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Climate protection and sustainable
development in China**

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**A Social Democratic Narrative to Counter
the Persistence of Class Society**

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»Project« Home

**A Conversation with Annika Klose,
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1968: Between myth and everyday
experience**

INTERNATIONAL QUARTERLY EDITION

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A Conversation with Annika Klose,
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Over the last few years, European social democracy has gotten itself into a deep dilemma due to a combination of globalization and unchecked mass immigration. Its troubles have implications for the European Union too, calling into question both its ability to function and even the cohesion of its member nations. This dilemma poses a stern test for the identity of social democratic parties. Furthermore, in a relatively short time it has driven large sections of its electoral base – above all those from the »working class« – into the arms of right-wing populists. Indeed, the populists themselves as well as a number of observers have gone



so far as to label them the »new workers' parties.« Like similar social upheavals in the past, globalization and migration have drawn new lines of social and political conflict through European societies, ones that overlap with and relativize the traditional right-left conflict. While the well-educated and high-earning winners of globalization, members of the new middle class, tend to cultivate a cosmopolitan outlook (open borders, acceptance of immigration, cultural tolerance), many of the poorly educated and low-earning members of the new working class and old middle class, concentrated among the losers of globalization, tend to embrace a disposition often called »communitarian.« The latter is marked by an aversion to mass immigration and the quest for shelter within social and political life-worlds such as home and nation, to be kept as closed as possible.

In addition to the socioeconomic aspect of the contrast between the two camps, there is also a cultural component that intensifies it emotionally and substantively to the point at which it seems insoluble. This cultural factor runs right through the social democratic camp and leads to losses of members and voters for the affiliated parties. That situation has precipitated a search for paths of compromise or synthesis between the two wings of social democracy. Unless this quest for compromise succeeds, the strength and indeed the very existence of social democratic parties as »big-tent« parties will be put in jeopardy. That issue, as well as some others, dominates the articles included in this number of the Quarterly. One of the questions that grows out of the aforementioned dilemma is highlighted in an article by Marc Saxer (»home« as a political concept). Until now, the social democratic spectrum nearly had banished that topic into taboo territory. It remains to be seen what role it might be able to play in a »left« context.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Meyer". The script is fluid and cursive.

Thomas Meyer
Editor-in-Chief and Co-Publisher

Eva Sternfeld

Black Cat – Green Cat

Climate protection and sustainable development in China

»When we said that ›a cat is good, white or black, so long as it can catch mice‹, we meant that we can adopt whatever means to ensure economic growth and improve the living standards of the people. The colour of the cat is not important. But our development over the past 20 years is in fact ›black development‹ or ›black cat development‹, to be more specific. It is characterised by high capital input, low output efficiency, high resource consumption and high pollution. It has sharpened the contradictions between population and resources and between development and environment. Now, the ›colour of the cat‹ has become important. We have to turn ›black cat‹ into ›green cat‹, shifting from black development to green development« (Hu Angang: *Green Development: The inevitable choice for China*).

As early as 2006 Hu Angang, an economist and member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, made statements that almost appeared to turn the familiar »cat-mouse theory« attributed to Deng Xiaoping on its head. Indeed, he called for nothing less than a paradigm shift in China's economic policy. If one takes a look at strategy papers recently issued by the Chinese leadership, such as the Central Committee of the Communist Party's declaration on so-called »ecological civilization,« as well as the goals set by the current 13th five year plan (2016–2020), it is obvious that here the »green cat strategy« has gained some traction. Both sustainable development and leadership in the global market for – and to the extent possible the technology of – renewable energy and e-mobility have been elevated to the status of explicit goals. By proclaiming such a structural transformation, the leadership is seeking solutions for major social challenges that carry a high potential for conflict. These days, bottlenecks in energy supplies, environmental devastation, and climate change all are perceived as challenges of this kind.

There is no doubt that the reforms ushered in by Deng 40 years ago have made possible an unprecedented economic miracle and lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty. In 2001, when the country gained admission to the World Trade Organization, the breathtaking boom accelerated. Within just a single decade, what once had been a developing country emerged as one of the world's leading economic and trade powers. Meanwhile, China has become far and away the world's leading producer of steel, cement, automobiles, and other commodities.

Goodbye to coal

China powers its economic miracle mainly with coal. About half of the world's coal is mined in China – and burned there as well. The high consumption of fossil fuels in industry and the emissions generated by the growing number of cars on the road have led to a noticeable increase in smog levels and thus to a diminution in the quality of life in major Chinese cities. The contentiousness of the issue was plain to see when, early in 2015, the documentary *Under the Dome* made by TV reporter Chai

Jing was shown on the internet. Although this wide-ranging and unflinching look at the causes and risks of urban air pollution was blocked after just a few days on the Chinese net, it had already been viewed by 200 million people there. By now »PM_{2.5},« the scientific abbreviation for particulate matter, is familiar to everyone, even children. City-dwellers regularly test air quality using the proper apps and, when smog alarms are issued, they try to protect themselves by using high-tech respiratory masks.

The government has responded to these challenges with action plans that, to some extent, involve quite drastic interference in the structure of the economy. The ambitious goal of reducing coal consumption in the chronically smog-plagued Beijing within just four years evidently was achieved. In 2017 the last coal-burning power plant in the capital, Beijing, was taken off the grid in favor of natural gas as a heat-generating resource. Now efforts are focused on the neighboring province of Hebei, which encircles Beijing much as Brandenburg surrounds Berlin. Hebei, which became China's biggest steel- and cement-producing region in the first decade of this century, has had to submit to strict standards for the reduction of coal use. The restrictions, imposed during the winter of 2017/18, were enforced by partial plant shutdowns and a ban on coal heating in private homes. While for some years Beijing residents have been able to enjoy extended periods of blue sky and days free of breathing masks, many people in the neighboring province have lost their jobs, at least temporarily. Indeed, the tough measures against air pollution have gone hand in hand with targeted regulation of the economic structure and the drawdown of overcapacity in the steel and cement industries. The structural transformation, now referred to as the »new normal,« has led to an observable, if slight, downward trend in coal use over the last two years, although the descending curve began from a very high benchmark.

The dynamic nature of the Chinese economic miracle and its impact on the global climate footprint came as a surprise to many energy and climate experts. As recently as the late 1990s they imagined scenarios in which China would overtake the United States as the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitter around the year 2030. As a result, China – then classified as a developing country – was exempted by the Kyoto Protocol from any obligation to reduce its greenhouse gases even though it contributed some 14% of global emissions in 1998. In fact, China overtook the USA just eight years later, in 2006, and today emits twice as much CO₂ as the United States. Currently, China is responsible for about 26% of global carbon dioxide emissions. According to figures supplied by the Dutch environmental agency PBL, China's average emissions per capita of 7.4 tons exceed the level in the EU 28.

Slowing growth and climate policy

For many years Chinese negotiators at the UN climate talks leading up to the Kyoto Protocol invoked their country's acknowledged status as a »non-annex-1-country« (i.e., as a developing country) and rejected any obligations to reduce its emissions by insisting on the right to development. Yet, by the time an agreement was reached at the COP 21 UN climate conference in Paris in 2015, their position seems to have

become more flexible. China pledged to reduce its absolute emissions beginning in 2030 as well as to cut back CO₂ intensity per unit of GDP by 60–65 % (compared to 2005 levels). It also committed to including at least a 20 % share of non-fossil fuels in its energy mix. However, according to studies done by the economist Sir Nicholas Stern, such goals tend to be rather modest. Stern expects China to meet its self-imposed climate goals considerably earlier, around 2025. And in fact, for the first time carbon dioxide emissions generated by China fell slightly in 2016. To some extent, this drop can be traced back to slowing economic growth (the »new normal«). But policy steps taken to improve energy efficiency and state-sponsorship of so-called »non-fossil energy sources« as alternatives to coal and oil also have played some role.

In addition to hydropower, which accounts for some 20 % of China's electricity output, since the mid-2000s the Chinese government has been hoping to exploit on a larger scale the vast potential of wind and solar power, especially in the country's northeast. In 2017 China already derived 163 gigawatts of electricity from wind farms as well as more than 77 gigawatts from solar energy plants. By now, China leads the world in the installed capacity of both energy sources. And during the past decade Chinese producers have also caught up technologically. In the past couple of years the Chinese firm Goldwind has outstripped the long-time leaders in the wind power sector, Vestas and General Electric. Another aspect of China's effort to encourage renewable energy is its stepped-up investment in the development of intelligent and more efficient ultra-high-tension electricity grids.

