

Social Democracy and European Integration Becoming Easy Targets

By Walter Baier

Since the end of WW II until 2011, the average vote for Social Democratic parties in parliamentary elections has decreased from 33 to 26 percent which means by more than one fifth. Yet, if we take the numbers from the Golden Age of European Social Democracy, the 1970s and 80s, as a starting-point, the picture becomes even bleaker. The decrease then is from 41 to 28 (slightly less than a third).

This decline however has not been a linear process. In the 1990s Social Democratic parties came to power almost simultaneously so in Germany, France, Italy and Spain; the Northern enlargement of the EU led to a strengthening of European Socialists due to the integration of the powerful Social Democracies in Scandinavia, Finland and Austria. Social Democrats were then represented in 12 out of 15 European governments and held the post of President of the European Commission. In Central and Eastern Europe the peaceful transition from state socialism to capitalism was accomplished under the leadership of former communists who transformed themselves into social democrats even faster than they transformed the societies.

Main stream political science – in ignoring the dimension of political economy – misdiagnosed a repetition of the Golden age of European social democracy when successful social democratic parties emerging after the end of the dictatorships in Southern Europe joined the already strong social democracies in Germany, Austria and Northern Europe.

However this revival turned out to be short living, not only since the general economic and social environment has become much less favourable for social democracy but also because of the transformation which the parties themselves have undergone.

The social democratic hegemony in the 1970ies had been due to a particular reform agenda which demarcated it from both the Communists in the East and the Conservatives with which they competed in the West.

From this agenda which was characterised by the articulation of welfare state and the strive for full employment with political and cultural liberalism in the 1990ies only the latter persisted while the former was abandoned in the name of the Third way. However political and cultural liberalism alone turned out not be enough to sustain majorities under the conditions of crisis.

Since the turn of the century the decline has accelerated. Half the losses suffered by the European Social Democracy as compared to the time its influence was strongest occurred only in the five years between 2009 and 2014!

The answer to the question why the crisis of neoliberal capitalism discredited to such a big extent the moderate left and the idea of European integration seems trivial. It did so because did not deliver what they have promised.

However the decline of social democracy and the delegitimation of the European integration is part and parcel of a broader and general process which frequently is denoted as the decay of liberal democracy.

Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States alarmed policy makers as well as the media and intellectuals particular in Europe, because the scenario very much resembled what they have become familiar with. 71 % of white, male voters without college degree voted for Trump, also giving him a majority among the over-45 age bracket and among the middle-income strata, which had up to now made up the core of Democratic Party supporters. 78% of Trump's voters say that the financial situation of their family has worsened compared to one year ago, and 63 % expect that life for the next generation will be worse than their own.

Must Trump's victory be regarded as the harbinger of an imminent political earthquake in Europe?

Francis Fukuyama, in praising 'good populism'¹ wrote that by voting Trump 'American democracy is finally responding to the rise of inequality and the economic stagnation experienced by most of the population'. This might seem paradoxical. But not if one considers that electoral decisions are over-determined by political and ideological preferences and therefore only in exceptional situations correspond congruously to the economic and social status of voters.

This explains that only a minority of 42 % of Trump's electorate say that the economy was the most important reason for their decision, while for 64 % it was immigration and for 57 % terrorism which made the difference.

What Trump voters think of him is quite surprising. Only one third (35%) believes that 'he cares about people like me', 26 % give him credit 'for good judgement' and only 8% feel he has the 'right experience'.

How could a person regarded in this way become president of the United States? The answer is striking. 83% of his voters felt he 'can change the system'.² Apparently, people have a quite realistic view of Trump: He might be a politically inexperienced egomaniac, lacking good judgement; he might not even care about me and mine; but still he holds out the possibility of 'system change', whatever this might specifically mean.

