

Whose Failure is the Rise of the Far Right?

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In recent years several EU countries have been facing a growing support for far right parties. Slovakia, my home country, is not an exception here. A couple of years ago the Slovak Prime Minister and leader of the social democratic party Smer, Robert Fico was asked if he felt any personal responsibility in this matter. He rejected this idea as nonsense and argued instead that the rise of the extreme right is the issue of right-wing parties, while the rise of left-wing extremism would be the problem of the left. This may first appear a logical sounding argument. However, is it really such nonsense to ask for the left's responsibility in the rise of the far right? Can the left really not be held accountable for this development? Let's look at this issue in a European context.

Silent (counter) revolution

One of the topics most discussed in the research into the far right is what causes its growth. There are several explanations offered. Currently, the most popular theory explaining the rise of the far right in the past three decades is the post-material one. Based on his research, Ronald Inglehart, the father of this theory and a well-known American political scientist came to the conclusion that after the Second World War a change of values occurred in the developed Western societies. This move from material towards post-material values was connected to the general rise of the standard of living in this part of the world. Once the standard of living rose, the focus shifted from traditional economic and class issues to lifestyle and identity issues. In everyday life it meant that people who were previously interested only in feeding or protecting themselves against the cold, could now be also thinking about the health aspects of the food they consumed or the working conditions in which their clothes were made. Inglehart called this process of value change a '[silent revolution](#)'. On the political level, it was reflected by increasing interest in topics such as human rights, minority rights, feminism or environmental issues. The answer to these demands also created a new political party family. It was the beginning of the Green parties and the liberal left in the 1970's. The support for these parties and their agenda came mainly from the so-called winners of modernisation, or in other words – young, well-educated and successful people who were able to adapt to the social changes associated with globalisation and the emergence of new technologies. However, where there are winners, there have to be losers too. These were the people who had struggled and could not adapt well enough to the new societal challenges. And here is where the far right arrives on the scene, approximately a decade later, representing the complete opposite of the agenda of the liberal left. While the latter has been in favour of minorities, the former is against them. And while the liberal left has appealed to the 'winners', the far right has managed to attract the frustrated 'losers'. In his seminal [study](#), the Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi, inspired by Inglehart's theory, called this mutiny of the 'losers' against the so-called silent revolution, manifesting itself in their increased support of the far right, a 'silent counter-revolution'.

Proletarianisation of the far right

The political developments in the late 1980's were dominated by a neoliberal agenda which characterised the policies of the two most influential political figures of the West at that time – Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. This neoliberal zeitgeist, however, did not only influence right-wing politics. The left was influenced by it as well and except for the stronger focus on post-material topics, due to the pressure of the neoliberal dominance, it also abandoned its traditional economic agenda. Under the label of 'third way' coined by politicians such as Tony Blair or Gerhard Schröder, the left became more centrist in economic terms. As a consequence of this post-material shift combined with the right-wing economic turn, the left – to a large extent – lost its attractiveness for its traditional electoral segment. This situation created a political opportunity to mobilise this group of voters, consisting mainly of members of the lower social strata who no longer felt properly represented. And it was the far right who took this chance by transforming its economic agenda in the early 1990's. The shift from the former pervasive neo-liberalism to the current agenda of welfare chauvinism characterised by selective solidarity shared exclusively among the members of the same ethnic group

with no room left for the solidarity with others, attracted the immediate attention of the less educated, lower income voters who felt threatened by the competition presented by an influx of the cheap labour force from less developed countries. This transition from neo-liberalism to welfare chauvinism which targeted the traditional left-wing electorate has been called the [proletarianisation](#) of the far right.

These ideological moves gained heavy criticism from some of the leading left-wing thinkers and political theorists such as [Chantal Mouffe](#), [Jacques Rancière](#) or [Slavoj Žižek](#), who have been criticising the left extensively for quite some time now. Recently, very similar diagnoses came from authors as different as [Noam Chomsky](#) and [Francis Fukuyama](#). They both see as the reason behind the current rise of the far right that the left lost touch with the segment of white working class voters by embracing identity politics over the fundamental class issues which were later picked up by far right politicians.

Shift the focus back!

The original question remains – whose failure is the rise of the far right? There is of course not just a single culprit as there is not only a single reason behind this complex issue. However, the question can at least partially be answered with a quote popular in leftist circles attributed to the German Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin ‘*every fascism is an index of a failed revolution*’. In this sense the rise of today’s far right as the ideological offspring of interwar fascism, is also the failure of some aspects of the silent revolution embodied in the contemporary left-wing agenda which lost touch with its traditional electorate. Hence, the future task for the left in its fight against the far right will be to shift the focus back on the problems and the needs of the working class voters and try to prove them that they are their rightful political representatives. How can this be achieved? Certainly not by copying the far right’s nativist agenda, but first and foremost by again becoming an authentic left with the focus back on its egalitarian roots and at the same time – as a traditional progressive force of emancipation – not losing its liberal side.