Polarisation researcher raises concerns

‘THERE IS A CLEAR LINK BETWEEN RECKLESS ANTI-POPULISM AND POLARISATION’

According to Andreas Schedler, the suitability of the term populism is becoming questionable; it is now weaponised. He praises Germany for not wanting to repeat its past. But hypervigilance comes at a high cost. People feel marginalised, and that mobilises them. In the migration debate, he sees both sides as extremely moralising, while the issue is full of unsolvable dilemmas.

The interview was conducted by Dr. Dirk Bornschein⁎ (Original in German⁎⁎)

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Dr. Andreas Schedler is a Senior Research Fellow at the Central European University (CEU) Democracy Institute in Budapest. He is Head of the Research Group on De- and Re-Democratization and a Visiting Professor at CEU Vienna. Before he was a professor in Mexico City. Schedler has widely published on democracy, authoritarianism and anti-political-establishment parties and other topics. His current research focuses on political polarization and the destruction of basic democratic trust.

Dirk Bornschein: With our work we aim to illuminate the migration debates of different European countries from their respective national perspectives, their causes and political consequences. We quickly realized, however, that this is closely linked to the populism debate and to polarization.

You are a polarization researcher and have lived and researched in several countries reputed to have a penchant for populism. What use do you see in the term?

Andreas Schedler: First of all, one must distinguish in this context who is talking about populists. Is it an academic debate, or a political one as reflected in the media?

In everyday politics the term has increasingly become a weapenised label, in which the actual content is arbitrary. Sometimes people are seen as populist because they are too emotional or supposedly irrational or too radical. This can concern either right-wing political circles or left-wing ones, and it is very uninformative.

Many speak, in general, of a crisis of democracy and of a wave of "autocratization," and sometimes the culprits are quickly identified and labeled as "populists." There is far too little asking what the actors we deem dangerous actually want, where they come from, where they ideologically stand. And of course the groups that widely distribute the label often avoid any self-criticism.

Unfortunately, academic debate is often similarly rapid and unreflective. In academia, we have a certain rough consensus on the definition of populism. Put simply, it states that populists are those who pit the good people against the supposingly evil elites.

That sounds a little bit vague.

Schedler: Yes, that's how it is. I would personally say the term isn't meaningless, but it needs to be defined much more tightly. As it's currently used—often merely to label all undesirable things—we should avoid it.

How should the term be developed further?

Schedler: The opposition of elites against the people is extremely broad. For many versions of elitist critique we have other terms. If the elites are the capitalists, we might speak of anti-capitalism; if it's about an imperial power, we can talk about anti-imperialism, and so on. I wonder why we need an omnibus term that presents the people in a broad, undifferentiated sense against the elites.

It becomes interesting when the people, i.e., the citizens, are contrasted with the democratically elected political elites, and when parties in existing democracies claim that we don't have democracy. In that sense, populists reinterpret democracy as authoritarianism in their discourse. They speak as if representative democracy were a dictatorial, repressive regime.

This has been heard in Germany from the AfD as well.

Schedler: Yes, indeed, the AfD has such a discourse. If you listen to them, Germany would resemble Russia or Venezuela, with Parliament, courts, and media being controlled. Of course you can always criticize certain structures or decisions, but you cannot claim that fundamental rights and freedoms are systematically violated. It looks very different in Turkey or Venezuela. Critique of real democracy can be warranted in many respects, even regarding the judiciary. Democracy must be weighed again and again. There is no eternal definition of how democracy should look

That sounds as if you were calling for moderation.

Schedler: Of course, and do you know why? Between easy anti-populism and political polarization there is a clear link. At the core, polarization is about actors treating each other as enemies of democracy. Those are grave accusations. Labeling someone an enemy of democracy has consequences. The so-called populists are quickly put into that category.

You mean mutual exclusion leads to more polarization...

Schedler: By definition. In democracy it should be that we acknowledge our differing positions, for that's what democracy is for. We treat each other as legitimate political opponents, not as enemies. The only ones we legitimately may treat as enemies in democracy are the enemies of democracy itself. Therefore it is so consequential when we describe someone as a democracy foe, because then much becomes legitimate. Then we may say we should not talk to them, not invite them, keep them away from power. We can mobilize the entire apparatus of militant democracy.

From your experience, how would you describe the political situation in Germany today?

Schedler: Complicated; here too you must be very, very careful branding political opponents as enemies.

But why, the AfD keeps cropping up with positions that shake our deepest beliefs, in the area of migration, in an orientation toward authoritarian role models, Trump, Putin...

