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Progressive patriotism

Progressives have ceded patriotism to the right. It's high time they reclaim it to end austerity and restore public services

Read this article in German.

The fear of social decline takes hold in all parts of society. Feeling at the mercy of the anonymous forces of globalisation, automation and migration, many are turning inwards in order to at least get their own lives under control. Yet this retreat makes communal spaces shrink further, where people once felt they were shaping their own surroundings together. The dwindling trust in the power of politics to shape society has also been eroded by the withdrawal of the state. Many people feel left in the lurch, and are looking to political alternatives beyond the democratic centre.

Enter right-wing populism: The new right offers protection and stability to all those who feel unheard by lobby-dominated post-democracies, left behind by the rapid economic changes and ignored by pluralistic society in general and the liberal elites in particular.

To beat right-wing populism, politicians need to put more effort into restoring people's control over their lives and their sense of community and belonging to society. This takes more than material security. People need an identity that gives them the pride, recognition and self-esteem to be able to engage with a fast-changing world. Therefore, social democracy has to offer an identity to all those who are looking for protection and belonging.

So far, social democracy has failed to counter the nativist rhetoric of right-wing populists with a progressive concept of identity. On one hand, progressives fear opening a Pandora's box of nationalism, opening the gates to racism and xenophobia. On the other hand, they argue that too much identity politics and too little attention to redistribution has alienated the white working class.

The dilemma of progressivism

Both arguments fall short. First, social democracy never shied away from drawing on the emotional energy of collective identities. In the days of the labour movement, institutions from hiking clubs and choirs to gymnastics groups were essential in building the awareness of the working class. Second, we can see from the central political conflicts of the 21st century – from immigration ("rapefugees") to gender equality ("#metoo") – that conflicts of material distribution are fought out under the guise of culture. If progressives are unable to express their position in a language that resonates with these new debates, then their arguments will go unheard. And ultimately, the progressives' surrender of collective identity politics has left the field wide open for right-wing populists.

Tactical arguments are by no means the only ones in favour of a progressive concept of identity. The heart of social democracy, the community of solidarity, is ineffective without a framework of identity. If it's unclear who belongs to the community and who doesn't, it also remains unclear who should share something with whom. That's a central dilemma of all progressive projects: redistribution is more effective between members of smaller, mutually supportive communities. Today however, the distributive struggles over resources need to be won against capital which acts on a global scale.

This dilemma shows the different directions in which progressives want to take their projects. Left-wing nationalists are pushing for a return to the nation-state. Strategically, the common frame of the nation is supposed unite isolated struggles of particular interest groups. Before the nation can be put to such use, however, left nationalists must first wrest ownership of this problematic term from the right. To achieve this, they propose a different form of demarcation. Where the nationalist right-wingers set "the people" apart from 'outsiders', progressives conceive 'the people" (99 per cent) as the opposite of the 'elite' (1 per cent). This way, they hope to save the democratic national welfare state from being totally worn down by global capital and technocrats in Brussels.

Therefore, a successful strategy must think beyond the nation-state while also meeting people's needs for stability, security and belonging.

By contrast, internationalists do not believe that the small nation-states can overcome global challenges by themselves. To fend off the neoliberal attack on social democracy, internationalists want to organise themselves on the same plane as global capital. Taken to its natural conclusion, this strategy turns the Europe of Nations into the cosmopolitan European Republic.

A progressive sense of identitiy

Both strategies quickly reach their limits. Left-wing nationalism could certainly gain new supporters, but also risks alienating its own internationalist core members. On the other hand, the libertarian values of many internationalists are putting off the working class, whereas the equally cosmopolitan middle classes remains wary of redistribution.

Therefore, a successful strategy must think beyond the nation-state while also meeting people's needs for stability, security and belonging. That's why attempts to replace a cosmopolitan sense of identity with a more conservative position are proving futile. Replacing same-sex marriage and open borders with traditional family values and deportations doesn't work, and rather risks new divisions in the progressive camp. Ignoring basic emotional needs and focussing solely on material redistribution is equally misguided. Instead, a progressive concept of identity must link material distribution with cultural recognition.

