The Loss of 'Home': Neoliberalism, Fascism, and the Necessity of a Moral Revolution in the 21st Century

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“Dear stranger… Do you still feel at home? And if so, for how much longer?” With this penetrating, almost claustrophobic question, Turkish writer and journalist Ece Temelkuran opens her award-winning work *Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century*. A book that not only earned a spot on the shortlist for the Women’s Prize for Non-Fiction but also serves as an existential warning for a world increasingly sliding into a state of collective displacement. In a profound conversation with American journalist and author Chris Hedges, Temelkuran

dissects the mechanisms that have hollowed out our democracies and sketches a somber but necessary compass for the future.

Temelkuran is no newcomer to predicting political earthquakes. For years, she functioned as a political Cassandra, warning the West about the rise of fascism, based on her own experiences in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey. But her analysis extends far beyond the borders of her homeland. She identifies global patterns repeating from India to the United States, and from Europe to Russia. The core of her argument is uncomfortable but inescapable: what we are experiencing today is not a temporary aberration or the result of a single demagogue, but the logical, fatal endpoint of decades of neoliberal devastation.

The Seven Steps from Democracy to Fascism

In her earlier work, *How to Lose a Country: The Seven Steps from Democracy to Fascism*, Temelkuran reveals a blueprint that is frighteningly recognizable in several contemporary regimes. These seven steps are not a coincidental confluence of events but a methodical dismantling of the rule of law.

The first step is the deliberate division of society into two hostile camps: the 'real people' versus the 'corrupt elite'. A leader positions himself as the sole true embodiment of the will of the people. The second step is the dissolution of truth, where loyalty to the leader is systematically valued more than decency or moral integrity. In the third phase, shame as a social corrective is dismantled. The leader breaks through established political and moral consensus with unparalleled ruthlessness. The longer this leader remains in power, the further the boundaries of the acceptable shift. What was considered unthinkable or despicable yesterday becomes normalized today.

The fourth step concerns the quiet hollowing out of the institutions that hold democracy together. Judiciary, media, academia, and legislative bodies are drained or filled with loyal henchmen. In the fifth step, the definition of democracy itself is rewritten: it is reduced to simple majority rule, where universal values, human dignity, and the rule of law are traded for fierce nationalism, proud victimhood, and a rewriting of history. The sixth step is the normalization of cruelty and ruthlessness, not only in the highest echelons of politics but also as a poison that trickles down into everyday life. Finally, in the seventh step, the circle of who is considered 'us' shrinks, while millions of fellow citizens are transformed into permanent suspects.

Temelkuran emphasizes that it is naive to think the problem resolves once a specific leader disappears. Whether it concerns Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin, or Nigel Farage: the tens of millions of people incited by their message will remain. They will stand ready to act on the command of a similar figure. The leader is merely the symptom; the disease lies deeper.

Neoliberalism as the Ideological Engine of the Abyss

To understand the roots of this decline, according to Temelkuran and Hedges, one must look at neoliberalism. They view it not as a neutral economic theory, but as 'cutthroat capitalism', the ideological engine that has emptied democratic institutions. Since the 1980s, with the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and their mantra that "there is no alternative" (TINA), democracy has been hollowed out to a mere facade, a superficial theatrical performance.

Due to extreme social injustice and lack of equality, democracy lost its meaning for the ordinary citizen. The promise of change repeatedly proved to be an illusion. When strong leaders appeared on the world stage, they promised the people that they would be 'their man' in the capital. People wanted to believe this, not because they are inherently bad, but out of sheer desperation and feelings of revenge against a system that betrayed them. These leaders, called "terrifying clowns" by Temelkuran, send out a dog-whistle signal: they acknowledge that the old rules of decency and social justice were a farce, and promise to play by the new, hard rules in favor of their supporters.



The support for these leaders is not motivated by a desire for a fairer society. They know there will be winners and losers; they simply want to be on the winning side. In Turkey, and now also in the United States, this has led to the creation of a deeply entrenched financial network that reaches into the capillaries of society. The livelihood of the 'little man' in a remote village has become directly connected to the political survival of the leader. His support is no longer an ideological choice but an economic survival strategy. This makes the support so fanatical and resilient to any form of criticism.

