

Features

When institutions matter: the EU and the identity of social democracy

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Parties have historically developed, among other things, in the wake of major institutional changes such as the parliamentarisation of formerly authoritarian states or the advent of universal suffrage. So, today, the unprecedented character of the European Union has a significant impact on party phenomena and party conflict.

How does the European framework, particularly its institutional aspects, influence the role and dynamics of political parties (and partisan families)? What are its consequences for the programmatic development and, more generally, the physiognomy and tradition, of social democracy?

A conservative system with little room for partisan logics

Historically, one of the important activities of political parties was the harmonisation of relations between different institutions within political systems. The partisan character of institutional harmonisation and government/administration was a specific trait of politics in Europe and contributed to the transition from classical parliamentarism to party democracy (Bartolini, 2005b).

The new governmental set-up in Europe is marked by a basic institutional asymmetry. In the twenty-seven states, the system of party government remains dominant and the national political power of parties, albeit reduced, is still considerable. By contrast, at the EU level, parties are not the principal units of decision-making and their *European* political power has not really been asserted. If partisan treatment of problems is common in European institutions, notably in the Council and the Parliament, the EU in general lacks coherent party leadership. No partisan family simultaneously controls the European Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament and no political family is likely to do so in the future. There is no unique, cohesive and undisputed partisan policy maker in this polycentric polity. As a consequence, the European system is a system without a party coordinator. In particular, Euro-parties exert neither the function of government (a central aspect of which is institutional and policy harmonisation) nor that of political representation (1). 'In its deepest characteristics, the European community model rejects the classical form of the political party' (Magnetete, 2001, 63).

Given this fundamental institutional divergence (party government at national level and its practical absence at a specifically European level), the parties can no longer ensure the cohesion of power centres and are no longer identified, as they used to be, with public authority; or, to be more precise: if they take responsibility for the cohesion of power centres at a national level, they do not ensure this cohesion in the system as a whole (for

the 'Brussels complex', which is not governed directly by parties, now represents a crucial component in the network of European executives).

Weakened institutional leaders, though nevertheless still leaders at a national level, but without a clearly defined role at the EU level, political parties have lost a significant part of their erstwhile influence and authority. Actually, in the framework of European multi-level governance, the 'asymmetrical dynamic' of party government, by short-circuiting the unity of the decision-making process, reduces the managerial and governmental efficacy (problem-solving capacity) of political parties. And this is a not insignificant development. As Arthur Schlesinger has written, 'politics in the end is the art of solving substantive problems' (Schlesinger, 1986).

The EU is furthermore a profoundly *conservative* system, in the sense that it 'protects' the units (the states) that make it up and does not easily revisit institutional and political decisions it has taken. Changes and adaptations in the EU invariably occur on the margins, without a fundamental challenge to initial options and ways of operating. The whole community culture is based on the idea that no institution is ruled by a clear-cut majority logic or a stable coalition (decisions being the result of an ongoing process of compromise, in which partisan logics play a limited role) (Costa, 2004, 282). In this system where the logic of consensus or grand coalition rules (2), it is very difficult to produce a new master narrative and a new 'frame of action'. Political leadership and strategic vision do not easily come out of such a system (Tsoukalis, 2005).

The 'conservative' character of the system is further encouraged by the marked tendency to depoliticise sensitive questions, so as to avoid decision-making blockages. The objective of 'keeping the engine ticking over', in order to maintain a cooperative dynamic, is the key – the real cause of the conservatism. Tendencies to regime preservation have been accentuated by successive enlargements – especially the 'big bang' expansion of 2004.

Of course, political parties remain firmly rooted in European representative systems. Parties remain central actors. However, they are suffering from the fragmentation and conservatism of European governance and their proper (albeit natural) incapacity for effective coordination of their European action. Parties, both as problem-solving structures and as producers of policy-oriented ideas, are seriously affected by the deep reach and scope of European integration. In a sense, national parties are the victims of Europe's success, in particular the major parties of government (precisely those that manage European governance at both national level and Brussels level).

