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Social Democratic Basic Values And The Work Of The SPD Basic Values Commission

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by Julian Nida-Ruemelin on 27 March 2012



The basic demands of the French Revolution – Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – are also the basic values of German Social Democracy: Freedom, Justice and Solidarity.

“Freedom” here is not used in the narrower liberal sense of formal freedom under the law or the free-for-all of economic markets, but rather means the concrete legal, social, economic, cultural and political conditions that enable

citizens to live a self-determined life;

“Equality” does not just mean equality before the law, but also the concrete legal, social, economic, cultural and political conditions that give all citizens equal chances to participate and equal opportunities in life;

“Solidarity” is not the lobbyism of a specific group, social stratum or class, but a practice of cooperation and inclusion at the national, European and global level that is founded on the universal values of equal freedom for all.

Ever since the SPD’s Godesberg Programme of 1959, basic values have played a central role in the political manifestos of German Social Democracy. The core message of the Godesberg Programme is contained in the first sentence of the opening chapter (“Basic Values of Socialism”): “Socialists aim to establish a society in which every individual can freely develop his personality, and as a serving member of the community contribute responsibly to the political economic and cultural life of mankind.”

The SPD's Berlin Programme of 1989 stated: "Only where civil rights and liberties are guaranteed and exercised can people live as free and equal citizens and practice democracy. Only where basic social rights are put in place can civil rights and liberties and rights of political participation be enjoyed by all." That is what differentiates this from the conservative and liberal concepts of freedom.

When the SPD decided at its party conference in December 1999 to draw up a new basic programme in response to the new global political and economic realities, the basic values themselves were the only non-negotiable item. In the new basic programme they would remain "the yardstick and guiding principle of our policy", the "standard by which the political reality is judged, the benchmark for a new and better ordering of society and a reference point for the actions of individual Social Democrats".

The discussion that preceded the SPD's Hamburg Programme of 2007 was likewise characterised by a continuing commitment to the basic values, which party members sought to reinterpret for the present times. This emerged from the discussions that took place at grass roots level and from the results of a membership survey. The findings were consistent across all age groups and occupational categories: the basic values were regarded as "very important", with *Justice* ranking first in order of precedence (77%), followed by *Solidarity* (70%) and *Freedom* (66%).

The Hamburg Programme now serves as the guideline for ongoing discussion and development of the Social Democratic policy programme. In a manifesto-driven party, such as the SPD has been for nearly 150 years, manifesto principles need to be matched by political practice. Here the SPD Basic Values Commission has a special role to play.

Since it was first set up in 1973, the SPD Basic Values Commission has been working on issues which – in the words of Willy Brandt himself – "go beyond the immediate present". In a rapidly changing world, new questions are constantly being asked that require an answer grounded in the basic values. This is principally about issues that have long-term implications and wider significance for the political culture and political action.

To ensure that the Basic Values Commission can make an effective contribution, its membership consists of leading figures and activists who between them represent all the important trends and forces in Social Democracy today. It also draws on the expertise of outside experts and academics, and seeks to connect with the broader scientific and social debate.

Here are some of the issues that have shaped the recent work of the Commission:

1. Following the decades-long dominance of market-radical ideology, it is time to redefine the relationship between the state and the market. At the back of this is the question of the extent of public and social services, and whether Social Democracy should make the project of a significant expansion of the public sector, particularly in the area of education and social services, one of its central programmatic aims.
2. The SPD has always spoken out strongly on education policy, and that will continue to be the case. If the entire education system is to be reorganised to reflect humane and social values, we need to have a proper debate about the education curriculum, to which the Basic Values Commission will be contributing.
3. The principle of economic and ecological sustainability (or fairness to future generations and the conservation of natural resources) needs to be more forcefully elaborated in terms of its importance for all areas of political activity. The goal should be an eco-social regulatory policy that is Social Democratic in character, embracing ecological, social and humane political aims.

In future the Social Democratic debate about basic values must take on a broader European dimension. For the past two years at least, European politics have been in the grip of the financial crisis. This has hit Europe at a time when the Social Democratic parties of Europe find themselves on the defensive, both in terms of their political power and their ideology. Social Democrats stand to gain very little from the crisis, or indeed from the fact that the idea of the social state is deeply rooted in European societies.

European Social Democracy faces a twofold challenge: on the one hand it needs to reassert its identity at the national level and take account of national distinctions, while on the other it must find a common approach in the European political arena. Both the national distinctions and the shared endeavours of European Social Democracy must be grounded in a consistent, and consistently normative, set of basic beliefs:

We must develop our ideas of **Solidarity** at the national and international level in such a way that social systems that have evolved over time are not played off against each other, but are brought into closer alignment.

We must work together to ensure greater economic and social **Justice**, because the gap between rich and poor is dramatically widening right across Europe. The big question, given the gross inequalities in income, is how we can put redistribution back at the heart of the economic debate.

We must counter the individualistic notion of **Freedom**, and its interpretation as “freedom from” the state, with a more inclusive and emancipatory “freedom to”, and we must persuade our fellow citizens once again that individual freedom needs a network of collective goods and effective democratic institutions.

This post is part of the 'Basic Values Debate' jointly organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Social Europe Journal. Read more on social democratic parties: 'The Future of the SPD as a Catch-All Party'.

