

## Whose Side Are We on? Liberalism and Socialism Are Not the Same

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Reflecting on the future of the Left we are too easily drawn into debates on what needs to be done to “solve our problems” – end exploitation, establish global peace, reverse the rise of inequality, restore the balance between nature and society. This begs the question of who wants those problems solved and is willing to do something, the “right thing”, to this end. Who is The Left, or can become it, apart from those of “us” who want to see it recreated and re-empowered because without it our reflections will never be more than idle chatter? Who are our constituents, our popular base waiting to be mobilized and organized, our class *an sich* whose interests, and indeed whose practicable interests, we can hope to define so as to coincide with the general interests of mankind?

### VANISHING CONSTITUENCIES

Surveying the social landscape of the advanced capitalist societies from which we hail and which we know best, many of us have sympathy with and still feel somehow indebted to the *old working class*, the generation of trade union and left party members under postwar democratic, state-administered capitalism. Many of them are now retired, or about to retire. Their industries, the factories where they have toiled, have shrunk or disappeared, leaving them behind in their now depressed and decaying local communities. They are, their labour is no longer *die Quelle allen Reichtums*;<sup>\*</sup> they now depend for their livelihood on a society more-or-less willing to pay for their pensions and healthcare. In a neoliberal, turbo-capitalist society, such dependence is a stigma. Even where governments and the public treat them respectfully, the legitimacy of the social entitlements their generation has instituted is fragile, as indicated by recurring discussions on pension reform and

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<sup>\*</sup> In English, “the source of all wealth”, as in the SPD’s *Gothaer Programm* of 1875 and Marx’s “Critique of it. The labor theory of value (which goes back to Adam Smith) was a central tenet of early socialism.

healthcare costs. “Grandfather clauses” freezing benefits for current recipients that the next generation will not receive further de-legitimize the welfare state in its present form. They also reinforce perceptions of the old working class as an unproductive surplus population that, fortunately, will wither away with time.

When we were young, we sometimes found solace in the belief that “the revolution advances on the mortality tables”. Something like this, I am sure, is today felt by the new generation of *human capital owners*, the new middle class recruited in large part from among the children of the old working class, who have moved to the cities where they live very different lives from their parents. The social marginalization their parents feel, their sense of being seen by society as an economic and social burden, is bound to breed deep resentment. The new politics of neoliberalism no longer has a place for their industrial-proletarian collectivism, not least because it required the shared experience of factory work to become politically productive. Alienated from the self-declared “knowledge society” of today and removed from their means of political production, many of them are now turning to the New Right, which has learned to cultivate their sense of undeserved inferiority. An important contributing factor seems to be that some of the new nationalist parties and movements defend the national welfare state in which the old working class has invested its political and economic capital and on which their livelihood depends. Their turn to the Right widens the gap between them and what has become the mainstream of “modern society”. While “the Left” may pity them for their disappointment, winning them back seems difficult at best, and so would be convincing the rest of society that they are more than a demographic rustbelt from which nothing can be learned for the future.

Who remains for the Left to give support to and draw support from? To answer this strategically all-important question we may look at extant ways of life under “advanced capitalism”, their different relationship to market and economy, and the kinds of solidarity associated with them. One group that comes to mind has already been mentioned: the children of the old working class who have made it under post-industrial capitalism, at least so far – certified owners of expensive human

capital, confident self-promoters and self-commodifiers, highly adept at marketing and networking, with a deeply engrained view of the world as a meritocratic tournament designed to detect and reward the best, according to inherited talent, acquired skills, and relentless effort. They are the born, or trained, individualists *par excellence*, and therefore liberals at heart and to the bone. Nothing is left in them of the collectivism of the industrial workers of yesteryear. Individualism reigns supreme, and politics is there to establish the freedom of the individual from the collectivity, whatever that collectivity may be. Democracy, then, is rights without duties, or more precisely: without authoritatively imposed and enforced duties. Rights, the model being human rights, come for free, from *a right to have rights* – and democratic progress consists in the removal of whatever obligations may in the past have been foisted on individuals as a condition of membership, detracting from the essential liberty of everyone to live the lives they deem best suited for their “self-realization”.