The Chinese also explicitly define nuclear power as included among the »non-fossil« or »new, clean« energy sources that are supposed to gradually replace coal, especially in the energy-hungry eastern part of the country, where it is intended to insure a steady supply of electricity. Nevertheless, even in China the nuclear accident at Fukushima in 2011 put a damper on planned development of atomic power and led to a two-year moratorium for safety inspections. But following this interruption, the country has continued to adhere to its – still somewhat curtailed – nuclear program. At present, there are 38 reactors in operation, while 20 more are under construction. Thus, in the international context China is the only country in which an expansion of nuclear power worth mentioning is taking place. However, it contributes only 3 % of the power generated in China (by comparison, Germany's nuclear plants continue to generate 13 %). At this point, it is still uncertain whether the targeted expansion to around 5 % will be attained by 2020. Even the Chinese nuclear industry is confronted with construction delays due to technical problems, cost overruns, and ultimately overcapacity in the energy sector. From time to time protests by concerned neighbors have also played a role. Even though it would be misleading to speak of an anti-nuclear power movement in China, Fukushima certainly has heightened sensitivity to the dangers of atomic energy. Thus, Chinese nuclear power companies have tried to compensate for declining orders and hedge their bets by joining forces with Chinese banks to keep an eye out for possible cooperation projects in foreign countries. However, with the exception of two atomic power plants in Pakistan, this strategy has not accomplished much.

State promotion of e-mobility is another focus of »green« industrial policy. The switch to electric vehicles promises a considerable improvement in air quality in Chinese cities. Plans are ambitious, since even in China the sale of electric vehicles so far has tended to be a niche business. But starting in 2018 auto makers will have to meet an e-mobility quota. By 2020 12% of all automobiles produced there will have to be equipped with actuators. Manufacturers can look forward to receiving extensive subsidies and vouchers for CO₂ credits, while consumers will be enticed by loans on generous terms and easier registration of their cars.

As far as China's current energy and industrial policy are concerned, the contribution they make to climate protection will be taken in stride as a welcome side-effect of measures that the government was forced to take to protect the environment. In this context, the »green cat« is not only eyeing the Chinese market; it is getting ready to leap to the forefront of international efforts to adopt »green technologies.«



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Benjamin Schraven

Climate Migration: A strategy of adaptation or a refugee catastrophe?

If you were to compare the scientific discussion of the nexus between climate change and migration with the political and media take on this issue, you would think you were dealing with two completely different realities, sets of assumptions, and expectations. In the media and among some politicians, the dominant tone is one of nearly unconcealed alarmism. More and more often one encounters headlines such as »Two billion climate refugees by 2100?« which awaken fears in the Global North of unprecedented movements of flight from the South. In the scientific community, by contrast, for quite some time scholars have talked about migration as a (potential) strategy for adapting to climate change. So what are the consequences of climate change likely to be as they affect migration? And how should political decision-makers deal with the issue of »climate migration«?

Even previous scientific discourses about climate migration have delivered some rather alarmist predictions. The best known of these is surely the report put forth by the British biodiversity researcher Norman Myers, who – by the mid-90s – was already assuming that there would be some 200 million climate refugees as early as 2150. This is a breathtakingly high number that many NGOs and politicians still cite, even though it has been somewhat discredited by the scientific community. In

this, the early phase of the scientific study of the reciprocal relations between ecology and migration, two camps quickly have emerged: On one side there is a faction consisting of »alarmists« – mainly climate and other kinds of scientists – that has encountered considerable resistance from a number of social scientists and migration researchers. On the other side, the group labeled »skeptics« consistently has pointed out that migration decisions are extremely complex. They are influenced not only by ecological considerations, but also by political, cultural, demographic, and social factors. The skeptics reject as inappropriate the interpretation of the migration process put forth by the alarmists – a simple equation in which a stimulus (perhaps a negative environmental event) evokes a response (i.e., the decision to migrate).

Preconditions for migration

Since the early years of the 21st century research generally has vindicated the skeptics. Several large-scale research projects carried out during the previous 10–15 years (e.g., one by the United Nations and another under the auspices of the British government) concluded that ecological pressure does not simply lead straightaway to more migration. Those chiefly affected by climate change and worsening ecological conditions are poorer population groups in the Global South: the urban poor, small farmers, fishers, livestock herders. It is frequently the case that their livelihoods depend directly on the utilization of natural resources. For that reason, they often lack the necessary (financial) means that would enable them to migrate at all. In fact, migration always involves costs (for transportation, lodging, etc.) that the hard-pressed groups noted above frequently cannot afford. Thus, many people belong to so-called »trapped populations.« They are usually hit much harder by the impacts of ecological change – such as vegetation losses and crop failures – than those who are mobile. And those who can be mobile do not migrate »only« because of the increasing psychological strain on their accustomed ways of life exerted by climate change or worsening ecological conditions. Instead, in these contexts individual motives – life plans, educational aspirations – and/or the (im)possibility of gaining access to jobs through the intervention of migrant networks play a significant role. Even in an age of climate change, migration decisions remain highly complex. The same is true of armed conflicts, which have been the chief catalysts for global movements of flight in recent years. Conflicts such as these have not simply been conditioned or unleashed on a massive scale by climate change or environmental devastation. Here, we are usually confronted by very complex causes.

The studies cited above also conclude that if people do migrate in the context of changes in their climates, they normally do so within certain time limits and usually inside the borders of their own countries of origin or within their home regions. Also, it is generally individuals who set forth on migration treks while their families normally stay in the places where they originally lived. The money earned by migrants and then partially remitted to their families can compensate for livestock losses or bad harvests. So there are good reasons why those who study migration related to environmental and climatic change talk about the mobility of migration as

a strategy of adaptation. Still, it should not be forgotten that migrants often live and work under extremely harsh conditions. Legal insecurity, exploitation, and precarious living conditions are unfortunately an everyday occurrence for them.

Even though fears in Europe or North America about a powerful »wave of climate refugees« may lack any realistic basis, it is nonetheless true that, in a few of the countries most strongly affected by climate change or environmental devastation, the uninhabitability of entire regions is becoming an ever more serious issue. To cite some examples from the list of such countries, both Bangladesh and Pacific Island nations like Tuvalu probably will be among the first victims of rising sea levels. Thus, in the years and decades to come, it is inevitable that a constantly increasing number of people will be forced to abandon permanently their home regions or consider other forms of relocation. Therefore, at all costs we should avoid the error of regarding climate change as a broadly available strategy of adaptation. People who worry about the permanent loss of their home place are not just suffering from fears of material losses; they are also threatened with the prospect of losing their cultural identity and life styles. It is the industrial nations of the Global North that bear the lion's share of the responsibility for this outcome.

How are political decision-makers the world over dealing with the difficult and highly complex phenomenon of »climate migration,« and how should they deal with it? To give important impetus toward solutions, a »Task Force on Displacement« set up under the umbrella of the United Nations Climate Convention (UNFCCC), held its initial meeting in May of 2017. To be sure, the task force's chief concern is to approach the issue cautiously, keeping the discussion on the level of principles. That is symptomatic, because even at the 23rd World Climate Conference held in Bonn (COP 23) last November it became obvious that migration in the context of climate change is a highly sensitive topic, especially when migration is seen as part of a strategy of adaptation. Many political actors – particularly those concerned with climate policy – barely distinguish between different forms of migration and seek to avoid the topic.

Binding international standards are lacking

What we should be doing now is creating options for the people who have been hardest hit by the consequences of global warming, either ones that enable them to adapt to those impacts more effectively where they live or else to help them migrate under conditions consistent with human dignity – i.e., so that they will not have to face risks of discrimination and exploitation or suffer disproportionate material and immaterial losses. This holds for all forms of migration, including measures aimed at resettlement. For that to happen we need binding standards that can be implemented consistently in the affected countries and regions. Obviously, this proposal is fraught with daunting challenges that clearly cannot be overcome by any one organization, not even the United Nations.

Two international framework documents, both currently being negotiated, provide important momentum and points of contact for tackling this challenge more effectively and broadly: the »Global Compact on Refugees« and the »Global

Compact on Migration.« At the moment, the outcome of both sets of negotiations remains in doubt, not least because the United States has withdrawn from them. But both processes certainly have the potential completely to restructure global migration policy. In short, the protection of refugees and migrants can be improved in some important specific areas. This is also a significant component of UN sustainability goals, given that one such overarching goal is a »secure, regular, and orderly migration.« But in order to support »climate migrants« more generously, we need better cooperation between both relevant spheres of international politics: climate and migration policy. Unfortunately, so far this has not really happened.

In order for an exchange between those two spheres to bear fruit, it is not enough to rely on the global level of policymaking. Since migration processes take place mostly within individual countries and regions of the globe, they accordingly must be designed and enacted at the national and regional levels. Unfortunately, many decision-makers continue to believe that migration is not something to be shaped politically, but instead something to be prohibited. Hence, a bit of consciousness-raising is indispensable if efforts to deal appropriately with the challenges of »climate migration« are to be crowned with success.



