Introduction

European Social Policy and Society after Brexit: Neoliberalism, Populism, and Social Quality

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The narrow referendum decision for British exit from the European Union (Brexit), and its explosive political consequences, has become a lens through which decades-long tensions in European society can be viewed. The result, which was expected to be a clear Remain victory, has been interpreted as various combinations of the unleashing of xenophobic and racist anti-immigrant sentiment; a kick back against disinterested elites by ‘left behind’ people; the fermenting of nationalist populism by political and media actors; a clash of cultural values; a rejection of ‘market is all’ gloablisation in favour of national borders; or as a reaction against austerity, inequality and insecurity (Corbett, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Inlgehart and Norris, 2016; Kaufman, 2016; Pettifor, 2016; Room, 2016; Seidler, 2018; Taylor-Gooby, 2017). This British made shock has parallels in and consequences for wider European society. In the Referendum, the EU became an emblematic representation of the distrusted, remote, technocratic elites, who are said to be responsible for an unbelievably large number of societal ills. While across Europe there are varieties of Eurosceptic populism and distrust of elites on both the right and left (Ivaldi et al., 2017).

Populism refers to a ‘thin ideology’ which, combined with ‘fuller’ ideologies, allows for some to speak on behalf of ‘the people’ against a perceived minority elite or group (Stanley, 2008). Populist discourses take on an anti-establishmentarian character and reflect, in Taggart’s (2004) view, an opposition to liberal democracy and veneration of charismatic leaders, who are able to simplify complex issues. Moreover, populism draws on an idealised ‘heartland’, which is threatened by some other group or groups, and provides the values that underpin the populist discourse (Taggart, 2004). Crucially, right-wing variants of populism identify ‘others’, as (political, economic, cultural) elites at the top of society (like left-wing populism), but are especially antagonistic towards those at the bottom of society, such as migrants, criminals, unemployed people and so on (Abts and Rummens, 2007). Moreover, populists often favour referenda as a means to confirm their preferences, rather than open-ended democratic processes (Müller, 2016). In the EU Referendum, English nationalist right-wing populism was used to garner much of the support for the Leave campaign (the left-wing ‘lexit’ perspective notwithstanding) (Corbett, 2016).

There is a critical tension in UK society, and potentially, wider European society, between the technocratic elitism of the neoliberal model that has dominated politics and society for the past 40 years, and a regressive nationalist populism, evident in Brexit, but also in Trump’s political project in the US, the Front National in France, and various far right governments and movements in Europe. The first purpose of this themed section is to look at the implications of Brexit for both the UK and Europe, by drawing on analyses of broader tendencies towards technocratic policy-making, nationalist populist politics, and the potential contained in social movements. A second aim is to highlight the potential that the social quality idea contains for moving beyond the narrow economism of the neoliberal period. ‘Remain and reform’ from the left is a broad position that the editors of this themed section share. However, this social democratic and socialist perspective was not an option in the Brexit Referendum. What was on offer was remaining on terms negotiated by then Prime Minister Cameron (Corbett and Walker in this issue), or leaving (with no planning for what would happen afterwards, or indeed that a successful leave vote would address the underlying grievances of the majority of leave voters).

All contributors to this themed section highlight significant problems that Europe faces today. Common threads in the five original articles presented here include the lack of genuinely democratic and responsive EU (and national) institutions; the elitist political choices made in response to the various economic crises over the past decade at EU and national levels (and especially, the continuing neoliberal policy consensus and its dire consequences for many European citizens); and the emergent threat on the far right from nationalist populism, with economic protectionism, social control, and xenophobia at the heart of various movements and now influential in a few European governments. Without serious re-appraisal of the consequences of the neoliberal period in Europe, these problems will remain unaddressed by EU institutions, individual member states, and other European countries. Any such examination should emphasise the need to revitalise both social policy and democracy in Europe. The concept of social quality offers a focal point for this endeavour.

