

## **SOLIDARITY! BUT WITH WHOM? – FORGING A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA**

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In most of the Western democracies we currently face a choice between two positions on the left, which – unoriginally – I will refer to as Old Left and New Left. My claim is directed against the currently dominant New Left. I argue that it should adopt the Old Left’s agenda of economic solidarity if it wants to be able to execute its own agenda of solidarity with future generations, migrants, women and sexual minorities, and other European peoples.

Over the last years we have seen – in the aftermath of the long recession after the financial crisis – a populist revolt, which has largely captured the old constituency of social-democratic parties: a constituency of labourers that have felt the consequences of industrial decline, outsourcing, flexibilisation of labour markets, and competition in the face of globalization. In most European countries, a part of this electorate has turned to parties to the left of social-democratic parties (Die Linke in Germany, the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, the movement of *La France insoumise* of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France), while another part moved to the xenophobic Populist Right (AfD in Germany, Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands). In first-past-the-post electoral systems, this dissatisfied electorate has captured social-democratic parties that had been turning centrist in the 1990s, but so far not with much political success (Bernie Sanders in the US, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK). This electorate of the Old Left, the ‘globalisation losers’, or – in Hillary Clinton’s telling phrase – ‘deplorables’, is now unavailable as a support base for social-democratic policies. In particular, the exodus to the Populist Right makes the electoral position of the left as a whole precarious. As a consequence, the only political force on the left-side of the spectrum which has some political clout now is a New Left which does not serve this electorate. They have recently been very recognizable in Clinton’s and Macron’s constituencies of white upper-middle class professionals combined with increasingly assertive immigrant minorities. In the German context things are more muddled. The Greens fit the New Left label most closely. The position of the SPD – like that of traditional social-democratic parties in other European countries – is complicated because it contains both parts of the Old Left (to the extent it hasn’t left) and the New Left.

To define these terms more clearly, I propose to take the notion of solidarity as central. The New Left is in favour of several types of solidarity which the Old Left is reluctant – or sometimes even hostile – to accept:

- solidarity with future generations, leading to policies combatting climate change and saving biodiversity, to protect living conditions for those coming after us (for some but not all in this camp, in addition, this includes an enlarged solidarity with animals and ecosystems)
- solidarity with refugees and other immigrants from Africa and the Middle-East, who have suffered from dictatorships, wars and degraded environmental conditions;
- solidarity with women and sexual minorities, leading to an agenda combatting discrimination of these groups, endorsing gay marriage, abortion and other progressive policies.
- solidarity within the European Union: not necessarily in the sense of financially helping Mediterranean countries, but at least in the sense of supporting a pro-European policy of openness to strengthening the EU's problem-solving capacities in the face of increasing Euro-scepticism.<sup>1</sup>

Some have argued that in the face of the urgency of these problems – especially climate change, migration crisis and European crisis – the political landscape is now dominated by a new axis: of an open, cosmopolitan, optimist versus a closed, nationalist, pessimist worldview and associated policy preferences. My suggestion here is that the contrast can also be described in terms of the solidarities one accepts or declines, as suggested in the items mentioned above. This overview deliberately takes together openness in the spatial sense (with Europe and international migrants) and openness in the temporal sense, towards the future and future generations. It is no accident that these coincide in the cleavage between the New Left on the one hand, and the Old Left/Populist Right on the other hand.

Sociologically speaking, the willingness to accept political decisions that create binding institutional schemes enforcing solidarity between groups (accept green taxes, accept refugees coming in, give up sovereignty to Brussels) is not unlimited. It either draws on a sense of altruism and sacrifice or on a sense of enlightened self-interest. The

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<sup>1</sup> The motivation for this type of solidarity is more instrumental than the other three types mentioned in the main text. Holding on to European solidarity is a means to an effective political capacity at the European level for tackling these other problems (especially migration and climate change). There is a principled side to it, which corresponds to the cosmopolitan attitude characteristic of the new Left, but this doesn't go very deep. To the extent that it is possible to have effective European problem-solving capacities without creating massive schemes of socio-economic solidarity between Member States, this is what the New Left seems to prefer.

