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Tilted

The familiar axes of politics are changing, with momentous consequences

Economic globalisation and its diverse effects are producing new social and political identities that depart sharply from those forged in the struggles of the past. **Colin Crouch** presents a guide to the shifting conflict axes within western societies, and their likely consequences.

From the time of the French Revolution, mass politics has revolved around two core conflicts: that between the preference for more or for less economic inequality, and that between conservative, authoritarian values and liberal ones. The main divisions among political parties in most countries fit into this frame. However, we have become accustomed to seeing the former – which raises issues of redistributive taxation, the welfare state, and the role of trade unions – as the senior partner. In western Europe, if not in the US, this has become even more the case as organised religion, the main historical carrier of social conservatism, has declined in importance.

This situation is challenged by the growing prominence of a chain of partly associated, partly quite independent forces: economic globalisation, immigration, refugees and the assertion of Islamic identities, which includes terrorism at its extreme. Together these reassert the old struggle between authoritarian conservatism and liberalism. Many people feel that everything familiar to them is being threatened: that they are being confronted with decisions, cultural artefacts and the presence among them of persons, all of which come from outside their familiar and trusted sphere. They seek security by trying to exclude the forces and people that are doing this to them. Most affected are those whose own working lives give them little control in any case, and who are accustomed to the security that comes from the enforcement of rules that exclude troubling diversity. This response takes various forms. Many Russians become highly nationalistic and also stress their homophobia. Many people in the Islamic world assert their religion (which is here far more important than nationality as a symbol of a pre-globalised past) and impose strict dress codes on women. Many Americans become not only fearful of Mexican immigrants and Islamic terrorists, but more agitated about sexual and reproductive ethics. A more general social conservatism, most powerfully embodied in deep-rooted feelings around sexuality, mixes with xenophobia to produce new social supports for the traditional, not the neoliberal, right.

Europe, especially western Europe, has been a partial exception to this. The final great battles of the 1970s in Catholic lands over contraception, divorce and finally abortion, petered out; the churches – the main bearers of

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European social conservatism – became weak and in many cases liberal in their social attitudes. There are today few supports for general authoritarian conservatism, and matters have narrowed down more closely to immigration and the following chain of thought: the EU is a super-national force that suppresses traditional national identities; in particular, it brings in immigrants with unfamiliar cultures and languages; it is difficult to distinguish immigrants from refugees, who come in alarming numbers from even more unfamiliar cultures; and since these refugees are Muslims, they are likely to include terrorists who will try to kill us.

Against these beliefs and fears stands a liberal, inclusionary mindset that sees in globalisation and multiculturalism a series of opportunities for a richer life, more varied cultural experiences, and perhaps new possibilities for individual advancement.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

To put this confrontation into context, we need to understand how it happened in the first place that ordinary people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose daily lives were very remote from big political issues, ever came to have political identities. It occurred as they found that aspects of their social identities, which they understood very well, were engaged in struggles over inclusion and exclusion in voting and other political rights. Depending on one's social position, one's identity was implicated either in demands to be included, or in demands to exclude others. Class and property ownership, religion and occasionally ethnicity (in Europe normally with reference to Jewish people, in the US to African-American people) were the key identities around which these struggles revolved. By the end of the second world war, and after considerable bloodshed, the concept of universal adult citizenship had become accepted in almost all advanced economies. Spain and Portugal remained outside this consensus until the mid 1970s; Greece flitted in and out. In central and eastern Europe a very back-handed kind of universalism dominated, in which universal inclusion came to mean universal *ex*clusion except for a small communist party elite. However, in general in the west, politics became peaceful and more or less democratic.

