Recent electoral successes of populists in Europe have created a nervous atmosphere in the political arena. Liberal democracy itself seems at stake. Politicians, intellectuals, and journalists feel the urge to "push back populists" and find a recipe against today's attacks on democratic institutions, against a model of agenda setting by politicians who are deliberately violating political taboos and norms. To contain populism, some intellectuals now call for increased, passionate and open disputes and (parliamentary) fights. Others claim that it is more promising to directly confront populists with calm, polite and fact-oriented responses – a liberal democratic "coolness of rationality", so to say.

In Germany, these quarrels for an adequate response to populism mingle with the wide-ranging criticism of today's political ruling class and its discourse. **The far-right "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) benefits from a sentiment of discontent and has become a non-neglectable political force**. The party now occupies a considerable share of seats in all federal parliaments as well as the German Bundestag. Against this backdrop, many commentators denounce a lack of vitality in the political debate as a reason and a missing anti-populist strategy by established parties, while criticising chancellor Angela Merkel's rhetorical shortcomings in particular. **Taking the AfD as asymptomatic malaise, one could believe that Merkel's strategy – which some authors call "post-political" (Marchart 2017: 16) – has failed**. Merkel herself has just recently reacted to severe electoral losses and continuing sharp criticism by resigning from her party's leadership in October 2018.

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Throughout her chancellery, Merkel had repeatedly called her decisions "necessary" and "without any alternative"; her unfussy style of governing and rhetoric have steered a

discussion on the intricacies and patterns of political discourse. In the electoral campaign of 2017, the candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Martin Schulz, explicitly condemned Merkel's strategy of depoliticisation, calling it an "attack on democracy" (Galaktionow 2017). Along the same lines, some critics argue that her government's communicative and political shortcomings have been beneficial to the rise of Euroscepticism and right-wing populism claiming back popular sovereignty, political agency and ideological reformulation of political cleavages. While politicians, appearing to be mostly crisis managers, like Merkel and her ministers, refer to constraints and seek to shift blame to others, populists offensively claim agency and credit. **Populists can build on the impression that crises – such as the Eurozone crisis or the so-called "migration crisis" – have revealed severe problems and challenges for democracies in a supranational and international setting**. And in the case of Germany, the populist discourse connects to the zeitgeist by pointing at politicians of "mainstream parties" who justified decisions and crisis management by negating any room for manoeuvre while discrediting protest as illegitimate, ideologically blinded or irrational. Fittingly, the AfD complains about putative discursive taboos and technocratic policy-making. The party has, rather successfully, politicised issues such as European integration, immigration or monetary policy, all the while reframing these discussions with nativist narratives of identity politics.

Searching for identity

By pretending to revolt against taboos and standards of political correctness, populists seek to polarise. And those who seek to polarise do not refrain from pathologising their opponents. André Poggenburg, former AfD opposition leader in Saxony-Anhalt, utters: "How sick in their breed and their mind, how degenerated is this red-green milieu? Germany is about to abolish itself" (Bender/Bingener 2011). **Following the nativist narratives of right-wing populists, Germans supposedly deny their nature and heritage by acknowledging multilateralism, multiculturalism and a multi-ethnic society**.

Alas, calls for more (cultural) segregation and more national sovereignty find followers across the political spectrum – not only with voters of the AfD. But what has made these claims and narratives acceptable even in milieus one can characterise as conformist and "bourgeois"?

We do not only detect crude and aggressive racism that has always been part of right-wing extremism, but also a

form of "neo-racism" that seems to thrive without the explicit notion of "race".

The idea of Western cultural supremacy stemming from the heritage of enlightenment, secularisation and all sorts of progress as well as the idea of clear-cut national identities are, indeed, crucial ideological elements for many right-wing parties across Europe. We do not only detect crude and aggressive racism that has always been part of right-wing extremism, but also a form of "neo-racism" that seems to thrive without the explicit notion of "race" (Balibar 1998). And this makes right-wing populists look compatible with voters who still consider themselves "liberal democrats".

To construct distinct, homogenous groups, neo-racists no longer use biological features such as skin colour but refer to religion and culture instead. These categories are overstressed as stable and supposedly natural and organic criteria of difference, which then serve to distinguish and confine cultural spaces, loyalties, and thus citizenships. **Ultimately, neo-racist ideology promotes the idea of essentially different, i.e. inferior versus superior groups and calls for a nationalist resurgence and reorganisation of political power**. Theodor W. Adorno already knew: "The noble notion of culture takes the position of the deprecated notion of race, but is nothing more than a mere mask for a brutal claim of dominance." (Adorno 1975: 276f.)

