

Hyperpolitics seeks to politicize every space without prioritizing any particular one. While apparently left-wing, hyperpolitics is in fact a bourgeois radicalization with a distinctive social base and political culture. Progressives are wrong to think that it offers a pathway to social justice. It is in fact a symptom of middle-class hegemony in social movements, from which the Left must break out.

# The Futility of Hyperpolitics

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It used to be that people who commented on politics or were involved in them complained about political apathy and what to do about it. It was a constant challenge to make people care *at all* about public policy, elections, and foreign affairs. At the schools I attended, having strong political opinions marked one out as political (and probably liberal) in contrast to one's peers. Today the political climate could not be more different. Politics is everywhere, all the time, and it feels like everything is political. What many are now calling "hyperpolitics" is a way of insisting on the politicization of every aspect of life.

This essay explores hyperpolitics, seeking to locate its social base and to reveal how that base pursues its interests in

institutional settings while also generating an ideology that helps it navigate those settings. Hyperpolitics is not an empty exercise; it does not lack purpose or vehicles for advancing its view of political change. Its vehicles are just not useful to achieve meaningful gains for the vast majority of people. This essay offers a critique of hyperpolitics in addition to the socialist left's relationship to it. What is needed, in the end, is a reorientation of the Left toward a different political vision and constituency.

## WHAT IS HYPERPOLITICS?

Hyperpolitics is our sense that everything is politicized. It is polarized political debate reaching into family dinners, sports leagues, streaming services, the Academy Awards, and the voting booth. It involves mass mobilizations, referenda, and partisan internet activism. The distinctiveness of this new form of politics is easiest to understand in a relational way rather than as a standalone description of political activism. As Anton Jäger writes, the hyperpolitics of the 2010s and 2020s is the historical successor to the post-politics of the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>1</sup> It is worth drawing out three contrasts to explain this historical shift: emotional, cultural, and ideological.

Post-politics was marked by apathy, whereas hyperpolitics feels like mania. In the aughts, it was common to hear activists, or anyone really paying attention to politics, complain about apathy. This criticism was moralistic in the sense that the diagnosis for political apathy often came down to the idea that people just did not care much about others due to selfishness or ignorance. The decline in working-class institutions that once facilitated the popular masses' political engagement were not replaced by

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1 Anton Jäger, "From Post-politics to Hyper-politics," *Tribune* (Autumn 2021).

new modes of participation. Try as they might, left-wing activists and the progressive intelligentsia could not come up with a replacement. A focus on human rights campaigns, civil society organizations, and volunteer work did not garner more political involvement. The result was a widespread sense of apathy, with bleeding-heart liberals appearing to carry the moral burden of the universe on their shoulders.

One reason for the apathy problem was the relative positivity of the times. It reflected an impression that moral progress was being made. The sensation of post-politics was, for many, the warm feeling that social conditions were improving all the time. After the Cold War, the major ideological battles were settled and the only thing left to do was develop economies and democratic systems to end poverty, bigotry, and ignorance. The most common phrase to introduce into a discussion about persistent inequalities was one I haven't heard in a long time: "I know there's a lot of work still to be done, but we've come such a long way." Most of all, this phrase pronounces a faith in the historical progress of democratic inclusion and the expansion of moral concern.

Hyperpolitics, in contrast, is a product of disillusionment. I would place this disillusionment at the emotional crossroads between indignation at unfulfilled promises and a sense of unease wrought by having no orientation toward the future. Its mania lies in the process of coming to realize that one has been subject to an illusion of progress and then demanding that every social, political, and cultural venue conform to one's contravening position of moral rightness. It is a politics of setting right what has failed us. For example, diversity, equity, and inclusion (or DEI) reforms set right the failures of affirmative action policies, or corporate advertising campaigns set right failures to adequately represent market demand. Likewise, the hyperpolitical individual sets right their family members over the dinner table to ensure that they

take responsibility for the racist uncle who has until now received too much grace.

