

Conspicuous Absence: Social Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

JEAN-MICHEL DE WAELE

interviewed by Aurélie Windels

For more than three decades, European social democrats have been lost in triangulation. Caught off guard by the “Conservative Revolution” of the early 1980s, they first tried to convince themselves that the social havoc wrought by market deregulations and supply-side incentives would soon eat away at the electoral appeal of the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In time, however, the leaders of socialist, labor and social democratic parties became persuaded that their own Keynesian creed was outdated – that the pursuit of full employment combined with stable jobs, decent salaries, and a solid social safety net was no longer an option in a globalized economy where financial capital flowed freely to what its handlers saw as the most attractive destinations. Thus, ever since, the members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) have been looking, often quite desperately, for some workable compromise between the values they still claim to cherish and the neoliberal policies that they implement as scrupulously as their rivals on the right.

The questions we have asked Jean-Michel De Waele, who has co-edited *European Social Democracy During the Global Economic Crisis: Renovation or Resignation?* and *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*, address the ongoing identity crisis of the center-left: they seek to retrace its history, to examine its present dynamics, and to speculate about its possible outcomes on the European political landscape.

AW: *In the introduction to European Social Democracy During the Global Economic Crisis, you write that European social democratic parties capitulated to neoliberal orthodoxy (deregulation of capital and labor markets, privatization of public goods and services) well before the 2008 financial crisis. When did this surrender occur and how would you explain it?*

JMDW: The ideological surrender of the social democrats dates back to the first years of neoliberal hegemony, in other words, to the “conservative revolution” that brought Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to power. Beginning in the mid-1980s, many social democrats thought that there was some element of truth in the neoliberal critique of the welfare state, and that the left would be well advised to adopt it. The social democrats’ conversion was fully completed in the 1990s, long before the 2008 financial crisis, when “third way” European leaders, like Gerhard Schroeder and above all Tony Blair, came to power. Blair’s vision of “New Labor” purported to be a social democratic response to neoliberalism. But it’s a response that actually integrates most of the ideological assumptions of neoliberalism.

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The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 also contributed to the ideological drift among social democrats. Until then, communist parties had been constantly prodding the social democrats to move to the left, even if their political weight varied from one country to the next and even if regimes practicing State socialism were being increasingly discredited. When the Soviet bloc collapsed, socialist parties no longer had to worry about competition from the left. They believed that the progressive vote was theirs once and for all and they could therefore veer toward the center in order to attract “moderate” voters without losing their traditional support base. I continue to believe that one of the merits of communist parties in Europe, between 1945 and 1989, was to push social democrats towards the left and keep them from becoming an American-style democratic party.

Finally, the European project itself was an important factor in the evolution of the socialists. One must remember that, in the beginning, not all social democratic parties were pro-Europe. There were big debates within the French Socialist Party, but also among Swedish social democrats and others. The creation of the European Union was largely the work of the Christian Democrats and the entrepreneurial elite on the right. Neither Jean Monnet, nor Alcide De Gasperi was a social democrat. And the same can be said of Paul Henri Spaak, despite his official partisan affiliation. Thus, there was a real reticence among important currents within the social democratic parties in relation to this nascent Union, in which they did not recognize themselves. Then, suddenly, socialists almost unanimously converted to the idea of “Europe.” From this moment on, in the name of prioritizing the development of the European Union, they never stopped making compromises. When you have a supranational framework, the power dynamic is much more complicated than it is at the national level. Also, once the representatives of social democrats understood that they could not share power with the right and hold onto their own convictions at the same time, they progressively renounced their identity. To justify their conversion, particularly in their own eyes, they hung on to the idea that the creation of a large European market was a necessary precondition for a “social” Europe. But it was a fool’s bargain, or at least a mistaken calculation, because, while the wider market has now existed for a long time, European social policy remains non-existent.

AW: *According to Joseph Stiglitz, Europe is having a harder time getting over the economic crisis and its consequences than the US because neoliberalism is so deeply ingrained in the European Union, in its political and monetary structures. As a result, the EU finds itself completely helpless in the face of a crisis caused by a neoliberal system that pervades its institutions. Do you agree with this analysis?*

JMDW: Absolutely. And I think that, as a consequence of its allegiance to the *modus operandi* of the EU, the social-democratic software is infected with the neoliberal virus. Many political leaders who claim to belong to the left have carried out neoliberal policies. At the end of the 1990s, Lionel Jospin, who was then France’s Prime Minister, for example, privatized the French economy more than any right-leaning government ever had – or has since.

