

Cities and the defence of democracy

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Democracy is under attack. In more than a few countries far right politicians have, in recent years, sought to undermine long-established constitutional, democratic norms and weaken citizen voices.

For example, as explained in these pages by Ivan Tosics, Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister, has since 2010 eroded press freedom, damaged judicial independence, and enfeebled elected local governments (*Insert link to EC 57*). A consequence is that Hungary has lurched away from being a society characterised by active citizen participation and the existence of accountable government, towards one in which political power has been super-centralised, with national politicians becoming increasingly authoritarian and repressive.

Unfortunately, Orban is increasingly active in international far-right and nationalist networks and, following his visit, in March, to Mar-a-Lago in Florida, has formed what appears to be a close relationship with former US President, Donald Trump (Bayer 2024).

It is well understood that Trump, himself, represents a direct threat not just to American democracy but to democratic societies across the world. He has clear autocratic tendencies, disrespects liberal tolerance and is more than ready to violate longstanding democratic norms. Indeed, last November, *The Economist* took the view that ‘Donald Trump poses the biggest danger to the world in 2024.’ (The Economist, 2023).

How can cities and urban scholars respond to these threats?

In a previous EURA Conversation (*Insert link to EC 48*) I suggested that it would be helpful if urban scholars could do more to document the ways in which cities and communities are resisting the rise of right-wing populism. By drawing on discussions that took place in New York City at the international conference on *Cities on the edge* (*Insert link to conference website: <https://www.xcdsystem.com/uaa/program/m3Rr61v/index.cfm?pgid=1588&SearchTerm=Hambleton>*), organised by the UAA, EURA and ENHR in April, I outline here three suggestions.

1) Celebrate achievements.

Victories by progressive movements are often not given the recognition they deserve. For example, in the lead up to the October 2023 Polish parliamentary election hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated against the way the ruling, right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) had seized control of the public media, attacked the courts, and was cracking down on the rights of migrants, women and LGTB+ people.

This authoritarianism was met with a remarkable rise in citizen resistance. Cities, communities and non-governmental organisations worked together to hold protest marches and thousands of ‘hate-free’ zones were designated. The culmination of the protests was the ‘Million Hearts March’ held in Warsaw on 1 October 2023. Organised by the Civic Coalition (PO), the main opposition party led by Donald Tusk, this political demonstration brought together between 600,000 and 1 million people and was the largest social protest rally ever held in Poland.

The increased politicisation of Polish society resulted in a very high voter turnout – at 74% the highest in Polish history - in the parliamentary elections. Turnout among young people, particularly women, increased dramatically. A consequence was that the PiS was swept from power by a coalition of three main opposition groups.

2) Defend institutions

Timothy Snyder, in his influential analysis of the way various European democracies collapsed into fascism in the twentieth century, identifies twenty ways in which citizens can resist the rise of tyranny (Snyder 2017). Here I highlight one of his themes – the recognition that democratically accountable institutions have a crucial role in preserving decency in society.

Snyder notes that egalitarian institutions need to be defended. He explains that they will fall, one after the other, as happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, if citizens do not fight to protect them. In addition, he rightly draws attention to the importance of public protest and social movements in campaigning for civil rights.

Kurt Weyland, an American political scientist, lends weight to the argument that Snyder presents. His international research demonstrates that, while far-right populism can, indeed, be a mortal threat to democracy, these movements usually fail to suffocate liberal pluralism due to institutional checks, balances, and opposition mobilisation (Weyland 2024).

If we turn to cities and communities, it follows that countries should introduce, if they do not already have them in place, constitutional changes that secure the legal independence of elected local governments as soon as possible. Such systems, and Sweden's constitution provides a good example, can provide local authorities with the right to do things differently. The European Charter on Local Self Government is relevant in this context:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/european-charter-of-local-self-government#/>

Without solid legal protections demagogues, as exemplified by Hungary, can easily destroy local democratic institutions, and impose centralised rule. Such demagogues can be thwarted if solid legal protections are in place.

3) Win the battle of ideas

Right-wing politicians seek to divide communities and turn people against 'other' people, for example, non-white people, immigrants, gay people, trans people, and other minorities. The main counter argument, as the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated so clearly, is that our wellbeing isn't served by denigrating other people. This is because our wellbeing isn't individual but social. Much good has come from the way the pandemic was met with an upsurge in social solidarity, including a spectacular increase in the number of people providing help and assistance to neighbours and needy groups of various kinds.

In closing allow me to highlight two themes that deserve, in my view, to be given more attention in ongoing research and analysis by urban scholars and others.

The first concerns the nature of social solidarity. In a major new book tracing the political struggles that have shaped the modern world, Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor explain how solidarity is different from 'doing good' (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor 2024). Solidarity is not selfless.

Siding with others is the only way to rescue ourselves from the catastrophes that will otherwise engulf us.

Last year Nazem Tahvilzadeh, in EURA Conversation 52 (*Insert link to EC 52*), drew on his experience with the Swedish people's house movement to offer important insights on the importance of cultivating solidarity in the city. It would be great to learn of other positive examples illustrating how community-based initiatives are promoting solidarity in the city, and I invite readers to provide examples.

My second theme relates to how we understand and conceptualise identity. The populist right usually advocates an exclusive, racialised and backward-looking view of identity. Indeed, right-wing figures often draw on the 'great replacement theory', a white nationalist far-right conspiracy theory that claims that white European populations are being replaced by non-white peoples.

In the UK the Brexit Party promoted a nostalgic view of what it means to be English, harking back to a time of empire when 'Britannia ruled the waves'. In other countries we also find right-wing parties encouraging a nostalgic, nationalistic, and socially conservative view of identity.

Clearly this entirely mythical and misleading conceptualisation of identity needs to be challenged and urban scholars can surely contribute to this endeavour.

Caroline Lucas, Britain's only Green Party MP, has written a new book that can, perhaps, provide some signposts to possible ways forward (Lucas 2024). By drawing on English literature and social history she documents in detail how English people, contrary to right-wing rhetoric, have a deep-rooted commitment to the natural world, to radical inclusivity and to civil rights. Her analysis presents an optimistic view of what it means to be English in the twenty first century.

Throughout human history, cities have grown and changed because of migration and immigration. A consequence is that all cities are, to some extent, multi-ethnic. Perhaps, urban scholars, because their work is focussed on cities – inevitably vibrant and multicultural places – can contribute new insights on how to articulate forward-looking and modern ways of understanding and talking about cultural identity.

References

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