The cultural shift to hyperpolitics is a move away from ironic detachment and toward activist sincerity. In popular culture, the millennial generation was marked by its political use of irony. Skepticism of large-scale systemic change led people to find ways of flirting with political and ideological transgression without setting down principled commitments. The intellectual culture of the age of irony issued critiques of historical metanarratives and universal principles as exclusionary and authoritarian. In response, many university students and graduates developed a paranoid relationship with notions like equality, freedom, and civil rights. It wasn't possible to promote politics that supported those things without distancing oneself from their potential blind spots. I once had a fellow graduate student explain to me that he'd like to write a philosophy of hesitation. At this time, hesitation came in the form of a knowing wink at power.

The era of activist sincerity began as this wink lost its critical force. In the wake of the financial crash of 2008, it became clear that some forms of power resist ironic transgression and parody. Economic power especially is nothing to wink at, and so many turned their critical eyes toward capitalism and its systemic effects. As Nancy Fraser declared triumphantly in 2014, "Capitalism is back!" and suddenly everything became *very* serious.<sup>2</sup> Where it had once been a social imperative to keep a cool head and not overcommit, activist sincerity set down red lines of political principles everywhere. Acknowledging these red lines was a social currency to show that one was not, nor had one ever been, one of those who were still in the dark. And so the political temperature

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2 Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," *New Left Review* 86 (March–April 2014).

began to rise, identifying sources of blame for systemic harms. The new social imperative was to point out who and what was “problematic.”

This intellectual environment was distinctively punitive. Some worthwhile corrections were made in mainstream culture to reevaluate the positivity of the 1990s and 2000s as politically and historically naive. But suddenly it felt as though everyone had received the same education about what their country’s history really was (imperial, barbarous, racist) and sought to find ways of expressing that knowledge in a way that was consistent with their career incentives. Red lines everywhere meant a proliferating number of personae non gratae at universities, at media outlets, in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and in the activist groups of urban centers. This punitive attitude was a remarkable about-face from the one that previously dominated intellectual milieus. Whereas postmodernism prescribed parody and hesitation based on a refusal of stable categories and suspicion of power, this system of punishment and reward was mightily sure of itself on every ideological front, especially in its exercise of power. Indeed, a profound literalism overtook the culture.

The video essayist and artist Brad Troemel defines literalism as the willful misinterpretation of metaphors, taking them as literally as possible by ignoring context and intent, which enables one to change the terms of debate about culture to cast oneself as a righteous protagonist and one’s opponents as the embodiment of pure evil.<sup>3</sup> Literalism was first popular on the US Christian right of the 2000s, which looked for signs that cultural institutions were propagating the occult through film, music, and TV. One may recall the Harry Potter moral panic and book burning as an example. In

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3 Brad Troemel, “The Literalists,” Patreon, June 26, 2023, video, [www.patreon.com/posts/literalists-85146298](https://www.patreon.com/posts/literalists-85146298).

the 2010s, literalism took hold on the Left, which began to interpret aesthetic objects as literal manifestations of white supremacy and patriarchy. The cultural demand by liberals and progressives was that aesthetic objects reflect their moral commitments immediately, unambiguously, and without reserve. Corporate anti-racist and pro-LGBT initiatives were a response to this wave of demand by consumers. This effort to wield power could be interpreted as an implicit backlash against postmodern sensibilities.

## WHO ARE THE HYPERPOLITICAL?

This new political culture has a social base as well as vehicles for agency. And the two go together. The Left of previous generations relied on political parties, trade unions, and mass movement organizations to represent its interests. Around them grew a vast network of smaller militant organizations that adopted critical postures toward the larger ones but nonetheless relied on their strength as the sine qua non of their existence. The world of mass politics had a broad spectrum. Those who were hostile to the bureaucracies of the parties and trade unions could organize in their workplaces among the same constituencies to vie for political influence. Though political strategies diverged, there was in this sense symbiosis among the institutions and their critics. The world of post-politics saw the collapse of the larger organizations and the proliferation of smaller ones. The symbiosis was broken, which relegated the Left to a subcultural milieu of people who sought to revitalize some part of its former political culture.

