

# The Amplitude of Uncertainty: Some Thoughts About the Coming Flood

BY PHILIPP BLOM

During his fellowship at IWM, historian and writer Philipp Blom worked on his forthcoming book, *What is at Stake*, in which he examines how Western societies' self-imposed stasis in the face of climate change and digitization is unleashing dangerous energies threatening democracy, liberal ideas, and human rights.



A few months ago I had occasion to speak to an engineer involved in the planning of Dutch flood defenses, building up dams against the rising sea levels. “It is not an easy task,” said the engineer. “Our experts agree that we have to increase the height of our coastal installations, but they are divided on whether it should be by thirty centimeters or by six meters.”

The threatening flood is a very real prospect in a country much of which already lies several meters below sea level. Nothing concentrates the mind like a metaphor becoming true, nothing mobilizes the community like a clear and present threat.

As a metaphor, the idea of a rising tide has become ubiquitous. From global migration to the crisis of democracy—an inexorable flood

appears to threaten the stability of postwar liberal societies, drawing together escalating concerns about the environment, population growth, climate change, globalization, national-

ist populism—or, depending on the point of view, the “flood” of refugees.

It seems remarkable that the idea of the flood may be the only area of basic agreement in a series of increasingly polarized social and political debates. Conservatives are frequently concerned about the influx

of new immigrants and new norms, about being flooded by immigration or liberal ideas and having to seek the safety of higher ground to escape the threatening waves already

lapping at their heels. Many liberals, meanwhile, identify their fears with environmental concerns, or with the idea that corporate money and influence have begun to undermine the democratic system.

A shared, underlying fear unites both sides, a fear which may center

on very different concerns and be expressed along very different lines of argument, but which always carries with it a brutal uncertainty, a monstrous possibility: what if the

change is catastrophic and sudden, not slow and limited? Will the flood walls have to be increased by thirty centimeters or by six meters?

The amplitude of this uncertainty is vast, and it illustrates why not only the voters of new populist movements cast their votes against

change. Many if not most voters in Western societies would prefer a never-ending present to a future that may bring uncontrollable change. It is also true, however, that the vectors of change most powerfully working on these societies—global warming, digitization, liquid modernity—are already changing the face and the fabric of these societies. The reality of change cannot be voted away.

Living with a rising tide, a flood even—this metaphor is so alluring, so intuitively sensible that it masks a problem that is different in kind. Rising sea levels apart, societies in the West are experiencing not so much the flooding as the fluidity, the liquefaction of certainties and borders.

As Zygmunt Bauman suggested, a new fluidity seems to inform the

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experience of life in the countries of the rich global north, a sense of identities and categories being blurred, territories being infringed, taboos transgressed, locations changed, whole populations on the move, entire economies being disrupted and cultures entering new, frequently uneasy constellations.

Rapid technological change does much to reinforce this sense of upheaval. Based on research into cultural transformation in Europe during the Little Ice Age (ca. 1570–1680), I would even argue that the evident everyday experience of climate change is contributing to the sense of ominous unfamiliarity, of an uncontrollably rising tide of unknown and unwelcome transformation.

During the Little Ice Age, an average drop in temperatures of two degrees Celsius, corresponding to a loss of three weeks of vegetation period, confronted European societies with a century-long cycle of bad harvests, famines, epidemics, social unrest, and political uncertainty. This crisis of agriculture in mainly feudal societies eventually also contributed to intensifying trading connections, strengthening markets, and incentivizing the study of the nat-

shifts towards the fear and resentment that always accompany surges of nationalist feelings, the voices of these self-anointed saviors are resonating more strongly.

Liberal democracy reveals itself to be surprisingly vulnerable to the idea of the flood, to the fluidity of the globalized present. For the first time since the Second World War it no longer seems the only option especially for younger voters within Western democracies, and alternatives are growing—from Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy" in Hungary to Austria's FPÖ in government, and to Germany's nationalist populists, who have claimed the word "alternative" for their party's name to suggest a new way out of the current political and economic order to which chancellor Merkel famously said there is "no alternative".