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Thomas Meyer

A Social Democratic Narrative to Counter the Persistence of Class Society

Any serious attempt by the SPD to catch up with some of its more successful sister parties, such as those in Portugal or Sweden, which even today still manage to garner around 30% of the vote, will first have to answer one question, and do so without the handy escape clause that a renewed Grand Coalition offers: How, in such a short span of time, could the party thoroughly fritter away the genuine successes that it achieved early in the election year of 2017? Certain causes are fairly obvious: The party's candidate for chancellor was unable to muster a plausible narrative showing how his great promise – that electing him would usher in a new age of equality – could be redeemed. He lost sight of this, the most crucial issue; moreover, he failed to show how the party could ever acquire enough power to keep its promises. Both the media and the voters had the impression that he was losing his bearings and his grip on reality. Those mistakes chipped away at the credibility of both the candidate and the party at large. The half-healed scar of »Agenda 2010« was torn open again. The outlines of German Social Democracy's alternative to existing

arrangements in society grew blurry, a tendency that was reinforced by two gaps in the electoral campaign – actually its crypto-issues – both destined to become the party's *bêtes noires*: migration and Europe.

These deficiencies should not be attributed to a lack of substance in the SPD's program. In fact, action plans, elaborated over many years and constantly updated by competent teams, are there for all to see in nearly every field of policymaking: equality, education, family, pensions, social policy, environment, digitalization, Europe, migration. But they contain too many bullet points and too little thought about how to imbue all the discrete policy positions with an overarching meaning. It is unlikely that the SPD can be rescued from the danger zone of between 15 and 20% of the vote without a social democratic narrative revised to fit the exigencies of the present historical moment. But what would be the nature of such a narrative, where would it come from, and how would it relate to the indispensable bullet points of concrete policymaking? The Grand Coalition is not a life preserver, but it does buy some time. While it is in office, and particularly during the first year or two, the profile of the SPD must be honed, beyond announcements trumpeting the success of Social Democratic Party governance. One thing is abundantly clear from the last election: the quality of the party's achievements is an absolutely necessary – but not a sufficient – condition for electoral victory.

By emphasizing how much remains to be done, one does not inevitably diminish the value of what has already been accomplished, at least as long as the narrative begins self-consciously with the formula: »we have achieved a great deal, but major reforms are still needed.« Political narratives differ from literary ones in two respects: In politics one may seek to generate meaning by depicting origins, intentions, accomplishments, and destiny, but the end-result cannot be introspective reflection; rather, a meaningful political narrative must culminate in a credible action plan capable of mobilizing many people. Furthermore, the narrator must personify the credibility of the story and the fulfillment of its promise. Classical social democracy breathed life into just such a story during both its early phases and in the late 60s. In the first case it was the person of August Bebel who embodied, plainly and persuasively, a narrative practically dictated by the social order itself. In the second, Willy Brandt once again made the Social Democrats' narrative seem convincing.

Both models clearly reveal the five decisive building blocks of a successful social democratic narrative. First, they show the *fundamental social democratic impulse* for social change: the conviction that *equal freedom should rest on secure material foundations in a society based on solidarity* – but the specific content of the party program should take its cue from the evident deficiencies of each age. Second, persuasive solutions to the crucial problems of society must be advanced, but in association with the *image of a better future*. Third, there should be two or three inspiring flagship initiatives (no more than that!) intended to illustrate that image. Fourth, we should strive for a substantial *synthesis between the values and interests of the »enlightened bourgeoisie« and those of the »working class.«* Finally, there should be one or a few *symbolic personages* who represent the aspirations of social democracy in specific situations.

No matter who tells a fairy tale, it is unlikely to lose any of its spellbinding power. The same holds true for the persuasiveness of scientific narratives. By contrast, the attractiveness of a political story in the struggle for a country's leadership depends entirely on the representative power and personal credibility of the narrator who uses it to attract support. Even today, good political rhetoric – the soul of democracy – comes from orators who are believed because they manage to amalgamate ethics, reasoning, and passion. However, credibility is not just a matter for top-level leaders; it relates to the party as a whole. Nor should we forget that it is partly a function of who the party's leading politicians from earlier years were and are, and what they are doing today. This is an especially vital point in the eyes of younger people and continues to be one of the most widely underestimated problems of the SPD.

How to regain credibility

The Social Democrats did not lack solid arguments during the past election year. Their policy statements could be found nearly everywhere and on every issue in up-to-the-minute texts. Thus, if the party hopes to light a fire under the voters, it cannot rely on still more texts, even slightly better ones. Missing was a sharp image of the situation in this country, the flagship projects that would showcase hoped-for improvements in that situation, and the heartfelt effort to combine the basic impulse of social democracy – i.e., the »one big thing« (Andrea Nahles) – with the reform proposals contained in the program of government (the »many little things«). In other words, the SPD's problem was that the one big thing it was offering could not be shown to have infused the many little things that it proposed. Still, what was mainly missing toward the end of the campaign was the credibility that the new candidate had so inspiringly embodied in its earlier phases. Clearly, no party can make a claim to permanent credibility; that in itself would not be believable. But persons and parties can restore lost credibility in cases where their actions have deviated widely from the principles that they (want to) espouse, even when they had good reasons for the apparent inconsistency. To regain it, they can offer an honest accounting of the motives behind their actions or sometimes even an apology that will have practical consequences. Such open and honest expressions of self-correction can even become the building blocks of a new narrative. During the campaign, the candidate and party had a chance to regain credibility in this way, but failed to take advantage of it. They created the initial impression that they were going to work through and reassess Agenda 2010, but as the campaign wore on, that implicit promise looked more and more dubious.

Neglect of the social democratic impulse and failure to produce an accurate, plausible description of contemporary society underlay the severe deficiencies in the unfolding of the narrative. Over the previous decade, the crucial elements of that image have been assembled. Plenty of excellent analyses are available on everything from Europe's malaise to the new finance capitalism, from the digital revolution to the current high levels of immigration. All have found clear expression in the party's policy statements. To modernize the Social Democratic policy sketch and anchor it in existing society, the crucial step is to understand the social struc-

ture, identify its central milieus and classes, and pinpoint their respective cultural and political interests. Recently, Oliver Nachtwey and Andreas Reckwitz published wide-ranging analyses that summarize, supplement, and complete a picture that had been sketched out previously only in illuminating yet highly specialized studies. Nachtwey's work on the »downwardly mobile society« proves that the internal dynamics of present-day finance capitalism lead to downward economic and social mobility in the long run, primarily for the entire lower half of the social pyramid. His work makes it apparent that the economic trends we are witnessing today break the promise of advancement implicit in democratic capitalism and thereby undermine its legitimacy. Modernity becomes regressive. Such a regression triggers a wave of discontent that still lacks cohesion and direction, and thus cannot yet generate anything really new. The whole issue revolves around the renewal of social modernity. Wouldn't that be an attractive starting-point for the renovation of the social democratic narrative?

The portrait of the »new class society« drawn by Andreas Reckwitz in *The Society of Singularities* is more broadly conceived and more challenging for social democracy. It clarifies the threads that connect socialcultural milieus, long the subject of research and crucial to social democratic debates on strategy, with new socioeconomic classes in the service-based digitalized society. The new social groupings deserve to be called »classes« because of their hybrid socioeconomic and sociocultural character and because of their social distance from one another. They are the foundation upon which the novel political-cultural line of conflict in post-industrial service-based societies has arisen. What is more, they add a new, diagonal fault line to the old horizontal split between right and left, pitting cosmopolitans against communitarians in the political arena. The strategic challenge for social democracy now is to discover productive points of contact between the two kinds of conflict and to offer answers that span both types. This endeavor ought to be the centerpiece of the new narrative.

Socioeconomic inequality

Reckwitz's realistic model provides a solid conceptual foundation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, for the already quite familiar expression »three-thirds society.« Above all it enables us to recognize the sense in which these »classes« can become effective political actors and what alliances they might enter into. Both the »new middle class« and the »new underclass« are in play here and bound together destructively. The former, which consists of successful, highly educated people working in key professions of the digital revolution and globalized economy, enjoys high and growing incomes. Meanwhile, the latter is slipping farther and farther down the income ladder and additionally is beset by career and social insecurity. But the really explosive antagonism between classes – or more precisely the socio-cultural confrontation between their attitudes and lifestyles – has emerged between the stratum of the cosmopolitan/liberal/culturally advanced (the »new middle class« that »lives consciously«) and the communitarian/tradition-bound class that is bedeviled by scarcity (the »new underclass«). Each of these classes keeps a watchful

eye on the other. Cultural antagonism leaves its mark on the lives of both in terms of tastes, nutrition, child-raising, leisure time activities, culture, communication, and political orientation. The »new underclass« is shunted to the margins and deemed »inferior« in social and cultural terms. It has reason to feel disdained on a daily basis, because all positions of influence in politics, culture, and communication are held by the very elites that look down on them. The »old middle class«, which consists of small-scale independents and portions of the working class and also tends to have a communitarian, traditional outlook, is located somewhere in between the two. The true »upper class,« however great its influence on the economy and politics may be, remains numerically insignificant. By and large, social advancement has been blocked. Even for the »new middle class« further downward mobility is a major worry (Nachtwey).