So how does one encounter these populist discourses on identity, nations and culture? In Germany, politicians as diverse as the conservative former Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière and the social-democratic former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel temporarily sought to revitalize the idea of a so-called German "Leitkultur" (which can best be translated as a "guiding, dominant culture"). Their strategy was to offer a liberal democratic version of cultural identity. However, their statements rather exposed cultural self-doubt instead of normative and historically validated confidence. By taking up discursive frames of a guiding German culture that needs to be endorsed by citizens, they do not contain but help populists. Their attempts make clear that, **for many people, the minimalistic liberal story of "constitutional patriotism", once put forward by Dolf Sternberger (1990) and Jürgen Habermas (1992), does not suffice. What political debates and party competition need are a different framing of political conflicts and a coherent liberal socio-cultural position** (Abou-Chadi/Wagner forthcoming)

Populism and the loss of differentiation

Today, politicians face conflicts that are characterized as an ideological battle between liberal, universal norms against nationalism and particularism. **In the face of anti-European and nationalist movements, we discuss whether to deepen European integration or to reinstall national sovereignty and independence**. Public debates are increasingly about building bridges or building walls, about integration or demarcation (Kriesi et al. 2006).

The cleavage "democratic versus populist politics" proliferates a problematic loss of differentiation and is itself beneficial to political polarisation.

In Germany, big-tent parties ("Volksparteien") are criticised for having neglected this cleavage for too long. Meanwhile, discursive frontiers have shifted: positions in favour of demarcation are widely denounced as "populist" while pro-integration positions are considered "liberal democratic". This discourse blurs existing varieties of conservative politics as well as ambiguities on the political left. The cleavage "democratic versus populist politics" proliferates a problematic loss of differentiation and is itself beneficial to political polarisation.

So, to quote Lenin: What is to be done? To overcome the blurring of political conflicts with simplistic identity politics and discourses of future culture clashes politicians need to reformulate ideological lines and reframe today's problems with the help of the old-fashioned left-right continuum. **Many of the voters of far-right populists and anti-system parties may be regained by addressing issues of welfare state policies and social investments**. Accordingly, we should discuss the prospects of well-targeted social policies while politicians of established parties, who – especially those on the left – need to work on a democratic vision of embedded nations, of cultural openness and plurality while actively pursuing those policies.

The puzzle of political credibility

In 2011, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker allegedly proclaimed: "When it gets tough, one has to lie" (Kafsack 2011). The philosopher Plato once called the "noble lie" a legitimate tool in politics that the ruling class of philosophers, thanks to their insight into truth, might use in favour of their citizens. Niccolò Machiavelli famously recommended deceit and ruse to maintain order. **Today, politicians are neither philosopher kings nor true Machiavellians. They appear, in the eyes of many citizens, not trustworthy or credible – a problem which needs to be tackled by politicians as well as political scientists, journalists, and intellectuals**.

In reaction to populist successes, politicians themselves have begun to call for more "credibility" and "authenticity". From an optimist's perspective, we might understand these new catchphrases as a first step to challenge routines with people in power reflecting their behaviour and standing. It is by far better to hear politicians wanting to "regain trust" than having them call voters "stupid" or "a mob" like former minister Sigmar Gabriel did in 2015. Those are but helpless reactions as **we witness a disturbing phenomenon: blatantly lying, wangling politicians who deny or make up their facts do not shock and repel their voters and adherents**. Some voters do not sanction lies, ethical and political failures anymore.

Populist gestures and emotive narratives have become a relevant factor while a politician's ability to compromise, to discuss, to decide, and to adopt adequate and rational policies is overlooked. Eventually, cynical observers could ask: do members of political parties need to invest more emotions, dare more lies – and more populism?

Instead, broken promises by politicians and governments of the so-called establishment are cited as ingredients for today's credibility crisis. Once Angela Merkel said that she would not agree to a motorway toll in the forthcoming legislation period – and a minister of her cabinet advanced one. Once the German candidate Martin Schulz (SPD) proclaimed that his party would not form a new grand coalition with the CDU/CSU under Merkel in 2018 – and his party

did. Paradoxically, for some voters, politicians of established parties do not seem credible, and in contrast to them, rude and disdainful populists appear more truthful precisely because they do not follow any constraints, rules or norms of political discipline nor control their affects and emotions. **Populist gestures and emotive narratives have become a relevant factor while a politician's ability to compromise, to discuss, to decide, and to adopt adequate and rational policies is overlooked**.

Eventually, cynical observers could ask: **do members of political parties need to invest more emotions, dare more lies – and more populism? No. Today politics need vibrant public debates** – since political decisions need to be discussed and rectified in public. Politicians have to explain positions, assume responsibility and be "responsive", i.e. react to voters' interests and demands (Mair 2013). Politicians (and their staff) must talk to voters and confront their position with opposing ones to make political competition visible. Debates need to represent pluralism – and politicians need to endorse it. **In democracies, politicians do not gain authority by authoritarian hints at the purported rationality, necessity or evidence of their stance but by communicating their positions and decisions in the light of other, conflicting options**. In doing so, citizens of liberal democracies are enabled to cultivate tolerance toward divergence and opposition. Politicians have to risk controversial standpoints, revise and reformulate policies and admit errors. Even if – in the worst case – this means to be voted out of office, a risk which is of course at the very core of liberal democracy.

At the end of his "Leviathan" Thomas Hobbes (1651), philosopher of the absolutist state, wrote: "Such Truth as opposeth no man's profit nor pleasure is to all men welcome". We need to falsify Hobbes by reminding politicians that we want to hear their uncomfortable and complex news. Democracy is not about delivering false promises for the sake of being elected, about claiming universal truths, unlimited feasibility or certainty. There is none. This is the real challenge for truthful politicians in the age of populism.

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