As long as social democrats don't take stock of what they have become – of the goals and hopes they have abandoned – they cannot move forward. They must reckon with the neoliberal policies they have carried out, and continue to carry out, and they must recognize them for what they are. But this is a debate that the European left will not initiate. Actually, the European left has come to avoid all forms of debate, a truly stunning development. The confrontation of ideas is a culture that has completely disappeared among social democrats.

Another central challenge for the socialist left is clearly to take a position vis-à-vis Europe. A third way needs to be found – though certainly not Blair's third way – between euro-skepticism and the status quo, which involves the joint management of the Union with the conservatives (German Christian Democrats, French Republicans, the Spanish People's Party) that make up the European People's Party. So far, the socialists' attachment to Europe has translated into a lukewarm stance – at once deprived of a clear direction and risk-averse. For a regeneration to happen, they must rediscover that they are the party of reform: reforming society, after all, was the initial *raison d'être* of social democrats. That is the stance that set them apart from the revolutionaries as well as from the conservatives. Today, however, the only reforms that are being talked about are the infamous “structural reforms” demanded by the neoliberals.

AW: *You write that, in light of the electoral losses experienced by social-democratic parties throughout Western Europe after the financial crisis, the chances of a return to Keynesian stimulus programs and fiscal redistribution policies are dim, at least in the near future. But is it really because of disappointing electoral results that the discourse of European social democrats has moved so far to the right? Or is the reverse true – namely that social democrats lost support for the timidity of their opposition to the policies responsible for the financial crisis in 2008, and for the absence of alternative propositions in their programs?*

JMDW: Obviously, election results penalized social democrats that were governing in 2008 because of their responses, or lack thereof, to the crisis. Yet, in the immediate wake of the crisis, most observers believed that the failure of neoliberal policies, insofar as it was recognized as such, gave social democrats a great opportunity to present themselves as the much-awaited alternative. The problem, however, was that they had nothing to propose. Not having tried to develop their own vision for the thirty years preceding the crisis, they simply had nothing to offer, no alternative project. As a result, the collapse of financial markets did not produce a confrontation between the right and the left, quite the contrary. What came out of the chaos, in the various countries of the EU, was a climate of national unity – with the purpose of saving the banks and of preventing small savers from losing everything they owned. Then, once financial institutions were bailed out, it was up to ordinary wage earners and taxpayers to clean up the mess and pave the way for the restoration of the same system that had produced the crisis. Never has the intellectual bankruptcy of the social democrats been so obvious than in the beginning of the “Great Recession.” It became clear that, instead of being the proponents of a political alternative, the social democratic left had become nothing more than an

alternative cast of characters meant to deliver the same policies as their right-wing rivals.

The social democrats' loss of imagination is not limited to economic questions. Socialists have also stopped distinguishing themselves with respect to education policy, despite the fact that education is the main tool in the fight against inequality. They are not particularly concerned with the question of democracy, with the issue of what democracy should look like in the 21st century. The socialists don't even want to seem more hospitable than the right when it comes to immigration policy. In Denmark, for example, which used to be a beacon of progressiveness and an especially open society, the social democrats are now doing all they can to show that they are capable of implementing measures that are as restrictive as those of the conservatives and their far right allies.

AW: *Traditionally, the social democrats were affiliated with powerful trade unions whose members formed their core constituency. While trade unionism has been declining in Europe, which has of course contributed to the problems of the socialist parties, over the years, a number of new social movements have emerged. Have social democratic parties managed, or at least tried, to connect with them?*

JMDW: There is indeed no lack of innovative initiatives stemming from civil society that could help the political left find a second wind – the movements against neoliberal globalization that came to life in the 1990s, the Spanish Indignados and the various Occupy movements in 2011, etc. Unfortunately, however, there is hardly any connection between the proponents of these initiatives and social democratic parties. The latter are either afraid or simply not interested in social movements, unless they think they can poach one of their representatives because he or she is likely to look good on television. To the extent that they pay attention to activists, the social democratic apparatuses are merely interested in turning them into their own rank and file.

