

The End of the European Left?

Social Democracy, Hope, Disillusion, and Europe

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The position adopted by left parties towards the European Union continues to raise important questions for both those parties and for the EU itself. What are left parties seeking to achieve in their support, rejection or proposed reforms of the European Union? What is it about the European Union that makes it so amenable, or hostile (depending on your viewpoint), to a left agenda? How, if at all, can the left parties relate to the European Union without receding to nationalism in their opposition, or to naiveté in their support and proposed reforms? And these are questions that have been repeatedly asked throughout much of the history of European integration. Indeed, European integration was for a long time considered by many socialist parties – including more moderate social democratic parties – to be problematic due to its status as a “capitalist club.” At some point between the 1970s and 1990s, however, socialist or social democratic parties came to almost universally accept that the European integration was a progressive project, or at least had the potential to become one. Today, the same could be said for radical left parties as well, with only a handful retaining a position of outright hostility to the European Union.¹ Almost all European left parties now seem to accept that membership in the EU is something to be embraced or accepted, and certainly not something to be overcome.

With the ascendance of neoliberalism across Europe from the 1980s onwards, the European Union came to be viewed – especially by social democratic parties – as an institutional antidote to globalization and the threat that it, along with the ever-present possibility of “capital flight,” posed to progressive public policy. Yet, we might consider this turn to the EU to be somewhat surprising. At the same time as European integration came to be viewed by left parties as a means to challenge the unfettered market, the EU (or EC, prior to 1993) was also responsible for the creation of a single European market that would *further* threaten a number of the achievements reached by the European labour movement in the more favourable pre-1980 period (Scharpf 2010). The promise of Social Europe had been the carrot used by European officials and their supporters to encourage left party support for a (to-be-reformed) European Union since the late 1980s. Yet, throughout the 1990s, and during the first decade of the twenty first century, Social Europe began to appear as an increasingly distant and unrealisable dream.

It is within this longer term context, and in both directions, therefore, that we should evaluate the effect of the interaction between left parties and the European Union. The lessons that can be learned from social democratic parties’ self-declared and long-running ambitions and attempts to reform the EU can help us consider how people on the left should relate to the institutions of the European Union today.

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1. In a recent survey, only the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), and Greek Communist Party (KKE) remained the outright opponents of the European Union (see Bailey forthcoming (a) for a discussion). However, with the recent governing coalition put together by the parties of the Portuguese left, it remains to be seen whether the PCP will continue in its outright opposition to Europe. At least, upon entering office, the left Government – which relies upon the parliamentary support of the PCP – declared that it would “abide by its European responsibilities and honour all its commitments” (quoted in Hanes 2015).

THE LEFT AND EUROPE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC EMBRACE OF SOCIAL EUROPE

Socialist and social democratic parties started out their relationship with the European project in a cautious mode. Whilst most parties avoided outright hostility, there can be no doubt that the degree of enthusiasm witnessed by social democratic parties towards the EU today was not matched at earlier points in the history of the European project. In the UK, for instance, the Labour Party opposed the early steps taken towards integration, including the Schuman Plan, the European Defence Community and the European Political Community. Labour Party leader, Hugh Gaitskell famously declared in 1962 that membership in the European Community would mean “the end of a thousand years of history” (Labour Party, 1962). During the 1970s, most of the Labour Party leadership supported EC membership, but this was in a context in which most of its membership opposed it (Bailey 2009a: 95–96). Similarly, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), under the leadership of Kurt Schumacher during the immediate post-war period, was sceptical of the initial steps towards European integration. The German SPD opposed the Council of Europe and criticized the Schuman Plan and the European Coal and Steel Community, which it viewed as too narrow in scope and therefore as an impediment to socialism (Moeller, 1996: 35). In France, the socialist party (SFIO) took an ambivalent position towards the early stages of European integration. Despite formal support of the initiative (indeed, socialist Prime Minister Guy Mollet was central to the negotiation of the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Community), “there remained a feeling of unease at being affiliated with a liberal, capitalist association of nations” (Cole 1996: 72). Similarly, during the 1970s, the alliance between the French *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and the Eurosceptic French Communist Party (PCF) required the continuation of this ambivalent stance towards the European project, witnessing “the flowering of a particular type of political rhetoric in certain sections of the party that confused socialism and national independence in a manner inimical to the EC” (Cole 1996: 72). In Sweden, social democratic opposition to membership in the EC remained in place up until the country’s application to join the Community in 1990. And ahead of the 1995 referendum on its membership, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) saw two formal “yes” and “no” organisations divide the party; the “no” camp viewed EC membership as a threat to the Swedish welfare model (Bieler 2000: 112).