Europe as a problem for social democracy

The segmentation of competences and multiplicity of power centres in the European system of multi-level governance, as well as the structural inability of parties to find a central guiding role in the overall institutional set-up, create a formidable problem of collective action and coordination for all those aspiring to a strategy of change and ruptures.

The institutional reality of the EU is a sizeable obstacle in the path of all actors (national states, left-wing parties, populist right-wing parties, trade unions, pro- or anti-European associations, anti-globalisation or alternative globalisation movements) which aspire to change the EU's economic policy and institutional architecture. There is no Winter Palace to occupy or surround in the European political system; there is no royal road for prompting and coordinating the mobilisation of actors with highly diverse sensibilities, cultures and interests.

This problem of collective action and coordination is common to all political parties and families, but it particularly affects left-wing parties: parties that aim to correct – or change – the dominant economic paradigm are more in need of strong institutional (and

societal) resources. This problem affects more specifically the social democratic parties, because it is mainly they which, as essentially governmental parties, are confronted head on with the 'conservative' character of the European institutions. They participate in the European Council and in the Council of Ministers, they contribute to the formation of the majorities in the European Parliament, they appoint some of the commissioners, they direct the national states. By contrast, the smaller parties of the radical left and the Green parties, as parties of the opposition, are the ones that benefit electorally from the conservatism of the system. Conservatism, forcing the social democrats to adopt pragmatist positions and thus to convergence with the centre-right parties, widens the competitive space for outsiders and new parties.

Everything that has been said so far confronts socialists, or at least those who wish – assuming they do wish – to 'change' Europe, with a very delicate problem: How to be radical (in the sense of promoting new policies and new operating frameworks) in a system that, by its very nature (complex and cumbersome decision-making mechanism, twenty-seven players-countries), is easily weakened under the pressure of change? And, consequently, how to change European policies without breaking the European 'machine' that generates them?

Two examples illustrate the problem of collective action confronted or, rather, avoided by the social democrats.

The 'lost' opportunity of the 1990s

First: the inability of social democracy in the late 1990s, when twelve out of the fifteen European states elected leftist governments, to produce more explicit left-wing policies and to exploit this politically unique – even if brief – moment of electoral convergence.

A plausible explanation for this failure is a lack of will: 'they didn't want to [produce more left-wing policies] because they weren't really left anymore' (Allen, 2002). In a sense, the 'forced' resignation of Oscar Lafontaine, whose expansionary economic proposals ran counter to the economic mainstream, illustrated this 'lack of will' on the part of social democratic leaderships (or of some of them) faced with a change of orientation in economic policy (Moschonas, 2002, 265–8).

However, European social democrats had at the time no common programme for economic regulation at the EU level (Notermans, 2001, 269; Ross, 2009). Beyond the presumed 'lack of will', the economic strategies of the twelve socialist governments and the interest constellations in the member states have been, from the very beginning, too heterogeneous for effective coordination.

Certainly, according to another hypothesis, the 'fundamental failure of imagination' was the main factor behind social democratic inaction (Allen, 2002). Socialists did not possess the ideas for refocusing economic policy and European integration. Ideas and imagination, however, are not constraint free. European institutional arrangements and social democratic divisions inhibited imagination and inventiveness. Diminished expectations impeded the production of 'creative political entrepreneurs'. Overall, the coordination problem prevented socialists from supporting more *dirigiste* and expansionary policies at the European level.

European social policy

Developments in the 1980s erected a structural asymmetry between market integration and positive welfare integration, hence endowing the EU with an institutional and legal framework in aid of 'Market Europe' and at the expense of 'Social Europe' (Hansen, 2005, 47–9). Compared to national political systems, the capacity of the EU to redistribute resources between individuals and groups through taxation and public spending is very limited. The EU has no real fiscal powers and very few means for implementing redistributive policies.

The residual character of the EU's social policy, besides the powerful market-making bias of the EU, is also due to the differences in social philosophy between the member states (the 'clash of national interests'), and the extreme heterogeneity of the national welfare states, which renders the construction of a genuine European welfare state extremely difficult (Majone, 1996; Eriksen and al, 2008, 7).