Once universal citizenship was achieved, those identities forged in struggles to achieve or prevent citizenship began to lose their *raison d'être*, but were so deeply rooted that they paradoxically became the basis of democratic electoral politics. Over time they could do this not as direct memory but only as memories of parents' and grand-parents' experiences. These necessarily faded, and in any case many people moved away from the social locations of their parents and grandparents. Democracy therefore began to depend for its vigour on forces that its very achievement had weakened. Their decline was reinforced by three major changes. First came the rise of the post-industrial economy and the creation of many occupations that have no resonance with the struggles of the past, and whose practitioners cannot easily relate their occupational identities to political allegiance at all. Class therefore declined as a reliable source of political identity. Second, (in Europe but not the US) religious

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adherence declined, and along with it both the power of the identity struggles surrounding it and general conflicts over authoritarianism versus liberalism. Finally, the use of ethnicity or nationality as identity resources in partisan struggles had been rendered horrifying to most politicians and ordinary people, partly as a result of the two world wars and their demonstration of the destructive force of nationalism, and partly through knowledge of the Holocaust and the passions that had lain behind it. A nationalistic fringe lived on in some countries, and the separate issue of racial entitlements to citizenship continued to flourish in the US until the 1960s, but in general this became a no-go area in political conflict.

We should not puzzle at declining voter turnout and even more strongly declining identification with political parties once we appreciate that a strong interest in politics by the mass of citizens who have no chance of being politically effective needs social supports, and that those bequeathed to us by the struggles of the past have declined in salience. There has now been such a general loosening of ties between parties and voters that it seems increasingly inappropriate to include a discussion of voting behaviour within a discussion of identities. Does voting for a party, even doing so repeatedly, necessarily imply an 'identification' with that party, any more than the frequent purchase of a particular brand of soap implies an identification with the firm making the soap? Certainly, election campaigns increasingly resemble advertising campaigns for products, which suggests that parties do indeed believe, at least to some extent, that they bond with voters in a way no different to that in which the producers of goods bond with customers.

But this may now be changing, as economic globalisation and its broader consequences start to reproduce social identities with powerful political potential. Central to them is revived national consciousness. While the great majority of politicians had for decades abjured using national identity in party conflict, there was no reason for them not to use it as a non-conflictual rallying call – after all, their role is to care for the nation. As a result, national sentiment has been left lying around in popular consciousness, available for other purposes should the occasion arise. Globalisation, immigration, refugees and terrorism provide such occasions. Meanwhile, memories of the appalling consequences of the political use of nationalism in the first half of the 20th century are fading. Nation is strengthening as a political force, while class and religion (unless the latter becomes implicated in conflict around Islam, and therefore absorbed into nationalism) are declining.

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The turnaround can be seen most clearly in parts of central Europe. The political implications of class identities had been stood on their head under state socialism, and national identity remains the only strong link that people can feel to their polity. This helps explain the puzzle of the Czech Republic, which has suddenly become the most Europhobic country in Europe (after the UK). The country has benefited more than any other from the EU, which has provided its modern infrastructure, a safe framework for its divorce from Slovakia, an easy channel for the German and other investment that has equipped its advanced economy, and a base for trading with the rest of the world that the infant country

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would otherwise have had to create from scratch. Then the EU asked for some payback, putting pressure on the Czechs to help bear the burden of middle-eastern refugees arriving on the coasts of Greece and Italy. Czechs – whose nationalism historically never hurt anyone, but has been a badge of resistance against various forms of foreign domination – suddenly became responsive to the wave of anti-foreigner feeling sweeping through Europe.

One major, unexpected result of these developments is that the old predominant conflict axis around inequality and redistribution is itself becoming interpreted through nationalism rather than through class politics. The new nationalist movements nearly always include the global financial elite in their attacks. Many observers were surprised when there were relatively few mass expressions of anger after the 2008 financial crisis. We can now understand why. For ordinary non-political people to take any kind of action, including voting, against powerful forces they need some confidence-boosting assurance that they are part of something wider, something rooted in a strong social identity. Given the decline of class, only national identity has been available to give them that assurance. All contemporary xenophobic movements and figures, from Donald Trump in the US and Marine Le Pen in France to Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Norbert Hofer in Austria, link their attacks on immigrants and refugees to those on the national elites implicated in the financial crisis. In turn, some protest movements that began as non-xenophobic opponents of elites, like il Movimento Cinque Stelle in Italy, find that they can get more traction if they include resentment at refugees in their rhetoric. Groups like the UK Independence Party (Ukip) or Alternative für Deutschland, which started life as critics of the EU, have found success by responding to fears around immigrants and Muslims. The challenge to powerful elites is hereby made safe, because it is enfolded in attacks on the weaker symbols of globalisation: that is, one might be frightened to kick a strong man, but one might kick what one believes to be his dog.