Today politics runs through different channels. In the main, activists work through university campuses, NGOs, media ecosystems, and street demonstrations. The subculture on the Left that would like to see the return of mass politics is forced to adapt to this terrain. In one way, this adaptation makes sense. Those who

were politically active in the post-political era saw fit to invest in wherever there was enough political energy, hoping to have an influence on a new generation of people seeking change. In another way, however, this adaptation has come at the cost — often unconscious — of failing to assess the incentives that these institutions put into place, who is likely to succeed in influencing them, and what their relationship is to the working class. If the hope is to create spillover effects into a broader social movement, then these are important strategic questions.

Universities and NGOs are the institutional homes of the professional class. Working at these institutions requires advanced credentials, often held today by progressive middle-class people. Their incentives are to seek funding for research or their operations from both public and private sources. Public universities and NGOs also have to seek parliamentary support for public money. In doing so, they have a particular way of framing their research that is responsive to the demands of their financial backers.<sup>4</sup> Their political advocacy must be palatable to politicians, philanthropists, or some combination of the two. Often NGOs focus on providing direct services to a vulnerable constituency, which makes them vulnerable, in turn, to changes in the political winds. This vulnerability has a conservatizing influence. It tends toward hyper-pragmatism and is resistant to alternative political strategies that may come from organizations' own constituencies. Universities can be similar insofar as research funding flows to the most applied and pragmatic areas, sometimes with political strings attached.

The media is another important institution. In the United States, the Left used to complain about the corporate media for restricting the scope of the facts relevant to political debate with

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4 Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek, "NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector," *Catalyst* 5, no. 1 (spring 2021).



one-sided messaging. The media has nowhere been completely democratic, even where there is popular public broadcasting. Today, however, the situation is much worse. On both the Left and the Right, the US corporate media is now a partisan propaganda arm that peddles elite-driven conspiracy theories and lies. This media landscape is no longer one of slant, bias, or a narrow scope but one of different epistemic worlds. Much of this shift has to do with the media's changing business model. The twenty-four-hour news cycle insists on an endless stream of content with diminishing returns. To keep an audience, the media has to provide the audience with what it wants: to feel just how right it is in being constantly outraged. At the same time, the media is now populated by elite university graduates who are less interested in reporting the news than they are militating for a political cause. Political activism within the media is pushing on an open partisan door that is instead managing to lose public trust at an accelerating pace. Americans now say that they trust journalists less than lawyers, advertisers, and in some cases car salesmen and lobbyists.<sup>5</sup>

Social media is an essential part of the media ecosystem. Not only is it where journalists from corporate media outlets develop their own profiles to report stories; it is where ordinary people now consume most of their news. It also provides communicative infrastructure for political debate. Social media hosts internal political debate within political organizations for all to see, plus debate among nonaffiliated people who are otherwise disconnected from politics in real life. Despite this relative openness, it is elite opinion makers who dominate the online space, including on the Left. Algorithms drive online discussions according to the views that get the most traction, creating incentives to share more extreme opinions for attention. It often happens that when a new

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5 Lydia Saad, "Americans' Ratings of U.S. Professions Stay Historically Low," *Gallup*, January 13, 2025.

political position is thrown into the online sphere, many people immediately position themselves toward one another based on their perceptions of how others will react. The internet can very quickly sort people into rival camps on topics that they had not much thought about until then. This process can be both psychologically rewarding and quite painful.

Street mobilizations are not an institution but rather an outlet for expressing political frustration. As such, they are not populated by the exact same demographics as universities, NGOs, and the media. But I include them on this list for their role in projecting those institutions' political messages to the public. Though it is hard to generalize about such a diffuse phenomenon, it is notable that major marches and demonstrations are headed by the leading NGOs that claim to represent the interests of certain constituencies. The point here is not to say that other political formations play no role in organizing marches or that they do not use marches to try to connect with activists. It is to observe that NGOs are usually the lead organizers of street mobilizations and that other groups are often in a position of having to negotiate with them over their political messaging. NGOs are, in large part, perceived as movement leaders in this environment. Thus, in this political period, there is a great deal of crossover between those who work in NGOs and those who organize large demonstrations. The same goes for campus activist groups.