Despite their initial hesitancy towards the project of European integration, however, social democratic parties moved to adopt a much more pro-European position throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Bailey 2009a: ch.4). As neoliberal globalization was increasingly perceived, by social democrats and the leaders of social democratic parties, to have imposed substantial constraints on the viability of social democratic programmes at the level of the nation-state, commentators began to observe that “majorities in one [social democratic] party after another have come to perceive European integration as a means for projecting social democratic goals in a liberalizing world economy” (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002: 975). In the UK, trade unions and the left parties came to view

European integration as a means through which to challenge Thatcher and Thatcherism following the transformation of British industrial relations during the 1980s. This was especially the case following the initiative taken by European Commission President Jacques Delors in addressing the national Trades Union Congress in 1988 (George and Rosamond 1992). Following President Mitterrand's infamous policy U-turn in 1983,² the French PS openly sought to promote a stronger European social model and create a more substantive European "economic government" (Dyson and Featherstone 1992: ch.2; Clift 2006). In Spain, the Spanish socialist party (PSOE) was widely considered to be the most pro-European party during the 1990s, despite many within the party having "negative concerns about the capitalist and imperialist forces promoting European integration" during the earlier post-Franco transition period (Ruiz Jiménez and de Haro 2011). There was, therefore, a general trend within the social democratic parties across the European Union: from an initial caution towards European integration, to an eventual embrace. By 2002 the observation was increasingly made that "Social Democratic Parties have shifted in favour of European integration during the past 15 years" (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002: 975).

In explaining the social democratic embrace of European integration, we need also to pay attention to social democratic parties' somewhat contradictory pursuit of "Social Europe." This was the name given by many on the left to the series of reforms that would need to be made to the European Union in order to ensure that it was an institution favouring equality, redistribution and social cohesion. As I have argued elsewhere, the goal of Social Europe was part of a broader transition from "traditional" to "new" or "Third Way" social democracy (Bailey 2009a). Thus, during roughly the same time that the transition away from Euroscepticism or Euro-ambivalence was occurring, social democratic parties were also abandoning their earlier policy and ideological priorities, including the promotion of organised labour, the welfare state, Keynesian demand management, and interventionist industrial policy. Under Third Way social democracy, therefore, there would be a greater role for the private sector, greater conditionality placed upon social security, and a de-prioritisation of the interests of organised labour (Arndt 2013: 44). It was the declared pursuit of "Social Europe," however, which enabled social democratic parties and party elites to maintain and tie together several contradictory positions, each of which contributed to the ongoing attempt to sustain social democratic parties even though they were suffering from a growing number of fundamental problems. In particular, the declared pursuit of Social Europe enabled Third Way social democrats to achieve a number of potentially contradictory outcomes. First, they could highlight (their acceptance of) the necessity of a move away from the "traditional" goals of social democracy (which were increasingly perceived as either programmatically impracticable or electorally unappealing), on the grounds that "globalisation" had rendered those longer-standing ambitions unachievable. Second, they could simultaneously appeal to their traditional supporters (and especially those supporters who might question the benefits of continued support for a party that had abandoned those earlier ambitions)

2. In 1981 France elected PS President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, both on a socialist programme of welfare expansion, nationalization and industrial democracy (Bell and Criddle 1988). This was wholeheartedly implemented between 1981 and 1983, seeing 50 major firms nationalised, the minimum wage increase by 15 percent, and social transfers increase by over 12 percent (Levy 2000: 321–2). The rapid increase in real wages that resulted, however, prompted a rise in imports and a serious balance of payments and currency crisis that was eventually resolved by a policy U-turn which took place in 1983, and which reversed a large number of the reforms introduced in the previous two years (Bailey 2009a, 71–3).

by declaring that some of the key traditional social democratic goals *could* be achieved at some point in the unspecified future, and outside the frameworks of the nation-state, through a coordinated process of supranational cooperation with other European social democratic parties and party actors within the European Union. Third, the declared pursuit of Social Europe could be made safe in the knowledge that EU-level institutional constraints would inhibit the development of more substantively redistributive policies, thereby ensuring both that the operation of the single European market would be free from political (or politicised) intervention (and therefore contribute towards the necessary intensification of European capitalism), and also provide an *institutional* target to be blamed for the subsequent non-realisation of the declared goals of Social Europe. In this sense, therefore, the goal of Social Europe represented an empty, yet important (precisely because it was empty), ambition that acted to sustain European social democracy by covering over its inherent contradictions.

