

# ‘Reverse waves’: how radical ideas spread and take hold

## ‘WAVES’ OF PROGRESS?

In his classic account of democracy, Samuel Huntington described the modern process of democratic diffusion in terms of a ‘wave’. Others have used similarly evocative metaphors – domino effect, snowballing, cascade, avalanche, demonstration effect, contagion – to explain how an unexpected, shock event in one place may affect other neighbouring communities and create a momentum for similar change. A classic contemporary example of such dynamic diffusion is the collapse of the Soviet satellite regimes in countries of central and Eastern Europe in rapid succession during the second half of 1989. A more recent example is the 2010–11 popular uprisings against authoritarian rulers in countries of the Middle East and North Africa, which became collectively known as the ‘Arab Spring’.

Huntington was perceptive enough to talk not just of ‘waves’ of positive change but also of ‘reverse waves’ that slowed down, reversed or even cancelled out entirely the effects of the prior ‘wave’. He was willing to concede that progress is not irreversible and that too much change happening too fast may produce a powerful backlash. This foresight has been echoed in explanations given for why political shocks, such as ‘Brexit’, have rejected the apparent progress of globalisation. Indeed, *Time* magazine’s shortlist for 2016 Person of the Year included the Brexit campaigner, Nigel Farage. The magazine’s rationale for this decision was that Mr Farage ‘was a face of the successful campaign, positioning the referendum as the start of a global populist wave against the political establishment’.

## RADICAL IDEAS AND ‘REVERSE WAVES’

Do ‘waves’ and ‘reverse waves’ unfold in similar ways? Generally, any idea that challenges convention or undermines social consensus teases the boundary of what it considered as acceptable. This is as true of ideas involving emancipatory,

inclusive change as of ideas calculated to divide, exclude, and persecute. The mechanisms for diffusion are essentially the same: breaking a previous taboo; gaining traction by receiving new adherents and mobilising human resources; and, finally, if successful, spreading further through multiple channels of interaction, getting translated in the process to respond to the requirements of different contexts.

Still, reverse waves and populist ideas have a distinct advantage when it comes to the momentum of their diffusion. They gain traction amidst prevalent perceptions of crisis and emergency within a group, seemingly caused by an impression (whether based

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on reality or not) that change has moved too deep too fast. Psychologists tell us that, once switching to fear mode, humans tend to narrow down their focus and fall back on prior stereotypes to deal with the perceived competitors.

This is where ‘reverse waves’ differ fundamentally from ‘waves’. They do not so much involve a departure from conventional wisdom as entail the reactivation and legitimisation of a suppressed desire. This process is better known as *cognitive liberation*, whereby the status quo ceases to be regarded as the only

legitimate way of thinking and acting. As a result, previously inadmissible – that is, taboo – alternatives become legitimised as plausible ways of thinking and acting. But it does take a radical innovator to take the first leap against the establishment and achieve a level of success that can inspire others to follow suit or go beyond.

Huntington considered the period starting with the rise of Mussolini in power (1922) and the end of World War 2 as the most seismic of ‘reverse waves’. During this short quarter-century, liberal democracy was obliterated in most southern, central, and Eastern European countries, and individual freedoms were derogated or sacrificed altogether to defend the collective community. But, there is no more chilling example of diffusion than the spread of violent anti-Jewish sentiments across Europe in the 1930s. While anti-Semitism was pervasive in interwar Europe, decades of Jewish emancipation and the ‘wave’ of liberal constitutions introduced in the early 1920s cultivated the – illusory, as it turned out – belief that the world had turned anti-Semitism into an unacceptable taboo.

The taboo was shattered in 1933–1935 by the National Socialist regime in Germany. The introduction of the racial ‘Nuremberg laws’ at the Nazi Party rally of September 1935 transformed the country’s Jews into second-class citizens and justified their designation as a racially inferior species. In the following six years, this particularly aggressive anti-Jewish paradigm was adopted by fascist and radical nationalist movements across the continent. It was adapted for political use by a number of regimes, from Hungary to the puppet states of wartime Croatia and Slovakia. In hindsight, this was the beginning of a seismic change that would swiftly normalise anti-Semitism and violent anti-Jewish policies in large parts of Europe. These were the first decisive steps along the previously unthinkable path to a campaign of genocide, unprecedented in scale, brutality and transnational participation.

Writing shortly after the end of World War 2, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce described the ‘wave’ of fascism and the violence it unleashed as an alien virus that infected Europe – contagious, devastating but eventually only temporary. Is ‘contagion’ a suitable metaphor to describe this domino effect of aggressive anti-Semitism in the 1930s?

Certainly the radical, taboo-shattering actions of Nazi Germany offered the most powerful legitimising precedent for others to follow. A ‘successful’ bold model for shaping similar ‘solutions’ to the so-called ‘Jewish problem’ outside Germany. But, far from alien, the radical action of the Nazi regime encountered a reservoir of support – suppressed, and until then inactive and invisible – in Germany and beyond, not only among fascists but also within mainstream society. It was in this lethal conjuncture of empowering radical precedent and widespread suppressed desire that the most devastating dynamics of a ‘wave’ seem to lie.

If we were to fully account for the diffusion dynamics of radicalism, then and now, we could heed instead the words of Albert Camus. In *The Plague* (1947), the celebrations that followed the containment of the epidemic came with an all-too-important caveat:

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years [...]; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightenment of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

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