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‘Not playing off the working class against women and migrants’

The working class has migrant background, it’s female, it’s as gay and lesbian as the rest of society, argues Tarik Abou-Chadi

Read this interview in German.

You compare the connection between the decline of social democratic parties and the rise of right-wing populist ones on an international scale. What types of voter migration have you identified?

There’s one simple empirical observation: if you look at the other parties to which former social democratic voters in Germany and other Western European countries have moved, then only a very small proportion have migrated directly to right-wing populist parties. So this direct exchange only accounts for a very small proportion of the losses of social democratic parties.

Looking at the last elections with serious losses, the Netherlands 2017, France 2017 and Germany 2017, the majority of voters have gone from social democrats to more progressive parties. In Germany, there have been great losses to the Greens, in the Netherlands the greatest loss has been to the Greens and D66, an economic-centric party that is more progressive on cultural issues than the Social Democrats. In France, by far the most voters have migrated to Emmanuel Macron.

The Social Democrats’ former core clientele of workers is shrinking. What impact does that have?

It’s a very similar with this argument. The shrinking working class has naturally posed a fundamental dilemma for social democratic parties because their former core clientele is becoming smaller and smaller. But social democratic parties have always relied on a coalition with educated middle class voters to play a role. Now, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that we have had a great expansion of

education, the group of educated people grows accordingly, while the core clientele shrinks.

Moreover, there's a general fragmentation of the political space. Not only the social democrats, but all the major mainstream parties are under enormous pressure. Society has pluralised and the ties to these parties have weakened. Under these conditions, parties must orient themselves to the groups they can still address. New political issues are now on the agenda that no longer only correspond to the traditional question of economic redistribution – gender justice, the environment, migration. This is a dilemma for major parties.

Any monocausal explanation that brings forward only one single reason for the crisis of social democratic parties is misleading. They should all be taken seriously only to a limited extent. The statement that social democratic parties are in such a bad shape because they turned to the "new centre" in the 1990s as part of the Third Way policy of Schröder and Blair is just as wrong as the statement that they only care about politics for the urban middle class.

Which direction can social democratic parties choose today?

Two possible directions are being discussed. They could try to address those who have migrated towards right-wing populists. Or they might try to appeal to educated middle classes and those professions we like to call "socio-cultural professionals"; people who usually have a higher education, but not necessarily the income of a manager. It's women in particular in this group whom social democratic parties could address through their policies.

The Greens are currently very successful with these voter groups. Are social democrats not too late?

Not at all. Yes, the Greens are competing for these voters. I don't believe, however, that this clientele in Germany has already moved so firmly towards the Greens that it can't be reached ever again. In Germany, for instance, I find the example of Martin Schulz – and his leap in the polls in 2017 – instructive. He had managed to get these people interested again in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), at least for a short time. But it's also clear that the longer one has not made an offer for these groups, the more difficult it becomes to address them. If you haven't been committed to environmental policy for thirty years, then of course you have little credibility on this issue.

But that's even more so the case when it comes to voters for right-wing populist parties. There's the idea that they are voters who have somehow accidentally landed there, perhaps in protest, and that they could actually be brought back. That's not the case. A very large

proportion of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) voters are very convinced supporters and hardly have any second party preference. If this party did not exist, they would not vote at all.

So you see mostly former non-voters there?

Yes, the AfD has addressed many former non-voters. There's this idea that these former non-voters were formerly supporters of social democracy. But there's no empirical evidence to support that claim. On the contrary. The classic work with regards to this question comes from Seymour Martin Lipset – an essay on "Working Class Authoritarianism" from the 1950s. The idea behind it: Part of the working class has authoritarian attitudes. Lipset's central statement states that this electorate doesn't elect social democratic parties. Instead, they elect communist parties, which represent more authoritarian attitudes according to Lipset. Even 50 or 60 years ago, a considerable part of the working class didn't elect social democratic parties but communist or Christian democratic parties, for example. Therefore, the assumption that social democracy should be a home for this group today doesn't automatically make sense.

It can't be proved empirically?

Exactly. On the contrary, our research shows that a policy combination also appealing to the educated middle class is more successful at the ballot box.

There's currently much controversy within social democracy about how to interpret the recent election results in Denmark, especially in terms of how to deal with migration. Do you see your findings confirmed by the latest election results there?

