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A Society of Empowered Citizens

Outline of a social democratic project for the
twenty-first century

■ Today, many voters are no longer able to discern what Europe's political centre-left actually stands for. Torn between traditional social democratic ideals and neo-liberal-inspired »reform policies«, its project has become illegible. If it is to avoid remaining on the defensive, European social democracy must adjust its programme to the realities of our time and present its own political vision for the society of the twenty-first century.

■ Such a vision must eliminate gaps and anachronisms from the social democrats' current programme and address the following issues: (1) the distribution of income and wealth and the aims of welfare-state intervention; (2) the social basis for a policy of solidarity; (3) the future role of the state; (4) the social democratic perception of human beings and society; and (5) the future of democratic participation.

■ Social democracy must develop its own vision of a »good society« of sovereign citizens in order to counter the neo-liberal image of »homo economicus« and its promise of happiness through consumption. This progressive vision must focus on the social conditions of individual self-fulfilment and happiness and an ecologically sustainable economy.

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1 Introduction

With the adoption of its Godesberg Programme fifty years ago, in November 1959, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) put forward a set of ideas appropriate to address the realities and sensitivities of post-war West German society. Godesberg provided the fundament for the SPD to win power in Bonn ten years later; but it also created an important reference point for the programmatic renewal of other West European »workers' parties«.

Half a century later, with social democracy on the defensive all over Europe, something similar needs to be done. Many voters currently seem unable to discern for whom and for what the centre-left really stands. Torn between social democratic traditions and neo-liberal-inspired »reform policies«, its project has become illegible. Attempts to attract new sections of the electorate have rarely brought long-term success. But in the process progressive parties have lost a considerable share of their traditional voters. At the same time, social and cultural changes and the consequences of globalisation and Europeanisation have permanently altered or even undermined the conditions for left-wing politics.

The following text will pinpoint five areas where renewal of the European left's thinking is necessary: 1) income distribution and the aims of welfare-state intervention; (2) the concept of solidarity and its social basis; (3) the future role of the state; (4) the social democratic vision of human beings and society; and (5) the future of democratic participation. Of course there are other important issues too – first and foremost how to reconcile industrial civilisation with the preservation of the basis for life on this planet. However, the »ecological imperative« is such that it will soon force all political movements to integrate environmental concerns structurally into their policies. The issue will soon cease to be a distinguishing feature of a particular political movement. Nevertheless, with respect to the environmental issue – as well as with gender equality or the regulation of transnational problems – the centre-left is still a programmatic step ahead of its main conservative rivals. What it needs to do now is to adapt other elements of its programme to the realities of our time and to develop a truly social democratic vision for the societies of the twenty-first century.

2 Bringing Income Distribution back on the Agenda

The growing social divide is the most urgent socio-economic problem the centre-left must address. During the last decade, most progressive governments were unable to prevent a deterioration of the economic situation of a broad group of low and middle wage-earners. Even if this problem is not everywhere as serious as it is in Germany, the underlying trend is the same worldwide. »There has been an increase in income inequality that has gone on since at least since the mid-1980s, and probably since the mid-1970s« (OECD 2008). This development has also affected parts of the middle classes, whose interests and needs the reformist left of the 1990s promised to defend in particular. The distribution of wealth is even more unequal. The main winners are a small class of the super rich, whose income and assets have grown enormously and whose excess capital has fuelled the speculative bubble on the international financial markets in recent years.

In view of this development a change of direction in the centre-left's economic, fiscal and labour market policy seems inevitable. Peter Mandelson's famous statement about New Labour being »utterly relaxed about some people getting filthy rich« sounds extremely strange today. Also in its social democratic version, »trickle-down« theory has failed to work. Progressive politics must focus again on income and wealth distribution: The aim of progressive politics should not be to alleviate poverty through social policy, but rather to prevent its creation by appropriate policies of income distribution.