This problem of collective action and coordination became evident with the pre-election appeal (in the 2004 European elections) for a 'Social Europe' by certain socialist leaders (including Rasmussen, head of the Party of European Socialists, and Antonio Guterres, President at the time of the Socialist International). Labour's Third Way policies and the 'Agenda 2010' of the SPD did not allow Blair and Schroeder to give their endorsements to such an initiative. For their part, the Scandinavian social democrats, who continue to represent a 'social' version of social democracy, were not ready to accept the harmonisation by Brussels of national regulations on social issues – something that could imperil their welfare states.

As national parties were moving in different, even opposite, directions, the constellation of political interests and approaches within the PES made impossible the construction of a majority coalition to promulgate a genuine *common* social programme. Social Europe has become a 'shibboleth' (Bellec, 2005, 275) without any impact – other than rhetorical – on the political priorities of the national socialist parties or the PES. The failure to develop a shared program on a matter of such profound ideological importance for social democrats illustrates the formidable problem of coordination and collective action in a supranational framework.

This problem of coordination on 'Social Europe' has been accentuated by successive enlargements. Distrust of any development of a 'social Europe' on the part of some social democratic parties from central and eastern Europe presents a characteristic example of how the new countries could strengthen divisions within the social democratic family.

The price of division

Socialist divisions are the common denominator underlying, notwithstanding some minor successes, the ideological inertia of the socialist family. Yet divisions are nothing new in the long social democratic tradition in Europe; they are a constant. In a sense, European socialism has never been as unified as it is today. In the past, the distance between left- and right-wing alternatives within the social democratic family was greater than it is today, and the contrasts were noticeably stronger.

But today, these divisions, when transferred, and because transferred, to the European level, entail – as managed by the EU institutional apparatus and regulated by it – the political paralysis of the socialist family. Divisions, because of the EU, because of the high institutional hurdles for any policy reorientation, are more important today than, let us say, in the 1960s or 1930s. In reality, the EU compels member states or national parties (in the Euro-parties or in the European Parliament) either to construct grand coalitions or to abandon their policy. Thus, social democratic disagreements on the institutional and economic construction of Europe lead to indecision or to the preventive abandonment of any 'transformational' aim outside the mainstream. Disagreements and divisions undermine, in a particularly disabling way, the partisan control of the Union's central institutions. The cost of divisions has become exorbitant.

Neo-liberal 'gridlock' and the 'great transformation' of social democracy

The institutional (and economic) logic of the Union does not have only European consequences, restricted to the level of the EU. It has an important influence on the policy proposals and governmental action of national parties and in this respect significantly defines the content of reformism at a national level.

The political and programmatic horizon being considerably narrowed, any kind of national social democratic reformism which appears 'disrespectful' of the EU's options seems eccentric; the attitude of Laurent Fabius in favour of the 'no' vote in the 2005 French referendum is a case in point. National party elites anticipate what is possible and what is not. Here too, as in the case of the Brussels elites, the logic of preventive renunciation cuts deep. Programmatic elites (party or ministerial, national or European), specialising in the production of policy-oriented ideas, adapt to the European political style. By a kind of 'ideational spill-over' (Thomas Risse, quoted in Hooghe and Marks, 2008, 120), Brussels gradualism spreads to the totality of national established political forces. In this sense, the distinction between 'national' and 'European' becomes blurred.

A double institutional trap?

In the current state of European affairs, the exercise of national sovereignty is impeded by political rules jointly decided within the EU, while, at the same time, in the name of national sovereignty a federal sovereignty has been prevented from emerging (Fitoussi, 2005, 99). To paraphrase and extend a conclusion of Simon Lightfoot's regarding the PES (Lightfoot, 2005, 147), the present situation falls between two stools: the EU is neither a truly supranational entity nor does it allow the member states to pursue a national road. Thus, the EU functions as a relatively strong impediment and as a relatively weak incentive.

