

Rise and fall of the SPD¹

1. Introduction: historical analyses

In the long run the rise of the SPD after 1945 was successful until the 1970ies. The SPD became a so called „Volkspartei“ with different left and right factions, representing mainly the protestant and atheistic working class as well as parts of the catholic working class, parts of the petit bourgeois and of the left bourgeois or social liberal intellectuals. The SPD was the only left or middle-left party in West Germany in the parliaments after the forbiddance of the Communist party (KPD) in the year 1956 and was partly representing the social movements, especially the young socialists.

Many representatives of the old left as Peter von Oertzen or Erich Gerlach and the New left were members of the SPD. The SPD was a party with more than one million members and one third young socialists in 1976. But after the rise of the SPD the crisis began during the chancellorship of Helmut Schmidt: The unsocial policy, the missing ecological policy and the NATO-policy mobilized especially young people against the SPD and the Green party was founded. The crisis of the SPD continued during the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder since 1998, especially after Lafontaine stepped back as minister of finance and chairman of the SPD in 1999.²

The growing desire for autonomy and participation in an increasingly differentiated and economically specialized society goes hand in hand with a dynamic of “increasing competence”. However, since the 1990s this dynamic has been accompanied by a growing level of insecurity and precariousness.³

(...) With the free-market liberal policies of ‘Agenda 2010’, and especially with the, at times, uncompromising insistence on these reforms in the following years, the SPD leadership violated deep-rooted notions of social justice, which are to some extent based on the work ethic of skilled labour and the “performance for participation”-promise. In the red-green government and partly in the succeeding grand coalition, the SPD followed a political course “against its own electorate”⁴ and inspired by New

¹ The introduction (first page up to „SPD in 1999“) and the last paragraph (lost hopes) is new (by Max Reinhardt). The following parts of the text were published in German as: „Max Reinhardt/Stefan Stache/Kai Burmeister 2016: „Sozialdemokratie in der doppelten Krise der Repräsentation Nach den Landtagswahlen: Halbiert und zurückgefallen hinter eine erstarken neuen Rechten, in Sozialismus 4/2016“ — translated by Carla Sasse (with some changes by Max Reinhardt). Thanks to Carla Sasse for the translation of the parts form this article. The headings in this article are new.

² For further informations about the rise and crisis of the SPD since 1945 see Max Reinhardt 2011: Aufstieg und Krise der SPD. Flügel und Repräsentanten einer pluralistischen Volkspartei, Baden-Baden.

³ For further information on the dichotomy between needs and wants on the one hand and growing insecurity on the other see, for example, Michael Vester/Christel Teiwes-Kügler/Andrea Lange-Vester 2007: Die neuen Arbeitnehmer. Zunehmende Kompetenzen – wachsende Unsicherheit, VSA: Verlag, Hamburg.

⁴ On politics “against one’s own electorate” see Daniel Gardemin/Heiko Geiling 2009: Gegen das eigene politische Lager: Die Krise der SPD, in: spw 6/2009, p. 14-22.

Labour in Great Britain “beyond left and right” (...). Social democracy in Europe increasingly turned into a political force for the winners in society. The neoliberal social, economic and labour market policies manifested themselves in discourses on just inequalities and small government, the stressing of self-reliance or the purported dichotomy of old and new social democrats. (...)⁵

Deregulation, experiences of the working class and the financial crisis 2008/2009

The experiences of parts the working class were:

- atypical employment,
- the growing sector of low-paid jobs
- or unemployment despite their work ethic and a good level of education,
- or who felt under pressure by the obsession of cost-cutting, the focus on short-term returns, controls carried out by non-experts or an authoritarian and hierarchical management. (...)⁶

During the global economic and financial crisis 2008/2009, the grand coalition introduced stimulus packages and strengthened *Kurzarbeit* (a subsidized short-term working scheme) as an instrument to prevent mass redundancies, especially in the heavily export-orientated industrial sector.

(...) After years of austerity and deregulation even the partial successes that were achieved in stabilizing the economy and labour market weren't attributed to the SPD – especially since the measures were communicated in a technocratic language and never embedded in a progressive interpretative framework built around the ideal of a modern welfare state or even a Green New Deal⁷. The narrative of the SPD as a just manager of the crisis failed to get through to the electorate.⁸

⁵ For further information on how the social climber milieus of Postmodern New Managers are guided by Blair and New Labour see, for example, Vester i.a. 2015, p. 39; on the politics “beyond left and right” see Anthony Giddens: *Jenseits von Links und Rechts. Die Zukunft radikaler Demokratie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.; on the social democracy of winners see, for example, Reinhardt/Stache 2014, p. 68ff., as well as Birgit Mahnkopf 2000: *Formel 1 der neuen Sozialdemokratie: Gerechtigkeit durch Ungleichheit. Zur Neuinterpretation der sozialen Frage im globalen Kapitalismus*, in: PROKLA. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft 4/2000, p. 489-525; on the history of the neoliberalisation of the SPD – using the examples of intra-party fights between the SPD's different wings and its political leaders – see, for example, Reinhardt 2011.