The thrust of this 'single-issue' movement colliding head on with the political system has surprised just about everyone. But in no way can it be considered apolitical. The popular disenchantment expressed concerns not only the political personnel; it also embraces the hegemonic system which by now guarantees political consensus, as Harvard political theorist Danielle Allen wrote in a comment for the *Washington Post*. 'Half the nation consistently fails to understand the other half because the US is a nation divided between those who watch the news and those who read it.' And

¹ Francis Fukuyama, 'American Political Decay or Renewal? The Meaning of the 2016 Election', *Foreign Affairs* 95,4 (July-August 2016)

² *The Washington Post*: '2016 Exit polls How the Vote has shifted, Updated Nov. 29, 2016', <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/exit-polls/>>.

she concludes that ‘understanding our political dynamics means spotting how those streams do or don’t mingle, and tracking the eddies, riptides and surf storms their convergences generate’.³

Europe, ‘de te fabula narratur’. The Eurobarometer detects the same degree of popular disenchantment. In 2015, 43 % of EU citizens said they were dissatisfied with their democracies; 48 % expressed distrust of the government, and 62 % believed wholesale that things are going in a wrong direction.⁴

These findings illustrate what in political theory is seen as the typical populist divide between ‘the system’ and ‘the people’, the latter constituting what Laclau calls an ‘empty signifier’,⁵ capable of absorbing, like a ‘black hole’, all kinds of popular consternation and frustration; it bequeaths a discursive void that can be filled with various significations, even antagonistic ones.

The struggle for filling up the ‘empty signifier’ is the typical struggle over hegemony and power which takes place in the already existing arena of power relations.

In contrast to conventional interpretations in which right-wing populism is interpreted as a ‘pathological’ deviation from the normality of Western liberal democracies, the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde argues that it is the symptom of a pathological normality, in other words, that right-wing populism is essentially a radicalisation of established neoliberal attitudes and values rather than their negation.

The populist divide

By way of 1997 Eurobarometer data, Mudde demonstrates that already by that year only a mere third of the citizens of the EU-15 represented themselves as ‘not at all racist’, another third acknowledged they were ‘a little racist’, while another third acknowledged openly racist feelings.

³ Danielle Allen, ‘Why the establishment was blindsided by Donald Trump’, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-the-establishment-was-blindsided-by-donald-trump/2016/10/28/1e5dd50e-9ab4-11e6-9980-50913d68eacb_story.html?utm_term=.f2b597c8ae6e>.

⁴ See ‘Stimmung für Protestwahl so günstig wie noch nie’, *Die Presse*, 30 April 2016, <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/eu/4978901/Stimmung-fur-Protestwahl-so-gunstig-wie-nie?_vl_backlink=/home/politik/eu/index.do>.

⁵ Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?’ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso, 1996.

And even going beyond what most radical right populist parties would propose, 20 % supported ‘wholesale repatriation’, agreeing with the statement that ‘all immigrants, whether legal or illegal, from outside the European Union and their children, even those born here, should be sent back to their country of origin’.⁶

This means that the populist cleavage between the ‘common sense’ of people and what is regarded as ‘politically correct’ has existed for quite a long time. Michael Fleischacker, head of the Vienna editorial board of the conservative *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, observes that with Trump’s election right-wing populism encompassing a broad range of socioeconomic, world-political, and institutional issues won ‘the first major victory in a long-lasting cultural battle. ‘Yes, it is true that an aggressive, growing majority, which has long been considered a minority [...] is about to cancel a consensus that has lasted half a century. The deal was something like this: We, the “progressive” left, say what is socially and culturally right, and what is to be thought and written and what is not. The others ought to keep their mouths shut; however, they are allowed to fulfil themselves economically. We let the smarter people get rich and buy subversive art; we provide social support to the less smart people, let them watch TV and have fun. At a certain point, the effective muffling of the majority gave the successful minority the impression that they were somehow a numerical majority and were thus democratically legitimated. Since the deal on the success-or-feed-side is coming unhinged, it does not really work on the cultural side either.’⁷

The diagnosis is of almost Gramscian lucidity. The hegemonic crisis here is explained as the crumbling of neoliberalism’s two constitutive elements, cultural liberalism and neoclassic supply-side economy. The interplay between them worked well as long as the economy delivered prosperity for a growing and optimistic middle class. Once it stalled, cultural liberalism encountered the active objection of those who hitherto have at best tolerated it without actually accepting it.

⁶ Cas Mudde, ‘The populist radical Right: A pathological normalcy’, <www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-08-31-mudde-en.html>.

⁷ Michael Fleischacker, ‘Trump gelaufen’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 12 November 2016, <<https://nzz.at/meinung/trump-gelaufen>>.

Of the inroads of right-wing radical parties into proletarian, formerly social democratic electorates there is much evidence.

