

The background features a dark blue gradient. On the left, there is a bar chart with seven vertical bars of varying heights, colored in a golden-brown hue. Overlaid on the right side of the chart are several white line-art silhouettes of people in profile, facing right. The silhouettes are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, suggesting a crowd or a group of individuals.

On populists, immigration and welfare

Niek Kok examines the rise of 'right-wing' populism in Europe, and finds that their policies match those of the social democrats of the mid-twentieth century

In her book *For a Left Populism* (2018), the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe argued for a 'left-wing populism' to counter the rising support for right-wing populists. Mouffe has observed that what makes most current European populist parties right-wing is their xenophobic character.

She refers to parties such as the Danish People's Party (DPP), the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). These parties present immigrants as a threat to the identity of what they claim to be 'the people'¹.

Indeed, most European populists (admittedly, an analytically often ill-defined category) share a preference for restrictionist immigration policies. But most of them also start to make political arguments in line with welfare statism and, though to a lesser extent, trade protectionism. All of these policy preferences were a part of traditional social democratic thought from the 1930s to the 1970s onwards.

Undoubtedly, the populist emphasis is on anti-immigration whereas traditional social democracy puts the accent on the welfare state. Still, comparing the views on the welfare state and immigration of the 'right-wing' populist of today with the traditional social democrat yields interesting parallels.

I argue that this begs the question if it makes sense at all to label the aforementioned political parties *right-wing* – and if they are, in a sense, not simply best compared to traditional working class parties that advocated welfare statism and, as a result, welfare protectionism.

What the populist says

Populists have been said to distinguish an 'us, the pure people' from a 'them, the corrupt elites'². They present themselves as leaders embodying 'the people's true interests'. Political analysts find that this discursive strategy is

used by most European populists such as the Dutchman Geert Wilders or the Swede Jimmie Åkesson – as well as by President Donald Trump, who is sometimes deemed a populist as well³.

Interestingly, these three politicians share similar views on immigration, but also adopt similar welfare chauvinistic views. Åkesson, for instance, presents politics as a dichotomous choice between mass immigration and welfare. In his view, you cannot have both⁴. Trump repeatedly called for renegotiated trade deals and a reduction in immigration as a way to promote working-class economic security⁵. And Wilders reportedly opposed attempts by

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the Dutch government to slash funding for health care and other welfare state programs after *"his criticism of Islam and immigration turned out to do very well with less educated voters"*⁶.

Many contemporary populists lament the idea of immigrants coming to the 'fully laid table' of the welfare state and grieve that *"people who have not contributed throughout a lifetime with their labour, taxes and socially useful activities are allowed to enjoy common benefits as free riders"*⁷.

It remains unclear whether populist parties adopt a protectionist approach to welfare to attract working class voters or whether they adopted this approach only after attracting the vote of the working class. What is clear, however, is that populist parties are increasingly attracting support from voters who, speaking for European politics at least, traditionally supported social democratic politics.

As Mouffe has argued, so called populists like Åkesson, Trump and Wilders are deemed right-wing because they favour strict immigration policies. I would argue that this is a rather limited view. Contemporary anti-immigration parties are using the welfare state as an argument *for* restrictionism.

The traditional European left also favoured anti-immigration policies to protect the welfare state. This is because of a conceptual congruence between the welfare state, a strict immigration policy and even trade protectionism. The history of social democratic ideas shows that these policies are likely to go hand-in-hand.

Traditional social democrats and the anti-immigration cause

Looking at the history of welfare statist ideas in Europe, we find very strong *ideological congruence* between support for the welfare state and restrictionist immigration policies. The reason for this is that a restrictionist immigration policy conceptually follows from the idea of the welfare state.

In a much-cited article, the political scientist Gary Freeman noted that national welfare states *“are compelled by their logic to be closed systems that seek to insulate themselves from external pressures and that restrict rights and benefits to members”*⁸. The welfare state presupposes a bounded group of people that distribute welfare amongst themselves – and not with outsiders.

This ‘logic of the welfare state’ stems from the idea that only those individuals who have contributed to its system may temporarily fall back on its benefits in times of unemployment or, for instance, for old age pensions. William Beveridge (1879-1963), a British economist and member of the Liberal Party, best known for his report *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942) which outlined the contours for the British welfare state, wrote that there is no absolute right to welfare benefits.

Citizens only have a right to welfare benefits in virtue of the contributions they have made to the welfare state. In other words, the solidarity of welfare programs exist for those who have contributed⁹. Foreigners, as well as anyone who does not contribute, can thus not be said to have a right to welfare benefits – they can acquire it only until after they have made contributions.

Beveridge already foresaw that exclusive rights to welfare benefits in one country would be problematic in a world in which people could freely move from one country to another. What would happen to acquired, individual social rights as soon as individuals would move to another country?

Beveridge proposed that, in due time, different countries should arrange possibilities for transfers of individual rights to welfare from one country to the other, *“enabling men on migration to avoid forfeiting security and allowing them to carry with them some of the rights that they have acquired in their former country,”* Beveridge wrote¹⁰.

