

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.

*Ernst Hillebrand,
Head of the Department of Central and Eastern Europe of the
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin*

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.

At the 2009 SPD party conference in Dresden a process of renewal was heralded, which will have far-reaching consequences. Where the journey will take the SPD is far from certain. Traditionally a broad church, the SPD encompasses very different views on the economy, the state and politics, which are usually in dialogue with one another but sometimes come into conflict.

Sigmar Gabriel and Franziska Drohsel, whose views on their party differ considerably, have laid out theoretico-political analyses and outlines for the future which, in a contemporary perspective, can be read as blueprints for a »post Agenda 2010 SPD.« Having said that, it is striking that both books were written in 2008, well before the election debacle. Neither, therefore, was solely intended to be a contribution to the party's renewal debate, but instead they represent fundamental pronouncements on the basic values and programmatic foundations of social democratic politics. The two books also share an interest in the normative-ideological grounds of political action, in contrast to the apolitical »there-is-no-alternative« discourse of the 2000s. The authors frame their reflections in terms of classic political topography: they raise the question of what »left-wing« means and what a contemporary »left-wing« politics ought to look like.

The book edited by *Franziska Drohsel* – »Was ist heute Links?« – constitutes a debate-oriented contribution to the issues. The volume consists of 63 theses agreed on by the Young Socialists (»Jusos«) – of which Drohsel was national chair until mid-2010 – in autumn 2008. Also included are articles by leading figures in the SPD, »Juso« veterans, academics, and representatives of civil society, all of whom take up the question of a modern left and the 63 theses.

The Young Socialists' theses are in the tradition of neo-Marxist theory and take their point of departure from an analysis of the basic categories of the capitalist economic and social order. They then turn their attention to the actors and also strategies involved in current political conflicts, as well as examining the current forms of capitalism in detail. Finally, they take a closer look at individual policy areas, such as feminism, anti-fascism, internationalism, and environmentalism.

Capitalism is the key concept, which the Young Socialists describe in the tradition of Critical Theory as a »totality« – »the dominant structural principle of society« (Drohsel 2009: 28), whose logic pervades every area of life. Despite its changing forms, capitalism is always inherently crisis-ridden, is driven by a compulsive logic of exploitation, and must therefore be surmounted in order to make possible a »free and equal life for all« (p. 20). The market principle automatically leads to inequality. Capitalism produces winners and losers »not for want of proper organization but as a consequence of its inherent laws« (p. 58). As the dominant trends of the historical forms capitalism has assumed the theses cite globalization and the disconnection of the financial markets from the real economy, as well as precarious employment and social divisions (cf. pp. 46–65). The Young Socialists regard the state as, on the one hand, a useful tool for progressive politics, by means of which changes can be secured (cf. p. 57), but on the other

hand as structural guarantor of the conditions of capitalist exploitation. What they are calling for, then, is not merely that the »good« state restrain the »bad« market, but rather changes of emphasis brought about by political means within a capitalist state and economic system.

The Young Socialists' theses judge SPD governments harshly. Not only because of their the political (co-)responsibility for the developments mentioned above, but also because of the depletion of democratic culture in the party as a result of a certain authoritarianism and segregation. Nevertheless, the Young Socialists are clear that progressive politics is simply not possible without the SPD and therefore that what is needed is to struggle »in and for the SPD« (p. 36). In Drohsel's book the success of SPD policies is measured not in terms of the party's approval ratings, but rather its ability to translate left-wing policies – whether alone or in partnership – and thereby to move closer towards the above-mentioned free and just society. The SPD is conceived of as an instrument for changing society, not as an end in itself.

The Young Socialists' theses oscillate between a rigorous anti-capitalism in principle and a reformist line in detail, even though the reform program remains fragmentary. The contradictions between radical rejection and incremental reform are as frankly admitted in Drohsel's book, as they are harshly criticized in the part presenting the debate. »Being left-wing« also has an individual component for Drohsel and the Young Socialists, however, namely putting up with life's contradictions while struggling for progress in the here and now (cf. pp. 90–92). The book devotes a fair amount of room to this aspect of self-assertion.

In contrast, *Sigmar Gabriel* spells out his »being left-wing« not as a position of marginalization but, on the contrary, as *a politics for the majority*. Gabriel's book which, in contrast to Drohsel's volume is a monograph, has its origins well before his election as party leader and is very much a controversial work, not an attempt to reconcile every position in the party. In his 370-page book »Links neu denken« the former German Minister of the Environment develops a policy outline for a »social democratic creative left« (Gabriel 2008: 12) to distinguish himself and his party from his political rivals.

