

Conflicts in cosmopolitanism and the global left

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The Amsterdam Process / Next Left

The future for cosmopolitan social democracy

DRAFT DISCUSSION NOTE

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Social democrats have been discussing how to respond to globalisation for two decades or more. Cosmopolitanism is one way that's been proposed. Cosmopolitanism is about being open to others from around the world and having obligations to them. This relates to traditions in social democracy of internationalism, egalitarianism and collectivism. Social democracy has also sometimes had liberal and progressive supporters with views that fit with cosmopolitan principles of tolerance and pluralism.

Globalisation is said to be one thing that's put cosmopolitanism back on the agenda. It leads to awareness of others, and of interdependence and global obligations. We've grown to see that we have globally shared problems – like climate change, human rights, global poverty, nuclear proliferation, and the risks that come with economic interdependency. Some argue that we should be addressing such problems and obligations through institutions like the United Nations or the International Criminal Court and via global talks about issues such as climate change and world trade. These means are cosmopolitan because they bring diverse people together to address common concerns.

There are two issues that arise for cosmopolitan social democracy. One is that it isn't proving all that cosmopolitan when it comes to openness and friendliness to others. The other is that it may be being too cosmopolitan when it puts faith in global gatherings to address world issues.

Openness to outsiders

Social democracy's response to globalisation should not be just to economic globalisation, the movement of capital and trade, or cultural globalisation, the mobility of communication and information. If it wants to

respond positively to globalisation social democracy should do so also to the global movement of people. Immigration is the biggest test for cosmopolitanism. It asks us to put our money where our mouth is by being open to others, welcoming them and accepting them for who they are. Social democracy is failing this test and giving succour to those who are anti-immigration. Rather than embracing cosmopolitanism, social democratic politicians have joined the race to empathise with intolerance towards immigrants, the blaming of them for societies' problems, and lack of openness to other cultures through questioning multiculturalism.

This is dangerous. It legitimates intolerance and racism. History has shown time and again what this can lead to in practice. It's also empirically flawed. We aren't faced by a tidal wave of migrants. Migration is one type of globalisation that has gone into reverse, since governments started to clamp down on it in the 1970s. 2.5% of the world's population are migrants. Even when migration is fairly free – as before the controls of recent decades and under the EU's open borders - we aren't swamped by immigrants. Immigration is economically beneficial. Britain's New Labour government estimated that it boosted growth in the UK by £6bn a year. Migration turns unproductive workers into productive ones. Immigrants in the UK are twice as likely to start a new business as people born there. Immigration creates jobs. It was behind a boom in the UK construction industry. It leads to further growth when immigrants spend their wages. It increases tax revenue – the opposite of immigrants being a burden on the welfare state. It provides workers for areas where it's difficult to recruit, for instance in high-skilled and low-paid work, and for public services. Young migrant workers also help with the demographic pensions crisis. Many prejudices are based on misinformation about migrants taking jobs and being a burden on the state. These need to be challenged rather than reproduced by anti-immigration rhetoric.

There are also cultural benefits. Look at London and New York. These are thriving cities, because of their diversity. Diversity is dynamic and leads to progress. Think of great sportspeople, scientists, writers and business leaders in rich countries and how many of them were born outside the countries that adopted them. But the most important advantages of immigration are the cosmopolitan ones, the ones for others. There are benefits for migrants themselves, often escaping poor or desperate economic and political situations, and for the world beyond our borders, for instance through huge remittances to poorer countries. Cosmopolitanism is about obligations to those other than our own. A failure on immigration is a failure of cosmopolitanism. And if social democracy won't take up this kind of wider obligation, who will?

Social democracy and anti-immigration

Social democratic politicians say they need to align with anti-immigrant concerns to connect with their core constituencies. They have to be seen to recognise that peoples' problems with things like housing and wages are linked to immigration. But in both of these cases there are social democratic and labour explanations for the problems. Lack of housing in the UK is not caused by immigration. It's caused by lack of housing. A significant proportion of this resulted from the selling off of social housing by Mrs. Thatcher, a privatisation of state assets. Low wages for unskilled workers aren't due to immigration (to the extent that wages go down with immigration, which is questionable). It's not immigrants that cut wages. It's employers that cut wages. The reason they do so is out of economic self-interest on the market and because of weak trade unions and poor employment rights. Social democratic politicians are complicit in turning issues like housing and wages into immigration issues when there are social democratic explanations for them – in terms of the limits of the market and workers' rights.

One argument is that politicians have to adopt anti-immigration politics to draw citizens away from the far-right. But it's not clear that propounding racist arguments undermines the far-right more than validates their arguments and makes racism more acceptable. Either way, the centre-right will siphon off anti-immigrant sentiment from the extremes. Let them do that dirty work and let social democracy be the force that sides with progressive and liberal ideas and cosmopolitanism. Some say that social democratic politicians need to appeal to popular anti-immigrant sentiment to get votes. Of course politicians have to win elections. But every vote won by being anti-immigration is one lost to liberals or greens, especially on an emotive issue to do with tolerance and race. And some issues are too important and dangerous to turn into electoralism. Antagonism to migration, which is often racism, is one of those.