A persuasive social democratic answer

Continuing socioeconomic inequality between classes is nothing new for a social democratic understanding of politics; the novel elements are the persistent tendency towards worsening inequality and the accompanying unprecedented *socio-cultural* conflict. Nothing here should come as a total surprise, since current analyses on almost everything have been available for quite some time. But the overall picture has become increasingly clear. And that clarity furnishes productive guidelines for a reframing of the social democratic narrative (including its content), and for determining how and to whom – especially to whom – it must be told. Willy Brandt’s formula for an alliance between the enlightened bourgeoisie and the working class now can be brought fully up to date. To what groups should the new narrative be addressed? Taking into account the traditions and political image of social democracy as well as the overall thrust of the policies set forth in the SPD’s current program, the »new working class«, the »lower echelon« of the »new middle class«, and the enlightened segment of the »old middle class« all suggest themselves as obvious choices. The socioeconomic section of the narrative therefore must contain a coherent blend of innovative growth policies, active incomes policy designed to put an end to social regression, and a high level of basic or »pedestal« equality to protect those who are precariously employed and/or in danger of slipping into poverty. In an atmosphere of acute sociocultural conflict, the only way to succeed at bridge-building across class divides is to dismantle social inequality and its attendant insecurity while fashioning a consistent policy on migration based on humane principles and tailored to society’s capacity to integrate the newcomers. As far as cultural conflict and immigration are concerned, there are in fact not very many »pure cases« of either cosmopolitans or communitarians to be found. In both groups, the number of moderates statistically far outweighs the number of those at the extremes. The moderate group would prefer to strike a balance among cultural liberality, controlled migration, and the encouragement and preservation of intact »life-worlds.«

A synthesis along these lines would weaken the appeal of right-wing populists. The political flagship projects calculated to reflect such a synthesis would include:

- *Supporting the digital revolution* such that it could create jobs and remain internationally competitive while remaining consistent with humane values.
- Offering legal guarantees for a kind of *social security that would include everyone*.
- *Enhancing chances for upward mobility* by offering educational opportunities (including adult and continuing education) while *improving incomes and working conditions*, as well as extending social recognition to low-skilled service occupations.
- Reducing income inequality by *much more steeply progressive taxation* upon high earners coupled with an increase in the minimum wage.
- *Revisiting policies on migration and integration*. The new policy approach would follow a principle that is both humane and realistic: drawing distinctions among asylum-seekers who have been personally persecuted (and who therefore have a claim to long-term residence), war refugees who have second-order claims to protection and only limited residence rights, and an immigration law designed to meet criteria compatible with a country's economic and social needs.

Andreas Reckwitz, to whom we owe the most up-to-date study of new class conflicts and the values and divergent interests implicit in them, has usefully outlined the contours of just such a synthesis with an eye to the role of social democracy in making it work:

»The starting point is a consistent revision of the prevailing ›new liberalism‹ which has significantly influenced social democratic policy toward the »new middle class« (the third way). It would have to advance even more the latter's accomplishments, especially its »opening-up« of various fields (emancipatory gains plus pro-innovation economic policies). At the same time the revision would have to regulate social and cultural matters more strictly, subjecting them to the imperative of the common good. That would entail measures touching many areas from housing policy and good work for all to the integration of local people and migrants, universally valid educational standards, and a guarantee of social civility. Actually, social democracy could be a major actor in setting a balance between liberal opening and normative regulation while finding productive ways to negotiate the line of conflict between cosmopolitans and communitarians. It would have to seek support from all major players. But will Europe's social democratic parties still have the energy for this? Or is it more likely that the conservatives will take charge of the paradigm shift?«

It is true: the question remains open. But the likelihood that a persuasive social democratic answer to it will be found is greater than it is reputed to be.



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»Project« Home

All across society anxiety levels are rising, because people fear downward social mobility. They seem to be exposed to anonymous forces of globalization, automation, and migration that they are powerless to oppose; as a result, many retreat into what they think they can control: their own life circumstances. Yet this withdrawal into the private sphere further constricts the shared spaces that used to provide a sense that one could shape one's own environment. Declining trust in the power of politics to shape living conditions has been intensified by the retreat of the state from numerous rural regions. Quite a few people feel that they have been left in the lurch and are looking for political alternatives outside the democratic center.

Right-wing populists promise protection and backing to all those who feel as though a post-democracy dominated by lobbyists will not listen to them, who believe they are marginalized by fast-moving economic changes and sense that they are being slighted and ignored by pluralistic society in general and by libertarian elites in particular.

The »identitarian« political project aims at restoring order to an ever more complex world by making society more homogeneous. Basically, that means restoring the preeminence of white, heterosexual males by excluding all those who are held responsible for the fact that the former feel vaguely threatened and alienated. The story of a golden age in the past remains attractive to anyone who is looking for security in a world that is apparently out of joint and who wants to consolidate his/her identity wherever traditional communities are dissolving or who seeks false certainties wherever insecurity is on the rise.

Therefore, to take the wind out of the sails of right-wing populists, politics must again become a means by which people fight to control their lives, and it must restore to them the sense of belonging to a community. Material security is not enough. Human beings need an identity that provides them with pride, recognition, and self-respect so that they can come to terms with a rapidly changing world. Social democracy, it is said, has to offer an identity to all such people.

Can there be a progressive version of identity?

Up until now social democrats have missed the opportunity to counter the nationalist version of identity served up by the right-wing populists with a progressive version of their own. This reluctance can be explained partly by their fear that they might open the nationalist Pandora's Box, thereby letting loose xenophobia and racism. On the other hand, there are many who complain that there is already too much identity politics while too little is being done to fight for fair distribution, and that is what has offended the white working class.

Yet both objections miss the mark. First, social democracy traditionally has not been shy about drawing on the emotional energy of collective identities. The everyday lives of those who were part of the workers' movement were full of consciousness-raising institutions, from the *Wandervögel*, an outdoor-oriented youth

movement, to singing groups and associations dedicated to exercise and physical training. Second, the political conflicts of the 21st century, over matters ranging from immigration to gender justice, are marked by the tendency for distributional conflicts to be cast in the garb of cultural differences. If progressives are not in a position to formulate their interests in a language that connects with such new kinds of debates, then their objective arguments will not get a hearing. By giving up their collective identity without a fight, they have abandoned the field to the right-wing populists, which the latter have been all too eager to exploit by making nationalistic promises.

But the case for a progressive version of identity is by no means exclusively a tactical one. The very heart and soul of social democracy, a community of solidarity, presupposes a framework of identity without which it can't work. If it is not clear who belongs to the community and who does not, then it remains equally unclear who is to share what with whom. Here, a central dilemma of all progressive projects emerges clearly into view. Redistribution among the members of a community of solidarity works better the smaller the community is. However, we must bear in mind that the necessary resources have to be won through a distributive struggle with a form of capitalism that operates on a global scale.

This dilemma helps to explain why progressive strategists have taken their projects in such different directions. On one hand, left-wing nationalists argue in favor of a return to the nation-state. The Scottish National Party (SNP), the Spanish party »Podemos«, the Catalan separatists, or the French movement »Nuit Debout« have little in common except their successful invocation of the emotional power of the nation. On the level of strategy, left-wing nationalists are trying to achieve something that has eluded progressives for decades: uniting the isolated struggles of particular interests groups. The nation is supposed to furnish the lowest common denominator among the heterogeneous interests of the »99 %«. To use nationhood as a kind of progressive ideological glue, one must first wrest interpretive sovereignty over this problematic notion away from the right. The first step in doing so is to establish different lines of demarcation. Whereas the populist right draws a line between itself and »foreigners,« progressives draw the crucial distinction between »the people« (i.e., the 99%) and »the elite« (the 1%). Thus, a Scot in the sense intended by the SNP is anyone who lives in Scotland regardless of birth or descent. Yet at the same time progressives emphasize their positive attitude toward the forward-looking achievements of the nation-state in its capacity as a welfare state. Indeed, the true goal of the left-wing nationalists is to prevent the welfare state from imploding – caused by the global capital and its minions in Brussels.

