

Between old Recipes and new Challenges: The European Left needs a Conceptual Renewal

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The center-left parties of Western Europe are in crisis. The number of countries in which they form the government has fallen significantly since the end of the 1990s. Elections are being lost one after another, even in countries where such parties had governed successfully. Four of the five Scandinavian countries – to many observers social democratic societies par excellence – currently have conservative heads of government. There is a great deal to suggest that this development is not (only) due to the normal swings of the political pendulum, but the effect of a qualitatively new challenge: the center-left parties are losing votes not only to their traditional opponents on the center-right, but increasingly also to new right-wing populist or even extreme right parties.¹ In some countries, these parties have taken root among the traditional electorate of the center left to an alarming extent: in the first round of the French presidential elections in 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen came first of all candidates among workers.²

Examination of the Causes: The End of a Cycle

In my view, this development marks the end of a politico-ideological cycle: the centrist-technocratic project – known as the »Third Way« in the

1. This applies not only to Italy (Forza Italia, MSI, Lega Norte), or to France with the Front National, but also to the Netherlands (List Pim Fortyn), Belgium (Vlaamse Belang), Austria (FPÖ), Denmark, and Sweden; there is also something of a trend in the UK where the spread of the nationalistic British National Party is increasingly giving Labour cause for concern.
2. Philippe Guibert/Alain Mergier, *Le decenseur social – Enquete sur les milieux populaires*, Fondation Jean-Jaurès/PLON, Paris, 2007, p. 18. This development is accompanied by a deep organizational crisis for these parties: they are losing members on a massive scale (the British Labour Party, for example, has lost around half its members since 1997) and therewith the ability to organize election or political campaigns effectively.

UK and the »*Neue Mitte*« in Germany, to which we can add Bill Clinton's »triangulation« – which was successful for so many years, has reached the limits of its political usefulness.

This project was characterized by a successful adaptation on the part of the center-left parties to changed voter expectations and changed global political and economic conditions since the mid-1980s. It represented an accurate and attractive interpretation of the political *Zeitgeist* and enabled the center-left parties in the second half of the 1990s to establish themselves as the dominant political force in Europe. The different varieties of this project were similar in content: they were based on the combination of moderate neo-liberal economic and fiscal policy positions with an insistence on the role of the (welfare) state and an emphasis on a liberal-progressive standpoint in terms of cultural issues and values, which attained considerable symbolic importance as proof of an authentically »progressive« ethos. Labor market reforms and the reduction and reorganization of welfare benefits were coupled with the reduction of redistributive elements in the tax system, the privatization of publicly-owned companies and services, and an alignment and adaptation of economies and social systems in European terms (extension of the Internal Market, European deregulation and competition policy, single currency, far-reaching restriction of national industrial and relocation policies). The center-left parties presented themselves to new voter groups from the lower middle classes as »more effective managers of capitalism« (William E. Paterson). At the same time, education returned to the top of the political agenda and was allotted tasks which went far beyond the classical understanding of education policy. In this project education superseded the redistributive fiscal policy of the post-War period as the central political reform instrument; the idea was that investment in education would over time also contribute to solving issues of social justice, unemployment, and international competitiveness.

For around 15 years this policy enabled the progressive parties to win elections and to govern more or less successfully. Today, however, what the »technocratic reform Left« (Perger) has to offer no longer appears to be sufficiently attractive to convince the majority and to win elections.³ Too many questions and problems have increasingly proven to be difficult to answer or to resolve within the framework of this model.

