

The Historic Significance of the New German Left Party¹

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Wann seid ihr noch Linkspartei
Für die Arbeitsleute,
Tut was gegen Dienerei
Gegen die Beamtenmeute?
(Barbara Thalheim, *Der alte Sozi*, 2007)

Jetzt weiß ich, was soll es bedeuten,
Dass ich so traurig bin.
Dem Märchen aus uralten Zeiten
Fehlt heute ein Neubeginn.
(Barbara Thalheim, *Ich weiß nicht, was*, 2004)

“There are centuries in which nothing happens, and weeks in which decades happen” (Lenin). In such historic moments, what flourishes is not just the battle of ideas and the freedom social actors experience to change the social structures that determine them; frequently historical advance also depends on coincidence and individuals. In our time of pessimism, relativism and *posthistoire*, it is not easy to think historically and grasp historic time-compressions. This kind of thinking needs to be wrested from the culture-destroying media which turns even our historical responsibility and position into a spectacle created for the purpose of improved TV ratings. In what follows, an attempt will be made to do the necessary kind of thinking, as we focus our attention on the historical break which, to all appearances, we are now living through. A symptom of this break is the rise of a left political force in Germany.

I am going to argue, first of all, that the German Left Party, Die LINKE, is the first (party-)political leftist articulation of the contradictions of neoliberalism in the core capitalist countries (i.e. outside the Latin American [semi-]periphery). In recent years in many of these countries attempts have been made to establish leftist parties (both by regrouping old parties and by founding entirely new ones) which could counteract the neoliberalization or marginalization of the traditional parties of the labor movement. The parties include, first and foremost, Italy’s (somewhat compromised) Rifondazione Comunista, but also Jan Marijnissen’s Dutch Socialist Party (as the currently most influential opposition party in the Netherlands) and the Norwegian Left Party (with its promising national coalition government program and the contradictory role it played afterwards)² as well as smaller attempts with Québec Solidaire, the Scottish Socialist

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared as “Transformation des deutschen Parteiensystems und europäische historische Verantwortung der Linkspartei” in the issue of *Das Argument* dedicated to the founding of the German Left Party in June 2007 (*Das Argument* 49.3, no. 271: “Theorie und Politik einer neuen Linken,” pp. 329-47). I thank Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, Stephen Gill, Ingo Schmidt, Julian Germann, Sam Putinja and particularly Leonie Knebel for critical comments on different drafts of this paper.

² Cf. Asbjørn Wahl, “Der Fall Norwegen,” *Sozialismus*, October 2006.

Party, Respect! in the UK, etc. However, in all of these countries the new articulations either have not been exclusively left ones – often being in heavy competition with, or helpless in the face of, strong right-wing populist parties (France, Italy, the Netherlands) – or have been of limited relevance because of either their organizational size (Canada, the UK), their financial, intellectual and political resources (the UK, Canada, but to a degree also the Netherlands and the fragmented left in France), or simply the size of their countries and their relevance in the global political economy.

Second, apart from its exceptional status, I am arguing that the relevance of Germany's Left Party can only be unravelled through the lens of hegemony theory and needs to be seen in the context of an emerging hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism. In this context, parallels can be drawn between the impact of the 1968 events and the aftermath of 1848. Both historical eras are characterized by failed revolutions, the cooptation of certain revolutionary elements compatible with a new system of rule, and the marginalization of other – more radical – elements that were incompatible. In the post-1968 case, we are dealing with the partial cooptation of the “old” New Left and its absorption into neoliberalism – a new means of production and a way of life – followed by the emerging hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism and the consequent rise of a new left party, Die LINKE. In looking at the aftermath of 1848, we have to consider the subsequent relationships among the bourgeois-democratic revolutionaries, the failure of all 1848 revolutions as a result of the historic conservative turn of the liberal bourgeoisie,³ the ensuing boom period that was partly due to the 1848 compromise between the old feudal elites and the ascending bourgeoisie, and finally the hegemonic crisis of Manchester Capitalism after 1873 that would mark the political ascent of the socialist labor movement as well as the rise of what Robert Cox has analyzed as the “era of rival imperialisms.”⁴ What this parallel suggests, is that just as the socialist labor movement differed from the bourgeois-democratic project of emancipation, so the new left will necessarily be politically and culturally distinct from the old left and the old “New Left”.

Third, the distinctive character of Die LINKE marks its rise as more than simply a normalization of Germany in the context of Western European proportional representation electoral systems, i.e. political systems characterized by the existence of (post-)communist left parties (to the left of traditional social democratic parties) which tend to gain from social

³ The failure of all 1848 revolutions has been explained by Eric Hobsbawm (1996: 9-26), following Marx's own analysis, invoking the idea of two hearts beating in the chest of the bourgeoisie. The split of the Tiers État into capital and labor – resulting from the dynamism of capitalist development – led to the first independent political articulation of the Quatrième État, the proletariat, making far-reaching demands on its former (bourgeois) partner in revolution. Leo Kofler (1984) has analyzed the bourgeoisie's need to stop the revolutions from radicalizing as its *conservative turn* leading to the emergence of two converging ideologies, feudal liberal conservatism (in Germany represented by the Free Conservatives) and capitalist conservative liberalism (represented in Germany by the National Liberals). In Germany, overdetermined by the passive revolution which Gramsci has analyzed as the path taken by nations coming late to capitalism (*Gefängnishefte [Prison Notebooks]* 5, Heft 8, § 236, p.1080; idem 5, Heft 9, § 89, pp.1137-41; idem 6, Heft 10, Teil 1, § 9, pp.1242-44), the economic ambitions of the liberal bourgeoisie were widely achieved in a process of co-optation (Bismarck's “revolution from above”) whereas its political ambitions failed and its representatives became marginalized. In the aftermath, many of the more politically liberal and radically minded elements of the bourgeoisie (including the successors to the small sector of German Jacobins) needed to switch to the social democratic labor movement to realize their original Enlightenment goals in a new context and through a different revolutionary subject, the proletariat. The parallels to the split of the 1960s reform movement into the widely – albeit in a perverted sense – successful “*critique artiste*” (as opposed to the marginalized “*critique sociale*”) should be obvious (Boltanski/Chiapello 2003).

⁴ Cox 1987: 151-210; cf. Deppe et al. 2004: 11-36.

democratic right-turns. Fourth, without Die LINKE, Germany would have been the next country (after France, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland etc.) to lose a significant share of the fragmented or declassed working class to modern right-wing populism or right-wing extremism. Fifth, because of all this, Die LINKE carries a historic responsibility transcending the German context (and arguably even the European context). Sixth, nonetheless, modern right-wing populism has not been eclipsed for good, as can be seen in cases where the PDS suffered electoral defeats as a result of having participated in or tolerated state governments led by the SPD. Therefore, seventh, in order to retain credibility, Die LINKE must insist on setting strictly anti-neoliberal conditions for government participation.

Finally, in the current conjuncture new political formations may find themselves in a situation in which they have to use the parliamentary rostrum to *make* their own classes, for example by shifting the discourse, by connecting themselves to and politically strengthening the trade-union movement (etc.), in an initial top-down approach (according to Gramsci's understanding of socialism also being "organization"). This means that class re-formation must rely on political parties of a new type and that political parties can – if they are conscious of it – create precisely the forces they need in order to "stay left" in the political sphere, which presupposes that these parties understand or come to understand how they need to construct their efforts around a clear class project.⁵

Neoliberal Transformation of Social-Democracy and the Rise of the Left Party

The rise of a left political force in Germany is a fairly recent development although it has a longer pedigree than may at first appear. The success story of the German Left Party began with the national elections of September 2005. Ever since, the Left Party has been represented in the German Bundestag, initially as a joint fraction of the Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit [Electoral Alternative for Work and Social Justice] (WASG) – which was initiated in the West by SPD dissidents and left trade-unionists – and the major East German party, the PDS.⁶ The most recent elements of this success included the first entry (in May 2007) into a West German state parliament (the state of Bremen), the founding of two youth and student associations (*Linksjugend*, with ca. 3,000 members, and the "new SDS" [Die Linke.SDS]) in the same month, the founding of the all-German (i.e. East-West) Die LINKE itself on June 16, 2007 in Berlin, and the ensuing wave of new party-members including leading trade-unionists and SPD and Green Party politicians as well as the remarkable emergence of local party institutions even in some of the smallest West German towns.

The process that led up to this point appears as if it were inevitable or at least linear. Of course, some people still remember the birth pangs of this great historic project which included

⁵ Assessing whether these requirements are met or can be met by the German Left Party is crucial and yet it cannot be done in the space available here and therefore will have to be addressed elsewhere. However, without being able to determine the party's future course at this point, what can be said for sure is that also in this respect there exist reasons for optimism (of the will).

