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The Future of Progressive Culture and Politics

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What relationship do progressive culture and progressive politics have with each other? A hundred years ago the answer was simple and clear: they were part and parcel of the same Labour Movement. Now there is no automatic link any longer between the two, as there is no consciousness based on a working class identity which would sustain a Labour Movement and a Progressive culture allied with it.

Obviously this does not mean that classes and differences between them have melted away. On the contrary they have actually been increasing again for some time.

I'm not sure that class societies can ever be eliminated as some form of social stratification will always exist. But as far as this is possible the nearest modern societies have come to it are the Welfare States built on the ideals of the so-called Nordic Model. The central feature and the key to the success of the model is to be found in the concept of *folkhemmet* or People's Home first evoked by Per Albin Hansson as the leader of the Swedish Social-Democratic Party in 1928.

The Ideal of an equal and just society, which in addition to democratic freedoms, also guarantees equal social and economic rights and opportunities to all its citizens is by no means Hansson's or anyone else's invention, but rather representative of the values which have guided many utopian socialists, pre-industrial revolutionaries or religious movements. And of course Marxists and Leninists also shared the goal of classless society, although they did not believe it could be achieved by peaceful democratic means.

The vision of a People's Home was an important opening in that it specifically started from the premise that basic social rights realized by social security and the provision of public services were to cover the population as a whole. This was the universalist principle which meant that social policies were no longer directed only to the poor or even the working class, as it up to then had been and was to remain for a long time, and it also reargued social policies not as a drag on the economy, but as a boost for economic growth. This view was adopted before others by the Swedish and Norwegian Social-Democrats who also began to implementing it already before Keynes, the economists of the Stockholm school or Alva and Gunnar Myrdal had presented the scientific economic base for it.

The adoption and construction of the Nordic Model proceeded slightly differently and in a different pace in the Nordic countries, Finland being the last one to embrace its basic tenets, but when it did so it was done with vengeance, with the ten-year period starting in 1966 when the elections returned a left-wing parliamentary majority and a "Popular Front" government, which presided over the most intensive structural readjustment and social construction period in our history.

The results were gratifying. All five Nordic countries are usually to be found among the top ten in any of the various beauty contests where countries are ranked on the basis of such criteria as lack of corruption, educational achievements, competitiveness, health, environmental responsibility, gender equality or just plain human happiness.

Also in Finland the more concretely measurable poverty rate (as measured by those with less than 50 % of the median income) was after taxes and income transfers 18 % in 1966 but this had fallen to 7,8 % in 1991 when it was at its lowest.

Since then it has again reached about 14 %. Income differentials before taxes and income transfers have also risen, but instead of increasing the redistributive intervention of the Welfare state this too has been diluted through tax cuts and cuts in income transfers. Thus we have in twenty years gone back to the differentials prevailing at the beginning of the sixties mainly by running down the redistributive intervention of state intervention.

While these figures refer to Finland this has been, with some variations, the overall trend in most if not all

of our countries.

We are now in fact witnessing the return of the Class Society. It is not, however, a return to the kind of Class Society which gave birth to the Working class movement, but rather a new 2.0 version.

In the class societies of the third millennium one is not confronted with the same kind of omnipresent and obtrusive inequality in the streets which characterized the older class societies. The dichotomies of the old class society were clear and institutionalized. The bourgeoisie had their Stock Exchanges, National Theatres, Opera, Cathedrals, country clubs, Scout movements, universities and Chambers of Commerce; whereas the working class had its own workers halls, its own newspapers, trades unions, sporting clubs and a whole range of cultural institutions and facilities of its own, from theatres to libraries and brass bands to educational associations etc.

In these societies everyone knew their place, and for most it had been determined at birth. Class boundaries were clear, although not completely unbreakable. Here of course countries have different histories and historical memories; in Finland the Civil War of 1918 between Reds and Whites determined the mindset of Finnish politics for many decades, not only as a source of bitterness and conflict but also as an inducement for reconciliation over class lines. Up to the nineteen-eighties it remained an axiom in Finnish politics that governments should normally be based on coalitions extending over the Left/Right divide.

It can be argued that the working class in most European countries achieved full citizenship only after World War II. The class identity and consciousness of the working class was then also at its highest, after which it began to weaken. This is by no means something to be bemoaned, as far as it has been based on a real erosion of class conflicts and a leveling of class differentials. This also explains to a great degree why labour organisations and the institutions that they upheld as alternatives and competitors those of the bourgeoisie have been weakened or even completely disappeared.

In Finland this is true of the once mighty concentration of so-called Red Capital, which was contaminated by the hubris of capitalist speculation in the nineteen-eighties leading to its nemesis and destruction in the nineteen-nineties. Still the good news is, that consumer cooperatives have never been as successful and powerful as today. The split of the cooperative movement into white and red sections in 1916 has now disappeared, but so has the pink hue associated with labour movement controlled cooperatives. Today's cooperatives cater to all and sundry, not specifically any class, least of all the working-class. This can be referred to as another example how the universalist principle has become practice.

