

RESETTING THE LEFT IN EUROPE
CHALLENGES, ATTEMPTS AND OBSTACLES

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The changes and challenges of the Left in contemporary Europe - An introduction¹

Abstract

Left-wing parties in Europe have been faced by a crisis for more than three decades. What in the 1970s started as a challenge by conservative political elites to the post-war constellation characterized by a welfare state and an institutionally regulated market, was, from 1989 onward, strengthened by the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent acceleration of economic globalization throughout the 1990s. Most social democratic parties in Europe did not only fail to question this emerging model of deregulated capitalism, but also went so far as to embrace it, thus triggering a ground-breaking ideological, political and also structural shift in themselves. The consequence was a loss of their traditional constituency, which, to a not insignificant extent, turned to right-wing populist parties. New Left movements, challengers of the established social democratic parties, started once again after the global economic crisis to garner support in countries in which economic deprivation had hit hardest, mostly in Southern Europe. Their examples showed that there is not only a strong need, but also a huge demand, for leftist policies. But being scattered between different countries, these movements also showed that without a united, transnational and solidary front of leftist movements throughout Europe, the chances of achieving a sustainable impact and paradigm shift of the dominating economic model will remain low.

Keywords: Left, crisis, change, critical mass, internationalization

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■ For a long time, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was seen as a pivotal and undisputedly progressive event in world history, which marked both the end of the true state socialism and the end of the political and physical division of Europe. Capitalism had allegedly proven to be the only game by whose rules humanity should play, while the model of liberal democracy had completed societal accomplishments. Although nobody spelled it out so bluntly, the fact that communist regimes had collapsed brought about the general conclusion that the Left and socialist ideas as such had become redundant; moreover, that the Left had lost to the Right.

It was however already a decade earlier, during the 1970s, when the Right had started to turn away from the post-war period of reconstruction and welfare state and to claim that there is no alternative to the liberal self-regulated market. Moreover, that a successful political and economical system is centred around individuals in which “there is no such thing as society” (M. Thatcher), while governments were perceived as problems, rather than a solution or even merely contributors to solutions (R. Reagan). The deregulated capitalism that is in place today had already then started to regain the upper hand, with conservative elites beginning to dominate politics once more, with policy reversals following in the wake of this. What back then had only seemed convincing to significant portions of the populations of the USA and United Kingdom at first was soon after fuelled by additional two factors. The first of these was the doctrine rising from the fall of communism, that all that the emerging national states in Eastern and Central Europe were in need of was a free and deregulated labour and financial market, with democracy following as a natural outcome, due to the absence of political repression. The other factor that helped fuel deregulation was the economic (hyper-) globalization, which, although being the result of a specific historical moment in global economic development, stood nevertheless in close relation to the other two factors. In other words, the pushing of economic globalization beyond the boundaries of institutions in charge of regulating, stabilizing and legitimizing markets (Rodrik 2016), was both in addition to the economic agenda of transatlantic conservative political forces in power and also largely driven by the wind of change blowing in Eastern and Central Europe.

The choices of the Left and the reasons behind them

Within this back-then-new narrative of the triumph of capitalism and the rising self-confidence of the conservative parties as its carrier, European left-wing parties found themselves disillusioned and discouraged, which was at that moment certainly not conducive to the development of an alternative economic model that would differ from capitalism, and at the same time be ideologically detached from the *really existing state-socialism* (Piketty 2020, 611-725). Consequently, instead of developing political, but more importantly economic, alternative ideas, social democratic parties in much of Europe embraced this new doctrine with relative haste, and during the 1990s systematically began to both adopt and internalize capital liberalization and to approve the processes of what later would be coined 'hyper-globalization'. While the Schröder-Blair paper of the Third Way was the best-known manifestation illustrating this trend (Schröder and Blair, 1999), it was certainly not the only one to emanate from parties with a social-democratic profile.² Abdelal shows that in France it was, in fact, more the elite gathered around the Socialist party, and hence formally around the Left, as opposed to the Right, that was more fervent in the introduction of these new paths, essentially making the views of the French Right and Left on further capital liberalization indistinguishable (Abdelal 2006, 6-7). Eventually, by the end of the 1990s social-democratic parties had more in common with conservative parties than with their own position three decades earlier in regard to economic governance and market regulation (Manow, Schäfer and Zorn 2008, 32). And while Vassilis K. Fouskas and Shampa Roy-Mukherjee in this volume leave no doubts about the responsibility of the social-democratic parties in adopting the Third Way, Piketty tends to find also some explanation, if not understanding, for the position in which left-wing parties found themselves after 1989: according to him, it was partially also the *Zeitgeist* of that period that drove social democrats to a scenario in which they did not feel that an attempt to change the dominant doctrine

² Interestingly this paper was published when both the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair and the Social-democratic Party under Gerhard Schröder were already in power, and hence it was neither meant as a tool to come to power, nor demanded by their constituency.

in Europe was necessary, but instead that it was sufficient to just help 'pave the road' to the winning free market which they would then come to take control of, and through this, begin to tackle social inequalities (Piketty 2020, 611-725). By doing so, left-wing parties created a paradox, in which, by failing to challenge capitalism as it was emerging after 1989, they helped establish it as the only remaining economic model, effectively rendering themselves superfluous.