⁶ The Left Party has been seen by most commentators as the real winner of the national elections of 2005. Die LINKE won 8.7% of all the votes, which equaled 54 seats in parliament (3 of them through direct candidates: Petra Pau, Gesine Löttsch and Gregor Gysi). One Die LINKE parliamentarian, Gert Winkelmeier, left the party in 2006, which means that currently Die LINKE has 53 MPs (out of a total of 613). The absolute number of people who voted for Die LINKE in 2005 was 4.086 million (out of 47 million valid votes and 61 million eligible voters). In all the polls from the different polling institutes, Die LINKE has been seen as the strongest opposition party since May 2007 and has been receiving between 9 and 14% support (which, based on voter participation and MP seat distribution of the national elections of 2005, would equal around 4 to 6.5 million votes and 56 to 87 MPs).

serious concerns each partner had about the other, for example, some West-German reservations about the PDS's "neoliberal government participation" and "fiscally conservative administration of poverty" in the state of Berlin, and the East German criticism of an alleged West German welfare-state illusionist orientation (derived from the Western Fordist experience) and hesitancy to subscribe to the final goal of a democratic-socialist transcendence of capitalism. It is well to recall these problems, for it is easy not to see, in the midst of the high expectations for Die LINKE, that the emergence of this all-German party to the left of the SPD was in no way inevitable. It therefore seems to me useful rapidly to review the rise of the German Left Party against the background of the last decade, in order to envisage the historical transformation of the German party landscape which will characterize the decades to come.

In 1998, the first red-green coalition – its predecessor having lost due to unification⁷ – came to power in the Bundestag and became "the German left government under neoliberalism" (see Haug 2005: 452ff). This (apparent) shift to the left was already illustrated quite clearly in the composition of the new administration, which was full of former radical left-wingers (and social climbers, some of whom had not even graduated from university).⁸ Political commentary in Germany therefore understandably conceived of this change of administration as part of a general "left turn" in the core capitalist countries: In the US, the *New-Economy* boom awarded a second term to Democrat Bill Clinton, who had been elected with integrative social-popular rhetoric, and in 11 of the then 15 EU member states center-left governments "came to power." In the same year – in which the international political economist Susan Strange, in her book *Mad Money* (1998), sharply criticized the growing power of financial markets over industrial capital and the loss of control exercised by nation-states over their own currencies – even politics, at least beyond Anglo-American financial-market capitalism, appeared to react. Thus Germany's then SPD Minister of Finance, Oskar Lafontaine – demonized by the British tabloid *The Sun* as "the most dangerous man in Europe" – announced a re-regulation of financial markets. And although the Schröder administration, after Lafontaine quit, made the notorious hedge funds into its personal pet fund (Hätschelfonds), abolishing the original hedge fund ban, and although even today after the fierce "locust" debate⁹ the G-8 heads of state cannot manage to do better than a plea for voluntary self-control of hedge funds, the failure of a social democratic re-regulation of financial markets was at the time far from predictable.

Thus, in parts of the left (which as a whole is often depicted as eternally pessimistic) the discussion revolved less around the question of whether a neo-Keynesian shift was to be expected than around whether this development, taken at face value, was desirable.¹⁰ Even

⁷ The Eastern sentiment for unification naturally benefited the then ruling CDU chancellor Helmut Kohl, while at the same time Oskar Lafontaine's critique of immediate reunification and monetary union – grounded in his fear of East German deindustrialization and peripheralization – was portrayed by his CDU opponents as unpatriotic. This helped win Kohl an unexpected landslide victory over Lafontaine and the SPD.

⁸ Former Red Army Faction lawyers like Otto Schily and Gerhard Schröder (who had both represented RAF member Horst Mahler) were promoted to leading government posts, as were Hans-Christian Ströbele as well as former protagonists of the so-called Spontaneist scene (Foreign Minister Josef (Joschka) Fischer) or former members of the Communist League (Environmental Minister Jürgen Trittin). Personally, this generation was diametrically opposed to the predecessor regime.

⁹ Then Minister of Labor Franz Müntefering had likened foreign speculative financial investors to a plague of locusts and initiated a lengthy debate about "Rhenish Capitalism's" relationship to "Shareholder Value Capitalism," the German (and European) Social Model, unbridled capitalism and social equality, etc.; locust in German refers to private equity companies.

¹⁰ Thus in 1998-1999 the left-liberal weekly *Jungle World* (which emerged from the editorial strike and split in the socialist news daily *junge Welt*) carried a long running debate on the question of Keynesianism.

Georg Fülberth's 1999 recapitulation of East-West German post-war history anticipated, although more cautiously, a development different from what actually was to occur in the Red-Green administration: "In the mid-1990s, in response to the previous neoliberal and conservative hegemony, center-left governments were elected in most EU countries. They did not fundamentally challenge deregulation and privatization, and even partly pushed these developments further. However, they claimed they could simultaneously achieve more social equality. Whether these two tendencies are compatible is still an open question" (Fülberth 1999: 289).

Hence it seemed as if the neoliberal counterrevolution would be followed at least by a classic institutionalist social-policy rectification of social processes (which had been transfigured into natural laws), i.e. by state-run social-democratic coordination of the modernization process driven by capitalist competition and technological development, along with an ironing out of its most drastic dislocations. The ensuing seven-year period of Red-Green government in Germany, however, proceeded in a quite different way, as we now know. It began with a change in foreign-policy direction which would have been unthinkable under a conservative regime (participation in an illegal war of aggression in former Yugoslavia), for which the Red-Green coalition traded on the credibility of their individual anti-fascist biographies, and diverted the new social movement's human-rights discourse towards human-rights militarism. In an atrocious historical irony, it was then the Red-Green coalition which made grand-style German participation in war thinkable again. The stretching of the interpretation of the German Constitution to justify military intervention in the Hindu Kush as national defense began here.¹¹ However, not only in foreign policy but also and especially in Red-Green economic, labor-market and social policy one saw neoliberalism's capacity for *trasformismo*, "in which the active elements, which emerge from the allied, and also from the antagonistic, classes are absorbed" (Gramsci, Gefängnishefte [Prison Notebooks] 1, Heft 1, §44: 101).

The SPD's neoliberal transformation, with the decisive influence of the Greens, was an affront to its electorate. It was not only institutional-political suicide, but also a scandal from a simply "moral" point of view. First, through wage-freezes the SPD cut the inflation-adjusted real

¹¹ The German Grundgesetz [Basic Law] article 26, paragraph 1 prohibits waging a war of aggression and aims at prosecuting actions disturbing peaceful relations among the world's peoples. Due to history, the peace question is very important in political debates in Germany, which have been characterized by a strong pacifist sentiment among the people. This sentiment is particularly apparent among East Germans and could be seen, for example, in Schröder's unexpected victory in the 2002 Federal Elections, due both to the way he presented himself as the "crisis chancellor" in the context of the Elbe flood and to the Red-Green coalition's opposition to the imminent war in Iraq, which caused a temporary rift in the transatlantic relationship. (American commentators, recognizing this specific German sensibility, more easily forgave German than French opposition to the Iraq war.) Interestingly enough, the strongest support for foreign entanglements, such as the war in Afghanistan, can nowadays be found among backers of the Green Party, whose original radical pacifism has almost completely given way to human rights interventionism. According to this generation's particular perception, it is not because of the imperialist war of annihilation in the East that "from German soil there should never again emerge war," but rather because of the Holocaust that military action *should* so emerge (in the sense that a special obligation of German foreign policy is now to prevent "Holocausts" from happening elsewhere). It is due to this paradigm-shift in the German discourse on war, supported by atrocious lies about the alleged "Holocaust" taking place in Yugoslavia, that German involvement in war, which nonetheless remains very unpopular among the general population, has become possible again. And yet, even among the Green Party rank-and-file the "war enthusiasm" has died down, as could be observed at the Green Party convention in September 2007, when the rank-and-file successfully rebelled against the party's Afghanistan policy and torpedoed the false confidence of the party leadership which had been convinced that it could connect the decision about the uncontested proliferation of the Isaf mandate to the unpopular decision of sending German Tornado airplanes to Afghanistan.

pensions of “their” pensioner constituency. Second, ever since the Red-Green Hartz-IV legislation,¹² a great part of “their” worker constituency is threatened, after a year’s unemployment, with personal ruin and social exclusion. With the tightening of the regulations on the unemployed’s right reasonably to refuse a job, with the downgrading of the category of *Arbeitslosengeld* (unemployment benefits) – which up to then had tied benefits to former income – to the category of *Sozialhilfe* (welfare), which has the character of alms and was originally meant to support people unable to work due to physical handicaps, mental problems, immigration status etc., the unemployed are being harassed, and the new degrading procedures for financial disclosure and the drying-up of unemployed persons’ incomes before they receive any welfare payments are now a threat to the majority of people who live in fear of losing their job.¹³ Needless to say, the Red Green welfare cuts are individualizing the social and political problem of unemployment without even slightly reducing its scope. Third, the health-care system reform, along with the newly introduced *Praxisgebühr*, which is a 10 €co-pay to be paid at doctor’s visits every three months, meant, for everyone, less services for more money, and in the same breath billion-Euro contributions were given to the capitalist class on such a scale that even a conservative Prime Minister, Jürgen Rüttgers – who had been maneuvered into power precisely on the basis of this very SPD policy – began worrying and called for an end to the “grand illusion” that tax advantages for entrepreneurs automatically lead to more employment.