What makes these institutions consistent with their social base is that they are the organic launchpads for the careers of middle-class people who have developed a sense of urgency about the fact that something is terribly wrong in their societies. When they radicalize, this group of people is most likely to see the rot in their society as a product of moral depravity and ignorance. Marshaling research and reporting to influence public opinion not only seems like a good political strategy from their perspective;

it is also where they have some disruptive capacity to influence elites. This political strategy is, moreover, a labor market strategy insofar as it is a form of horizontal competition among members of this group. Once there is an institutional interest in promoting social justice, one's activist credentials become an asset.

## THE LIMITS OF HYPERPOLITICS

Hyperpolitics is marked by its disinterest in differentiating between various spheres of power. Though it is keenly aware of power in general, especially of a dispersed social kind, it is less likely to consider how institutional incentive structures place constraints on actors framing and trying to address political problems. Consequently, hyperpolitics has the ironic effect of contracting the political space to a one-dimensional plane of activity. This one-dimensional politics is dominated by the middle class, which pulls the Left in two opposing directions. This section raises the question of how the Left should respond to this dilemma given the institutional challenges of changing the existing terms of political debate.

All political institutions have limits and contradictory incentive structures. Trade unions, for example, cannot demand more in wages than employers can afford to pay. They resist employer efforts to cut labor costs to maximize profit, but they cannot resist so much that the employer becomes unprofitable. Trade unions are not usually in the business of hiding this constraint. They tend to advertise their ability to improve living conditions and promote human dignity, not force their firm to go under. The reason behind this relative transparency is that a trade union needs the trust of its membership to negotiate on its behalf. It wouldn't work to make demands like one were in a revolutionary situation unless one were really in a revolutionary situation. Even when trade unions

are weak, they must maintain some real political authority to keep a seat at the bargaining table.

Activists at universities, NGOs, and the media seem to have the opposite messaging strategy. They project far-reaching political aims and tend to overstate their capacity to represent the marginalized groups they serve. Where it exists, the political legitimacy of these activists and intellectuals does not depend on the trust of a constituency to which they are accountable. It is rather more often the case that the constituencies whom NGOs serve are accountable to the NGOs as service providers or advocates. Campus activism by both faculty and students depends on their goodwill and commitment to a cause, not their capacity to represent the interests of those who are most affected by a social, political, or economic problem.

My intention is not to suggest that political activism in these institutions is always a waste of time or is unable to draw attention to important social issues. It is instead to clarify why everything can seem political and yet politics seems ineffectual from a left-wing point of view, assuming that the Left wants to organize a working-class base that can exert power over vested economic interests to change the direction of politics. When one is incentivized to take more radical positions than one can deliver on and to overstate one's connection to a political constituency, there is no impetus to differentiate among various spheres or levels of political power and influence. It is more likely that one will try to rationalize one's political activity as having spillover or trickle-down effects, developing a theory of political action that places oneself as close to power as possible. Thus hyperpolitics is a way of doing politics just where one is. The problem with this approach for the Left is that most politically active people are embedded in institutions that do not become progressively more accountable to a popular working-class base.

The Left should reevaluate the stance it has taken toward these institutions. When this wave of radicalization began, it wrongly thought that the radicalization would go in a progressively left-wing direction, by which I mean support for working-class or anti-capitalist politics. Most socialist debate after the financial crash of 2008, which really took off in 2011 with Occupy Wall Street, was about how to bring the most progressive layers of radicalizing liberals into the orbit of the Left. My account suggests some reasons for why this process has been uneven and in some cases did not result in a left turn at all. In brief, the radicalizing liberals had other options, and many still do. The socialist left thought that a significant layer of radicalized liberals would see the limits of what either middle-class institutions or bourgeois political parties had to offer, then join the Left.

This approach bore some fruit but underestimated the pull of the internal cultures of these institutions as well as middle-class people's ability to achieve their goals within them. In one way, this underestimation was understandable. After post-politics, it was reasonable to breathe a sigh of relief that there was a broader progressive and politically active current in society. In the 2010s, we used to call it "ongoing radicalization," which implied the direction that we thought it was all likely to go. But in another way, the Left overestimated its own ability to differentiate itself from the liberal milieu in which it was embedded and to attract progressives within it. The emotional, cultural, and ideological pressure to adapt to the political messaging and positioning of this milieu was very strong. In a hyperpolitical environment, the politicization that was once new and invigorating can be profoundly disappointing, demoralizing, and alienating.