AW: *Let's now turn to central and eastern Europe, where the situation of the social democratic left seems to be even grimmer than in western Europe.*

JMDW: In eastern European countries, the question is rather whether social democracy exists at all. In Poland, a large European country, the left no longer has a single representative in parliament. Likewise in Slovakia, even Robert Fico, the Prime Minister, is a member of the Party of European Socialists. Fico, we should remember, is a man who, for many years, made an alliance not with the right but with the extreme right to stay in power. And the situation is hardly any better in Bulgaria and in Rumania, not to mention Hungary. In eastern Europe, the left has completely lost the battle of ideas. Societies are clearly moving to the right. The social democrats are partly responsible for this evolution insofar as their own drift to the right has precipitated the conservative turn of the societies within which they no longer stand for an alternative. In central Europe, however, the main problem lies elsewhere.

With the exception of the Czech Republic, social democracy never managed to take hold in the former Soviet bloc – except in name. The politicians who call themselves social democrats are all former communists who hastily reformed after 1989. The parties to which they belong have been in power for 45 years. After the USSR crumbled, their central committees held meetings in the morning to dissolve the Communist Party and in the afternoon, as if by magic, they had all become social democrats. And today, the same people are still in place. There has been no turnover of political personnel. The leadership of these parties has remained essentially the same since even before 1989; with the exception of a few new additions, they are for the most part the children and friends of the old guard. These political formations operate in a closed circuit, they sustain a post-communist environment, but are completely lacking in what one could call “left culture.” Their sole *raison d’être* is to fill a space: since liberal democracy supposes the existence of an electoral market where a right and a left compete, and since the left side of the political spectrum was otherwise unoccupied, the apparatchiks of the old communist parties decided to make it their own.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, Western social democrats went to see the old leaders of the Stalinist regimes and brought them into the fold. By that time, the line of the Party of European Socialists (PES) was already devoid of daring propositions, so it was not complicated for these new members to adopt the party line. All they had to do was declare that it is important to reduce inequalities, but without getting specific about how to achieve such a goal, and to claim that peace and democracy are at the heart of the European project: anyone can do that, especially seasoned apparatchiks who tend to be quite good at following the party line without asking questions. The elites of the ex-Soviet bloc were thus easily “retooled” and dubbed socialists by their “brothers” in Western Europe. Moreover, being recognized as certified social democrats helped them defend themselves when they were questioned for their past. “How can you doubt our loyalty to democracy” they protested, “when the social democratic leaders of western Europe recognize us as members of their family?”

Obviously, their understanding of social democratic doctrine was often lacking. I remember talking to Adrian Năstase, the former Romanian PM, currently in prison for corruption, while he was in power. He explained to me that he had wanted to pass the flat tax, so that everyone would pay 18% of their income in taxes. Of course, the flat tax is one of the most extreme neoliberal policies imaginable. Even Margaret Thatcher wasn’t able to pass it. When she tried, she faced resistance within her own party. A number of British Tories found it indecent that a millionaire and a blue-collar worker would be taxed at the same rate. However, Adrian Năstase saw the flat tax as a measure promoting equality, and thus in keeping with his idea of social democracy.

Fiscal policy is not the only domain within which ex-communist-social democrats are a bit disoriented. In Poland, after the end of the communist regime, when the first right-leaning government passed an extremely restrictive law with respect to the right to an abortion, the supposedly social democratic opposition did not think it wise to protest. Neither did they try to reform

the law when they came to power a few years later. To justify their inertia, they invoked the influence of the Catholic Church and their own responsibility of keeping the peace; yet, the statistics show that Polish churches were continuously losing members and that the young Polish people led the same lifestyles as other young Europeans. Regardless, however, former communists refrained from fighting for a right that was actually recognized under Communism. Under such conditions, how could one expect a political left to emerge? And how could feminist organizations receive public support when the party that is supposed to care about women's rights ignored their issues?

Finally, we should remember that every time the social democrats have been in power in central Europe, they have striven to disassociate themselves from the "old regime" from which they stem by showing how modern they are; and to demonstrate their "modernity," what they have done is to conduct privatizations at a record rate. None of this contributes to the emergence of a left political culture.

AW: *If the political left exists only in name, are we witnessing the emergence of more authentic alternatives in central and eastern Europe, be they radical parties like Podemos in Spain or Occupy-like movements?*

JMDW: Not really. In these countries the level of politicization is quite weak and electoral participation is catastrophically low. This is understandable. In central Europe, after the fall of the communist regimes, all the parties said the same thing: "Long live Europe!" For years, at least up until they joined the EU, the debate in these countries revolved almost exclusively around who would get them into the EU the fastest. There was practically no discussion about ideas, whether on the right or the left, or about the modalities of the post-communist transition. In order to attract votes, all parties proclaimed the same thing: "Vote for us, we'll get the country into the EU faster than our opponents." The only other debate was about the personal histories of the different political leaders, who mutually accused each other of having a Nazi past or Nazi parents or, more frequently, a Communist past. When political life is reduced to such questions, citizens are not drawn to participate.