Politicians need to shape arguments, not just accommodate to the electorate. Social democratic politicians should respond to anti-immigration ideas by explaining the benefits of immigration and giving social democratic explanations for the problems it's said to be responsible for. Where would we be if progressives, liberals and the left hadn't tried to shape views in the face of popular prejudice? Would people without property have got the vote? Would we have trade unions? Would we have a welfare state? Would slavery have been abolished? Would women have the vote? Would homosexuality have been legalised?

Global cosmopolitan politics

Social democrats are lacking cosmopolitanism when it comes to openness to outsiders. But there's a danger they'll put too much faith in cosmopolitanism as a means. This is in the case of actors from around the world coming together in global institutions and talks to deal with global issues. Why should we have doubts about

this approach? One reason is that there isn't much evidence of values providing a basis for global cosmopolitan politics. World values surveys show that people identify with local or national identities as much as global ones. On the issue of openness to others, surveys show that people exaggerate the scale of migration, misconstrue who the main immigrant groups are, and blame migrants for problems to do with jobs, wages, welfare and crime. Large numbers believe there are too many immigrants and favour stronger immigration controls. That's the social and cultural basis for cosmopolitanism, or the lack of it. What about prospects in political life?

Europe is sometimes seen as the highpoint of cosmopolitanism. In the EU different countries have come together in mutual structures. But mobility within the union has been liberalised while that from outside restricted. Furthermore agricultural subsidies help European farmers to compete with those from poorer countries. Europe favours its own over outsiders – the opposite of cosmopolitanism. There's also a record of cosmopolitanism not working in talks on climate change, nuclear proliferation, global poverty and world trade. Agreements are frequently not reached and are stymied by the most powerful states pursuing their own interests. They break down as a norm, or are weak, or unenforceable, or not carried out, for instance in relation to emissions reductions, millennium development goals, debt and aid pledges, EU deficit rules, and free trade.

An alternative political approach to cosmopolitanism

If there isn't much basis for cosmopolitanism in social values or politics how can we pursue it? One way is through conflict politics. You can't be cosmopolitan with an enemy who has opposite interests and ideas. Clashes of interest and ideology are why global talks fail. So you should work with a conflict rather than a cosmopolitan way of doing politics. This doesn't mean you can't form alliances with others. But these need to be selective rather than agreements with all in globally inclusive fora. Of course you should do what you can through institutions like the UN. But the left will stand a better chance of achieving cosmopolitanism if it's choosier. Social democrats should look for a global left rather than global cosmopolitanism.

If you want to reduce nuclear arms you're better off doing it through bilateral deals with other states with nuclear weapons, as the US and Russia have done, than through global treaties like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If you want to reduce climate change you may have a better chance looking for initiatives on the ground and supporting them than trying to agree and enforce abstract targets in global meetings like Copenhagen. If you want to combat American neoliberalism you might be better off starting a

trade group with other anti-neoliberal states than pushing for global economic regulation via world fora like the UN, WB or IMF.

Top-down agreements (eg to keep warming to two degrees) are too abstract and unenforceable. So change needs to come from practical experiences on the ground – the power of example, for instance in areas like energy reduction, solar power or electric car initiatives. The Tobin tax, debt relief and the exposure of exploitative MNCs are cosmopolitan initiatives to do with obligations to others. Social and protest movements put these on the agenda. They are a non-state source of cosmopolitanism that social democrats should look to for guidance and alliances. On issues of internationalism, liberalism, ecology, and appealing to young people, greens have a better record than social democrats. So social democracy should also reach out to the greens.

The future for cosmopolitan social democracy

Cosmopolitan social democracy needs to shape arguments against populist nationalism not accommodate to it, or it will betray cosmopolitan respect for others and their cultures, as well as liberal principles of the right to move and escape suffering, and it will be abandoning progressive territory. The dangers of racism are too great to pander to anti-immigration. Social democracy can gain reactionary support by doing so but it will lose progressive support.

Cosmopolitan social democracy should work on different levels, not just through global governance. It should use bilateral forms of internationalism restricted more to those you can agree with, in conflict with those with different interests. This is rather than searching for an impossible cosmopolitan consensus with actors who have opposed interests and ideologies. There isn't much choice when the other side is against cosmopolitan goals. This involves internationalism with cosmopolitan objectives but not cosmopolitan means. It includes working with developing countries and social movements who have cosmopolitan values. And internationalism needs to work up from the power of example and practice rather than pursue abstract and unenforceable agreements from the top down.

Social democracy has to be friendlier to outsiders if it wants to call itself cosmopolitan. But it needs to compromise on cosmopolitanism in its means to achieve cosmopolitanism ends.

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