Here's the point: a bourgeois radicalization has no organic connection with or pathway to a socialist radicalization. The Left's disregard of the lack of historical synchronicity between them puts

it in a perilous position when confronting an opposition that calls liberalism's bluff. The reason there is working-class dealignment in liberal political systems is because working-class people rightly understand that liberals do not represent them and do not share their values, nor do liberals care to have their support in the way they did fifty years ago. As the populist right calls this situation out for what it is, the Left faces a dilemma of whether to cleave to the left-liberal alliance at all costs or to accept the terms of political debate set by the Right. Both are reactive to middle-class priorities and to the priorities of different parts of the capitalist class, but there is no in-between ground because the Left does not have its own social base of support or its own institutions.

Hyperpolitics, then, is a result of middle-class hegemony within social movements. It's not that there are no institutional vehicles for change; it's that there are no working-class ones that play a prominent role in the dominant political coalitions. The failure of the left-liberal alliance to distinguish between sources of political power — and of the Left to organize where it can have the most political influence over the long term — is part of the problem. For too long, the Left has uncritically accepted that NGOs are movement leaders that can broaden the political terrain. For too long, it has taken the radical pretense of university professors and students at face value. In many countries, the Left has overstayed its welcome as a junior coalition partner to political parties that are hostile to reforms that benefit the working class. There is altogether too much wishful thinking that political activity in one place will bleed into another no matter the institutional context.

Ironically, then, hyperpolitics contracts political space at the same time that it makes everything feel political. It does not broaden the scope of politics so much as present more opportunities for status-conscious maneuvers that push various political balls down the playing field until the other side kicks them back.

Political change happens, but it is to the benefit of the classes that are most capable of participating in the process. Though social media is not the efficient cause of hyperpolitics, it plays an important mediating role. I call the social media dynamic that I described in the previous section, where people sort themselves into highly charged ideological camps in response to fleeting controversies, meta-positioning. It happens when people consider how they are perceived in a discourse first and the substance of the views they endorse second, as though viewing their politics through a third, spectral eye.

Meta-positioning flattens our depth perception of certain power relationships. Marginal phenomena can seem existentially important and then disappear from sight. One experiences this atmosphere as deadly serious at the same time that one is aware of its profound unseriousness. As some left-wing commentators have noticed, it's not unlike kayfabe in professional wrestling.<sup>6</sup> Kayfabe is the practice of knowing that a performance is scripted but behaving as though it is not to suspend disbelief and allow for enjoyment. On social media, it seems almost beside the point to insist that there are more important things to worry about. People know that, but they just don't care, since those things are what they can least control. That meta-positioning is bad for the Left should be obvious. It places mental roadblocks to political analysis and strategic assessment of and within social movements, since its focus is on how political positions appear to one's peer group, not on their substance.

A final problem that is endemic to hyperpolitics is its moralism. Moralism is the practice of turning politics into the art of making moral judgments. The philosopher Raymond Geuss

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6 Freddie DeBoer, "The Age of Kayfabe," Substack, May 19, 2021.

describes moralism as “politics is applied ethics.”<sup>7</sup> The punitive problem-finding, the rhetoric that promises too much, the lack of democratic accountability, and the meta-positioning create a political culture in which there is every incentive to scrutinize what is wrong with people who do not share the same priorities or orientation to the world. In this culture, all the good things go together, all the bad things go together, and there are no strategic trade-offs so long as one’s political theory can secure consistency among all the good things. It is not important that one has little influence over the major institutions of economic and political development. In my view, the Left cannot go on in this way. Something has to give.

## WHAT’S THE ALTERNATIVE?

The alternative to hyperpolitics is class politics. As it stands, the Left is trapped in a cul-de-sac of middle-class hegemony. In response, it needs to do three things. First, it needs to focus on labor. Second, it should adopt a problem-oriented approach to organizing within social movements. Finally, it should continue to develop its media profile.