A great deal of empirical material has been amassed in order to suggest that the rise of the radical right parties in Europe is the expression of the demoralised and confused lower classes, which are contaminating societies from the bottom up. However, these observations are ideologically biased as they do not even bother to examine the vote shares of the radical right parties in other segments of the electorate, in particular among the upper class.

But the rise of the far right cannot be approached only empirically. The disarticulation of a hegemonic structure which has become dysfunctional is neither the direct reflection of the crisis nor is it a spontaneous reaction of the masses.

Political and ideological components come into play here. In contrast to the discussion in the US, in Europe the role which powerful media play in boosting the campaigns of radical right parties is barely addressed in the debate. Neither is the lavish financial support which these parties receive from large financial corporations a topic of serious research and debate.⁸

People's grievances expressed in their vote for the populist radical right must be taken seriously as the 'the sigh of the oppressed creature' as well as of 'the opium of the people'. However, in this instance too the fundamental insight applies that 'the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.'⁹

How the European Union became an easy target

⁸ <<https://www.greenpeace-magazin.de/nachrichtenarchiv/diese-deutschen-firmen-unterstuetzten-trump-im-wahlkampf>>.

⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, chapter 2, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>>.

The common accusation of the European Union for being supposedly inefficient ignores the EU's great efficiency in imposing the neoliberal agenda on Europe's societies, even taking advantage of the financial crisis to do so.

However, what is true is that since the 1990s the EU has systematically betrayed the promises it has made to the people of Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe it failed to provide the promised swift catch up (except in a very few metropolitan areas); in the South the incipient welfare states have been sacrificed on the altar of neoliberal austerity, while even in the countries of the centre the living standards of the middle class are stagnating and welfare systems are being curbed.

For all of this, the European Union became too easy a target of populist criticisms. All the more so that Brussels, unlike Washington, is not the commonly recognised capital of a sovereign state which could confer historical and political legitimacy on its system of sophisticated checks and balances.

Some comrades in the left have nevertheless proposed playing this card. In an article published on the eve of the British referendum former Syriza MP Stathis Kouvelakis rejected the EU as unreformable and called for its dissolution. 'So we have to play the referendum game, while blocking the forces of the xenophobic and nationalist right from winning hegemony and diverting the popular revolt.'¹⁰

Similarly, Stefano Fassina, former Finance Minister of Italy, calls on the left to create 'national liberation fronts' rallying the progressive forces with 'the democratic right wing and sovereignist parties'.¹¹

¹⁰ Stathis Kouvelakis, 'The EU can't be reformed', Verso Blog (26 June 2016), <<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2726-the-eu-can-t-be-reformed>>.

¹¹ Stefano Fassina, 'For an alliance of national liberation fronts', *Defend Democracy Press*, 27 July 2015, <<http://www.defenddemocracy.press/alliance-national-liberation-fronts-stefano-fassina-mp/>>.

Although the two authors apparently differ on whether the left should fight the nationalist right on its own ground or forge alliances with it, in essence they agree that the European Union needs to be demolished in the name of the nation.

This is pertinent insofar as the European Union beyond the Economic and Currency Union constitutes a sophisticated system of institutionalised interstate relations whose democratic deficit arouses criticism that can easily slide into nationalism.

The revival of nationalism

In other words, in contrast to what the predominant, optimistic European-policy rhetoric of today's Europe maintains, Europe is by no means done with the 'national question'.

The rise of nationalism in Europe is an indicator of growing inequality between the centre and the periphery, accompanied by a reinvigorated rivalry between the major powers, both resulting from the growing inequalities caused by neoliberal austerity.

Eric Hobsbawm, as a British historian with old Austrian roots, began his famous monograph on nation and nationalism by making reference to 'the first noteworthy attempts to subject the issue to a dispassionate analysis', which were 'the important and under-appreciated debates among the Marxists of the Second International on what they called the "national question"' involving 'the best minds of the international socialist movement, Kautsky and Luxemburg, Otto Bauer and Lenin, to name only a few'.¹²

Interestingly enough, although dedicating a study to the concept of nation, Hobsbawm recommends to those interested 'in this subject' to 'adopt an agnostic attitude' and 'not [to work with] an a priori definition of what makes up a nation'.¹³

¹² Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalisms Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991; quoted from the German edition, Frankfurt a. M., p. 12.

¹³ Hobsbawm, p. 19.

