

Left-Wing Tribalism in the Face of Climate Change

An interview with Robbert Bodegraven, Susan Neiman

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For years, political philosopher Susan Neiman has been urging for an increased focus on morality in politics. The Left, she argues, has lent its ears too long to the dogmas of economic growth and individual self-interest. In this conversation from before the Covid-19 pandemic, she spoke to Robbert Bodegraven about how it is time for a rehabilitation of values to enable the Left to connect and mobilise communities to address climate change.

Robbert Bodegraven: In your work, you present yourself explicitly as a left-wing political philosopher. At the same time, however, you criticise left-wing politicians for lacking the courage to practise value-driven left-wing politics. What do you mean by that?

Susan Neiman: I think one of the explanations is connected to 1989, a crucial year the Left still has not thought through well enough. The collapse of state socialism marked a watershed, together with the supposed triumph of neoliberalism. It rendered the Left helpless. In Soviet Union state socialism, the problem was, aside from the terror, its materialistic worldview. Which isn't any different from neoliberalism. The idea that the bottom line is the bottom line. And what really counts are materialistic goals.

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I think it's Marx' fundamental mistake. Marx himself was confused. He was not able to move people through an appeal to more potatoes. As Brecht wrote, "*Erst kommt das Fressen, und dann kommt die Moral*" ("Grub first, then ethics"). What really moves people to a Marxist or socialist view is the basic idea of justice. Marx made the mistake to label morality a repressive strategy of the bourgeoisie while himself making moral appeals. That leaves Marxism in basic contradiction with itself.

Without a value-driven moral compass, the emphasis on potatoes will not be enough. Sure, people want to be able to provide for their basic needs, but a just and fair society demands more than just enough food for everybody. Still, when I speak with social democrats about the declining support of the Left, I often hear: we have to go back to basics, we need to talk about basic meat and potatoes issues. I don't think that's the case. In the end, people are motivated by ideals.

The Left's emphasis on material possessions – even if it is phrased as the fair division of goods – puts them way closer to a neoliberal view of the world than they like to think. Naturally, inequality is a theme that the Left must fight, but not because every one of us should try and collect as many material possessions as possible.

Take the neoliberal dogma of economic growth. The Left just goes along with that. Who would be against growth? No one of course. We look at GNP and say, “Oh my God, the growth is amazing”. But growth means the manufacture of stuff, the use of raw materials – it means exhausting the earth. If the Left goes along with that logic, then, in the end, the only question that remains is: “do I get my share of the pie?” At that point, the Left is closer to neoliberalism than it wants to admit.

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You mentioned 1989, why was that such a crucial year?

As a result of the fall of the Berlin wall and the failure of state socialism, the Left totally despaired. Marxism had predicted the triumph of workers over capitalism, while socialism promised equal opportunities and a reliable, caring government. Nothing had come true of that. Many people who had wondered before the fall of the Berlin wall to which branch of Marxism they belonged, all of a sudden said they had never been Marxists. They claimed that they had known all along that state socialism and Marxism would lead to the gulags. That relieved them of the duty to think about what had really happened. The Left went into retreat.

Are there also other reasons for the despair of left-wing parties?

The confusion that overcame left parties worldwide has other causes as well, among others the rise of evolutionary psychology and post-modernism. Evolutionary psychology took over the world just about the same time as neoliberalism did. It began as a pseudoscience in America in the 1970s, where it was called socio-biology first. It argues that people are biologically determined, they act to increase the power of themselves or of the tribe they belong to. Socio-biology was fiercely attacked because it was supposedly racist and sexist. Racist I don't know, but it was definitely sexist. That is the reason why it died out for a while. But in the 1990s socio-biology was reborn under the name evolutionary psychology; and the tragedy is that the Left went along in this evolutionary-psychological thinking: many left-wing movements believe that people are only motivated by a desire to power and wealth. That is at odds with the idealism that should characterise the Left.

And what about post-modernism?

It led to all claims to truth being negated because according to post-modernists there are only stories. Since Foucault, we have gone on to believe that all those stories only serve to increase one's own power.^[1] In post-modernism you actually see the return of the same worldview that exists in evolutionary psychology: man only lives for himself and his own tribe, groups confront each other and competitive rivalry determines who wins and who loses. This post-modernism has had a tremendous influence: whole generations of students grew up with it and it is partly responsible for the many forms of *fake news* we are dealing with today. If nothing can be said to be true, any story can stake a claim to truth.

