

The Shift towards an Authoritarian Future: Why the West Slowly Abandons its Civil Liberties

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Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who construct an image of toughness – tough on crime, on terrorism, on humanistic-inspired idealism etc. – are tapping into a sensitive spot that blocks critical thought among the public. Obama’s brute and harsh reaction on Edward Snowden’s revelations is just another example. Somehow it seems like “We, the people...” lost track of ourselves. Four main reasons why we abandon our once hard fought civil rights.

Many countries in the West, like Britain, France, Spain the US and the Netherlands have experienced in recent years an exponential increase in technological surveillance and a resolute decline in parliamentary and judicial control over state police and secret service.

Issues like the ban on torture, the possibility of detention without charge, privacy and freedom of speech were in the public debate reframed in favour of state control. And everybody accepted it. To be fair, there was some opposition – but it lacked intensity. Why is this happening?

To give an example, under former British Prime Minister Tony Blair 45 criminal laws were approved creating 3000 new criminal offences. British writer John Kampfner argues that in the past ten years more criminal offences were made in his country than in a hundred years before. All this was legitimized by the idea that a ‘terroristic’ virus attacked Western civilization. Of course, there is some truth in it – but these risks were grossly exaggerated. Still, we fearfully went along with the proposed measures.

This cultural shift towards perhaps a more authoritarian future for the West is no coincidence of nature. It is manmade. If the opportunity is there, top down induced shifts happen only if politicians, corporations, media pundits and other cultural icons are able to find the right symbols and techniques to get a new message across.

But first, besides these techniques, famous American psychologist Abraham Maslow is probably aware that there is also something else which stimulates our apathy in this respect. He signified the importance of leisure time for our own personal well being as well as for the well being of the community as a whole – it creates so to speak the possibility to make well informed decisions. Currently our leisure time is under assault. Thirty years of income stagnation in the midst of rising prices – people have to struggle to earn a living – meant that for most of us there is less time for critical thought.

But it has even been made harder to reflect on important issues since politicians and opinions leaders use marketing tools in order to seduce. Remember that soon after the 2008

banking bailout the discussion was reframed in such a way that government spending instead of the unregulated financial sector itself, was the root cause of all 'evil' - this message was repeated like a commercial, over and over again. This technique of repetition effectively neutralizes critical thinking. Hence, Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, was on to something when he famously stated:

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it."

Long after Goebbels died, psychologists experimentally discovered that it is a natural tendency of human beings to react more receptive to whatever kind of message the more they are exposed to it. They call this "the law of mere exposure". We should question ourselves if this habit is healthy for our general welfare.

Furthermore, psychologists discovered that our ability to think critically is severely limited when we act under stress. Frightened people tend to perceive reality through a prism of simple right and wrong answers, leaving the complexities aside. Scared, we are easily fooled. Politicians and corporations can't resist the temptation to manipulate this animal instinct - like when we started a war without having been shown any serious proof of its legitimacy.

One could expect that the mainstream media in its role as guard dog was attacking those politicians that create black & white polemics. However, currently most (privately owned) media echo the voice of corporations, which these days doesn't differ much in substance from that of the government. As a result alternative and more nuanced voices are underrepresented in cultural discourse which, again, makes it harder to produce well informed decisions.

And, when considering the information that is filtered thru to a broad audience - one also notes the slow, but steady disappearing of the separation line between news media and entertainment. American academic Daniel Hallin argues that the average time for sound bites politicians are given in media performances has shrunk from forty seconds in the 1960s to ten seconds in 1988. Hallin's crucial point is that he believes that the biggest victim of this still on going process is the careful scrutinizing of social problems. This results in so called 'horse race' news - news about politics presented as a game of "who's the most witty" in which politicians try to be popular instead of reasonable. The blur of catchy one-liners reaching the audience creates a further alienation from reality.

Taken together an assault on leisure, repetition of information, fear policies and the transformation of our media outlets from guard dogs to lap dogs create a situation wherein our spirit for the common good slowly dissolves into an ocean of noise, distraction and misinformation.

Meanwhile, the social environment which politicians, corporations and media gurus are constructing produces anxieties and illusions in order to make profits or political gains. Together these social forces act as a gravitational pull for government and corporate empowerment. That is to say, they pull away strength from the people to participate in the maintenance of a mentally healthy, meaningful democratic environment.

Thomas Jefferson once argued that a government should fear the power of the people. In that respect the apathy with which the audience in general responds to the revelations of

Snowden is a cynical demonstration of our time frame. Although, however little, a message this confronting does still stir society a tiny bit. We are not completely brain-dead – and there is some hope in that.

Probably the best question contemporary Westerners can ask themselves is: will today's power structure be able to obscure these clear violations of human civil rights or is this message too loud to ignore?

Or to say it more bluntly than that: will there be a transition to a meaningful democracy in the West or to an advanced form of authoritarianism? What's your point of view...

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