As for new political movements or parties to the left of the "socialists," Poland is currently the only country where something of the sort may arise. The party Razem ("together"), that claims a likeness to Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, has made a remarkable entrance into the political landscape in the last few months. Created by left-leaning citizens in May 2015, they were ignored by the media at first, until a televised debate in October featuring the spokespersons of the eight parties competing in the general elections. The debate was held five days before the vote. One of the leaders of Razem, Adrian Zandberg, who represented his party during this debate, was so successful that the party's website was visited by thousands of Polish citizens that same evening. Razem surprised everyone. While the polls gave the party 1.2% during the campaign, in the end it came up with 3.6% of the vote. It is the only such example at the moment. When I go to central Europe, I'm presented with some parties supposedly on the left of the spectrum, but it is shocking to see to what extent there is no habitus of social conflict and struggles in these parties.

In this regard, the socialist party in Bulgaria is an interesting case. It is a party that has a considerable social base and an undeniably rich history. The cultural heritage of the party is apparently maintained through a yearly summer festival. And indeed, the loyalty to the party's roots is undeniable: tens of thousands of people travel to the spot where, in 1891, the socialist party was founded. It's fascinating. On Bulgarian roads you see great-grandmothers, grandmothers, entire families on their way to the festival, in the middle of the mountains. But once you arrive, there is not a single stand, no distribution of political tracts. You can't buy any books and there are no representatives of feminist groups or environmentalists, no foreign delegations. Put simply, there is nothing political about it, other than a neutral speech given by the leader of the party. When the speech is over, the public sings the national anthem. And the day ends with a round of folk dancing.

AW: *Even the ferocity of Viktor Orban, in Hungary, and those who emulate him in Poland, did not have the effect of bringing about opposition movements?*

JMDW: The problem is the lack of an activist tradition: decades of communist rule have almost completely depoliticized these societies. Furthermore, with respect to Hungary, we must stress that the Hungarian socialist party is largely responsible for the situation that brought Viktor Orban to power. The socialists truly pillaged the Hungarian state when they were in government: corruption was endemic among the party leaders and they privatized almost every public company.

In Hungary and Poland, it is Orban and Kaczyński, the arch co-conservative and authoritarian leaders, who appropriate the “social” discourse, not the left. Like Marine Le Pen in France, they claim to pay attention to the fate of ordinary pensioners and small-scale farmers, posing as the protectors of the victims of deregulation and free markets. In other words, they paint themselves as the rampart against the neoliberal policies of their rivals, in particular the former nomenklatura communists who are the social democrats of today – and who are often millionaires, like Gordon Bajnaj, a wealthy investment banker and the last Hungarian Prime Minister from the socialist ranks.

The social democrats of western Europe are also responsible for the absence of a left worthy of the name in central and eastern Europe. When former Warsaw Pact countries entered the EU, the priority of the Party of European Socialists (PES) was to find powerful, well-organized allies in order to balance the influence of their partner and rival, the conservative European Popular Party, in European institutions and especially the European Parliament. Thus, for reasons of expediency, they chose former Communists hastily converted to social democracy over budding movements and parties that, while fledgling, actually belonged to the left.

In Poland, for example, there was a collective called *Solidarność i Praca* (“Labour Solidarity”), which became *Unia Pracy* (“Labour Union”), a political movement composed of left-leaning trade unionists. In light of their agenda and experience, they probably would have been capable of introducing the

social and democratic issues that are currently absent from the public debate. And contrary to the old *apparatchiks*, the members of Unia Pracy could not be accused of having been involved with the Communist regime. However, because they were still young and small as an organization, western social democrats did not provide them with any aid: instead of a principled long-term investment, they opted for whitewashing the old *nomenklatura*, on the grounds that they were already fully operational.

AW: *What happened to these movements?*

JMDW: Without external support, they were never able to impose themselves as an independent force on the left. The German social democrats, through their powerful foundations, are especially responsible for letting these small organizations wither away. After 1989, the two main German foundations, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, associated with the SPD, and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, associated with the CDU, invested massively, financially and materially, in the political space left vacant by the fall of the communist regimes. They used their influence and considerable financial resources to redraw the political landscape of central and eastern European countries according to a German blueprint. In this process, and to the detriment of the smaller albeit more promising collectives, former communists were chosen to play the part of the social democrats. That hollow and largely corrupt characters got to represent the “left” goes a long way toward explaining why it is the extreme right that is best able to exploit the public’s hostility to neoliberal reforms.