Internationalists vehemently reject this strategy of »socialism in one country.« They don't believe that small nation-states are in any position to master global challenge such as climate change, terrorism, or financial crises on their own. In order to ward off the neoliberal attack on social democracy, internationalists want to match global capital's level of organization. Taken to its logical conclusions, this strategy of multilateral integration would convert the Europe of fatherlands into a cosmopolitan European republic.

Yet both strategies quickly run up against inherent limits. Left-wing nationalism certainly could attract new allies, but it risks alienating its own internationalist base. On the other hand, the cultural messages of the libertarian internationalists put off the working class, while their program of economic redistribution leaves the cosmopolitan middle classes cold.

Thus, a successful strategy must think outside the box of the nation-state while simultaneously satisfying the human need for security, stability, and a sense of belonging. That explains why attempts simply to replace a cosmopolitan version of identity by a conservative position come to nothing. To strike a balance between marriage for all, integration, and gender justice and security, a guiding culture, and coal miner romanticism offers few benefits and risks opening up new fissures within the progressive camp. Yet it is equally misguided simply to ignore emotional human needs for security, stability, and a sense of belonging and instead to stake all one's hopes on material redistribution. Hence, the progressive notion of identity must combine both elements in a constructive way.

Every endeavor to construct a progressive notion of identity must tiptoe cautiously through a minefield. Ideas with emotional connotations such as nation, patriotism or guiding culture are a tough sell in the libertarian milieu of the social democratic life-world. On the other hand, anemic notions like constitutional patriotism are not capable of satisfying the universal human needs for a sense of belonging, pride, self-respect, honor, stability, and security.

An emotional connection can be inferred from the community of solidarity. The American political scientist Mark Lilla understands the latter to be a »community of citizens who are all in the same boat and therefore must help one another.« Progressives can take justifiable pride in empathetic virtues such as caring for others and protecting one another against internal and external threats. A progressive identity can emerge from the pride we feel in contributing to the community of solidarity. Still, the notion of a community of solidarity is not an especially catchy one.

A progressive notion of home is more promising, but of course only as long as it is not taken to mean simple-minded Germanophilia. Home for progressives is neither an ethnic concept nor a religiously exclusive one. It refers to somewhere that all citizens of the country, regardless of their origin or descent, can gather. Thus, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has spoken of a place in the future which we, as a society, still have to create. To be sure, it can accommodate the vital cultures of local traditions. Because human beings can construct their identities on a variety of levels, there can be homes in the plural as well. Home is the place in which community can be lived and experienced for the first time. Hence, the reconstruction of community-endowing spaces and symbols is an important part of home thus understood. Home offers security amid the dizzying pace of change, cohesion where solidarity is weaker, a place of belonging in an individualized society and recognition of one's own life story.

It should be emphasized that a progressive idea of home must always be internationalist and European. The social democratic home, though located in the middle of Europe, is open to the world.

Lately, there have been repeated attempts to construct a social democratic concept of home. But amid such efforts it is important to avoid describing »home« in purely cultural terms. In the worst case scenario, that would be counterproductive, since it would stir up conflicts between the cosmopolitan and communitarian life-worlds within social democracy. Thus, a progressive concept of home will also have to involve a material component. In short, there is much more to social democratic identity than just traditions and values. Finally, a progressive home should be a place that enables the »good life« in a »good society.«

Without arrangements to provide for public welfare, a good life is impossible. When there are neither buses nor trains available in the Erz mountains or when Berlin is on the verge of suffocating under garbage, it is hard to see how a good life is possible in either place. When young parents shudder at the thought of not getting a place in a day care center for their children or have to move to send them to a better school, or when women, gays, or refugees cannot go out into streets and squares without fear, then we don't have a good society.

The progressive home is therefore a livable home. Rooted in local traditions, it nevertheless looks out openly upon the world. It strengthens people's ability to shape both their own lives and the lives they share with others in the community. Without first class public goods as a material foundation, none of this would be possible. In both rural regions and run-down areas of post-industrial cities, this means investment in mobility through the expansion of local public transportation, the provision of basic postal services and fiber optic cable, and the promotion of both public gathering places such as swimming pools and sports clubs and venues for cultural debate and memory such as theaters and museums. These considerations also imply a radical reform of educational systems in keeping with the challenges of digitalization. And to reduce the level of fear felt by many people, a good society also needs to strengthen the police and the system of social security.

All this will be possible only if the financial strength of municipalities and federal states improves. Still, unless we move past the notion that the state must always »break even,« we will not witness the return of a competent state willing to invest large sums. Hence, the political goal of a livable home is to rescue the state from the neoliberal chokehold of austerity. Because it is only the competent state ready and willing to act that enables the very capacity implied by the idea of social democratic policymaking: the ability to shape our society as we see fit. If and when public authorities are once again empowered to make significant investments in public goods, social democracy will recover its Keynesian toolbox. And it will urgently need the latter to work on the structural crisis of demand that has been destabilizing capitalism for decades. Concretely, all this means that record budget surpluses should no longer be diverted to debt reduction, but instead should be invested in education, infrastructure and internal security.

For Europe and against austerity

Commitment to Europe is by no means a mere rhetorical device; it constitutes a substantive material bargain. France and Italy rightly expect a clear sign from Berlin

that it will strengthen Europe. However, demands for a transfer union are a tough sell in Germany. The end of austerity promises a way out of this cul-de-sac of European policy. Moving past the investment bottleneck not only would spur growth in Germany; it would simultaneously help solve the crisis of Europe. Therefore, the mitigation of European imbalances via renewed investment and rising wages in Germany is the only proper signal to send to European partners.

The return of public authorities to rural areas would signal to the marginalized residents that the state has not abandoned them. The reinforcement of the social welfare state as a bulwark against the centrifugal force of global finance capitalism also would help to alleviate fears of downward mobility. Finally, improved internal security enables people to accept the rapid change going on in society. Thus, a livable home offers stability amid the tempests of change and is therefore the best means of taking the wind out of the sails of the far right.

In short, the livable home offers a shared platform upon which all the different schools of thought within social democracy can find common ground. The strengthening of internal security is an important demand of conservative social democrats, while a paradigm shift in economic and social policy constitutes the vital concern of the left. At the same time, the focus on public investments in the provision of services is also attractive to those who are skeptical about redistribution. Furthermore, the comeback of public authorities should attract adherents from rural areas as well as among members of the middle class who depend on the domestic German markets.

Preliminary experience indicates that the notion of a livable home works very well in the communitarian segment of the social democratic life-world. By contrast, the cosmopolitans often feel ill at ease with it. They vent their concern that adopting a concept associated with the right will make right-wing populists more acceptable in political circles. Paradoxically, it is precisely the (right-leaning) identitarians who have demonstrated how previously »leftist« ideas such as »the establishment,« »the system,« or »movement« can be repurposed successfully. Thus, combating right-wing populism means no more or less than regaining interpretive sovereignty over key concepts. Divergent interpretations of language underlie these tactical discussions. For essentialists, concepts have an objective meaning and thus cannot be arbitrarily recoded. For constructivists, their meaning is permanently or repeatedly (re-)negotiated in the context of societal conflicts.

What at first glance appears to be an academic debate must be conducted with a sense of urgency if social democracy wants to renovate itself. As the perpetual quarrel over the symbolism and politics of Agenda 2010 suggests, the discussion has gotten stuck on the axis of material distribution. Now, an equally unproductive zero-sum game between the cosmopolitan and communitarian wings of social democracy threatens to emerge around the axis of cultural recognition. As was shown through the example of the livable home, we can escape this trap only by constructively combining the material and cultural dimensions. But without creative use of language, it is impossible to dispel and overcome such tensions and contradictions dialectically.

To reinvigorate social democracy we need to reach a future-oriented compromise among its most important currents of thought. Hence, it avails little to pick out only the segment of the livable home idea that fits into one's established agenda. Continuation of the austerity policy with a dollop of home thrown in is a conservative approach that will not work in the social democratic life-world. Conversely, those on the left should be willing to accept a concept of identity not derived from their own echo chamber as the price they will have to pay for the return of a competent state into the field.

Naturally, it is also important to consider whether other concepts such as »domesticity« or »community« might prove more suitable as ideological glue to hold together cosmopolitans and communitarians. Assuming that the redefinition of a concept is the outcome of political-social conflicts, one must then soberly assess whether social democracy these days even has the power to capture interpretive sovereignty over the notion of home. In any case the concept of identity must combine the issue of material distribution with that of cultural recognition. Because of its unique positioning in the center of the political spectrum, social democracy is in a position – unlike any other political force – to formulate answers to both questions.

To survive the great upheavals of our time, we must make sure that people feel neither materially left behind nor culturally alienated. Thus, considered as a signal of a new beginning for social democracy, the notion of identity only works if it is combined with a Keynesian economic policy.

