

editorial: end of social democracy?

Looking around Europe in 2018, one could easily find supporting evidence for the demise of the moderate political left: the collapse of the Socialist Party in France, devastating election results in the Netherlands, agonizing arguments in the German SPD, instances of utter political corruption in Slovakia and neighbouring post-communist countries, and as rays of hope appear ex-communist Syriza, old-fashioned Trotskyistic entrism in the UK. Ex-chancellors as moneymakers and parties from former colonies in the Socialist International that could not be called democratic round out the portrait of a movement under strain.

However, when we started working on the call for papers for the present volume, several of the abovementioned incidents had not yet occurred. The present issue does not aim to offer commentaries on the most recent developments in politics in Europe, but seeks to open minds both geographically and temporally. Social democracy is old enough to have gone through more than one crisis and it is not our intention to depict the current troubles as the final crisis before its complete collapse.

In its 150-plus-year history, social democracy has experienced more than one set of threatening circumstances. In 1914, internationalism collapsed in the face of raging nationalistic moods and policies; after the end of the Great War, the schism of communism established a new cleavage for the forthcoming decades. Grilled by the Third International on the one hand and the rising anti-democratic fascist movements on the other, interwar social democracy lost its appeal to the masses. The inability of the labour movement to establish showpieces of democratic socialism beyond the municipal level (e.g. Red Vienna) weakened the interwar 2 ½ International. After the end of the Second World War, the short-lived existence of social democratic parties east of the Elbe came to an end when Stalinism's one party policy swallowed them up. From 1917 to 1989, social democrats again had to fight a two-front campaign and only when they voted for an armistice with so-called capital-

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ism did they start to win elections. The four decades coinciding with what has been called the Cold War became the moderate left's period of their greatest success.

In postwar Europe, social democracy is associated with democratization, the welfare state, educational expansion and liberal judiciary reforms. As a common feature of the moderate left, the various national flavours of social democracy (as will also be demonstrated by the contributions to this volume) share the aim of securing social progress within a democratic society,¹ as opposed to communism and Soviet authoritarianism. This stance still acknowledged the experience of persecution, incarceration, and resistance under Nazi and Fascist regimes in Europe, which the social democrats shared with the communists and other political orientations. For some decades, leading figures from the moderate left could refer to this heroic past and defend their moral supremacy. The next generations of leaders lacked any comparable heroism. Admiration for particular instances of political activism went elsewhere: Movements under the banners of antiwar, feminism, environmentalism, development aid and quite recently refugee help did not come into being in the milieu of the moderate left. Social democratic parties became innovation followers instead of frontrunners of social betterment.

Echoing earlier phases of socialist internationalism, many a left-wing thinker (whether moderate or more radical) had one central plan for the time after the Second World War: building a new and better Europe. Some actually gave voice to ideas that had been around at least since 1925. In 1941, Altiero Spinelli (an Italian Communist who was later European Commissioner, and a Member of the European Parliament) and Eugenio Colorni (an Italian scholar and resistance fighter who was killed by the Fascists in 1944), both prisoners of Mussolini on the island of Ventotene, sketched a plan of a European Federation based on a socialist revolution. For them it was evident that capitalism and its crises had led to Fascism and the Second World War, and thus nationalism in Europe had to be eradicated by a European Federation in which “[p]rivate property must be abolished, limited, corrected, extended: instance by instance, however, not dogmatically according to principle.”² Interestingly enough, the Heidelberg party programme of the SPD in 1925 claimed that the SPD as a member of the socialist labour international would fight Fascism and Imperialism by erecting a unified European economy under the auspices of the United States of Europe.³

Internationalism as a cornerstone of socialism had manifested itself as Europeanization in the moderate left parties after 1945. But even in such a field traditionally occupied by the left, the social democrats very often demonstrated ambiguous stances because of the need to defend their social base against competitors from abroad. Open borders undermine the negotiation power of trade unions for higher salaries of the masses. Brexit was at least to some degree the answer to over 10 years

of an open labour market for citizens of new EU member states. Faced with similar economic and social challenges, the various national European social democratic parties practised a lively exchange, which is also reflected in the contributions to the present issue. Some of these parties soon became beacons and many a strategic debate referred to the deeds, successes or failures of a European sister party.

The expansion of the welfare state, and the tremendous increase in income that went with it, along with the social security of an expanding economy, induced German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf to call the 20th century the social democratic era.⁴ However, social democracy in Europe after 1945 has also been associated with Dahrendorf's dictum of social democracy falling prey to its own success: because social progress led to changes in social structure, the upward mobility of the working class to the lower middle classes (particularly in relation to skilled labour and public services) caused the working class electorate to almost vanish.