It is this potential – for Third Way support for Social Europe to bring together these potentially contradictory outcomes – that explains the coincidence of both the transition to a Third Way position, and the embrace of Social Europe, both of which occurred at the same time in most countries across much of western Europe (Bailey 1999a: ch.4). Thus, In the UK, the Labour Party transition towards support for European integration took place during the 1980s. It followed the defeat of the party in the general election of 1983, and emerged as part of a broader effort for “modernisation” of that party that was overseen by the party leader, Neil Kinnock, and constituted the groundwork for the subsequent move towards Third Way politics. The effort saw the party move from a general election commitment to seek an exit from the EC in 1983, to the claim in 1989 that “1992³ and the Single Market create great opportunities and great challenges for Britain” (Labour Party 1989: 79; for a more detailed discussion, see Bailey, 2009a: 98–106). In Sweden the social democratic government announced in 1990 that it intended to apply for EC membership. The announcement was part of a wider set of measures which marked the move towards a Third Way position, and included the replacement of full employment by low inflation as the party’s top priority, as well as a series of austerity measures (Bailey 2009a: 107; Ryner 2004). In France, the move by President Mitterrand to seek a more substantive European economic government, was part of the 1983 U-turn away from the socialist programme that had been in effect since 1981 (Bailey 2009a: 113). Similarly, in Spain the revision of PSOE ideology during the 1980s was integrally linked to the Spanish accession to the European Community: “the relevance of the workerist/Marxist rhetoric that the PSOE had championed since its days of clandestinity no longer conformed with the party leadership’s new perception of European economic realities” (Marks, 1997: 96). As Holman put it, “each part of the government’s domestic, social, and economic policy was presented and legitimized by reference to the necessity of adjusting Spanish socio-economic and political structures in the light of future membership of the EEC” (Holman, 1996: 80; quoted in Bailey 2009a: 123).

3. “1992” was the term used at the time to refer to the goals of the Single European Act.

THE UNRAVELLING OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY'S EMPTY (AND ONGOING) PROMISE OF SOCIAL EUROPE

The move by European social democratic parties to adopt a Third Way position in the 1990s was inextricably bound up with the move towards the embrace of Social Europe; the latter acted in part to conceal and obfuscate the long-term failure and increasingly unrealisable nature of the social democratic project, and therefore (in part) provided a source of legitimation for Third Way social democracy. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, most social democratic parties had converted, with some variance, to the Third Way. However, as subsequent developments made the tensions created by their conversion more visible, the Third Way “solution” to the ongoing decline of social democratic parties proved increasingly untenable.

The social democratic adoption of a Third Way agenda initially resulted in electoral success – with the much remarked upon high point of 1999, when 13 out of 15 EU member states were either governed by social democratic parties or by a coalition that included them. The electoral record of the 2000s, however, was much less successful. Indeed, Christoph Arndt has clearly illustrated that the major electoral consequence of the Third Way turn was a sharp decline in the level of support amongst social democratic parties’ core working class voters. This decline contributed to electoral defeats during the first decade of the 2000s in Germany, Sweden, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, and France, and in 2010 in the UK, and in 2011 in Spain and Portugal. Perhaps more fundamentally, as table 1 demonstrates, the average vote share achieved by social democratic parties fell in a large number in European countries. The table tracks the change in vote share in 11 European countries, and compares the last election before (or during) 2000, with the first election after (or on) 2010. It therefore compares the vote of social democratic parties as they exited in the first decade of the 2000s, with their share upon entering in the next decade. With the exception of France and Italy, in every country in the sample there is a decline in the share of votes. Yet, the comparison in the Italian case is complicated by the fact that the Democratic Party was formed during that decade by joining together both the Social Democratic party (DS, which had itself emerged out of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) following the end of the Cold War), and other Christian democratic parties. Thus, during the first decade of the 2000s, among all of the social democratic parties compared, only the French PS can really be said to have improved its vote share. This has been convincingly shown to have occurred as a result of both a rise in abstentions amongst social democratic parties’ core working class voters, and by those voters switching to either parties of the radical left or far right (Arndt 2013; Karreth et al., 2012). The prevailing explanation for these trends is that the move towards a Third Way position had only short-term benefit for social democratic parties. Whilst it allowed the parties to appeal to centrist voters in the short-term, in the longer term it weakened their ideological “brand,” creating a net effect that was largely detrimental to their electoral support. As Karreth et al. have put it, “gains these parties derived from the policy shift toward the middle in the 1990s were short-lived and came at the expense of electoral success in the subsequent decade, mottling the ideological coherence of the parties as political organizations in the process” (2013: 792).