Historically, European integration was conceived and developed on the basis of economic principles which can be described as 'liberal', even if these principles 'were not apparent for the first two decades', even if they left 'enough space for governments to pursue social democratic policies' (McGowan, 2001, 75, 78), at least until the middle of the 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s something important happened at the heart of Europe that was comparable in its impact to the creation of the Common Market in 1957. The Single Market, the enlargement of the scope of liberalisation in new areas, the reinforcement of majority voting in the Council of Ministers, the more active role and the new dynamics of the Court and Commission (notably under Jacques Delors), the strengthening of the European Parliament, the foundation of the European Central Bank and, more generally, the impact of the Maastricht Treaty, took integration to a new level (Ferenczi, 2008, 56–62; Ross, 2009).

The revitalisation of European integration during the 1980s and 1990s had and continues to have large-scale effects on both Europe and social democratic parties. The 'Brussels complex', which has passed from a 'primitive site of collective government' to a densely institutionalised system of interrelationships (Caporaso and Sweet, 2001, 221), has functioned as a *double* institutional trap for the future: first, in the institutional gridlocking of the neo-liberal logic and the resulting difficulty of countering liberal solutions at the European level; and, second, by the weakening of national institutions and parties and the associated difficulty in countering neo-liberal logic at the national level (3).

Thus, what may have been initially an institutional event may produce enduring ideological results. The blind mechanics of strong complementarity and mutual neutralisation between European and national institutions (a product of the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s) made virtually inevitable the almost 'unconditional surrender' to liberal solutions. As a result, the new 'asymmetric dynamic' between social democracy and European integration (with the EU liberal policies contributing to a reorientation of national social democratic options more than vice versa) was not only the consequence of liberal ideas becoming locked in at the EU level (McGowan, 2001, 85); it was also the result of the weakening of parties and institutions at the national level, which made this locking in more solid and powerful. This double trap gave liberal economic solutions a long-term advantage.

The 'second project of integration' (Ryner, 2007) was a key moment in the social democratic history of the last thirty years. In the 'great transformation' of social democracy

(Moschonas, 2002) there was a key period of extension and consolidation when disorderly effervescence took on a more stable structure, more depth and solidity. This period, and the extraordinary strengthening of the EU from 1985 until the end of the 1990s, are intimately linked. George Ross perceptively shows this critical influence: 'the EU took the lead in enjoining its members to conform to a new world where Keynesianism was anachronistic and welfare states and industrial relations systems needed serious reform ... These were the European conditions in which "Lefts" would become "Centre-Lefts"' (Ross, 2009).

Managing the financial crisis

The neo-liberalisation of social democracy pre-dates the European Union (Lavelle, 2008, 23–4, 121, 151). Even so, the Single European Market and implementation of the Maastricht Treaty converged to create a specific trend in Europe – an accelerated and focused adjustment that made the neo-liberalisation of European social democracy deeper and more coherent. As Francis McGowan wrote, 'European integration involves member states committing themselves to a much more robust set of rules than those which might be regarded as framing globalisation (WTO, IMF, etc). Moreover, in the detail of reforms, the imprint of the EU is much clearer than that of global pressures' (McGowan, 2001, 98).

Recent developments in Europe offer fresh evidence of this. The financial crisis opened up the Pandora's box of chaotic economic dynamics. Nevertheless, this tremendous crisis and the extraordinary collapse of the old policy mainstream exerted a much greater influence on United States policies than on EU decision-making. In Europe, national leaders, always trapped amid European institutional constraints and poor cooperation, had a great difficulty in inventing new policy solutions attuned to the needs both of the scale of the crisis and of the European stage. Despite the exceptional emergency circumstances, despite evidence of a clear dynamism during the early and most difficult moments of the financial crisis, the gridlocking of neo-liberal policies as well as the absence of a strong central authority (i.e., a strong political will) prevented the EU from adopting a more daring policy package.

In particular, the European Commission, guardian of the Treaties and of the Stability and Growth Pact, while exhibiting some flexibility, continued to act within the EU as the institutional centre of economic liberalism. In effect, Europe was seeking Keynesian-type solutions to the crisis while at the same time striving to maintain a neo-liberal status quo and to preserve the Stability and Growth Pact, which had become almost obsolete. In the end, the change towards more expansive and *dirigiste* European policies has been very partial. As the PES put it, it was 'simply not enough'.

