



Visions for a future European way of life

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Abstract

In the wake of a shifting global landscape marked by a resurgence of authoritarianism, this article explores the challenges facing Western democracies. The euphoria of the post-1989 era has given way to self-doubt, with the rise of left- and right-wing populism a symptom and not a cause of the crisis. The lack of a cohesive vision for the future European society is identified as a major contributor to the current underperformance of Western democracies. Four key axes of development are outlined: societal cohesion, reinterpreting the concept of work, (re-)legitimising democratic political representation and unleashing new sources of value creation. The analysis delves into complex issues such as intergenerational justice, multi-ethnic integration and the re-evaluation of work, emphasising the need for a broader understanding of human existence. The article concludes by advocating for a renewed social vision, drawing on the historical insights of Christian Democratic thinking to navigate the challenges posed by the ongoing transformations in Western societies.

Keywords

Democracy, Future of work, Christian Democracy, Centre–right, Representation, Intergenerational justice, European way of life

Introduction

The pendulum could not have swung back more brutally. Gone are the euphoric times of the post-1989 world of eternal peace and the dominance of the liberal democratic order—a vision that kept the Western resistance against totalitarian regimes alive and spurred the European integration project.

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As waves of authoritarianism surge along the shores of the ‘larger West’, self-doubt within these societies about the democratic model itself has surfaced, and the temptation for autocratic solutions has grown—this is not quite the vision the forefathers of European integration had in mind after the Second World War.

As the German historian Heinrich August Winkler (2024) recently pointed out,¹ the most significant threats to Western democracies come from *within*. Yet, the public discussion often takes superficial phenomena, such as the rise of right-wing populist parties, as the cause of the crisis. But these phenomena are mainly symptoms, and politics is still too often trying to cure the symptoms instead of treating the disease. This is quite understandable, as addressing the root causes would mean acknowledging some inconvenient realities and making unpleasant decisions.

In the author’s opinion, a major reason for the current crisis is the lack of a new vision for the future European society. Vision, in this understanding, means a set of concepts and values that describes the idea of a ‘good society’ and serves as a common basis for a citizen-based, democratic community. This shared understanding and consensus have been eroded over recent decades due to massive changes in Western industrial societies’ ‘base and superstructure’ (Marx 2014). Whether a new common ground can be found and on what foundations it should be built are far from clear.

The following article will present some ideas and serves as an introduction and conceptual framework for this edition of the *European View*, which focuses on major societal and political developments of *longue durée*—developments which are already massively reconfiguring the foundations of Western liberal societies, from demography to the idea of labour. As dramatic and sometimes apocalyptic as they sometimes look, these challenges do not mean that the Western model is doomed to fail, as some of its ideological adversaries constantly assert. There is no reason to underestimate the capacities of democratic political systems and societies. But to ensure the survival of the underlying market-based economic system, Western societies have to drastically reform their political institutions so that they become more inclusive and can quickly adapt and respond to new developments.

We will focus on the internal developments of Western societies. But we are aware of the increasing global interdependence in all of the dimensions outlined below and will consider developments globally if necessary.

The following four challenges correspond to the core elements of democratic societies and are considered the key development axes:

1. finding a new basis for *societal cohesion*, be it intergenerational justice or the integration of a multi-ethnic society;
2. reinterpreting the *concept of work*;

3. (re-)legitimising *democratic political representation*; and
4. unleashing *new sources of value creation* without destroying the social and environmental fundaments.

These topics/dimensions are bound together and guided by the idea of *sustainability*, be it institutional, social or economic,² when we discuss the vision of a future society below.

Some thoughts about ‘visions’

Talking about political or social visions from a conservative–liberal or Christian Democratic perspective needs some explanation. Historically, the idea of visions of (future) societies has been dominated by left-of-spectrum political forces. For good reasons and due to bad historical experiences, conservatives have always loathed the idea of ‘designing a society’ in the armchair, coffee house, or salon—the usual breeding grounds for fancy ideas in the long history of European social visions. Scepticism of the idea of (linear) progress and the human ability to govern complex societies, alongside the constant fear of creating an almighty ‘Leviathan’, have often prevented moderate conservative forces from entering the competition to conceive social visions.

But this is not quite the whole story. Let us consider the idea of a ‘good’ or ‘just’ society³ as the core of any social vision. Leaving ancient and medieval debates aside, we can tap into a broader reflection among both Christian Democratic thinkers and at least some conservatives. This tradition is far less utopian and more realistic in terms of the *conditio humana* than its totalitarian alternatives, which have almost always ended up in a bloody history of attempting to impose new social visions upon existing societies.