However, one cannot but notice that, as a consequence of the economic progress in the post-war period, the traditional voter bases of social democratic and left-wing parties went through bigger changes than those of conservative parties, and that hence the leftist parties also had to adapt to such change, both internally and within society, much more than was the case for parties on the Right (Krell and Hollenberg 2018). Up until the end of the 1960s, the left-wing (social-democratic/labour) parties were associated with lower education and lower income voters (working class). Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the structure of the voters for left-wing parties began to change, including also those with higher education, turning them also into parties of the intellectual elite/class (Piketty 2018, 16-19). This marked the beginning of a *representation gap*, in which a mismatch developed between the preferences and interests of the traditional voters and the policy profiles of left-wing parties (Berman 2016): those parties that used to protect them from the negative consequences of capitalism now had embraced the principles of capitalism. In such a situation, traditional left-wing voters consequently, being dissatisfied with the political choices and representation offered to them by left-wing parties during the 1990s, opted – in the categories employed by Albert Hirschman – either for *exit* or for *voice*: exiting by abstaining and turning away from the party that had represented them for decades, or raising their voice against them by voting for other parties by whom they felt better represented, mostly (far-)right-wing populist parties, as witnessed during the second decade of the 21st century throughout Europe.

These social processes during the 1970s and 1980s in effect triggered the creation of new dimensions of inequality and conflicts, and the gradual development of new cleavages, against which left-wing parties had to position themselves. In addition to these changes, the increase in economic growth, global integration and

technological progress from the 1990s primarily benefitted only the wealthiest, and hence not the traditional constituency of leftist parties (Milanović 2016), producing another burden for such parties. Further, the social structure of the leadership of left-wing parties also shifted over time, so that – as Patomäki in this volume argues – the contemporary Left is no longer even formally controlled by those who they want and claim to represent, which consequently puts their credibility additionally at stake.

Finally, also the sensitivity for socially vulnerable groups and minorities had changed over time, as these groups gained more rights and recognition. Traditionally attached to left-wing parties, there had been an expectation that they would continue to be represented by them, and that left-wing parties would adjust to their needs. However, vulnerable social groups are nowadays highly diverse regarding the social and economic backgrounds of their members, creating conflicting narratives within the Left, which might not only impede a sustainable cohesion and the creation of an overarching Left ideology and policy, but also reinforce divisions among different groups, regardless of the fact that they are all supportive of the policies of the Left. This is also because the historically-used category of *class* became too narrow and less functional for the purpose of addressing all issues within a society, which naturally fall in the realm of the Left. In addition, combining the interests, needs and experiences of all these socially and economically diverse groups, and at the same time developing an alternative economic model that would accommodate all of them has opened up another essential question: that of whether left-wing parties should structure and narrow down their programs around one social group or class, or rather attempt a ‘catch-all’ approach (Krell and Hollenberg 2018).

In spite of these obvious detrimental circumstances, the crisis of the Left over the last three decades still remains mainly a product of its own making. Given its long time frame, it is questionable whether the crisis of the Left can be described as *a current crisis* of the Left, or whether there are rather intrinsic structural problems pertaining to capitalism that cause the Left to be in a “permanent crisis”, as Lošonc and Josifidis in this volume argue. Further, the question remains as to how the Left can once again regain credibility and power.

The difficult return

As just discussed, in the party landscape of Europe, the left-wing parties seem to be the biggest loser of the last three decades of globalization. But when looking closer at what globalization has produced – growing inequality, climate change, migrations, the deconstruction of the welfare state – one tends to think that all these negative consequences of globalization are textbook examples of issues that are served up on a plate to the Left. Income and class cleavages in particular have traditionally strengthened the political Left, and the only thing the Left needs to do is to reach out and resolutely address the concerns of those who have suffered the most as a result of these changes, with a high chance of striking a chord of resonance. But why is this not happening?

According to Chantal Mouffe, left-wing and social democratic parties in Europe are stifled because they refuse to be introspective. Calling them prisoners of their post-political dogmas, Mouffe thinks that they are reluctant to admit their mistakes, which, as with a personal ‘new beginning’ is a precondition to allow moving on. Being stuck both in their past and in the capitalist system that they have embraced, they are incapable of recognizing all these negative effects of globalization – originally an issue for the Left *per se* – and instead leave them to be addressed by populist Far-Right parties. These populist right-wing parties are the ones that are stepping out of the given capitalistic frame, articulating demands among which, Mouffe believes, lie also some democratic ones, to which a progressive and Leftist answer or a Left alternative must be given. And if it wishes to work on its future, the Left will sooner or later need to position itself to face such demands (Mouffe 2019).