Schedler: We should be careful not to view everything in binary terms. Even this AfD is a more or less complex entity. Some people remain fairly close to the right center, others can be well described as neo-fascist. You don't want them in a democratic politics. It would be important to identify these individuals individually and hold them to account for specific statements and actions, for example for willingness to use violence, or for downplaying Nazi crimes. The message would be: "we are tolerant and flexible, but certain things are not acceptable." We should first condemn concrete actions and individuals, not brand an entire party from the outset, especially since that would give them even more traction. We should be careful not to lump all voters and sympathizers into one corner.

And if it really is the case, as you say, that all voters are being lumped into one corner?

Schedler: That's a complex topic. Let me illustrate with a school-policy example. When a Muslim student at a school advocates extremist views, it has proven counterproductive to blanket all Muslim students with countermeasures. I see it the same for the AfD. The simple discourse, "they're all fascists," also has a mobilizing effect for the party. In a democracy, the greatest insult is to be called anti-democrat. Hearing that would not please any of us.

Premature labeling is counterproductive, very much so. And it is true that some people support the AfD because they feel their views are being excluded as undemocratic too quickly.

Because they fear being robbed of the possibility to criticize...

Schedler: Yes, I think so. And even if they do not share the hysteria within the AfD, some of these people simply seek a more open discourse space.

And conversely, what moves democrats to identify others as enemies of democracy?

Schedler: Well, in Germany and Austria everything today still lies in the shadow of the 1930s. We all want to prevent a return of Hitler; that is our stated main task. One must understand this hypersensitivity. How often do we hear, “we don’t want to walk into ruin with our eyes closed again”? I share that worry. But we should not overdo it. Hyper-vigilance has costs.

What role does immigration play for this new right, such as the AfD in Germany and its successes? In polls, they’re around 25 percent already.

Schedler: Of course, you cannot talk about the AfD without addressing immigration. In Germany as well as elsewhere in Europe, it creates clear material problems, for example in housing and schooling. And on the other hand we see the difficulty of talking about it. Immigration is a Europe-wide issue that simply has no easy solutions, with intractable dilemmas at its core. No solution is free of consequences; all produce follow-on costs.

To name just one example: we can generously welcome people fleeing poverty and dictatorship. But then they are missing in their home countries. There, the discontented who would create prosperity and fight dictatorships are absent. Both sides deny these dilemmas and argue with extreme moralization. On the left, criticism of the accompanying aspects of immigration is often labeled racist, in the sense of "we are the good ones."

...And on the right...

Schedler: There is a kind of amoral nationalism. In his classic ethnographic study from the 1950s of a southern Italian village, political scientist Edward Banfield coined the term "amoral familism."

According to his observations, in then-southern Italy the moral space of people was limited to the family. That was the only realm that could impose moral demands. Outside the family, there were no binding norms. For strangers and also for elected representatives, it was generally assumed they did not pursue the common good but only their own advantage.

Do you see this today also among the radical right?

Schedler: Exactly, such a moral split of the world is voiced at the national level by them. For them the nation is the only legitimate site of moral claims. Everything outside that lies beyond consideration. Such “amoral nationalism” is a core element of the AfD, but also of Donald Trump.

Moral relevance in this worldview is only how it affects one’s own people, the members of the nation, the natives. What happens to migrants or sending countries is morally irrelevant from this view.

Two moral codes thus clash…

Schedler: Yes, both sides feel morally superior. They believe they have a monopoly on moral correctness. The world is more complex, and that is lost.

Progressive politicians sometimes say that the radical right appeals to the primitive impulses of the voter. Hillary Clinton phrased it similarly when she described Trump voters as “a basket of deplorables.” That carries a huge moral claim: only we are the good ones!

Yet in migration issues there is no morally superior path. We always operate within a field of moral tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas. As long as we don’t acknowledge that, we should not be surprised to lose broad swaths of the population.

But isn’t there a danger that if you adopt the discourses of the radical right, you strengthen their themes and thus empower them?

Schedler: Yes, this theory is popular with some observers, and there is some evidence in its favor. Well, when we address a topic, we push it to the foreground; that is part of democratic competition. But conversely, if we suppress a topic, discontent can build up over time and channelize and erupt under certain conditions. Avoiding a relevant topic is politically risky for democracy. Suppressing problems also plays into the hands of the radical right. Of course it’s different if someone speaks xenophobically or racially. It always depends on how one discusses it, but it doesn’t help to lay a general suspicion of immorality over the debate.

You also observe politics in the United States. The country is widely regarded as a paradigm of a polarized democracy. What is your take?

Schedler: That’s right, absolutely.

Is it about questions of ideology?

Schedler: In political science we distinguish between ideological and affective polarization. In the late 1990s colleagues in the United States saw how toxic public discourse had become, but they never analyzed the public debate itself. Instead they did what long-standing scientific tools allowed: public opinion research.