Most probably, Dahrendorf too must have been surprised to see a blossoming time for social democracy immediately after the publication of his book-length statement. After the implosion of communism east of the Elbe, the majority of the declining state parties became born-again social democrats (at least in name). In the West, in a kind of non-simultaneity, the implosion of communism was accompanied by the flourishing of the moderate left-wing governments in the US under the Clinton administration from 1993, in the UK under Blair from 1997, and in Germany under Schröder from 1998. They adapted the label *New Labour* (which was a party conference slogan in 1994 and the title of a manifesto in 1996) in order to pursue a so-called *Third Way* (launched by Clinton and Blair in 1998 in New York) “[b]eyond Left and Right” (Giddens 1994). The very same slogans that earned those Third Wayers acclaim in the bourgeois press contributed to their defeat at the ballot box: in Spain in 1996, in the US in 2000, in Germany in 2005, and in the UK in 2010.

Moreover, these European social democratic parties also compromised themselves in various welfare retrenchment policy reforms (Blair's “welfare to work”, Clinton's “end welfare as we know it”, Schröder's Agenda 2010 etc.) and the continental Social Democrats today are faced with the threat of extinction due to a perceived loss of their distinct political profile in coalition governments, and consequently a loss of working class voters due to the rise of (right-wing) populist parties. At present, the German populist party AfD has a higher percentage of working class voters than the SPD.⁵

This brief survey of the parties' histories could easily be expanded to other domains, but first we should recognize that the sketch shows something else, too. The ups and downs in parliamentary representation of the social democratic parties do not fit a simple model of expansion, contraction or cycles. In party politics, the moderate left is still around, not always running under the name “social democrat”,

and some parties campaigning under this label lack serious references to the tradition of August Bebel, Victor Adler and other undisputed heroes of the past.

The trajectory of the moderate left in (Western) Europe could also be seen as the longevity of its oligarchical structure. When the German labour movement reached its first peak in the early 20th century, a then young comrade and sociologist became famous for pointing to undemocratic patterns within the SPD: Robert Michels argued that a movement that preached democracy lacked mechanisms of democratic representation. His “iron law of oligarchy” claims that “the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators” characterizes such organisations.⁶

Over a century has passed since Michels proposed this mechanism, and it would make a nice exercise to prove his argument, although there is insufficient space here to do so in detail. Roughly speaking, both the social democratic parties but also newcomers like the Green parties regularly show the isolation of the party elite from the members, voters, or the masses as they were called earlier. Only quite recently, the Labour Party elected its new leader by popular vote – and it is ironic that in Jeremy Corbyn the delegates chose someone who did not fit the requirements of a party leader propagated both by the yellow press and by political pundits.

What we can observe in nearly all European countries with a strong party on the moderate left is the nationalization of its personnel, accompanied by a sharp decline in the numbers of ordinary members. This is, of course, due to the fact that all catch-all people’s parties have suffered severe losses in membership; to cite just the German example, the SPD, which had around 600,000 members after the Second World War and in the 1950s, has declined to half a million party members and may not – unlike in the 1950s – realistically expect another sky-high peak of one million members like in 1976. This is by no means a social democratic problem per se, similar shrinkage currently affects the conservatives (the combined CDU and CSU), who started from a much lower level and have never exceeded ca. 800,000.⁷ The decline in the number of party members has been even sharper in Austria. Until the late 1970s, the SPÖ had nearly three quarters of a million members; in 2017 it was reported that the number dropped below 200,000.⁸

The Austrian case of subsidizing parliamentary democracy is of particular interest here because it exceeds all other countries. Today, all parties live primarily off taxpayer’s subsidies, and this applies not only at the national level: the regional and the local parties receive a fixed sum of Euros for each voter and, not surprisingly, the highest premium is given for the regional party level, which amounts to up to ten times the national level. Additional financial contributions go to the educational branch of the party, its publications and other channels. Membership fees have constantly declined over the last half-century. In addition to direct funnelling into the

party budget, indirect financing takes the route of personnel working for the party but being financed by the government: parliamentary assistants, secretariats of ministers and other office holders, plus staff of institutions closely related to the labour movement such as workers' chambers, trade union think tanks etc. In 2017, the SPÖ would have been able to collect a maximum of €14 million if every single party member had paid the regular fee (a completely unrealistic assumption). This fictitious revenue is dwarfed by the much higher and real allowance the party received from the taxpayers: €55 million.⁹

To illustrate Michels' iron law of oligarchy, we point to the social composition of the "political class" of Social Democrats in Austria. During the most recent parliamentary campaign in 2017, the SPÖ put 461 people on its list of federal candidates for parliament, the *Nationalrat* (ultimately winning 52 seats). Each of them presented themselves on the ballot with some basic data, including information on their occupation. Not all particulars were revealing enough, but 451 of them could be classified according to their occupational status. None of them called themselves a worker or labourer!

