The foundation of The Left Party in Germany

Albrecht von Lucke

The foundation of The Left Party in June this year produced a forceful reaction in the German media. In the main, the leading journalistic organs of the Republic dismissed it as an insolent populist gesture. In the words of Die Zeit newspaper, whose familiarly patronizing judgement appears to articulate an opinion widely shared: ‘Everyone knows that the Left has very little to offer in reality.’ With these words, the newspaper predicted something of a ‘half-life’ for the new party from the off.

The strident tones of the new party might indeed come across as somewhat arrogant. Founder of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and prominent Left Party member Gregor Gysi admitted as much, with reference to the party’s name. Its self-labelling as ‘The Left’ is bound to irritate, as much on linguistic grounds as matters of content. In the future we will be compelled to ask whether any instance of ‘the Left’ is to be written with an upper or lower case T – unless, of course, it is meant to merge ‘The Left’ with the Left.

This brings us to the second bold claim on the part of the new party. It takes a fair amount of chutzpah for Gregor Gysi to postulate, mantra-like, that the foundation of The Left Party has really achieved ‘unity among the Left’ (and supposedly, along with it, the ‘unity of Germany’ too). Unless, that is, this Left, which has been ‘unified’ since the party’s founding conference on 16 June 2007, imagines it is going to remain permanently restricted to its current share of around 10–15 per cent of the vote, a percentage that does not seem likely to change in the foreseeable future. Were that the case, the Left, now shrunk to ‘The Left’, would certainly not be a noteworthy political force in Germany, much to the delight of its opponents. And, from this perspective, the third full-bodied claim by the new party appears distinctly dubious too: namely that the day on which The Left Party was formed out of the fusion of the PDS and the Electoral Alternative – Labour and Social Justice (WASG) will go down as a ‘historic date’.

Irony of history: it took less than a day for all of the new party’s bold announcements to be strikingly corroborated. The impetuous reactions of the rival parties provided proof enough that the foundation of the new party was indeed of historical significance.

Unsurprisingly, the most immediate and loudest reaction came from the opposition Free Democratic Party (FDP). To be precise, the reaction came from ‘the Republic’s Statue of Liberty’, as its leader Guido Westerwelle cared to describe himself recently. At the Liberals’ party conference, which took place at the same time as The Left’s,
Westerwelle summed up the foundation of The Left Party in the manner of a Cold Warrior, deploying Franz Josef Strauß’s old battle cry ‘Freedom or Socialism’ – to the irritation of his own friends in the party, who seemed rather surprised to hear such stilted tones from the mouth of the former ‘fun candidate’.

Equally surprised by this turn of phrase were those in the Christian Union (CDU/CSU) who are desperate not to lag behind the Liberals when it comes to the question of who is the actual inheritor of the Cold War legacy. The general secretary of the CDU, Ronald Pofalla, classified the new formation as a ‘radical Left party’, while his counterpart in the CSU, Markus Söder, zeroed in on the figure of the new leader, Oskar Lafontaine, whom he characterized as an ‘extremist’ and an ‘insult to upstanding Social Democrats’.

It is easy to dismiss this reaction, bordering on the absurd, as simply laughable. By contrast, the reaction on the part of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) amounts to a genuine political response. Or, to be more precise, a caesura. This is clear less in relation to the SPD’s fairly predictable stigmatization of The Left Party as fundamentalist, populist and, in any case, not properly part of the Left – in short, as Kurt Beck put it, ‘a successor grouping to the SED–PDS’ (the parties of the Communist and post-communist GDR); or, in Peter Struck’s words, as the ‘PDS/ML [Marxist–Leninist] plus Lafontaine’. Rather, the real consequences of the foundation of The Left Party are perceivable in the altered relationship of the SPD to its coalition partners; that is to say, in its simultaneous distancing from the Christian Union.

In the wake of The Left Party’s consolidation, the SPD headed immediately for confrontation with its coalition partners, with the Minister for Labour, Franz Müntefering, at the helm. In the meeting of the coalition committee advising on the minimum wage, on the Monday following the conference, ‘Münte’ finally gave up his compromising style vis-à-vis Chancellor Angela Merkel and instead presented a fifteen-page policy paper – including positions that had hitherto seemed long abandoned. According to the Christian Union delegates who were participating, it took three hours ‘to discuss it off the table again’.

But that is by no means all. On the morning after what ended up as the adoption of a compromise resolution, Müntefering announced the actual lesson of the evening, namely that one could only ‘enforce’ the minimum wage ‘in opposition to the Christian Union’. He had, he said, wanted to ‘render his contribution’ in this regard. Given this new concept of the minimum wage, which was radicalized pretty well overnight, the days of conspicuous unity within the coalition are clearly over, and now, even before reaching the midway point of the legislative period, we see the beginning of the electoral campaign for the next round of federal elections, whose testing ground will be the regional pre-elections held in 2008.