Moreover, it is revealing that the 'unorthodox' French presidency was obliged to bypass European institutional routines (and the European Commission) in order to cut corners and be more effective. Sarkozy's presidency was considered to be successful exactly because it did not follow the famous 'community method'. Sarkozy's ways 'put EU peers on edge', worried, even exasperated, several of his European Union partners, precisely because his methods were not in line with the *acquis communautaire*. Although this active presidency was, all in all, good news for Europe, the partial disrupting of the conservative institutional logic was not and could not be a lasting development. Quite the contrary: Sarkozy's activism was institutionally 'rootless'. The ensuing Czech presidency exemplified the almost structural absence of leadership that characterises the EU. It brought to the fore, in full force, the institutional weaknesses of the European system of decision-making.

Thus, even if the EU, to a certain degree, surpassed itself, the response of the member states to the crisis was neither unified nor bold. Poor leadership is part of the story: Europe, unlike America, 'doesn't have the kind of continent-wide institutions needed to deal with a continent-wide crisis' (Krugman, 2009). In fact, the internally fragmented and

conservative system of European decision-making, one without a central core of authority and without a single, unique centre of power, proved to be – even in such extraordinary conditions – quite resistant. The EU response to this crisis is consistent with the thesis that the EU institutional workings are, in fact, a strong disciplinary force constraining political actors and preventing new ‘frames of action’ from being implemented.

An identity dilemma

If, ultimately, the EU poses a problem of ‘finding a role’ for each and every party family, this problem is more pronounced for social democracy. Control of the market and capitalism entails – actually, it has always required – both a strong central authority and a strong political force capable of pursuing policies that are different from the market’s. Nowadays, in the framework of multi-level and multi-sited European governance, neither prerequisite is met: no central public authority exists and a powerful transnational social democracy capable of managing European governance is not easy to set up.

The EU, in its current form, is not the ideal place for socialist ideologies, moderate or radical. It is not supportive of more economic regulation, a more encompassing welfare state, or Keynesian deficit spending. EU developments do not fit the traditional social democrats’ ‘love affair with centralised control’ (Sassoon, 2006, 24) and are at odds with the principle of welfarism, a central ideological pillar of modern social democratic culture. Moreover, the EU’s conservative institutional logic and the decline in the role played by political parties in generating policy-oriented ideas are also at odds with the ‘belief’ in the primacy of politics (over economics) that, historically, has been underlying social democratic action and has made social democracy a transformative political force (Berman, 2007).

Given these influences, it is scarcely surprising that current popular anxieties and growing euroscepticism remain without an effective political response on the left (4). The European programmatic stance of social democrats, bereft of Europe-wide political alternatives, is scarcely capable – despite the revisionist fever of the 1990s – of structuring the politics of the European Union differently. Furthermore, sociological analysis of support for European integration yields a picture of a social democracy incapable of creating a genuine popular Europeanism (see Cautrès and Grunberg, 2008). The euroscepticism of the lower classes and the lack of a European social policy are traumatising the social democratic profile and, in part, the electoral dynamics of social democratic parties (Moschonas, 2009). The ‘losers’ of the pro-/anti-integration cleavage are not represented by social democracy (Magnette and Papadopoulos, 2008, 13–15; Kriesi et al, 2006). Thus, Europe is weakening the sociological specificity of social democracy and is becoming an additional factor in identity change.

At the same time the EU is a mechanism that allows social democracy, which has become pro-European, to connect better with the salaried and educated middle strata of the population. Social democracy’s commitment to European integration reinforces its link with these *strata*, strongly ‘attached’ to cultural liberalism and post-materialist values, and in particular with the segment of the population frequently considered to be the ‘integration winners’. This attachment – social democracy moderately opts ‘for the winners’ side’ (Kriesi et al, 2006, 928) – sustains electorally the modernised aspects of the social democratic profile.

