

Meet Europe's Left Nationalists - "A momentous turn against free movement in Europe"

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The rise of leaders like Sahra Wagenknecht and Jean-Luc Mélenchon marks a momentous turn against free movement in Europe—at the expense of immigrants.

In May 2016, at a conference for Germany's left-wing Die Linke party, Torten für Menschenfeinde ("Pies for Misanthropes") struck again. Sneaking up the side of the conference hall, a member of the anti-fascist organization threw a piece of [cake](#) at Sahra Wagenknecht, a prominent Die Linke member in the Bundestag. It was a direct hit: Wagenknecht's face was covered in chocolate frosting, a streak of whipped cream extending from ear to ear.

Torten für Menschenfeinde targeted Wagenknecht for her vocal position against an open-border policy for Germany. Earlier that year, she challenged Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to accept more than 1 million refugees, arguing that Germany should impose limits on entry and deport those who abused German "hospitality." The cake attack—which followed a [cream-pie offensive](#) against a member of the far-right Alternative for Germany—isolated Wagenknecht in her party, which had otherwise pledged support for Merkel's policy.

Nearly three years later, however, Wagenknecht and her views on migration have gone mainstream, in Germany and across Europe. In September 2018, Wagenknecht and her husband, Oskar Lafontaine, founded Aufstehen ("Rise Up"), a political movement combining left-wing economic policy with exclusionary social protections. The movement has garnered over 170,000 members since its official launch; according to a recent [poll](#), more than a third of German voters "could see themselves" supporting Wagenknecht's initiative.

"I am tired of surrendering the streets to the [anti-Islam movement] Pegida and the Alternative for Germany," Wagenknecht said at the launch event. Onstage, she was joined by allies in Germany's Green Party and the Social Democratic Party. "As many followers of the political left as possible should join," several Social Democratic politicians wrote in a joint statement.

By founding Aufstehen, Wagenknecht became a member of the new vanguard of left politics in Europe. In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon leads La France Insoumise, a left-populist movement that has been critical of mass migration. "I've never been in favor of freedom of arrival," Mélenchon has [said](#), claiming that migrants "are stealing the bread" of French workers. He is now the most popular politician on the French left, widely considered the face of the opposition to President Emmanuel Macron and a [champion](#) of the Yellow Vest movement.

In the United Kingdom, Jeremy Corbyn leads the Labour Party and offers a radical vision of socialist transformation. And yet, although he was a vocal advocate for migrant rights during his tenure at Westminster, Corbyn has expressed deep skepticism about open borders as the party's leader.

“Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle,” Corbyn [said](#), committing Labour to a policy of “reasonable management” based on “our economic needs.”

The rise of these left-nationalist leaders marks a momentous turn against free movement in Europe, where it has long been accepted as a basic right of citizenship.

Forget The Communist Manifesto’s refrain that “the working men have no country”; the new face of the European left takes a radically different view. Free movement is, to quote Wagenknecht, “the opposite of what is left-wing”: It encourages exploitation, erodes community, and denies popular sovereignty. To advocate open borders, in this view, is to oppose the interests of the working class.

By popularizing this argument, these new movements are not just challenging migration policy in Europe; they are redefining the boundaries of left politics in a dangerous, and inopportune, direction. Over the next few decades, global migration is set to explode: By 2100, up to 1 million migrants will be applying to enter the European Union each year.

Right-wing populists have already begun their assault on migrants: In Italy, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has called for “mass cleaning,” while Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has proposed that recent arrivals should be sent “back to Africa.” As left-nationalist movements charge ahead in the polls, it is not immediately clear who will challenge their pessimistic view of migration and fight for the right to free movement.

In April 1870, Karl Marx wrote a [letter](#) to two German migrants in New York City, imploring them to “pay particular attention” to what he called “the Irish question.”

“I have come to the conclusion,” Marx wrote, “that the decisive blow against the English ruling classes cannot be delivered in England but only in Ireland.” For Marx, Ireland would play a decisive role because of its mass emigration—the Mexico of its time. “Ireland constantly sends her own surplus to the English labor market, and thus forces down wages and lowers the material and moral position of the English working class,” Marx continued. “It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power.”

In the century and a half since, Marx’s letter has become a key reference point for the left critique of free movement. The passage is cited as evidence of a fundamental tension between the traditional goals of the left—equality, solidarity, working-class power—and a policy of open borders. “Karl Marx identified that fact a long time ago,” [announced](#) Len McCluskey, general secretary of Britain’s Unite the Union and a close ally of Jeremy Corbyn, in 2016.