3. Werner A. Perger, *Die Lage der Progressiven in Europa*, Berliner Republik, No. 3/2007, pp. 52–61.

- ▶ Globalization and Europeanization (as the specific European form of internationalization) have affected European workers' relative economic situation for the worse. Third-Way governments have been able to do practically nothing to change this. The wage share – that is, the proportion of wages and salaries in domestic income – has fallen continuously in the European Union over the last 25 years, from 72.1 percent to 68.4 percent. In parallel with this the number of those in work has increased significantly – the employment rate has risen from 61.2 percent in the mid-1990s to 64.5 percent today. In practice this means that an increased number of workers share a relatively lower amount of wage income. The Gini Index of social injustice has risen in many Western European countries since the 1980s.⁴ As a consequence of these developments the central promise of the reform Left – that by means of efficient technocratic policies and »feasible« reforms within the system they would represent the economic and social interests of »ordinary people« more effectively than others – has tended to lose credibility among those negatively affected.

Table 1:

The Economic Tragedy of European Integration, 1961–2005

<i>Year</i>	<i>1961–1970</i>	<i>1971–1980</i>	<i>1981–1990</i>	<i>1991–2000</i>	<i>2001–2005</i>
<i>Growth</i>	4.8	3.0	2.4	2.1	1.6
<i>Unemployment</i>	2.0	3.8	8.5	9.4	7.8
<i>Wage share</i>	72.3	73.9	72.1	69.2	68.4

Source: European Economy (figures relate to EU-15).⁵

- ▶ At the same time, acceptance of the center-left parties' second traditional response to economic changes – the promise to create a new and more efficient framework for the organization of social and economic policy by establishing an integrated economic and political space within the EU – has diminished. Many citizens of Europe are now skeptical towards or even opposed to this, not only in France and

4. Roger Liddle/Frederic Lerais, *Europe's Social Reality – A Consultation Paper from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers*, European Commission, Brussels, 2007, p. 30.

5. Table in Michael Dauderstädt, *Increasing Europe's Prosperity*, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, No. 1/2007, pp. 28–46.

the Netherlands where referenda went against the introduction of the European Constitution.⁶ This reaction is by no means just irrational: as successful as the EU has been in creating an area of peace and political stability in Europe, over the long term it has fallen short in terms of economic growth and unemployment. Michael Dauderstädt speaks in this connection of the »economic tragedy of European integration.«

- ▶ The promises of the »education revolution« have also proved to be relatively hollow. Youth unemployment in Europe stands at 18.7 percent according to the official statistics, but the real figure is likely to be higher. Social mobility has not improved in educational terms (if anything it has deteriorated) and the number of successful secondary-school graduates in the EU has barely changed over the last 20 years.⁷ In Germany, the number of university students has risen by a meager 0.5 % over the last ten years. At the same time, the inadequate financing of many education systems has undermined the quality of university degrees and devalued them on the labor market. New jobs are coming into being not primarily in the highly-paid sectors of the service economy but at their lower end: the most rapidly growing occupation in the mid-1990s in the UK was that of hairdresser.⁸ And this situation is not likely to change in the foreseeable future: UK government estimates indicate that 80 percent of the jobs which will be created by 2010 will not require a university education.⁹ In Europe today young people, including the well educated, not only suffer from above-average unemployment but also are relatively poor: 37 percent of the under-30s in the UK, 42 percent in Germany, and 49 percent in the Netherlands are »poor« in statistical terms.¹⁰
- ▶ At the same time, new challenges have emerged to which the Left has so far no adequate response. This applies above all to the topic of immigration which has become increasingly important in recent years. The Left's answer to massive European immigration in recent

6. René Cuperus, *European Social Unease – A Threat to the EU?*, Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft, No. 1/2006, pp. 65–90.

7. Roger Liddle/Frederic Lerais, *Europe's Social Reality – A Consultation Paper from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers*, European Commission, Brussels, 2007, p. 24.

