

European social democracy is in danger of terminal decline unless it can reengage with its core values

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With the rise of parties on the far-right and radical left of European party systems, social democratic parties now face a challenge to retain their support base in several European countries. [Tom Angier](#) writes that the primary problem facing social democrats is that they have shifted their appeal away from their core constituencies and the social organisations that previously entrenched their place in communities, such as unions and cooperatives. He argues that only by reengaging with their traditional priorities can social democrats hope to arrest this decline.



Europe is in trouble. This is evident at the purely political level, where the EU project elicits indifference or hostility from an increasing number of European citizens, and membership of mainstream parties has [declined precipitously](#) since 1980. It is evident at the economic level, where wealth is being concentrated in a small number of hands, hands that seem unbound by ties to any particular nation or locale. And it is evident at the level of civil society, where the social fabric is being disfigured by fears of political Islam, fears unallayed by those who reduce them, patronisingly, to a form of mental disorder or ‘phobia’.

In face of these developments, what should be the response of social democrats? Commentators like [Timothy Garton-Ash](#) put their hope in a renewed EU-loyalism, telling UK citizens, for instance, that they are far more European than they think. Recourse to European identity and values will supposedly preserve us from widespread political disaffection, radical economic inequality and bitter cultural dissension. But this advice sounds more hollow than ever. Genuine EU-loyalism was never widely or deeply spread, even outside the UK, and worse, in the current climate it smacks of a Merkelite version of *Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen* – ‘the German spirit will rescue the world’.

Indeed, EU structures have moved ever closer to the neo-liberal consensus, thereby ensuring both political disaffection and economic inequality, while doing nothing to address incipient cultural conflict. What can the left offer that is not only practicable, but also embodies real hope for the future?

Reviving social democracy in Europe

Here we face a problem of great historical moment: namely, the European left’s abandonment of its core constituency. Since the 1980s, the working classes have been progressively deprived of a political voice, a situation exacerbated by the increasing ‘immiseration’ of those still clinging to the label ‘middle class’. In the face of such downward mobility, those who might have stood up to the emerging *status quo* have engaged, instead, in a full-scale retreat. And this has taken place on two main fronts.

First, the social front, where the left – previously alive to the reality and significance of social classes – has become increasingly enamoured of social justice construed in ‘lifestyle’ or so-called ‘identity’ terms. Here the left’s agenda has shifted to embrace all those priorities prophetically announced in Theodor Adorno’s [The Authoritarian Personality](#): ridding the public sphere of ‘prejudice’, ‘discrimination’, ‘intolerance’, ‘bigotry’ and ‘ethnocentrism’. What this new lexicon has enabled, however, is the privileging of policies which appeal primarily to the metropolitan upper middle class, whose concerns are of little consequence to the majority of citizens.

Such policies are relatively easy to enact, involving no cost to the wealthy, while steadily occluding the real territory of social justice – namely, the socio-economic well-being of ordinary families. At the same time, the left sees no problem with the main corollary of identitarian or lifestyle politics: strongly increased powers for the State. For years

now, the State has been called on to act as a universal parent (so that when children are harmed by their 'carers', outrage is directed not at their family or wider community, but at the 'social services'). But identity politics has made organs of the State all the more ubiquitous and ready to interfere. By contrast, organisations previously dear to the left – such as trade unions, church schools, mutual societies, and cooperatives – have been either emasculated or rendered defunct.

On the economic front, the left's retreat has been even more ignominious. In a thoroughly globalised economy, there is an acute threat of nations (and even supra-national organisations like the EU) being at the mercy of multinational corporations' importunate demands. But the European left has been unconscionably slow in addressing this threat.

Half-hearted requests are made to close tax-loopholes, and under pressure from citizen groups like UK Uncut, the UK Labour party has paid lip service to curtailing the activities of tax havens (many of which are ex- or surviving [British overseas possessions](#)).

But this is too little, too late: it being highly embarrassing that the campaign for a living wage in the UK, for instance, emanated not from any left-leaning political party, but from the independent group, [Citizens UK](#). Governments' reluctance to act against tax havens or in favour of a living wage goes along, of course, with a keenness to deprive the truly vulnerable of any remaining benefits provided by the welfare state. But once again, the left finds itself cowed into submission by those who employ the rhetoric of 'shirkers' and welfare 'cheats'. Such rhetoric could, if deployed intelligently and with conviction, be turned against precisely those corporations which have secreted their wealth outside the countries in which they operate. But the left systematically refuses to rise to this challenge, and instead confines itself to suggesting qualifications and minor adjustments to the neo-liberal programme.

What is to be done? To begin with, social democrats need to curtail or abandon their lurch to the lifestyle left. They need to recover a sense of social mission on behalf of hard-working, ordinary families, whose stability and integrity is ill-served by the relentless emphasis on 'diversity' (which is alienating not least to those from many immigrant communities). A sense of responsibility within and for the family is perfectly consistent with traditional left values, and furthermore stands against an agenda that effectively hands over such responsibility to the State.

True, the State must be encouraged to stand up for the interests of the truly vulnerable, such as the disabled and children in care. But social democracy should not come at the expense of community organisations that have the resources and expertise to do such work. (That such organisations are perfectly consistent with traditional left politics was obscured by David Cameron's short-lived 'Big Society' idea, until it turned out to be a mere cover for further privatisation.) One of the most dispiriting aspects of current European life is the way in which both State and market have crowded out autonomous civic institutions, and the left should be at the forefront of restoring such civic social space.

On the economic front, the good of family and community depends largely on shielding them from the depredations of global capital fluctuations. To prevent further economic impoverishment of the middle class, there must be a concerted effort among social democrats to prevent nations being at the beck and call of multinational corporations. Resistance to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the US should therefore be a social democratic priority. More widely, real pressure must be brought to bear on the abuses perpetrated by tax havens, and on those businesses which refuse to pay their workers a living wage (not to speak of those that make



widespread use of unpaid internships and zero-hours contracts).

If Europe becomes thus *socially* minded once again, the fortunes of political Islam may even be likely to wane, since by all accounts it offers itself as a solution to those who feel socially and economically most disenfranchised. But equally, a return to traditional left priorities is likely to allay the anti-immigrant fears of the white indigenous population, whose social and economic prospects have been so drastically undermined since the financial crisis. Let us hope that in discerning its future path, the European left will finally stop shirking its pressing responsibilities.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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