In short, the social compromise between capital and labor that had still been for the most part defended by the conservative-liberal coalition was now politically revoked by the SPD-Green coalition. If Tony Blair, who could draw on the neoliberal social reorganization of his predecessors Thatcher and Major, was according to Eric Hobsbawm a “Thatcher in trousers,” then Gerhard Schröder was in historic terms *the* German Thatcher who, because he was wearing the pants in his freaked-out party and in relation to the trade-unions, could better play this role than could any conservative.

The SPD’s “betrayal” of their “constituency” was followed by a massive process of disintegration of internal party structures, while the party – gagged by Schröder’s claim of no alternative to the “reform” process being pursued, flanked by his frequent resignation blackmail – passively sat back and watched it happen. The SPD saw itself confronted by a historically unparalleled wave of party resignations and lost its support in one state-parliamentary election after another, either through voter abstention or voters switching to the CDU. This reached such a point that the notion of a “proletarianization of the CDU base” circulated in the feature pages of German bourgeois newspapers and magazines, leading a representative of the neoliberal counterrevolution’s avant-garde, the historian Paul Nolte, to warn the CDU not to change the direction of its “reform” politics (meaning the neoliberal reorganization of society).¹⁴ When

¹² Lowering the unemployment benefits to the level of social security benefits has brought down the payments received by the unemployed after a year of unemployment (or 18 months in the case of people 55 years old or older) to 345 euros per month plus the cost of rent in “adequate” housing (which for many people has entailed having to move into smaller apartments). Prior to Hartz IV unemployed workers had been receiving between 12 and 32 months of full “unemployment pay” (60 to 67% of the previous net salary) and after that “unemployment benefits” of 53-57% of the last net salary).

¹³ It is not difficult to imagine why Hartz IV has become a frequently used scareword for the majority of society. It is ironic that in this case one of the usual terms meant to conceal the rolling back of the welfare state has become a major factor discrediting Red Green claims to social justice. It is also no wonder therefore that there have been demands to change the name of the welfare reform in order to put it in a better light.

¹⁴ Nolte wrote: “Thus, the considerable similarity between the complex mixes of problems faced by the two big parties has recently become quite clear. Both leaderships are committed to a reform agenda not supported by a great many of their followers or only very reluctantly put up with. Both are struggling with the loss of milieu, against

finally in April 2005 even the heartland of Social-democracy, North Rhine-Westphalia, was lost as expected (after the devastating defeat in the municipal elections the year before) and the inner-party protest potential got ready for the wounded Chancellor's fall and an internal confrontation over the SPD's political direction and endless electoral defeats, suddenly the "not-another-word" politician Schröder, in a party-political coup d'état, cut the ground out from under this debate and, after a clandestine consultation with his party's blustering Machiavellian Franz Müntefering, called for new elections to be held at the end of 2005.

This maneuver not only shifted his own party into an electoral state of exception (with an election already considered unwinnable), but also had an additional purpose. In West Germany social protest had found a political form on the left margin of the SPD, as the northwest German *Wahlalternative* [electoral alternative] and the Bavarian *Initiative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit* [Work and Social Justice Initiative] (*IASG*), which soon combined into the *WASG* [Electoral Alternative for Work and Social Justice] and came together in June 2004 in Berlin for their first federal conference, created an unusual echo in the media. Thus *Der Spiegel*, in its June 24, 2004 online edition, saw the new party as "dangerous for the SPD," although since the failure of the Democratic Socialists (DS) in the beginning of the 1980s there seemed to be an unwritten law to the effect that post-war history showed the hopelessness of party formations to the left of the SPD.¹⁵ Moreover, the central weakness of the *Wahlalternative* was already visible in its national conference, namely that it drew on a specific and comparatively homogeneous spectrum with clearly limited outreach. Thus the *WASG*'s circle of activists and sympathizers consisted of a mixture of classical left trade-unionists and people disillusioned with the SPD, including trade-union-oriented Fordist employees in their 40s, socialized in the social-reformist 1970s and now in danger of descent down the social ladder – in other words, that part of the social spectrum which the bourgeois feature pages like to characterize as "*besitzstandswahrend*" ("protecting their vested rights") and, in a perversion of the original late 19th-century historical concept, as "*sozialkonservativ*." In fact, it first appeared as if the *WASG* was to be altogether cut off from crucial societal groups, such as the unemployed, the precariously employed, broad sections of those employed in the service sector, and younger workers. On the other hand, there were signs that it posed a threat to the SPD with several large union demonstrations, the spontaneous "Monday Demonstrations" against the Hartz IV laws (which, however, died down like brush fires),¹⁶ and the first serious rapprochements between representatives of the *WASG* and the PDS, which had emerged strengthened from the state parliament elections in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg as well as the European Parliament elections, and which in nation-wide polls was again almost everywhere above the 5% hurdle. What the SPD leadership seemed to be up to was

frustration, political withdrawal and populist temptations, found in about a third of our population. There is hardly any alternative for the CDU but to support Schröder and Clement. Anything else would be foolish and irresponsible. However, it would also be foolish, for the sake of improved electoral prospects, to call a halt to the debate on reform that has begun in the party and to yearn for the certainties of the Bonn Republic, whether of a social-policy ('Blüm') or societal and domestic policy ('Dregger') sort" (2004).

¹⁵ We should also keep in mind "that for almost fifty years – especially given the context of the Cold War and the elimination of the KPD – to the left to the SPD began the policial 'abyss', the realm of secret services, the Berufsverbote [blacklisting] and political judiciary" (Deppe 2007).

¹⁶ The adoption by the protesters of the term "Monday Demonstrations" was an affront to the West German historiography of the GDR, which saw the East German Monday Demonstrations of 1989 as a unique phenomenon whose goal was completely realized in the renunciation of the GDR and its absorption into the West. The 2004 anti-Hartz Monday Demonstrations, which started and mostly took place in the East, consciously used the 1989 slogan "We Are the People."

strangling in its cradle the new opposition forming to its left through an unwinnable national election that would end by handing over power to a conservative-liberal coalition as the lesser evil; then while out of government the leadership would presumably attempt, as it had done in the early 1980s, a renewal of the party after the crisis.

At this point it is helpful to recall the apocalyptic situation of the first half of 2005 when the WASG increasingly appeared to be dealing the PDS an unintended death blow as a left political force in the Bundestag. For despite the immediate short-term polls, according to which almost 20% of Germans could see themselves voting for a “Work and Social Justice” party, it was largely obvious that the WASG was not in a position to jump over the 5% hurdle on its own. Even in one of its homelands, North Rhine-Westphalia, and despite considerable media attention, the WASG was unequivocally defeated in its attempt to enter the state parliament. Moreover, no special electoral arithmetic was needed in order to envision that for the PDS in the East German states, where its electoral potential had grown to be about a fourth of the votes, there would be no room for play beyond this level, and consequently the WASG would necessarily take away from the PDS in the West exactly the votes essential to re-entering the Bundestag (see further Weis 2004: 114f). Critical warnings Frank Deppe gave to the Hamburg circle around the journal *Sozialismus* and VSA-Verlag, very much engaged in the WASG process, pointed to the gravity of the situation. And still from week to week the tone between the PDS and WASG worsened. Thus the PDS accused the WASG, or at least its North Bavarian offshoot, of having made unjustifiable “claims,” as early as its founding phase, “to being the dominant force” (Weis 2004: 112). And indeed, at its First National Convention, the WASG distanced itself in a notably aggressive way from the PDS, which it regarded as a part of the neoliberal problem (Soltz 2004).

In the end, it was thanks to Oskar Lafontaine, who had re-entered the political discussion after his 1999 resignation and in his March 2005 book *Politik für alle* [Politics for All] (168-172) had already discussed his possible role in a West German left party, and to Gregor Gysi and those forces in both parties working for convergence, but also – as historical irony would have it – to Schröder’s attempted blackmail, that a few weeks and months before the scheduled national election, an electoral alliance could be set up which despite the shamefully libelous media campaigns against Lafontaine and the German Left Party, was able to enter the Bundestag with 8.7% of the votes, showing the extent to which the population suddenly felt the need of a party to the left of the SPD.

Societal Transformation, Social De-classing, and Modern Right-wing Populism

As is known, one cannot draw direct conclusions from political elections about the relationship of social forces. It is therefore essential in evaluating the 2005 national election and its aftermath that we place them in the context of the last 30 years’ processes of transformation, commonly known as neoliberalism. It seems an historical paradox that at least a part of the neo-Keynesianism debate from the late 1990s and the promise of a neo-social-democratic managing of modernization “beyond left and right” are not dissimilar to the current debates. The differences are due to the collapse of the “Third Way” and the “Neue Mitte” – conceptual detritus from the end of the last century – which led to the SPD and CDU converging to the point of indistinguishability. Unlike what many had expected, the first decade of the 21st century has not been a post-neoliberal decade, not even in germ form, but rather one in which a significant part of the forces of resistance and cultural opposition in the spirit of 1968 have inscribed themselves into neoliberal counter-revolution.

