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EXPERT COMMENT: Three radical political experiments for a new age of extremes

Michael Patrick Cullinane, Reader in US History at Northumbria, writes about political extremes for The Conversation.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm famously called the 20th century an "age of extremes", one characterised by polarising ideological battles fought in the name of nationalism. Whether fascism, communism, or Western capitalism, Hobsbawm related how these ideologies transformed the political consensus, sparked global wars, and incurred an astonishing death toll.

When the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union disbanded, American policy wonk Francis Fukuyama declared Hobsbawm's "age of extremes" all but over. The end of Soviet communism, Fukuyama believed, signalled the triumph of liberal democratic capitalism as the only viable form of national government, although he admitted the potential existed for extreme nationalist ideologies to reemerge in periods of strife. Unfortunately, they have.

Theological fundamentalism has thrived in the Middle East and Africa, inspiring the rise of Islamic State and Boko Haram (and many more besides), sparking deadly civil wars. China has mastered a combination of one-party authoritarianism and market capitalism. In the Americas, the "neo-Bolivarianism" of leaders such as Hugo Chávez and the Kirchners broke stride with free-market globalisation and helped destabilise their countries.

Europe's nationalist vanguard includes neo-fascist parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, the xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric of UKIP, France's

Marine Le Pen, the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, and Alternative for Germany. In some ways, the US is late to the party, but Donald Trump and his sympathisers on the the so-called alt-right embrace many of the same messages.

But there are two things worth remembering about this sort of populist nationalism.

First is that extremism begets extremism. The apogee of nationalism in the early 20th century was no accident; it was an international phenomenon sparked by international discord. Debates about national identity and progress that developed in one place often found platforms and adherents elsewhere. Moreover, the rise of far-leaning politics often led to a counter-current of political activism.

Second, as the 20th century wore on, the extremes of left and right proved to be remarkably similar; fascists and communists, for instance, were equally proficient in the ways and their means of authoritarianism. We might think political ideologies cover a linear spectrum ranging from left to right, but a more suitable symbol is the horseshoe – the far-left and far-right ideologies residing at the tips, rather closer together than they might care to admit.

Why is this history lesson worth remembering today? Although the media report endlessly on Trump and the alt-right, they often neglect those on the far left. The far left shows similar signs of authoritarianism as the far right, and offers a radical plan to restructure society and international relations. If history offers any prediction for the future (which could be up for debate), we should pay attention to these ideas on the left, because they are likely to play some role in our politics.

Here are three big ideas from that area of the political spectrum – some of which might leave political centrists a bit rattled.

Universal Basic Income

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a social welfare policy that, in principle, would provide every citizen with a living wage. The living wage is calculated on basic subsistence costs, namely the costs of food, clothes and shelter. The idea can be traced to eighteenth and nineteenth century thinkers like Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, although it became a serious consideration in the twentieth century among intellectual circles in Europe and North America.

The logic of UBI is that it sets a standard for social welfare, and ensures that no member of a community falls into abject poverty. But this is only part of what UBI adherents promise. They say it will increase social mobility, allow citizens to gain further education, and provide a renewed sense of personal freedom.

Some fiscal conservatives like UBI, too. Unlike the various welfare programmes that exist today, UBI would override all such programmes, and because it would be available to all citizens, administration would be straightforward. Proponents even say it would be cost saving.

But some important questions remain unanswered. Would people still work? Would inflation soar? Would it lead to mass immigration? Swiss voters rejected the proposal for this very reason. And how do we calculate a living wage? Urban living is more expensive than rural.

Epistocracy

The divisive politics of nationalist populism has raised new concerns over the functionality of democracy. In the UK, the Brexit campaign was chastised for using fake statistics, and in the US the fake news circulating on social media has led many to criticise gullible voters.

Parodies of the electorate abound, from Jay Leno's Tonight Show skits that put Americans through a citizenship test (spoiler alert: they always fail), to Jordan Klepper's Daily Show segment that "fingers the pulse" of today's most irrational voters.

In his new book, Against Democracy, Jason Brennan argues for an "epistocracy", a system under which only the informed can vote. It's an appealing idea, especially if you watch one of Klepper's skits, but it's controversial because it dispenses with universal suffrage to make the case that public welfare trumps equality.

It also presumes we can accurately test knowledge and exclude a portion of the polity without causing mass resentment.

The end of cash

Why do we need cash in a world where electronic transactions are faster and more efficient? Cash is a vehicle for criminal activities. Without it, the

government could use transaction records to more closely audit businesses, indict organised lawbreakers, and check the flow of illegal immigrants who rely on cash for work. Bank robberies would be pointless.

More than that, cashlessness could make a big macroeconomic difference. When recession hit and deflation threatened an economy, a cashless world would allow central bankers to impose negative interest rates, which would in turn force banks to loan money because not doing so would actually cost them.

So what's to worry about? Plenty. Black markets will surely survive, and new ones crop up; as we've seen with the likes of Bitcoin, electronic currencies can in fact cater nicely to illegal activities. We also inevitably lose a degree of privacy when we start leaving our financial footprints electronically, meaning hackers or a technology failure could reveal our financial records – or worse still, wipe them out. Above all, a system without cash would need to cater to everyone, including those who find it difficult to learn digital systems.

Radical and complicated though they are, these are captivating ideas for strange times. The way things are going, expect them to start cropping up in political campaigns sooner rather than later.

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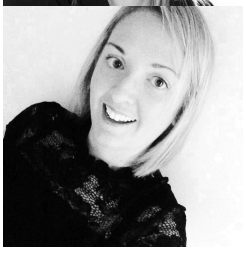

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