But critics of free movement often neglect to mention Marx’s conclusions: “Given this state of affairs,” he wrote, “if the working class wishes to continue its struggle with some chance of success, the national organizations must become international.”

Marx’s analysis of mass migration did not lead him to advocate harder borders. Instead, it made him support international mobilization to protect workers’ rights in a world of free movement.

After all, Marx himself was a triple émigré: He fled Prussia to Paris, faced exile from Paris to Brussels, and—after a brief incarceration by the Belgian authorities—found his way to London. And he was hardly a model immigrant: Poor, sick, and a notorious procrastinator, Marx was much more of a scrounger than a striver, leeching off the largesse of Friedrich Engels.

As such, Marx had little sympathy for the “ordinary English worker,” who “hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standards of life.” The solution to the Irish question was not to bow to these prejudices, he argued, but to dissolve the antagonism between the various camps of the

working class. "A coalition of German workers with the Irish workers—and of course also with the English and American workers who are prepared to accede to it—is the greatest achievement you could bring about now," he advised.

Following Marx, the concept of left internationalism came to be associated with support for free movement on both ethical and strategic grounds. Ethically, open borders gave equal opportunity to workers of all nationalities. More important, the movement of people across borders created new opportunities for a coordinated challenge to capitalism. Internationalists like Marx supported free movement for the same reasons they supported free trade: It hastened the pace of history and heightened capitalism's contradictions.

"There can be no doubt that dire poverty alone compels people to abandon their native land, and that the capitalists exploit the immigrant workers in the most shameless manner," [wrote](#) Vladimir Lenin in 1913. "But only reactionaries can shut their eyes to the progressive significance of this modern migration of nations.... Capitalism is drawing the masses of the working people of the whole world...breaking down national barriers and prejudices, uniting workers from all countries."

Back in Lenin's day, a very similar debate over the merits of migration was roiling through the European left. But while the pessimistic view of Wagenknecht and other left nationalists has now taken hold in many parts of the continent, Lenin's, at the time, prevailed.

At the 1907 Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, Germany, leaders of the Socialist Party of America introduced a resolution to end "the willful importation of cheap foreign labor." Morris Hillquit, a founder of the party, argued that migrants from Asia—the "yellow races," unlike those from Europe—amounted to a "pool of unconscious strikebreakers." The convention [rejected](#) the resolution: "The congress does not seek a remedy to the potentially impending consequences for the workers from immigration and emigration in any economic or political exclusionary rules, because these are fruitless and reactionary by nature."

Lenin would never forget the incident. In a 1915 [letter](#) to the Socialist Propaganda League of America, he called out the American socialists for their efforts to restrict Chinese and Japanese migration. "We think that one can not be internationalist and be at the same time in favor of such restrictions," he wrote. "Such socialists are in reality jingoes."

By the time of Lenin's letter, of course, Europe's great powers had been whipped into a frenzy of nationalist violence. In the First World War, British soldiers sang "Rule, Britannia," the Germans sang "Deutschlandlied," and they all marched to their deaths. Even the Social Democratic Party of Germany—a key player in the Second International—voted in favor of the war. Citing the need for national self-defense, large swaths of the European left abandoned the cause of open borders.

But by the end of the next world war—which left another 80 million people dead and 60 million more displaced—support for free movement had moved from the margins of the left into the heart of the postwar political establishment. When the United Nations convened in Paris to draft its Declaration of Human Rights in November 1948, the committee [considered](#) mobility a matter of "vital importance." "Freedom of movement was the sacred right of every human being," commented the representative from Chile. "The world belongs to all mankind," added the representative from Haiti.

The architects of the European Union took this view of free movement as fundamental to the project of European integration. In the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which laid the foundations for a union in Europe, diplomats and ministers included the "freedom of movement for workers" as one of the four freedoms—alongside those of goods, services, and capital—that would govern the European Economic Community. This decision sought to encourage Europe's reconstruction by enabling

workers to move where they were needed most.

Over the next three decades, this fourth freedom shifted from a provisional economic measure to a right of European citizenship. The 1985 Schengen Agreement eliminated internal borders and the customs checks that went along with them; the 1992 Maastricht Treaty established a European Union citizenship that guaranteed free movement on the basis of personhood, not participation in the labor force.

Such was the grand ambition of the Socialist French president François Mitterrand. “It is to turn the whole of Europe into one space,” he [announced](#) in a televised Bastille Day interview in 1990. “Now the barriers and the walls have collapsed. The storm is not over...but we are getting there.”