Not that there was no place in this for compassion and indeed solidarity. Where individual rights are at stake – in particular rights to be different and not to be discriminated against in the market-place – they are almost religiously upheld. Equality comes from and is identical to the absence of discrimination on the basis of whatever ascriptive characteristic may distinguish an individual from others.<sup>†</sup> Democracy means above all equal access to markets and institutions. It also has a place for material solidarity and egalitarian redistribution, but ideally these should be voluntary, private not public, springing from an informally benevolent “civil society” rather than being formally obligatory. Rights of citizenship come for free, unlike in the past when they were linked, legally or morally, to military or other public service. Freedom and democracy mean the right to choose one’s obligations freely. Since the draft was abolished in most Western countries, no comparable civic duty has emerged anywhere to take its place. Parties or trade unions, with packages of programmatic commitments one has to buy wholesale as a matter of organizational discipline once they have been

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<sup>†</sup> For example, Tufts University’s “non-discrimination statement” lists “race, color, national or ethnic origin, ancestry, age, religion or religious creed, disability or handicap, sex or gender (including pregnancy, sexual harassment and other sexual misconduct including acts of sexual violence such as rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and coercion), gender identity and/or expression (including a transgender identity), sexual orientation, military or veteran status, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal, state or local law.”

formally adopted after “democratic” deliberation, are perceived as archaic, and so are the bureaucratic formalisms of traditional political organization. Projects, not parties, are the organizational form of choice: one can join and leave any time, as one sees fit, hang on as long as nothing more attractive appears, and not longer. Democratic centralism, as it used to be called, and party discipline of whatever kind are out.

Political parties or movements pursuing an alternative society, instead of specific, individual, and programmatically unrelated single purposes, do not thrive on this kind of motivational base. Any attempt to organize the new middle class must accommodate high fluidity of commitments, “non-ideological”, fleeting enthusiasm, and a continuous building and rebuilding of individual and collective identities, as in “patchwork families”, in “flexible” labor markets, and in project-group work organization. This very much corresponds to the possibilities offered by the new “social media” for individually-centered social networking, as a substitute for or, depending on one’s perspective, a technological improvement over older, more stable social structures. Political engagement is voluntary in this world, funded by donations rather than dues or subscriptions, often taking the form of mass petitions on the internet in support of specific causes. Basically, such engagement is a charitable activity. Compared to the new politics of disjointed spontaneity, the social-democratic welfare state appears like a rigid bureaucratic monster,<sup>‡</sup> and the charitable giving of multi-billionaires like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg is apt to elicit more admiration, in spite or even because of its capriciousness, than the tax-financed, routinized programmes of public social policy.

As to the political economy of the new middle class and its liberal libertarianism, we find here a strong belief in merit as the principal source of socio-economic status and in the basic fairness of educational institutions and labor markets, if properly arranged so as to offer equal opportunities to everyone. This combines with a general mood of optimism, perhaps linked to the need in the new service sector jobs to display a friendly face to everybody, customers and colleagues alike. Quasi-

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<sup>‡</sup> Remember Jürgen Habermas, who in the mid-1980s, after his conversion from “critical theory” to liberalism, found the “lifeworld” under attack from two sides, the market and the welfare state, which he considered equally socially destructive (Habermas 1985; 1987).

obligatory optimism and socially expected cheerful confidence in one's own market chances suppress concerns over social security, including in old age, which deepens the cultural gap between the generations. That the world is a competitive meritocracy, an open-ended rat-race is considered normal and nothing to complain about, not least since complaining may be read by others as a sign of weakness or of a disposition to underperform. With hard work in precarious employment under competitive pressure comes a demand for advanced consumption as a reward for and demonstration of personal success.<sup>5</sup> Conspicuous consumption often includes conspicuous attention to environmental sustainability, signaling social responsibility. Markets, for labour no less than for goods and services, are experienced as empires of freedom – whereas public provision tends to be found lacking in quality and attention to individual needs and tastes,<sup>1</sup> making privatization appear desirable even among progressives. As women in the new middle class are fully integrated in competitive career and consumption efforts in the money economy, families, where they still exist, have little to no time to contribute to the production and maintenance of public goods, in particular where building their human capital had required them to take up credit which they now have to service.

#### DIVISIVE CONFLICT: THE CASE OF IMMIGRATION

Whether the future of the Left can be in an alliance between the old working class and the new human capital owners must be doubted. Interests, worldviews, and identities differ widely. An important example of political discord is immigration, an issue central to the politics and economics of contemporary societies. In the Fordist factories of the past, the political integration of immigrants, working side-by-side with their local colleagues, was promoted by trade unions, as a matter of both economic self-interest and political ideology. More recently, however, immigrants have tended to work in the small-firm service sector, which is typically not unionized. There they must be and are willing to accept any wage, inevitably outbidding their indigenous competition. Also, with precarious

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<sup>5</sup>And as a precondition of ever-increasing work effort. As Durkheim already observed in his *Division du travail*, we are in modern capitalist societies not working as hard as we do because we want to consume more, but we must consume more in order to be able to work harder.