AW: *While some allegedly social democratic parties are in fact the most impudent exponents of neoliberal “modernization,” isn’t it the case that others tend to flirt with a pretty crude form of nationalism – such as Robert Fico’s party in Slovakia?*

JMDW: Yes; Robert Fico’s SMER-SD is socialist only in name. He may be a member of the PES, but it is only because the social democrats, at the European level, are willing to anoint almost any party that does not adhere to the EPP in order to enhance their position in the competition with the conservatives. And when their unsavory partners slip up, even when they indulge in racist or xenophobic outbursts, the socialists simply look the other way.

Such an attitude, within the social democratic club, extends beyond the confines of Europe. After all, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the former Tunisian President, as well as his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, were both members of the Socialist International. So, why should Robert Fico stand out? Of course, his openly racist policies vis-à-vis the Roma are embarrassing – but not embarrassing enough to treat him more harshly than the EPP treats Viktor Orban. Besides, I’m not sure that the position of Manuel Valls, the French and socialist Prime Minister who has explained that going back to Romania and Bulgaria is the Roma’s calling, is so far apart from Fico’s.

AW: *How do you explain that central and eastern European countries, especially the Baltic states, all adopted such harsh positions vis-à-vis Greece during the discussions about restructuring of the Greek debt?*

JMDW: Indeed they were incredibly harsh. At the same time, the arguments that the leaders of eastern and central Europe used to justify their hard-line positions were well received domestically. First we need to remember that these countries are for the most part poorer than Greece which has a GNP per capita of \$22,000, compared to \$18,000 for Slovakia, \$15,000 for Latvia, less than \$14,000 for Poland and Hungary, \$7,500 for Bulgaria, etc. As a result, large sections of the population in these countries were not inclined to let the Greek government evade its obligations when they themselves had suffered through especially drastic austerity programs. In Latvia, for example, salaries were reduced by 40% after the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, they largely bought the narrative according to which Greek authorities were to blame for the state of their country's public finances.

In a deeper sense, the people of eastern Europe believe that they have pulled themselves out of communism by their own bootstraps, and that western Europe never showed much solidarity with them when they were subjected to the Soviet rule. Moreover they believe that when they were finally invited to join the EU, member-states including Greece, imposed extremely tough conditions on them, and did so particularly for the sake of protecting western European farmers. Finally, since they have become members of the EU, they feel that the dominant countries of the Union have exploited their economic weaknesses: German, French, and Italian firms all take advantage of their qualified yet underpaid workforce. In short, resentment is powerful and widespread. And Greece paid for it.

AW: *Despite the dark picture you have painted, do you believe there is still hope for social democracy in Europe? Will the social democratic ideology be reborn? And if so, how?*

JMDW: As far as I'm concerned, it's impossible to be on the left and not be optimistic. It's one of the fundamental differences between the left and the right. The left is optimistic about human nature, whereas the right does not trust it. I believe that the left never dies, even when it is doing very badly. Also, crises can be salutary. That said, the renewal of the left is only possible under certain conditions: Firstly, political parties must relearn to open up and to move beyond their own partisan structure. They need to seek rejuvenation by exposing themselves to social movements, intellectuals, and artists. Secondly, the momentum must be European, but at the same time attentive to differences forged by history and geography. The relationship to Russia will never be the same for Spain and for Poland. Similarly, the relationship to Africa will never be the same for Poland and for Spain. Thirdly, the left must renew its repertoire of ideas in order to be able to once again mobilize the public and at the same time, rediscover a taste for "the struggle," that is, the courage to accept conflict.

While social democracy may not be the driving element of this renewal, will it at least be capable of contributing to it? It is hard to say. For this to be possible, social democrats must examine their track record and reckon with what they have become and the compromises and the mistakes they have made. However, I don't think they will find the courage to be lucid until they experience even more catastrophic defeats in the polls – especially if it is the radical left that takes advantage of their losses.

AW: *Does your optimism, while measured and conditional, also apply to eastern Europe?*

JMDW: The advantage of central and eastern Europe is that they are starting from scratch, so to speak. They can create a European left of the 21st century without having to examine past failures, because up until now there was no left to speak of.

Now, if a progressive movement were to appear in central Europe, would their western European counterparts pay attention? Unfortunately, there is good reason to doubt it.

Translated by Lucie Kroening

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