



# Escaping or shaping reality?

On youth, extremism and democracy

by Filip Coussée



It's not time to make a change. Just relax, take it easy.  
You're still young, that's your fault,  
There's so much you have to know.  
Find a girl, settle down, If you want you can marry.  
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,  
To be calm when you've found something going on.  
But take your time, think a lot, Why, think of everything you've got.  
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.

("Father and Son", Cat Stevens, *Tea for the Tillerman*, A&M)

## You have to be realistic

I start this article with a wonderful song on being young and dreaming of change. When I was younger I thought the song was written by Howard Williamson who used to sing it on each and every seminar for international exchanges supported by the Council of Europe. Quite soon I found out that the song was written by Cat Stevens, today known as Yusuf Islam.

"You have to be realistic." Many young people have been bombarded with this (non-) argument. Actually, not only young people get to hear the argument but anyone who dares to imagine that there may be more just alternatives to today's social system is asked to be realistic. There is no alternative. Even political debates that pre-eminently should tackle the subject of another world do not go beyond the bounds of "reality". Ideas that do not fit within the restricted horizon of maintaining the social project are shoved aside as unrealistic. People who defend ideas that go

beyond that horizon are looked at with pity, as long as they express their ideas in a relatively harmless way. This changes the moment one starts to shout a little bit louder or to form a group around "extreme" ideas. A popular strategy to cope with extreme ideas is what Herbert Marcuse (1969) has named repressive tolerance. That is the technique to give dissonant voices a certain forum in society, grinding down too sharp edges. In doing so, deviant ideas about the organisation of society are assimilated into the dominant discourse and dissonant voices are politically recuperated within "realistic" views of the desired social order. The initial revolutionary ideas are welcomed as ideas for cultural renewal. Implications that would go in the direction of social conflict are averted. Ideas that cannot be recuperated find no response. If needed, they are obstinately persecuted and violently repressed. This can in turn initiate a spiral of violence, so the strategy of repressive tolerance is always the preferred option.



## What's wrong with a little bit of repression?

In itself there is nothing wrong with a society aiming for stability. As long as this does not mean that the confrontation of divergent ideas on the desired social order is paralysed or too strictly canalised. The risk here is that the voice of people who enjoy the least benefits within the existing social order is not heard. They are further away from dominant ideas and mainstream ideals. They have to shout really loud to be heard. They don't have easy access to the channels that amplify one's voice. This concerns not only questions about the inequality between young people and adults, but also – and perhaps even more important – about the inequality between poor and rich or in more general terms, ethnic, disability or gender differences between the "established and the outsiders" (Elias and Scotson 1965). In a way one could say that young people are "doubly disempowered" if they grow up in poverty, if their parents were migrants or if they are disabled. Sometimes disempowered groups create innovative instruments and techniques to question "reality" or to shape their own realities (often in the areas of the informal economy or housing). Societies are not always willing to support those initiatives. Those who are established in society find it quite nice that the outsiders want to emancipate themselves, but not if they do it on their own terms. Other groups play with different forms of social action, exploring the frontiers of what is acceptable (*Indignados* in Spain, the Occupy movement on a global scale, squatters' movements on a local scale). Other groups that do not have cultural, social or financial resources opt for violent action (riots in Greece or England). Often this is because their voice has not reached an organised level, many members of this group therefore are focused on individual opportunities, more than on getting things moving on a more structural level.

It is clear that a living democracy needs to engage in a lively social debate. This debate can't neglect the existing balances of power in a society. This requires maximum transparency as it concerns

the underpinning values of our social order. A democratic society needs a permanent and honest debate on the question of which realities are in whose interests and the grounds on which some ideas or ideals are confirmed as "realistic" while others are not.

To a certain degree these values and grounds are already firmly established. A genuine democracy is supposed to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. But it must be clear that these rights are not absolute rights that can simply be claimed by each individual person. These rights act as a lever. The confirmation of these rights does not mean that they are realised. It means that we expect the government to take the necessary steps in order to realise those collective rights. The question of course is what kind of social order gives people the necessary space to work towards the collective realisation of these rights. This is the perennial search for democracy. It's nothing new. We need to learn to live with debates and dilemmas in order to reconcile the two inherently contradictory values that underpin a democratic society: freedom and equality. As Tocqueville (1835) argued, the principle of equality can either lead to misery or to prosperity, it all depends on our choices. But one thing is sure, giving up on the deliberate quest for equality will inevitably lead to misery.