employment and rising unemployment, immigrants are seen as competitors for welfare state services and benefits as well, especially by those living on social assistance or old-age pensions, in a world of tightening public budgets where fiscal consolidation has become the order of the day. Moreover, in the larger cities where immigrants are most likely to find employment, they seek accommodation in the postwar housing developments built for and occupied by the old indigenous working class, where rents are low due to public subsidies and poor maintenance. Here immigrants' ways of life jar with those of the older inhabitants, who find their accustomed societies disrupted and see their communities dissolve. In response, they look for new places to live, which they find only outside the big cities where free market housing has become too expensive for them. As they leave, the suburbs turn into enclaves of – themselves ethnically divided – immigrant communities. Meanwhile the old working class forms its own segregated settlements in the small towns on the borders of the metropolitan areas where they live, resentfully, like a minority in their own country.<sup>2</sup>

Political division is reinforced by spatial segregation. In recent years, the urban–rural divide has become a main cleavage line in the politics of contemporary capitalist societies. Cities and their hinterlands have turned into political monocultures, libertarian-cosmopolitan the former and traditionalist-communitarian the latter. The result is mutually hostile, self-reinforcing political milieus that have little else in common than strong visceral contempt for one another.<sup>3</sup> Center-left parties, in alliance with the libertarian wing of the political spectrum as a whole, have withdrawn into the cities and abandoned their former followers to new right-wing “populists”, often insulting them for turning to the nationalist Right in search of political voice. As a result, the centre-left, locked into the cosmopolitan rhetoric of its new middle-class constituents, has in important countries lost the capacity to govern – not least in the United States, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and elsewhere.

While immigration is perceived as a threat by the former working class, it is not a problem for the new urban middle class. Not only can they afford to reside in the cities where they work, but they also remain undisturbed by the immigrants who live apart from them in their own quarters in the suburbs. Indeed, without continuing immigration, legal or illegal, seekers of asylum, protection, or

employment, the new middle-class way of life would be unsustainable. Cheap immigrant labor is required for care and repair work of all sorts, performed on homes, children, the aged and the sick, as well as for cleaning and cooking and the delivery of goods ordered over the internet to spare high-speed consumers from having to do their shopping in person and on site. \*\* Career feminism in particular, and the family structure and family life that come with it, would be entirely impractical without poor people ready to make the long daily trips back and forth from their segregated quarters to where they perform their indispensable services.<sup>4</sup> If in spite of all precautions, the two urban classes come too close to one another, as in integrated schools where immigrant children threaten the proper preparation of the future elites, ways are found to stream the designated high-achievers into more private educational institutions where they get what they need for inheriting the status of their parents.

Perfectly fitting the lifeways and interests of meritocratic urban dwellers is a universalistic-cosmopolitan worldview in which free migration in and out figures as a natural human right and open borders appear as a state of political innocence with which governments must not be allowed to tamper. Communitarian insistence on older rights and local traditions easily appears racist from this perspective, and is without hesitation called so. Borders of any kind are regarded with suspicion and indeed disgust by anti-racist cosmopolitans, except where they are drawn by markets rather than by communities or states. Social integration is to be on the basis of universal values only, which makes social bonds superficial enough to allow for unlimited individual choice as well as for arms-length market relations, in all relevant spheres of life. Cosmopolitan human capital owners, with their natural affinity to market freedoms, see themselves as citizens of the world unaccountable to any national state, and the world as a duty-free market, for fine foods just as for employment and lifestyles. Their labour markets being global, or imagined to be so, they want in the name of equality and soli-

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\*\* Not to mention the regular supply by immigrant family businesses of the illegal drugs required for increasing the performance and enhancing the leisure activities of the creative classes. Immigrants also bring in and prepare at affordable prices the exotic foods needed for advanced cosmopolitan consumerism. For an impressive ethnographic account see Ben Judah, *This is London: Life and Death in the World City*. London: Picador, 2016.

parity the same privilege to be extended to Philippine women desiring to care for small children in New York, Polish plumbers eager to fix toilets in Chelsea, and Moroccan marijuana dealers dying to enrich party life in Cologne. As documented by Brexit and Trump, and by Le Pen, Wilders, and many others, permissive-anarchic cosmopolitanism of this sort is unlikely to resonate positively with the old working class, let alone provide a foundation for a political alliance including it.

But what about the immigrants themselves, so cheerfully welcomed by urban cosmopolitans? For the Left, they are on the whole a political disappointment. Being happy to be where they are, they are not easy to organize. Miserable as their lives may appear to others, where they come from life was worse, or so they believe. Always scared of being expelled, especially if their legal status is less than fully secure, they prefer not to stick their heads out. As their main competitive advantage is their willingness to work for less, and still less, they are unlikely to join trade unions, which in turn often see them as a new, politically hopeless *lumpen* proletariat. Moreover, they are far from a unified group, typically carrying their cultures of origin with them to form ethnically homogenous enclaves often enough at loggerheads with one another, fighting over economic turf and social status.<sup>5</sup> Traditional and often exploitative social relations inside immigrant communities are vigorously defended against egalitarian pressures from the surrounding society, helped by the fact that television, the new social media, and cheap airline travel enable immigrants to maintain close personal ties to their native countries.<sup>††</sup> Far from using host country opportunities for political participation and organization, many immigrants, and often a majority of them, not really having arrived where they now live, remain politically loyal to their home countries and its parties and movements, and this seems to be so even where they are superficially well-integrated in their countries of choice.