In Southern Europe, indeed, Left movements have already taken upon this argument of Mouffe, and made an attempt to address popular demands. Coming out of a particular historical moment in which the discontent with the dominant neoliberal system was growing and heavily impacting the lives of the majority of people belonging to the middle and lower classes, left-wing parties in Greece, Spain and Portugal have succeeded in formulating an

alternative program.³ A large part of their success has to date been based on a populist strategy, and on explicitly distancing themselves from the social democratic parties in their countries and acting as their challengers, as Labrinou and Balampanidis show in this volume. However, it was not only the readiness and credibility of these movements to question the system as such that drew a distinction between these Left movements in Southern Europe and other similar movements in Western Europe, e.g. *Momentum* in the United Kingdom, *France Insoumise* in France or the movement *Aufstehen* in Germany. It was also an – at least temporary – critical mass in these societies and the will of this mass to break not simply with the life of economic deprivation imposed by austerity programs, but with the overall neoliberal logic of humiliation and dehumanization of which a policy of austerity is just one element in the complex logistics of economic, political and moral devastation. The persisting popularity of, for example, Syriza, even after the rejection of the referendum outcome, should be understood in the light of this larger historical mandate (Douzinas 2017).

One reason for this critical mass (still) having not reached Western European countries is because they – contrary to the South – did not (yet) reach such a level of inequality and deprivation, while their welfare state is, though in the process of being actively dismantled, still strong enough to maintain a minimal social balance, which certainly also goes back to different paths of economic growth and expansion in the postwar period. Apart from the absent critical mass the political agenda in Western European societies have been for more than a decade to a great extent dominated by the issues of migration and terrorism, and in the United Kingdom in addition by the highly polarizing and nationalistic issue of Brexit. Contrary to class cleavages, these are identity cleavages based on race and ethnicity, and consequently traditionally

³ The same can be to some extent said for two other left movements in Europe: For France Insoumise under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France and for Momentum and the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain. Both movements achieved a remarkable success for a Western European left party, but still far from the ground-breaking success of the left in the south of Europe and hence also without reaching a majority to form the government, as Marlière and Pribičević analyse in this volume.

exploited by right-wing parties, often in a populist manner (Rodrik 2016). And as the examples of the Labour Party under Corbyn and France Insoumise show, entering these domains means adopting a similar populist technique and sliding into a right-wing rhetoric and into narratives of sovereignty, nation, and even xenophobia, which, as Pribičević demonstrates in this volume, was eventually a game which Corbyn was only destined to lose to the Right. Marlière, on the other hand, shows through an analysis of France Insoumise, how, by using populism as a strategy – strongly advocated for among others by Chantal Mouffe – many principles of the Left are being sacrificed or simply ignored. But, moreover, she explains how the usage of populism and the simplification of complex social issues, as done by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, eventually backfires and does a disservice to the future strengthening of Left ideas and movements throughout Europe. This certainly is overall contrary to a New Left doctrine, which as Patomäki points out, has to be based on international interdependence, common transnational institutions and hence upon the rejection of national borders.

Internationalization, and moreover an international mobilization, is certainly one of the crucial elements for a sustainable success of the Left. After all, history shows that the requirement of internationalization was also present in previous times, and is even more so in the globalized world of today. The lack of such a strong solidarity movement within the European Left and social democracy was, according to Douzinas, the main factor for Syriza, once it had gained political office and gathered a critical mass, failing to translate this into a longer-lasting dominance of the Left. However, at the same time, and based on the experience of Syriza, he urges the Left to give up its ideological puritanism and to resist what Walter Benjamin termed the “Left melancholy”; a militant commitment to a high ideal at the expense of action. The Left should not confine itself to resistance and rebellion, nor is it any longer about reform vs. revolution. When assuming power, the Left has to be both in and against the state, and to take over the responsibility for running a country, disrupt the institutionalized balance of social forces and make pragmatic compromises (Douzinas 2017).

Many examples, from Syriza, through Momentum, to small local (grassroots) movements show that leftist social policies are

possible, because they are needed. And that social freedom has still not reached its limit. The complexity of addressing the variety within the wide and growing voter base of the Left in the conditions imposed by 21st century world politics and economy, and creating cohesion within this, is a challenge for the Left on many fronts. It requires thinking outside the given capitalistic frame, and offering an economic model that goes beyond balance sheets. It requires further a transnational joint action and political solidarity. And finally the hope, in line with Patomäki, that the accumulation of relatively small quantitative changes in specific areas in one part of Europe or the world can lead to ruptures, sudden transformations and substantial qualitative changes in other parts, in this way triggering a reaction that will gradually lead to the formation of a critical mass able to support and implement substantial change.

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