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Why we need to rethink liberalism

Liberal democracy is under pressure worldwide. It is being challenged by anti-liberal movements and parties from within as well as by self-confident authoritarian regimes. Above all, a new systemic conflict between China's high-tech authoritarianism and liberal democracies is on the horizon.

For the elites in Beijing and Moscow, liberal democracies are a model of the past - incapable of strategic politics, paralyzed by political polarization and social fragmentation. Critical voices in the West also see democracy as exhausted and doubt its ability to act. Only regimes organized strictly from the top down, so the argument goes, are capable of tackling major challenges such as climate change. The liberal credo that in the long run only democracies are capable of finding creative solutions and overcoming crises through innovation is beginning to falter. But this argument may just be overestimating China's strength and underestimating the potential of open societies.

We face major challenges in the 2020s and beyond:

- **Climate change** is arguably the biggest challenge of the coming decades. It is only slowly translating into political action. It is an open question whether we will slip into some kind of ecological emergency regime or whether we will succeed in stabilizing the earth's climate through a new wave of green investment and innovation. A policy of restriction and frugalism will not stop climate change, but it will endanger democracy. What is needed are innovative solutions, market-based instruments, and the dawn of ecological modernity. In short, we need liberal answers to climate change.

- The **digital revolution** is a second challenge that has so far been understood only to a limited extent. Digital technologies are impacting every aspect of our lives and work, dramatically changing public communication and the way politics is made. In the final analysis, AI and the ongoing automation of complex activities are challenging the dominance of humans over machines.

- Western **societies are becoming more socially and culturally heterogeneous**. This process is increasing due to global migration. How can social and political cohesion be established in diverse societies? How can we ensure equal rights and opportunities for all and prevent society from disintegrating into identitarian, self-referential groups?

- Meanwhile, a **new systemic competition with China** is looming on the horizon. The Chinese regime, with its mix of authoritarianism, economic dynamism and digital surveillance, is poorly understood in the West. How can liberal democracy hold its own in the face of this new type of high-tech totalitarianism? And what concrete answers are there for dealing with this new form of authoritarianism beyond appeasement and war?

Crisis and Renewal of Liberalism

Liberalism as a school of thought has contributed significantly to the spread of liberal democracy. It has promoted democracy and the rule of law, free trade, and an active civil society. At its core is

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the postulate of equal freedom for all, the normative idea of human rights, and an international order governed by law. Liberalism, in short, gave birth to democracy as we know it today. It has penetrated so deeply that today we use the terms "liberal democracy" and "democracy" almost synonymously.

Today, liberalism - understood as a broad, bipartisan direction of political thought - is on the defensive. In recent years, there has been a wide range of criticism and self-criticism of liberalism in academia and journalism. It is often associated with market radicalism, social coldness and ecological ignorance. Some accuse it of having "overstretched" its claim. Others suspect that liberalism has lost its emancipatory potential and has become a mere defense of the privileges of the privileged. Nevertheless, there are liberal-minded actors in almost all democratic parties and social milieus. Liberalism as a school of thought is not dead, but it needs a profound renewal.

Rethinking liberalism

What is lacking above all are liberal concepts for the major challenges of our time outlined above. What are liberal responses to climate change, globalization, the digital revolution, transnational migration, and the growing inequalities in our societies? How should liberals respond to the growing need for security and stability in a rapidly changing world? How must the relationship between the state, the market, and civic self-responsibility be redefined? How can openness to innovation be promoted? What future narrative(s) can it offer?

Debates on the renewal of liberalism are often confined to the national space. There is little cross-party exchange across national borders, and there is a lack of coordinated collaboration on the renewal of liberalism. This is where we come in with our conference "Rethinking Liberalism, Renewing Democracy." We want to bring together an international network of liberal-minded people from academia, politics, civil society and business, from Europe and beyond, to develop programmatic impulses for a renewal of liberal thinking and politics.