Overall, then, the EU strengthens the modernity of the social democratic profile while it contributes to the decline of its historical components, which are part of the profoundest political specificity of centre-left parties. The EU assumes the role of both an amplifier and an obstacle: it is a factor that contributes to the *consolidation* and *deepening* of the great identity change of social democracy and, at the same time, an obstacle to the *re-social* democratisation of its programmatic options. The great programmatic flexibility of contem-

porary social democratic parties, which has allowed them to produce a large number of new ideas and policy proposals at the national level, is at bottom a flexibility respectful of the basic economic orientations of the Brussels mainstream. Not to respect this mainstream would be to block or destabilise the EU, and 'explode' the ideological and electoral stability of the social democratic parties, a majority of which have made Europe a fundamental aspect of their new ideological profile. Yet to respect it is also to further destabilise social democracy's *historical* identity. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, which is both a policy dilemma and a problem of identity.

The future

If, until now, the EU has set important limits on any programmatic alternative and policy innovation, it is not impossible that there will be a change of direction in European politics.

According to some, as European integration is transformed from a market-creating and market-enabling process to a polity-making process, the focus of debate will probably shift from creating a market to regulating it (Marks, 2004, 258). In a sense, this process is already underway. Moreover, the ongoing economic crisis has thoroughly reactivated core social-democratic ideas about the regulatory role of politics and states. Thus, in the future we probably will see two parallel drives operating simultaneously: one pushing (under the influence of the 'European Law') the EU to integrate itself further into the paradigm of economic liberalism; and another one adjusting this paradigm by instilling into it elements derived from a largely non-liberal perspective.

In a system, however, in which 'the standardisation of the internal market regulation and the centralisation of the jurisdictional activities have developed before and without the centralisation of political power ... and the creation of political agencies' (Bartolini, 2005, 247), any such correction will be limited in scope, without fundamentally altering methods of operation. Any *radical* correction would necessitate revising some of the most deeply rooted elements of the EU's workings, requiring all, or almost all, of the major European players to sign up. This would mean formulating a new ideological mainstream and creating a new 'grand coalition' within the EU. The 'secret combination' of EU operations (segmented powers, high institutional hurdles for any policy reorientation, jurisdictional *acquis*, small EU budget, the difficulty of conducting partisan politics, social democratic divisions, and, last but not least, the absence of a distinctively left-wing agenda for the EU) makes a social democratic reorientation of the EU difficult to implement. Social democratic moves to the left, evident at the discursive level, risk ending up without important policy consequences because of European constraints – in part put in place by social democrats themselves.

Today, the mechanisms of the Brussels system impede social-democratic action politically, through collectively decided rules, and not only through economic constraints (Fitoussi, 2005, 99). Institutions count. As a result, in today's Europe, parties are powerful only on conditions of cooperation. The ineffectiveness, if not the paralysis, of social democratic action in Europe, because of disagreements and poor collaboration, has shown how important transnational cooperation has become for national parties.

Programmatic innovation and effective cooperation in a European (and global) context of reduced programmatic autonomy is a puzzle that contemporary social democratic parties are called upon to resolve. As both these targets are difficult to achieve, pessimistic views seem justified. However, social democracy, like anything under pressure, always has the potential to surprise, notably in a period of great turbulence. The ideological terrain is nowadays, because of the crisis of the liberal paradigm, more favourable. If pessimism is still justified, it seems, given these turbulences, a little less justified than a year ago.

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Notes

1. For a perceptive and pragmatic balance-sheet on Euro-parties, see Hanley, 2008.
2. The EU, as Simon Hix argues, 'is perhaps more consensus-oriented in its design than any political system in the history of modern government' (Hix, 2006, 12).
3. 'National policy is severely restrained in its problem-solving capacity, while European policy is constrained by the lack of intergovernmental agreement' (Scharpf, 1996, 15).
4. 81 per cent of workers voted 'no' in the French referendum on 29 May 2005 (Perrineau, 2005, 241–2). This massive negative working-class vote, in a period of decline in working class culture and political cohesion, indicates the profound frustration among lower classes in relation to the EU.