⁶ This section was shortened.

⁷ For further information on the Green New Deal see, for example, Kajsa Borgnäs 2014: *Eine grüne Wende der Sozialdemokratie*, in: Reinhardt/Stache/Meise 2014, p. 425-457.

⁸ For further information on the instrument of *Kurzarbeit* and on the division of the work force see, for example, Klaus Dörre 2013: *Krisenmanagement. System permanenter Bewährungsproben*, in: *Magazin*

After the historic electoral defeat in 2009, the SPD's new leadership responded with partial programmatic revisions of the 'Hartz' legislation and by shifting the discourse on "good" (i.e. secure and well-paid) work. But the federal election in 2013 were lost as well with a right candidate and a more or less progressive manifesto (...). Steinmeier and Steinbrück appeared to many as authoritarian political managers, who couldn't be trusted.⁹

The SPD have placed some of its core projects:

- the introduction of a minimum wage,
- improvements for those entering retirement age,
- a Frauenquote (women's quotas) dax companies
- or an expansion of paid parental leave
- but not a left taxation policy instead of austerity in Europe and Germany despite the lack of investments in the public sector.
- And the SPD voted for free trade agreements despite a lack of social and political standards.¹⁰

2. Refugees, authoritarian voters and the uprising of the right wing populists

(...) The neoliberal, conservative, export-fixated German model had become an unquestioned guideline for political action. This revival of positions from the previous decade found its programmatic expression in the executive committee's paper *Starke Ideen* ('Strong Ideas') of the SPD, which doesn't set out a socially integrative vision for the future. The question of a fair distribution of wealth is no longer asked, the one-sided model of savings and exports, on the other hand, is cemented. And Sigmar Gabriel tried to focus on authoritarian voters with a programme for the homeland and did not support the so called „welcome culture“ for refugees in Germany.¹¹

The more modern and solidarity-orientated parts of the electorate were well aware of the shift in discourse and reacted with a further withdrawal of trust. (...)

The new message of upper limits on the borders of Europe gave rise to societal doubts as to whether Germany was prepared for the refugee crisis. Overcrowded emergency shelters, pessimistic statements issued by local authorities and a missing long-term perspective at the federal level, led to many feeling concerned. The CSU

Mitbestimmung 1+2/2013, p. 54-57; on the SPD's crisis of confidence at this time also see Reinhardt/Stache 2014, p. 61-76.

⁹ This section was shortened

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See the paper »Starke Ideen für Deutschland 2025. Impulse für die sozialdemokratische Politik im kommenden Jahrzehnt«, SPD-Präsidium 2015, online: www3.spd.de/linkableblob/129600/data/impulspapier-perspektivdebatte.pdf (18.5.2016).

(the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's CDU) in particular, which seconded the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), called for an upper limit and spoke of an overload caused by the refugee crisis.

Merkel's stated approach of "Wir schaffen das" ('we will manage') seemed to represent a liberal Germany, but without political consequences. Also the SPD failed to respond to the refugee crisis with an approach centred on human rights and a systematic strategy of investing in integration policies. It also failed to encourage and politically represent those who believe in humanitarianism and solidarity. Surveys conducted by Infratest dimap in the 'DeutschlandTrend' show that the mood changed between the beginning of 2015 and 2016. The number of people who agreed that Germany should accept refugees "who have fled because they don't have work or a livelihood in their home country" decreased from 41% in January 2015 to 25% in February 2016.¹²

A paper by federal ministers Barbara Hendricks, Andrea Nahles, Aydan Özoguz and Manuela Schwesig as well as the prime minister of Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer, did contain approaches for investing in integration.¹³ But it hardly stood a chance of being implemented and wasn't able to contain discourses focussing on strains and burdens. The vice chancellor's unexpected call for a 'solidarity pact' and an improvement of social benefits for German citizens hardly came across as credible or authentic. It was rather conceived of as an affirmation of the AfD's narrative of a competition between refugees and the native population over scarce resources.

(...) In light of declining approval ratings since nearly 20 years, the crisis of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) continues and is increasingly taking on the form of an existential threat: In March 2016 the SPD won in the elections of two federal states just 12.7% in Baden-Wuerttemberg and 10.6% in Saxony-Anhalt. Those setting the tone in the party leadership – after a brief moment of shock – agreed on the familiar approach of "business as usual". Instead of engaging in a critical and publicly analysis, the protagonists hid behind the SPD's electoral success in Rhineland-Palatinate, where the party gained 0.5% more than 2011 and finished with 36.2% of the votes in an election.¹⁴ Sigmar Gabriel's recent critique of 'Agenda 2010' (the so-called 'Hartz reforms') as being the cause of the SPD's decline appears rather disjointed at this point. What would have to follow is an actual change of policy.

¹² This section was shortened. For further information on the data and their analysis see Hoff/ Kahrs/Stahl 2016, p. 34.

