MIGRATION AND THE EUROPEAN LEFT 07.07.2017 | Ľuboš Blaha

# John Lennon is dead

## The liberal vision of a borderless world serves only the monied, not the poor

Following the unprecedented escalation of Europe's migrant crisis in the summer of 2015, European societies have seen the emergence of two extreme camps engaging in a philosophical trench warfare: the ultra-liberals and the ultra-conservatives. The concerns of socialists are no longer part of the picture. And that's a problem.

A full-blown culture war has erupted in Europe, and even within left-wing parties. On one side we have the liberal cosmopolitans who "welcome" refugees, advocate supra-national identities and consider borders obsolete. Some even label working-class people with a conservative bent "fascists". On the other side are traditional socialists who distrust globalisation, supra-national projects and individualistic liberal values. They consider the post-materialist "New Left" completely detached from reality, and blame them for the fact working-class voters are shunning socialist parties for the far-right. Taken to their extremes, both attitudes are dangerous: one leads to neoliberalism, the other to predatory nationalism.

The left's ultra-liberal wing embraces a kind of liberal globalism with socialist characteristics while fighting hand-in-hand with right-wing neoliberals for a world without borders. In this kind of world, transnational capital reigns supreme. Ordinary workers from Tallinn to Timbuktu are exploited, without nation states offering a restraining hand. But the social globalists add to this grim neoliberal picture a promise of a brighter tomorrow in the form of a global welfare state and transnational regulatory bodies.

## A cosmopolitan future: just for

## dreamers

In reality, a transnational regulatory body with any teeth is nowhere in sight. The strongest such organisation – the European Union – often behaves like a neoliberal tank, crushing the social achievements of the post-war era. Look at the way they ravaged Tsipras´s Greece, ordered pan-European austerity and negotiated TTIP, the stalled EU-US trade deal which threatens to Americanise European safety and environmental regulations. Whether we like it or not, a cosmopolitan "brighter tomorrow" is still a long way off. In the meantime, we live in a cruel neoliberal reality in which transnational capital erodes the socially protective measures of nation states. That is why liberal cosmopolitanism is not just a utopian concept, but also a dangerous one.

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Cosmopolitanism divides voters. Despite decades of hyper-globalisation, only the upper middle-class have achieved a truly cosmopolitan identity. These are businesspeople, artists, scientists and students of elite universities who are accustomed to worldwide travel, and for whom their place of birth is nothing more than a detail on their CV.

The lower social groups that the left traditionally stands up for don't share in this cosmopolitan identity. They are integrally connected to their homelands, because they don't have the resources or the education to travel the world and live as a "global citizen".

The political consequences of this reality are grim. The globalised liberal left has turned its back on traditional left-wing voters, and appeals instead to an educated, reasonably wealthy, mobile middle class. Its advocates seem no longer to care about left-wing economics. They are willing to advocate some limited form of welfare state at best, but their priorities lie elsewhere. They are concerned with lifestyle issues and the recognition of minorities – not bread and butter matters like where the next pay cheque will come from. And why shouldn't they? After all, their material needs have already been fully met. They needn't care about questions of poverty and exploitation of the working class. They would rather enjoy a fine organic tarte in their favourite café than go out and fight against a transnational capitalist class, out to benefit itself.

This presents more radical leftists with a conundrum – it is difficult to fight for socialism and a more just economy for tomorrow when your supposed allies are doing fabulously well in the economy of today. Thus,

the priorities and the electorate of the liberal left have shifted – they are no longer the working-class, but urban liberals, minorities, the LGBTIQ community, NGO activists and so on. Social and economic radicalism has no place in the new left-wing order.

## Imagination v. reality

At the other end of the spectrum, left-wingers who subscribe to a socially conservative, nationalist agenda are no more praiseworthy. They have adopted the xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes traditionally associated with the far-right. Muslims are falsely viewed as a threat to European identity and culture. This attitude is even more pronounced in countries where most people have never met a real-life Muslim – discounting holidays in Egypt. This kind of thinking is sadly rife in Central Europe.

People find it easier to hate people in the abstract than people they've actually met. Those who grow up in multicultural societies are used to meeting people of different races, ethnicities and religions in the underground, the supermarket, school and work. Stereotypes don't hold. In many parts of Eastern Europe, "Muslim" is merely a concept. People can't pin the description to people they know – not with Ibrahim at work who lent me a tenner last week; nor with Muhammed next door who was rooting for my favourite football team yesterday; nor with Fatima who fixes my daughter's teeth. Lacking any real contact with actual Muslims, people associate the word instead with scare stories – like the terrorist they saw decapitate an innocent priest on TV. It is a sad truth that the less people experience those from other cultures, the more susceptible are to xenophobic attitudes.