Steve Corbett and Alan Walker’s review article addresses the Brexit referendum from the perspective of ‘the social’. It considers the idea of the European social model, which was supposed to delineate a specifically European concern with both economic success and social progress. But while the EU has long been an economic project concerned with building markets and providing mobile labour, the European social model (or the social dimension, social Europe), at least rhetorically, granted some sense of European exceptionalism to the liberal capitalism of Anglo-saxon countries. However, Corbett and Walker argue that the under-theorisation of ‘the social’ is a central weakness in the articulation of the concept. Instead social quality is proposed as an approach with a strong theoretical basis in ‘the social’ as a distinct entity within which politics, economics, and culture take place. This implies that ‘social concerns’ should always take precedent over economic ones. It also challenges the EU and European countries to rethink what is meant by ‘social progress’. By applying a social quality perspective to the Brexit referendum, we see that the campaigns took place between a technocratic neoliberal perspective on the one hand (Remain’s ‘project fear’), and a right-wing nationalist populist one on the other (Leave’s ‘take back control’). As Fraser (2017) has pointed out with regard to the US, neither of these offer solutions to the problems that the post-financial crisis world faces. Instead, Corbett and Walker propose social quality as expressly opposed to the neoliberal imperative within the EU, and as a means to realise a more social Europe (not least to also recognise the migrant crisis on Europe’s borders, and promote social quality as a global concept), which encourages more sustained participatory democracy and meaningful participatory social policy, which should begin to address the roots of the anger and discontent manifested in the Brexit vote. The first steps towards this are set out in the Appendix to this themed section, in a revised version of the 1997 Amsterdam Declaration on the Social Quality of Europe, tailored for post-Brexit Europe.

In the second article, Mary Daly analyses the possible future directions for EU-level social policy in relation to member states after the UK leaves, with reference the UK’s role in the development of the EU. She draws on a three-part analytical framework which considers the primacy of economic concerns within the EU, the role of institutions and the agency of political actors, and recognises that welfare states have largely been seen as national level concerns. Like Corbett and Walker, Daly sees the ‘market-building' economistic imperative in the EU as dominant over the ‘market-correcting' or social policy dimension. This is reflected in Thatcher’s enthusiasm for building the common market in the 1980s, but with opposition to pooling political power within EU institutions, and especially, vehement ideological opposition to an active, interventionist social policy – the European social model. Indeed, this pro-market but anti-social policy strategy has characterised the approach of successive British governments to the EU, including the supposedly social democratic ‘New Labour’ governments of Blair and Brown. It is interesting to note that the UK is set to leave, despite having been largely able to ‘have it’s cake and eat it’ in its time as a member of the EU, with the most optouts from legislation secured, minimising the social policy dimension, and promoting the neoliberal direction of EU policy. This shows the flexibility of the EU in being able to incorporate nation states with specific preferences (Denmark, Ireland, Poland, and Sweden are other cases in point). Daly suggests a mixed picture for post-Brexit EU social policy, with several possible directions. While Brexit may allow for a more ‘social Europe’ direction with a key obstacle to this imperative removed from the Union, for Daly, there appears to be an acceptance of a lack of political will for deepening EU-level social policy, with much more diverse interrelations and ‘muddling through’ between integrating and dis-integrating countries, and further differentiation across the EU-27.

The third article, by Julia Lux, applies discourse theory to the contention that the EU’s technocratic and neoliberal approach to economic and social policy has invoked a crisis for both representative democracy and the legitimacy of EU institutions (in particular after the 2008 financial crisis and Eurozone crisis). For Lux, the de-politicisation of European integration – a form of defusing dissent and contestation – combined with the limits to liberal democracy have produced disinterested, elite-led EU institutions. This period of ‘new economic governance’ is characterised by a technocratic neoliberal approach that opposes the social policy concerns of ‘social Europe’ by directly weakening unions and workers’ wages, and maintains the focus on fiscal consolidation over societal problems such as poverty and inequality. In this context Lux argues that, in France, this has opened up space for the far-right Front National to articulate a form of populist politics that seeks to colonise traditionally left-wing issues of socio-economic security, anti-poverty strategies, and housing provision, albeit with nationalist protectionist and racist solutions. In order to usefully counter the rise of the far-right, Lux argues for a transformation within EU institutions towards more participatory and deliberative processes that enhance the quality of democracy.

