

# 150 Years of German Social Democracy

by Zygmunt Bauman



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Some time ago in Leipzig, representatives of 70 socialist and social democratic parties from all over the world met to commemorate an open letter issued by a citizen of Wroclaw, Ferdinand Lassalle, on 1 March 1863. In it, Lassalle addressed people who suffered injustice, were victims of intolerance or who had been denied their dignity. He called upon them to unite their efforts to build a world that will fulfil the principles of justice. Shortly afterwards, on 23 May, the first meeting of the people addressed in that letter was held in Leipzig. The ADAV (General German Union of Workers) was founded, an organization which became the prototype of all subsequent workers' associations in the whole of Europe. They all responded to Lassalle's challenge.

What did Lassalle want? He had quite a specific programme and, considering the historical context, one must admit that his vision was quite realistic:

1. To unite. Only in unity are we strong, individually we shall achieve nothing. We must merge our strength, our ideas and our courage.

2. We are uniting in a party, and then we will use our combined strength to win the general right to vote, to which man is entitled by virtue of his humanity.

3. When this has been achieved, the workers will form the absolute majority of the nation.

Most of Lassalle's contemporaries expected industrialization to last forever, just as we expected consumerism to last until 2007. Thus, a stage would be reached where society is divided into two parts: Workers, and those who supervise and exploit them. So, given the general right to vote, it seemed obvious that the workers would gain power in the state.

But what to do with that power? The state had to compel the banks to subsidize manufacturing cooperatives. Instead of factories owned by one man, each worker was to be co-owner of a factory – a cooperative of manufacturers. This was meant to be an alternative to the emerging industrial society. Industry – yes, scientific progress – yes, modernization – yes, but not in the manner pursued by capital, devoid of political control.

These postulates need to be updated, but as far as the objective is concerned, Lassalle's vision is a vision of a just society in which people live together in harmony and cooperation instead of competition and suspicion. This is on the agenda today just as it was 150 years ago.

We are celebrating an anniversary this year, and usually one talks of the heroes of anniversaries only in positive terms. In commemorative speeches, we forget the errors they committed in their lives. But regarding today's situation with social democracy, we must discuss a few unfortunate matters.

German social democracy has enjoyed many decades of rapid growth and triumph. Still ten to fifteen years ago, the attainment of 35 per cent of the votes was normal. Today, the SPD obtains about 24–26 per cent of the votes, which is a serious decline. Since the adoption of Agenda 2010 by Chancellor Schröder, the SPD has lost one third of its members – a disastrous downturn in the party’s history. The SPD is in huge difficulties. One must admit this honestly. This year’s anniversary is not a moment of triumph. Rather, it is an opportunity to realize how great is the effort that lies on the road to triumph.

What are the reasons for this historical downturn? Why is social democracy in a crisis, why in public opinion polls do fewer and fewer people place themselves to the left of centre?

The wonderful Portuguese writer José Saramago expressed a cruel, even brutal opinion of this: “The [social democratic] movement once represented some of mankind’s greatest hopes, but with the passing of time it has ceased to play this role. This movement has sold itself to the left-wing”. The left-wing’s programme tells the right-wing: “Whatever you do, we do it better”. Instead of preparing a programme for the future, the socialists are trying to prove they can do the same as the right wing. The illustrious Belgian political scientist Jean-Michel De Waele wrote that the great collapse of the capitalist-consumer-banking economy in 2007, instead of boosting the left wing, revealed its inherent weaknesses.

If you consider the SPD’s current situation, you will notice two different attitudes that are difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, there is an attempt to satisfy those who are paying the costs of the crisis, while on the other hand there is total confirmation of the economic model that is being realized in Germany. To quote Antonio Gramsci – the right wing has won the cultural war with the left.

What is the war about? According to Gramsci, the social situation and man’s social condition depend not on bargaining at the top or on political moves, but only on philosophy. But not philosophy in the sense of university seminars, but the philosophy that is called either ideology or, more recently, *imaginaire*: – a term coined by Deleuze, later used by Castoriadis, and now avidly discussed by Charles Taylor.

*Imaginaire* is in other words how we imagine the world order, what the conditions for our actions are, and for what values it is worth struggling or, if necessary, make a sacrifice.

The bourgeois *imaginaire* has triumphed. I shall now present its most conspicuous features. A panacea for all social ills is an increase in output measures in terms of GDP – there are no other ways to improve mankind’s lot. But behind this assumption there lies a hidden, silent condition – one can increase the production of industrial commodities to no end, one can deliver more and more goods.