A telling example are German Turks or Turkish Germans, often third-generation immigrants who remain passionate Turkish nationalists, taking sides in Turkish domestic politics while mostly staying out of German political life, even though many now have dual citizenship (which was legally

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<sup>††</sup> This makes them unlikely political allies for the urban middle-class with its liberal causes, in spite of their symbiotic relationship with it. That relationship is in fact one of master and servant, and sometimes one of charity.

introduced to advance their “integration”). The campaign in 2017 by the Turkish president, Erdogan, for a new constitution that would greatly increase his powers involved numerous rallies in Germany and other Western European countries organized by local Turkish communities. Members of the Turkish government addressed and were cheered by tens of thousands of flag-waving Turkish immigrants, many of them with dual passports. The situation is similar with former Russian citizens who, as ethnic Germans, were admitted to Germany after 1990. In the conflicts between Germany, or “Europe”, with Russia over Crimea and Ukraine they tend to take sides with the present Russian government. Similarly, Polish immigrants in Germany tend to support the present “nationalist” Polish government, against the freely dished-out “democratic” advice by German politicians and the German news media.

Moving on, would not the *young losers*, those who have tried but failed to join the new middle class, having in vain invested in their human capital only to be rejected by the human resource specialists and their assessment centers – would they, scared of the precarious life and not confident enough to forget their anxiety about their future, many of them one-time supporters of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, not be the ideal constituency for a revived left politics? Sidelined in the rat race, overwhelmed by debt, their hopes disappointed, now eking out a marginal subsistence in jobs for which they are vastly overqualified, forever on the margins of financialized capitalist consumerism? Add to them those who may, in the not-too-far future, be made redundant by the advance of artificial intelligence – drivers of trucks, trains, tanks, and taxis, delivery men, soldiers, and meat cutters, but also lawyers, architects, journalists, and surgeons whose jobs may soon be performed by machines<sup>6</sup> – all of them candidates, perhaps, for a guaranteed basic income, free healthcare, and public provision of entertainment and education in the arts and humanities. Of course, we don’t know how many there will be – although indications are that they will be more than just a few. Nor do we know how they will mentally manage the experience of being designated losers in a world designed for winners – low achievers disparagingly compared by others, and often enough by themselves, to the “high potentials” recognized early as such by those in charge of status assignment in

contemporary capitalism. Losers tend to be demoralized; whoever wants to organize them must have a story ready that credibly reassures them that their defeat is not their fault – which is far from easy in a world so deeply individualistic and meritocratic in spirit. Ultimately, what this means is nothing less than that a new Left must somehow steer its potential constituents away from the late-capitalist lifestyle of *coping* as test of personal worth, *hoping* as a civic duty, *doping* as a shot in the arm to either help with or substitute for individual achievement, and *shopping* as the ultimate reward in an honorable capitalist life.<sup>7</sup>

### LIBERALISM, COLLECTIVISM, SOCIALISM

Will it be at all possible to draw the losers of digitalized capitalism, current and future, into a left political alliance with old labour, with (some of) the immigrants, even with (some of) the winners forming the new, urban middle class? Can their private frustration be transformed into public mobilization for fundamental social change, or will it continue to be culturally suppressed and politically pacified by occasional economic handouts providing them with a small share in the blessings of consumerism? One question is about the channels by which the Left would be able to communicate with them – a question that is in different ways also relevant in relation to the immigrants: how to lure the losers away from their Facebook and Instagram studies of Justin Bieber’s and Selena Gomez’s latest exploits – from their captivated entanglement in the unsocial diversion networks provided for them by Silicon Valley tycoons with certificates from Harvard College? More important, however, is what an alliance that includes them, assuming that their numbers will rise, is to offer them as a programme to act upon.

My claim here is that, today, a left politics that is not from the beginning doomed to let down its constituents must be more than liberal politics, while in important respects it must also be less than liberal. What Americans mean by liberalism is by and large what Europeans call social democracy: a “progressive” politics of individual freedom from traditional social constraints combined with corrective egalitarian intervention in free markets under capitalist relations of production. American-style liberalism emerged when classical liberalism, a doctrine for which individual freedom depended

on a state-free market economy and a government devoted to economic laissez-faire, co-opted under the pressure of circumstances “programmes” like the New Deal and the Great Society, the War on Poverty, No Child Left Behind, and so on.<sup>††</sup> In Europe, by comparison, liberalism did not turn social-democratic since the political space of social democracy was occupied early on by the political parties of the labor movement. Liberal parties, unless they temporarily become social-liberal to govern together with social democrats, usually side with the center-right. Culturally, they may be either conservative or progressive, mostly somewhere in between. Their core constituency being business, small and large, they continue to represent strong preferences for free markets, balanced budgets, and low state spending, which they ideologically link to their central theme, the freedom of the individual citizen as a *bourgeois*.