Next, Jasna Balorda assesses how the neoliberal transformation of the Danish welfare state has provided the conditions for the rise of the far-right Danish People’s Party (DPP) in the current period of post-financial crisis turbulence. Again, in this country we see the market imperative coming to dominate over societal concerns, which has produced a vacuum that is increasingly filled by nationalist populists and fascists. In place of Denmark’s widely-viewed reputation as a highly successful social democracy, a more mixed picture emerges of contestation, rupture and change. The previously strong levels of decommodification, universal provision and solidarity in the Danish welfare state have been in decline since the 1980s. The weakening of organised labour, along with shifts towards global production processes, and financialisation of the economy, have undermined solidaristic values and promoted in their place neoliberal ones. In fact, the strongly social democratic commitment to public ownership of industry has enabled a more rapid and societally damaging process of neoliberalisation (including under the rubric of EU neoliberalisation) as these monopolies have been broken up and sold to overseas investors, with the travails of utility company DONG as a case in point. The adoption of neoliberalism by mainstream political parties of the left and right, as in France, has opened up space for the fascist and populist far-right to use the previously social democratic territory of social welfare to push their political agendas. In Denmark, the DPP has adopted a position of ‘protecting’ the social democratic welfare state in the interests of the working class, who are experiencing precarity, insecurity and declining wages (while paradoxically not being averse to supporting neoliberal reforms in government). However, for the DPP this has been framed as a problem of immigration (in particular, Muslims) and decline in ‘Danishness’, along with ‘socially liberal’ economic elites in finance. As Balorda argues, this populist strategy places fascist politics as something closer to state capitalism, opposed both to neoliberal financialisation and the EU. Without a significant left-wing approach that is distinguished from neoliberalism, this strategy offers a troubling alternative to the disenfranchised.

The final article, by Armine Ishkanian, draws on research into left-wing social movements in the UK following the Occupy protests in order to make some sense of the contrasting perspectives on Remain and Leave in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing austerity policies. For Ishkanian, the tendency to stereotype Remain and Leave voters (especially by the media) is highly problematic, especially the notion of the Brexit voting ‘left behind’ as the ‘losers’ from neoliberal globalisation, and does little to explain the trajectories and grievances that led to the Brexit vote and the consequences of it. Instead, the preference for and against Brexit can be drawn from all sides of the political spectrum, across different age groups, from business, and through the lens of social class. Both the political and economic systems of rich countries were the target of the wave of global protests in the early-2010s, and deepening inequality, poverty, and decline in democracy are cited as fuel for these protests. While participants in left-leaning social movements are not representative of the country as a whole, Ishkanian’s research participants identify the lure of right-wing nationalism for those who feel disenfranchised in UK society. By the 2016 Brexit referendum, this anger had become colonised by right-wing nationalist populists, and more alarmingly, fascists. But the point remains that, without a concerted social policy response, the continuing path of ‘market is all’ neoliberalism or nationalist populist protectionism remain dangerous threats in this ‘interregnum’ period after the financial crisis.

This is the tragedy of the Brexit vote, that a Referendum intended to silence competing factions of the governing Conservative party has unleashed a great deal of anger and sense of injustice from many quarters about British society and the (largely mythical) role that the EU plays in it. But the engine driving Britain’s plans for exiting the EU is the same neoliberal one which has wrought destruction on communities, industries and people’s lives over the past 40 years. The same imperative that has hollowed out social policies and public institutions in many EU countries, especially the UK, and undermined the social quality of millions of Europeans, as well as those striving to become Europeans. If Europe is to learn any lesson from the Brexit debacle it is the pressing need for new imperatives: social quality and democracy.

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