PARTY	% VOTER SHARE (PRE-2000)	% VOTER SHARE (POST-2010)	% CHANGE
Austria (SPÖ)	33.2% (1999)	26.8% (2013)	-6.4
Denmark (SD)	36.0% (1998)	24.9% (2011)	-11.1
Finland (SDP)	22.9% (1999)	19.1% (2011)	-3.8
France (PS)	23.5% (1997)	29.4% (2012)	5.9
Germany (SPD)	40.9% (1998)	25.7% (2013)	-15.2
Greece (PASOK)	43.8% (2000)	13.2% (2012)	-30.6
Hungary (MSZP)	32.9% (1998)	19.3% (2010)	-13.6
Italy (DS/DP)	21.1% (1996)	25.4% (2013)	4.3
Netherlands (PvdA)	29.0% (1998)	19.6% (2010)	-9.4
Poland (SLD)	27.1% (1997)	8.2% (2011)	-18.9
Portugal (PS)	44.1% (1999)	28.1% (2011)	-16.0
Spain (PSOE)	34.2% (2000)	28.8% (2011)	-5.4
Sweden (SAP)	36.6% (1998)	30.7% (2010)	-5.9
UK (Labour Party)	43.2% (1997)	29.0% (2010)	-14.2
AVERAGE	33.46%	23.44%	-10.02%

Table 1: Change in social democratic party vote share during the 2000s

As part of this disappointing record, the 2000s also saw the institutional obstacles to Social Europe become increasingly evident. It became more and more difficult for social democrats to claim that the European Union represented an opportunity for progressive policymaking. Yet, the decade had begun with social democratic parties in a position of strength across the institutions of the European Union, and with ambitions correspondingly high. Many placed their hope in the EU's Lisbon Strategy, which was adopted in 2000 in order to modernise the European economy and promote Social Europe, in part through the pursuit of "sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." This included the commitment to coordinate social inclusion and social protection policies of the member states. By 2005, however, the process was largely considered to have failed, and a heavily critical review – the Kok Report – saw the Lisbon Strategy "streamlined" so that social cohesion was deprioritised and more emphasis was placed on the market-building elements of the European socio-economic regime. The subsequent "no" votes in referendums on the EU Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands were widely viewed, in part, as rejections of the neoliberal, pro-market tendencies of the European Union, with the debate ahead of the vote prompting a significant and lasting division within the French *Parti Socialiste* (Bouillaud: 166–67; Crespy 2008; Bailey 2008).⁴

The onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 was a significant moment in terms of the development of European social democracy. The crisis was widely perceived to have been a result of the excesses of neoliberal globalisation. Under-regulated and over-liberalised housing, financial and trade markets had resulted in the formation of speculative bubbles and economic imbalances that put an end to the idea that unfettered markets would produce equilibrium,

4. Between 2001 and 2004 the European Union sought a European Constitutional Treaty that was supposed to increase the democracy, transparency and efficiency of the European Union. In 2005, however, the ratification of the Treaty had to be abandoned after experiencing "no" votes in national referendums in both France and the Netherlands.