former is always limited, and the latter relies on a perception of vulnerability, so that the scheme of solidarity becomes an insurance premium for one's own future. In a standard socio-economic scheme of risk pooling such as they have been built in welfare states (think of disability or unemployment benefit schemes), this vulnerability related to a feeling that one day one could be in the other's position, i.e. one could become unemployed or sick oneself. With respect to the types of solidarity at the core of the New Left agenda, I would suggest this is different. This solidarity relies more heavily on altruism than on self-interest, if both of these alternatives are taken as referring to one's individual interests. The sense of vulnerability doesn't mean that one thinks one will reincarnate in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century and suffer a rising sea level oneself, or that one will one day be a refugee or a homosexual oneself. Instead, it relates to a perception that these problems will backfire against one's own progressive middle-class way of living, broadly defined. So it is better to say that solidarity here relies on something different from both pure altruism and self-interest. It is reconfigured as pertaining to an 'enlarged sense of self', in which adherents of the New Left stand up to fight for urgent matters to be solved not for them personally, but for society as a whole: to save Western civilization from becoming flooded under with rising sea waters, mass migration, cultural conservatism, or all of these (to put it crudely). There is a subtle sense of moral superiority in this enlarged sense of self, which often makes populist voters aggressive.

Morally speaking, the agenda of the New Left is impeccable. Whether out of a sense of altruism towards future generations and the global poor or out of a sense of enlightened self-interest, or a mixture of both, they rightly ask for solving these major global problems and maintaining a European and international attitude to do so. The problem is that they will only get support from a part of the traditional right, namely that part which is equally enlightened to see that these problems can no longer be postponed. Normally that will not be enough. Hence my claim: to make true on this agenda, they will need to win back their old electorate. They will have to convince people who are not naturally predisposed to hip, vegetarian life styles, giving language-classes to refugees, and visiting Barcelona for the weekend through a fancy Airbnb-apartment, to join their agenda. But in order to do so, we have to bring into the equation the so far unmentioned traditional type of solidarity on which the left originally was built, and in which is defining for what I have called the Old Left:

- economic solidarity, as expressed in an education system that promotes emancipation, job security and respectful working conditions and last-but-not-least, (p)re-distribution to mitigate inequalities in wealth and income. As instrumental to this agenda should be added: political measures supporting trade unions and economic democracy, breaking up the power of banks and large corporations, combatting international capital flight, etc.

It is at this point that the electorate of the Old Left/Populist Right has felt terribly left alone by the white urban professional elite that runs the New Left. And for good reason. For the New Left has basically given up on the ambition to regulate the economy in such a way that the items on the agenda of economic solidarity can be effectively realized. Basically, it has accepted the realities of the globalized economy as naturalistic facts: some people will never be able to make it in the modern high-productivity service economy. Thomas Frank, in his recent book (*Listen, Liberal*) diagnoses this as caused by the success of a meritocratic system of beliefs. Clinton-Democrats in the US feel that working hard and using their talents, they deserve their privileged social position, and those who haven't made it, don't. Hence they are willing to defend a system which on the front of economic solidarity restricts itself to lukewarm efforts to create 'equality of opportunity'. Their personal success has blinded and shielded the members of the New Left from feeling the urgency to adopt the much further-going, confrontational agenda of restoring the economic balance of power and wealth that the constituency of the Old Left/Populist Right is longing for. A similar story can be told for many European countries, in which former Third-Way Labour leaders like Tony Blair, Wim Kok and Gerhard Schröder accepted well-paid business opportunities after their political careers. By accepting Frank's diagnosis in such stark moral terms, I do not mean to deny that part of the New Left's accommodation to the economic right's agenda may also be explained out of realism and pragmatism (even if they wanted to, the instruments available for economic policy were gone due to globalization) and another part out of a principled conviction that too much social protection had been harming economic dynamism. But whatever of these more respectable motives, a sense of urgency and willingness to risk a political fight for a left-wing economic agenda was lost. In terms of the preconditions for solidarity: the perception of economic vulnerability within the New Left is and remains low.

