

Languages English

What does it mean when the centre becomes extreme?

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The Akademie der Kuenste der Welt, Koln, Germany. Photographer: Roel Weenink

"People talk about the extreme left and the extreme right, but the real danger today is from the extreme centre." Tariq Ali

The current global political landscape has been accompanied with fear, shock, uncertainty and a lack of democracy. As a response, Tariq Ali's eponymous book *The Extreme Centre* was chosen as the title for the symposium organised by the Academy of the Arts of the World in Cologne, Germany, (18th-19th April 2017). The symposium asked whether a new fascism is imminent with the mainstream entry of right-wing nationalist positions, or if different variations of fascism spread themselves out in a diversity of national nuances. To address and discuss the issues occurring worldwide, renowned intellectuals such as Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, Croatian philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat, American sociologist Saskia Sassen, British historian Tariq Ali, Spanish doctor and theologian Teresa Forcades I Vila and German journalist Andreas Speit.

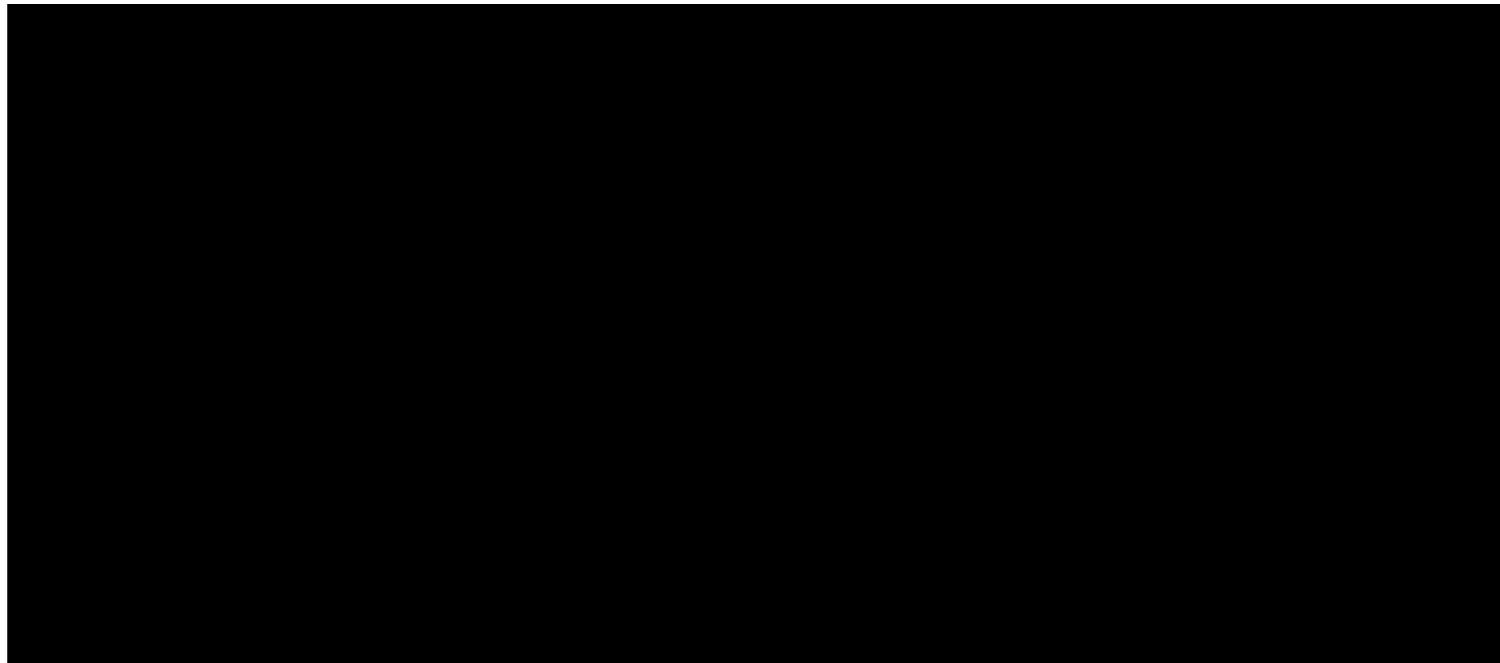
The 'extreme centre' as presented by Ali is a political system where two political parties with different clientele are basically carrying out the same policies. Hence, the political categories of 'left' and 'right'

have been replaced by the 'extreme centre': a neoliberal consensus distinguished primarily through a compliant service to the market. Ali believes it has extended from the United States to European politics¹. He talked about the ways that governments employ the extreme centre rhetoric: by introducing policies that punish their own people, by wars abroad, by austerity and pro-capitalist measures at home. He warned that the politics of the extreme centre present no alternative to the status quo and this demonstrates the threat to people.

From the presented thesis and current political turmoil worldwide, it almost seems as though capitalism no longer needs democracy. Many intellectuals observe the crisis of democracy today.² Because the question of democracy has become more urgent in recent years, it has also become the key objective of the DiEM 25, the pan-European democratic movement.³ Its founding member and the co-curator of the symposium, Horvat, pointed out the importance of the democratising of Europe.

The symposium was accompanied by art and music events, including a performance by the band Laibach. Interestingly, this Slovenian rock band was the first foreign band to perform in North Korea. They were invited there for the 70th anniversary of the Korean peninsula's liberation in 2015. The band is known for its controversial aesthetics associated with totalitarian regimes and fascism.⁴ Slavoj Žižek has been one of their biggest defenders, and coined the term 'over-identification' to describe their practices. He describes their strategy as: 'it "frustrates" the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it - by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.'⁵

To create even more comprehensive discourse and engage with broader audiences, the symposium was also accompanied by the international students' workshop that aimed to intensify the topics presented by the symposium.



[Student Workshop 'The Extreme Centre' from Akademie der Künste der Welt on Vimeo.](#)

In the following five blog posts I will look at the exhibition 'Enigmatic Majorities' which accompanied the symposium. I will also address the need to look outside of Europe for answers and I will question whether the symposium served as pure intellectual masturbation.

1 — [Tariq Ali: 'Renationalise the railways. Cut military spending. Argue with whoever says it can't be done'.](#)

2 — Gaspár M. Tamás observes that: 'We are experiencing a serious crisis of liberal democracy.' Likewise warns Zygmunt Bauman who says that the migration crisis is a global phenomenon, 'but we still act parochially. Our democratic institutions were not designed for dealing with situations of interdependence.' Timothy Snyder claims that: 'Democracy failed in Europe in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, and it is failing not only in much of Europe but in many parts of the world today.' Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Random House, 2017, p. 114.

3 — DiEM 25.

4 — Amy Bryzgel wrote a text about their performance in North Korea in 2015.

5 — Slavoj Žižek.



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