This debate about democracy and universalism will become more polarized as global warming and its main side effect, migration, will pressure societies from without, while the immense social and political repercussions of digitization increase the stakes from within.

The rising flood of circumstance, and of fear, intensifies the long-smoldering debate about the legacy of the Enlightenment. Not only have cli-

What is the intellectual consequence of the fear of a great flood? How will the legacy of the Enlightenment hold up to the rising tide? Which social interest will assert itself and its ideals? The Enlightenment will come under pressure from the politics of fear, and the outcome of this confrontation seems entirely open. Liberal, representative democracies are already on the defensive, and their appeal may wane further. The economic and social changes made inevitable by climate change and digitization seem immense and are often greeted with hostility. The result may be a backlash against historical achievements and a retreat—temporary at best—behind borders and walls.

Connected to this political process is a more properly philosophical challenge. Can it be assumed that the experience of the transformations that are already taking place will create intellectual consequences comparable in magnitude to the debates begun by the Enlightenment? And would this process leave the Enlightenment behind as a less developed, deficient way of thinking, just as the Enlightenment itself attacked theology as antiquated?

The flood, the liquefaction of social reality, has become a master met-

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and enabler, helping to get the right stakeholders to the table. For Michaela Bonan, participatory democracy is not a shopping list where citizens get all they ask for. Done properly, it involves all stakeholders, politicians, citizens and administration on equal footing. Tapping into the know-how of citizens who are already engaged in their neighbourhood and encouraging a culture of participation within civic administrations are among the factors that make *Nordwärts* a role-model for participatory democracy.

But can these ideas work on a larger scale up? Can citizens be trusted to advise on complex policy issues that go beyond their immediate local needs? Rarely does the chance occur to experiment with democratic decision making at a larger scale.

### Citizen Assemblies

The deep political and financial crisis that Ireland experienced ten years ago offered a window of opportunity for change. Trust in political institutions and politicians was at an all-time-low when, in 2008, two political scientists, Jane Suiter and David Farrell came up with what they were convinced was way to bridge the gulf between politics and the citizenry. Inspired by an earlier exercise in deliberative democracy—a citizens' assembly working on electoral reform in British Columbia—they proposed holding a nationwide citizen assembly in Ireland.

The proposal was simple: a number of important issues of constitutional reform would be debated by a group of randomly selected Irish citizens. They got funding to organize a prototype assembly based on the theories of American political theorist Jeremy Fishkin. After the test run had been completed, they successfully lobbied the main political parties to include citizen participation in their election manifestos.

After the 2012 election, the first national citizen assembly ever to have taken place anywhere became a reality. It was called the "Convention on the Constitution". Between December 2012 and March 2014, 66 randomly selected citizens representative of society at large, together with 33 parliamentarians, gathered over several weekends to debate constitutional reforms. Under an independent chairman, guided by a group of facilitators and receiving impartial expert advice, all delegates put forward recommendations on issues such as electoral reform and the outdated blasphemy clause. The most contested question, however, was on the legalization of same sex marriage.

Politicians had avoided the issue in the preceding years and instead passed the buck on to the convention. The media saw it as just another deferral tactic and were sceptical. In the end, everybody was surprised by the seriousness and matter-of-factness of the debates. After intense deliberation, the participants voted in favour of same-sex marriage and recommended that the conservative government hold a referendum on the issue. Enda Kenny, then prime

minister, felt forced to act. In August 2015, Ireland became first country ever to hold a referendum on same sex marriage. The country voted in favour with a 62% majority.

Deliberative citizens' assemblies like Ireland's are based on the belief that citizens can reach consensus on questions where party politics is too entrenched in ideological battles or fails to recognize longer term societal needs. In 2016, Ireland's new parliament voted in favour of a second series of citizens' deliberations. The "Citizens' Assembly" started work that year and is still running. It opens up a public space for fact-based debate and deliberation, helps strengthen consensus-based decision-making on "hot topics", and increases trust in political decisions.