8. Larry Elliott/Dan Atkinson, *Fantasy Island*, London, 2007, p. 79.

9. Jon Cruddas, *Neo-classical Labour, Renewal*, Vol. 14, No.1/2006, p. 34–41.

10. Roger Liddle/Frederic Lerais, *op cit*, p. 28.

decades – the concept of a »multicultural society« – has failed dramatically. It has led to fragmented societies and ghettos of marginalised minorities in which integration is not taking place and where the mutual frustrations of both the indigenous population and the immigrants have rather increased than diminished. This applies above all to immigrants from Islamic countries, among whom the second and third generations often have much more hostile attitudes to Western society and its values than their elders. For many years the Left has refused to even debate this issue. Immigration is now the topic on which the activists and officials of the center-left parties are most at variance with the opinions and expressed interests of their core electorate.¹¹

- ▶ The essentially passive discourse in relation to globalization and internationalization which marked the project of the technocratic reform Left – a kind of social democratic version of Margaret Thatcher’s TINA-discourse (»there is no alternative«) – is increasingly no longer satisfying parts of the population, which expect a more pro-active role on the part of nation-states than the new Left has so far been ready to offer. In many countries an emotional re-nationalization has taken place which is hard to reconcile with the globalization-friendly and pro-European discourse of the Left establishment.¹²
- ▶ There are signs that in Western societies a creeping change of values is taking place which the center-left parties seem not to understand, nor to address in policy terms. In some countries the *Zeitgeist* appears to have become conservative once again: opinion polls indicate a slow shift of the value barometer in the direction of traditional/conservative values. The socio-cultural liberalism and value relativism which have characterized Western »hedonistic« societies in recent decades (and, furthermore, were so important for the technocratic reformers as proof of their »progressive« nature) are in this perspective increasingly being perceived as problematic, excessive, and socially dysfunctional.

11. In a recent YouGov poll in the UK on the priorities of the future Gordon Brown government 65 percent of all voters and 53 percent of Labour voters declared that the topic of immigration was the most significant challenge for Gordon Brown: in contrast, only 20 percent of Labour-Party members saw this topic as a priority.

12. René Cuperus, *Populism against Globalisation: A New European Revolt*, in *Rethinking Immigration and Integration: A New Centre Left Agenda*, Policy Network, London, 2007, pp. 101–20. See also David Goodhart, *National Anxieties*, Prospect, No. 6/2006, pp. 30–35.

tional. This mood is increasingly being picked up by the Right: in his successful election campaign Nicolas Sarkozy devoted considerable attention to a »reckoning« with the 68-ers; and in the USA, the Republicans built their successful election campaigns strategically on »value issues« and so repeatedly outmaneuvered the Democrats.

As a consequence of these problems and contradictions in many countries the center-left parties are today very much alienated from a substantial part of their traditional core electorate.¹³ Especially in the ordinary, »populist« sectors of society these parties are no longer capable of connecting communicatively or culturally; they neither speak the language nor share the problems and worries of this part of the population. The center-left parties are organizationally and infrastructurally absent from the problem areas of many large European cities. This is the gap into which the new right-populist movements – and some left-wing movements – are pushing their way. These movements are increasingly used by marginalised population groups as a vehicle for the articulation of their feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. In this respect they are perceived as addressing everyday problems which the mainstream parties – above all those on the Left – either hide or suppress.¹⁴

At present, the center-left parties are manifestly clueless in the face of the loss of credibility of their technocratic project which has diminished the emancipatory potential of politics and offers to a substantial part of their traditional social base no alternative other than the adaptation to the prevailing »postmodern« economic, social, and cultural order. A study by the Jean-Jaurès Foundation, close to the French PS, of the living situation of the working and lower middle classes in France cites in this connection a resident of a French *banlieu* who explains: »It is not us who have become apolitical, the politicians have become apolitical.« As a con-

13. Werner A. Perger, Die Lage der Progressiven in Europa, Berliner Republik, No. 3/2007, pp. 52–61.

14. See on this point Jörg Flecker (ed.), Changing Working Life and the Appeal of the Extreme Right, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007; and Philippe Guibert/Alain Mergier, Le decenseur social – Enquete sur les milieux populaires, Fondation Jean-Jaurès/PLON, Paris, 2007. Local Labour Party opinion polls conducted among British National Party sympathizers which asked them what ideas they associated with the BNP yielded a depressing result for Labour: »free speech« and »fairness« were the ideas with which the BNP was primarily associated among Labour's core electorate.