In your work, you refer to Plato's dialogue *The State*, where Socrates posed the question of what justice really means. According to Thrasymachus, it was just a smokescreen for behaviour in the service of self-interest. Socrates retorted that while individuals pursue self-interest and power, they also show empathy and solidarity with mankind as a whole. Do you think that describes the political divide between left and right?

No, that divide is not necessarily right-wing or left-wing. You can see elements of Thrasymachus' point of view on

the Left as well. Basically, there are two choices: you are either a universalist or a tribalist; either you believe in ideals, or you are a materialist.

The reason I am a Kantian is that he is a grown-up idealist. He is quite conscious of the reality of the material world with all its shortcomings, at the same time, he believes in a better world. His view allows for a universalism that is not just a universalism of needs, but also of solidarity and common goals. Historically, the Left has always tended towards universalism, while the Right veers towards nationalism and tribalism. But what worries me a great deal about today's Left is the way it is inclined to go in the tribalist direction.

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If tribalism means attention for the national identity, then maybe that is not a bad idea per se.

That is right. National identity is important, but it has to be one with an open, universal attitude. Without universalism, support for dispossessed groups leads to identity politics in ways that can boil down to tribalism. It leads to a focus on the needs of specifically oppressed groups, without a sense of common good.

Hannah Arendt said that Adolf Eichmann (the Nazi high official who fled Germany after the war but was arrested and tried by an Israeli court in 1960) had to be sentenced for crimes against humanity, not for crimes against the Jews. That distinction is very important. If you look at the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, then the question is not if Black bodies are being broken; the question rather is if unarmed citizens may be shot down by people because they happen to be Black. It is about human rights, civil rights.

Right-wing nationalist and populist movements emerging everywhere are pitting people against each other. But left-wing populist parties do that as well. Apparently, it satisfies a deep human need.

I don't think populism has been clearly defined at all; it's used as an insult. I don't know a single group that would describe itself as populist, left or right. I really fail to understand why someone like Carl Schmitt (the conservative German jurist who lent his scholarly power to the defence of the Nazi government's policies) gets so much attention. He expressed extreme "us" and "them" thinking, believing that outgroups can't exist in liberal democracies and you even have to push them out. But civilisation means you move beyond tribalism, you think beyond your own group, you want to expand your world. That is how people grow and how civilisations develop. And I draw a sharp line between civilisation and barbarism.

Left-wing political philosopher and follower of Schmitt, Chantal Mouffe, advocates for a left populism. She maintains that populism means a broad popular movement which runs through all the social classes.

Fine, I'm in favour of that. If populism means that it connects people through social layers, then I am all for it. Who would not be? But it should not pit people against each other.

So, you do not believe in the natural contrast between the population and the elite, whether they be politicians, people in managerial positions or CEOs?

Well, it is a kind of rhetoric. It is empty, or dangerous, or both. I think that very often we do not know where the sources of power are. Who are they anyway, the people who make up the elite?

I was very much involved in the Obama campaign. Some criticised him, called him a neoliberal. And yes, he was more neoliberal than he should have been. But look at the way decisions were taken under him. Whether it was the closure of Guantanamo Bay or the setting up of a reasonable healthcare system, Obama faced more opposition than any president before him ever because he was the first Black president. It was clear that there were counterforces preventing him from carrying out the changes he wanted. So, in the end, who was the elite back then? The president of the United States? Or the powerful groups obstructing him to do what he wanted to do? We have to be very clear who we mean when we talk about power and the elite.

You are saying that populism and nationalism do not provide any answers; they divide society up in groups, while the Left has to be able to connect them. In your work, you suggest taking a number of Enlightenment values as a starting point. Is that going to be of any help?

They provide direction. Values help to tell a profound tale about the world as it should be, connect people, and motivate them to make a change. The Enlightenment represents a period in which there was a strong need to rise above the material side. It stands for idealism, a belief that the world can be different from what it is now. Happiness, and the idea that we have an equal right to it, is a value that really emerged during the Enlightenment. Before, the rich were rich and the poor were poor, and they had to wait until after death to get what they deserve in heaven. Religion promised them a life in the hereafter. The Enlightenment did not reject religion but took as a starting point living people's entitlement to a dignified life. That idea was revolutionary. To the present day, it is of significance; it stands as the basis of the fight against poverty and injustice.