130 could be coded as belonging to the political class (chancellor, ministers, mayors, party functionaries etc.), 33 of them belonging to works councils, trade unions and institutions under their direct influence,

157 white collar workers,

65 civil servants and other employees in the public service,

28 professionals such as MDs or lawyers,

20 students,

19 were self-employed and entrepreneurs, including some who most probably belong to the precariat,

18 were retired and

only 14 of the candidates listed occupations which fall under blue collar occupations such as electronics technicians (2), engine drivers (3), a fire fighter, a gardener, a machine fitter, a mechatronics technician, a production operator, a production technician, a waitress, and a shop floor technician.

For the sake of fairness, we should add that a sizable number of those candidates for a seat in the parliament had worked in manual jobs, received their occupational training in blue collar jobs, made their social advancement often times through their political career and rose above their electorate only later in their careers. According to data about the German SPD, older party members are overrepresented and might therefore include some more blue collar workers. However, the same applies to the Christian Democrats and even more to *Die Linke*.¹⁰ Besides the anecdotal character of these data, there is no doubt that present-day social democratic parties no longer represent anything like a labour movement, neither their elite nor their voters.

The more political parties are on a drip feed, the less ordinary party members are heard. Traditional party organizations like neighbourhood associations (collecting dues by grassroots functionaries), party-run newspapers, recreational organizations for hiking, fishing or for teetotalers have disappeared without functional substitutes. In some ways, political parties in the early 21st century, including social democratic ones, bear greater resemblance to the dignitaries' parties from the heyday of liberalism in the late 19th century: loose organizations around elected politicians striving for re-election. Members and voters are lumped together in one basket, approached only in one-way communication whose content is pre-determined by political consultants who offer their services for cash. Attempts to catch up with competitors with regard to social media literacy were delayed, representing another instance of what could be called "innovation followerism".

Connecting the party with its voters, we must mention one further decline, the decreasing opportunities to bind people to the party via patronage. Parties can still advocate particular policies in favour of their clientele, but the claim to take care of their pressing demands – for housing, telephone, jobs, kids' summer vacation etc. – can no longer be fulfilled. One could say somewhat cynically that the good news is that opportunism is gone because of a lack of incentives given to them.

A third development, which contributes to another type of decline, is the composition of the electorate. Social democracy started as the political arm of the labour movement but in the 21st century it is hard to find workers. Their share has fallen from nearly half the population to less than one third, and within the remaining workers the compositions have changed too. The traditional place of the labour movement, the shop floor of a large factory, has disappeared from the scene. Even if there are still large employers, their personnel is seldom assembled under the roof of one factory hall. Among the ten biggest employers in Germany, two automobile producers with classic assembly line production are listed, but also four supermarket chains and two logistics enterprises; very similar patterns could be given for all highly-developed countries.

Consequently, a German survey confirms that between 2000 and 2016 the percentage of workers among the SPD voters dropped from 44 to 17, while at the same time the percentage of self-employed individuals doubled (from 3 to 7 %) and both white collar workers and civil servants increased.¹¹ So the party functionaries as portrayed in the anecdotal evidence from Austria more or less represent their voters quite well. Why then the notion of the "End of Social Democracy"?

Apparently, the answer to this question depends on how one conceptualizes the core identity of social democracy.

While Robert Michels perceived a lack of democracy in the social democratic party and thus dismissed the idea of democracy altogether (and moreover turned to

fascism), some focus on the programmatic writings of the party and the ideas that are being voiced there.

The SPD's Bad Godesberg programme was seen by many as a reformist, softened version of socialism in complicity with capitalism. Karim Fertikh's paper studies the genesis and reception of this programme in both Germany and France. The debates back then certainly saw social democracy wane with the perceived scientification of the authorship of the committee charged with devising the answers to society's most pressing problems. However, as Fertikh demonstrates, there is far more continuity than change between the Marxist ideology of the Heidelberg programme and the Bad Godesberg programme.