After the victory of economic liberalism over political liberalism in the FDP (materialized in its coalition switch from the SPD to the CDU in 1982) and the ensuing first 16-year phase of moderate neoliberalism, the second, *social-democratic* phase of neoliberalism co-opted the Social-Democratic forces renewed in the period of opposition and the new social movements which had been consolidated into the new political form of the Green Party. This co-optation then meant a broadening of the basis of neoliberalism's rule, or, what Mario Candeias, in his periodization of neoliberalism, called its "hegemonic generalization" (2004: 333). Through this, the left was effectively weakened for years to come. Even the 2005 success of "the left" (SPD + Greens + Die LINKE) and the defeat of the so-called bourgeois parties of the CDU-FDP front – which would have reinforced and actually openly embraced and promised the fundamental break with the German social model – cannot conceal this reality. This success is the first political expression of an urgently needed political resistance but is not in itself the answer. The de-social-democratization of the SPD means ultimately that the new Die LINKE, with its currently hopeless transitional demands in the direction of democratic socialism (e.g. for the re-introduction of a ban on hedge funds, the nationalization of the energy sector, etc.), first has to take over the role of the old SPD, carry out social-democratic policies and push in the direction of re-regulation and thus the regaining of the fundamental means of welfare-policy control (e.g. by undoing privatizations), in order to create the necessary societal basis for real socialist politics. At least for this reason, as Gregor Gysi points out, the accusation of "social conservatism" is wrong or slanderous (2007: 24), and resistance against neoliberalism is not just resistance, but thoroughly constructive. Nevertheless Lafontaine is right when he characterizes the new Left as an "emerging resistance movement against neoliberalism" (2006).

Thus, the republic did not move to the left in 2005; especially in the relationship of forces in society and the cancellation of the historic compromise between capital and labor, it has moved far to the right in the last 30 years. It takes a great deal of formalistic narrow-mindedness to conceive of the slight, purely numerical red-red-green majority as more than a mere left adjustment within the larger societal rightward shift, considering that the programmatic differences among all established parties carry less weight than do the differences between all those parties on the one hand and Die LINKE on the other. The media debate on the sudden "left-turn" of the SPD — comprised of small adjustments to Hartz IV, the promotion to prominent positions of some of the party's left, and significant shifts in rhetoric leading up to and during the party's October 2007 convention — is therefore diverting public attention from the material realities.

Let us be clear: the significance of the late-1960s cultural rebellions only became visible later. Only with the collapse of "actually existing" socialism and the new consciousness of "globalization," i.e. the "spread of capitalist social relations to every corner of the globe and every facet of our lives" (Panitch 2004: 77)¹⁷ did it become clear how post-war capitalism in its

¹⁷ Oskar Lafontaine (2005: 49-120) has directed much of his attention to speaking in a language free of jargon and concealment. One of his main political points is that neoliberalism's success revolves around concealing social cuts through undecipherable terminology such as Hartz IV and Agenda 2010. According to him, one of the main concepts concealing social realities is the term "globalization": "The third central term ... is 'globalization'. I advocate that in the future we replace it by the term 'capitalism'. Because if we do that – and I must say that it took me quite a while, I have also made use of the term 'globalization' just as much as I made use of the term 'ancillary wage costs' without realizing how I was fooled by them – if we therefore replace the term 'globalization' by the term 'capitalism', then we realize that suddenly the context is clear again. It will become evident then that such a system presses for expansion, that it crosses national borders, that it destroys all existing traditions, and that all those

“big crisis” used aspects of the cultural resistance against its Fordist character to rejuvenate itself as it made the transition to a computer-based mode of production and related transnationalization, with a balance of forces powerfully shifted in favor of capital. And so it was that during the red-green period former opponents coalesced within a new project. For the most part, the process unfolded behind the backs of social actors and – according to the social law of unintended consequences – against their original intentions and hopes. The new structures emerged through the state’s complex management of contradictions on the terrain of its own apparatuses, the final result being what Lipietz might call a “historical find.”

After a brief pause and the capitalist triumphalism of the early 1990s, the contradictions of the new formation – increasingly called “neoliberalism” since the 1980s – intensified with astounding speed. The abandonment of the political goal of full employment in favor of balanced budgets and fighting inflation (resulting in chronic mass unemployment, increasing after each economic cycle), combined with state budget deficits due to privatizations and the decline of the so-called *sozialversicherungspflichtige Beschäftigungsverhältnisse*, i.e. those jobs which support the welfare infrastructure through deductions, led to struggles over economic resources and, in the 1980s, to the emergence and instrumentalization of contradictions between non-integrated migrant workers and an asymmetrically split middle and lower class (the “two-thirds society”) characterized by the fear of social decline. The resulting anxiety was intensified by the (real and feared) wave of immigration after the collapse of state socialism and the 1993 debate around limiting the right of asylum.

It is true that Germany did not experience the stable establishment of right-wing populist parties on the federal level that took place in most other European countries. This had to do with the fragmentation of these forces in Germany as well as the historic mortgage of guilt that adheres to German (right-wing) conservatism. Furthermore, the SPD had managed until the beginning of the 21st century to more or less avert the historic process of social-democratic parties losing their firm grip on the worker constituency which in most other European countries had begun in the mid-1970s (Moschonas 2002: 83ff, 93ff). Nevertheless it was clear that a growing percentage of the German population was vulnerable to extreme-right “social patterns of interpretation” (Harald Werner) so that it only appeared to be a matter of time before an extreme right party would be able to carve out a place as a stable fifth party on the right margin of the German party system. Complementing this development was the dwindling capacity for integration of the former “Volksparteien,” i.e. major parties originally conceived to be cross-class, which in relation to the enormous growth of the party of non-voters could no longer rally even half the German population – a sign of the legitimacy crisis of the neoliberal state and the political dimension of the crisis of social disintegration.

In the annexed former GDR, the specific conditions of the extension of market relations led to an economic collapse. The social infrastructure of the former GDR crumbled, not least because the great majority of the factories in the East not only were unable to compete with Western enterprises, but also had insufficient capital of their own due to the payment of their earnings to the former state. East Germany was largely de-industrialized and had to compensate for the drain of its younger working population.¹⁸ Simply on the basis of the lack or undercutting

things that we and so many other people have criticized as globalization’s negative side effects are contained in this term. Hence, let us call globalization capitalism and then we will always be on the right track” (Lafontaine 2006).

¹⁸ It should be noted that the specific way in which the annexation (through the *Treuhandanstalt*, the National Trusteeship Office) was carried out has resulted in an enduring feeling among large parts of the East German population – especially the elderly and regardless of their stance towards reunification – that they were effectively

of wage agreements in some of its regions due to the “advantage of its competitive position,” and with the help of state transfer payments, it turned into the “flourishing landscapes” promised in the 1990 federal elections by Helmut Kohl.¹⁹

The profound crisis of representation resulting from neoliberal restructuring and from the special East German situation thus led in the former GDR to an increasing rallying to the PDS, which had emerged from the SED and metamorphosed into a major Eastern party. However, already early on, right-wing extremist parties were continually able to enter state parliaments, which led to the establishment of stable structures on the basis of local anchoring (for example, in privately built right-wing youth centers which in many places have compensated for the shutting down of publicly run ones).

In the West, right-wing extremist parties could occasionally chalk up electoral successes. In some federal states like Baden-Württemberg they even produced stable party structures on the state parliamentary level as the Republikaner had. But the crisis of representation really came to a head there during the first years of the red-green coalition. Parts of the SPD’s traditional electorate – especially workers, unemployed, and pensioners – turned their backs on the SPD, sought refuge in the CDU, or swelled the electoral reservoir of modern right-wing populism, by now socially as well as politically decoupled, and therefore all the more easily mobilizable. In fact, in view of the exultant and promising efforts of the three larger right-wing extremist parties (the wealthy one-man DVU party, the Republikaner which had become radicalized, and the rejuvenated NPD) to set up an electoral alliance for the 2006 Bundestag elections and thus avoid competing as individual parties for the prize “betrayed” by the SPD, it seemed inevitable that finally and somewhat belatedly a right-wing extremist party could be established at the federal level, and permanently in some localities, even in Germany. A similar development had already taken place in France, where the interplay of the communist-proletarian milieu’s historic decline and fragmentation with the perception of social-democracy as bourgeois (and as part of the alienated state elite) created a political vacuum used by the extreme right-wing Front National which ever since has captured a good part of the proletarian protest potential. Right-populist parties have de facto been present since the late 1980s in the national parliaments with proportional representation electoral systems in almost all of Europe (Italy, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway).

The historical legacy of the SPD is to have made German participation in wars for the new imperialism respectable again (“the erosion of the UN peace system” – Paech 2006: 19) and to have taken major steps in the direction of abandoning Rhenish capitalism and adopting finance-market capitalism. If a united extreme right party were to have succeeded in entering the Bundestag for the first time through the votes of alienated traditional SPD voters, this would

robbed when almost all of the nationally owned assets were sold at token prices. This share of the population is incidentally larger than the generation of people whose careers were shattered by reunification and the ensuing loss of their state jobs (administration, university positions etc.), which has formed one of the central building blocs of the PDS.