While citizens in Ireland were peacefully debating same-sex marriage, street protests were raging in Paris over François Hollande's plans to liberalize the existing law. For Axelle Lemaire, then member of French Parliament, this was too much. She vowed to do things differently if she ever got the chance.

That chance came about sooner than expected when, in 2014, she was named Minister for Digital Affairs. In this function, she implemented the first participatory law-making process in France. Funded out of her own travel budget, because her government did not want to commit a budget, she launched a ground-breaking process of digital consultation on a new "digital Republic" bill, in which 8000 citizens ended up making over 20,000 contributions. Many useful suggestions not previously considered by lawmakers were included in the law.

Lemaire is one of a growing number of politicians who want to "do" democracy differently in Europe. Like the other protagonists of the friendly revolution in Europe, she is convinced that democracy can only survive when people are able to contribute beyond placing a ballot in occasional elections.

Participatory democracy offers a new public sphere for dialogue on contested issues. It encourages compromise over conflict. It thrives where citizens feel that they are being taken seriously and that their ideas are welcome. These and many other innovations show that we have moved far beyond the prototype stage. So what are we waiting for? Up the friendly revolution across Europe! <

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## Resistance to rapid transformation leads many to question the validity the Enlightenment ideals of universalism and equality.

ural sciences, beginning with botany and astronomy.

These innovations were carried out by urban professionals, whose influence and power grew in the process and who eventually adopted universalism, human rights and individualism as the philosophical articulation of their social attitudes. This formed a constitutive part of the early Enlightenment. The great Western intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment was at the very least accelerated by the experience of climate change.

Here Bauman's idea of liquid modernity is of immense utility in enabling us to understand the transformations due to climate change, digitization and economic globalization in the present. Powerful but diffuse currents of capital, data, people, news, weather systems, pollution, market intervention and terrorism can no longer be kept beyond the horizon of attention of Western societies. The consequences of far-away actions and involvements have become mobilized, liquefied. Controlling or at least adapting to their impact will be one of the great challenges of the coming decades.

The fear of being flooded has already put pressure on Western liberal democracies. Populist politicians make political capital out of staging themselves as defenders, building walls, closing migration routes, reasserting differences, very much in opposition to the liberal vision of global culture and pluralism. As the climate of opinion

mate change and digitization raised once again the power and possible horrors of instrumental reason—a pervasive sense of unease, of unwillingness to change, of resistance to rapid transformation leads many to question the validity of the Enlightenment project as a whole, and with it the validity of core ideals such as universalism and equality.

It is a historical irony that the Enlightenment found part of its historic dynamism in the social, economic and intellectual upheaval created by the Little Ice Age, and that now, during another period of social upheaval related to climate change, the legacy of this philosophical sea change is being renegotiated. But vast changes in social experience and technological possibilities (both constructive and destructive) always result in a change of philosophical perspective.

The decisive and very probably unanswerable question in the context of philosophy is to understand the structures of change underlying this revolution of thinking about being human. This is not the place to discuss the relationship between the canonical Enlightenment and its marginalized and suppressed authors, but it does seem pertinent that Enlightenment ideals only gained in intellectual currency and eventually in political power because they were associated with a social force—the rise of the educated bourgeoisie. Only this dynamism gave a set of ideas as old as human thought the power to become intellectually dominant.

aphor of social and political discussion. It remains to be seen whether the current episode of climate change will produce a philosophical transformation akin to the impact of the Enlightenment, or if the resilience of aspects of Enlightenment thought proves sufficient to weather the fear and resentment caused by the onset of systemic transformation. In view of the history of the Enlightenment, however, there is every reason to assume that the amplitude of change is inestimable, that the changes to the outlook on what it means to be human might be so significant as to be unimaginable at present. <

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