

Back to the Roots?

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How left movements and parties see themselves in society and how they behave towards people outside of them has been continually changing in the last 150 years. As a result, they have been able to reach specific social groups more successfully while others have tended to elude their reach.

Left movements and parties emerge as self-organised movements, as movements of social, economic, cultural, and political self-help and self-assertion. In this emergent phase, reaching people means finding common paths towards the realisation of one's own interests and of mutual aid. The earlier organisations were not detached from the masses; they were part of everyday life. The representation of political interest, social protection, the organisation of economic struggles, militant solidarity, conscious internationalism, and the appropriation of culture and education constituted a unity. This was a common feature of all left movements and parties that arose in this period. In the following brief theses, this question will be traced using the example of the German labour movement.

The crowding together of people in factories and residential areas created the space for this. The disappearance of this space and the social relations tied to this disappearance since the 1970s is seen as a primary factor in the decline of left movements. Certainly, this aspect is important – but more important still is the question of why left parties and movements could not appropriately react.

The cause can be traced to the beginning of these movements. The founding of the Social Democratic Party by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht already had its organisational-political background: Under Lasalle an organisation had emerged that was concentrated on his personality or those of his successors. The new organisation, according to Bebel, ought to be not only socialist but also democratic. In 1869 he declared that as soon as a party recognises a specific person as an authority it moves outside the realm of democracy – because the belief in authority, blind obedience, and the cult of personality are in themselves undemocratic. The rise of German social democracy thus rested on two pillars – the political separation from bourgeois liberals (carried out by Lasalle) and the its constitution as a democratic force in itself. The emancipatory claim vis-à-vis society had its counterpart in the emancipatory claim raised in relation to each other, in its own organisation and its own culture. Reaching people meant giving them a political and cultural activity that they would have to shape together with their comrades.

However, already by the end of the 19th century this democratic feature came under pressure and began to lose its relative weight. The apparatuses and parliamentary groups moved back to the centre of political initiative. Rather than in the party organisation itself, the emancipatory elements were manifested in a rich social democratic associative life and in economic struggles. In Western Europe, on the one hand, and in Russia, on the other, different organisational models developed under different conditions. The professional revolutionary of the Leninist type and the organisation based on him became the point of departure of a then generalised type of communist party within the Communist International. In German social democracy, Rosa Luxemburg, already by the beginning of the 20th century and with increasing exasperation, had criticised the gradual disenfranchisement of the 'simple' party members. With the approval of war credits in 1914 and the impeding of the further advance of Germany's November Revolution in 1918 this process was

completed. From being an organisation of self-empowerment the party became an organisation that disenfranchised, that confirmed that the masses were not ready to lead a society. It finally became an electoral association that could be borne by its members but only on condition that the latter let themselves be led. It conveyed the certainty that the leadership already knew what is to be done. In the Communist current a similar process took place. Following Lenin (but partly also distorting him), the apparatuses essentially adopted the same path as social democracy, only under different ideological auspices: The members were to trust the functionaries who know the path and the means. The parties, originating as self-organisation, began to choose their members; the selection and, if need be, sorting, evaluation, and control of the membership increasingly became the privilege of the apparatuses. To reach people now meant to find those who are ready to be inserted into a framework that had already developed. With the Stalinisation of most communist parties the tradition of self-organisation as a constitutive factor rapidly lost ground. Self-organisation was relegated to the area of 'party-affiliated organisations' and was thus devalued. The class's claim to leadership became the party's claim to leadership, which then became the claim of the party apparatus. This constellation emerging in the 1920s changed little in the following decades. In the countries of real-existing socialism this claim was reinforced by a partly concrete conflation of party and state apparatuses – culminating in the mass terror of the Stalin era.

Naturally, the element of self-organisation and self-empowerment never completely disappeared. However, this active representation of oneself was gradually subordinated to the representation of interests via an abstraction, that is, the party. It was no longer so important that actual bearers of working-class interests were independently active – what was important was that they let themselves be led and were active in the given framework. This is not to say that this structure of political action could not score successes; certainly many protagonists of this path subjectively had a praiseworthy goal of people, within this framework, emancipating themselves from the given social limitations. But historically this approach failed.

If the 19th century was the century of left self-organisation, then the 20th century was the century of left representational politics: interests were represented, and the left was proud of this. The problem is that this permitted a leadership claim and finally the power to define interests. It worked as long as various promises could in fact be fulfilled. In the end, the assumption of responsibility by this stratum for improving living conditions was also convenient – one could benefit from the results without either the burden of endless debates or the strenuous activism that would otherwise have been required. But in the process the masses also lost their capacity to recognise and articulate their own interests and appropriately organise for them. Parties were not seen as entities that offered a space and a support for one's own activism but as corporate bodies that emerged in the place of that activism. In this sense, the communist parties became social-democratised, not ideologically, not in relation to their political demands and their social-political goals but in terms of their path – the path 'from above', even if this 'above' differed from the social democratic above and the discourse was one of revolution. At any rate, not only were the successes substantial in terms of binding people to the organisation but also with respect to two claims linked to the 'left mode of life': trust and truthfulness. According to contemporary witnesses in 1989/1990, the SED's loss of its member base among workers was above all connected with the feeling of having been lied to by the party leadership and functionaries – in relation to its own history, the real economic, ecological, and social situation, and also the financing of party work.