Both European social democracy and American New Deal liberalism disintegrated under the pressures of the successive crises of capitalism after the 1970s.<sup>§</sup> The postwar combination of liberalism with welfare state interventionism, (also known as democratic capitalism) had never been more than tenuous; now, with “globalization”, labor as a class, acting as a counter-party to capitalism on behalf of society, had lost any capacity to strike mutually beneficial deals with capital and its management, except heavily lopsided ones due to dramatically changed power relations.<sup>§§</sup> In response, American-style liberalism – and in Europe, classical liberalism and social democracy – transformed into neoliberalism. In the United States this involved a re-definition of the “social question” addressed by the New Deal into the “social issues” of current “culture wars” over almost anything sexual, from abortion to transgender restrooms. In Europe, liberal parties turned life-style libertarian, dissociating themselves from more traditionally bourgeois values, and social democrats basically followed suit, often to the unease of their core membership. Politics, with class issues suspended

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<sup>††</sup> It helped that in American English, the semantic spectrum of “liberal” overlaps with that of “generous” – and that “free” can mean free of charge, as in “free lunch”.

<sup>§§</sup> This was different under “Fordism”. See Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streeck, “Productive Solidarities: Economic Strategy and Left Politics,” in David Miliband, ed., *Reinventing the Left*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1994, pp. 128-145.

under the dictates of “Third Way” globalization, turned liberal-pluralist, with ever new “cultural” concerns being paraded before the public by ever new groups claiming attention for their particular demands for free choice and social recognition.

This, I argue, is where *socialism* must come in. A renewed left politics cannot be a revamped version of American liberalism or European social democracy: global capital is not a class with which national societies can negotiate a productive class compromise. And it cannot be neoliberal-libertarian either, neoliberalism as an economic doctrine having collapsed in 2008,<sup>9</sup> and libertarianism being taken care of by neoliberalism’s remaining liberal-pluralist politics of individual liberty, personal freedom, self-realization and choice, and with its critique of pre-established social identities and moral obligations. The left counter-programme to libertarian consumerism can only be socialist. However it may in detail be defined, socialism comes with the idea of society as a moral community, both imperfect and in need of improvement by its members, a collective order of human interdependence that precedes its individual members, or a collective good that needs to be protected from falling into the hands of individualistic predators who would privatize and thereby destroy it.

Socialist politics is stewardship for a social community that human beings need as much as their natural environment. It is collectivistic, both respectful and critical of tradition, as well as constructivist; and it recognizes individuals’ existential dependence on a community, which in turn depends on and is entitled to the support of its more fortunate members in particular. As much as socialism wants individuals to be happy, it knows and lets it be known that a hedonistic life is not a responsible life; that people owe something to their weaker neighbors; and that a good life is impossible without responsible collective maintenance, not just of natural but also of social resources. Socialists also know that societies and communities that can effectively demand and attract moral commitment – that can, in other words, create and enforce social obligations – are and must be smaller and “thicker” than the imagined global society of contemporary neoliberalism-cum-libertarianism; citizenship, with the rights and duties that flow from it, just like the government by

which it is constituted, is always particular and never universal.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Socialist politics requires and is possible only in collectivities that have a capacity to make effective demands on their members. In the modern world, such collectivities are organized as states that draw their moral authority from being democratic. While socialists must be, and are, willing to find a place in society for communities other than states, socialism has been and continues to be intricately bound up with statehood – democratic and in need of democratization – and with its territorially delimited monopolistic control over the means of violence.

In its move toward universal liberalism, the Left has largely abandoned collectivism – which can exist only as particularism, today predominantly invested in nation-states and national politics – to the radical Right, allowing it to pose as defender of last resort of the national arena of collective interest articulation and binding government. In the 1990s, with left-liberal and increasingly neoliberal individualism riding on the coattails of market expansion, the Left began to define itself as anti-nationalist – ergo anti-racist, ergo anti-fascist, in effect allowing collectivism to become associated with nationalism, racism, and fascism. As a result, nationalists, racists, and fascists could present themselves as the only remaining allies of those seeking national protection from international markets and corporations. On the Third Way, what had once been *left anti-capitalism* turned into *liberal-libertarian pro-capitalism*, if not intentionally then by default, by dissociating itself from the politically most effective collectivism, that of the nation-state. As a consequence, collectivism came to be captured by the Right, and in fighting the Right the Left allied itself with neoliberalism – with free trade, free markets, and state-free globalization. Economic prosperity and social protection were to come, no longer from collective action, but from the beneficial effects of free trade made possible by neoliberal national reforms in response to international market conditions and constraints. In the new left-universalist-cosmopolitan frame of mind, borders became anathema, as did localized soli-

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> As the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, pointed out in October 2016 at the Conservative Party conference, where she promised to stand by the result of the Brexit referendum. In his 2017 Reith Lecture, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah let it be known that this made her a hopeless Western chauvinist. For a brilliant comment that says everything that needs to be said on this, see Dani Rodrik, “Global Citizens, National Shirkers”, in: *Social Europe*, 22 February 2017.

arity – discounting national-state government in favor of liberal-voluntaristic governance by experts, epistemic communities, well-meaning NGOs, and problem-solving, knowledge-processing international conferences.

