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## Economy, culture, discourse and engagement in heterogeneous societies

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## Economy, Culture, Discourse and Engagement in Heterogeneous Societies

Globalization has changed our worlds domestically and beyond the nation-state. Our societies are facing opportunities and risks. It depends not at least on political action what will prevail. Three major factors will be decisive for social and political cohesion in our advanced democratic societies, but they can be changed and are not set in concrete. They are the essential screws for knocking politics into shape.

- Class: socio-economic inequality
- Culture, religion, ethnicity: cultural heterogeneity
- Cosmopolitan elites and communitarian citizens: which engagement?

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All three variables can be separated out analytically but, in reality, they are very closely woven together, they overlap and buttress each other. If there's any mismatch then they may become deactivated; if they overlap then conflicts mount and the problems of integration intensify. Theoretical considerations as well as empirical facts suggest the following basic hypothesis: intelligent political action can create the social and cultural pre-conditions for successful societal integration and political engagement in liberal democracies. But to do so you must put to one side the postmodern naivety of multi-cultural and cosmopolitan optimism and to accept the empirically proven fact that it's harder to govern heterogeneous societies than homogeneous ones. What IS and what SHOULD BE the case must not be mixed up in any sober analysis.

### 1. Social class and socio-economic inequality

From the beginning of the 1980s inequality of income and wealth rose in the OECD club of economies regardless of the indicator used: Gini-index, upper and lower quintile, decile, poverty ratio or especially the top 1.0 or 0.1% of the income pyramid (cf. inter alia Piketty 2014). This steep rise in inequality is not the 'natural' consequence of the digital revolution, the knowledge economy or bold creative disruption. Mainly, it's a result of political decisions that have been propagating this particular form of market empowerment and the shrinking of the state for pretty well three decades.

At the same time, the OECD group of countries is witnessing lower turnouts at elections as well as declining membership of political parties and larger

collective bodies in society. The lower third of society in particular has turned its back on politics. New or direct forms of political participation such as NGOs, referenda, citizen councils and participatory budgeting or deliberative fora are socially much more selective than the ailing institutions of representative democracy. The participatory world of the OECD has witnessed the emergence of two-thirds democracies. The lower third has broken away from political engagement and our democracies.

Democracy lives on assumptions that cannot be reproduced by economy and society alone. This is not a structural fault of democracy. Rather, we are dealing with a partially deliberate, partially careless surrender of the state's capacity to regulate and intervene in an economy that structurally creates socio-economic inequality and erodes the fundamental democratic principle of political equality. So the issue is to strengthen the state and reboot much more strongly redistribution as a general *leitmotiv* within fiscal, economic and education policy. The more socially just the more integrated a society and, with that, the higher the quality of democracy. Social equality, societal integration, and political engagement by the people are closely connected.

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## 2. Governing Heterogeneous Societies

Culturally homogeneous societies are easier to govern. Heterogeneous societies tend to draw ethnic cleavages, to fragment into sub-cultures, to create parallel societies and cut back on the build-up of inclusive social capital. That sounds alarming because heterogeneous societies *are* our future and many aspects of them can be exceedingly positive, such as cultural diversity, economic and social creativity as well as the practice of tolerance and recognition of the other.

Empirical research can demonstrate the following about social capital: the greater the socio-economic and ethno-religious inequality the lower the level of mutual trust among citizens. This link is not unavoidable but it can be mitigated – including via: economic growth, meritocratic mechanisms in society (equal life chances: Amartya Sen), social security, fair rules of redistribution beyond the markets, low levels of social inequality, and strong social links between ethnic communities (bridging social capital).

The negative scenario in our society would be: no growth, high economic inequality, a weak welfare state, high levels of ethnic diversity with, at the same time, barely any cross-ethnic community social organizations. This has been the path followed in the last three decades. But turn these around and there's a positive integration scenario.

The removal of socio-economic inequality in a prosperous economy could unleash a special pro-integration dynamic that, over the long term, could help bridge not only economic, but also cultural gaps. Right now, there's

the risk of a cleavage becoming starker between Arab Muslims and European immigration societies whether these are laicistic like France, or liberal-multicultural like Holland, or Catholic like Poland and Slovakia. Today's Europe demonstrates barely a successful example of Muslim integration: neither of Arab Muslims in France, Belgium, Holland, Spain nor of Turkish Muslims in Germany, Switzerland and Austria nor again of Pakistani Muslims in Great Britain. One cause of this is certainly a failed policy of integration. The immigration country did not take their engagements connected to immigration and necessary for integration sufficiently serious.

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But is that all? Have all countries simply failed? The liberal multi-cultural policies in The Netherlands, the laicistic republican policy of France and the much stronger bent towards ethnic assimilation in Switzerland, Austria and Germany? Or is it the case that people from Muslim cultures are the hardest religious-ethnic minorities to integrate in European societies because core elements of their current communities display the greatest distance towards the guiding principles of our liberal and secular social cultures? There are signs of evidence if you look at the cultural modernization that's happened in our society in recent decades: gender equality, gay rights and the right to determine ones own sexuality, right to skepticism, irony and satire vis-à-vis religion in general, freedom to convert religious beliefs, and last but not least the condemnation of anti-Semitism.