The second assumption is that human happiness consists in visits to the shops – all roads to happiness lead via shopping, in other words an increase in consumption. At the basis of this thinking lies the conviction that consumption can be increased ad infinitum and that

one can forget about other simple, primitive pre-industrial methods of achieving happiness. And there were such methods.

The search for happiness is recorded in the results of our natural and cultural evolution, and is universal to all members of the human race. Maybe we forget the methods that were applied in the past, even 1,000 years ago, such as satisfaction from a job well done, an “instinct of workmanship” as Thorsten Veblen described it, a pleasure from working with other people, from friendly neighbours, from partnership, from a common march through life. All this we set aside. The shops provide us with all the pleasure.

The third assumption of bourgeois *imaginaire* is something called meritocracy: Although people are and will always be unequal, inequality in itself is not an evil. It is a means with which to increase prosperity. However, “people get rich through honesty and work”. If you try hard and work hard, you will find plenty of room at the top. Poverty and impairment are a sentence imposed not by fate, but by indolence or negligence.

All these three elements of bourgeois *imaginaire*, in other words the ideology of bourgeois “common sense”, are also in difficulty today. So it is not just social democracy that is in difficulty. This bourgeois *imaginaire* is as well.

Today we know that an endless increase in output is impossible and that the earth – our common home – will not withstand it. We know we must consider very carefully what to do so that our grandchildren can survive on earth. This second point is under a question mark, all the more so because with the current rate of consumption, we are already using up 150 per cent of the planet – 50 per cent more than what the planet is capable of giving us without self-destructing.

The third point is currently the most tragic in terms of the human suffering it is causing. Paradoxically, young people today, aged from 16 to 25, are the most educated generation in history, and yet also the most unemployed generation in history. That is a great misfortune. Millions of young people who do not know what to do with themselves feel redundant and drift into violence. This has been increasing in recent years.

The baby boom generation, the X-Y generation – all these post-war generations have shared a common feature: They regarded the point where their parents had brought them as their starting point. “This is where we start, and we will go much further than mum or dad”. Today’s generation is the first to suffer sleepless nights because it is not sure if it can maintain the social status it has inherited. This is a total change of mood, a change to the rules of our inter-generation co-existence.

These are the problems we are facing today. The fact that the left wing, social democracy, has allowed bourgeois ideology to win the cultural war is particularly regrettable and humiliating, all the more so because it has occurred at a time when that ideology is in an increasingly worse crisis. And social democracy is incapable of exploiting this favourable circumstance.

The misfortune of today's social democracy is that there is no alternative vision, no "utopia". Chancellor Schröder has gone down in history with his remark that there is no capitalist or socialist economy, there is only a good or a bad economy. It is as if he had thrown in the towel: "I give in, I have nothing to say. We are all in the same camp – we are all aiming towards a good economy". There was no thought here of the message of this already semi-bankrupt bourgeois *imaginaire*.

Well, the time has finally come to wonder why this has happened. Let us not simplify the matter, it is not a question of electing bad leaders or a bad party. Let us put aside for a moment the press hype about corruption, dishonesty etc., which brings the morality of politics down to the level of the morality of politicians. Why is politics the way it is? Why are things developing contrary to logic?

This is attributable to a series of matters. I will start with the most conspicuous one: the fall of the Berlin Wall. This did not just free the world from the threat of totalitarianism and nuclear annihilation. After all, Russia today has exactly the same number of warheads as it had then, yet no one is losing sleep through fear that war will break out. It is not true that the fear was caused only by the accumulation of warheads. There was something more – the myth of an alternative society. It was generally believed that communist society had shed the troubles with which the capitalist West was struggling to no avail. It was feared that unless something is done to mend the holes in the social situation in the world of capitalist democracy, people would revolt in support of that alternative.

This is the way in which communism attempted to impose an agenda upon the rest of the world: The undertaking of such tasks as the struggle against misery, humiliation and impairment. Compensation for the role of the working class in the process of creating wealth, the right to education for all, and health care.

The capitalist rest of the world undertook these tasks with the aid of social democracy, which forged ahead in this direction with far greater success than communism itself (not so much in order to pave the way for communism as to block its path). The lives of workers improved considerably, the general standard of living rose and workers' self-defence organizations were legalized, so that social democracy fulfilled most of the postulates that communism had extolled in its ideology but never put into practice itself. As the insightful Italian political scientist Roberto Toscano put it so succinctly: "Communism was a very good thing for everyone except for those who had the misfortune to live under it."

Thus, the fall of the Berlin Wall has had dual consequences. Capitalism felt free on its home ground, and for the first time in ages the world began to live without an alternative. Karl Jaspers said he was afraid of something like a unification of mankind or a world government, because he would have nowhere to escape to. And that is what happened. Sooner or later, everyone must go along the same road.