Although I am personally convinced that joining the Old Left's economic agenda is a matter of justice as much as the forms of solidarity endorsed by the New Left, I am here quite literally seeing this as a bargain. If the New Left wants to convince the Old Left of its open, progressive style of dealing with climate change, migration, discrimination and European integration, then it will have to show that it takes seriously the concerns of those who fear such an agenda will only worsen their already considerably weak social position, privileging the interests of the unborn and the foreign over their own economic interests. If the economic and social price to be paid for these types of solidarity comes to weigh more heavily on their shoulders (because the environmental taxes weigh more heavily on their household budgets, because they live in the neighborhoods where asylum seekers are housed, etc.), then this is rightly

perceived as adding insult to injury, a cynical attempt of the urban elites to claim the moral high-ground while making others pay the price.

Two final questions. First, can it be done? Will such an alliance be possible? The most important reason for doubt stems from the economic protectionist agenda which the Old Left/Populist right has endorsed over the last years (see Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump during his election campaign, see European populists trying to bring down the euro). Can economic solidarity be restored under conditions of globalization? This is a large question, which calls for a lot of further analysis. Suffice it to say that the New Left here can only make true on its preference for an international solution over backtracking to nationalist protectionism if it shows that this can deliver the needed success. Crucial in this respect are things which are felt on the ground as tangible measures of success: renewed job security and strong real income growth which give the lower strata in modern democracies the feeling that their participation in society makes a valuable contribution and that they are sharing in the fruits of economic collaboration. Anything less won't do.

But even if all this could be done, then another condition of possibility may block the way for a return of sufficient numbers of populist voters. This is the cultural conservatism amongst Old Left and Populist Right voters. The tensions of living together may simply lead to a quasi-permanent refusal to vote for parties which defend the rights of migrants. Here I see two options. Either ignore these cultural concerns and hope that they will vanish once the old left electorate starts to experience the fruits of economic redistribution and regains a sense of psychological security about its own socio-economic position and optimism about social progress. Or don't gamble on this, and propose something more drastic. The only thing I can conceive of is a Marshall Plan for Africa and the Middle-East, which makes migration superfluous by injecting massive economic development and investment in the areas of origin of current migration streams. However, implementing such a plan may be politically and financially asking too much for the European Union in its current state. And its implementation may also shatter on the realities on the ground in many of these countries.

Second, will the New Left want to make this turn? Here I perceive the ever-growing populist attack on the elite as a major opportunity and a major reason to worry at the same time. It is striking how populist anger has been directed at the institutions of the media ('fake news!'), science (who are they to say the earth is warming?) and courts ('a bunch of leftists'). These are the bastions of professionalized, independent and objective, expert-based judgment. These are, in their best days, the counterweights speaking truth-to-power against business and political elites, but now under attack by claims from populists that they are a self-serving elite. This attack fits the sociological cleavage mentioned earlier between the constituencies of the Old Left/Populist Right

and of the New Left. From the business elites nothing was to be expected. But these professional elites were the old allies of lower-class labourers in the heighdays of social democracy. Their ignorance of normal people's declining economic fate is felt as betrayal. It can have two effects. It can make the elite turn defensive and lead to endless trench warfare between both camps, in which case the alliance I have been defending here will only get further out of sight. Or it can make the elite realize that they are more vulnerable than they thought they were. From the death-threats on the internet to the declining prestige of professional judgment, all the way to the declining political support for their institutions where populists manage to gain political power, they may suffer real consequences from the increasingly hostile social climate. It is hard to predict which scenario is more likely.

Anyhow, whatever the predictions of success of the course which I have been suggesting in this contribution, I do not see a sustainable alternative strategy for the left in most European countries. In the German context: Only if the SPD can win back the voters who have turned to the AfD and Die Linke, it can win the German elections and re-establish itself as a social-democratic stronghold. Indeed, today's polls suggest that this would be enough to beat the CDU. It may not happen this time, however, and if it doesn't, then this is probably because more credibility needs to be amassed that the New Left is serious about its commitment to the Old Left's economic agenda, and has found ways to implement it in times of globalized capitalism.