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Back to the roots

Why social democracy needs to represent ordinary people instead of middle-class cosmopolitans

Read this article in German.

Election and polling results for the centre-left in Europe are becoming increasingly worrying. But at least people are beginning to look more seriously at the reasons for this crisis. For far too long, the centre-left simply refused to recognise that the world around it is changing.

However, the socio-economic and socio-cultural landscape has been shifting for a long time now. The reason is relatively easy to identify. The unbounded nature of global and European capitalism creates different polarities and different conflicts from those of the old, nation-state capitalism of the 19th and 20th century.

The instruments by which those conflicts were contained – limited redistribution within the framework of the welfare state, and democracy on nation-state lines – are losing their effectiveness. In many cases, they do not work at all: they have proven largely ineffectual against the new conflicts of cultural identity within multicultural societies. Immigration, global trade and the possibility of European or global relocation of enterprises have drastically shifted the balance of power between capital and labour. The bargaining power to compromise on the distribution of wealth is disappearing.

Instead, in the age of the disappearance of borders, a new fundamental socio-political constellation of capitalism is emerging: a profound conflict of interests between that part of the population believing it will benefit from these developments and another part believing it will not. This conflict has many names. In Germany, it is currently labelled ‘cosmopolitans’ versus ‘communitarians’. The British author and commentator David Goodhart uses instead two more concrete terms drawn from actual life experience: mobile and cosmopolitan ‘Anywheres’ against nationally-oriented and localised ‘Somewheres’.

Social democracy should represent the 'Somewheres'

This contrast is much less severe in everyday life than in theory - a point Jan Eichhorn recently made in this very journal. Goodhart, too, points out that the 'communitarian' Somewheres are, broadly speaking, comfortable with the liberalisation that has taken place over recent decades. Their problem is not with what might be called social 'everyday liberalism' but with liberalism as an economic, political and cultural ideology of the elites – and with its impact on their lives.

If social democracy wants to remain true to its self-perception as 'protector of ordinary people', then it also has to take their side in the conflicts generated by globalised capitalism.

Conversely, the global 'cosmopolitans' are often quite astonishingly 'communitarian' in outlook. In their preferred enclaves, from Munich's Glockenbachviertel to Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, the proportion of economic migrants and Muslims in the population is significantly lower than in other districts of major German cities. Some people do prefer to be among their own kind.

Can the centre-left can withstand, or perhaps even overcome, this split? Christian Krell and Sönke Hollenberg, for instance, recently argued that social democratic politics must consist in a firm 'not-only-but-also'. Social democracy must create policies for both camps, and must not choose between 'Anywheres' and 'Somewheres'. They could just as well have written that they want the good old social democracy back. But is that even still possible?

The new division into globalisation's winners and losers currently splits the historical electoral base of social democracy right down the middle. And the forces driving this division are massive – too big to be controlled by any single party. The centre-left is like someone standing with one leg on each of two separate ice floes drifting slowly but inexorably apart. In this situation, there are only three alternatives. Do nothing, fall into the water and drown. Or save yourself on either one of the two ice floes. The question is: which of the two ice floes to choose? That of the 'Anywheres' or the 'Somewheres'? I strongly believe that the decision should be for the 'Somewheres'. This is for reasons of both principle and strategy.

The principle has to do with the history of social democracy. It was a self-help movement of the proletarianised 'Somewheres' who went off to the factory or the mines at 14, not to study in Heidelberg or Paris at 18. Improving their life and participation prospects was the whole point of the exercise. The achievements of 20th century social democracy have

been spectacular in this respect.

Now, however, a significant proportion of the 'Somewheres' see the achievement of this level of prosperity, political participation and social recognition as increasingly uncertain. For them, things don't feel as if they're getting better, but rather worse. If social democracy wants to remain true to its self-perception as 'protector of ordinary people', then it also has to take their side in the conflicts generated by globalised capitalism.

Of course, there are counterexamples, not least in Scandinavia. There, disasters were predicted but did not come about.

The second dimension is strategic. It concerns the future of Europe's political systems at a fundamental level. The refusal of the established parties to defend the interests of the 'communitarian' section of the population leaves a vast number of voters – in most countries it is likely to be a 50/50 split – either unrepresented or prey to new 'populist' movements from the right and the left. Among the communitarian 'Somewheres', the proportion of socially disadvantaged people is significantly higher than among the half made up of the 'Anywheres'. It's the historical base of left-wing politics that is now being politically abandoned. One can picture what the impact of this development will be on the party system in Europe.

The European Left must make a clear choice

Of course, it will also have an impact on the centre-left. It's making itself redundant because the ice floe inhabited by the 'cosmopolitans' is already quite crowded, especially in Germany. The Greens, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), The Left Party and parts of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) are already jostling there. There's not much room for social democracy. This became obvious in the recent elections in Bavaria, where the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) placed all its bets on 'cosmopolitanising' its political profile.

But things look very different on the second ice floe. Until now, only the Christian Social Union (CSU) has really been active there. And there's someone else now trying to board this promisingly empty floe: the right-wing populists of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). It already has one

leg on board. If this social space is handed over to the AfD without a fight, there is a distinct threat that it will thrive and multiply there.

There is not much time remaining for the European Left to choose between the two floes. The underlying drift is not going to get weaker over the coming years, but stronger. A simple 'carry on as before', in an attempt to appeal to both sides, will fail – if only because it has no persuasive business plan anymore. Why should voters choose parties that want to defend their interests only half-heartedly with an eventual compromise in mind?

In today's party landscape, both sides – cosmopolitans and communitarians alike – can find more authentic and genuine offers. Middle-class cosmopolitans especially find that there's an increasing number of political options more in line with their cultural and sociological instincts. The fate of the *Parti Socialiste* in France and of the *Partij van de Arbeid* in the Netherlands illustrate what happens when both parts of a party's former electoral base feel more authentically represented by others.

Of course, there are counterexamples, not least in Scandinavia. There, disasters were predicted but did not come about. But the precondition for this was a drastic change of course by the Social Democrats, for example with regard to migration policy – involving a clear turn towards communitarian positions. In this sense, it's possible there may indeed be scope for a policy of 'not-only-but-also'. But at the moment, this would have to consist of seriously representing the 'Somewheres' and their interests once again, rather than finally disappearing in the La La Land of the liberal Left.



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