During the thirty years after World War II the scale of social inequality began to diminish and people were sure that the tendency for it to increase had been brought under control. Yet after the fall of the Berlin Wall this inequality began to rise once again. Since 2007, 93 per cent of the value added produced in the United States has been appropriated by 1 per cent of Americans; the remaining 99 per cent have had to make do with the remaining 7 per cent of the value added. These are alarming figures. They would have been unthinkable during the "glorious thirty post-war years". We are currently undergoing a split of our existential situation. On the one hand, there are powers liberated from political control, while on the other hand we have politics that is suffering from a chronic shortage of power.

Power is the ability to do things. Politics is the ability to decide how things should be done. The marriage of power and politics has fallen apart. We are living in a period of their divorce. This is a serious problem for social democracy, because ever since Lassalle's days the answer to the question who is realizing its social problems has been obvious: The state, having both the power and the political tools to use this power properly. But power released from political control is capable of guiding itself by its own interests. Politics can and does promise much, for prime ministers and chancellors must win elections. But it cannot fulfil them. Not so much because of bad will or deceit, as because of the divorce between power and politics.

Another cause of social democracy's present troubles is – and let us have no illusions about this – the decline of the working class which was the political base of social democracy. Today, the working class is going through the same process as the peasantry went through in the 19th century. The farmers entered the 19th century representing 90 per cent of the population. They ended the century as 10 per cent of the population.

The percentage of workers in Europe is already falling below 20 per cent. The great industrial plants in which solidarity was born have disappeared. Yet these were great, effective schools of social solidarity, venues of a common march towards jointly established objectives. At present, the proletariat is being dissolved in something which one may call in French *précarité* – precariousness, a feeling that the ground beneath our feet is unstable, that we are living on top of shifting sands, chronic uncertainty. A feeling of *précarité* is enveloping an increasing portion of the middle classes. But the difference is that being packed in factories, under one roof and in the same situation (with measurement of time and movement, as introduced by Frederick Taylor, or on Henry Ford's assembly line, which places everyone in a straight row) was a different school – factory – of solidarity.

Today we are in a totally different situation in which everyone hunts everyone else. We live in schools – factories – of mutual suspicion and competition. According to the new management philosophy, every employee is obliged to prove to his supervisors that when the next round of job cuts come, he should not be dismissed but his neighbour. Unlike the

proletariat, people under *précarité* have no tendency towards solidarity, except for the type of solidarity which I call "explosive" or "festive" – a solidarity that does not encourage one to join ranks, but merely serves to synchronize shouting. How to proceed from shouting to transforming social living conditions remains unknown.

In my opinion, these are the main, but not all, causes of the troubles which these 70 parties that met to honour Ferdinand Lassalle are now experiencing. To quote Gramsci, nothing comes of this except the need for a new cultural struggle. The replacement of the old, worn out and unrealistic *imaginaire* with another one. This is work that will take many long years.

I wish to end with a confession. Sometimes I feel the way the first socialists in the 19th century must have felt. They were a tiny minority, on the sidelines of political life. There was no question of winning elections, or even taking part in them. The more courageous ones among them, such as Lassalle, decided to work up from the very bottom, so they rolled up their sleeves and got down to work with energy. They did not expect solutions to social problems to fall from heaven. They prepared themselves for long, drawn-out polemics with the common way of thinking at that time. I am not saying we should start from the same point yet again. I am merely showing the similarity between the situation in which Ferdinand Lassalle struggled with the opinions prevalent in his day and the situation we are in today. I do not agree with the optimists who claim we are living in the best of worlds, nor with the pessimists who suspect that the optimists may be right. I attach myself to the third category of people today – people of hope who believe the world can be made more hospitable than it is right now.

Just like our forefathers almost two hundred years ago, today we are like acorns from which mighty oaks should grow. No majority ever started off in any other way except as a minority, a minority that often caused laughter and mockery. Fortunately for us and for the remainder of the human race, if we are acorns, then at least we are the ones endowed with the ability to think and choose.

The tasks facing us cannot be fulfilled between today and the date of the next elections. The building of a more hospitable world is not a jar of instant coffee. One has to wait for the results. There is nothing here for instant use. But on the other hand, no one can guarantee success in advance. Failure will be separated from success by the presence or absence of a long-term perspective, accompanied by a suitable measure of patience and determination as well as the longevity, or even the immortality, of hope.

***This is the text of a lecture delivered by Zygmunt Bauman in Wrocław in June 2013. The lecture took place by invitation of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Ferdinand Lasalle Center for Social Thought. Translation by George Szenderowicz.***

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