Another value is reason. In it is the principle that all of us can think about what is important in life, and the capacity to think does not solely belong to the powerful. We do not have to accept things as being true, we can challenge them – that abolished the traditional division between those in power and the people.

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Reverence as a value is about respect, for each other and for the world, for nature and the planet on which we live. It is tremendously important if we want to inspire both secular and religious people to act on the question of the planet. Many of today's discussions still focus on the cost of countering climate change without taking into consideration that worrying about the cost is fundamentally a blasphemous argument, it lacks seeing what we have done to the earth.

Finally, hope, the fourth value, is about the world as it should be. It is different from optimism. Optimism is about the world as it is, while hope is the idea that what is, isn't necessary—people have the possibility to change the world as it is.

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Why do old left-wing values such as solidarity, equality and tolerance no longer suffice?

In those values, you will find hidden the notion of solidarity. It is at the basis, and so is equality. But this is not true of tolerance. It is often seen as an Enlightenment value, but we have been mistaken to elevate it. We deploy tolerance against something we do not like yet cannot change. It is not only a weak and negative emotion, but it also does not motivate people to do good. It reminds people of their powerlessness.

The respect value was met with some apprehension at the time. It was associated with religion, something that wasn't associated with either the Enlightenment or the Left. You associate it with the climate debate. Has it become the most important of the four values?

To be honest, for a long time, I belonged to the group of people on the Left who did not take the climate problem sufficiently serious. I thought: let's deal with inequality and racism, first. Now I must admit I was wrong, and I would like to see the Left fully committed to focusing on climate change in the next decade. If we do not have a healthy, liveable planet anymore, there is no basis to fight injustices like poverty, sexism and racism. I would even go so far as to say that other priorities have to be put in the back seat for a while.

But addressing that problem also means breaking the status quo, not gratuitously accepting the division of power. I agree with Naomi Klein that we cannot formulate a serious answer to climate change if we don't talk about the distribution of wealth and question the basic premise of capitalism that unlimited economic growth is the right goal. It is promising not to be given plastic bags at the local market, but real change must come from tackling the assumptions of industry.

Climate policies are about accepting how bad things are and taking drastic measures to keep the world a liveable place. How can the Left close the gap between how things are and how they ought to be without antagonising people who already have a hard time?

History has shown that people can be surprisingly passive in times of crisis. What did people do during the war to fight fascism? During the first stages of the oppression, the population was divided. But people can be mobilised if things get really tense. In the war, there was a moment to say, "Okay, there are a lot of genuinely important things, but now here is a priority." That was the moment people united and started fighting fascism.

Similarly, now, we need a broad movement, running through all population groups, devoting itself to fighting climate change and to devising climate policies. The problem is that society principally does not show any solidarity in a way that is necessary to solve the problems. There are too many marginalised groups, people who have been forgotten, whose history does not seem to count; you cannot expect them to participate in a broad social programme without incentives, without knowing that there is something at stake for them too.

So, I think the Left has to fight on several fronts at the same time. Sound climate policies go hand in hand with organising solidarity between various groups. What is more, the Left must show extra care for marginalised groups and it must not be blind to its own racism. All of this seems very important to me if the Left wants to form a community to address the climate crisis.

That sounds a lot like a Green New Deal.

Sure, I am all for it. The question is, how strong are the oppositional forces against it? And how much energy can we muster globally around the green agenda? The green movement needs an idealistic narrative, uniting all population groups.

They could learn from one of my favourite anecdotes about pope Francis. In an address to the American Congress, he states, "Well, as you know the church believes in the sanctity of all human life." All the Republicans start clapping because they think he is going to address abortion. But then he continues, "And that is why I am against

the death penalty.”

That is very political, the pope showed that he knows exactly how to bring the message across. It shows that with the right focus you can convincingly get your message across to opponents. The Left could learn something here.

Footnotes

[1] Foucault argues that every claim to truth is very much a product of its time and that those with the greatest power determine what is being accepted as truth (comment by RB).



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