sequence of this development for the first time in decades there is a real possibility that the social alliance that forms the political bedrock of the European Centre-Left – the alliance between the working and lower-middle classes – will break down.¹⁵

We Need a new Project

In this situation the Center-Left is faced by the task of formulating a new politico-ideological project which will make it again capable of winning a majority. This project must free itself of the narrow economism of the technocratic reform projects of the Third Way, without surrendering the strategic terrain of society's »middle ground.« There can be no return to the ideas of the 1970s and 1980s. What is required instead is a political discourse which not only correctly interprets the *ambitions* of the population – this was one of the greatest strengths of the *Third Way* projects and should by no means be renounced – but also addresses their growing fears in a world which is becoming ever more confusing.¹⁶ It must bring to an end the stigmatization of certain population groups (»the losers in the modernization process«; »defenders of vested interests«) and recognize that in recent years a series of developments have negatively affected many people (income and job losses, growing uncertainty about employment relations, growing social alienation in increasingly ethnically and culturally heterogeneous societies,¹⁷ growing pressures in the workplace, increasing pressure towards mobility with corresponding consequences for people's personal life prospects). »We have talked about Sweden, not about Swedes«: this was the explanation given by a former Swedish social democratic minister for his party's defeat in the last elec-

15. This does not mean that the political protest of the marginalised has an anti-systemic character. To the contrary: these people want to participate in, not to overcome the system. They are essentially, in the terms of Zygmunt Bauman, »failed consumers« and their central ambition lies in becoming real ones, participating fully in the western culture of consumption.

16. Cf. Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, London, 2006, especially Chapter 2, *Talent and the Spectre of Uselessness*, pp. 83–130; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge, 2006.

17. For the negative effects of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity on social capital and cohesion see Robert Putnam, *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2/2007, pp. 137–174.

tion. If the Center-Left wishes to become capable of winning a majority once more it must again ground its discourse in its voters' realities of life.

At the same time, the Left's ideological taboos simply must be broken, above all in relation to the immigration question and the failures of integration: here the Left has refused, as in no other area, to face up to societal realities. This refusal has done much to alienate it from parts of its core electorate.¹⁸

Apart from that, the Left must clarify its relationship to the nation-state and the question of national identity. In fact, over the last 100 years the nation-state has been the central instrument of the Left in pursuing its political and social aims and so far it has found no substitute. There is a great deal to indicate that many people are hoping for a new, more active role on the part of the nation-state, certainly in terms of its role as »protector,« and not as an executor of globalization, which in many cases is how it presented itself among Third Way governments. Here the trick would be to reclaim the nation-state in a positive way, while at the same time proceeding further along the path of European integration.

At the end of the day, the Left will again have to show how it wishes to use political power in the interests of center-left-party voters. In recent years it has confined this use of political power almost exclusively to the area of »soft,« socio-cultural themes on the basis of a liberal interpretation of individual rights and group interests, whereas the »hard« economic, fiscal, and politico-institutional space was declared almost a no-go area for left politics. In societies marked by growing inequality and the absence of social mobility for the lower and lower-middle classes this cannot continue.¹⁹

At the same time, the Center-Left must also resume discussion of longer-term societal issues, and not only in relation to the environment. Notwithstanding the fact that the rapid social and economic changes of »liquid modernity« (Zygmunt Bauman) have led to uncertainty and

18. Cf. René Cuperus, *Populism against Globalisation: A New European Revolt, in Rethinking Immigration and Integration: A New Centre Left Agenda*, Policy Network, London, 2007, pp. 101–120. See also Ernst Hillebrand, *Migration and Integration – The Errors of the European Left*, *ibid.*, pp. 35–44.