The traditional opposition, such as the Democratic Party under Bill Clinton or the Labour Party under Tony Blair, bears a heavy historical responsibility here. By embracing neoliberal policies themselves – think of NAFTA, the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, and the deregulation of the financial sector – they have swept away any credible alternative. They transformed themselves into a 'Republican Party lite', leaving the voter with no real choice. Figures who do speak about social inequality, such as Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul or certain progressive voices in the US, therefore generate so much enthusiasm: they fill an existential vacuum that has been ignored for decades.

The Arrogance of the Intellectual Class and the Complicity of the Media

One of the sharpest observations in the conversation concerns the role of the media and the intellectual elite. Temelkuran points to a fundamental failure in journalism: the confusion between neutrality and objectivity. Under the influence of neoliberal propaganda, it has been forgotten that journalism essentially has the task of questioning power and siding with the weaker. She recalls how in her early years as a journalist, the 'labor reporter' was dismissed as a communist sympathizer, while the 'business reporter' gained increasing prestige. This shift within newspaper newsrooms was a microcosm of what was happening in broader society: the interests of capital became the norm, and the worker's voice was marginalized. This pattern repeated identically in American media, where the business section took over dominance, culminating in the failure to foresee the 2008 financial crash because they were too busy interviewing bankers.

In addition to complicity, there is a deeply rooted arrogance within the intellectual and cultural class. This group continues to believe that their words, their presence, and their moral judgments still carry weight. Temelkuran calls this a dangerous overestimation of oneself. She shares an anecdote about the launch of her book in France, where a far-right businessman bought a major publishing house, after which

all writers resigned in protest. Her reaction was telling: "Why do you think your absence matters? Your presence doesn't matter anymore." The intellectual class does not understand the new reality: the rules of the game have changed, and clinging to old etiquette and formal protest has become useless.

This requires radical humility and the courage to face reality. We no longer have the luxury of hiding in the illusion that everything will become 'normal' again once a certain leader leaves. That is a comforting thought that masks the depth of the systemic crisis. The real challenge is not removing an individual, but rebuilding a foundation that has long been eroded.

Elections as an Endurance Game

When discussing how to address this authoritarian decline, Temelkuran points to the pitfall of superficial outrage. Anger and emotional reactions to the daily spectacular statements of leaders like Trump are understandable, but strategically useless. It is a diversionary tactic. While public opinion gets entangled in the 'reality show' aspects of leadership, critical changes are being implemented behind closed doors in the judiciary and other institutions.



Combating such regimes is not a sprint but an 'endurance game'. A country must mobilize organized, active attention. Temelkuran points out that the United States is still in a relatively privileged position compared to Turkey because Trump has not yet had time to fully institutionalize his regime or raise an entire generation in his vision.

This makes the current period crucial; it may be one of the last chances to reverse the country's fate.

The lesson from Turkey is that elections should not be passively endured. When hope for a fair electoral process faded, voting in Turkey transformed into an act of political militancy. Citizens organized themselves to guard polling stations, act as witnesses, and prevent election fraud. This active involvement not only gave the population back a sense of control but also reinjected energy into party politics. It forced politicians to moderate their false promises. Temelkuran hopes that Americans and Europeans will follow this example: protecting the democratic process is at least as important as casting the vote itself.

Existential Displacement: The Loss of 'Home'

The title of her latest book, *Nation of Strangers*, refers to a deeper, more existential loss than just the political. Temelkuran makes a distinction between refugees and exiles, where the latter term often has a sanctioned, romanticized ring to it. But in practice, at visa counters and in the queues of bureaucracies, this distinction becomes irrelevant. Anyone forced to leave their country shares the same fate of displacement.

However, the concept of being 'displaced' (aptly described by the 18th-century word 'unhomed') nowadays also affects citizens in their own countries. When a government begins to see you as an enemy because you defend basic values – as recently seen in protests at American universities – you no longer feel at home in your own country. We are losing our home through war, through fascism, through the climate crisis, and through the moral decay visible when leaders with psychopathic blindness give presentations about building luxury resorts on the rubble of a genocide, as in Gaza.

