

Is the Far Right an Earthquake or Simply a Shock?

The powerful, influential poem of W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, composed in 1919, is subject to different interpretations. Written after the horrors of World War I but not specifically referring to it, the poem suggests the decline of European civilization and proclaims that things fall apart and that the center cannot hold.

If this is too strong and too pessimistic an assertion, recent political developments in Europe, notably the presidential election in Austria on May 22, 2016, evoke the thought that political moderates especially social democrats, believers in pluralism, in rational diversity of opinion and freedom of expression, rejection of dogmatism, mistrust of power, and minimal use of coercion are becoming an endangered species.

It is not true that the best lack all conviction but in the first round of the Austrian presidential election on April 24, 2016 the Austrian political center, even though the two mainstream parties held together and worked to halt the advance of Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the far right Freedom Party, received only 22 per cent of the vote. But in the second final round "mere anarchy was not loosed upon the world" with the defeat of Norbert Hofer, the candidate of a party full of passionate intensity.

Europe, and indirectly the U.S. has received a wake up call. Hofer, a less confrontation figure than most of the other leaders and many members in his party, only lost by the narrowest of margins, 49.7 per cent, compared with the winner, Alexander Van der Bellen, the 72 year old economist and candidate of the leftist Green party who got 50.3 per cent.

A fact that should disturb and may alter the approach of

mainstream politicians in Europe and the U.S. is that almost 90 per cent of Austrian manual workers voted for Hofer. This denotes a problem, if not a crisis, in Europe, and soon to be tested in the U.S., for the success of moderate leftist political parties. The traditional industrial working class, with a changing life style and concern for "identity" of their country, may be less supportive of centrist politics, left or right. Moderate leftists are chagrined with their parties which have necessarily modified their ideological programs in coming to terms with the vagaries of the free market, reducing public investment, making cuts in state services and in social programs, and most of all being unable to deal with difficult current problems of migration and Islamist terrorism.

To a limited extent a few extreme leftist groups, disillusioned by failures of moderate social democratic parties have emerged to challenge the political center. The left wing, populist Podemos in Spain was formed by academics in March 2014 largely as a protest against inequality and corruption in the country and because of fear of a European debt crisis. It is now the second largest party in the country in terms of membership. In the December 2015 parliamentary election it got 21% of the vote, 69 of the 300 seats, and is the third largest party in the parliament.

In Greece, the far left and anti-austerity Coalition of the Radical Left, named Syriza, founded in 2004, is the largest party in parliament, winning 36% of the vote, and 149 of the 300 seats at the January 2015 election. The leader of the party Alexis Tsipras, Prime Minister since September 2015, has been primarily concerned with the Greek debt, and the referendum on a bailout agreement, but has been forced to deal with the migration crisis.

However, far more important than these far left parties is the increasing strength of the far right parties that exist in all the 28 countries of the European Union, and which must be distinguished from the mainstream moderate or center-right

parties. It is worth looking briefly at a few of them to assess the problem.

Poland has the Law and Justice party, populist, national conservative, anti-free trade, believer in law and order. It is the largest party in both houses of the Polish parliament, with 234 of 460 seats in the lower house, and 62 of 100 in the Senate. Its leader has called for getting rid of "illiberal indoctrination."

Finland has The Finns party, populist, nationalist, the third largest in the country with 18 % of the vote, and one stressing law and order.

Sweden has the Sweden Democrats, a party with roots in a former Fascist party is a far right, ethnic nationalist, anti-immigration party. In the last election it obtained 13% of the votes, and 49 of the 349 seats, in parliament.

Hungary has the Fidesz populist, anti-free trade, anti-immigration party. With two thirds of the seats in parliament its leader, the forceful and energetic Viktor Orban, is currently prime minister. Orban's policy, now more centrist than far right, is one of opposition to Islamization, and in favor of what he terms "illiberal democracy."

But Hungary also has the more extreme party Jobbik, Movement for a Better Hungary, formed in 2003, conservative, radically national, and Christian party, to protect Hungarian values and interests. Its stress is on public order, national self-defense, and Hungary for the Hungarians. Though leaders deny it, it is antisemitic, racist, and homophobic. Not surprisingly, it believes that Jews orchestrated World War II, and that they control the international media. At the April 2014 election it got 1 million votes, 20% of the total and is the third largest party in Hungary.

France has the National Front (FN), generally considered to be a far right, nationalistic, anti-immigrant party. It has

grown in strength, gaining 25% in the EU Parliament election in 2014, and 28% in the French regional election in December 2015. Its ambitious leader Marine Le Pen obtained 6.4 million votes at the presidential election in 2012, and will be a challenging candidate in the next presidential election.

Italy has the Lega Nord (Northern League) a regional party founded in 1991 as a federation of parties in northern and central Italy. It is essentially interested in a federal Italy with regional autonomies. It takes a tough stand on illegal immigration, especially from Muslim countries, and on terrorism. It wants to erase Roma (gypsy) settlements. Matteo Salvini, the leader of the party, calls for the expulsion of African migrants. He has praised the "good work" of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

In Greece the Golden Dawn, a far right party, ultranationalist, Eurosceptic, anti-Semitic, racist, xenophobic, and violently anti-immigrant, uses Nazi symbols such as the swastika and the Fascist salute. In September 2015 it obtained 7 per cent of total votes, winning 18 of the 300 seats in Parliament, making it the third largest party.

In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (PVV) under the charismatic Geert Wilders, economically liberal, but hostile to the EU is primarily concerned to stop Muslim immigration. Wilders has stated, "I don't hate Muslims, I hate Islam." For him, the *Koran* is a "fascist book," that he compares to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

He argues all Muslim immigrants should be paid to leave and opposes construction of new mosques. In September 2012 PVV obtained 10 % of the vote for the House of Representatives, a decline from 15% in 2010.

Why is this far right surge happening? There are a host of problems. All the parties express concern about economic grievances and insecurity, unemployment, especially the 20 %

among the youth in the EU, and underemployment, criticize the EU, the bank credit problem, "globalization" and the competition of China, are troubled by loss of ethnic and cultural cohesion, are discontented with the political, social and economic establishment.

Above all it is the threat of Islamist terrorism, and the accompanying fear of Muslim immigration. The dilemma is whether the political center, especially left of center parties, facing the problem that their traditional base, an industrial working class and middle of the road progressives are disenchanted with it, has the strength to deal with Islamist terrorism and thus remove the main appeal of far right parties. For the rational moderates this is worth thinking of, not merely a fancy.