The receiving country could, or so seems to have been Beveridge's assumption, not be expected to provide welfare for newcomers who had never contributed. One could only have a right to as much as one had contributed at home.

At the end of the 1940s, several British Labour politicians already foresaw the problem mass immigration could pose to social and economic security. On the 22nd of June 1948, they wrote a letter to Prime Minister Attlee, suggesting "*that the British Government should, like foreign countries, the dominions and even some of the colonies, by legislation if necessary, control immigration in the political, social, economic and fiscal interests of our people*"¹¹.

These politicians thus called for a restrictionist immigration policy to prevent mass immigration in the future. Back then, their argument was not all too controversial. But when in 2007 Labour minister Margaret Hodge had the very same insight and argued that giving council housing to newly arrived immigrants undermined Beveridge's idea that welfare should reward individuals who paid into the system, she was heavily criticized for using the language of the 'far-right'¹².

Hodge's argument was, however, an argument congruent with traditional social democratic ideas. Mid-twentieth century European social democrats realized that citizens would only *want to* contribute if there was solidarity amongst them. And solidarity is more easily achieved in a homogenous society: one in which citizens feel like they are all part of the same family.

Concerns about immigration by the traditional Swedish and Dutch left

The Swedish ideologist and economist Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) expressed this exact notion. He explicitly linked welfare rights with nationalism and the 'commonness' of the people. Myrdal was acutely aware that the welfare state in Western countries is, as he wrote, by necessity, *protectionist* and *nationalistic*.

“The peoples in those countries have achieved economic welfare at home – economic progress and a substantial increase in liberty and equality of opportunity for all within their boundaries – at the expense of indulging in nationalistic economic policies”¹³. Myrdal moreover attested that the supporters of the welfare state are naturally of “the inclination to take defensive action against the repercussions of the international crises in order to preserve stability and welfare at home”¹⁴.

All in all, a welfare state flourishes through the people’s homogeneity and economic stability. The successive Swedish social democratic prime ministers Per Albin Hansson (1936-1946) and Tage Erlander (1946-1969) based their welfare state ideology on these ideas (Myrdal served as minister for commerce between 1945 and 1947 under both prime ministers).

Hansson introduced the famous Swedish notion of *folkhemmet*, which expresses the welfare state as a home for the people. Welfare statism required the Swedes to view each other as a single, large family. Hansson argued that the basis of the Swedish welfare state was the commonality and mutuality of its people. The idea of *folkhemmet* led his government to adopt strict immigration policies and assimilatory integration policies, as ethnic differences collided with the social democratic interest in building up a welfare state.

Folkhemmet excluded non-Swedes on both biological and cultural grounds¹⁵. Hansson’s successor, Erlander, continued his policies. In 1965, he compared Sweden to the United States, observing that *“We Swedes live in an infinitely happier condition. The population of our country is homogenous, not only in regards to race but also in many other aspects”¹⁶.*

The same ideological congruence between welfare statism and restrictionist immigration policies can be said to have been part of the Dutch social democratic ideology in the 1950s. From 1948 until 1958, the social democrat

Willem Drees was the Dutch prime minister. In this role and as minister for Social Affairs, he became known for having laid the foundations for the Dutch welfare state.

Drees, too, was aware of the danger of mass immigration to Dutch social and economic security. At one point, he even advocated a proactive emigration policy, as in his eyes the Netherlands started to become too full. He held these views throughout his lifetime.

In 1977, when Drees had long left politics, the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* reported that Drees had strongly criticized the immigration policies of the later social democratic cabinet of prime minister Den Uyl, which had allowed the free settlements of many Surinamese, Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands¹⁷.

Recalling the image of Drees' leadership is rather fitting in the context of *folkhemmet* and populism: paralleling the populist idea of a leader representing the people's interests and the *folkhemmet* idea of the people as a family, Drees was nicknamed Father Drees. Deeming a political leader to be a fatherly figure attests to a rather deep bond between him and his supporters – and it fits neatly into the analytical framework of populism proposed by many present-day political scientists.

Conclusion

In the 1970s, traditional social democratic views on immigration started to shift. New social democratic leaders such as Olof Palme in Sweden and Joop den Uyl in the Netherlands started to approve of multiculturalist policies and allowed for more foreign influx in their respective countries. But the parallel of their predecessors with contemporary so-called populists remain – and on top of that, their predecessors and contemporary populists appear to have the same voting base.

“[S]ocial democratic parties have in most countries identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle classes, and that they have stopped representing the interests of the popular sectors – whose demands are considered archaic or retrograde,” Chantal Mouffe writes¹⁸. Much of the support for the traditional left has shifted toward what is called the ‘far right’.

But besides the ideological congruence between welfare statism and restrictionist immigration, the observation that many left-wing voters now vote for ‘far-right’ parties begs the question: why should we so explicitly associate populists like Jimmie Åkesson and Geert Wilders with the right-wing?

In many respects, these politicians advocate the same ideas as the social democrats of the mid-twentieth century – except for a more explicit anti-immigration emphasis. Chantal Mouffe has called for a left-wing populism. But in a way, the supposedly right-wing populists are already quite leftish. ■

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Endnotes

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2. *Ibid*, p. 55.
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