¹⁹ The socio-economic differences between East and West Germany are one of the causes of the dissent between the WASG and the PDS over what sensible anti-neoliberal demands would be. The conditions of the labor market in the East make it seem more than logical to demand an unconditional basic income (which implicitly concedes the “crisis of a society based on labor” and abandons an orientation to full-employment), while some in the WASG regard the introduction of unconditional basic income as the silent acceptance and codification of social division (between those with jobs and recipients of transfer payments) and remain oriented to the sphere of production rather than distribution and hence to full-employment and radical reduction and redistribution of working hours.

have been a further catastrophic step in the SPD's "betrayal" of their own electorate. The prevention of such a constellation is due exclusively to Die LINKE.²⁰

The Expansion of the Left Party in the West and the Transformation of the German Party System

With the victory of the Left Party the *political* arrangement in Germany has changed immensely and become highly dynamic. First of all, political discourse has shifted significantly to the left with the debate over the minimum wage, the "underclass" and "social justice."²¹ The ruling elites had not conceived of the possibility of losing their grip on such a significant share of the German population and are now spending a lot of resources on establishing just how dangerous Die LINKE is to their dominance. The weekly journal *Die Zeit*, for example, attracted a lot of attention with an August 2007 issue in which, in an annoyed manner, it proclaimed in its title that "Germany is turning left" and found that "by now, classic leftist positions have become capable of attracting majorities even within wide areas of the conservative milieu." The different articles dedicated to this theme were based on a poll which showed that in 2007 34% of the population considered themselves to be on the left (as opposed to 24% in 1993 and 17% in 1981).²² 68% of the population favored the introduction of a minimum wage demanded by Die LINKE and now also by the SPD (with 25% of the population being against it). 82% of SPD supporters, 80% of CDU supporters and even 71% of FDP supporters were in favor of rescinding the "Pension at Age 67" recently introduced by the grand coalition. 76% of Die LINKE, 72% of SPD and 71% of CDU supporters and even 57% of the supporters of the free market FDP liberal party were opposed to (further) deregulations and privatizations and in favor of keeping under national control the key infrastructural sectors of the economy such as telecommunications (Deutsche Telekom), postal services (Deutsche Post), the railway (Deutsche Bahn) and the energy providers (only the Green Party's historical anti-statism has managed to come up with a small majority in favor of further deregulations and privatizations). Furthermore, 72% of the population argued that the government did not do enough with regard to establishing social justice (including supporters of the governing parties: 76% of all SPD supporters and 60% of all CDU supporters). Today, also only 43% of the population still perceive the power of the labor unions as "rather too much" (as opposed to 51% in 2003) and 46% consider it to be "rather too little" (as opposed to 41% in 2003). 64% of the population opposes the war in Afghanistan (34% favoring it). And a large majority of the population wishes for more expenditures in the field of

²⁰ It might be useful to paraphrase therefore Horkheimer's famous dictum on capitalism and fascism and to say: He who does not want to talk about the role of Die LINKE regarding the averted rise of the extreme right should also be silent about this extreme right.

²¹ The degree to which social justice, which in the polls accompanying the state elections of Bremen had been named as the decisive voting issue, has become a dominant, if not *the* dominant, discourse can be seen in the example of Hubert Kleinert, a frequent *Spiegel* columnist and former Green Party official in its early stages, who in the aftermath of the so-called "left turn" of the SPD at its party convention in October 2007 argued that the SPD was not going to win back the trust of those who had converted to the Left Party and wrote about the shifting discourse: "... the 2009 election will probably be marked by the competition of exactly four more or less social-democratic parties, which all will prioritize the theme of social justice. In this context, how the Social-Democrats can profile themselves, from their position of junior partner in the government, within the competition with the CDU on the one hand and the Linkspartei on the other (add to this the Greens) is an open question" (Kleinert 2007).

²² On the other side, only 11% of the population considered themselves to be on the Right (as opposed to 38% in 1981 and 26% in 1993).

public childcare facilities (including two thirds of CDU and even 82% of FDP supporters). In short, *Die Zeit* concludes,

This poll is a snapshot of a deeply unsettled society. The left turn which is emerging in it is based on a fervently emotional core: the feeling of injustice.... For obvious reasons, Die LINKE is perceived as a problem for the SPD in particular, because it occupies its themes. Our polls show that to think this way is shortsighted. Die LINKE represents attitudes and opinions which are widely shared within the bourgeois milieu.... It is probably still true that elections in Germany are won in the center. However, this center has moved significantly to the left (*Die Zeit*, August 9, 2007, p. 3).

In a similar vein, commentaries in the bourgeois press have expressed much concern regarding the return of a positive connotation to the term socialism. *Der Spiegel*, in commenting on a poll they conducted November 2007 (marking the coming of age of the generation born around the fall of the Berlin Wall), was disturbed that the traditional West German historical portrayal of the GDR apparently did not lead to the expected common-sense reaction of the population. Instead, 73% of East Germans between the age of 35 and 50, 44% of West Germans between the age of 35 and 50, 47% of East Germans between the age of 14 and 24, and 36% of West Germans between the age of 14 and 24 thought that “socialism is a good idea which until now has only been translated badly into public policy” (*Der Spiegel*, Online Edition, “Deutschland uneinig Vaterland.” November 6, 2007). And under the heading of the return of “The Alluring Sound of Socialism,” commenting on a poll conducted by the Allensbach polling institute, the national-conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found that

today 45% of the citizens of the formerly West German states say that socialism is a good idea which was only applied badly; only 27% disagree with this statement. Therefore, arguing that socialism has failed in the GDR is going to fall on deaf ears. The notion that the socialist system was doomed to failure from the start due to its fundamental collectivist principle is now less widely accepted than ever before. The same thing can be said about the notion that it would be unjustified to believe that the state might be able to run the lives of humans better than they could themselves. The ideal of socialism has survived the end of the communist dictatorships in a remarkably unharmed manner” (*FAZ*, “Der Zauberklang des Sozialismus,” July 18, 2007, p.5).²³

In short, the general plausibility of neoliberalism has been radically undermined. What was shown by the protests against Hartz IV, by the electorally motivated “locust” debate on “predatory capitalism” (Helmut Schmidt), and by the plebiscites rejecting the EU Constitution (which occurred against nearly the whole political class and its intellectuals in the Netherlands and in France)²⁴ has acquired an astonishing political expression in Germany, namely that even

²³ Cf. an indicative interview with the FDP chairman Guido Westerwelle in *Der Spiegel*: “There is too much GDR in Germany” (*Der Spiegel*, Online Edition, “Es gibt zuviel DDR in Deutschland,” November 9, 2007).

²⁴ It helps to recall the reactionary role that some leading intellectuals from the European social-democratic spectrum have played in legitimizing not only the neoliberal European Constitution but also Hartz IV. Thus, when it became apparent that French voters were leaning toward “No” in the referendum on the European Constitution, Jürgen Habermas addressed them directly through an article published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Habermas 2005), calling on them to embrace the constitution for the sake of being able to challenge the neoconservative world (dis-)order. His article received much criticism including a vehement rebuttal by Lucien Sève (Sève 2005). However, while Habermas in his hopes for a post-national European model as a means of reembedding globalization and recivilizing international relations was perhaps idealist and naïve but at least well-meaning, there can be no excuse for the

the winners of the 2005 Bundestag elections appeared to be the real losers and had to distance themselves from their political project of Germany's total radical market capitalization. It is notable that the project of a CDU-FDP coalition, already seen as inevitable in the run-up to the elections, proved fundamentally incapable of rallying majorities not just after entering government and in the ensuing state parliamentary elections, but already before that stage. Radical neoliberalism, i.e. increasing the dosage of the wrong medicine for the "sick patient" (already known from the final phase of the Keynesian welfare state),²⁵ appears in Germany to be off the table once and for all, and the societal discourse is opening itself up to thinking about a post-neoliberal constellation. With this opening of the discourse, a party of the new type, which sees the social movements as more than mere conduits, could convert the parliament into a stage for social protest and thus actually create the social movements that the party needs for socialist politics, in an initial quasi top-down approach.

In all of this, most party-political researchers, albeit begrudgingly, grant Die LINKE a very bright future. The disintegration of the former Volksparteien and the transformation of the German party system reflect the Europe-wide trend, characteristic of neoliberalism, toward small grand-coalition governments. The 2005 entry of the SPD, as a junior partner, into a CDU-led coalition, which is carrying forward red-green neoliberalism, has proven to be a considerable endurance test for the SPD. Part of this test is an intensified conflict between the party leadership and the rank-and-file while it is precisely this rank-and-file which is essential for the SPD's hegemony in civil society. While the PDS was able to stabilize itself by arresting its demographically determined loss of membership and to gain about 12,000 members by fusing with the WASG to become Die LINKE (and then add approximately 4,000 more members in the days and weeks after its official foundation), to become the third largest federal German party (after the CDU/CSU and SPD), the SPD's process of dissolution appears to be going inexorably forward. In less than 10 years after it came to office in 1998, the SPD has lost 30% of its members. If there were still 775,000 members when the party came to power, this number sank by the end of April 2007 to 553,000, with the greatest loss occurring in 2004, that is, in the Hartz IV year. It was above all those strata of the population squeezed during the period of red-green rule who turned their backs on the party. From when it entered the grand coalition until February 2007, the SPD lost over 23,000 members. Among them, 44% were workers, skilled workers, and white-collar employees (*Die Welt Online*, February 26, 2007).

disgraceful role played by Günter Grass, who in October 2004 co-signed an ad with the President of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA), Dieter Hundt, and the President of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Michael Rogowski, criticizing the anti-Hartz IV demonstrations and their slogan "We Are the People" The text read: "We are the people, too. The changes made to unemployment benefits and welfare associated with the frightening ... term Hartz IV are absolutely vital for Germany's competitive position, [which] is plastered with the gravestones of missed opportunities. Gravediggers exist in all political parties. In the past, all governments have made promises to the voter which could not be kept. All the more painful therefore is the hour of truth. Now the only solution is a radical change of direction. Such [social] cuts hurt, as does any critical surgery, but to do nothing for fear of pain would be irresponsible. Only demagogues who are already past their prime tell the people what they want to hear. Their formulae are as simple as their motives are transparent. Therefore we are all supporting Chancellor Gerhard Schröder – regardless of our normal political preferences – in a grand coalition of reason. We are hoping that he will withstand the slogans of populists from left and right who are mercilessly exploiting the anxieties of the people for their own purposes...." (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 2, 2004).