19. It is possible that inspiration will come from an unexpected quarter: the Democratic Party in the USA has begun to discuss »redistribution« seriously for the first time in ages. Cf. *Democratic Hopefuls Push for New Way beyond Clintonomics*, *Financial Times*, 15.6.2007.

status anxiety even in the classical middle classes it is also clear that for a substantial part of the population of Western societies the »social question« can be regarded as largely solved for the foreseeable future. A narrow economism, which does not address and articulate politically issues of quality of life and lifestyle has only a limited attraction, politically and ideologically, for these social segments. This means also that the Left, in its search for a new political narrative, has to avoid falling (again) into the trap of »social pessimism« (Zaki Laidi), an exclusively negative interpretation of the changes of recent decades and their consequences for society and people's lives.

The Right too is Changing

As if these dilemmas were not difficult enough, an additional challenge is increasingly facing the Left: the Right, too, is modernizing. In recent years it has said goodbye, at least rhetorically, to neoliberal radicalism and successfully endeavored to recapture the political middle ground. This reorientation amounts to an implicit recognition of the deep embedding of core elements of the Center-Left's political project in Western societies. This »re-centering« of conservatives can be observed, in different forms, in many countries: George W. Bush has successfully contested two election campaigns with the promise of a »compassionate conservatism.« The Swedish Conservatives under Fredrik Reinfeldt have committed themselves to retaining the Swedish welfare state and as a result won elections against a, »technocratically«-speaking, highly professional governing social democracy. The CDU, after its near disastrous »Angie« election campaign, has again adopted a much more traditional Christian Democratic guise. In the UK, under the leadership of David Cameron the Conservative Party has undergone an astonishing about-turn. Cameron has declared his support for public investment, as well as the NHS, the environment, and homosexual marriage. In France, in his election campaign Nicolas Sarkozy laid claim not only to the »dignity of labor« and the secular republic, but also to sacred figures of the French Left such as Victor Hugo and Jean Jaurès. The strategy of the new »conservatism lite« consists in no longer calling into question the aims of the Center-Left – a certain degree of social welfare and solidarity, but also its emphasis on educational opportunity and minority rights – but rather its means. The state is an inappropriate instrument for achieving these aims:

too costly and often too ponderous. The market, private suppliers, and voluntary commitment could do these things better. Basically, it boils down to a conservative version of the slogan with which the SPD pursued its election campaign against Helmut Kohl in 1998: »We wont do everything differently, but there's a lot we'll do better.« The new »soft« Right is promising the same thing today: »We wont do everything differently, but there's a lot we'll do better – and cheaper.«²⁰ At the moment the center-left parties have no sensible response to this. The alternative of economic and social policies to those of the Center-Left but shorn of their cultural liberalism and ideological idiosyncracies is apparently being very well received by voters from the most diverse social groups.

A counterstrategy will have to operate on many fronts: the role of the state ought to be a core theme, however. If there is a difference between the visions of social and societal systems of the new Right and the new Left, it lies in the question of the future role of the state in the provision of social services and public goods, and in the creation of individual and collective life chances in deeply unequal societies. In times of growing uncertainty the vision of a strong, active, enabling state should look more attractive to many than a system in which social provisions and public goods are removed from the area of citizens' rights and hived off to the arbitrary, selective, and charitable realm of the non-state or commercial sectors.

At the end of the Mitterrand era Lionel Jospin tried to assert a »*droit de l'inventaire*« for the French Left. It is exactly such a »right to take stock« that the European Left must now claim in relation to the technocratic reform project of recent decades. A critical discussion is required concerning what should be retained and what appears inappropriate and outdated in the current situation and must be replaced by new political ideas. It is time again for a serious exercise in reformist revisionism.

20. See also Tobias Dürr, Das sozialdemokratische Paradox, Berliner Republik, No. 3/2007, pp. 18–20.