A labor focus is the critical pathway to connect the existing Left to a working-class base. In the end, there is no replacement for this. It is not possible to pull a wider constituency of people, including parts of the progressive middle class, into the left-wing political orbit without organized labor. Organized labor is what brings the Left from the margins to the center of political life. Even if existing labor unions seem intransigent, the project should be to democratize them, expand them, and set them on offensive rather than defensive footing. In the United States, there are

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7 Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).



encouraging signs that the labor movement is already taking a turn in this direction. Socialist organizers who are able to do so should devote their time to these efforts by getting jobs in union shops or workplaces where there are union drives. Elsewhere, union reform movements should follow suit. In Europe, where I live, it is clear that unions are preparing to adopt a defensive crouch for the long haul. Unfortunately, the existing European left has no interest in turning this situation around. They should reflect on how the weakness of labor in the rest of the world affects the capacity of the Left to influence politics, then reconsider.

A problem-oriented approach to organizing within social movements should be born of a strategic assessment of what issues are likely to increase the disruptive capacity of ordinary people such that they gain political influence. This disruptive capacity, the power to disrupt the routines of economic and political elites, should be responsive to the issues that working-class people care about the most, issues that they are willing to act on.<sup>8</sup> These priorities are not always in strict alignment, so what socialist organizers should do is deliberate honestly about the trade-offs between strategic importance and community concern. The goal is to gain credibility with working-class people so that they see socialist organizers as willing to learn from them in the short to medium term as much as they are interested in large-scale social change. This problem-oriented approach is different from NGO organizing. NGOs gain political legitimacy from providing services, but they are ultimately accountable to their donors, not to the people they serve.

Problem-oriented organizing should primarily respond to how people think about their own problems, not to how donors think

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8 Adaner Usmani, "Democracy and the Class Struggle," *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 3 (November 2018).

about them. This approach might yield conflict with NGOs that currently occupy the moral high ground in their claims to represent marginalized people. It may also yield conflict with local political representatives. Socialists should not be afraid of these confrontations. It is good to reject business-as-usual politics in a context where liberal institutions have lost a great deal of the legitimacy they once had. At the same time, it is important to be careful not to alienate those who have no time for denunciations and infighting without very good reason. What is needed is to strike a balance. Simply put, the idea is for the Left to become less beholden to misrepresentations of the political interests of working-class and poor people by working with more of them. Too much debate on the existing Left *theorizes* who workers are and what they want without having any contact with working people.

Finally, the Left needs a media profile of its own. In recent years, the Left has entered the mainstream more than it had in many of our lifetimes. There are media outlets read beyond a small subculture and proliferating online resources to engage with. Those who are involved in media and in intellectual output should think about how their efforts dovetail with the first two foci on labor and on problem-oriented organizing, not on the meta-positioning of political alignment. Leftists ought to take a step back to ask whether they are part of a common intellectual project with others that has the potential to grow. When I once asked a philosophy professor how to choose my research project, he said that the first thing I had to decide was whether I wanted to focus on problems or people. When you focus on a problem, you read what's relevant to solving it. When you focus on a person, you read what's relevant to them. If I were to analogize, I would say that the Left ought to focus on analysis rather than on who is and isn't in one's ideological camp. That's the only way to learn to trust one's own political judgments.

A critical objection to this line of argument is that it's not possible to distance oneself from liberalism in the current climate. The rise of the populist right requires that the Left solidify an alliance with the best liberals to oppose reactionary policies as much as possible. What I see as the shortcoming of this approach is that it's mostly defensive and does not gain political traction on new ground. Moreover, with the middle class calling the shots, the Left succumbs to its toxic brand, especially when liberals work to sabotage left-wing opponents. In my view, this relationship has long been abusive. In the medium term, the Left needs to promote an alliance with middle-class supporters of progressive social programs where the working class is calling the shots. In other words, the terms of the left-liberal alliance need to change. And for that to happen, the priorities of the Left need to change too. That a shift in priorities may come with short-term trade-offs is unavoidable. Being the weaker party, one has to allocate one's resources in a discriminating way.

These suggestions are not grandiose, but I think they are realistic. The electoral success of the populist right should have been a sobering moment for those who thought that swimming in the hyperpolitical current would pay dividends for the forces of progress. Indeed, it should humble us all, as we are not where we want to be. Perhaps, as the saying goes, self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom. ☯