In 1990 the PDS tried, as a membership party, to break with this logic and return to the roots of left movements as expressions of their members' self-organisation. The attempt very quickly failed. However, time is required to reach the masses, the more so when a party is accomplishing a 180-degree turnaround regarding a certain tradition. The consolidation phase was assured especially by the self-initiative of many members in the various interest communities and work groups. After this phase a new generation of substitutive/representative [[substitute-representative]] politicians appeared on the stage. This seemed logical – the masses apparently did not want self-organisation but representation. He who represents them well has voters; he who has voters has seats in the parliaments; he who has seats in parliament has money for the organisation; he who has money for the organisation can represent people better and win better representatives because personal survival can be ensured. The cultural-emancipatory demands of those represented thus recede into the background and are imperceptibly transformed from an end to a means. An example is the recent demand, prompted by sagging poll numbers, to present Die LINKE once again as a 'care party'. However, this caring for the social concerns of concrete individuals in the 1990s was inseparable from the self-organisation of members and tied to related rights; the party offered an organisational framework for this. This framework no longer exists. Recreating it would require a reform of the party.

The participation in state governments in some eastern-German federal states starting in 1998 appeared to provide a means of reaching people in a completely different way.

In the balance sheet Harald Wolf draws of the PDS's and LINKE's government participation in Berlin from 2002 to 2011, he vividly depicts how these questions played out, concluding that the 'party of government' and the 'membership party' stand in a complicated relationship to each other – and, we would have to add, there is an enormous internal-party power gap dividing them. Wolf shows that false promises were frequently made in electoral campaigns in order to win voters. He establishes that as a result of government participation there was a transition from a 'clientelist-parasitic capitalism' in Berlin to a 'normal capitalism'. Leaving aside for now the need to qualify this formulation, there is no doubt that this transition is a success – but only insofar as it can be converted by the party into an increased capacity of the masses to act. In this Wolf takes up an old argument in the left – what is the sense of parliamentary struggle at all and what is the relationship of government participation to it? What goals can be realistically formulated? Are reforms an end or a means? For Rosa Luxemburg, the parliamentary struggle was important for creating more favourable conditions for the everyday struggles of the workers; for her, the measuring rod for all parliamentary action was whether the labour movement could gain more freedom of movement and learn to understand the system. This presupposes an active party membership between elections. Winning people for left politics via parliamentary or government activity thus presupposes the existence of two parties within the one party – one of them creates the possibilities for action and the other uses these possibilities. But with this a part of the party necessarily comes into conflict with the other. The resolution of this contradiction increasingly becomes the precondition for the winning over and retaining of new co-combatants.

There is no way back to the 19th century. The form of representation in 19th century social democratic movements and parties corresponded to the conditions of the period: the wage earner as a type was hugely visible, forced to similar forms of resistance and self-assertion through similar life conditions, and experienced this similarity literally every minute. The workers reached each

other – that was the way in which the party reached the masses. Although the class condition of being a wage worker has not changed it presents itself in a completely different way today. The old ‘reaching others amongst ourselves’ no longer exists. In the course of the establishment of the welfare-state compromise and the general cultural evolution many arenas of self-empowerment and self-assertion have been taken over by the state or private economic institutions. Why should and how can one offer people a framework for self-organisation when there are so many possibilities to express oneself non-committally? Yet the idea of a self-organised political party is actually still contemporary. Never before have wage-dependents been so skilled; they are no longer tied to a specific operation – which blinded them to social contexts – because of the new kind of consolidation of the social division of labour as a complex process, and they are consequently truly capable of gaining control over society together. Not to speak of the possibilities that the internet offers today. Why then do they leave the managing of society to lawyers, business economists, professors, and officials, that is, people with very limited views of the world but with greater rhetorical skills?

The problems of self-organisation in political space have been brought to people’s attention by the Pirate Party. In order to consolidate as a party it had to find someone to represent other than themselves – which actually contradicts the basic approach of the party. The base for this remained narrow.

Representation is indispensable. But how should it be shaped if a political, party-like organised force with left goals and demands is to achieve mass influence? Another way to express this is to ask what the right question is: How can an organisation bind people to it (in which case the organisation is conceived as a constant to which people have to accommodate)? – or: How can something be created around which people can themselves organise?

Against this background the question of how the left deals with forms of direct democracy, or of another kind of connection between direct and representative democracy on all societal levels and in the organisations themselves, takes on an existential significance. The opportunities for participation, created by today’s late bourgeois state under pressure of quite different factors, needs to be actively used just as much as alternative practices emerging in apparent ‘niches’. The retreat from public space, its privatisation, commercialisation, and fragmentation, as well as the emphasis on the internet as an unbinding and thoroughly commercialised surrogate for public space – all of this must be resisted – or, in the case of the internet, be relativised – by forms of encounter in which people can experience each other directly and openly deal with their contradictory as well as coinciding interests.

If the left movement wants to reach people once again then an organisational model is required gives self-confidence and trust in one’s own capacities back to ‘simple people’. The communist and the social democratic expropriation [[of this kind of self-confidence]] has to be reversed. This in turn is first of all a cultural task. In one’s own organisations a break with the habits of the past, with the behaviour of the past, has to be accomplished. No organisational model, however cleverly it is conceived, can substitute for this step, which has to be accomplished subjectively.

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