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In a recent *Guardian* article, Martin Jacques claimed that the successful Brexit campaign and various other instances of widespread support for populist movements around the western world constituted the return of class politics in general, and a political reassertion of the working class in particular.[1] This was wishful thinking. Outside Greece, Spain and possibly Scotland, the new populism is precisely *not* articulating itself in the form of class movements, but as nationalistic, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee – quite apart from the fact that a majority of Brexit voters were comfortably off Conservative voters in southern England.

THE SOCIAL SUPPORTS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Is nationalism therefore set to trump all other political forces, as its deeply rooted emotions come up against little more than voting behaviour of the soap-buying kind? Are persons holding liberal opinions anything more than randomly scattered individuals? Stalin

1 Jacques M (2016) 'The death of neoliberalism and the crisis in Western politics', *Guardian*, 21 August 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/21/death-of-neoliberalism-crisis-in-western-politics

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invented the term 'rootless cosmopolitans' to stigmatise Jews, but the general idea that cosmopolitanism or a positive approach to multiculturalism implies rootlessness or normlessness is widespread. Some recent research suggests otherwise, however, providing evidence that liberal attitudes are associated with particular social locations.

The starting point is the work of a Swiss sociologist, Daniel Oesch.[2] He became dissatisfied with the idea of an undifferentiated middle class used in so much academic as well as popular discussion, given that the category was coming to mean the broad majority of occupational positions in the advanced economies. He proposed that social and political attitudes were formed not just by the positions people occupied in organisational hierarchies (class), but by the kinds of work tasks with which they were engaged. He distinguished three of these: technical (manufacturing, for instance), administrative (banks, public bureaucracies and so on), and interpersonal (public services, for example). If these categories were combined with hierarchical position, he found that one could account for differences in, say, voting behaviour among those occupying middle-class positions.

Oesch's idea was applied to issues of direct relevance to us here by two German political scientists working in the US, Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm.[3] Gathering data from all western member states of the EU, they examined typical differences in attitudes among people working in different hierarchical positions and on Oesch's different types of task along the three dimensions that I have used here: inequality and redistribution; the role of authority versus liberty; and immigration. The first of these relates to the inequality axis, the other two to the authoritarian-versus-liberalism axis. Unsurprisingly, they found that people at the upper and middle levels of hierarchies in all types of task held less egalitarian views than those in lower positions, though senior and middle-ranking persons in interpersonal services were considerably less inegalitarian than the others. Those at higher and middle levels in all work tasks had liberal attitudes on both general authoritarianism and immigration, though there were differences. The most liberal were professionals in interpersonal services, then those engaged in technical tasks, least so those in administration. Those at the lowest levels of hierarchies held illiberal views on both dimensions, and egalitarian views on the third dimension. These findings held true after controlling for whether people worked in the private or public sectors, or whether they were male or female.

Without more detailed research it is difficult to know to what extent people with certain social attributes are drawn towards working on particular tasks, or if, conversely, working on particular types of task leads people to develop the attitudes in question. From the finer details of Oesch's work and that of Kitschelt and Rehm, it emerges that the more people have discretion in their work tasks and work directly, face to face, with other human persons, the more liberal and inclusive they are; the more their

2 Oesch D (2006) *Redrawing the Class Map: Stratification and Institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland*, Palgrave Macmillan.
3 Kitschelt H and Rehm P (2014) 'Occupations as a site of political preference formation', *Comparative Political Studies* 47(12): 1670–1706.

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own work follows rules and routines in impersonal contexts, the more they support authoritarianism and exclusion. There does not seem to be any important difference between attitudes to immigrants and those on general issues of authority. For example, people who believe that immigration should be restricted are also likely to believe that school discipline should be tougher.