Having declared national politics and the nation-state obsolete, and having placed its hopes on global cosmopolitanism as the social solidarity of the future, center-leftism has become indistinguishable from libertarian liberalism, most of all in the United States. The radical Left, for its part, seems to lack the ideological imagination to recognize phenomena like the one-nation Toryism of the post-Brexit British Prime Minister as an invasion of political territory that is by tradition theirs. Instead many on the Left feel a sense of sympathy with what one can call Silicon Valley progressivism: with its universalistic pro-immigration language confusing solidarity with charity, with its billionaire philanthropy, and with its utopian social policy projects such as a guaranteed minimum income for everybody, presumably worldwide. Redefining international relations to make them a vehicle of high-tech globalization while re-building social structures into networks of global consumerism, Silicon Valley progressivism needs politics to provide for effective demand in its borderless markets, so that electronic gadgets can be sold to “users” and advertisement space to corporations seeking customers able to pay for their products. There is no underestimating the attraction for much of the former Left, now (neo-)liberal Left, of the Silicon Valley utopia of a borderless global society based on universal civil rights – essentially the right not to be discriminated in free trade on ascriptive criteria – and governed by a stateless *lex mercatoria* in conjunction with circles of elite experts disposed to protect global universalism from the temptations of particularistic, national, state-organized solidarity.

Of course, socialism is more than just community-building and good government. Ultimately the reason why socialism must be at the heart of left politics is *capitalism*. Speaking of a Left that wants to be more than just liberal, or what has remained of liberalism, simply makes no sense without speaking of capitalism. It is capitalism, not democracy, that constitutes the unity of modern society, and it is from this unity that a left politics must derive its – socialist – programmatic and practical

coherence. Capitalism with its peculiar “laws of motion” is the inevitable vantage point for any socialist project concerned, as it must be, with society as a whole. It is the fight against capitalism, and it alone, which makes left politics socialist – that is, makes it more than a collection of unrelated worthy causes advancing individual liberty and well-being. This does not preclude sympathy with, and indeed support for, such causes as equal civil rights for gays, lesbians, transgenders and others, although they can be served just as well and perhaps even better in a single-purpose, liberal-pluralist organizational format. To be closer to the core of a socialist agenda, causes must be related to the overall confrontation between capitalism, as a socially destructive political-economic order, and society as organized by left-socialist politics. Socialist feminism, for example, demands that men and women not allow themselves to be pitted against one another in the labour market; it has nothing in common with the exploitative “leaning-in” feminism proclaimed by American corporate business, or for that matter with center-left ideas to make it obligatory for large companies to have a specific percentage of women on their boards of directors. Characters like Marissa Mayer and Sheryl Sandberg are capitalist icons created to elicit treacherous hopes and misguided identifications in real-life women struggling from day to day to make ends meet – propaganda tools just like other celebrities making money by way of the glorification of capitalist consumption and production.

#### FIGHTING CAPITALISM TODAY

This raises the question of what capitalism is, a question that I obviously can no more than touch on. I define capitalism for present purposes as a social regime dependent for its survival on the continuous expansion of the range and nature of monetized social relations, producing “economic growth” (as measured by the total volume of monetized transactions) by eating into its surrounding social context. “Growth” under capitalism results in, and serves the purpose of, continuous accumulation of monetized capital available to be invested in further accumulation – a process that is fundamentally inegalitarian as capitalist capital is privately owned and new capital accrues mostly to those possessing or commanding old capital. Capitalist capital accumulation is conditional on the

social values that govern non-monetized social relations being replaced with market prices, making it possible to extract profit from them. Capital is invested – that is, combined with human labour – for profit maximization only, subordinating all substantive purposes of economic activity to the single, formal purpose of increasing the sum total of (privately owned) monetized capital. In particular, capitalism’s need for endless growth requires that subsistence economies be transformed into profit-maximization economies, a transformation that requires complex means of social control, especially in societies where the level of material satisfaction is high enough to allow in principle for a less “capitalistically rational” life. Moreover, capitalism’s dependence on endless growth, breeding with the help of ever more absurd motivational technologies an unnatural psychology of greed as the centerpiece of modern culture, diverts attention from the finiteness of the natural and social world, and from the wastefulness of production for its own sake. It also hides the senselessness of ever-intensifying competitive effort in a world of obscenely increasing inequality amidst unprecedented abundance, as well as from the increasing risks of collapse inherent in a growth model that is beginning to reach its limits.