Social democracy already has succeeded in shaping the last great transformation for the benefit of everyone. By combining social, internal, and cultural security with an optimistic narrative of a new start, it will succeed this time as well.

The idea of a livable home shows in exemplary fashion how the issue of material distribution can be embedded in a cultural matrix. Now, other concepts must be developed that mesh with this formula. The concept of a livable home is thus the first step in redefining what social democracy means in the 21st century.



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The Wind is Turning against Us

The World Social Forum is not dead yet

Admittedly, the media have not paid much attention to the World Social Forum (WSF), the summit meeting of social movements, but it still exists. Nevertheless, the 14th gathering, held around mid-March in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, may have been the last one. While more than 100,000 participants still attended regularly during the decade from 2000 to 2010, lately fewer than half that number has been coming to the summit.

Back in 2001 the WSF started on a high note: It set out to overcome the old splits in the left and invite new groups to exchange experiences about their social struggles. In contrast to the branch of the left organized along partisan lines, there was to be free discussion at the WSF without any need to reach a decision at the end. That was supposed to make possible a freer exchange of ideas while also helping to forge new alliances. The concept of an open space and the call of the World Social Forums bore fruit, enticing tens of thousands of participants every year with the slogan, »Another world is possible.«

During the 90s an anti-globalization movement began to take shape, reaching its apogee in protests – ones that sometimes ended bloodily – against a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999 and then in 2001 against the G8 summit in Genoa. What held this movement together was its battle against neoliberalism, and this was the issue that shaped the World Social Forum in the first decade of the 21st century. It was founded explicitly as a counter-model to the World Economic Forum in Davos. There, the global elite met; here global civil society-to-be was in attendance.

The first World Social Forum also coincided with the leftward shift in Latin America. In 1998 Hugo Chávez had seized power in Venezuela, and it seemed as though the entire continent of South America might be on its way toward the socialism of the 21st century. In Brazil the Workers' Party was on the march, so the first World Social Forum was held in Porto Alegre, a town known for its citizens' budget, and one that had accumulated some experience with participatory schemes. The WSF began in a »decade of hope« for its social movements (as the sociology professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos put it).

There has been much experimentation since that time: In addition to an annual forum in one place there were tricontinental meetings in three places simultaneously. To support the Arab Spring the Forum moved to Tunis in both 2013 and 2015 where it encountered a grateful, discussion-loving civil society *in ovo*. The »First-World-Forum« (Naomi Klein) in Montreal 2016, Canada, was a hot topic of discussion. Should people go to the heart of capitalism rather than its periphery to give the concerns of social movements a higher profile? Hundreds of rejected visa applications, a date distant from that of the World Economic Forum, as well as low participant numbers led to a return of the Forum to the southern hemisphere.

Thus, the decision to go to Salvador de Bahia in 2018 was not a hard one to make. But neither the Forum nor the world as a whole is the same now as it was in 2001. The »decade of hope« – like the leftward shift in Latin America – is a thing of the past. Many countries have authoritarian governments; even Europe is not immune to them. The wind has turned against social movements. And in Brazil, the Workers' Party no longer governs after Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016.

The 2018 Forum in Bahia, like most other World Social Forums, was strongly influenced by the local participants. Afro-Brazilian and indigenous issues such as racism, police violence, and land grabs dominated the discussions among the nearly 60,000 participants from 120 countries. As always, a majority – reports speak of 95% – came from the country providing the meeting venue. Brazilian domestic politics played a major role. Even former President Lula da Silva tried to fill a soccer stadium. Contrary to what had been announced, few if any other deposed Latin American heads of state showed up. Many of the event's attendees felt that others were trying to use them.

It was also striking that many of the formerly hope-filled social struggles had assumed a purely defensive posture. Accordingly, the motto of the World Social Forum was changed to suit the times: instead of »Another world is possible« it now became »Resistance is development, Resistance is change.«

The accomplishments of the Social Forums have been overlooked

To cite one example of the pessimism about the World Social Forum, Tazio Müller of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung thinks that we should declare it dead and wait until global, issue-specific networks take shape that could assume a coordinating function for social movements. These funeral dirges overlook the fact that World Social Forums accomplish three things at the global level for which (so far!) there are no functional equivalents.

First, the meetings manage to establish linguistic understanding among people who in all likelihood would not otherwise talk to one another. To some extent, professional translators enable this to happen, but mostly it is done by omnipresent, self-organized whisper translations.

Second, this self-organized translation effort is only one of the elements that allows participants to develop a sense of belonging. Despite all the differences, these meetings manage to generate a bond. It is not the case that everyone must conform to a commonly accepted line. On the contrary: The exchange formats enable participants to present their own concerns without having to agree on anything. They can retain their own identities without friction yet at the same time feel that they are part of an emergent global civil society.

Third, the feeling of sitting or demonstrating among many other committed people reinforces the belief that another world is possible. This motivational boost is further intensified by the fact that, within a limited context, this alternative world is simulated at the World Social Forums. People from all over the world with different skin colors, problems, desires, and life plans exchange ideas and experiences with interest and openness, laugh together, and seek consensus instead of conflict.

In this way, globalization is being rethought and another world is being directly experienced. The World Social Forums are and remain places in which people can become acquainted with other lived realities in other parts of the world, because the meetings foster the openness needed for that to occur. In this manner transnational bridges can be built that otherwise could never come into being.

Another World Social Forum is possible

There is no substitute (thus far!) for the WSF. It is an important setting in which to discuss global justice and the global dimension of problems. In order to keep going, it will have to change. Thus, for example, the preparations for and organization of the meetings has been precarious for years. That is also connected to the low budget principle of the Forums: nearly all major transnational NGOs have cut off funding, so the organization of the Forums has become ever more awkward. Something has to be done about putting Forum finances on a more solid footing over the long term.

The precariousness of the Forums' organization also has something to do with the International Council (IC). It is composed of approximately 170 people and decides on the strategic orientation and venue of the Forums. It is not clear how one gains a voice on this Committee, nor are its power arrangements transparent. There is thus an urgent need to bring in new social movements that are less focused on the critique of globalization. At any rate new social movements that have formed since 2008 must be included, and the committee should be open to the changes they suggest.

There have been constant quarrels about the venues as well. Porto Alegre may have been glad to host the Forum in the decade from 2000 to 2010, but those times are gone. Given restrictive visa policies, it appears that a move to the Global North would be difficult, especially since the Forums would like to involve more participants from other continents. However, venues should be selected in which – unlike Salvador – people do not feel used or »instrumentalized.«

The World Social Forum continues to occupy an important place in the world of social movements, at least until something else comes along to replace it. Of course, many of the overblown hopes of the early years have gone unfulfilled. The world has changed since then; besides, a global civil society cannot be established in ten years. An important step has been taken in expanding the meaning of globalization beyond cheap flights, climate change, and free trade when large numbers of people from every continent can come together and discuss matters with each other free from fear. The intensified discussions about issue-based social forums, for example on migration in November 2018, laid a building block for the further development of the meetings.



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A Conversation with Annika Klose, Knut Nevermann, and Gesine Schwan
1968: Between myth and everyday experience

What changes did the revolution of 1968 bring about? What remains of them today, and is there a counter-movement against '68 from the right? These were some of the topics discussed in an interview with the political scientist, Gesine Schwan, the attorney and former state secretary, Knut Nevermann, and the chair of the Young Socialists (Jusos) of Berlin, Annika Klose. Thomas Meyer conducted the interview.

NG|FH: How much of »68« is just myth? What is left of it, and what do you associate with that era?

Annika Klose: The revolt of '68 still plays a major role in the ongoing debates among us Young Socialists. We associate it partly with the student protests of the day, but also partly with the protest movement that got going around that time across the entire society: an antiauthoritarian protest, a protest against the Emergency Laws, the rearmament of the Federal Republic, and an international protest, mainly against the Vietnam War. Then too, people were beginning to rediscover Karl Marx and discuss socialistic schemes for society. Even today the Jusos, especially, still trace their roots back to that time. The leftward turn of the Jusos in 1969 was a crucial moment for us, which we will commemorate next year with a major congress.

NG|FH: Mr. Nevermann, what do you remember?

Knut Nevermann: The decisive thing for me was that, suddenly, people were willing to oppose authoritarianism: that they contradicted a rector or professor, that they wanted to know why someone was an authority figure, or perhaps whether that person had a tainted personal history. People always had the issue of National Socialism in the back of their minds then. Many came from authoritarian families and schools, while both lectures and university operations were still relatively authoritarian.

Nowadays it is hard to imagine that people attended lectures wearing ties and collars and students addressed each other with the polite form of »you« (*Sie*). Between 1966 and 1968 all that was swept away. At first, the idea was to reform higher education, but ultimately what we wanted was more democracy.