economic efficiency, and growth. In the wake of the crisis there emerged a consensus, especially amongst those on the centre left, that the global economy required re-regulation (Giles et al., 2008). This consensus represented a perfect opportunity for social democratic parties to reformulate a more interventionist, regulatory and redistributive agenda and offer an alternative to the Third Way and its tacit acceptance of many of the economic orthodoxies of the neoliberal right. It offered a chance for a renewed commitment to the merits of the European Union and the opportunities that it posed for transnational market regulation. As a result, the consensus could be the catalyst of the political, policy, and regulatory infrastructure that would eliminate the possibility of another large-scale crisis. This apparent opportunity for European social democracy, however, resulted in yet more disappointments. The electoral fortunes of the centre-left did not fare well as a result of the crisis. Social democratic parties found themselves with little to offer the electorate. Their claims to represent an alternative to neoliberalism rang hollow, not least because they had acquiesced (sometimes willingly) to most of its core tenets over the past two decades. Likewise, social democratic parties were hardly convincing when they presented themselves as the voice of economic “responsibility,” since, prior to the financial crisis, they had largely endorsed the economic doctrine that was widely accused of having caused the crash. The key point of this realisation was the 2009 European Parliament elections where, despite expectation of strong social democratic results, the centre-right prevailed.

Following the onset of the global economic crisis, the social democratic parties also fared poorly at the national level. Most parties failed to substantially change their party programmes. Indeed, in a recent overview covering a range of social democratic parties across the European Union, it became clear that, “the prospect of a reintroduction of Keynesian-style reflation, or traditional measures for redistribution, is unlikely in the foreseeable future.” (Bailey et al., 2014: 6) In most cases, the post-crisis period did not bring about any substantial revision of the social democratic party programmes. For instance, as Philippe Marlière (2014) shows, in the case of the UK (prior to Corbyn’s election as the party leader) the Labour Party continually stuck to the premise that “there is no alternative” (TINA) to austerity measures, and the (soon-to-be-outgoing) Labour Government announced in 2010 that its public spending cuts would be “deeper and tougher” than under Thatcher (Marlière 2014: 106). Similarly, under Ed Miliband’s leadership between 2010 and 2015, Labour continued to accept the TINA doctrine – that there is no alternative to austerity (albeit “austerity-light,” at least in comparison with that of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government). The Labour Party stuck to the conviction that industrial action should be avoided or discouraged, and that the focus of macroeconomic policies should be providing support for business (Marlière 2014). This program resulted in a more resounding general election defeat in 2015 than had been widely expected.

For those social democratic parties out of office during the crisis, there was greater opportunity to adopt a more explicitly “traditional” social democratic programme and offer it as an alternative to austerity and fiscal orthodoxy.

However, in many cases this opportunity was short-lived. In Sweden the social democratic party oscillated between left and right positions before settling on the more “sensible” right option in pursuit of its election to office (Andersson 2014). In France, the PS under Hollande performed another U-turn towards more orthodox policies once it entered office (Bouillaud 2014). In both of these cases, moreover, the ideological movements witnessed were not received well. In Sweden, the social democrats managed to form a minority coalition government in 2014 despite receiving a historically low share of the vote at only 31% (up only 0.3% on its worst post-war performance in the 2010 elections). The coalition government nearly collapsed only months after it was formed in December 2014, and polls have indicated that it has suffered a further decline in support during 2015.⁵ Likewise, Hollande’s approval ratings slumped throughout much of 2014 and 2015. He only recovered at the end of the year, in a context of perceived national crisis following the November 13th attacks – a situation where national leaders usually see their popularity rise. It was under these exceptional circumstances, that Hollande infamously announced his support for the far-right’s “*déchéance de nationalité*” (plans to strip convicted terrorists of their French nationality), despite strong criticism from the party’s left wing (Vinocur 2016; see also the discussion in Chabal 2016).

Social democratic parties did not, therefore, benefit electorally from the global economic crisis. Indeed, if we compare the pre-crisis period with that which followed, we witness a fall in electoral support for social democratic parties in most member states (Bailey et al., 2014: 7). Social democratic parties that were in office when the crisis hit suffered particularly badly. For instance, the Spanish socialists (PSOE), in office from 2004–2011, oversaw the implementation of what it claimed were “necessary” austerity measures, which they couched in an unclear ideological message. The outcome, in the general elections of 2011, was the party’s worst performance since the end of the Franco regime (Kennedy 2014). Since then, the PSOE’s popularity has declined even further and reached a new low of 22% of the vote in 2015, equivalent to half of what it had been in 2008. More infamous is the case of the Greek social democratic party, PASOK. With the exception of an interim technocratic government in 2012, PASOK was in power as the governing party or as a member of coalition from 2009 to 2015. Following the party’s implementation of a series of austerity packages at the insistence of the so-called “Troika,” the party experienced a near-total collapse. In a process that is paradigmatically referred to as “PASOK-ification,” and is widely feared by social democratic parties across Europe, the percentages of the parties vote plummeted from 43.9% in 2009 to just 4.7% in the January 2015 elections (Sotiropoulos 2014).