In Hobsbawm's view, the nations are more than mere ideological constructions related to statehood, either already existing or the subject of a new liberation struggle, but constitute an element of material social reality.

Socialists before 1914 agreed on the principle of socialist internationalism, which meant always prioritising the interests of the working class over national differences. But from this principle opposing strategies were inferred. While Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg were looking forward to an imminent withering of national and even linguistic differences – a development they regarded as progressive – Lenin proclaimed, at least in theory, the unconditional democratic right of each and every people to national self-determination.

As far as the controversies among socialists were more than ideological preoccupation, that is to say, the reflection of different conditions they encountered in the struggle, they demonstrate that nations are not essential facts, time-transcending and immutable, but phenomena that are historically contingent within time and space.

Therefore the principle of internationalism that implies above all else the prioritisation of 'class interest' over national difference does not oblige socialists to opt for a particular scheme for handling national questions but always to adopt a political position that prevents the working classes of different nations from being pitted against one another.

This was exactly the position of the Austrian socialist Otto Bauer who commented with irony on the bitter polemic among Polish socialists at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century about whether they should fight for an independent Polish nation-state or not: 'At a time in which working-class militants are still daily imprisoned, shot and hanged, the workers of Warsaw and Lodz fight about whether the relation between Russia and Poland should be regulated by the constitutive assembly in

St. Petersburg or in Warsaw, whether they should demand the eight-hour day from the Russian Duma or from the Polish parliament.’¹⁴

Does this not resonate with today’s ideological discussion about the European Union which threatens to divide the left? The wisest way to proceed would seem to lie in acknowledging that a democratic, social, ecological, and feminist Europe will never become a reality if not achieved through the struggles of the people – instead of focusing now on divisive issues around specifically formulated plans A, B, C, etc.

There are good reasons for the growth of Euroscepticism, especially in the countries of the European South. Can an internationalist European left ask the left in these countries to ignore these feelings of their people, all the more as they are grounded in real experiences?

Nobody today can predict the future of the euro and even the EU. Instead of mainstreaming obvious differences vis-à-vis the European Union the left needs debates for agreeing on a clear set of essentials for a common strategic platform which also acknowledges political differences.

The European ascendancy of the radical right and the imminent threat it poses to liberal democracy once more demonstrates that the struggle is not only about socio-economic rights. And it becomes even more political since it cannot be addressed in the national framework only.

False dilemmas

How can we react? Do we accept the dilemma of choosing between Europhilia and Euroscepticism?

In reality most left parties always put forward a nuanced position. While supporting European unity in general they never have been ‘Europhiles’ in the mainstream sense of the term. Consequently,

¹⁴ Otto Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 p. 453. This criticism clearly is related to the exhaustive treatment of the question of a Polish delegation in the Russian Constituent Assembly in the final chapter of Rosa Luxemburg’s *Nationalitätenfrage und Autonomie* [The Question of Nationalities and Autonomy].

they were against the Maastricht Treaty, against the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nice, against the Fiscal Pact and the so-called Five Presidents' Report, and of course against TTIP.

If the question then is not whether to unconditionally accept European integration or reject it wholesale does the left then have at least to decide whether it is in favour of 'more' or 'less' Europe?

Actually, the vast majority of the left already rejects more of the same European Union politics. Indeed, a discussion about more or less of something only makes sense when it refers to a specific content. Therefore the right questions would be: What policies does the left advocate? What European Union does it want? And in what proportion should powers and competences be shared between the Union and the countries?

This debate requires a twofold disenchantment; we need to be disabused of two illusions:

One concerns the actually existing EU. The European Union never has been the democratic, social, and peaceful project that the governing parties made it out to be.

However, there also is no reason to have illusions about a possible post-EU Europe. The law of *horror vacui* also applies in history. If the existing European order falls apart it would make way for another one which however would not be less capitalist and would be characterised by Great Power rivalries well known from inter-war years where they mingled with the petty conflicts among the small nation-states, especially in Central Europe where borders drawn after the First World War are still at variance with the multinational composition of the territories in question. Conflicts over South Tyrol between Italy and Austria or over Transylvania between Hungary and Romania, which were contained through the EU, would most likely re-emerge spurred on by reinvigorated nationalisms. Could such a repetition of history ever be in the interest of the European people or benefit the left?