**Sticking point**

Of course it is no coincidence that it is precisely now that the SPD is provoking confrontation with its coalition partners on the subject of the minimum wage. For one thing, as already demonstrated earlier this year during the elections in Bremen, this symbolic theme is beneficial to them in the run-up to the elections, both regionally and, by 2009 at the latest, nationally. But with the sudden sharpening in their attitude towards this issue, the SPD were also explicitly reacting to the foundation of The Left Party. By bringing up the SPD concept of the minimum wage in the Bundestag – in full knowledge that the Social Democrats would have to reject its own proposal, because of the coalition – The Left Party managed to force it properly onto the agenda.

This is an exemplary instance of the pincer grip in which the SPD currently finds itself – caught between the Christian Union, which, in the person of Ursula von der Leyen, has increasingly conquered the centre ground, and The Left Party, which is
now going on the offensive with its claim on left-wing themes. Müntefering’s gauntlet laid down to the Christian Union, in the form of a radicalized concept of the minimum wage, represents a litmus test of the credibility of SPD demands. This is the first historical achievement of The Left Party: its foundation has awoken the SPD to new ‘Social Democratic life’. No other political party reacted with such a transparently bad conscience vis-à-vis the new party. The hasty dismissals voiced by this rival party should not lead us astray on this point.

On the contrary, the positions taken on the minimum wage are of relevance not just in the immediate period or in relation to this one policy issue. They will be significant in the future. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the SPD is already beginning to set the course for the period after the great coalition. Now that the SPD has discovered ‘the cold face of Angela Merkel’ and Kurt Beck accuses the Christian Union of ‘neo-liberalism’, an inevitable question crops up: would it ever be possible for the party to manage a future coalition with the Statue of Liberty known as Westerwelle? One thing is certain: the fight for the minimum wage is a signal that the SPD is equipping itself for an electoral campaign against the FDP. The SPD senses increasingly that it has no chance against Angela Merkel if it stays in the centre ground. There is no improvement in sight, either in the shape of a more suitable candidate for chancellor or in the form of a more convincing post-Schröder agenda. For these reasons, it must tend towards the Left in terms of its programme, in order to win back ground from under the new party. The more it does this, the less any coalition with the FDP becomes possible. Indeed, any serious prospects of a Social Democratic–Liberal government (something that was bound up with election of Kurt Beck as candidate for chancellor) were knocked on the head as soon as The Left Party made its appearance.

And herein lies another historic achievement of the new Left Party. Two years ago, Franz Müntefering’s slogan ‘Opposition is bullshit’ was his justification for leading the SPD into coalition with the Christian Union and Angela Merkel. There was a hope that the SPD might regenerate itself in government. The Left Party is now convincing Müntefering of the opposite. To put it more precisely, reality has convinced him of it. Nine years of one-sided pro-business government policies have seen the SPD shrink by over 10 per cent to new all-time lows, not to mention the outflow of tens of thousands of its members. Throughout this period the party has experienced a massive haemorrhaging of personnel as well as ideals. As a consequence, panic increasingly rules on the old tanker, expressing itself in ever more helpless attacks on the Christian Union and, in particular, the chancellor.

There is just one major belief that the coalition members hold in common at the moment: the conviction that, within at most two years, the days of coalition government will be over. And yet neither of the two parties currently has a viable exit option. What we are witnessing now is the attempt at an orderly retreat, in particular on the part of the SPD. Indeed, the question that the Social Democrats are faced with right now is: how might we creditably leave this government to stand alongside The Left Party?

According to the dialectic of circumstance, herein lies the historical dimension of the new foundation of the Left: in the short term, it will not be possible to speak of a unity of the Left, but in the medium term it will be. ‘The Left’ will compel the SPD to enter into a unification of the Left – either in opposition or in a conjoint government. And, in this manner, Lafontaine will have succeeded in achieving what, according to his own estimation in 1999, he never wished to achieve: namely, the exertion of considerable influence on the course of the SPD.

Now that The Left Party is on the scene, the SPD is no longer able to be a free-floating multi-option party, a role in which it felt very comfortable for a long time, for strategic reasons – even if it was constantly to the detriment of their former programme. The Left Party’s attack – that is to say, its very foundation – brought
the SPD back into Social Democratic waters, in terms of policy (the minimum wage). Subsequently, Lafontaine promptly followed up tactically and strategically, by extending, via an interview in Der Spiegel, an offer of coalition to the SPD. Quite clearly the ball now lies in the SPD’s court. For in spite of all the repudiations on the part of officials and functionaries, the vast majority of members and voters feel a much closer bond to The Left Party than the Christian Union, not to mention the FDP.