Already back then the political discussion in the USA was quite polarized; today it has gotten worse. So they looked at voters' opinions, searched for political differences, and concluded that no, there aren't many ideological differences between Republicans and Democrats. The parties themselves, however, had become internally much more homogeneous. In the past there were conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans who bridged the gaps. Today you'll find far fewer of them. But after this finding from the USA—that ideologically the trenches aren't that deep—people talk today about affective polarization.

How is affective polarization measured?

Schedler: We in political science do it with extremely simple measurement tools. For example, there is a so-called feeling thermometer that records on a scale from 0 to 100 how “warm” or “cold” the feelings are toward particular parties or politicians. The finding is that people on average can “warm up” more to their own party than to the other side.

You don’t sound convinced?

Schedler: I find it rather trivial. Democracy requires only minimal reciprocal respect; it does not require that we love our political opponents. And in reality we don’t even know how to interpret the measured relative emotional distance toward political opponents. Some speak of hate, others of anger or fear. Everyone has their own interpretation of which feelings lie behind it. I find all of it completely misguided. Because substantive conflicts and emotional distance are part of a democracy.

How do you understand democracy in this context?

Schedler: In my understanding, democracy is about being able to resolve or balance conflicts over ideas, interests, or values. It becomes problematic when we transgress the basic rules of democracy. That is the threshold marking the transition from "normal" democratic conflict to polarization.

In the toxic conflicts we perceive as "polarized," political actors transcend democratic norms. They often become intolerant and treat political opponents as political enemies who stand morally outside the community of citizens and basically have no place in democracy. Generally they also see their opponents as enemies of democracy who pose an existential threat to democratic life.

Why is that so?

Schedler: Both sides talk about the death of democracy. That may be hard to conceive if you sympathize with the Democrats or the liberal camp in the USA, even as an academic. But even the Republicans view their political opponents as unfair, hyper-ideological, and manipulative, as unscrupulous actors who sacrifice democracy when it serves their interests.

And from there democracy loses all footing. When the leading political parties in a country accuse each other of being enemies of democracy, the judiciary becomes the last instance of civil conflict resolution. But if courts are drawn into the swirl of suspicion and everyone who loses a case accuses the judges of being politically motivated, then the foundations of democracy crumble. Then there is no credible institution left. Any claim to impartiality is dismissed as a farce. Then only the law of the strongest remains. It’s a process that unfolds gradually and deepens step by step with the reaction and discourse of the other side.

What practical steps do you see as possible to slowly reverse the tendency toward polarization? Isn't that difficult right now?

Schedler: There is a broad debate about "de-polarization." In the USA that's a kind of fashionable trend, a thriving field where numerous NGOs organize citizen dialogues across political divides. For me, that's a kind of symptom-cure. It's okay when people start learning to communicate with each other, a few hundred or a few thousand. But that's not enough. Elites matter more, because they set the tone. I am very skeptical about the current form of depolarization initiatives.

But what could help, in your opinion?

Schedler: I think, for example, drastic changes in political personnel. If the chief conductor of polarization in a country disappears from the political stage, things can calm down and become less bitter and rigid. When Mexican President Manuel López Obrador properly ended his term and retired, it became less toxic there than before.

Overall: we can only control how we present ourselves; we have little influence on others for the moment. My core recommendation is that we should be more self-reflective and cautious in our heroic defense of democracy, in which we often risk destroying more than preserving or repairing.

Progressive and conservative narratives have their own fact-checks and favorite experts. You close yourself off from the other side. It feels as if there is no room for discussion anymore. Isn't our communication research perhaps too goal-oriented as well?

Schedler: Well, marketing is not the same as communication. And communication is actually the first victim of polarization. Polarized democracies are the opposite of deliberative democracies. Political actors no longer listen to each other and only talk over one another, no longer with each other.

But at the center of the political crises we describe as “polarization” lies the question of basic democratic trust; do we believe that our political opponents are reasonably reliable democrats, or do we consider them undemocratic scoundrels? If this trust breaks down, something fundamental breaks as well —e.g., starting to believe that elections are stolen, judges take money, or candidates threaten each other’s lives. We are not at that point in Central Europe, fortunately. The situation in the USA is, on the other hand, catastrophic, and in Spain the debates are terrible. In Germany polarization has fortunately not gone that far.

To what extent do debates about direct or representative democracy play a role in the polarization process?

Schedler: Some say that populists are direct-democracy proponents, while “we Liberals” defend representative democracy. It may be partly true that some so-called populists would like more direct-democratic instruments. I would personally like that as well. Overall, I do not believe that differing conceptions of democracy are a relevant motor of polarization.

But certainly, in principle every democratic system should continuously question itself and confront new challenges with self-criticism. That goes without saying.

Andreas Schedler, thanks a lot for this thoughtful conversation.

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