It seems clear that attitudes on issues of authority and liberty are not just personal whims, but socially rooted. The Brexit referendum similarly revealed sociological regularities. Young, particularly female, well-educated people living in large cities were more likely to vote to remain in the EU; older, mainly male persons in both declining industrial cities and prosperous provincial areas not much touched by the new economy tended to vote to leave. The politics of this question are more complex in the British case than elsewhere. Whereas the Brexit campaign played on fears of foreigners and implicitly encouraged isolationist tendencies, the purpose of the ministers involved in negotiating the UK's future economic place in the world seems to be to expose the country to intensified global competitive pressure. How they will eventually reconcile that with their mass supporters is a very interesting question, but one that is beyond our concerns here. Most important is to recognise that openness to multiculturalism and internationalism have become deeply felt, socially grounded beliefs among those parts of contemporary populations whose work and other aspects of social location lead them to reject exclusion and to value inclusiveness. This determined cosmopolitanism might be based on a positive appreciation of being enriched by engagement with other cultures, or on a desire to be free of constraints on individual freedom. In either case, it is necessary to note that the revival of exclusionary nationalism is not the only popular development in contemporary politics. A major cleavage is opening between two sets of deeply held attitudes.

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NEOLIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES: INCREASINGLY AWKWARD BEDFELLOWS

These changes will have long-term and unpredictable consequences for all main political forces in advanced societies. The biggest challenge is to what is currently the world's dominant political formation: the alliance of neoliberals and conservatives which expresses the inegalitarian end of the inequality and redistribution axis. Hegemonic as the economic ideology of an international elite, neoliberalism is rarely a powerful force in democratic party politics. When it appears virtually alone in a party's identity, that party is usually very small (as with the German Free Democrats). More normally it appears within conservative parties, as with the UK Conservatives or US Republicans. But classic European democratic conservatism is weakening alongside its former religious supports. Its parties then face a strong temptation to rediscover the nationalism that is part of their heritage and to become part of the new xenophobia. They can do this either in coalitions or deals with far-right parties (as in Scandinavia) or through shifts within the party (as with the UK Conservatives). But this threatens the heart of the neoliberal project, which is globalising and highly cosmopolitan. So

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far the tension has been even more severe in the US, where the Christian right is far stronger than in most of Europe. The Republican party is being torn apart between, on one side, the neoliberals who have dominated it for years through their billionaire backers, and on the other the protectionist nationalism represented by Donald Trump. Neoliberalism and conservatism are allies when the main conflict axis is that around inequality and redistribution; if that is gradually replaced by one that sets liberalism and a nationalist conservatism against each other, they stand at opposite poles.

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Moderate conservatives do not necessarily follow the nationalist path. Using their central position in most political systems, they can achieve simultaneous accommodations with the two main rival forms of liberalism – neoliberalism and social democracy. One sees this most clearly in German Christian democracy – that is, in the one country where the nationalist option is seen as most dangerous. It could also be seen in the now defeated Cameron-Osborne wing of British conservatism.

Neoliberals also have the option of shifting to the left by making compromises on the inequality axis, if that axis is being overshadowed by the conservatism–liberalism one. There are certainly precedents: Blair's New Labour, Schroeder's *Neue Mitte* SPD and Clinton's New Democrats are examples, as are Renzi's *Democratici* today. These may seem uncomfortable antecedents, but arguably the largest social change in recent times – the move towards gender equality – has been a shared neoliberal/social-democratic, anti-conservative project. When, following the financial crisis, the OECD and IMF began to resile from their earlier neoliberal policy stances, they were motivated mainly by the risks being posed to mass consumption by growing US inequality.[4] In the wake of the Brexit vote some global investment advisors went further and began to worry whether growing inequality was not nourishing xenophobic resentment against globalisation. To what extent are neoliberals willing to accept redistribution and strong welfare states in order to safeguard their other achievements?

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS: FIGHTING FOR THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LIBERAL MIDDLE MASS

Social democrats have their own crises. As the manual working class declines in size, they reluctantly face the reality that they will never again be the assured representatives of the biggest fraction of society. Instead, they fight for their share of that large middle mass of the post-industrial world. Thanks to Oesch's analysis, we can see that this mass is no longer just the conservative bourgeoisie of the past, but includes (particularly among those engaged in interpersonal work tasks) the new constituency of the left – though, where voting systems give them the option, they often prefer environmentalist and other non-social-democratic forms of the left. These people are primarily liberal, though they also favour redistribution, and there is growing tension between them and the old working class as the conservatism–liberalism axis grows in importance. Can social

4 See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising.*

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democrats reassert the priority of the inequality axis in order to hold their coalition together?