Gesine Schwan: When it all began in 1967, I could hardly imagine that it could cause such a radical break all around the world, albeit with different inflections: in Asia, the USA, and even in Eastern Europe. And it was always a protest movement against the whole system. The journalist Erich Kuby advanced the provocative argument that the Free University of Berlin could not really be free, given the implied contrast between it and the unfree university in East Berlin. At the time, his claim stirred up a lot of anger, since it was also a tacit critique of the FU, the symbol of Western freedom.

I witnessed the origins of the so-called critical university, which proposed alternatives to the existing system and allowed student groups to work out many of the specifics. And because I defended the critical university, which was of course comparatively harmless, my liaison lecturer at that time told me that he didn't think there was much common ground left for us any longer. From today's perspective, we could only laugh at such things, but back then they were taken quite seriously.

NG|FH: The '68 movement was a worldwide one, from Berkeley to Tokyo. In Germany, it was triggered mainly by the Emergency Laws and the massive use of force against demonstrators when the Shah of Iran visited Berlin, leading to the death of Benno Ohnesorg. Were these phenomena causally connected all over the world?

Nevermann: Here, we have to mention the Vietnam War. The photo reportage, which grew ever more riveting, had a devastating effect on viewers. At the time I was very pro-American and so initially I argued only that all nations should enjoy the right of self-determination and such. But then we noticed that we were suddenly using slogans like »Americans out of Vietnam.«

We got radicalized from one month to the next and all of a sudden we were for the Viet Cong. That change of heart had a European background: France's tactics in the war in Algeria. As early as my time in the ranks of the »hawks,« Algeria played a major role. This great moral protest that had been directed against colonialism also arced over somewhat into attitudes toward Vietnam.

NG|FH: As we know, Rudi Dutschke made an intense effort to forge emotional links between these conflicts. We are waging the same fight here as the Vietnamese are against the Americans, he suggested. There is a connection; it's just that we are using different means here. Of course, that had an enormous rhetorical impact.

Schwan: In addition, there was the profound question concerning the extent to which the Federal Republic – i.e., West Germany – really had democratized itself. Wasn't there continuity, for example in the universities, between the National Socialist elites and those of today? And didn't it occur even at the Free University of Berlin, a newly founded institution that was considered progressive in comparison with many traditional universities with their fraternities and such? But one could find these continuities in other spheres as well, such as the courts, the ministries, etc. In spite of my critical attitude toward the deficient democratic quality of the Adenauer era, I myself – a West Berliner as distinct from East Berlin – really did not want to condemn West Germany absolutely.

NG|FH: The idea that the revolution was happening and that the new society was right around the corner was a reality even among truly bright and thoughtful people.

Schwan: ...I never believed a word of it, I must admit.



Milna Geringross

Gesine Schwan, Annika Klose, Knut Nevermann

Nevermann: ...Not seriously. Still, it was available as a nice rhetorical phrase.

Klose: Didn't this also have something to do with the Grand Coalition that existed then and with the Chancellor, Kurt Georg Kiesinger? Naturally, the social situation in 1968 differed from the one today, but right now young people, especially, have the impression that we are pitted against a very large majority against which presumably we can't make much headway. A form of impotence is widespread that people wanted to resist and contradict, right?

Schwan: At least as far as I can recall, that was not so much the case. Kiesinger, an ex-Nazi, was a bone of contention. But at the time I saw the Grand Coalition as a springboard into the future for the SPD and not so much as a dead end, in the way people today sometimes are inclined to perceive it.

And then in the Grand Coalition there was one minister who was responsible for the Emergency Legislation, but who has always been an ideal for me – Gustav Heinemann. He resigned his post as interior minister in the Adenauer cabinet and left the CDU as well. And he always defended communists. He was beyond reproach. At that time I did not feel any sense of impotence vis-à-vis the Grand Coalition. What I saw instead was the prospect that a Social Democratic government would soon take office. Of course, Willy Brandt represented an alternative set of policies, e.g., in respect to Eastern Europe, internal reforms, or family and marriage law.

NG|FH: Considering the fact that existing society was being called into question across the board, shouldn't one have expected that critics would develop some idea of what was to succeed it? But those discussions took place on a highly abstract level.

Nevermann: I frequently raised the question: in a council democracy, will there be multiple parties or not? That usually silenced everyone. It just had not been thought through. Some bits and pieces were lifted from writings of the period 1918/19, but that was it. Moreover, the context did not fit.

I think that we were relatively effective, even in the long run, and that was due to our having issues around which people could mobilize. And we were the only ones who had them. To cite one example, except for us there was actually nobody who was against the Vietnam War, not even a party. That started later.

In Berlin we still had the issue of press concentration. 70 % of the newspapers were owned by the Springer Company, which treated us like complete idiots. And there was the authoritarianism theme. How do we deal with authoritarian structures in the state, society, and the family? There, too, we were pretty much going it alone.

Today as in the past, a minority occasionally will hit upon a »hot button« issue, e.g., too many foreigners. But this minority is in the wrong and will therefore eventually fade away. Even looking at it from the viewpoint of our own day, the enduring success of the '68ers is partly due to the fact that we were simply right about our issues.

Today it is much more difficult to find an issue that can be set in a historical context and for which an appropriate form of protest can be developed, but that one that is also right and can be sustained. Nowadays you can always find some party that covers the issue. The Greens have taken over ecology, the Party of the Left has cornered left-wing populist topics, etc. So it is hard to find something that the majority does not want and that would allow us, as a minority, to make a name for ourselves.

NG|FH: Ms. Klose, do you get the impression that the issues of the '68ers are still relevant today? Or have they become superfluous due to the impact that '68 has had?

Klose: I think that a lot has changed, especially when one takes a look at the women's movement. There, things have progressed enormously. But that does not mean we have already reached our goal. Struggles over the issues that continue to engage us still must be fought out. Also, internationally – as in the past – there may be issues on which we certainly would be on the right side, historically speaking, and that we would have to politicize. Some examples would be: the military offensive of the Turks against the Kurds in Afrin, or the fact that many people are still drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. That flies in the face of my sense of justice. After all, things like this ought to engage a lot of people, yet one has the feeling that we are not really getting through to them.

Then there is the question of the systems of exploitation that continue to exist today, but that also have changed. Or the question concerning new forms of workers' organization: As yet no group has managed to politicize that topic in such a way as to assemble a mass of people behind them. That is something that the Jusos and the left wing of society as a whole ought to tackle. Obviously though, that is not working out well right now, because – as before – the camp of non-voters is still large. Many people now feel as though they are not represented or have the feeling that parliamentary democracy in the capitalist system is simply incapable of formulating answers to their questions. I think that there might be a very high potential for mobilization here, but maybe the momentum for that has not yet arisen.

NG|FH: Ms. Schwan, the critique that was made in those days was extremely radical and got radicalized even more as time went on. No one was able to imagine what changes could have been made that would have met the demands of this critique. Then, beginning in 1969 everything went downhill: the SDS was dissolved, and a few splinter groups emerged. One small group embarked upon a very long process, the march through the institutions, and tried to change society step by step.

Then there were the K groups, organized along military lines, disciplined, fixated on authority, and determined to change things by force. And there was the Red Army Faction (RAF). How do you explain this process – that in the end the anti-authoritarian movement gave rise to splinter groups such as these that of course did not last long, but kept the republic on the edge of its chair for ten years?

Schwan: As I recall, it's not the case that the »myth of '68« began at the end of 1967 and ended in 1969. It was more like an explosion that started in 1967 but then continued through the summer of the Emergency Legislation and kept on developing in various strains. For me, all of those phenomena still seem connected. One aspect of the mobilizing element was that the private became political or that the political was experienced existentially in the private sphere. That was true above all – albeit not exclusively – for women. People had experienced authoritarian behavior personally in their families, and now a lot of men were having friction with their fathers, while quite a few female students grew annoyed that their mothers just knuckled under the whole time.

The point is that it was not merely about far-off Vietnam; rather, we also experienced many of the problems very directly at home. And since the protest was geared to generating practical results, it is actually clear why it should then have broken up into splinter groups. Radicalism always harbors the potential for violence. The more radical your behavior is, the smaller will be your base of voluntary supporters. I interpret the life history of the Red Army Faction leader, Ulrike Meinhof, as signifying the despair of a woman who no longer considered it remotely possible that society could change, especially when it came to National Socialism. But she did not come from a right-wing milieu. Her radicalization happened as the result of an ever-narrowing vision as well as violence itself.

In the SPD, reforms came about as a result of 1968, but in the CDU it played virtually no role at all. One segment of the SPD, to which I later belonged, was regarded as rightist from the very outset. Others were becoming more radical, for example in their analysis of the economy, and acquired an anti-capitalist, Marxist orientation.