¹³ Neustart in Deutschland. Für ein Jahrzehnt umfassender Gesellschaftspolitik. 12 Punkte für Zusammenhalt und Integration in Deutschland, online: www.bmfsfj.de/RedaktionBMFSFJ/Internetredaktion/Pdf-Anlagen/integrationsprogramm-neustart-in-deutschland,property=pdf,bereich=bmfsfj,sprache=de,rwb=true.pdf (18.12.2016).

¹⁴ For further information on the election results see Benjamin-Immanuel Hoff/Horst Kahrs/Andreas Stahl (2016): Ergebnisse der Landtagswahlen am 13. März 2016 – Wahlnachbericht und erste Analyse, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Berlin, p. 2.

The same is true for his criticism of low pension incomes: it needs to be followed up with action.¹⁵

The most recent state elections send a dual message. On the one hand, the results point to a continued loss of trust in social democracy over more than a decade.¹⁶ On the other hand, the SPD's stabilization in Rhineland-Palatinate, which runs counter to this trend, shows how asynchronous this crisis of confidence is, and that there is still a chance to retain or gain back trust among the electorate.

(...) The crisis of social democracy is not a crisis of solidarity itself, but rather a crisis of the political representation of patterns of cognition, thought and action that are based on solidarity. Representation does not only refer to material demands, but first and foremost to everyday life problems and debates. Trust and lasting ties with voters can only develop if the members of social classes can identify with the discourses of a party (...).¹⁷

A majority of social classes and socio-political fractions would be responsive to a policy of more solidarity and environmental protection. Parts of the working class are very disappointed by the SPD. The more authoritarian parts voted for right wing parties to protest against the unsocial policy, although the AfD stands for inequality and less social justices, but as well for an antiestablishment position. (...)

And on the other side: The everyday social practices of solidarity found in partly revitalizing trade unions, protests against free trade agreements and the refugee relief movement need a political representation.¹⁸

3. Lost hopes: Martin Schulz, the federal election and a grand coalition

The new candidate for the chair of the SPD Martin Schulz and his announcement for the candidanship as chancellor for the federal election 2017 raises false hopes about his political aims and behavior. He was a projection surface for left voters for a left change in

¹⁵ This part was shortened and changed.

¹⁶ For further information on the crisis of the SPD see, for example, Max Reinhardt 2011.

¹⁷ For further information on the critique of the proposition of a disintegration of social milieus, the depiction of their modernisation and the building of trust, as well as on the emergence of crises of political representation, see Michael Vester/Peter von Oertzen/Heiko Geiling/Thomas Herrmann/Dagmar Müller 2015 [2001]: Soziale Milieus im gesellschaftlichen Strukturwandel. Zwischen Integration und Ausgrenzung, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft: Frankfurt a.M.; on the transformation of solidarity-orientated attitudes and on the crisis of confidence also see Max Reinhardt/Stefan Stache 2014: Solidarität als Lernprozess. Voraussetzungen und Möglichkeiten einer solidarischen Gesellschaft, in: Reinhardt/Stache/Meise 2014, p. 55-80.

¹⁸ For further information on social milieus and socio-political factions see Vester, i.a. 2015; on everyday social practices of solidarity see, for example, Reinhardt/Stache 2014.

Europe and Germany, but he disappointed the voters, because he did not want to decide for a clear left programme. Instead his strategy was to be politically unclear as he mentioned during the electoral campaign during a conversation behind closed doors.¹⁹

The SPD lost the federal election 2017. It was an electoral collapse: not just 10 percent less than the voter surveys at the beginning of the candidacy of Martin Schulz. The SPD reached the worse result since 1949 for a federal election. All leading social democrats promised not to build a grand coalition with the Union (CDU/CSU) to renew the party and the strategy in the opposition. But again the SPD started grand coalitions talks, after the negotiations of Union, FDP and Greens failed, although a majority of the SPD supporter prefers a minority government of the Union.²⁰ The SPD has no clear political programme. The dominance of the right wing is obviously. The SPD has a long history and risks nowadays to become a small party. There are progressive examples in Europe (Jeremy Corbyn) and USA (Bernie Sanders) to turn things around. Hopefully this will be successful with and within the SPD as well or if not possible without the SPD.

¹⁹ For further informations about the view of Martin Schulz see Markus Feldenkirchen 2017: Sein Höhenflug, sein Absturz. Die Martin-Schulz-Story, In: SPIEGEL 40/2017, online: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/martin-schulz-die-story-seiner-gescheiterten-kampagne-a-1170957.html> (06.01.2018); for further informations about a political analysis see Michael Vester 2017: Der Kampf um soziale Gerechtigkeit, online: http://www.spw.de/data/michael_vester.pdf (06.01.2018).

²⁰ See SPON-Wahlrend. Mehrheit der SPD-Anhänger lehnt GroKo ab, In: Spiegel Online 05.12.2017: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/spd-mehrheit-der-anhaenger-lehnt-grosse-koalition-ab-a-1181759.html> (06.01.2018).