Standing on the precipice of ground-breaking changes, the following can be seen as an attempt to identify those building blocks and mechanisms that could outline the vision of a society. It will tap into moderate conservative and Christian Democratic thinkers’ rich, often less-known history of social vision. At the same time, it tries to identify those developments of *longue durée* in post–Second World War European societies that are now irrevocably linked with and embedded in global developments. At a time when the siren songs of closed societies are becoming more and more attractive, the indisputable political framework for this vision remains an ‘open society’ (Popper 2011) and a liberal–democratic constitution.

The four dimensions of a societal vision

To create a comprehensive framework for any debate on a sustainable societal vision, an analysis of the four policy fields covering the major developmental challenges for contemporary Western societies is necessary. This will be juxtaposed with the long history of Christian Democratic and conservative thinking since the nineteenth century. It may surprise many that these challenges are, in many aspects, less novel than current debates suggest. However, some aspects are linked to technological progress or anthropogenic

changes to the ‘earth system’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2013), and therefore addressing these will require considerable intellectual effort and reinterpretation.

Finding a new basis for societal cohesion

The debate about societal cohesion is one of the most divisive within Western societies. It can be clustered around three major dimensions: *ethnic homogeneity*, *intergenerational justice* and *‘belonging’* (in the sense of globality vs. locality).

In this debate, right-wing prophets often refer to the ‘golden age’ of ethnic homogeneity, best realised in a nation-state framework. They praise this form of statehood as a kind of ‘natural state’ of societal organisation and a precondition for societal cohesion. Nothing could be more distant from historical truth—Europe is the best proof of this. Throughout its history, multi-ethnic societies have been the normal state rather than the exception, given the continent’s geographic openness, multipolarity of state organisation and cultural adaptability. But it is equally true that concerns about social cohesion and disintegration, and fears of identity loss have been constant companions and powerful drivers for internal and external conflicts. In recent years, immigration to the EU, particularly from non-European regions, has reached unprecedented heights. Consequently, the increasing prevalence of different cultural and religious concepts concerning, among other things, statehood, the rule-of-law and gender relations has fundamentally called into question the dominant cultural and political norms that have constituted European identity so far.

When Western Europe entered the fourth phase of the demographic transition (Mather et al. 2021) between 1960 and 1980, with low fertility levels and a significant rise in life expectancy, a series of challenges unknown in human history also arose. These developments go beyond the dimension of individual identity and choice and cut into the known fabric of human societies. In this fourth phase, the creation and redistribution of resources during one’s lifespan and between the different age cohorts of society have put existing private and public institutions, particularly families and social security systems, under extreme pressure. Basic assumptions about intergenerational burden sharing, which can also be described as redistributive, intertemporal justice, are faltering. The (perceived) lack of fair distribution of the costs of adapting to these changes has the potential to force parts of society to terminate the (implicit) social contract. Systemic reforms are happening painfully slowly and face massive opposition from vested interests.

The third divisive dimension is the result of unprecedented mobility. Being liberated from the centuries-old bounds of space and traditions, societies are now segmenting themselves into a global class of ‘anywheres’ and the majority, who are ‘somewheres’ (Goodhart 2017). Combined with other cultural developments, such as woke-ism and post-colonialism, a strong sense of deprivation of traditions, identities and values is being felt among significant parts of European society. The rising left- and right-wing populist and protectionist movements, often combining anti-globalist, anti-capitalist and anti-modernist sentiments, buy into and increase this driving apart of societies.

Reinterpreting the concept of work

Since industrialisation, political debates in Europe have largely centred around the concept of work. It is, therefore, no surprise that the waves of major political and social conflict in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were linked to dramatic changes in employment conditions and labour market structures, primarily driven by technological changes and economic/trade (dis)integration processes on a global scale. From a broader perspective, social norms, societal hierarchies and value systems are largely determined by an individual's position and 'value' in the production process. This is not only Marxist thinking (Schaff 1965): from the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII 1891) to *Laborem exercens* (John Paul II 1981), Christian Democracy, largely based upon Catholic theology, has equally struggled to reconcile modern work with a more comprehensive understanding of human existence and the idea of a just society.

We are now at a similar stage of disruptive development, equal only to the first Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2017). But the recurrent debates about 'the end of work' (Rifkin 2004), which started in the 1970s and are now accelerating due to the revolutionary progress in artificial intelligence, miss major dimensions of the challenge as they often focus on the narrow concept of (paid) labour. Such approaches impose limitations when it comes to understanding the scope of the challenges and the potential solutions for the future of work and its role in a changing society.

Within the given legal and economic framework, technological change will lead to widening gaps (Georgieva 2024) in income, and changes to the idea of meaningful work and the sense of (non-)belonging. The consequences of feeling increasingly excluded will further loosen the bonds of societal cohesion. At the same time, more and more citizens will become dependent on state subsidies, opening the 'road to serfdom' (Hayek 2007). Furthermore, the traditional concept of work falls short of answering the challenges imposed by demographic changes.