In my opinion, the effort to break up authoritarian tendencies almost inevitably entailed that there would be resistance against – in some cases – renewed expressions of authoritarianism as well. But in retrospect I noticed that the breakup of authoritarian elements also played a role in France and Italy, but not in England. British students had a very different generation of fathers and treated the latter almost as heroes. In Poland it was the children of the communists who opposed the Stalinization of a brand of communism that they originally had taken as a normative standard. And in the USA, Nazi fathers and authoritarianism were not the issues; instead it was more likely to be Vietnam, racism, or the failure of the country to live up to its own values.

NG|FH: Are we currently experiencing a kind of backlash directed against the success of the '68ers and the anti-authoritarian mindset associated with it? Many people say that '68 destroyed social order, discipline, and motivation and perhaps even jeopardized democracy.

Schwan: That is not a new backlash. Certain people have always said that the '68ers destroyed values, but they cannot specify which values those actually were. After all, no one could say that Germany was a model country before 1968.

However, I myself have serious reservations about a series of actions undertaken after 1968, because I had the impression that the leaders of these revolts – often authoritarian, intolerant, and uncommunicative – were repeating the patterns of behavior and disposition of the parents they criticized, even though the content of their actions was different. Clearly, rudeness, brutality, ruthlessness, and impoliteness are always bad. But of course that was not at the heart of '68.

Nevermann: In point of fact many tendencies did get completely out of control. The RAF story is one of those. I could never in my life have imagined that any of my fellow students would hold a gun in their hands. But then again they always remained a very small group. We should not forget that. Even their fellow-travelers, a somewhat larger group, never carried guns themselves.

And the K groups at the universities, with their authoritarian and to some extent inhumane ways, were quite small and grew smaller still, although they continued to radicalize themselves even more as their numbers dwindled. That entire phenomenon gradually disappeared by the mid-70s.

The great majority, however, returned to their studies, and joined parties, unions, or church groups, etc. Still, many people were imbued with the ideas of that era and that is the true outcome of 1968. Later on, the Greens, the anti-nuclear movement, and others emerged from that milieu.



Minna Gerngross

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NG|FH: But after all, today we notice that there is again a trend toward authoritarianism. It can be seen among the few who preach it and among the many who are attracted by it and vote for the parties associated with it, and not only here in Germany. Is that a counter-movement? Is it likely to generate much more?

Schwan: I don't see it as a true counter-movement against '68. Otherwise, that would imply that the current movement had to be explained in purely cultural terms. The cultural after-effects of '68 lasted perhaps well into the 90s. I don't know whether the Zeitgeist after that can still be traced back to '68. Many people have tried to do that, but I don't see it that way. Instead, there are new socioeconomic, psychological, and social reasons that have been decisive for the phenomena we are now experiencing. I don't see it as a backlash against '68.

Nevermann: The fact that many people want to have a strongman back again most likely should be ascribed to their sense of helplessness and insecurity. A lot of people cannot answer a question like »How many refugees should we let into this country?« In fact, I can't answer it either.

And when people get the feeling that Chancellor Angela Merkel, with her highly uncommunicative leadership style, is not making any decision, then they want to have clarity. They want to have the answers that they themselves cannot give. They want decisions and they probably don't even care what those decisions actually are.

Klose: I also think that the attitude of saying that this is a counter-movement against the '68ers is an oversimplification. Clearly, the right-wing movement likes to stir up resentment against what they call the »dirty, leftist-greenie milieu.« But I agree with Mr. Nevermann that the growing strength of the right is primarily due to tremendous feelings of personal insecurity. The root of this movement should be sought in a widespread dissatisfaction with the way in which the social system works as well as in the impact of neoliberal policies. The latter lead to a state of affairs in which individuals are thrown back upon their own resources, subjected to a logic of competition and achievement, while large sections of the social security network are being cut back. The resulting fears and missing structures of solidarity make people more susceptible to supposedly »simple answers« and authoritarian movements.

Schwan: One of the fundamental issues of '68 was the democratization of social sub-systems, on the assumption that, in the wake of National Socialism, democracy had never taken firm root. Today, democracy is again a hot topic, but this time in a different context. Although democracy has been established for decades on the foundation of the nation-state, at least in Europe and North America, the latter is no longer trusted to solve problems. We respond to that either by introducing supplementary forms of democracy or by rejecting liberal democracy altogether. Thus, all of a sudden illiberal structures become attractive once again, and not just in Central Europe. There are many supporters here as well, for example among some sections of the entrepreneurial class. There, the opinion prevails that there is too much talk, there are too many legal hurdles to cross, etc. The only thing that might help is deregulation.

Actually, '68-style democracy never really has been called into question as a normative scheme, but there has been a great deal of discussion of council democracy and grass-roots democracy, and many people (myself included) say: This has not been thought through, that can't work. Recently, the link between democracy and political liberalism has been questioned. To be sure, I don't think people are fully aware of what they would be leaving behind, and of what a return to authoritarianism would mean, because that would be the alternative.

Klose: The critique that claims »democracy does not work« actually just reflects the image of it that exists in people's minds. Democracy is truncated to mean the parliament, whereas one of the demands of the '68ers was of course precisely that »all spheres of life should be democratized.« We are still quite far away from that. In fact, today for example only some 40 % of all employees have an elected representative body in their places of work. Furthermore, those bodies have only limited rights. People are simply becoming aware that production at the macro-level of society no longer can be regulated democratically at the national level. And for some time now many other spheres such as educational institutions are no longer democratically structured.

Schwan: On the contrary.

Klose: We would thus have to democratize other spheres of life, but the right wing is steering us in exactly the wrong direction in this matter.

NG|FH: So have there been any crucial changes in the economic, educational, and political structures due to '68?

Nevermann: The truth is that quite a bit has changed in the educational system as a result of '68. That is the case because many of those who were involved at the time later ended up in those same institutions. If you compare photos of high school classes from 1970 with ones from 1965, you'll notice immediately that a cultural revolution has happened – in everything from hair styles to clothing and bodily posture. You might almost think you were in a different country. Or take the institution of the *Kinderladen*, a small, self-governing, alternative to more formalized day-care centers. The *Kinderladen* is not beyond criticism, but was certainly innovative. Or consider the expansion of Kindergartens as a whole that today has culminated in the assertion of a legal claim to a place in a Kindergarten. These all involved shifts of emphasis that owe their origins to the '68 era. And some things also have changed in the political system. On account of the sudden openness, new forms of protest came to the fore: citizens' initiatives, social movements, activists from civil society: they all came up with different ways to exert influence on politics. All of that has even had structural significance for the Federal Republic.

Schwan: I think so too. But at least since the 90s a different way of restricting democracy has emerged, especially in higher education, but in other spheres as well: namely, replacing democratic co-determination, self-determination, and spaces of freedom by a model more powerfully influenced by economics. That shift tended to favor technocracy over democracy.

Think of the following trend: the success of an institution of higher education is now measured more by its success in soliciting funds from third parties than by intellectual accomplishments. When one considers the fact that matters defined as political in '68 are now suddenly interpreted in purely technocratic terms again, and that economic efficiency now must be the decisive criterion, it is clear that democracy is being narrowed and vitiated. But that has not taken place in the traditional way, but more in the manner preferred by Milton Friedman: the recession of politics in favor of the market.

As I see it, today it is much more difficult really to »live« democracy. I believe there is a very important and promising response to that: strengthening participation, transferring more power and financial clout to the local government level. There, we again can accumulate primary experiences of democracy and not depend on media as the »middlemen.«

And here we return in a certain sense to the roots of '68, because of course we always have said that the local community is the seedbed of democracy. At this point I don't expect much help from the national level for participatory democracy, because democratic elites at the national level and to some extent at the state level

as well have been drawn into a maelstrom in which democracy is seen only as a mechanism for attaining and holding onto power – and this in a way that I could never have imagined back in '68.

Let's return to the SPD. In the 60s, Willy Brandt wanted to have a different kind of politics. Inwardly I was jumping for joy when he finally became federal chancellor in 1969. When we ask ourselves today which party we would trust to carry on a very different kind of politics, the answer is no longer quite as simple.

NG|FH: Ms. Klose, at the conference of Young Socialists that you've organized, will you be discussing current political issues too, or will it be more a reflection about history and its aftermath?

Klose: Both. We want to look backward and ask where we actually come from. We see our past as an important component of our current identity as an organization. What battles were fought then and what ones are we fighting today? But we also want to focus on the question: What does »democratic socialism in the 21st century« really mean? What significance should be attributed to the development of new productive forces and what kinds of democratization do we need? But of course those discussions have to be carried on from an international and feminist perspective as well.

I believe that we won't get any fundamental changes at this time without protest and pressure from the streets. And that also forges a link with '68.

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