Gabriel understands left-wing politics to mean »guaranteeing social inclusion and incentives to economic progress for the great majority« (p. 22). He derives his concept of the »left« from the principle of emancipation. In the opening passages of his book he uses this idea against a politically eviscerated fetish of the »center« in political communication, which he considers inherently conservative. Gabriel explains convincingly how talk of practical constraints and the lack of any alternative is a repudiation of democratic politics and an abrogation of responsibility. From this he derives his demand for a renewal of democracy in which the primacy of politics is restored. But he also discusses internal party reforms, such as opening up the SPD to people who have already distinguished themselves in other spheres, in order to make democratic participation attractive again.

The greatest contemporary challenges to the putative capacities of democratic politics, according to Gabriel, are financial capitalism, environmental disruption and climate change, post-democratic tendencies, and social cleavages, as well as the dissolution of political boundaries and the disturbance of societal equilibria. The detailed explanations satisfy the author's claim to »say how things are« (p. 66), but they neglect to say why. Gabriel largely leaves out of account the SPD's contribution to many of the developments he describes and deplors. The book contains virtually none of the analyses of the party's mistakes or the self-criticism of Gabriel's later public statements.

Based on his analysis of the situation Gabriel wishes »to continue with the left-wing project« (p. 139). Against a conservative environmentalism which is skeptical about technology he opposes the idea of sustainable progress, which marries Bloch's principle of hope with Jonas's principle of responsibility (cf. p. 143). From the idea of progress understood in this way he develops a political blueprint, the majority-oriented »politics of balance« (p. 109). An environmental industrial policy which promotes growth and employment has a key role in this, as does the promotion of innovation and the frequently invoked enabling welfare state. The education policy side of former teacher Gabriel is evident from his focus on a culture of learning and early childhood education, but the explosive debate on the school system is largely neglected. By and large, these passages illustrate Gabriel's political strengths, containing a polished presentation of a logical and ethically well-grounded reform program, marred from time to time by a ministerial predilection for detail.

In strategic terms, Gabriel puts his faith in social democracy finding its place as a »creative left« which pursues balanced policies for the majority of the population. He sets himself apart from the »bisected liberalism« of the FDP, the fickle Christian Democrats, and narrow-minded environmentalists among the Greens (pp. 336 f) and takes a strong stance against the »protest left« (pp. 354 f) and old-left »to-ing and fro-ing« (pp. 124 f). In the process, he construes his political opponents, in particular to the left of the party spectrum, rather simplistically, as typical dogmatists in thrall to their respective ideologies. This reduces the political competition to cardboard-cutouts who can easily be knocked over. Any search for common ground is rarely to be found.

»Left« does not always have to mean the same thing: this insight is confirmed by reading these two books. On a number of fundamental questions the authors are worlds apart. This is particularly evident in respect of the crucial question for the left: where do you stand on capitalism? Sigmar Gabriel evinces a generally optimistic conception of capitalism which rests on observations of the variety of capitalist phenomena. Gabriel conceives of capitalism as malleable and economically productive, and basically trusts it to be able to deliver balanced development within the right political framework. Furthermore, Gabriel considers markets to be fundamentally adequate instruments of allocation which, through the appro-

appropriate regulation and internalization of external effects, curb power and enable efficient resource distribution. Although he wishes to roll back the market in some areas, in others – for example, climate change – he wishes to expand market mechanisms. For the Young Socialists, in contrast, the capitalist system per se is crisis-prone and its fundamental workings are not readily susceptible to reform. They consider the market principle to be the actualization of capitalism's competitive logic, which systematically produces social inequality and exclusion. The question of whether a left-wing politics can succeed with or against the market may therefore be answered in a number of different ways.

Beyond the differences, the two books share a number of ideas about what it means to be »left-wing.« The analysis of the current situation is similar in the two books, as are some of the proposed instruments and detailed reforms. The differences in respect of the assessment of the SPD are significant, however. While Gabriel barely mentions any of the SPD's mistakes, and tends to attribute unfavorable developments to market fluctuations, the Young Socialists touch on a sore point by pointing out the fact that the intensification of precarity and social polarization coincided with social democratic participation in government. In terms of strategic issues »left-wing« means different things to different people. While the Young Socialists understand themselves to be part of a societal left, who work within the framework of a left-wing project both individually and in groups, for Sigmar Gabriel »left-wing« is exclusively reserved for social democracy. But a politics of the majority will also need partners.

Anyone hoping to distill a magic potion or elixir of life to fill up the water bottles of those engaged in everyday political conflict will be disappointed – the prescriptions are too much at variance. Anyone seeking stimulus for a debate and incentives to think more deeply will have much to gain from these books. Because they confirm at least one thing: the left's distinctive culture of reflection and debate. The open and rational discussion of what it means to be »left-wing« is part and parcel of »being left-wing.«

*Matthias Ecke,
Scientific Assistant to a member of the German parliament*