The transformation of free movement from a radical demand to a pillar of EU governance was critical to the emergence of left nationalism in Europe. Since the Maastricht Treaty—signed and celebrated by socialists like Mitterrand—the hope for the European Single Market as a force of social cohesion has largely failed. Today, the European Union looks less like a workers’ utopia and more like a neoliberal fortress: demanding, enforcing, and policing a free-market order. Banks, corporations, and investors may be free to move their capital across the continent, but national governments are not free to implement policies that address their local needs. It is out of this contradiction—and Mélenchon’s view that the EU is a “totalitarian project”—that the new left vanguard has formed.

In short, the terms of radicalism have changed. A century ago, left movements advocated international integration as the answer to “bourgeois chauvinism under the guise of patriotism,” as Lenin put it. Today, they advocate national devolution as the answer to the unfettered power of globalized capital.

Both approaches aim to challenge capitalism and advocate a fairer redistribution of resources; the latter, though, views international institutions as instruments of capitalism rather than as potential vehicles for worker power. Its goal, best expressed by the left-wing advocates of Brexit, is to take back control from those institutions: “a once-in-a-lifetime window of opportunity” for a “radical break with neoliberalism,” as Thomas Fazi and William Mitchell, authors of *Reclaiming the State*, [wrote](#) in their 2018 Jacobin article “Why the Left Should Embrace Brexit.” As a result, for these critics, the right to free movement is the sacrificial lamb in a radical break with the European Union.

Fazi and Mitchell, for example, don’t mention migration once in their 3,000-word brief for embracing Brexit. In their framework, the priority is first and foremost to build a socialist economy, which they claim is impossible within the constraints of the single market. Migrants, then, are collateral damage.

Most left nationalists in Europe don’t stop there, however; they view the demise of free movement as a worthy end in itself. These critiques can be broadly divided into three types: economic, cultural, and political. And all of them aim to justify the introduction of new border controls.

The most prominent of these critiques, building on Marx’s 1870 letter, rejects free movement on the basis of worker exploitation. “The state has a duty to protect men and women from foreign workers who take their jobs away for lower pay,” [said](#) Oskar Lafontaine, co-founder of *Aufstehen*, in a defense of border controls in 2005. Likewise, in a *Guardian* op-ed supporting Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s 2017 presidential bid, Cambridge lecturer Olivier Tonneau [asserted](#) that the “noble principle of freedom of movement” had been “perverted into forced economic migration, which undercut wages and stirred tension between peoples.”

Jeremy Corbyn makes a similar argument. After the Brexit referendum, Corbyn laid out his opposition to free movement in the European Union. “If freedom of movement means the freedom to exploit cheap labor in a race to the bottom, it will never be accepted in any future relationship with Europe,” he [wrote](#).

The problem is that there is virtually no evidence to support the claim that foreign workers depress wages and discourage the employment of native workers. In a landmark report in September 2018, the United Kingdom’s Migration Advisory Committee [found](#) that “migrants have no or little impact on the overall employment and unemployment outcomes of the UK-born workforce.” In fact, it added, “there is some evidence to suggest that skilled migrants have a positive impact on the quantity of training available to the UK-born workforce.” The findings in Britain echoed those of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which found in 2014 that migration “contributes to spur innovation and economic growth” and that migrants give more in taxes than they take in benefits.

“Crudely,” wrote economist Jonathan Portes in a recent [article](#) summarizing two decades of his research, “immigrants are not taking our jobs.”

The real threat to labor standards is not freedom of movement, but rather its restriction. And as countries like the United States have learned time and time again, harsh border controls are not effective deterrents to migration: According to a 2007 [study](#) in the journal *Regulation & Governance*, border enforcement has had “remarkably little influence on the propensity [of people] to migrate illegally to the USA.”

Upon their arrival, unauthorized migrants are vulnerable to exploitation, undermining the entire labor market—exactly the problem that the restrictionists identify. Unauthorized labor is largely off the books, and without legal protections, the people performing it lack bargaining power against their employers. One wide-ranging [study](#) found that 37 percent of unauthorized migrants in the United States suffered minimum-wage violations, compared with 21 percent of authorized migrants, while 85 percent of unauthorized migrants were not paid overtime, compared with 67 percent of their documented counterparts.

On a more conceptual level, the economic critique fails to hold together. In making the case for managed migration, many people distinguish between two classes of migrants: economic migrants in search of work, and asylum seekers in need of refuge. The latter pose a humanitarian concern, which many left nationalists are (for good reason) happy to accommodate, while the former threaten the labor market and therefore merit tighter regulation. “When we are talking about economic migration,” Labour MP and UK shadow secretary for international trade Barry Gardiner [told](#) the BBC, “the economy has to work in favor of the British people and the British public.”

