

# There is no left-wing case for Brexit: 21st century socialism requires transnational organization



*The contribution of traditional social democracy to the consolidation of neoliberalism in Europe illustrates the difficulties of developing a nationalist left alternative in the contemporary capitalist state, argues [Lea Ypi](#). Contemporary socialism requires new ways of organising and must be transnational. Using the British case, she explains why neither Remain nor Leave fully capture the demands of the left.*

[The left-wing case for exiting the European Union](#) rests on a civic republican ideal of the nation. Its origins are in the revolutions of 1848 and a radical democratic project that is open and inclusive, that aspires to overcome divisions of gender, race, and class, and where domestic equality matters as much as international solidarity. For the civic republican ideal, nation is not a culturally homogenous unit but a daily plebiscite.

The opposite of civic republicanism is ethnic nationalism. We are all familiar with it: it is the nationalism of Viktor Orban and of Nigel Farage, of Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump. [Ethnic nationalism has always done the dirty work of capitalism](#). Denying vulnerable minorities political representation while continuing to exploit them in the labour market is one well-known source of increasing profit. But socialism and civic republicanism have traditionally been considered [not only compatible but mutually complementary](#). Can civic republicanism still fuel progressive politics? Is there a left-wing case for Brexit?

Skeptics argue that changing the EU [is best done from within](#). Civic republicanism, they say, is in decline. In [analysing](#) the reasons, some talk about political apathy, loss of trust in representatives and hostility to elites. Others discuss the consolidation of financial capitalism and [global economic failure](#). Others warn about [the rise of the far right](#): while the poorest citizens continue to be victims of austerity budgets, they become more and more vulnerable to facile ethno-cultural rhetoric leading to more racism and xenophobia.

But those who advocate civic republicanism are understandably frustrated with these propositions. Suppose all this is true, they say. Suppose you want to change transnational institutions. [How are you going to do that](#), if you can't even sort out your own nation state? How are you going to advance ambitious proposals of state intervention in the economy given the [disciplinary neoliberal legal](#) constraints that the EU imposes on its members?

But the real problem for a left-wing Leave position goes well beyond ethnic nationalism. And well beyond neoliberalism. Neither of them just happened. The left contributed to both: in the case of the centre-left by accepting the cooptation in the capitalist state, in the case of the radical left, by making itself irrelevant to it. In the first case there was not enough critical distance. In the other, there was only that.

The social democratic left has been not only silently complicit but singlehandedly responsible for the demise of the welfare state and for the emergence of the post-Cold War global order. It was the SPD under Gerhard Schroeder that brought the Hartz reforms to Germany. It was the Labour party under Tony Blair that supported the Iraq war. What civic involvement can social democratic parties expect from ordinary people when they contributed to their immiseration through austerity packages over decades? What faith in international solidarity can one have when social-democratic governments supported dropping bombs on civilians in the name of humanitarian war? What tolerance of other cultures can one advocate when they failed to dismantle migrant detention camps in the name of tighter border control?

The radical left resisted all this. But it too was fragmented and electorally irrelevant, divided between Cold War nostalgics who seemed out of touch with the times, and young, educated, social movement types that seemed out of touch with ordinary lives. As representatives of the centre left wore business suits and moved into central bank buildings, those of the radical left kept the squares, the flags, and the slogans. But both lost ordinary working people.

Yet this *is* the Left as it currently stands. This is the challenge of the Labour party in Britain. However different the responsibilities of each side, distinguishing the mainstream from the radical projects will not undo their respective failures. Their fate is intertwined, the legacy can't be undone.

The left nationalist project collapsed when realising socialism with peaceful means turned into a project of stabilising capitalism. This is not what the founding fathers of social democracy originally intended. As [Eduard Bernstein put it](#), his famous statement “the movement is everything to me” was at no point intended to express “indifference to socialist principles”. His hope, the hope of nascent social democracy was that left nationalism would support “the peaceful abolition of class-government” through an ever-expanding process of civic education. Social democratic parties around Europe sought to transform the state by taking advantage of national mechanisms of democratic participation: national parties, national elections, national mobilisation, national strikes.

Current attempts to revive civic republicanism through projects of socialism (or social democracy) in one country are not dissimilar in spirit. But the unwillingness to learn from the history of traditional social democracy is striking. The radical left denounces the complicity of the centrist left in the consolidation of neoliberalism. But while the cooptation of socialism by the capitalist state cannot be denied, it would be naïve to ascribe the failures of traditional social democracy to the ill-will of individual leaders, parties and policy-makers. In 1871 Marx [warned](#) that the working class could not “simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes”. At the time of writing, this was mere conjecture, now it is an empirical fact.

The paralysis of traditional social democratic projects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not just a matter of failed volition, of opportunistic politicians and policy-makers unwilling to listen to their supporters though there was some of that too. The problem is related, on the one hand, to the incentive structure of liberal parliamentary democracy and on the other, to the influence of capital, corporations, the media, and international regulatory regimes on domestic politics. The institutions of liberal democracy required social democratic [parties to serve two masters](#): speak for their supporters on the basis of shared principles in order to be elected but also face fierce opposition, and pressure to compromise those principles for the sake of national stability (including the stability of capital) once in government. Failing that, they were condemned to electoral irrelevance, the kind of marginalization from mainstream politics that the radical left has enjoyed up to this point.

These structural constraints on national social democracy have not gone away. The nationalist left needs to learn the lesson of this failure. It needs to rejoin its critique of the capitalist economy with its critique of the neoliberal state. Advocating widespread socio-economic reforms without a radical transformation of liberal political institutions is unlikely to work. But once we add to the critique of the economy the critique of the state, the project looks less like one of ambitious economic reform and more like one of political revolution. To succeed, it requires an extremely large base of popular support, a mass of citizens sufficiently politically mature to resist the appeal of the far right acting in collusion with neoliberalism. After years of xenophobia, austerity, cuts to education, dismantling of unions and the progressive erosion of political learning platforms, lasting support on the ground is likely to be very thin. Reviving civic republican sentiments begins to look as hopelessly idealistic as the kind of cosmopolitan aspirations that left nationalists criticize.

The left needs to turn resolutely to Europe. It needs to pluralise (and not reduce) the sites of political conflict. It needs to build a pan-European movement through transnational party lists, shared political manifestos, and common protest initiatives. It needs to mobilise migrant workers rather than alienate them even further. It needs to campaign, in a coordinated way, not for a [liberal superstate with a common army](#) but for a European socialist federation which renounces neo-imperial ambitions once and for all. It needs to advocate neither the abandonment nor the reform of the European Union but a review of the Lisbon treaty that dismantles neoliberalism and bureaucracy. It needs to campaign for non-territorial citizenship, European-wide public ownership, extensive popular control of the economy, a new digital common, direct democracy, a federal parliament with revocable public offices and a non-technocratic, accountable, administrative apparatus based on strong principles of subsidiarity.

This is neither “leave” nor “reform”: it is “transform”. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to how the project can become appealing to European citizens, given the current predicament. Matters of tactic and strategy will be different in different member states. This is why Remain and Leave mean very little without concrete ideas of how one can go from where we are to where we aspire to be. But these ideas need organizational structures and an international mass movement to be developed. Rushing to abandon the primitive forms of transnational coordination that the current European Union offers seems premature in the absence of realistic, alternative paths forward. Retreating to civic republican projects disconnected from the wider fight for transnational democracy will only strengthen capital, and the far right.

Socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century took a civic nationalist form. Socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only be transnational. This is a very demanding task. But it has one advantage. Unlike socialism and social democracy in one country, it has not already failed in the past.

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### About the Author



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