In addition to their failure to capitalise on the post-crisis context in the polls, social democratic parties have also failed to steer the European Union towards the realization of their declared ambitions for a Social Europe. Thus, policies adopted by the European Union in response to the crisis have arguably consolidated the inequalities and pro-market agenda witnessed ahead of the crisis. This trend has been most evident in the case of strict constitutional requirements that have institutionalised the pro-cyclical macroeconomic policies associated

5. See the recent SKOP poll, December 2015: <http://www.electograph.com/2015/12/sweden-december-2015-skop-poll.html>

with tight fiscal discipline. This is in stark contrast to the ambitions of transnational social democratic actors in the initial post-crisis context of 2008–09. For example, right after the emergence of the crisis, the Party of European Socialists declared that “[t]his crisis is the great defeat of neo-liberal capitalism” and advocated a social democratic alternative that would consist of “energetic and coordinated action from the EU and its Member States” (quoted in Bailey 2014: 239). Yet the reality has been somewhat different. In creating the European Stability Mechanism as the main means to support the struggling member states, and in binding the support to abide with the Treaty on Stability, Cooperation and Governance (or the Fiscal Compact as it is more commonly known), the European Union initiated a highly orthodox, pro-cyclical fiscal regime that would punish those member states that sought to respond to low growth through the adoption of deficit-spending or other fiscal strategies for reflating national economies (Closa 2015). Likewise, attempts to implement or agree to more progressive policies at the EU-level were largely unsuccessful. For instance, each of the three most high-profile attempts to implement progressive social policies – reform of the Working Time Directive, the adoption of the “Pregnant Workers’ Directive,” and the “fourth anti-discrimination directive” – foundered in the face of opposition from key veto actors (see Bailey forthcoming (b) for a more detailed discussion).

THE SYRIZA EXPERIMENT: TESTING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

It is within this context that we should understand the Syriza experiment for the left. Syriza represented an attempt by electoral left actors to test the degree to which the European Union could be challenged and directed towards a more progressive agenda. To what extent would the institutions of the European Union be prepared to override the clearly expressed democratic preferences of the electorate of one of its member states? Syriza wagered that the potential for a legitimization crisis that would be prompted by the clear and visible confirmation of the EU’s so-called “democratic deficit” would surely be enough to secure a compromise or concessions from Europe’s political elite. As Yanis Varoufakis, the Greek Minister of Finance at the time of the negotiations puts it, “Our five month long negotiation was a contest between the right of creditors to govern a debtor nation and the democratic right of that nation’s citizens to be self-governed.” (Varoufakis 2015) The result of the Syriza experiment was damning for those on the left who continued to express the hope that the European Union could be made progressive. The elected Syriza government was forced to capitulate on its electoral mandate, and on the subsequent reinforcement of that mandate in the July referendum. The capitulation imposed on the Greek government represented a direct attempt by the core powers of the European Union – the ECB, the Commission, the government of Germany, and the creditors within the European Union – to exert their authority over, and to deny the possibility for, a democratic alternative to their expressed will. To quote Varoufakis again:

It is not true that our creditors are interested in getting their money back from the Greek state. Or that they want to see Greece reformed... They cared

uniquely about one thing: To confirm Dr Schäuble's dictum that elections cannot be allowed to change anything in Europe. That democracy ends where insolvency begins. That proud nations facing debt issues must be condemned to a debt prison within which it is impossible to produce the wealth necessary to repay their debts and get out of jail. And so it is that Europe is turning from our common home to our shared iron cage...this episode will go down in European history as the moment when official Europe declared war on European democracy. Greece capitulated but it is Europe that was defeated. (Varoufakis 2015)

If we accept, therefore, that the manifesto and election of the Syriza government, and the subsequent July referendum were each part of an experiment to test the degree to which democracy could defeat the commitment of the European Union to economic orthodoxy, then how should we interpret the results of that experiment? And, in particular, what do those results imply for social democratic and socialist governments with regard to their now longstanding support for, and pursuit of, Social Europe?

