

The 'open society' and its contradictions

Stephan Lessenich

The 'openness' of liberal democracy is part and parcel of the Western world's self-description. However, this openness has always been functionally dependent on building effective shields against the outer world. While the rising prosperity of the advanced capitalist societies rested on, among other things, the establishment of a free trade regime systematically biased towards their own economic interests, the institutionalisation of 'social peace' in the relations between capital and labour was actually an effect of exporting social unrest to the peripheries of the capitalist world system. And democracy itself was effectively stabilised by redistributing substantial parts of a hitherto unknown dynamic of economic growth – a dynamic resulting from the steady rise in productivity of a capitalist economy which was structurally able to externalise large parts of the social and ecological costs of its mode of production onto third parties, specifically the labouring classes and the natural environments of the so-called developing countries.

Today, this dialectic of openness and closure built into democratic capitalism is becoming ever more visible. Confronted with migration flows unprecedented since the world wars, liberal democracies have rediscovered the idea of a political closure of the nation state and try to reserve the fruits of democratic capitalism for their national citizens only. At the same time, driven by the habits of prosperity, the societies of the Global North adhere fiercely to the productivist model of economic and social development. By restructuring their own accumulation regime in the direction of a highly productive knowledge economy, and by relocating the old extractivist and labour-intensive industries into the low- and medium-income countries of the world, they systematically produce negative externalities for societies throughout the Global South – externalities that in turn lie at the heart of the very migration flows the rich democracies are desperately trying to confine and deflect.

This is, basically, the paradox of democratic capitalism: obviously living on the externalisation of its negative effects to third parties, it depends on effectively immunising itself against the potential backlash against its externalisation regime. By all appearances, at the beginning of the 21st century the traditional combination of economic coercion and moral suasion no longer suffices to stop the external world from counteracting and subverting the global order which the liberal democracies established after World War II. They now resort increasingly to the policing option – border

controls and deportations, visa restrictions and military patrols – to safeguard the political, economic, and social privileges that the Western world has become accustomed to.

Opportunity hoarding and cost shifting

For at least three decades now, politics and the social sciences have been telling us that we are living in the age of globalisation. Globalisation is a notion that may well be regarded as the post-1989 correlate of the post-1945 discourse on the open society. Freedom of movement has, in fact, been enlarged in recent times (though obviously not on equal terms throughout the globe) for goods, services, and finance. People's freedom of movement, however, has not been enhanced in the same way. To be more precise, it has been eased for some parts of the world population and restricted for others.

In this process, the borders of the rich democracies throughout the world have been transformed into a sort of semipermeable membrane. For national (or, in the case of the EU, supranational) citizens of the countries of the Global North, it is remarkably easy to leave their countries whenever they want and to come back again whenever they wish to. In contrast, for non-citizens from the Global South, there literally is no way to get into the social container which globalisation theory tells us does not exist anymore but which surprisingly, at least in the OECD, has a life after death.

Visa policies around the globe and their historical evolution may serve as a perfect illustration of the emergence of a global mobility divide. Access to visa waivers has become a major stratifying factor in the global social hierarchy. Not surprisingly, OECD countries benefit disproportionately from visa-waiver programs, while they tend to impose visa restrictions on countries outside the OECD world. What is more, the inequality in terms of visa-free travel has increased substantially over the past 40 years, that is, in times of globalisation. Since the late 1960s, there has been a clear polarisation of mobility rights, with citizens of rich countries maximising travel options and people from poor regions being restricted. The so-called liberal Western countries have thus heavily influenced the global mobility regime to their advantage.

By way of mobility divides and social closure, on the one hand, and through unequal economic and ecological exchange, on the other, the Western externalisation society practices a politics of opportunity hoarding for their own firms and populations and of shifting the expense on to the resources and life chances of the countries of the Global South. In a nutshell, the instruction manual for externalisation professionals reads pretty simply. First rule: exploit nature, use cheap labour, sell your goods, and monopolise ecological sinks at some place out there in the world. Second rule: enhance prosperity, promote mass consumption, organise intelligent and clean production, and grant a modicum of social rights (especially for the symbolically treasured middle classes) at home. Third rule, see to it that access to the outer world is kept open, while preventing all sorts of aliens from having access to your own world.

Externalisation coming home

Arguably, these instructions have been followed by the rich democracies in the Global North since the very beginning of Western modernity. Today, however, it seems that we are reaching the limits of the seemingly irresistible growth and reproduction of this specific Western model of development. At the same time, there is ever more evidence of externalisation eventually coming home: on-going climate change and an acute refugee crisis may be seen as manifestations of nature and people – the outside and the outsiders – finally exacting a toll for decades of exploitation, obstruction, and abuse of power by the world's happy few.

This privileged minority is not composed only of those two handfuls of people who were recently identified by the charity Oxfam as being as wealthy as half of the world population. The bitter truth is that, in terms of global social inequality, it is virtually the Global North as such who is profiting. Sure, the strata profiting most from the way externalisation is constantly being reproduced are the better off, the rich and wealthy in the rich democracies. But on a more modest level – and being relegated to a dependent social position themselves – the households in the lower parts of the income distribution of the advanced capitalist societies also actually participate in the structural privileges these societies historically tend to enjoy. This constellation is at the core of the ambivalent position the Western working classes, in global terms, are locked into: socially dominated and economically exploited, they – unintentionally – profit from the domination and exploitation of the Global South by the world's rich democracies.

It should come as no surprise, then, that those others at whose cost we are systematically living are now reporting back to us, challenging the injustice of the global birthright lottery: the fact that citizenship is acquired by purely accidental circumstances of

being born at one place of the world rather than another. Being born in Germany or in Uganda, into a welfare state or into poverty capitalism, is just a question of fate – but one that is absolutely decisive for one's personal destiny. When the going gets rough, citizenship rights cross-cut and even out-do human rights. Why should those who drew a blank in the birthright lottery, those who bear the costs of the Western life-style and who are excluded from the whole range of life chances and opportunities others simply take for granted, keep on playing by the rules imposed on them?

The costs of open societies living in splendid, one-sided isolation from the world surrounding them are out of control and have become unbearable for those who have been paying the price for decades and generations now. Critical sociology should be actively engaged in uncovering 'openness' as an ideological discourse – and in unveiling externalisation as an instrument of global power and dominance. But it is civil society and its manifold organisations, in the countries of the Global North as well as in those of the Global South, who are called to struggle against the structural dynamic of externalisation and the institutions that uphold this very dynamic. The alternatives to the capitalist world system as it has evolved in the last decades are out there, from the democratisation of multi- and bilateral trade agreements to the institutionalisation of global social rights. But it is also true that these alternatives will partly have to be pushed through against the objective interests of parts of the working classes in the rich democracies.

Stephan Lessenich is a professor of Sociology at Ludwig Maximilians University (LMU, Munich, Germany) and coordinator of the Research Focus on "Global Capitalism and the Dynamics of Capitalism" at the LMU's Center of Advanced Studies.