

life circumstances of all parts of the population improve. This calls for a veritable paradigm change.

Statistical juggling or not, in pursuit of the right policies to open up people's life chances social democracy has also long overestimated the importance of markets, within the framework of which the issue of distribution is downgraded and the close connection between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes ignored. Under the aegis of economization and consolidation programs in the wake of the financial and economic crisis (social democratic) governments have limited room to maneuver. Equality of opportunity under the aegis of fairer distribution, however, requires in particular intact welfare states and a decent level of public services, and both these things are in jeopardy.

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FRANZ WALTER:

Vorwärts oder Abwärts? Zur Transformation der Sozialdemokratie

Berlin 2010

Suhrkamp, 142 pp.

Individual accounts of the problems of European social democracy and the various parties and organizations which make it up are available in abundance. High time, therefore, for a synopsis, an analytical overview, a positioning of current processes within the framework of longer-term political and ideological contexts and lines of development. With »Vorwärts oder Abwärts?,« Franz

Walter provides precisely this. While there is a certain emphasis on the SPD and the changes it has undergone in recent years and decades the book's perspective is at the same time much broader, taking in developments outside Germany, in particular in France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and the UK.

This broad-based approach makes it possible to avoid the danger of excessive personification of the current problems of European social democracy. Although Walter goes into a fair amount of personal detail especially concerning leading German social democrats, he puts this in the context of broader developments. The decline of social democracy, according to Walter, basically began in the early 1970s when post-war Keynesianism reached its limits. This assessment is not new as such. But where other authors have been content with arguing on the basis of »sheer force of circumstances« – in other words, bowing to necessity and adapting to the prevailing conditions – Walter depicts the political and ideological developments of this period and the triumph of »new liberal« (»neoliberal«) thought as a battle of ideas, an interest-driven »ideological struggle« which the traditional left simply lost. It was at the end of this course of development that social democrats adapted themselves to the »Zeitgeist« and the prolonged dominance of liberal thought, in its neoliberal, but also eco-liberal forms. The subsequent flirtation with the Third Way, which turned out to be a blind alley, ultimately did massive and lasting damage to social democracy's basis of trust among its traditional constituencies – and finally led to the debacle of the Bundestag elections of 2009. An extensive chapter on the situation in Europe shows that the German experience in this regard was not unique.

In his analyses of the crisis of social democracy Franz Walter has always strongly emphasized the inclusion of developments in terms of social background and organizational sociology. A chapter is also dedicated to this in »Vorwärts oder Abwärts?«, in which the author describes the dissolution of the traditional social democratic milieu, the disconnection of parties and organizations from the social context of the classic working classes and the capture of the party apparatus and positions by a generation of careerists who have little empathy with those losing out as a result of modernization. Anyone wishing to understand developments in Germany, but also in the UK in recent years must not underestimate this factor, as many authors have done. As a consequence of this slippage of the sociological anchor, social democratic parties can be characterized less and less as workers' parties. Instead, according to Walter, these parties are increasingly becoming parties of the public sector, whose foothold in Europe's problem and crisis locales is now fairly tenuous.

In the description of the »defective party,« the SPD, what stands out is how much Franz Walter focuses his analysis on the socio-economic and sociological aspects. Presumably – although the reviewer does not feel competent to judge – this is perfectly proper for an understanding of the problems of the SPD. In this respect, however, Walter differs from some other authors who, in recent years,

have tried to explain the current problems facing European social democracy. Hanspeter Kriesi and his co-authors; René Cuperus, who is repeatedly cited by Walter; and also Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle stress much more emphatically than Walter the significance of socio-cultural factors – adaptation to a »cosmopolitan« elite ideology, the effects of immigration processes and the fetishization of multiculturalism and universalism – for the problems of European social democracy and its separation from parts of its erstwhile proletarian electorate. It would have been fascinating to see how the shrewd and extremely knowledgeable Walter assesses these aspects.

In the final chapter, Walter addresses the prospects for social democracy in Europe. His conclusion is not optimistic. Given the structural shortcomings of European social democracy, the enormous loss of trust over recent years, and the deep-lying alienation of strategic constituencies it is far from certain that social democracy will ever be able to re-establish its hegemony. Instead, the specter of an upsurge in right-wing populism looms – the »negative mobilization« of those disaffected with democracy.

To sum up, »Vorwärts oder Abwärts?« is a book which has no equivalent in either Germany or the rest of Europe: no other author has so far managed to summarize the variety of crisis symptoms from which European social democracy is suffering in similar depth. The variety of sources from different European countries is impressive. Precisely because it denies the reader a happy end the book is simply required reading for all those interested in the future of social democracy.

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Left-wing Ways: Reconnoitering Political Topography

FRANZISKA DROHSEL (ed.):

Was ist heute Links? Thesen für eine Politik der Zukunft

Frankfurt 2009

Campus, 250 pp.

SIGMAR GABRIEL:

Links neu denken. Politik für die Mehrheit

Munich 2008

Piper, 379 pp.

The SPD's election defeat on September 27, 2009 can be described with some justification as a watershed in the history of Germany's oldest political party.