²⁵ Theorizing from the standpoint of state-policymaking, this would have to be understood as a trial-and-error approach on the part of a relatively autonomous political class trying to reestablish the conditions of dynamic capital accumulation.

Furthermore, although the SPD is clearly still more deeply rooted in trade-union and social-political organizations than Die LINKE, the WASG nevertheless has cracked open the door to those organizations in a way that the PDS could hardly have done on its own. Thus, especially after its first big gain in the West with its brilliant entry into the state parliament in Bremen (with good prospects in Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Hesse, the Saar and North Rhine-Westphalia as well), Die LINKE is becoming a dramatic problem for the SPD. A May 2007 Forsa poll of SPD members shows that 58% of those questioned felt that the SPD has “betrayed its principles,” and 62% rejected the planned raising of the pension age to 67, while 67% were against the planned reform of business taxation. Almost every third SPD member (29%) played with the idea of leaving the party, 4% of SPD members said they were shortly going to do so, and 9% could imagine themselves switching to Die LINKE (this is 50,000 people, which would almost double its membership of currently approximately 78,000). The power of attraction exercised by Die LINKE, which by now all polls show at a constant 9-14% level of voters (note 5 above), is ultimately seen in the fact that even those sectors of the (academic) left which despite the war in Kosovo and Hartz IV stuck with the SPD, are now being driven into Die LINKE’s arms after its successful expansion in the West.²⁶

The SPD is reacting to the rise of Die LINKE with a double strategy: On the one hand, it has, especially in the Bremen electoral campaign, appropriated some of its demands and rhetoric (minimum wage, reduced-price public transport tickets for the needy, etc.); on the other, it has also tried to contain its own left by nominating leftists as top candidates in two central Western federal states. Thus the North Rhine-Westphalian SPD broke with Wolfgang Clement’s economic-liberal tradition and nominated the SPD leftist Hannelore Kraft as chair (albeit in an unpromising campaign), while in the traditionally rather left Hesse, the party leftist Andrea Ypsilanti will head the slightly more promising 2008 state parliamentary electoral campaign.²⁷ On the whole, we can observe that the rise of Die LINKE has led to a discursive opening and left shift within the SPD and beyond. The tendential law of the invigorating effect of competition within the left, where a rightward shift of Social-democracy benefits the party to its left (rather than producing a general rightward shift of society) seems to have been borne out. Also, as a whole, the All-German “reform party” has started to move and, as a result, common-sense certainties on the economic and social-policy course to be pursued are being thrown into doubt.

On the other hand, the SPD is still trying rhetorically to avert the unavoidable – that is, the establishment of a force on their left – through clumsy and painful attempts at ostracism,²⁸

²⁶ See the declaration of defection “Time to Say Goodbye” [in English – Ed.]: <http://linksnet.de/artikel.php?id=2074>.

²⁷ Here, disregarding the federal grand-coalition sensitivities, the incumbent right-wing CDU prime minister Roland Koch is preparing for a highly polarized electoral campaign against the “Left Bloc” (meaning left-leaning SPD and Green members and Die LINKE) with the slogan “Freedom Instead of Socialism.” In the likely event of Die LINKE’s entry into the state parliament of Hesse, this will probably undermine Koch’s ruling majority. For the time being, SPD officials have spoken against any consideration of a coalition with Die LINKE, whose Hessian electoral campaign is, not without some initial opposition, directed by the former head of the Hessian section of the German national federation of trade-unions. However, Kraft and others have started thinking about the coalition option and there are voices among rank-and-file Hessian social-democrats calling for more openness towards Die LINKE. Finally, the success of the Cold War slogan “Freedom Instead of Socialism” has given way now to a notable reappraisal of the word socialism. Die LINKE has drawn on this shift and reacted to the Cold War rhetoric by constantly arguing in favor of “Freedom and Socialism” (Gysi) or “Freedom Through Socialism” (Lafontaine). Lafontaine on July 9, 2007 also published a long programmatic article under the latter title in the national-conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

²⁸ Thus, especially Müntefering has been frequently warning that Germany “was never made for communism” or that the SPD “is the only party of the labor movement in Germany.”

depicting the Eastern PDS as being realpolitically trustworthy but hampered by a bunch of chaotic leftists from the West, who are irresponsible when it comes to governing. A part of this double strategy then is the obligation within the party to vehemently dissociate itself from Die LINKE – an approach which, though rejected by the wage-earner wing of the SPD around Ottmar Schreiner, is being accepted by all three of the “left” leaders: Ypsilanti; Andrea Nahles, who has been elected to the shrunken party executive; and Kraft, who only recently embraced a slightly more open position by arguing that decisions on state coalitions were matters for the state party organizations. That this double strategy will work is very doubtful, since the alienation of the electorate from the party elite has in the meantime become very pronounced, and the SPD’s credibility has sustained continuous damage.²⁹ Even if the political commonalities between the SPD and the CDU remain greater than those between the SPD and Die LINKE, the SPD’s base will increase the pressure on the leadership to no longer shut the door to Die LINKE, to which it feels closer in terms of socio-economic outlook.

There is much evidence pointing to a left turn in political discourse and to a legitimization crisis of neoliberalism. Part of this is the deliberation on the change of name of the Hartz IV reforms, which has become a dirty word throughout the society not least because of the corruption affair around Peter Hartz. The CDU’s Dresden Party Convention points in the same direction with its partial retraction of its market-radical policy and the internal conflict in the CDU/CSU over the party’s future orientation (a debate in which even former neoliberal steamrollers like Ole von Beust and Christian Wulff found their way to a language of “social justice”). Added to this are the discussions on the long ignored new poverty in Germany, the conservatives conceding the existence of a new social question and of class society, which is partly expressed in counter-offensive endorsements of the same. Further symptoms are the nervousness of the repressive state apparatuses before the June 2007 G8-Summit in Heiligendamm, which is also evidenced in practically equating criticism of capitalism with terrorism (e.g. the hysteria of the debate over the pardon of Christian Klar³⁰), and the defiant reaction of the enfant terrible and former party leader of the CDU, Heiner Geißler, to the irrationalist deterioration of the general level of discourse and undue criminalization of the

²⁹ An example of the SPD’s loss of credibility is a poll, one of dozens, conducted to examine the extent of the SPD’s legitimacy crisis. The poll was conducted by Infratest dimap and dealt with fallout of the “locust” debate. It found that: Two-thirds of citizens considered Müntefering’s critique of capitalism justified. Only 25% thought it wrong. At the same time, almost three-fourths of the 810 people polled believed that the SPD was not interested in initiating a debate on problematic developments in the German economy, but rather in improving its electoral outlook in the North Rhine-Westphalian parliament election. *Spiegel-Online* (April 22, 2005) reported furthermore that “in view of the federal government’s measures for the reconstruction of the social systems in recent years,” 56% of Germans felt the SPD’s criticism of the entrepreneurial class was merely rhetorical.

³⁰ Christian Klar was a prominent RAF terrorist who belonged to the generation active from the German Fall in 1977 to 1982, which was responsible for the murders of Attorney General Siegfried Buback, Dresdner Bank Speaker of the Board Jürgen Ponto, and National Employer’s Federation president Hanns Martin Schleyer. Klar was sentenced to a life-imprisonment, which in Germany normally means a maximum of 15 years, but with recognition of particularly heavy guilt allowing for incarceration for a longer period. On the occasion of a potential amnesty for him and another one of the few remaining RAF terrorists in prison (Brigitte Mohnhaupt), a quite hysterical debate with strong illiberal undertones took place in the Spring of 2007 around the question of whether amnesty presupposes remorse and/or the clear repudiation of one’s old political and especially strategic beliefs. Klar’s bid for amnesty was turned down by President Horst Köhler due to an address Klar had written for the 12th International Rosa Luxemburg Conference in Berlin which was then also published in the socialist national daily newspaper *Junge Welt* on January 15, 2007.

global justice movement, as manifested in his May 2007 declaration that he was joining ATTAC.³¹

