

## END-OF-YEAR REFLECTION

# The dangerous resurgence of authoritarianism: alternative accounts about the liberal order

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We can't deny that the western world is living disconcerting times. The way our society is facing this confusion enhances authoritarian populisms and reinforces policies that tend to economic protectionism. Is withdrawal the best way to face our fears? Is the search of security, of quick and easy answers, the way to build alternatives to the crisis we are living? In other words, a profound crisis of the liberal order, based on a social pact that is now broken, is made manifest. The post-Cold War stage is coming to its end and is leading to a deglobalisation process that puts the accent on the closure of political, social and cultural spaces. Do we have the capacity to create global consensus that pursue common good instead of private interests?

In this end-of-year reflection we aim to undertake an overview of the root causes

of this confusion and its consequences in the form of *siren calls* and *wolves in sheep's clothing*. But we would like to go further and suggest the foundations for the construction of alternatives or the support of those already started.

## Perplexity about frustrated economic expectations

Middle classes derived from globalisation have been frustrated in their expectations of improving their life conditions and social rights. Economists such as Branko Milanovic (Global Inequality, 2016) have identified the winners and losers of economic globalisation. Since the 1980's middle-income has stagnated and increased internal inequality and economic polarisation.

In Spain, for instance, the crisis and the labour reforms have led to precarious work conditions in such a way that being employed is no guarantee to overcome the crisis or to avoid it. This shapes a new social class with individuals who have no opportunity to develop their potential and capacity.

But what is most worrying is that the fall of social expectations lacks of a hopeful horizon. The fourth industrial revolution is just starting and will continue to affect living and working conditions. This revolution arises as an horizon of opportunities but is perceived with fear by many workers who suspect that their jobs may be replaced by robots.

As we have already said, the social contract based on the promise of social improvement has cracked. Besides, it must be said that this contract was also based on inequality, but this new scenario adds to existing inequalities new ways of exclusion and aggravates social polarisation which involves the disappearance of middle classes. This leads us to a scenario where the economic exclusion of a large proportion of the population is difficult to avoid.

### **Puzzlement about vacuum of power**

The divorce between power and politics, which has been described by Zygmunt Bauman (*Liquid Times*, 2008) has destroyed institutional capacity to set rules and limits to transnational problems such as human mobility, ecology, taxation, etc.

On one hand, democracy is accepted as the least bad form of governance. Democracy is not to be sacrificed but is being emptied of meaning. On the other hand, there is a clear hostility to pol-

iticians and institutions. Political forces are unable to generate credibility and confidence expectations and therefore lose their sense. In addition, especially in the Spanish case, political corruption compounds the problem. The feeling that there is no fight against corruption increases social rejection towards political forces and politicians.

In the last year the ghost of populism has appeared with an unusual strength. Populism is a political strategy to obtain and retain power appealing to an “us against them” message. Trump’s victory in the US is a paradigmatic example. Starting from a political slogan appealing to the people and the victims of globalisation and traditional democracy, he has implied regressive policies on taxation, migration and environment. This shows the failure of social democrat and traditional left proposals.

Furthermore, this has turned out on a greater disaffection with representative institutions as the absence of power and the collusion with the elites is perceived as part of a system which does not seek a common good but private interests. As a result, the elections become a space of protest instead of a place of proposals where people vote in terms of punishment, which provide unexpected results.

We are aware that part of the political crisis is based on the Spanish territorial crisis. The Catalan political scene seems to gather some elements of the democratic crisis and institutional disaffection along with the population’s need to embrace exiting political proposals. Sadly, the way this conflict has been managed has not encouraged dialogue but polarisation of both sides, involving strategies of judicialisation and institutional disobedience.

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## **Confusion about nonsense and a threatened identity.**

Every terrorist attack in the heart of Europe is a new seed of fear in our own hearts. We live with fright when faced to a threat, which is difficult both to define and to understand. Knowing that the threat is global and that the majority of terrorist attacks take place outside our borders is of no use. Shielding our borders has become a priority.

One of the arguments that have been pointed out is the rejection of foreigners and the defence of a supposed European identity. It is easy to find anyone who is asked answering that “these people are not integrated”, “they don’t want to adapt to our way of living”, “they threaten our way of being Europeans”, “they want to destroy us”.