The last election in Denmark tends to be opposite to our comparative results from over 20 countries. It's important that what we are examining are structural contextual conditions and the relationship that develops between political position of parties and socio-economic changes. Of course, each individual election still has many specific factors. I would therefore warn against drawing conclusions about major changes and general strategies from the results of a single election. For example, the question of who's the candidate is also very important. Is a party currently in government or in opposition? In Denmark, the social democrats have moved enormously to the right when it comes to migration issues. As a result, they have won back just 10 per cent of the former right-wing populist voters. And overall they did not win any votes.

They have stabilised their result.

Exactly. What's interesting is why so much is said about Denmark and so little about Spain. There, the social democratic party gets in polls as much as 40 per cent. The right is destroying itself with precisely this idea of adapting to the radical right. Social democracy in Spain did not go along with that. The Spanish social democrats have also relied on certain culturally progressive issues for a relatively long time. For example, Spain was one of the first countries to introduce same-sex marriage.

One could also argue that the Spanish socialists have it easier. There's no large Green party there and so they can probably pick up these voters much more easily.

But the question the other way around would naturally be: why isn't there a Green Party? Of course, there are many reasons for this, but social democracy in Spain engages this clientele. By the way, there's no particularly strong Green party in Denmark either. To put it bluntly, the question for German social democracy is now: if you give up this electorate, you can remain a petty-bourgeois niche party. Then they're at 10 or 15 per cent. Who else votes for the SPD? At the last European Parliament elections, it basically only addressed old people. In the state elections in Bavaria, one of the largest voter groups social democracy lost was the group of the deceased. In the Netherlands there is a Pensioners' Party. In the 2017 elections, the average age of social democratic voters in the Netherlands was the same as that of the Pensioners' Party. This is a fundamental problem for many social democratic parties: they no longer appeal to young people.

Where do you see the reason for that?

We can empirically show that social democratic parties that are socio-politically conservative lose a lot of voters in the young age group. This is about issues such as gender equality, the environment, migration or a generally open international orientation.

Do you think the traditional division of the electorate along the right-left axis is outdated?

We do not argue that the general question of redistribution no longer plays a role. It can be shown, however, that the difference in preferences for redistribution between the educated middle class and other groups is rather marginal. They are less in favour of direct redistribution than those who earn less money, but the difference is not particularly striking. But they are very interested in an investment-oriented policy.

What does this mean concretely?

These are measures aimed at aligning government spending and redistribution in such a way that people become more successful in the labour market again. Moreover, there are investments in social inclusion. Typical examples are expenditure on childcare, education, training and certain infrastructure measures. On the other hand, there are groups that prefer a more consumer-oriented policy. These are typical measures that maintain a standard of living, such as unemployment insurance or pensions.

The conservative-shaped welfare state in Central Europe is oriented in such a way that the groups that are becoming more important for social democratic parties, such as educated women with discontinuous careers, are often disadvantaged. One example is the income splitting, another is the structure of the statutory pension insurance. A woman who goes in and out of work, who may be partially self-employed, who works part-time, gets little out of the German statutory pension insurance. The system is not designed for them. Social democracy can therefore address such groups by changing its economic and social policy.

Your recommendations remind of the "Third Way" of the Schröder and Blair era. You have already mentioned that you do not believe that all evil began at that time.

It depends very much on which parts of the "Third Way" are meant. The policies I have described are not about dismantling the welfare state. It's a matter of adapting social policy to a new situation resulting from a socio-structural change.

The recommendation for social democratic parties is not to revive New Labour. In general, there was too strong a belief in market mechanisms as solutions at that time. New Labour and the new centre often also had a very authoritarian side, for example in internal security. This does not coincide with what we can identify as successful approaches. A return to New Labour will not lead to a better medium-term situation for social democratic parties in Germany or elsewhere. I don't think anyone is calling for that either.

Rejecting identity politics for minorities and advocating more restrictive migration policy do not serve as a recipe for a return to old greatness?

That's really the central finding of our research. Restrictive migration policy and a more conservative attitude to questions of so-called identity policy do not lead to social democratic parties gaining more

votes. On the contrary, they lose young and educated voters. Electorally, a tough stance on migration is definitely not a successful strategy for social democratic parties. And it cannot be the normative goal either. Playing off the working class against women, gays and migrants cannot be the ideal of social democracy. The working class has the same, if not more, migration background, it's female, it's as gay and lesbian as other parts of the population. The idea of politics being dedicated to an urban upper class is an incredible distortion of the social structure of modern societies.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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