Under closer examination, this distinction falls apart. Every day, scores of young men arrive in Southern Europe after harrowing journeys from their homes. But the European Union draws a hard line between those worthy of asylum and those migrating for economic opportunity. Boys from Syria—who are recognized as refugees of war—tend to receive asylum swiftly, while boys from Pakistan have little hope of it, despite the fact that many have fled similar levels of violence. “Migration is something that people do to try to survive,” Jeremy Corbyn once [told](#) the House of Commons. “Every case is a human story.”

The cultural critique doesn’t bother with this distinction. Rather, it takes aim at all migration on the basis that it erodes, dilutes, or otherwise undermines national culture. Free movement is “not also a principle of socialism,” [wrote](#) the left-wing British journalist Paul Mason in 2017. “It says to people with strong cultural traditions, a strong sense of place and community (sometimes all they have left

from the industrial era) that ‘your past does not matter.’” By calling their heritage into question, then, migration threatens to incite even stronger xenophobia among working-class communities.

Yet there is very little empirical basis for these claims, either. In case after case—from the Brexit vote to Germany’s general election last year—areas with the fewest migrants have expressed the strongest cultural grievances. And research suggests that contact between different communities—gay and straight, black and white, Shia and Sunni—is actually a route to more solidarity, not less. A [meta-analysis](#) of 713 independent samples from 515 studies concluded that contact “typically reduces intergroup prejudice.” In other words, if the goal is to reduce xenophobia, borders are not the solution; interaction is.

The very fact of anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe often leads to a political critique: European citizens never had a full say on the rules that would govern their union, whether on immigration or environmental regulation. The principle of free movement is meaningless in the absence of democratic support for it, this argument goes. And, once again, we find a rationale for exiting the European Union: Only then will voters be able to shape their own political future.

But while some people advocate exit as a pretext to curb migration, others, like [Costas Lapavistas](#), a former member of the Greek Parliament for Syriza and author of *The Left Case Against the EU*, view it as a way to reconstitute a fairer, more global kind of free movement. The freedom to move within the EU is, in fact, premised on restricting free movement into it—a system known as “Fortress Europe.” Rather than reforming the EU from the inside and defending and extending the principle of free movement, these critics believe that exit is the best route to a more humane immigration policy. In other words, they want to destroy free movement in order to save it.

Such critics often consider themselves to be internationalists, tweeting support for sister parties and crisscrossing the continent to speak on their panels. But make no mistake: This isn’t your grandfather’s internationalism. It has little in common with Lenin’s optimistic view of migration “uniting workers from all countries.” It hinges on a decidedly nationalist desire to claw back national sovereignty, to undo the excesses of liberalization, and to reclaim the borders of the nation-state.

Mélenchon, for his part, has stopped playing the “Internationale” at his public rallies. He prefers to fly the Tricolore and sing “La Marseillaise” instead.

The new left-nationalist vision emerging in Europe is not shared worldwide. Over the last decade, pundits and politicians have frequently pointed out the similar trajectories in Europe and the United States. The 2008 financial crisis exposed the deep interconnections between their banking systems, while the populist earthquake of 2016 revealed the shared fault lines in their democracies.

But one of the most striking patterns in the migration debate is the divergence in attitudes on the two sides of the Atlantic. While the left vanguard in Europe backtracks on its support for immigration, support on the American left is surging. In 2006, 37 percent of Democrats believed that immigration to the United States should decrease, while 20 percent believed that it should increase. In 2018, only 16 percent of Democrats believed that immigration should decrease, while a whopping 40 supported its increase. Compare that with Britain, where 49 percent of Labour voters think that immigration is too high, and a microscopic 5 percent think it’s too low.

The rapid rise in support for immigration on the American left marks a historic role reversal. Recall the 1907 Congress of the Second International, where the Socialist Party of America’s motion to restrict immigration was dismissed by its European counterparts.

Today, there is virtually no Democratic politician who offers a tough line on immigration. Within the

Democratic Party's progressive wing, in particular, we find a vigorous defense of migrant rights and a call to abolish immigration-enforcement agencies altogether—a far cry from the criticism of free movement flourishing in Europe. As Labour MP and shadow home secretary Diane Abbott [stressed](#) in her remarks at the Labour Party's conference in September: “Real border security...that is what Labour stands for.”

What explains this sudden divergence in transatlantic attitudes? And what can it tell us about the left-nationalist case against free movement?