Since the 1990s at the latest, capitalism has been a global system. But the social structures with which it interacts – from which it draws support while at the same time commodifying and thereby consuming them – differ by locality as repositories of territorially situated histories and cultures. As a result, the intersection between capitalism and society where the conflictual relationship between the two is institutionally and politically regulated is not universally the same, and neither are the problems that pose themselves in it. That capitalism is now global does not mean that the battles between capitalism and society, even though they result from the same general tension, are the same everywhere. Political interventions to minimize economic risks and maximize social protection, slow down resource consumption, correct asymmetries and inequalities, defend substantive against formal rationality, and in general manage the contradictions entailed in a capitalist production process must take different forms in different places. In fact, they may have to protect local particularisms against the universalism of capitalist monetized profit-making: not everything has a sales

price that can be compared to its production cost, and nobody can impose on us non-commercial obligations other than the particular social system to which we owe who we are.

The need to act locally to gain control over what is now a global system is one of the many problems facing a socialist politics today. How to coordinate across political jurisdictions, cultural divisions, linguistic barriers, and economic interests if we cannot and do not want to speak the universal language of the general equivalent, treating social conditions and human needs as though they were convertible into convertible monies? What would a comprehensive and coherent socialist project for a global capitalist society have to be like to take into account the diversity and particularity of the human condition? Even if we limit ourselves to the “developed” societies of “the West”, the task of inventing a “future of the Left”, and indeed for a socialist Left, appears nothing short of awesome. In the past socialists could rely on collective action for economic self-interest as a pre-school for socialist politics, although demanding “more” was as such never socialist, even if done collectively. Now we face a situation where an entire culture, that of “the West”, has been made to believe in an open-ended happiness scale, corresponding to an open-ended needs scale motivating and necessitating the open-ended work and consumption effort required for the unending accumulation of capital under conditions of material abundance – the capitalist rationalization and monetization of the last remaining non-commercialized social relations. What we are dealing with here is a cultural problem, not one of inefficient production, and only partly one of unequal distribution. Our most formidable task may well be to talk people out of the myth that they will be happier in proportion to how much more they consume, proportionate in turn to how much more “money they make” – a myth spread and pressed into people’s minds and souls every day, every hour by the most gigantic, most sophisticated, most expensive propaganda machinery mankind has ever seen.

Dispelling that myth and breaking its hold over our fellow citizens, and in particular those of them who have to struggle hard to keep up with ever-more-demanding consumption standards, requires nothing less than a cultural revolution: a deep re-definition of progress and modernity. Remember how Soviet Communism by the 1960s at the latest turned into goulash communism, promis-

ing its citizens to catch up with and overtake capitalism in private consumption. Not kept, that promise contributed to Communism's demise (Spufford 2010; Alexievich 2016) and fueled the consumerist greed that has, since the transition to capitalism in the 1990s, beset the countries of the former Soviet empire. What socialists must explain if capitalism is to be put back in the cage is that progress is not in having more of the same, but in replacing it with something else, not in a *plus* but in an *aliud* – since in today's capitalism, capitalist plus-making<sup>+++</sup> depends vitally on non-capitalist plus-wanting, plus-working, and plus-consuming.

Ending *the era of plus* is not just a matter of whether one finds a less materialist life ethically superior – which most socialists probably do. If anything is certain, then that the capitalist-consumerist lifestyle of “the West” is not generalizable to humankind as a whole; here Malthus finally wins his case. Any left project must take this to heart. Ultimately it will have to answer the question how it will convincingly communicate the need for a global modernity that learns to conserve resources, physical and social, rather than continuing to use them up; to switch from creative destruction to creative protection, including protection from excessive free trade (not leaving this to the Trumps of this world); to appreciate the economics of subsistence as opposed to expansion; to slow down rather than speed up; and to start a *perestroyka* that does not amount to *uskoreniye*, meaning acceleration, which was the late-communist reform project of Gorbachev, but to controlled deceleration, de-capitalization, more local development, more collectivism and solidarity – in short, a project as utopian as it can possibly be, but probably equally necessary. In the real world, perhaps, such a turn from, essentially, private to public and purchasable to non-purchasable means of satisfaction may be started by saturation or, on the contrary, frustration, or simply by exhaustion from the daily struggle for the latest-model SUV, running shoes, or mobile phone. Left to itself, however, it is likely to be nipped in the bud by social pressures, fear of the future, seductive design, sexualized advertisement and the like. To turn political, it needs to be supported by an ideology of, well, absten-