David Goodhart,[5] Wolfgang Streeck[6] and some other observers have pointed out that the social democratic welfare state was an essentially national institution, rooted in people's sense of shared membership in a national community. The idea is expressed most clearly in the Swedish idea of the welfare state as *folkshemmet*, the place where people can feel at home. These meanings could be stretched to include small numbers of immigrants, but to how many? Is the US aversion to a strong welfare state a reflection of its cultural heterogeneity? Thinking along these lines leads some to seek a national social democracy, which requires severe limitations on immigration, a rejection of liberalism, and in the case of European countries withdrawal from the EU.

Political clocks cannot be put back. The great welfare states developed under the aegis of a benign form of national identity that was not directed against outsiders. The most advanced welfare states developed in open trading nations – Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK. That world cannot be recaptured. To assert the limitation of social citizenship to 'real' nationals now can no longer be the *folkshem* of a people who just happen to be ethnically homogenous, but becomes symbolised by the demand of the Front National that rights be limited to *français de la souche* (best translated broadly as 'true-born French'), requiring active exclusion of those deemed to be outsiders. Non-aggressive nationalism is still possible in places like Scotland or Greece, where resentment against external domination does not require the victimisation of immigrants and refugees. Elsewhere it has become very difficult to sustain.

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GLOBAL RULES, POOLED SOVEREIGNTY AND ELITE COMPROMISES

Also, free trade is now nested in a regime with global rules, not a series of national decisions regarding how much free trade a country wants to accept. In this context the EU constitutes an opportunity to extend social policy alongside free trade, expressing the pooled sovereignty of its members, rather than the loss of sovereignty implied by the pure free trade of the World Trade Organization.

But is the direction of pooled sovereignty towards the construction of transnational social policy possible with the current politics of the EU? Today's European tragedy has two components. First, Europeans are being asked to absorb large numbers of dispossessed people from the other side of the Mediterranean. Second, the EU is coping with both this and the free movement of labour from central Europe at a moment when EU policymakers and the European Court of Justice have experienced an extreme neoliberal turn, rendering it unwilling to provide the social policy support that these large movements of people require. The first was not Europe's fault; the second is fully within the power of its policymakers

5 Goodhart D (2013) *The British Dream: Successes and Failures of Post-War Immigration*, Atlantic Books.
6 Streeck W (2015) 'The Rise of the European Consolidation State', discussion paper 15/1, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies.

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and jurists to change. This is again dependent on some rethinking by European neoliberals, which the withdrawal of the UK might facilitate.

No political family can look forward to a comfortable future. The outcomes of these tensions and their explosive consequences for the main contemporary political currents will be very varied. A particularly important variable is the balance between the electoral (democratic) component of political systems and that which concerns lobbying, the role of big money, and the bargaining power of global corporations. The latter is probably more important in shaping our politics, though since it is largely invisible we can say least about it. It is the arena within which neoliberalism mainly operates as a political force. Ironically, it is likely to be here that alliances between neoliberals and social democrats are forged. It may be easier for neoliberalism to soften in this non-democratic but dominant part of political life, because change involves rational calculation by small numbers of self-interested individuals and corporations, not the deep feelings of large numbers of people. One can already see the framework for this elite compromise in the changing approaches of the OECD and IMF. As international organisations, these can never share in the new xenophobia. Since the late 1970s they have helped forge the neoliberal hegemony and have been major protagonists of an open global trading system, but their recent fears about the impact of growing US inequality on mass consumption and the role of big money in political lobbying indicate a major shift. The OECD has also started to soften its earlier hostility to the work of trade unions and collective bargaining. This could be the start of a new neoliberal–social democratic historic compromise.

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In the electoral sphere much depends on the relative sizes of Oesch’s different fractions of the middle class, on party structures and voting systems. The tensions within both conservative and social-democratic parties as the relative importance of the two great axes of conflict changes can be most fruitfully released in systems in which new parties can form and then make various alliances. Electoral systems of the British and, in particular, the US variety force everything to remain within existing parties, sometimes contorting them out of all meaning. Within all this complexity, generational change and economic restructuring seem to favour the growth of various kinds of liberalism, while every new horror emerging from the Middle East strengthens xenophobic nationalism.

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