One plausible driver is demographics. Much has been made of the United States' transition from a predominantly white country to a majority-minority one within the next three decades. Meanwhile, the fast-growing Latino community is also the most active in its pro-immigration movement. It is possible, therefore, that public opinion is simply shifting with the tides of American demography.

But the demographic story is insufficient to explain this transatlantic divergence. After all, the percentage of foreign-born residents in the United States is almost exactly the same as that in Germany or France—13.1 percent, 12.8 percent, and 11.7 percent, respectively. A country's demographic profile, therefore, does not necessarily dictate its attitudes toward immigration. In any case, it is difficult to see how these long-term trends could produce such a sudden shift in attitudes.

Instead, the key factor is the electoral system around which these demographics change. In the United States, a polarizing two-party system has laid the groundwork for a full-throated defense of immigration from the left. As Republicans vow to “build the wall,” Democrats advocate breaking it down. As President Trump radicalizes the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, senators like Elizabeth Warren and Kirsten Gillibrand call for its abolition. As a Republican administration detains migrant children, the Democratic Party demands amnesty for them. In short, the politics of immigration is a politics of opposition.

“America's views on immigration have changed more over this short period than at any time in any other country in history,” says political scientist Rob Ford of the University of Manchester. “It would suggest, paradoxically, that harsh migration policies create the conditions for a radical turn in a pro-immigration direction.”

Ford's comments should provide a measure of cold solace to immigration advocates in Europe. As far-right parties come to power across the continent—creating an anti-immigrant “axis” from Berlin to Vienna to Rome, as Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz eerily described it—so the terms of left opposition may once again tilt in favor of free movement. In their own way, by seeking to destroy the right to freedom of movement, the European alt-right may end up saving it.

But the extent of the divergence between the European and American cases raises fundamental questions about how we define the left today. What does it mean that Democrats associate the European economic critique of free movement with their Republican enemies, or that they associate the European cultural critique of free movement with the emergent alt-right marching through cities like Charlottesville, Virginia?

On International Human Rights day in 2017, Jeremy Corbyn delivered a [speech](#) at the United Nations' Geneva headquarters in which he laid out his vision for a new global system based on “cooperation, solidarity, and collective action.” The present migration crisis, he argued, has been fueled by a mix of economic inequality, war, and climate destruction, and its solution lies in addressing those underlying causes.

“European countries can, and must, do more as the death rate of migrants and refugees crossing the

Mediterranean continues to rise,” Corbyn said. “But let us be clear: The long-term answer is genuine international cooperation based on human rights, which confronts the root causes of conflict, persecution, and inequality.”

Yet even in this vision, freedom of movement still appears suspect. At best, it distracts us from the true solution—a Band-Aid under which the real problems of the world continue to fester. At worst, it numbs us to injustice by celebrating migration instead of condemning the conditions that force people to migrate. “People do not leave for pleasure,” Jean-Luc Mélenchon said in 2017. “Exile is suffering.”

Mélenchon is certainly correct, as is Corbyn in his insistence that we must tackle the root causes of the crisis. The big problem here is that no amount of international coordination will significantly reduce migration in our lifetime. Before the end of this century, up to 2 billion people could be forced to migrate on account of rising sea levels alone. Even if Europe’s entire left vanguard were to come to power and make good on its promises, families around the world would continue in their relentless pursuit of a safer or better life abroad.

Sahra Wagenknecht has [described](#) the policy of free movement as “naïve.” But the evidence suggests that hard borders threaten international solidarity, not strengthen it; fortify inequality, not decrease it; and inflame xenophobia, not reduce it. Europe’s new left nationalists may not grasp the likely results of their attempts to curtail free movement: scores of deaths on the sea, an explosion of slums at the borderlands, the continued economic exploitation of desperate migrants, and an increasingly militarized system of passport apartheid.

This is Corbyn’s formulation flipped on its head. In the short term, migration controls might win some votes and throw some sand in the gears of international capitalism. But over the long term, such controls can become their own root causes of conflict, persecution, and inequality.

For now, activists—not political parties—are shouting the loudest in support of open borders. At the Labour conference in September, the Labour Campaign for Free Movement passed out thousands of flyers to attendees. In Berlin, demonstrators marched against the far right under the banner of “Global Freedom of Movement.” For their part, the pie throwers have called for a Tortaler Krieg—total cake warfare—until Germany’s leaders heed their call. “No activist wants to throw a pie at a politician,” they insist. “But a cream pie is a last resort.... The pie throw is the last measure at the border of humanity.”

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