Any attempt to construct a progressive sense of identity will inevitably face difficulties. Emotionally charged terms such as nation, patriotism and *Leitkultur* have no currency in the libertarian part of the social democratic sphere. Yet anaemic concepts such as constitutional patriotism fail to meet human needs for belonging, pride, self-respect, honour, stability and security.

For Germans, the term *Heimat* (meaning 'home' but also 'sense of belonging') provides these emotional ties. Admittedly, it rouses mistrust in those who associate it with right-wing populist ideology. Yet this kind of essentialist interpretation plays straight into the hands of right-wing populists – they win the game without a proper contest. *Heimat* has no set meaning. Rather, it's meaning is determined by political struggles over its interpretation.

To be absolutely clear: a progressive interpretation of *Heimat* has nothing to do with chauvinism. This progressive understanding of the term needs to be internationalist and European. As such, the social-democratic *Heimat* is an open-minded place in the middle of Europe. But this can absolutely be combined with the vibrant culture of local traditions. Consequently, the reconstruction of communal spaces and shared symbols is an important part of this understanding of *Heimat*.

Heimat is living in a good society

Recently, there've been increasing attempts to set out a social democratic definition of *Heimat*. Too often, however, it's defined in cultural terms

only. This inevitably results in conflicts between the cosmopolitan and communitarian lifeworlds of social democracy. Therefore, a social democratic definition of *Heimat* always needs a material counterpart: the progressive *Heimat* is a place where it's possible to live a good life in a good society.

A good society doesn't work without public services. If there are no buses or trains in rural areas, or if city streets are lined with litter, then a good life is more difficult. If young parents have to worry if they can afford a place in the nursery, or if women, gays and lesbians and refugees are too afraid to go out, society is not good.

The progressive *Heimat* constitutes a places and community that makes life worth living. It's rooted in local traditions and, at the same time, open to the world. The progressive *Heimat* helps people to shape their own lives and communities.

To embed the issue of material distribution in a cultural framework is a winning formula that can work effectively in the emerging form of digital capitalism.

In rural areas as well as the 'rust belts' of post-industrial cities, this means investing in mobility by expanding local public transportation, in basic infrastructure by providing postal services and fibre-optic broadband, in public amenities such as swimming pools and sports clubs, and in cultural facilities such as theatres and museums. It also requires a radical reform of the education system to meet the challenges of digitalisation. And the police and social security systems must be strengthened to overcome people's fears.

We can only achieve all of that through more financial resources for local authorities and regional governments. But the return of state investment requires an end to balanced-budget rules. In other words, the political goal of a liveable *Heimat* is to free society from the neoliberal grip of austerity. After all, a state cannot perform the core function of social democracy – shaping society – if its hands are tied. A return to proper public investment provides social democracy again with its Keynesian tools. And social democracy will certainly need them to handle the crisis on the demand side that has been destabilising capitalism for decades.

The state and Europe

The commitment to Europe is not a purely rhetorical one, but indeed a substantial material offer. To strengthen Europe, France and Italy expect, for very good reasons, a clear sign from Berlin. However, it's hard to communicate demands for a transfer union in Germany. The end of

austerity would open an escape route from this dead end of European politics. Overcoming the low investment rate in Germany would not only help the German economy, but also solve the euro crisis. The only meaningful signal to Germany's European partners would be alleviating the imbalances in Europe via more investments and increasing wages in Germany.

The return of public services to the periphery signals to those who feel left behind that the state has not given up on them. Strengthening the welfare state as a bastion against the centrifugal forces of global financial capitalism helps to alleviate fears of downward mobility. Improved domestic security enables people to accept rapid changes in society. So a liveable *Heimat* means control, and is therefore the best way to burst the bubble of right-wing populism.

In addition, a liveable *Heimat* provides a shared platform where all strands of social democracy can find themselves represented. Strengthening domestic security is a key demand of the more conservative social democrats. The paradigm shift in economic and social policy is the main concern of the left. At the same time, the focus on state investment in public services is also attractive to those who are sceptical about redistribution.

To embed the issue of material distribution in a cultural framework is a winning formula that can work effectively in the emerging form of digital capitalism. Consequently, a liveable *Heimat* is a first step in re-defining what social democracy means in the 21st century.



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