The subsoil on which the new party can grow is the epidemic fear of social decline, no longer contained by credible promises of globalization and of “information society,” as well as the increasing concern over the accelerated disintegration of civil society. Last but not least, the Bremen elections clearly show the significance that attaches to “social justice” in Germany, if one sees that in economically impoverished Bremen “social justice” ranked even before “labor-market policy” as the decisive voting issue (31% of voters). The poll “Perspektive Deutschland,” presented in April 2006 by former Bundestag President Richard von Weizsäcker, also reflects the progressive shift in public opinion regarding the role of the state and possible taxation increases as a means of reducing growing inequality.³² *Der Spiegel* commented on this, “In German society the desire is growing ... for [a fair] social equilibrium: A clear majority, 76% of Germans, want less social differences in society. A year ago the figure was 56%. 38% also want more state responsibility in social security; a year ago 32% expressed this wish. For this there is also willingness to sacrifice: According to the poll, a majority is ready to accept higher taxes if these narrow the social differences in society” (*Spiegel-Online*, April 26, 2007). Also reflecting the erosion of neoliberal hegemony are recent expressions of a consciousness of the connection between the wealth of nations and the misery of the peoples (see Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. I, MEW 23: 799): Notwithstanding the massive attempt at explaining the current considerable economic upswing and the symbolically important decrease in the number of unemployed to under 4 million (spurred in part by budget-cuts, but due mostly to globally increased demand and the introduction of state-subsidized One Euro Jobs),³³ the upswing is in no way leading to a consolidation of the grand coalition or a reappraisal of Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV reforms. Thus a recent ARD poll ascertained: “In 2007 Germans are looking toward an upswing, but not personal profit. 56% of federal citizens believe that unemployment will decline and even 70% that the conjuncture will continue to develop in a good direction. Nevertheless only 23% expect that they will personally benefit from sustained growth” (*Spiegel-Online*, January 4, 2007).

In short, the starting position for the first all-German left formation since the banning of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) is extraordinarily auspicious. What is more, the better these conditions are, the less is the danger of modern German right-wing populism and the greater the scope for strengthening the social movements, the re-social-democratization of the SPD, and the emergence of a counter-hegemonic post-neoliberal emancipatory project.

Die LINKE and Post-Neoliberalism

The electoral repudiation of the red-green government signaled not only the personal and massive farewell of the ‘68 generation from the political scene, but also the inglorious end of the

³¹ Along with Norbert Blüm, the former Minister of Labor in the Kohl Administration and a defender of the historic compromise, Heiner Geißler, a Jesuit, is one of the most outspoken and radical conservative critics of neoliberal capitalism. In his book *What Would Jesus Say Today?* he depicts Jesus as an “anticapitalist” with a this-worldly salvational message and in the oddly named chapter on “Jesus and Capital” he poses the question whether “capitalists may call themselves Christians,” concluding: “The interests of humans are more important than the interests of capital. The capitalist economic order contradicts the gospel and is a crime committed against billions of people who are forced to live in poverty, disease and ignorance” (Geißler 2003: 154).

³² “Notorious Egalitarianism in Germany,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

³³ German corporations and businesses have now begun to base their calculations on these quasi slave-labor jobs and have also begun replacing “good jobs” by “one Euro jobs” on a massive scale, which implies that the One Euro Jobs are a massive redistribution of taxpayers’ money to the bourgeoisie.

“march through the institutions” as a political project,³⁴ with all the attendant social-reformist hopes involving the world of work, child-rearing, schooling, and higher education, etc. The passive revolution within each of the different sectors of this emancipatory movement has now been inscribed in the neoliberal agenda, entailing the cooptation of such originally emancipatory goals as flexible work lives, cultural liberalization, end of restrictive sexual morality, end of the male breadwinner model, the contradictory partial ecological reform of capitalism, etc. In this process, in the words of Jürgen Habermas’s prognosis at the beginning of the neoliberal counter-revolution (1985: 143), those “utopian energies” which in the 1960s had been directed against the Fordist disciplinary regime were now exhausted.

Intimately linked to this historic caesura is a fundamental crisis of the Enlightenment concept of progress (both in its gradualist-social-democratic, as well as its communist-revolutionary variant), which set in during the initial defensive struggles of the socialist labor movement in the 1970s, and which distanced the left from the concept of progress, allowed that part of the ex-left which undialectically focused on the destructive potential of the development of productive forces to become conservative, and made it thinkable that the left as a whole could be depicted as conservative and fixed on the past.³⁵ It may well be that a new offensive “humanism” or anti-capitalist-utopian spirit, after options for a progressive post-neoliberal path have appeared, will have recourse to the theorists of reference for the 1968ers (Marcuse, Adorno et al.), whose writings are timeless “messages in a bottle” (Adorno) in terms of their logical-abstract anti-capitalist liberatory radicality. Nevertheless this anti-capitalism will be, or has to be, about a completely new and different project. It makes sense that such a new project can base itself in Die LINKE precisely because it is not just an inheritance of the past but also the product of new protest movements. The debate conducted in North and Latin America and also in Germany on modern socialist strategy and society (which in Germany has to and does relate to the concrete economic experiences of the GDR) could flourish in such a structure and be carried on by the protagonists of this change who gather within a new left party. That as early as the Federal Elections of 2005 Die LINKE was seen as a credible alternative by 7% of all young and first-time voters is one of the positive signs of rejuvenation of a party long suffering from an aging problem.

The recovery of the left from the co-optation of its 1968-movement remnants may occur in a way analogous to what followed the co-optation of the bourgeois-liberal opposition after 1848 and the marginalization of the bourgeois-revolutionary democrats. This suggests that it might occur over a similarly long arc of time. Despite the bourgeois-revolutionary democrats’ symbolically significant conversion to the socialist-democratic tradition of the labor movement as a result of the 1848 defeat and the historic conservative turn of liberalism, it took a quarter century, in the period of restoration after the collapse of the bourgeois revolution in Germany, and required the unfolding of capitalist society’s contradictions and the “negative integration”³⁶ of the workers gradually *making themselves* into a class as well as the intensification after the

³⁴ The well known editor of the long-standing radical left journal *konkret*, Hermann Gremliza, who has played an unfortunate role in diverting many radical leftists towards a moderate so-called “anti-German” imperialist position (very similar politically but theoretically quite different from Christopher Hitchens’s position in the United States) has the honor of having coined the term “in den Arsch der Institutionen” (“in the ass of the institutions”) instead of “Marsch durch die Institutionen.”

³⁵ See the special section “Den Fortschritt neu denken” [“Rethinking Progress”], *Das Argument* 230/1999.

³⁶ “Negative integration” is a term developed by the German social historian Dieter Groh that refers to the specific path toward capitalism taken by Germany, the German *Sonderweg*, which among other things was characterized by the extraordinary exclusion of the working class from late 19th-century German society.

Great Depression of 1873 of the specifically German “class symbiosis between Junkers and bourgeoisie” (Lothar Machtan/Dietrich Milles) before it was possible, with Marx and Engels’s help, to develop a language distinct from bourgeois-democratic thinking and thus to pose anew the question of social emancipation. A similar confrontation – in this case over what remains of 1968 – will also be necessary for modern socialism. During the discussions about how to name the new party, a large portion of former PDS members vehemently and understandably insisted on maintaining the term “democratic socialism” as part of the new name, to reflect the party’s underlying goal of overcoming capitalism through democratic means. However, in hindsight the conscious choice (or was it the “flashing up” of the *Weltgeist* at a moment of opportunity?) to simply and somewhat audaciously call the new party Die LINKE, The LEFT, proves to have been a wise strategic move inasmuch as it takes away from the old parties of the left the monopoly in defining what is “left” and confronts the general public as well as its own membership with this crucial question of definition after the failure of the post-1968 left and the exhaustion of its utopian energies in the context of its inscription into neoliberalism.

Right-Wing Populism and the European Historic Responsibility of Die LINKE

When we gain enough historical distance, we will be able to understand the rise of Die LINKE in Germany as the historic event that it is. After the Bremen elections, at the latest, Germany’s post-war party landscape was no longer the same. Here it is necessary to draw two sharp distinctions: one of them historic-geographic, and the other, historic and social.

From the outside, and seen formally, the historic transformation of the German party system to a five-party system with two – or, if one counts the Greens, three – competing parties on the left may seem to be a West-European normalization of Germany in the framework of a (nearly proportional) majority electoral system (Norway, Sweden, Finland, France, Italy, etc.). The banning of the KPD in the Cold War front state of West Germany led to a development different from that in other variants of continental European proportional-representation electoral systems, in which strong Communist parties arose from the anti-fascist resistance movements of World War II (including the paradox that in those countries in which the socialist-revolutionary tendencies were strongest, capitalism was introduced more or less forcefully, while in East European countries with resistance movements less characterized by socialism, state-socialist/planned economy systems were imposed in the context of the Cold War).³⁷ *Seen from this angle, Die LINKE is not a weakened holdover of past epochs with an aging fountain of youth from the 1960s, but rather a new party formation arising in the midst of a hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism whose outlines are gradually emerging.* Up to now, this is unique in Europe, and even more so in all core capitalist countries, since here, in contrast e.g. to the Latin American

³⁷ The illegal KPD, which had already lost much of its support by the time of its abolition, maintained its activities through the labor of tens of thousands of self-sacrificing communists, but for many reasons communism never played a role in West German history comparable to its role in France and Italy. At the same time, the “better Germany” in the East initially attracted the greater share of surviving and returning communists and revolutionary socialists who then found themselves in the bizarre position of struggling for a socialist fatherland against the initial will of the Soviet Union which favored a united Germany as a neutral zone. This conjuncture led to a history of fierce persecution of communists in the West and of anti-communists in the East. The history of the two German states produced a significant number of Cold War victims of whom, of course, only the Eastern ones have been financially and politically rehabilitated, which is why Oskar Lafontaine in his speech addressing the party-founding convention in Berlin specifically called for the acknowledgment of Cold War victims on both sides of the inner-German border.

periphery, the growing social resistance has not produced a successful political form and – as the French elections show – stands on shaky ground.

