



Responding to populist value triangulation

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The European right as a whole, including the far right, have gained a much better understanding of the forces shaping modern European societies. They have successfully triangulated onto traditional social democratic territory leaving the left fatally unsure about how to respond. To reclaim abandoned territory, social democrats have to target the political debate at cultural values, with a wholly renewed consideration of 'equality' serving as a prominent pillar

Everywhere in Europe, a new kind of populism is rising. The election of Marine Le Pen as the new president of the French National Front (the daughter of the far right party's founder) is the latest event in this political wave.

The popularity of radical right-wing parties defending a populist or neopopulist agenda has increased in recent years. Their platforms are all the same: anti-immigrant (and, moreover, anti-Islam), anti-European, anti-elite. There is a rising neo-populism on the left, too. In France, for example, a former member of the Socialist party is now openly presenting himself as a left-populist. All these forces and parties claim a desire for the return of the real or genuine 'people' (the 'P' word) to power.

The main explanation, among commentators as well as among social-democratic analysts, is that this phenomenon could be attributed to the current economic turndown and its social consequences. But the malaise is far deeper than that – this neopopulist phenomenon has not only economic and social causes but deep cultural roots. The new pan-European populism challenges the entire political system, but particularly the place of social democratic parties. European social democracy should be worried.

A lost confidence

Social democracy is said to have lost the confidence of the public because it was not able, while in power, to draw a distinction between itself and the then dominant discourse of economic neo-liberalism (and it was in power in most European countries at some point over the last two decades). Social democrats are accused of having failed to govern their countries better than the right and of having accepted the worst excesses of the market economy (including deregulation, privatisation, financialisation, and casualisation of labour). And once relegated to the opposition, where they again began to talk the language of the left, they are accused of continuing to think on the right. In short, social democracy is said to have betrayed its ethos and its base by tacking to the right.

This explanation – that the social democrats lost their economic and social bearings – is the most widespread, and there is some truth to it. But it doesn't tell the whole story; first, because the list of European social democracy's economic and social successes and failures over the last 20 years is obviously more disparate than they would at first appear – not to mention differences from one country to another, which are deliberately ignored; and, second, because measuring performance against this yardstick misses, if not the essentials, at least the more fundamental level at which political change takes place in societies.

The issue facing social democracy now transcends the question of the extent to which it has or has not been converted to economic and social neo-liberalism. It will be noted that confining the discussion to this question is of no help to the social-democratic leadership. The issue must be addressed at the more fundamental level of ‘values’ or prerequisites (of the economic and social model in particular). The European right as a whole, as well as the political forces that are here and there referred to as ‘populist’, have clearly gained a better understanding of what is at stake. The governing right was forced to do so, since the left embraced most of its economic policy – for example, in the triangulation practiced by the New Democrats in the United States and New Labour in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. The right had to wage the political struggle on the basis of values by ‘triangulating’ the values of the left in turn, as Nicolas Sarkozy did in the case of labour values during the French presidential election in 2007.

The populist challenge

In doing this, the right all over Europe picked up on and benefited from popular aspirations often neglected by the left (which thought it could take them for granted based on its historic monopoly, which was largely a figment of its own imagination): labour values, of course, but also national identity, family values, a sense of belonging and collective security. These are aspirations, and therefore values, that the left, seeing itself increasingly deserted by the working class that had traditionally supported it, gradually began to denounce as ‘populist’. Social democracy ceded these values – and the support of those who, for one reason or another, set great store by them – to non-respectable political movements and leaders, particularly on the extreme right. It was not so much a matter of the traditional right benefiting electorally (if not programmatically) by ‘co-opting’ the extreme-right working class as it was one of social democracy (i.e., the governing left) forfeiting that part of the electorate because it was unable to offer a platform that accommodated both its interests (economic and social) and its identity (its ‘values’) – demonstrating, in the process, that the two are closely linked.

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For this reason, populism is the central issue. It is a double-edged sword. In its European version (but not in its US incarnation) it harks back to the continent’s darkest hours and smacks of a dangerous manipulation of working-class despair. But it can also be read as a signal that must be picked up on and listened to, especially by the left (if one considers that the left without the people is no longer the left). It is therefore important for European social democracy to take a dialectical approach to populism, if only to avoid falling into the trap set by the right. This is the major challenge facing social democracy if it is to survive as a historic tradition, a source of bedrock values and a political alternative within the democratic process.

To take one example, consider how this new wave of European populism is challenging the ‘multicultural compromise’ social democratic parties (and, beyond them, our societies) rely on. The neopopulist movements present themselves, as Ed West from the Telegraph has put it, as “neoliberal islamophobes”, defending postmaterialistic individual rights (those of women and gays) against the Muslim (not just immigrant) habits and rules threatening them. They oppose “traditional inter-faith gay-bashers”, including religious fundamentalists from everywhere, who attack women and gay rights in the name of family and religious values. It means that social democrats

must now take this new landscape very seriously into account, especially if one considers their multiculturalistic ethos: social democrats are now challenged on their comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a ‘minority’ – an inclusive concept of the different kinds of identities in western societies including those of ethno-race, religion, immigrant status, gender and sexuality.

Straight to the people

To tackle populism, social democracy must re-connect with the people. This objective is within its reach. If it is openly and clearly formulated as such and expressed with conviction – not as just one more last-ditch communication strategy on the part of social democratic parties – and if it is regularly improved with as broad a range of discussion and experience as can be managed, it can represent the platform of democratic socialism for years to come. To target the debate at values and avoid being drawn into a polarising approach, the European social democratic left needs to identify a few highly relevant and energising issues.

The next European social democratic economic and social programme must include a totally renewed consideration of ‘equality’ as a prominent value (and not just ‘justice’, for example) and a strong determination to fight against all kinds of ‘unearned or illegitimate income’ in order to create a decent, fair society. The social democrats have to target the political debate at cultural values, which means that they have to tackle the consequences of our social and economic choices both at national and European levels. For example, if we favour immigration for economic reasons, we have to reshuffle our integration policies: no more rights for the newcomers without a strong set of commitments and the recognition of our values. By not doing this, social democrats will let the neopopulist forces claim that they better protect our western values of liberty, toleration and gender equality. In France, Marine Le Pen now says, at every opportunity, that she is the first to defend *la laïcité* and *la République* against the communitarian (i.e. Islamic) threat.

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Beyond the specific programmatic proposals, social democratic parties need to find a new general theme that they can focus on to regain the people. This ‘narrative’ could, for example, take inspiration from the concept of ‘common decency’ (which encompasses the moral standards, social conduct and self-respect of the individual) as formulated by George Orwell in a letter to Humphrey House in 1940: “My chief hope for the future is that the common people have never parted company with their moral code.”

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