This process of natural depletion also includes the way in which many activities originally created to serve the needs of the working class - the theatres, libraries, choirs etc mentioned earlier as well as many organisations which pioneered child care and public health services - have been "nationalized", in other words taken over by local councils or in other ways become part of publicly financed and run services in a way which has disconnected them from any bonds to the working class. Compared with the past there is very little culture being produced under the specific label of working-class institutions.

But, correspondingly many former bourgeois institutions have also evolved into forms making them in practice indistinguishable from former labour institutions. It is not easy to spot the difference between, say, a theatre evening in the Finnish National Theatre or the Tampere Worker's Theatre or playing basketball in the Helsingin Jyry or YMCA team.

The trade-union movement remains formidable in all the Nordic countries and has the highest degree of unionization to be found anywhere in the world. Even so, its influence both over its own members as well as over national decision-making is only a shadow of what it once was. Trade unions have been forced on the defensive and they focus on trying to defend the rights and wages of their members. This also means that trade unions have difficulties in addressing those in the most precarious situation on the labour market, a.k.a. the precariat of part-time and temporary workers.

While inequality and classes have not disappeared, they do not announce themselves in dichotomies as clearly as before. Clothes, lifestyle, cultural interests and activities do not reveal people's class status as clearly as before. What used to recognize itself as the working class has splintered into many different layers and groups. There is now no unified or common working class identity any longer nor the kind of labour

movement as its representative with which people would and could instinctively identify themselves. People define their identities on national or ethnic lines on the one hand and through different subcultures and minorities on the other.

Despite the growth of income differentials very few in the 2.0 version of class societies live in abject poverty. Even so the weakest in our society are dispossessed too. Whereas in the past they had at least a sense of belonging to a working class and could believe in the labour movement's promise of a better future, nothing of this remains. Finland today is a 35 % nation - this being the proportion of people who in opinion polls are unable or unwilling to name a single party they support. The vast majority of these people are poor, often single-parents or singles, with little education and unemployed for various reasons; increasingly plagued by ill health as well.

As these people have for a long time been politically passive even left-wing parties do not always show sufficient interest in taking up their cause. Most parties want to compete for the votes of what is regarded as the politically floating but active Middle Class voters in a way which further serves to alienate the already politically dispossessed 35 % from all established political parties. Far-Right and Centre-Right populist parties are able to draw voters from left-wing parties, not primarily because of their anti-immigration or racist views, but because the left parties are perceived as having forgotten the working people and become part of the well-to-do establishment.

Deprivation, poverty, marginalization or becoming merely objects of politics has not disappeared with an identifiable working class, but has actually increased with growing inequality as the welfare state is being dismantled, even if the return of class society does not yet dominate the city landscape. All social indicators confirm this trend, not only in terms of money income distribution, but also regarding health and other indicators. Moreover social mobility, which has had a mitigating effect on class divisions, has actually begun to decrease again, meaning that both welfare and poverty are increasingly inherited, but not due to any genetic reasons.

And what about culture? The picture I have presented so far is, that as a recognizable working class with its own institutions keeps fading away, so has the separate working-class culture based on these institutions or identifying them also faded.

As true as this may be it does not mean the end of the working class movement as we have historically known it, does not mean the end of either progressive politics or progressive culture. There is and will in the future also continue to be, in some form or another, a left which opposes rising inequality and seeks to improve the lot of those worst placed in our societies. This may be even more apparent in arts, literature, theatre and other cultural spheres.

The way in which the working-class, working-class institutions and working-class parties have eroded maybe a loss and a huge challenge to left-wing politics to which no satisfactory response has yet been provided, but in my incorrect this may at the same time have been a liberating influence for progressive culture.

This is undeniable at least so far as it has meant that - apart from maybe Cuba and a few other places - there are no longer any party-appointed cultural commissars with powers in the name of the working-class to decree what is acceptable and what is not in arts, literature and culture.

I have managed to speak so far without trying to define what progressive culture is and I am happy to say that not even the ubiquitous Wikipedia provides a definition. Perhaps it is more easily done by spelling out what its opposite is. If the opposite of working-class culture is bourgeois culture then the opposite of progressive culture is conservative culture. With these terms it is easy to understand that there was no automatic correlation between working-class and progressive culture and that in many respects - and not only in Stalinist practice - the prevailing ethos of working-class culture could have a strong strand of cultural conservatism.

For the purposes of discussions and the values that the participants at this seminar presumably share we need to understand progressive culture more politically as culture which either aims at changing the world in accordance with the aims of progressive politics or without explicitly or conscientiously sharing these aims nevertheless supports them.

This understanding of progressive culture can be taken somewhat further and say, that progressive culture is transformative and emancipating - leading to the question, does what passes for progressive politics itself any longer fill these criteria?

Could it be, that instead of politics showing the way for culture (and, in extreme version, guiding it with commissars), culture will show the way for politics?

To finish I will present these conclusions:

- Progressive politics need progressive culture more than culture has use for politics, and politics even of the progressive variety cannot and should not try to guide culture
 - the Role of Progressive politics is to enable (hopefully) progressive culture to flourish
 - Progressive politics should seek to establish an equal working relationship with progressive culture and cultural workers and use them, not only or even primarily as people who can design sets, play music or put on shows for events arranged by parties, but as a source of ideas and inspiration