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<sup>+++</sup> *Plusmacherei*, as Marx calls it in *Capital I*, with the sarcastic undertone that is characteristic of his writing. The English translation, “appropriation of surplus-value”, has nothing of the caustic flavor of the original.

tion – a social equivalent of veganism that is amenable to being politicized, meaning organized into something like a political movement.<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

Is this asking too much – at a time when people are working so hard to turn their creative powers into “human capital”? If the revolution that is required to replace capitalism with something better is indeed a cultural revolution, then what might be needed for it is a modern, perhaps post-modern, variety of religion, both critical of the world and self-critical – a post-protestant spirit, as it were. There is little in the established religions of “the West” that could be of use here. Contemporary Protestantism has lost all distance to modern consumerism, having firmly settled in the *juste milieu* of the new middle class, perhaps with a guilty conscience once in a while that is easily appeased if the eggs one has for breakfast are from organically fed, free-range chickens. Catholicism, as it always has, reserves asceticism to its various cadres of religious virtuosi (Weber) – and is even there under pressure to become less strict or else die out. Veganism is still a basically private obsession, limited to a very few urban dwellers; in fact, it has already been accommodated within the consumer goods industry’s ever more individualized product range. Private abstention is not a problem in a liberal society; resistance sets in, however, if it is to be politicized. In Germany during the 2013 election campaign, the Greens suggested that Germans should commit to one “veggie day” a week, and employers should on that day offer vegetarian meals in their cafeterias. This was scandalized by the media as an attack on freedom of choice and contributed to the party’s disastrous election result. The incident was reminiscent of earlier episodes when the same party called for the price for a liter of gasoline to be doubled, to the equivalent of euro 2.50, or for people to fly by air into their holidays only every other year. Both times voters abandoned the party in droves.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> One should not forget that in the first half of the twentieth century, the Left produced a good number of radical-socialist movements and parties devoted not just to a planned economy but also, as for example the SAP in Germany, to what was then called *Lebensreform* (life reform). In the last years of the Weimar Republic, the young Willy Brandt was a member of the SAP. So was Otto Brenner, a man of enormous political importance for the democratic development of postwar Germany, where he was until his death in 1972 president of the country’s leading trade union, IG Metall. Today the puritanism of the socialist life reformers, if it is at all remembered, tends to be considered a strange aberration and is easily ridiculed. Still, we might venture the thought that their commitment to a simpler, more modest life may today be more relevant for socialism than their belief in state-led economic planning with nationalized means of production.

The only significant religious holdout against Western consumerism today happens to be Muslim fundamentalism – which, however, can attack the consumerist lifestyle only from the outside by violence rather than from the inside by moral argument. Muslim fundamentalism may be seen as a “sour grapes” response to the end of hopes on the capitalist periphery for a kind of “development” that would ultimately give those living there equal access to North American and Western European prosperity. In this way a generational disappointment, in combination with Islam’s historical culture of both strict sobriety and warlike militancy, is transformed into an activist ideology. Parallels between the Taliban and early Calvinists or Puritans are many: black dress, no music, no dancing, no alcohol, no fun, and a harshly restricted sexual life – a collective asceticism rigorously enforced in tightly knit and densely controlled social communities. Muslim fundamentalism can only appear terrorist in Western societies, not just because it finds itself at war with the sinful consumerist West, but also because the atavistic social organization it prescribes for its adherents makes it entirely unsuitable for an anti-capitalist politics in Western societies. In fact Islamist terrorism is today used to reinforce and legitimate the consumerist lifestyle claimed to embody “Western values”, as after the massacre in Paris in November 2015 when European leaders called upon citizens not to allow the terrorists to disrupt their libertarian way of life and continue to go out, dance, drink, and listen to rock music, as their heroic contribution to the war on terror.

A left agenda worth its name must be a socialist agenda, conceived to heal society from the disease of plus-making: more money, more work for money, more consumption with money, more transformation of nature into garbage. But while there can be no new socialist Left without a politicized culture of de-commodification, no such culture is anywhere in sight. Perhaps the historical moment for it has passed, at the latest when Socialist Man was allowed, or had to be allowed, or allowed himself, to be as greedy as Capitalist Man? How will another attempt at socialism assemble a constituency willing and able to fight for it? Others writing in this volume seem to be more confident than I am that such a constituency, one for a Left that is more than just liberal while also in important respects less, will somehow be cobbled together as the need for it becomes even more obvious than

it is already now. I am not so sure that the human species will in the near future rediscover society and in the process rid itself of its late-capitalist addiction to privatized, competitive, socially and physically destructive consumerism. Maybe capitalism as a political economy will expire because of systemic disintegration while capitalism as a culture and way of life will carry on, in helpless and hopeless libertarian confusion and disorganization, and more destructively than ever exposed to the vagaries of – increasingly unstable – global markets?

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