

Why Did the Socialist Parties Lose?

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The fierce defeat of the Socialist and Social Democratic parties in the recent election to the European Parliament is something of a mystery, at least from a social science perspective. The most obvious reason for why the left should have been victorious is of course the collapse of the neo-liberal ideology which has preached that markets work best if left unregulated. The collapse of the financial industry last Fall has led to a general understanding that this ideology, that has dominated the international policy agenda for almost twenty-five years, is now gone. It would thus seem logical that the traditional vote winning Socialist agenda of Keynesian economics and social regulation of markets should have implied a victorious election for the left, but this did not materialize. The simple reason for this is that the conservative leaders in Europe, for example the French President, the German Bundeskanzler and the Swedish and Danish Prime Ministers, were quick to move in this leftist direction when the crisis hit their countries and thus overtook the Socialists' agenda which left the latter with little room for manoeuvre. The failure of the left to come up with an intellectual alternative to the neo-liberal "Washington consensus" has now had its political prize.

However, on a more basic level, it is even more difficult to understand why the left lost this election. Behind this argument is the now overwhelming result from research in social epidemiology showing that social and economic inequality is generally bad for society's well-being. The much publicized research by for example Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show that the more unequal a society is, the more devastating are a large number of social ills. In their recent book - *The Spirit Level* - the most interesting thing politically is that their research clearly shows that inequality does not only hurt the less fortunate strata in society, but also large segments of the middle class.

For example, it is well established that children from educated parents are likely to do better in schools. However, this research shows that even children from the most highly educated families are more literate in the more equal countries. Similarly, the risk for getting struck by mental illness is five times higher in the most unequal of the OECD countries than in the least unequal. For all social classes, life expectancy is longer in more equal societies

and most health problems are less frequent. Reviewing over 170 studies, Wilkinson and Pickett show that life expectancy, infant mortality, low birth weight and self-rated health have repeatedly been shown to be worse in more unequal societies. The list can be made longer, the point is that not only the poor but everyone seem to benefit from living in a society with less inequality when it comes to their health and social well-being. In addition, there is lots of evidence that inequality at work also is an important social ill. Lacking control and influence at work is clearly detrimental to people's health and takes away years of people's life.

One can add that the neoliberal agenda that more inequality would lead to higher economic growth has also turned out to be untrue. Even if one excludes oil-rich Norway, the three other Nordic countries, which have comparatively encompassing welfare programs and high levels of taxation, have done very well when it comes to economic growth.

The puzzle is this: Why have the parties to the left been unable to make politics of these empirically well-established facts showing that inequality is, to quote a British daily (The Guardian), "the mother of all evils". Reducing social and economic inequality through various universal systems of social protection, social services, and high quality public education seem to pay off quite well. This has traditionally been the lefts' best game and the attack on this political ideology from the neoliberals is now in shambles. Given the collapse of the financial industry, the ideological defeat of the neo-liberal agenda and the mountain of research showing the benefits that comes from more social and economic equality, this should have been an "all time high" for politics from the left.

The reason why this did not happen is not so obvious. One possibility is that the left in Europe have abandoned their oldest and best ally, namely the project of a "politics based on the idea of enlightenment" and its accompanying idea of the existence of "the universal human" and thereby universal human rights. Instead, the lefts' political agenda have become dominated by intellectually obscure and anti-empiricist post-modernist thinking that shies away from the idea that politics can be based on a combination of ideological visions about what is normatively good and empirically based investigations about what is practically possible. Likewise, the left have to a large extent abandoned the idea of a political based on universal humans rights and instead been overtaken by what has been called "identity politics". Instead of a politics "for everyone", the left has become a conglomerate of political forces that strives to advance the interests of various groups whose members perceive themselves to be oppressed by virtue of their shared and marginalized identity, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, cultural interests, physical and mental handicaps, etc. etc. Almost by definition, identity politics is anti-majoritarian and politically divisive. Thereby, this sort of

politics de facto constructs a majority against itself since it is built on an ideology that puts political mobilization *against* the majority at the forefront. It is also very difficult to build a political majority on “the sum” identity politics since there is in reality very little that unites the various groups. For example, lesbians and gays do not have much in common with most immigrants from for countries in the Middle East who are in their turn unlikely to understand the political demands raised by say people that are struck by obesity. The injustices and marginalization felt by the various groups are specific to the group and can not be generalized to other groups. The practical dimension of this is that the left’s earlier focus on universal social programs has been replaced by programs that are targeted to specific “identity groups”. Thereby, left politics have become less inclusive and anti-majoritarian. My conclusion is that the post-modernist turn in the lefts’ politically thinking has marginalized its traditional political project and this has led to this surprising electoral defeat.

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