Temelkuran cites a powerful, poetic definition: "Home is not what you remember, but where you are remembered." This is a fundamental shift in perspective. We often think we long for a place, but in reality, we long for a time and for people who know and acknowledge us. When you leave your country and end up in an environment where no one knows you, you doubt your own existence. It is a terrifying blank slate. That is why the promise of politicians to make a country "great again" is an absolute absurdity. You cannot restore a nostalgic fantasy, because home is about human connection and mutual recognition, not a static past.

Ironically, it is precisely the refugees and exiles who possess the necessary wisdom for this era. They have lost everything and had to rebuild their home from nothing.

This is exactly what the rest of the world will soon have to do, for whatever reason. The question is whether we are capable of forming relationships and a new politics from this shared fate of displacement and vulnerability.

The Necessity of a Moral Revolution

Faced with this dark reality, Temelkuran argues that a purely political revolution is insufficient. What we need is a moral revolution. In her earlier work, *Together: A Manifesto Against the Heartless World*, she already stated that we have not only lost democracy but also our human dignity. This is the central problem of politics in this century.

There is enough indignation, enough cruelty, and even enough intellectual ideas about how things should change. What is missing is the binding agent: the pathos, the language. We need a new language, a language of humility, truthfulness, and, she dares to say, human love. All authoritarian systems, from neoliberalism to fascism, are rooted in fundamental fear. Leaders mobilize this fear and fabricate hostility and hate from it. The progressive answer must be to organize 'human love' at that moral and philosophical level.

This may sound abstract, but it is the only basis for global solidarity. To create the passion people need to fight for a dignified existence, we need poetry and a special human language. Without it, we remain stuck in the cold, technocratic language of the establishment, which does not reach people's hearts. The suppression of this language – such as seen in the heavy-handed crackdown on student protests against genocide, or the draconian measures against freedom of speech in countries like Germany – shows that the state now sees the demonstration of human dignity and compassion as an act of subversion.

From Hope to Faith and the Dark Laughter

In this context, Temelkuran makes a crucial distinction between 'hope' and 'faith'. Many people ask for hope, but what they really ask for is a reason to believe. Neoliberalism has not only stripped us of social justice but also of our faith in human agency. The system is built on the premise that humans are naturally selfish, greedy, and bad. Because we have come to believe this definition, our faith in humanity and in the future has been stolen.

To break through this, we do not need vague 'hope', but an active 'faith' in humanity. As with any form of faith, this does not begin with the object of faith, but with yourself. Once you start believing in humanity, you start believing in yourself. This is

the starting point of the political struggle. When you participate in a protest camp at a university, you experience a specific joy: the joy of dignity. You go there to refresh your faith in humanity, to see that we exist, that we are many, and that we are not the selfish beings we are portrayed to be.

Finally, Temelkuran offers a surprising tool for these dark times: the 'dark laugh' or black humor. She refers to the Austrian writer Joseph Roth, who in the 1920s saw the rise of Nazism and felt like "a mouse squeaking against an avalanche, but squeak I must." This laugh is not the laugh that protects us from danger or comforts us in naivety. It is a dark, liberating laugh that brings us together and makes us stronger. It is the laugh of those who have seen the abyss and nevertheless refuse to bow. As oppression increases, this laugh becomes an act of defiance.

Conclusion: The Time for Courage is Now

The analysis by Ece Temelkuran and Chris Hedges leaves no room for self-deception. We live amidst the ruins of institutions hollowed out by decades of ruthless capitalism. The wounds are mortal. For the first time in history, we mourn in the future tense: we mourn what we know we will still lose.

But crises have a tendency to crystallize things. They crystallize evil, but also good. They are moments when people allow themselves to be heroes. The time has come to shake off the taboos of the Cold War and speak courageously about social justice, regardless of accusations of 'communist' ideology that the establishment still uses as a weapon. We must free ourselves from fear.

The struggle for the soul of the 21st century will not be won by waiting for a savior in politics, nor by fleeing into the bunkers of the rich. It will be won by those who realize they have nothing but each other. By choosing humility, truthfulness, and an unwavering faith in human dignity, we can, despite everything, begin to rebuild a home in a world of strangers. The mouse must keep squeaking against the avalanche, for in that squeak lies the seed of our collective redemption.