WHAT NEXT? ONWARDS TO A SOCIAL EUROPE (AGAIN)

The central question facing social democratic (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, radical left) parties following the Syriza debacle, must surely be that of how to approach the European Union. Three options appear to present themselves: a continuation, or relaunch, of the search for Social Europe (again); a rejection of the European Union on the grounds that it is an inherently neoliberal institution beyond reform; or indifference towards the question of European integration, with the recognition that the real struggle lies elsewhere. The social democratic centre-left will almost certainly adopt the first option – the search for Social Europe (again) – despite the fact that (or, more accurately, because) the EU is an un-reformable neoliberal institution. The progressive significance that contemporary centre-left actors have attached to European integration, despite all evidence to the contrary, ensures that there is really little choice left for the centre-left other than to continue to proclaim its support for a progressive Social Europe. As in earlier times, this position affords the centre-left to continue attempting to build a progressive constituency – and thereby establishing one of their “conditions of existence” – in a form which obfuscates the core problem which social democratic parties face in the present. The problem is the following: the global economic context is such that it has become increasingly difficult for centre-left parties to identify feasible and practicable ways in which to ameliorate the inequalities that constitute contemporary capitalism (McKee2016). As such, *any* attempt to propose policies that might ameliorate those inequalities are also *de facto* assaults upon the reproduction of capitalism, necessitating the transcendence and replacement of capitalism if they are really to be implemented. Yet this transcendence would require a degree of militant popular mobilisation which social democratic parties, and especially their party leaders, are loathe to advocate (not least because its occurrence would pose significant challenges to the role and position of those leaders themselves) (Bailey 2009b). Support for the European Union, and especially the pursuit of

Social Europe, therefore, continues to enable centre-left parties to adopt a progressive stance even when the implementation of the content of what is being advocated is largely unachievable. The centre-left will make further declarations about the need for institutional and policy reform of the European Union in order to overcome the institutional obstacles that are claimed to obstruct more progressive outcomes from being realised. The institutional obstacles will offer a convenient target for blame (highlighting *further* need for reform) yet again when they prove too resilient to reform and continue to prevent Social Europe from coming into effect.

The position recently adopted by Jeremy Corbyn on the question of Europe illustrates this point well. Despite his election being widely interpreted as a radical departure from Third Way social democracy, Corbyn's position on European integration shows remarkable continuity with that of earlier Third Way discourse on Europe. As Isabelle Hertner (2015) points out, "despite being Labour's most Eurosceptical leader in decades, Corbyn decided to back the 'in' campaign for Britain to remain within the European Union." As she shows, this was a decision presented almost entirely through a discourse that emphasised both the Social Europe elements of the EU and, perhaps more importantly, the need for EU reform in order to create a more fully Social Europe. Thus, Corbyn states, "Labour has campaigned to make sure our place in Europe has led to better protection and rights in the workplace, and we will continue to fight for jobs and security for all the British people" (quoted in Hertner 2015). In setting out his proposals for a reformed EU in more detail in an essay he published in the *Financial Times*, Corbyn performed each of the standard tropes of earlier (Third Way) social democrats. That is, first, to announce that the EU needs reform: "Labour is clear that we should remain in the EU. But we too want to see reform." Second, to establish that the EU makes it possible to achieve progressive public policy that would otherwise be unachievable through unilateral action by a single member state: "Europe is the only forum in which we can address key challenges for our country, like climate change, terrorism, tax havens and, most recently, the mass movement of refugees from the violence in Syria seeking sanctuary and hope in Europe." Third, to make it clear that this agenda can be achieved through cooperation with other social democratic party actors at the EU-level: "We will make the case through Labour MEPs in the European Parliament, *and our relationships with sister social democratic parties*, trade unions and other social movements across Europe" (emphasis added). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to make it clear that this recipe of actions will result in a progressive outcome that confirms the progressive credentials of the social democratic party in question: "If Mr Cameron fails to deliver a good package or one that reduces the social gains we have previously won in Europe, he needs to understand that Labour will renegotiate to restore our rights and promote a socially progressive Europe." (Corbyn 2015)