At a sociocultural and identitarian level confusion prevails and has led to simplistic stories that appeal to strong identities which feel threatened. Xenophobic messages are taking hold in European society as it makes an easy but evil diagnosis and projects ways of governance that break with liberal tradition and reinforce cultural essentialism.

Not only migration generates the identity crisis but also other elements such as secularisation, which hampers the search of sensible proposals in a highly utilitarian and materialistic society. The devaluation of historic memory impedes us to integrate the value of tradition

As we recently stated,<sup>1</sup> right-wing parties determine the political agenda in many countries. Movements as Le Pen’s political party, the Flemish Block, the Austrian FPÖ as well as the German AFD focus their discourse on the weaknesses of liberal democracy and the EU’s peace project.

## **With this background, how can we construct hopeful discourses?**

Globalisation is a real threat to equality and democracy, which has generated new ways of violence and terror. We do not defend deglobalising processes but propose an alternative globalisation founded on alternative principles such as global justice and the search of common good.

It is not a question of finding instrumental, technical or even minimal answers. Our horizon must be marked by the construction of a more fair and just society where progress is not based on macroeconomic figures but in the situation of the excluded.

We can draw three ways of facing all this confusion: a) Introducing changes and reforms that the system may assume b) Fostering reactionary changes with structural modifications based on strong and authoritarian governments, and c) A paradigm shift grounded in a democratic deepening, a better sense of freedom and an increase of fraternity.

We can here quote Hölderlin saying: “where danger is, also grows the saving power”. As far as we overcome our fears, new and alternative ideas arise in complex and uncertain situations which force us to rethink our most fundamental questions: what do we understand by development? What does welfare mean? How do we seek happiness?

We must ask ourselves these questions. We have to reach an agreement about what is best for our lives, taking into account that the criterion will only be positive for us inasmuch as it benefits the majority.

The reasons for the construction of alternative and hopeful messages can be summarised as follows:

1. It is necessary because our world faces a conflict between capital and life. We see it when we observe the faces of victims or when we measure environmental impact. We must break this technocratic paradigm, which dominates economy and politics based in growth, domination and human and environmental exploitation. Pope Francis has laid emphasis on these aspects, becoming one of the world leaders who have better understood the meaning of *the search of common good*, while denouncing arms trade and the unjustifiable existence of nuclear weapons.
2. It is desirable because we live in an unfair system. We strongly believe that humans have firm beliefs, ethical and ideological principles and emotions that aim to improve and dignify life. This is why we need to generate the transformation of personal consciences in order to promote collective changes and vice versa.
3. It is possible because by means of social, economic, political and cultural action people and communities can

change reality. The future is not yet written. There are many experiences that show that life, economy and politics can be managed in a different way. There are resistance and transition frames.<sup>2</sup> According to this point of view, small-scale alternatives are possible and necessary but insufficient. The next step must be the construction of narratives that give a sense to this change and boost it to a global scale.

This proposal is made with sincere humility because we do not have all the answers but we are clear about the starting point: moving from the concept of an egocentric subject and a sense of freedom understood as opposed to the other's freedom towards a mature, communitarian subject and a sense of freedom which ensures the other's freedom.

This is the only way we can succeed and build this new world that we desire without embracing messianic projects which are, at a time, authoritarian and threaten the most fundamental rights.

Cristianismo y Justicia<sup>3</sup>

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1. SCHELKSHORN, Hans (2017). *Cristianismo y nueva derecha en Europa*. Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia. Papeles CJ, núm. 238.
  2. SANZ, Jesús (2017). *How to think about change today*. Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia. Booklet, n. 106.
  3. This reflection has been drawn up by CJ's Board of Directors starting from the conclusions of the round table "The great proof of the growth of inequality and the new authoritarian populisms", which took place in the II workshop about the "update of dialogue between faith and justice" hosted in Barcelona in June 2017. About twenty members of Cristianismo y Justicia attended this round table which started with the participation of Josep Miralles, jesuit, Mary Tere Guzmán, Alboan's responsible for public action and Ignacio Sepúlveda, professor at the Loyola Andalucía University.