From a Christian anthropological perspective, re-evaluating work as a central dimension of human existence is necessary to avoid a 'reductionist' view of work as a pure production factor. This change of perspective includes embedding an enhanced concept of responsibility to society and the natural environment (John Paul II 1981, Chapter II.6)

The (re-)legitimation of democratic political representation as the core of the European way of life

Denouncing the established democratic order as 'undemocratic', 'elite-driven' or 'having lost contact with the people' is part of the left- and right-wing populist narrative in Europe and the US. At the same time, global systemic rivals use these arguments and present their systems as truly democratic alternatives (*The Economist* 2014). The dominant mode of political participation in Western societies is delegating power to elected representatives, with political parties as the main intermediaries. Not surprisingly, the massive loss of trust in the political system goes hand in hand with equally low trust in

political parties (European Commission 2020, 7). Another reason for this decline in legitimacy is the rising influence of non-state actors, often transnational ones, including international non-governmental organisations.⁴

Plenty of proposals and efforts have been made which aim to overcome the limitations of the established representative forms of political participation (Muzergues et al. 2023). The debates during the Conference on the Future of Europe and the citizen conferences (*consultations citoyennes*) that take place in France are among the most recent. Other symptoms are the (often short-lived) rise of ‘movements’ or digital parties. But a realistic focal point must be restrengthening the representative political order, which may also mean a redistribution of power in line with the principle of subsidiarity.⁵ Unfortunately, this basic element of the European constitution has often been sidelined. Taken seriously, however, it could serve as a bridge between the principles of indirect-representative and direct-democratic political will formation. The crucial point is the experience of self-efficacy as a citizen (Barnett 2014). And quite paradoxically, enhancing the voice of neglected minorities has often led to the unwanted impression that the ‘silent majority’ is no longer being heard, increasing the lack of democratic representation (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). The space for democratic deliberation has massively shrunk and has to be regained (Hefele 2023a).

Unleashing new sources of value creation

A core element of any social vision is creating a sustainable material basis for a society. The need to revolutionise the current system of production and consumption hardly needs to be questioned, given its detrimental effects on the ‘earth system’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2013). This is in line with the modern concept of enlarged responsibility (Joas 1985) in which the purely anthropogenic view must be left behind and the whole planetary system considered. Such an approach does not necessarily mean *degrowth*, as demanded by some (Hickel 2021). While, to some extent, a redistribution of resources on a global scale may be needed, technology and new business models are much more necessary for this transformation. In both cases, European societies need a common vision: to set and agree on shared objectives and to increase social acceptance of the unavoidable costs of this transition. Similar to what has been argued in the previous sections, value creation has to be understood in a much broader sense, including in terms of building social capital.

Conclusions from a centre–right perspective

Despite being tainted by bad experiences during the twentieth century, the concept of ‘social vision’ has never become obsolete in modern political thinking or practice. One could even argue that it is inherent in any reflection on society. In recent years, as during the Cold War, the surging systemic rivalry between the West and its autocratic adversaries has made it once again inevitable that the groundwork is laid for a renewed self-concept of Western open societies. In other words, a new social vision is needed to ensure the survival of this historically rather unique societal model.⁶ Moderate

centre–right political forces have to stand at the forefront of this endeavour as they bear the responsibility for stabilising the democratic and representative political order. In particular, the history of Christian Democratic thinking, as the main strain of the European centre–right, provides rich conceptual insights based on a comprehensive yet realistic idea of human nature and the proper functioning of societies. The idea of individual freedom, bound by social responsibility and embedded in a time continuum, also sets certain limitations for any attempts to radically and forcefully transform societies.

Developing a vision for how society can undergo a sustainable transformation can only be compared with the attempts in the nineteenth century to understand the forces unleashed by industrial modernity, and to create a new institutional framework for societal bargaining, resource allocation and the preservation of human dignity.

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Notes

1. The decline of democracies is lucidly described in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Krastev and Holmes (2019).
2. On the concept of sustainability from a conservative–liberal and Christian Democratic perspective, see Hefele (2023b).
3. The close conceptual relationship between ‘good’ and ‘just’ was established at the dawn of political theory, in Greek philosophy.
4. While the debate usually focuses on private multinational companies or global regulatory bodies, the assumption that international non-governmental organisations contribute to the democratic deficit is often taken for granted. But this is far from evident as Beijerman (2018) shows, and needs further scrutiny.
5. Articles 5(1) and 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union.
6. On the uniqueness of Western societies and their values (‘the weirdest people’), see the inspirational Henrich (2021).

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