These exemplary cultural achievements are protected under law. But it's not enough just to respect the law when it comes to integration but to accept the core values of the immigrant community. Of course, the immigrants' values are construed at an individual level in society but, as in all societies, it's a question here of deep-rooted social dispositions which cannot be 'unconstrued' haphazardly or in a short timeframe. The offer of language and integration courses is a necessary but certainly far from sufficient condition. Immigrants have to engage actively in politics and societies.

At least just as important is swift integration into the labour market. Long waiting times for work permits are fatal. But integration into the labour market cannot undermine important regulations such as the minimum wage or job protection, including against dismissal. And it's crystal clear that any such squaring of the circle can only involve painful compromises for social democratic policy. Neoliberal labour markets can absorb unskilled migrant labour easier than regulated markets. In the short term, one might be sceptical that such partial re-regulations can be won against any trade union veto – and the unions can, for their part, claim legitimate grounds for their positioning. Social democratic labour and welfare policies have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis.

It will be even tougher to undertake that 'deconstruction' of deep-rooted patriarchal and anti-Enlightenment value models that is essential for integration.

Anybody thinking in shortened timeframes does not want to understand how deeply ethno-religious values are rooted in an individual's personality. It's not improbable that parallel societies emerge that may well not run up against the constitutional decrees of the state but may still reflect patriarchal and illiberal traditions. But the parallel subcultural societies rarely engage in common organizations, projects and activities. The likely medium-term perspective is therefore neither the normatively unacceptable assimilation to a dominant culture nor a multi-cultural mishmash but the hopefully peaceful co-existence of segregated cultures. Such a realistic perspective does not negate the need for cultural integration but it does separate the diagnosis of what IS from an ever-valid perspective on what SHOULD BE.

### 3. Discursive Engagement: cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism

There's a third cleavage that's starting to form in our societies in the wake of globalization: that between cosmopolitan elites – the sociologist Richard Sennett mocks these as *frequent flyers* – and the intellectually, geographically as well as socially immobile parts of our societies.

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Three principles define the normative core of cosmopolitanism: individualism, universalism and openness. Cosmopolitans want open borders, open-door immigration, easier access to citizenship, cultural pluralism as well as global responsibility for universally valid human rights and environmental protection. Cosmopolitans play up the opportunities of globalization, communitarians its risks. The latter prefer communities built on solidarity, controlled borders, they stand for limits on immigration, opt for cultural identity and stress the value of social cohesion and engagement that is supposedly easier to maintain in small definable communities than in unbounded social spaces whose texture rapidly alters. A positive variant of communitarianism would be the social democratic "Folkhemmet" (*people's home*) in Sweden or Denmark, a negative or chauvinist model today's rampant right-wing populism. The first is a political project of solidaristic engagement, the latter is an ethnic exclusion of the immigrants and new citizens.

Cosmopolitan views are found above all among the educated middle classes. Many of them are the winners of globalization. They enjoy the human capital enabling them to cope with cultural differences and economically forced geographical mobility. These are the social groups that social democracy has won over even more strongly since the 1970s. The lower half of society is less mobile and more critically disposed towards open borders, immigration, imposed mobility, multiculturalism and competition in the least-qualified segment of the labour market. These are the losers of globalization and potential voters of right wing populist parties. And, of course, it's not dicey to speculate that they bear the biggest brunt

of open borders within their local quarters as well as in daily and working life. They bear the costs of open borders most of all while the upper and parts of the middle classes profit from them.

These new cleavages have for some time grown into a dilemma for European social democrats: if they make concessions to one side they lose votes on the other. The decline in voter support over the past decade precisely reflects this dilemma. The influx of refugees and the so far uniquely cosmopolitan policy of the federal government within Europe have served to deepen this dilemma. This is an even bigger challenge for the communitarian, conservatively positioned Christian Democrats. They wanted openness for the free exchange of economic goods and services, not for migrant cultures or the massive inflow of culturally 'alien' people of whom it's impossible to say whether they will help or hinder the economy and the exchequer.

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Despite all these difficulties, the contours of a social democratic narrative can be discerned in this integration debate: the widening socio-economic divide between winners and losers of globalization must be closed; a strong state shows itself not only as a reliable set of laws but also as a guarantor of social advancement and equal life chances for all; this holds true not least for refugees and immigrants; to help them integrate they need disproportionate financial support, if necessary even with affirmative action. Those affirmative actions have to be extended to the lower third of our society. It would make our societies more just and resilient against right-wing populist temptations.

Initiatives to build bridges and stimulate engagements between ethnic communities, organizations and associations within civil society must be promoted from below. The immigrants and the majority within modern and just societies must change too. But there can be no negotiation of the rule of law and the cultural values of an open society. That's as true for indigenous xenophobia on one side as it is for religious-based intolerance in many current Islamic utterances on the other.