we find everything we have lost and what is the foundation of the ideal of a liberal democracy: the human soul as our core identity and the quest for wisdom to cultivate our soul, to become the human being we are supposed to be, a spiritual being that rises above its animal nature by living in truth, creating beauty, doing justice, offering love and friendship. This is what the democratic spirit is all about, this is what a true liberal education with its arts and philosophy will help you to educate.

This brings us to a more personal point. If you want to help to restore that ideal of a liberal democracy, for yourself, for your children and the generations after you – then do ask yourself: what is it that you truly believe in and act upon? Is your own mindset focused on quantity with its more, more, more – or the quality of life? Is it focused on the cultivation of commercial or moral and spiritual values? Do you want to give your children an education that prepares them primarily to get a ‘good job’ or that prepares them to have a meaningful life? Is your identity primarily based on belonging to a group or a nation; or do you realize that your core identity is not based on what makes you different from others but on striving to make the universal values which unites humanity your own: truth, justice, compassion. Mozart so beautifully expresses this at the end of his opera *The Magic Flute* when the protagonist of the story, Tamino, enters the hall of the Masonic priests and one of them says: ‘He is a prince!’ But the high priest Sarastro corrects him and says: ‘More than that – *Er ist Mensch* – he is a human being.’ The restoration of the Western liberal democracy depends first and foremost on the choices we have to make.

**The foundation of our liberal democracy is not so much crumbling, it is already gone – and with it we cannot be surprised about the rise of anxiety and the escape for its fear by the mass into the new fascists movements.**