We can compare this statement by Corbyn with some of the classic Third Way texts from the late 1990s – each of which repeat almost exactly the same sequence of social democratic tropes on the European Union. That is, first, to announce that the EU needs reform: "it is precisely because we both need

Europe, and Europe needs reform and change, that Britain's participation in Europe is so essential" (Blair, 2001). Second, to establish that the EU makes it possible to achieve progressive public policy that would otherwise be unachievable through unilateral action by a single member state:

In the modern world it is only through Britain's committed participation in the European Union that we can regain true sovereignty – in other words, the political ability to tackle problems in the public interest – over many issues which have slipped beyond the nation-state's individual reach, whether the question be global warming, the prevention of future wars in Europe, or international economic cooperation to provide the conditions of stability necessary to boost economic growth in Europe and restore full employment. (Mandelson and Liddle 1996: 27–8)

Third, to make it clear that this agenda can be achieved through cooperation with other social democratic party actors at the EU-level: "Part of the answer, as many suggest, should be to couple greater power for the European Parliament (EP) to more effective transnational party organization." (Giddens 1998: 143) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to advance that this recipe of actions will result in a progressive outcome that confirms the progressive credentials of the social democratic party in question: "we will sign the [EU] Social Chapter because it is right for our country and gives people fairness as well" (Blair 1994). The degree of overlap between Corbyn and Blair on the issue of Europe is clearly quite remarkable, not least because they are so often depicted as being at ideological polar opposites (at least within the broad field of social democratic politics). Nevertheless, they both adopt an almost identical position on the need to pursue Social Europe (again).

RESPONDING TO THE LACK OF SOCIAL EUROPE

The relationship between the left and the European Union continues to demand our attention. Opposition to the European Union has come to be associated with nationalism; whilst the embrace of European integration, or at least the promise for internationalism, multinationalism, cosmopolitanism, and/or transnational solidarity that it contains, is considered axiomatic by most progressives, despite the consistently un-progressive nature of actual European policy output. How, then, should leftists approach an apparently un-reformable neoliberal institution such as the European Union, while bearing in mind that opposition to it is likely to be interpreted as yet another sign that nationalist instincts prevail (or have become re-emboldened) and are the result of the economic hard times of the post-2008 global economic context? Opposition to the EU risks fanning the flames of nationalism. As we see with the debates surrounding the forthcoming "Brexit" referendum, arguments for leaving the European Union are difficult to make without simultaneously heralding the merits of the nation-state. Nationalism, surely, is not the route for the left. On the other hand, support for the EU, or advocating the search for Social Europe (again), risks perpetuating the myth that contemporary capitalism can be rendered more fair, if only the institutional

obstacles to supranational progressive governance could be overcome. The primary role of this myth is to sustain the belief in the ability of leftist politics to achieve ameliorative goals. However, in a context where the reproduction of global capitalism necessitates the intensification of socio-economic inequality in order to compensate for stagnating profitability and growth, the reformist goals are visibly bankrupt. That would seem to leave indifference as the only viable option. That is, to declare the European Union of little interest because it has little potential to be emancipatory; neither embracing nor rejecting European integration will produce emancipatory outcomes.

It would be better perhaps to be “critically indifferent”: neither to support nor reject European integration, and instead highlight, simultaneously, the attempts by the European Union to quieten popular demands and dissent, and the ongoing and ever-present capacity of the people in Europe to refuse and disrupt domination (for more on which, see Huke et al., 2015). The options available during 2015 in Greece became centred on a choice between staying in Europe and seeking the best possible negotiated outcome (Syriza), and leaving either the Euro or the European Union in pursuit of a national route to socialism (Lapavistas, Popular Unity, and the KKE). The Syriza route risks a mystification of the (absent) possibilities of Social Europe (as we saw) while the Euro-exit strategy risks prompting a rise of nationalism. Instead, the more progressive option might be to note the role of European integration in limiting the options for the left, and at the same time, to concentrate instead on the construction of alternative networks of resistance in order to challenge neoliberal capitalism during its post-2008 stagnant phase. The multiple and innovative forms of grassroots associations and new forms of mutual aid that sprung up in the Greek context of economic and political crisis, illustrate most clearly new avenues for progressive action that continue to disrupt the attempt to impose ever-fiercer forms of capitalist domination (on which see, Simiti 2015; see also Omikron project, 2014).

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