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The left has to fight against fascism and racial hatred. But we must not express contempt for the fears and prejudices of the economically disadvantaged. Without them, there is no left to speak of. Neither must we overlook the real risks to people's security, earnings and culture that might stem from the migration crisis. Be it terrorism, protection of progressive European values against religious irrationalism, global pressure on employment and social standards or the loss of national identity, all of these are important and sensitive topics for the working class.

Our comrades in the West are often bewildered by the fact that the

central European left is not very liberal when it comes to cultural issues. The philosophical difference is obvious: while the modern western left draws its programme and ideology from a consequential interpretation and implementation of human rights (including social rights), the central European left emphasises social protection, including protecting its citizens from the jungle of the markets.

As a consequence, the Central European left is at its core more communitarian and less individualistic. It's to do with our history (state socialism was the official regime until 1989), as well as our socially conservative culture (individualism and liberalism were adopted mostly by the pro-market right-wing). The liberal left, as we know it from Western Europe, is at best a marginal political force in Central Europe.

## A brotherhood of Slovaks

Also, central Europe is far more culturally and religiously homogeneous than other parts of the continent, and its approach to multiculturalism is different. Here, it is not the universal validity of human rights declarations that determines the value of solidarity, but a sense of belonging to a community – be that Slovak or European society. The left in Slovakia reflects this communitarian bond. Its values lie more in the Swedish concept of *folkhemmet* – the idea that society should function like a small family where everyone contributes, or former Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander's notion of "the strong society" – affluent, and undergirded by a strong welfare state. In Slovakia, the term "left-wing" connotes this kind of socially just society. Multiculturalism doesn't have a natural place in this narrative in the same way it does in the West.

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The vision of a global cosmopolitan society without borders is nice in theory – a modern-day version of John Lennon's "Imagine". But in practice, left-wing liberalism is often merely a camouflage for Western imperialism. People from Europe's periphery feel threatened by globalisation, particularly the working class. Liberalism does not understand these people: their communitarian instincts are beyond the comprehension of most *Economist* writers. Outside Western Europe and the other Anglophone countries, only a small minority subscribe to liberalism. People from across the globe see themselves as a part of communities, social classes, cultural units, nations, religions, tribes, families: in short, larger units that give

> their lives meaning. Reducing them to the *homo oeconomicus* – the rational, self-interested agent whose soul goal is to maximise utility as a consumer and profit as a producer – is a trait of chauvinistic, Western culture. Today, these people do not belong anywhere. Capitalism has broken their traditional means of living and liberalism is disrupting their stable identity. People need to belong. And the left must embrace a more communitarian vision – one that recognises people are connected by a shared history and culture – or risk losing out to fascists, be they European, American or Islamist.

International relations scholar Susan Strange acknowledged the vision of a global state, guarded by transnational institutions, was unappealing for those living on the periphery. For citizens of smaller, poorer, weaker states, "the international secretariats look more like enemies, instruments of a new kind of collective colonialism devoted to the preservation of the capitalist system and the hierarchies of power represented in it, even at considerable cost to their material welfare, the dignity and sometimes even the survival of individual men, women and children in a neo-colonial society."

In short, the fact that working class voters rarely subscribe to liberal values is not a mark of backwardness or moral immaturity, as some Western liberals surmise. Rather, they recognise that the global capitalist economy is deeply unfair.

## Share the world? No thanks!

Central European workers tend to share this view. For them, western liberalism and multiculturalism are products of a snobbish metropolitan elite which is totally disconnected with their own lives. In a geopolitical setting, in which the stronger always seems to devour the weaker, the liberal left-wing's celebration of cosmopolitanism, human rights, freedom and democracy comes across as imperialistic. Unfortunately, poorer societies often react to this with religious bigotry, racism and xenophobia. But again, left-wingers are to blame. It is as if they have forgotten that the target of their struggle should be capitalism, not the worker.

That globalisation has weakened the left is beyond question. Some of their voters have moved to liberal, globalist and green political factions. Others have strayed towards conservatism, nationalism and neo-fascism. But their core voters will stay faithful, unless their leaders also choose to

follow one of these extremes. True leftists are not distracted by the clash between liberal and conservative values. They realise the main mission of the left is to advance the social and economic interests of working people. They stand for social democracy and the welfare state, and against exploitation, poverty and inequality. When it comes to questions of culture, the left should remain moderate. It may choose to adjust its progressive priorities according to the level of acceptance in a particular community. But when it comes to economics, the left must be radical and search for socialist alternatives to neoliberal global capitalism.

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