Fritz Weber advocates an alternative perspective by claiming that the moderate left lost the battle first during the Great Depression of the 1930s by refusing to adopt a *Realpolitik* approach. Adhering to the Marxist tradition of the imminent end of capitalist production hampered the formulation of a labour market policy creating jobs for the unemployed. Weber argues that it was only when the reception of Keynes replaced orthodox Marxist views on economic policy that social democracy became successful.

As Jan Hansen shows in his chapter on a later crisis of – again – the SPD, the alienation of the SPD party rank and file from their increasingly critical milieu in the discussion about the Euromissile base in Germany seems to have put an end to a party tradition. The new social movements appeared to outperform the social democrats in terms of moral authority. The party hierarchy and its reason of state were no more appealing; on the contrary, new forms of articulating new content and the cry for participation were particularly attractive to the young socialists (*Jusos*), women, and the party's left wing. Hence for a hardliner such as Helmut Schmidt this must have been the end of social democracy as he steered it.

Turning to the Netherlands and Harm Kaal's paper, the *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) was faced with the criticism of embourgeoisement when it decided to follow a catch-all approach and modernized its campaigning strategy with the use of mass media and corresponding imagery of celebrity party leaders. Some activists rejected this course – as to them it must have meant the end of social democracy – and founded new movements (such as *Nieuw Links*) that particularly strove to address the underprivileged in society.

Two papers (Alan Granadino's study of the Portuguese socialist party and the role of its leader Mario Soares and Jan de Graaf's all-European comparative analysis of the adoption and rejection of the shiny models of the Labour Party and the Scandinavian social democrats) seem to point in a different direction: what critics of Soares and the reformist social democratic parties regarded as a case of deflection from the pure belief in Marxism was often the result of political realism in the

face of an economically developing society. They acted as what the great Berlin-born economist Albert O. Hirschman conceptualized as “reform mongers”: “Hirschman proposed exploring the extensive area that lies between the traditional polarities of pacific reform and revolution. He thus created a scheme according to which moderate reform can be approved if the reform monger manages to convince, first, the progressive camp that the chances of radical reforms being enacted are very slim and that the only choice is between the status quo and moderate reform; and, second, the other camp that the chances of maintaining the status quo are almost nil and that their only choice is between moderate reform and radical reform cum revolution.”¹²

Incidentally, Hirschman’s brother-in law was the aforementioned Altiero Spinelli, whose political life was dedicated to building a new, more democratic, peaceful, and federal Europe. Under his name, a European federalist think tank presently summons European leaders of the left such as Jacques Delors, Romano Prodi, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, of the Liberals and the European People’s Party, to network and lobby for a “federal and post-national Europe, a Europe of the citizens.”¹³

Perhaps the future or rebirth of social democracy lies in initiatives that transcend both national and ideological borders and historiography will have to look for social democracy in totally new guises.

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Notes

- 1 Whereas many an ideological argument about the economic system of such a society has been fought within the parties.
- 2 Altiero Spinelli/Ernesto Rossi, *The Manifesto of Ventotene* (1941), https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the_manifesto_of_ventotene_1941-en-316aa96c-e7ff-4b9e-b43a-958e96afbecc.htm (20 April 2018).
- 3 SPD: *Heidelberger Programm* (1925), <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/geschichte/deutsch/spd/1925/heidelberg.htm> (31 January 2018).
- 4 Ralf Dahrendorf, *Das Elend der Sozialdemokratie*, in: *Merkur* 41/12 (1987), 1021–1038; Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict: An Essay on the Politics of Liberty*, London 1988.
- 5 Kark Brenke/Alexander S. Kritikos, *Wählerstruktur im Wandel*, in: *DIW Wochenbericht*, no. 29, 2017, 595–606, 604.
- 6 Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens*, 4. ed., Stuttgart 1989 [1911], quotation from

the English translation: *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Glencoe, IL 1949, 401.

- 7 Oskar Niedermayer, *Parteimitglieder in Deutschland: Version 2017 NEU*, Berlin, <http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/systeme/empsoz/schriften/Arbeitshefte/P-PMIT17-NEU.pdf> (20 April 2018).
- 8 ORE, 17 July 2017, <http://orf.at/stories/2399160/2399159> (20 April 2018).
- 9 Wiener Zeitung, 3 January 2017, https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/865364_Mehr-Geld-fuer-die-Parteien.html (20 April 2018).
- 10 Niedermayer, *Parteimitglieder*, 19.
- 11 Brenke/Kritikos, *Wählerstruktur*, 599.
- 12 Luca Meldolesi, *Discovering the Possible: The Surprising World of Albert O. Hirschman*. Notre Dame, IL 1995, 206.
- 13 <http://www.spinelligroup.eu/aims> (20 April 2018).