We should not be deceived by the fact that Beck promptly labelled Lafontaine’s offer as one ‘not to be taken seriously’. In fact the general secretary revealed just how immensely seriously the SPD takes both the competition and the offer from The Left Party. According to Hubertus Heil, the ‘political aim’ of the SPD is to hinder the ‘westwards expansion of the PDS’ in any upcoming elections. It hopes to avoid entering into coalition with The Left Party in the old federal states, but this possibility cannot be entirely excluded, and the decision remains with the various affected regional associations. Such an unprotected glance into the future is all the more astonishing when, up until now – apart from in Bremen – The Left Party has no representation in any West German regional government. Clearly, the party leadership of the SPD is reckoning with a quite different length of half-life than those ‘professional’ observers of the zeitgeist cited at the beginning.

The Greens

Yet if, against this backdrop and in light of the coming spring elections in Lower Saxony and Hessen, there is already talk of coalitions at a regional level, then it is also to be assumed that nothing should stand permanently in the way of a coalition at a federal level – indeed, this is what the history of the Green Party teaches us. It is simply a matter of time before the Left majority, already in existence at the last federal elections, is turned from its currently virtual state into a real one.

This presupposes, of course, that the eco-party, should it one day come to take the oath, would count itself as part of the left-wing camp in the broader sense. For it is through the Green Party that the actual fault lines of speculations about a coalition run. The Greens have become the tipping point on the scale. Whether black–yellow–green (CSU–CDU/Greens/FDP), red–green–yellow (SPD/Greens/FPD) or red–red–green (SPD/Left/Greens) – all combinations are possible. With the foundation of the new Left Party the old four-party system is finally consigned to the past; and with it any prospect of the smaller coalitions that characterized the Bonn Republic for more than forty years. The ending of this tradition itself constitutes a historic event.

After the next election, the main issue will be in what camp the Greens wish to be counted in future. For the moment this remains largely open. To that extent, it is no surprise the Green Party had the least to say following the foundation of The Left Party. The ‘tear’ goes straight through the middle of the Green Party leadership too – and even more so through its membership. When the Red–Green coalition was first elected in 1998, it was the left-wing Lafontaine who embodied the Red–Green exemplar of the SPD. And right until the end of that coalition, the economic liberal Gerhard Schröder remained the unloved ‘Basta-chancellor’, intolerant of discussion or reflection. Today the heart of most Green Party members still beats, as Lafontaine likes to say, on the Left.

In contrast to all this, however, there is a preference in media circles as well as in growing sections of the Green leadership for the so-called ‘Black Light’ coalition of the CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens, while for the former Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin, a coalition of SPD, FDP and Greens would be fitting for a ‘modern Germany’ – a shocking proposition for a one-time pronounced left-winger. But how the rank and file of the party, who tend towards the Left, could be warmed to a coalition with Liberals, who are just as much hated today as they were yesterday, is impossible to imagine. The
Left, and especially Oskar Lafontaine, are all too aware of this. Appropriate forays in the direction of the Greens, in terms of competition as well as coalition, should be on the agenda very soon.

It is thus quite easy to forecast the future on the basis of the founding conference of The Left Party: it was the historic catalyst of numerous party-political turbulences, whose shockwaves will continue to affect things over the next few years. First and foremost, the new Left now occupies a large empty space that opened up in all the old parties as a result of their lack of sensibility regarding social questions. The blatant failure to address social justice in their policies is the main reason why ‘The Left’ is currently benefiting from an influx from all camps, apart from the Liberals. The outgoing CSU leader, Edmund Stoiber, was in this sense quite justified in warning his party against underestimating The Left Party – not as revolutionaries, but as rivals. The less the established parties challenge social disparity in the country, the more they will have to reckon with the new Left.

Translated by Esther Leslie

Notes


Third Text is an international scholarly journal dedicated to providing critical perspectives on art and visual culture. The journal examines the theoretical and historical ground by which the West legitimises its position as the ultimate arbiter of what is significant within this field. Established in 1987, the journal provides a forum for the discussion and (re)appraisal of the theory and practice of art, art history and criticism, and the work of artists hitherto marginalised through racial, gender, religious and cultural differences. Dealing with the diversity of art practice within the visual arts – painting, sculpture, installation, performance, video and film – Third Text addresses the complex cultural realities that emerge when different world views meet, and the challenge this poses to eurocentric and ethnocentric aesthetic criteria. The journal aims to develop new discourses and radical interdisciplinary scholarships that go beyond the confines of eurocentricity.

WRITING EUROPE
SPECIAL ISSUE
88 VOLUME 21 ISSUE 5 JULY 2007


FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT
Routledge Publishing, Taylor and Francis Ltd, Customer Services Department
Rankine Road, Basingstoke, Hants RG24 8PR, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 1256 813 002 Fax: +44 (0)20 1256 330 245
OR Routledge Publishing, Taylor and Francis Ltd, Customer Services Department
325 Chestnut Street, 8th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA
Tel: +1 215 625 8900 Fax: +1 215 625 8914
Email: journals.orders@tandf.co.uk Website: www.tandf.co.uk/journals