The fact that a left force could form in Germany does not even necessarily speak to the comparatively greater capacity there for building hegemony of an alternative left project nor to a higher degree of class consciousness; or, if these capacities and this consciousness should materialize, they will be mostly due to the particularities of recent German history. The resolution of the WASG’s problems as a political formation, i.e. its initially limited sphere of influence, is owed to the “collateral damage of German unification” (Detje/Schmitthenner 2006: 14). This means that the starting position of the PDS for a post-communist transformation differed from that of all its sibling parties in Eastern Europe, since it could neither transform itself into a social-democratic party on the Western model, nor shape the process of transformation, but instead saw itself objectively forced into a position to the left of the SPD.³⁸

The effects of privatization, de-industrialization, informalization, precarization and social discrimination, dramatically obvious even right after the 1989 “*Wende*,” as well as the memory of a passably functioning system of full employment, social protections, cheap rents and free education, albeit at a leveled down standard, made it possible for the PDS to enjoy a remarkable and uninterrupted resurgence as a democratic socialist party, with setbacks due solely (aside from the sudden electoral success of the right-wing DVU in Anhalt-Saxony in 1999, which needs to be scrutinized separately) to government participation (GP) or tolerance (GT).³⁹ If one looks at election results in the East German states since re-unification, one sees that the PDS was able to increase its results by about 5% each time until it reached about a fourth of the electorate.

Brandenburg	13.4 / 18.7 / 23.3 / 28.0
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	15.7 / 22.7 / 24.4 / 16.4 (after GP) / 16.8 (after GT)
Saxony	10.2 / 16.5 / 22.2 / 23.6
Anhalt-Saxony	12.0 / 19.9 / 19.6 (DVU: 12.9) / 20.4 (after GP) / 24.1
Thuringia	9.7 / 16.6 / 21.3 / 26.1
Berlin	9.2 / 14.6 / 17.7 / 22.6 / 13.4 (after GP)

With its (partial) representation on the Bundestag level (with single deputies as part of a group, a full fraction, or having been elected through direct mandates) as a result of this strength in East Germany, the PDS made it possible for socialist representation, politics and projects to hibernate in the West as well. At the same time it could clearly be seen that the Western expansion of the PDS had historically failed, for it never reached 2% there despite intensive efforts in all elections up to the end.

The historic development of parties to the left of the SPD clearly shows what special and historic character attaches to Die LINKE’s entry into the Bundestag and its growth in the West, apparently unstoppable, at least in the medium-range future, for ever since the KPD ban no

³⁸ Rainer Rilling points out that a fundamental misjudgment of the West German elites was to think that the PDS would eventually disappear from the political scene. The SPD’s decision to bar former members of the GDR’s ruling party, SED, to join their party as an East German socialist left-wing which then could have been tamed over time, made possible the survival of the PDS as a democratic-socialist left wing force (cf. Rilling 2007).

³⁹ Government tolerations, which are common in the Scandinavian countries, are rare in the German political system. They imply that no majority coalition between two (or three) parties has been formed but that a minority government is tolerated by one party inasmuch as they agree on voting in a specific way.

socialist party was anywhere near being in a position to jump over the 5% hurdle, not even once, let alone in a stable way. Not even in the heyday of the left from 1965 to 1975 did this happen. Even with the GDR's support, the DKP (German Communist Party) – founded in 1968 – was unable to gain more than local, or at the most regional, influence. While the DKP in the 1970s could achieve six electoral successes between 0.9% and 3.1% in northwest Germany (four of them in the city-states of Bremen and Hamburg), its election results since 1978 were under 0.5% (with the exception of Bremen and Hamburg, where it still was able to get 0.6% twice and 0.7% once). The SPD dissidents of the Demokratische Sozialisten (DS) failed in the early 1980s, though admittedly the migration of a part of the left – among them peace activists opposed to Schmidt and the NATO Double-Track Decision – to the newly founded Greens was a co-factor. That the fusion of the WASG and the PDS has a catalytic function, in which the success of the whole is much more than the sum of the individual parts, is shown, for example, by the first electoral defeats of the then still independent WASG, which in two of its heartlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg, landed under the 5% hurdle (2.2% and 3.1% respectively).

The rise of the Die LINKE is by no means the end point of an historic political left shift of the German party system. As we said, it would require a narrow-minded institutionalist understanding of parties to ignore the neoliberal transformation of the SPD and the Greens, and to consider as left a purely arithmetical red-pink-green majority. For the time being, in the struggle against the neoliberal *pensée unique*, Die LINKE is the sole occupant of a wide-open field. In addition, there is not yet a strategic approach to the dilemma of government participation: how can the party remain credible if it participates in governments, something which will hardly be avoidable if its electoral popularity approaches 30%. However it is precisely this credibility which government participation in East German federal states has endangered and which has aided the rise of extreme right parties for whose electorate Die LINKE is in part competing (see Wiegel 2006: 66ff). The question of government participation therefore has to be determined by the concrete requirements of left politics, with a strict set of anti-neoliberal criteria such as those formulated by the party's co-chair Lafontaine, who in this respect is to the left of much of the old PDS. Still more central than the question of credibility, however, is the related question of what socialist realpolitik can be today.

We have seen that with the establishment of a fifth party there has been a historic transformation of the German party system. On the basis of the present circumstances and relation of forces we can expect grand coalitions to be the rule rather than the exception, unless Die LINKE goes the way of the Green Party. A repetition of history as farce, however, seems largely impossible in this case. In the first place, the growth of Die LINKE is a product of neoliberalism's downturn and, unlike the case of the Greens, not a factor in or an outcome of its rise. Furthermore, the class bases of Die LINKE and the Greens are fundamentally different. While the Greens were made up of the so-called "post-material" enlightened, culturally left citizens-to-be and accordingly today have the highest average income of all parties (vying with the FDP in this respect), the originally strongly white-collar LINKE has in recent years steadily acquired more of an unequivocal class basis. In this respect, Die LINKE is increasingly winning particular support among workers and the unemployed. This tendency has been confirmed in the Bremen elections, in which the party's share of workers' votes (12%) and its share of the unemployed (21%) were identical with the Bundestag elections. The conscious adoption of trade-union demands and consistent opposition to Hartz IV have started to pay off.

However, in the context of the increasing inability of the Volksparteien to exert cross-class appeal, the question of credibility will become more and more important for Die LINKE. The disintegration of the Volksparteien observable everywhere in Europe, reflected in the historic rise of grand coalition governments on the continent, also means the emergence of an unrepresented and non-voting (occasional and protest) electorate. Therefore Die LINKE will also have to be evaluated according to its success in moving the non-voters to new participation in society and politics. At the moment it is reasonably effective in mobilizing them, but it is only partly intercepting the flow of former SPD voters to the party of non-voters, and electoral participation in Germany continues to decline. In this context the non-voter party has a pronounced class character. Where former social-reformist parties have given up on representing the “little people” – as in the US’s de facto class electoral system – it is primarily the workers and lower income earners who turn their backs on what they perceive as the “electoral circus.” In the Bremen elections the difference in electoral participation between the bourgeoisie and the working class was striking. In short, Die LINKE’s success will also have to be evaluated in connection with the question of whether it can succeed in increasing its support not only among those who currently vote but also in absolute terms. This could then be seen as a sign of Die LINKE’s acceptance as a forum of a new political culture in which social movements and political representation mutually reinforce each other. The question of the non-voters is also central because the basic pre-conditions for the rise of a right-wing populist political formation within this socially and politically decoupled sector are still present in Germany. As is known, the right-wing populist potential far exceeds the actual electoral support for right-wing populist parties.

With the sharpening of capitalist contradictions and the need for alternatives to neoliberalism, the rise of Die LINKE has taken place within a remarkably short span of time. Fortunately Karl-Heinz Roth proved in hindsight to be correct in relation to Georg Fülberth at the residual left’s self-laceration “What Is to Be Done?” conference. The emerging “new proletariat” observed by Roth did not make room for Fülberth’s “grass-roots fascisization” (see Gröndahl/Schneider 1993: 31, 253ff, 422ff, 434). In Germany, right-wing populism has been averted for the time being. *Die LINKE is therefore the only exclusively left political response to the neoliberal processes of social division in the core capitalist countries.* This has given it an historic responsibility which goes far beyond the German context. In Europe and North America, people should eagerly watch Die LINKE to see if it can put forward concrete alternatives, through credible politics and a sustainable neo-socialist strategy linked to the intensified resistance to neoliberalism and its imperial global enforcement. Precisely because this development is unique so far in the core capitalist countries, Die LINKE has to be conscious of its responsibility and live up to it.

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