How do you like your state?

To defeat the nativist right, social democrats must offer an alternative vision of the good society — and rethink the role of nation-states within it

Social democracy is clearly struggling to return to its past glory. This time, the challenge does not come from Christian democrats but from the right-wing, nativist parties attracting votes across Europe, from Italy and Poland to even Germany and Sweden.

The most frequent explanations for this predicament point to socio-economic factors: rising inequality and poverty, structural unemployment and the decline of public services in health, transport and education. Much of this happened when social democrats and Christian democrats were in power, which suggests why the anti-establishment populist parties are now more in vogue than ever.

It would be naïve to think that changing leaders and massaging the messaging would make citizens go back to social-democratic parties *en masse*. The pragmatism displayed by such leaders as Olaf Scholz in Germany, Elly Schlein in Italy or Keir Starmer in Britain looks like an endorsement of muddling through — an acknowledgement that for them, ambitious leftish projects of the past are dead, yet, new ones are hazardous or non-existent.

Between individuality and collectivity

To bounce back, social democrats need to offer voters a more attractive and credible vision of the 'good society' than that advanced by the nativist right.

The vision of the right is familiar and straightforward: we need to restore three pillars of the good society — the family, the nation and the state. Do social democrats have something better to propose?

Both groups castigate neoliberal economics

Social democrats also need to show how positive change can be made to happen. Who will

generating inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

defend us from calamities — military, financial or environmental? Will it be the state, the market or civil society? Or maybe the European Union, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, Greenpeace or the Vatican?

Curiously enough, right-wing rhetoric on the economy does not differ substantially from that of the social democrats. Both groups pretend to speak on behalf of ordinary working people rather than *rentiers* or bankers. Both groups castigate neoliberal economics generating inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

Contrasts are clearer in the politics of family life. One group supports and the other opposes gay and interethnic marriage. Abortion and so-called gender ideology are also matters of contention. However, some prominent nativists, such as Marine Le Pen in France, have not put familialist slogans on their banners. Many social democrats meanwhile worry that preoccupation with cultural issues diverts their parties from economic matters — the former focus on individual rights, the latter on the collective rights so dear to the social-democratic tradition.

The statism of the left

The trickiest issue is the social-democratic vision of the state and the nation. The two are merged in right-wing rhetoric advocating the return of the nation-state in Europe: the state ought to be sovereign again, according to the nativists, if it is to enjoy to the full the legitimacy derived from the popular vote, national history and associated cultural 'purity'. State borders are central for the right, to keep at bay 'migrants', secure 'law and order' and arrest the spread of 'alien' cultures supposedly eroding national identity, religion and the family.

Social democrats struggle to counter this right-wing vision because they largely embrace statism, albeit 'with a human face'. They promise to defend borders by arresting globalisation and migration, just more rationally and humanely. Social democrats accuse the right of perverting democracy, but they do not challenge the assumption that democracy is chiefly a state matter — as if multi-level governance involving the EU, regional governments and municipalities was somewhat suspicious.

Social democrats opposed the communist narrative about the capture of the state by the bourgeois

They also cultivate national symbols as much as the right, although in parallel with European symbols and mythology. Statism is even evident in social-democratic cultural policies advocating the integration of newcomers (read national

class.

assimilation) rather than interculturalism (a two-sided process).

The statism of the left is rooted in post-war intellectual history. Social democrats opposed the communist narrative about the capture of the state by the *bourgeois* class. They employed the state to enhance democracy, workers' and women's rights, social welfare and an ethical foreign policy. In his famous book, *The Future of Socialism,* published in 1956, Anthony Crosland of the British Labour Party argued boldly that the state had managed to transform capitalism and the very business class itself: state intervention had weakened the power of capital and finance houses.

This statist vision implied not just opposition to communism but also to 'guild socialism', for which public authority was better located in communities and autonomous associations of workers than in a supposedly omniscient and omnicompetent state. Statism also implied lukewarm support for European or other cosmopolitan forms of democracy.

A shock to the system

Over time, however, state-anchored democracy began to show ever more flaws. This was partly due to the rise of 'cartel' parties and the subsequent crisis of parliamentary representation. Moreover, democracy confined to the borders of nation-states could not properly handle transnational challenges, such as climate change or people movement, in a globalised world.

Capitalism, meanwhile, liberated itself from effective controls by states, especially small and weak ones. With capital, goods, services and labour moving across borders with relative ease, the concept of the welfare state required reinvention, supported by a plausible project of transnational justice. Such a project, however, failed to emerge.

The liberal-left discourse of human rights is premised on universal norms and values, yet, the vindication of these rights remains linked to national legislation. Even within the EU, the right to abortion or gay marriage is the exclusive domain of nation-states.

The lack of novel solutions to cope with the digital era has made social democrats

The internet revolution probably represented the greatest shock to the state-based system. It made communication and transactions faster than ever and largely unbounded. It also empowered informal and thinly institutional

look old-fashioned and uninspiring.

networks at the expense of bureaucratic and hierarchical states. Even security has moved progressively to the boundless cyberspace.

The left has struggled to articulate a vision of a workable transnational democracy that would offer legitimate governance for the 'flat' world resulting from technological, economic and cultural change. The response of the nativist right was to go back to the nation-state — and social democrats willy-nilly followed suit. This implied weakening some social-democratic flagship projects: open borders, cultural diversity and ethical foreign policy. After all, tough measures aimed at arresting people movement are usually arbitrary and discriminatory.

The lack of novel solutions to cope with the digital era has made social democrats look old-fashioned and uninspiring. Can one believe that economic remedies suggested by John Maynard Keynes in the industrial era will do the trick in the digital one?

Social democrats need to create collective bonds and solidarity that go beyond the egocentric – if not racist – notion of the 'nation' as imagined community.

The right's solution for addressing the future is of course to look further back. So, history wars are resurging everywhere, as the right tries to create new myths and heroes. These are not the terrain of the progressive left, which would much rather be heralding the way ahead to a better world. Yet, it is hard to fix a world with largely dysfunctional nation-states.

If social democrats believe the nativist right proposes utterly wrong solutions for governing the digital era, they cannot rely on statism with a human face. They should think hard how to secure democracy, social policy and environmental sustainability in a world dominated by networks. They need to oblige states to share power and resources with other public actors, local and transnational. Social democrats also need to create collective bonds and solidarity that go beyond the egocentric – if not racist – notion of the 'nation' as imagined community.

This is first and foremost an intellectual rather than political challenge, but new ideas will not get far in parties reluctant to embrace change and experimentation. Pragmatic muddling through will not defeat the nativist right. Social democrats must offer an alternative vision of the good society — and rethink the role of the nation-state within it.

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Jan Zielonka
Oxford

Jan Zielonka is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Universities of Venice and Oxford. His latest book is *The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It* (Yale University Press, 2023).