Now we come to the point where it's really cooking, for this democratic struggle seems to have come to an end at the dawn of the 21st century. As Fukuyama (1989, p.4) argued after the fall of the Berlin Wall: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." There's only one way left to experience democracy, so why debate and discuss any longer?



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### Societal violence?

But what exactly is Western liberal democracy? It concerns a parliamentary democracy, although the significance and scope of parliaments are not very clear. We went beyond left and right (Giddens 1994); no big ideas, no all-embracing ideologies anymore, so what is democracy about? And what about the gross violations of human rights in our Western democracies? What about one in three children in the UK living in poverty? Liberal democracy takes its toll. Why can't the final form of human government solve poverty? Is it because poverty has positive functions in a market society (Gans 1970)? Is the invisible hand of the market perhaps the final form of human government?

Would poor people agree with the statement that our Western societies present the final form of human government? Of course they would not, but global capitalism enjoys near total dominance (Zizek 2009). It is difficult to imagine another world, let alone discuss it. The continuous quest for a legitimate, albeit always provisional, consensus on the organisation of society is referred to the dustbin of history (Lorenz 2005). The causes of persisting social problems such as poverty can no longer be found in the organisation of our society, because "there is no such thing as society", as Margaret Thatcher famously declared. Private troubles are no longer to be transformed into public issues (Mills 1959). So, poverty must be a problem of the poor. If there is a societal responsibility in solving the problem of poverty, then it must be restricted to a pedagogical mission: helping poor people to work hard or to learn to bear their suffering in a worthy way, without disturbing other citizens. This pedagogy hides possible social responsibility; remoralising the poor becomes more important than redistributing wealth.

Some people may well have the power to transform their own private concerns about profit maximisation into a public issue. So if one thing is clear it is that a liberal democracy cannot develop without debate. That is simply because it is based on two inherently contradictory values: liberty and equality. The freer the market, the less equity there is, and the other way round. This means that society can't be ruled merely by the

invisible hand of the market. The depolitisation of politics itself is pernicious for marginalised people, pushed to the edges of the system. A debate that defines the balance between freedom and equality is indispensable. The influence of trade unions, the church, social movements and youth movements has decreased in these post-political times, but does this mean that we have to leave the governance of our society to invisible hands?

### In need of radicalisation, preventing violent extremism

It becomes more and more difficult to believe that individual problems can be transformed into public issues. Policy, research and practice are increasingly obliged to work within restricted, individualised problem definitions. The magic triangle is increasingly growing into a devil's triangle. Our societal horizon to which we situate and define social problems is narrowed down to "anti-social behaviour". There is no question that our social system could be partly antisocial, due to deeply embedded historical and cultural developments. Researchers and practitioners are no longer policy makers. Their practice stays within well-defined narrow borders, reinforcing the social horizon instead of broadening it.

That is why a democratic society is in need of radicalisation. If one thing has become clear throughout history, it is that there is no such thing as the ideal society. A social system that reconciles the interests and concerns of all different social groups does not exist. A society is a social system, carried by a set of conventions, constantly shaped and reshaped, drawing on processes of social learning. Of course we are in need of a broadly shared legitimisation of our system, but no system can ever be the final form of human government. As society changes (due to migration, technical evolutions, global warming, etc.) the democratic debate has to be open. At the same time this openness leaves room for radicalisation, which is the only way, in my opinion, to prevent extremisms that get stuck in their own beliefs, or extremists who for one reason or another see no other way than to oppose the mainstream using strategies of violence and destruction.



### Social and pedagogical aspects of democracy

A democratic society has a social mission. A democracy strives for equal access to social resources and a just redistribution of wealth. A democratic society also makes room for all ideas and meanings to be taken seriously and not to be oppressed without dialogue or debate. But a democracy also has a pedagogical mission. All citizens have to learn to participate in the democratic debate. Ignoring democracy's social mission, as we do when leaving equal opportunities to market mechanisms, leaves us behind with the pedagogical responsibility to educate citizens, making abstraction of their social position. In such a "desocialised democracy" education is restricted to the smooth integration of (young) people into the established social order.

There may still be a dialogue with young people who are requested to integrate into the existing system, but this dialogue just instrumentalises them. It starts from the point where we want young people to be, not from the point where they are. It does not make a connection with (young) people's search for identity, with their questions on what kind of life is worth living, with the way they explore their own aspirations against the background of societal expectations. Young people are overwhelmed by life questions, but the only things society seems to have to offer are life rules.