Another scenario is possible. The contradictions inside the European Union might not necessarily result in a sudden collapse. Perhaps we will see a process similar to the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which proceeded for over five decades until it resulted in World War I. Combined with a bi-partisan system of the centre-right and radical right, this scenario too would not create favourable conditions for the social and democratic progress that the left is fighting for.

In other words, neither a slow decline nor the sudden collapse of the EU opens the gates to a progressive exit of the crisis. Dismantling the EU would only benefit left goals if it were so that the major problems societies have to face could be better managed in a Europe of 28, 35, or 50 national currencies, nation-states, and border regimes.

But is not the idea of reforming the EU as unrealistic as the idea that demolishing it would lead to a better Europe?

The question is justified as the system of European treaties and institutions, particularly after the Maastricht Treaty, constitute a powerful bulwark against any progressive social change. However, this does not mean that all democratic struggles are in vain since it is also true of national constitutions that they provide spaces for progress only to the extent that these have been won through popular struggle.

In today's politics the question of the European Union question cannot be separated from the question of how to combat nationalism and the radical right. It is crucial here to counter the populist right's claim to be 'anti-systemic'. In substituting an authoritarian '*Führer*-state' for liberal democracy the populist right is in fact preventing resistance at a time when popular democracy is being distorted and depleted by the political establishment.

How to fight the radical right

In fighting the radical right it is necessary to shift the emphasis from moral condemnation to political struggle, which in the first place requires us to acknowledge the validity of the social concerns, complaints, and criticisms of the people whom politics has abandoned.

Bernie Sanders rightly pointed out in his first statement after Trump won the White House that the President-elect had tapped into a real and justified anger. We need to acknowledge the validity of social concerns stemming from crises for which people are not given adequate political responses.

It has often been said that the decisive battleground with the far-right is the overcoming of mass unemployment and precarity in working and living conditions. The left must not only raise these demands but propose feasible strategies. This means a break with the system on both the national and European level – a socio-economic transformation.

But advocating the social and economic rights of the people is not sufficient.

We must at the same time defend liberal democracy, human rights, women's liberation and the rule of law, all of which are threatened by the radical right. However, democracy in the broad sense of the term cannot either be defended or extended in alliance with the ruling forces – whose aim is to cancel the political rights won through struggle by the working class – but in opposition to them. Without becoming liberals ourselves, we must ally with all forces available in defending what is democratic in liberal democracy.

By the same token, defending democracy on the national level must not be confused with nationalism against which the left always has fought.

It is evident that in its present shape the European Union is part of the problem and not the solution. However, choosing between democratising the nation-state and strengthening transnational democracy is to accept a false dilemma.

The political left and particularly its parliamentarians should therefore fight for a fully-fledged European Parliament, a Parliament elected by universal and equal suffrage, whose rights must be expanded, not to the detriment of the national parliaments but on the basis of a reasonable and transparent division of authority grounded in a democratic constitution.

The most powerful response to the growing nationalism in Europe would be a programme of integration to establish democracy on the European level while respecting the self-determination of its national components.

Before World War I overturned Europe's system of states Otto Bauer proposed a reform of the Austro-Hungarian state which he termed 'cultural national autonomy', also presenting this as the 'socialist nationalities principle' in which collective national rights would be assigned not primarily according to territory but be understood as rights of persons wherever they lived. This concept could be a very relevant one in relation to old as well as new national communities that are currently emerging through migration.

Bauer was conscious of the larger implications of this proposal. Thus in 1907 he already wrote that it could yield the blueprint of a 'new kind of social structure', a "'state of states" in which the single national communities are incorporated'.¹⁵ Thus the 'United States of Europe' would be the 'final goal of a movement on which the nations have embarked and which through forces that have already become visible will be greatly hastened'.¹⁶

Bauer's far reaching concept for the progressive and democratic unification of Europe remained theory, apparently negated by World War I. But so was also the order which emerged from the war, which in turn proved to have only been the prelude to an even more murderous clash of Europe's nations.

Seven decades of fragile peace followed, however, leading Europe again to a crossroad to which the left has to offer a response.

Although the radical left always has been internationalist there is still no justification for idealistic views. Defending and expanding social rights as well as real democracy on both the state and

¹⁵ Bauer p. 519.

¹⁶ Bauer, p. 520.

European levels require discontinuity with the existing system, and if the formula 're-founding Europe' is pertinent then its meaning consists precisely in the call for this political and institutional rupture.