We need to take young people and their possibly extreme ideas seriously. We have to offer frameworks and resources to help them find and express their views on human dignity and a just society. A society that neglects this social and pedagogical responsibility pushes people into a marginal position and drives them to possibly undemocratic frameworks and methods that offer them building blocks for their identity. Even young people that deliberately stand outside the system must be approached in a social and pedagogical way. It is counterproductive to narrow their identity to one extreme aspect. The mere exclusion of extreme ideas does not work and leads in many cases to a violation of human dignity.

reality?  
democracy

society





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### Youth work and the reinvention of the social

The desocialisation of liberal democracies has also restricted the role of youth work. In many countries, youth work is centred on apolitical play and recreation. In other countries youth work is extremely instrumentalised and is required to contribute to employability and prevention, all in the service of becoming the most competitive market economy in the world. A society that goes to extremes may expect extreme ideas to find their way to extremist frameworks. This goes especially for young people who fail to find their place in this competitive market; a failure that must be individual.

In apolitical societies, such as our Western liberal democracies, political education becomes one of the core missions of youth work. This mission should not be restricted to citizenship training, although that may be the task that governments want youth workers to fulfil (Giesecke 1972). Youth workers should be well aware that they cannot be objective and neutral to the existing social system. "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (Freire 1985, p. 122).

Three decades of neoliberalism have affected youth work more than we might think. In the 1980s youth clubs participated in protest marches of young people for employment. Youth organisations organised demonstrations against racism or nuclear weapons. Also youth workers increasingly seem to define their social engagement in terms of

helping individual young people to scratch out a living, not join the ranks of those not in education, employment or training (NEETs). Inspiration to reconnect youth work with society can surely be found in history (Coussée 2010a; 2010b), but should also be grounded in today's practice of working with socially excluded young people. Political education can be local and modest. Youth workers play a crucial role in engaging politicians in local practices and engaging young people in local debates on neighbourhood redevelopment, playground renovation, traffic plans, re-employment programmes, etc. Lots of young people are not addressed. Their capacities, knowledge and energy remain unused. Many groups of young people are seen as problems, not as resources, even by youth workers (De Block 2012). Through youth work we reconnect young people to the social debate and we revive that democratic debate. We do not resign ourselves to the treatment of the symptoms, but help develop sustained solutions. This can lead to tensions with local governments that provide subsidies. That's good, tensions keep us moving. Handling these tensions in a constructive manner is one of the main fields of expertise of well-trained youth workers. Although it is hugely overlooked in most of our youth work training programmes that focus on other, equally important fields such as creativity and animation techniques, developmental psychology and motivational conversations, youth work is probably the most difficult job in the world (Coussée and Williamson 2011).

### Conclusion

A democracy needs extreme ideas. As magnificently illustrated by Cat Stevens, young people have different perspectives than older people. Sometimes the dilemmas that are inherently connected to a living democracy need to be approached from an extreme perspective to come to productive new strategies to cope with them. Of course, not only young people can come up with renewing perspectives. Martin Luther King propagated pretty extreme ideas, as did Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks. It is clear that all minorities turn to extremes to alter their societal position. They show that any social order can be "de-naturalised" by broadening the horizons of reality and showing that there could be alternatives that lead to a more just society. Ideas are not extreme in themselves, but are labelled as extreme because other ideas are identified as normal, natural, real or mainstream. Extreme ideas are necessary in order to demythologise the idea that a society can be guided best by an invisible hand, whether the hand of the market or the hand of God. We need extreme ideas to keep democracy alive and kicking. If we try to define democracy as an unchangeable project carved in stone then we run the risk that young people with extreme ideas will move to extremist frameworks operating with extremist methods – even violating human rights – to have their voices heard.

Without extreme ideas there is no social debate; without social debate democracy becomes a desocialised project; a desocialised project creates extremism; extremism leaves no room for extreme ideas. So, it is vital to a democratic system that people, wanted or unwanted, are listened to, especially if they are standing outside the system. Changing the system from within would be another option, but not really a realistic one for young people. That's what another famous singer-songwriter taught us:

***They sentenced me to twenty years  
of boredom For trying to change  
the system from within.***

(Leonard Cohen, "First we take Manhattan",  
*I'm your man*, Columbia)

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I'm your  
man!