In recent years, however, precisely the opposite has happened. Issues related to income distribution have been largely excluded from the centre-left's »embedded neo-liberalism«. The debate has instead centred on social policies and welfare state concepts – from the »activating state« to the »Scandinavian model«. Yet, the »activating« social policies of the Third Way actually represent a prime example of the imponderables of politics in the »age of side-effects« (Ulrich Beck). In other words, the unintentional effects of these policies may well have far exceeded the intentional ones. Making labour legislation more flexible, reducing social benefits and stepping up the pressure on people to take even low-qualified jobs has, in a situation of continuing mass unemployment, led to considerable pressure on wages and working conditions. A weakened trade-union movement has been unable to do much

to counter these tendencies. Real wages have been decoupled from productivity increases, to the extent that wages in the bottom segments of the labour market are no longer sufficient to live on and have increasingly to be supplemented by social transfer payments (like the British tax credits or the German wage supplements for low-earners or the new French RSA). The accumulation of extra wealth on the employer's side is indirectly being financed by the taxpayer in the form of subsidies to underpaid workers. »We are running to stand still« was how a close advisor of Gordon Brown's recently described social developments in Britain: even the major efforts made by Labour governments in the field of social policy since 1997 have merely managed not to make things worse.

It goes without saying that it is difficult in market economies to influence the distribution of income between labour and capital via political action. Globalisation, European integration, entrenched mass unemployment and immigration have further limited the impact of state policies and the effectiveness of trade union action. Yet there is still much that can be done politically. Greater rights of co-determination and the extension of compulsory profit-sharing agreements, the introduction and increase of legal minimum wages, the re-regulation of labour markets, the strengthening of worker's rights and of opportunities for trade unions to organise, an offensive wages policy in the public sector that would put pressure on the private sector, higher taxation of profits, top incomes and inheritance – there are many ways to drive stakeholder capitalism if one is really serious about doing so. The goal should be to correct the decades-long trend of redistribution from wages to profits, to combat the decoupling of productivity and wage increases and to ease the burden on the welfare state that emanates from the need to subsidise insufficient wage incomes. The scope for cost-neutral (re)distribution is huge: of the additional 202 billion Euros by which Germany's national income rose between 2001 and 2006, 85% was creamed off by revenues and profits while a mere 15% went to the salaries of the country's workforce of 34 million people (Bontrup 2006: 15).

3 Social Policy in an Age of Declining Solidarity

The redistributive welfare state is the hallmark of centre-left policy, the material manifestation of the

social democratic ideal of social solidarity. There is much to indicate, however, that popular approval for the established forms of solidarity and welfare has declined in recent years or at least changed considerably. The reasons are to be found in fundamental changes in the social structures of western societies: the class identities of the industrial age have dissolved and a multitude of new professional and social groups and milieus have emerged. Cultural group affiliations as well as identity patterns based on people's role as consumers rather than as producers have become much more significant. The mobility of capital, goods and labour across boundaries (at least within the EU) has deeply affected the economic situation and living conditions of people, leading to a new socio-political division of society into »cosmopolitans« favouring globalisation and an elimination of boundaries and more sceptical »communitarians« (Kriesi et al. 2005: 921–956; for Germany: Neugebauer 2006). Immigration has led to an exponential rise in ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. As a result, everyday life in western societies today is marked by the cohabitation of an increasingly broad spectrum of values, socialisation patterns and behavioural norms. To speak of a »common culture« or even of »common values« when referring to the population of a country sounds increasingly artificial. »The problematic thing about the term post-industrial society«, the French economist Daniel Cohen wrote several years ago, »is not the term 'post-industrial'. It is the term 'society'« (Cohen 2006).

The key question for the centre-left will be how much approval for the concept of »solidarity« can still be mustered under these conditions. The spontaneous modes of behaviour observable in those segments of western society who fear social degradation and a loss of status are generally not responses of solidarity and cooperation (i.e. common political engagement by those who are either at a disadvantage or perceive themselves to be), but rather attempts of cultural and spatial segregation from an »underclass« that is increasingly defined by ethnic or religious terms. After all, much of the increase in poverty in Western Europe is the result of immigration processes.¹

1 If one is to believe the calculations of the German Institute for Economics and Society, almost three-quarters of the increase of people living in the low-income segment in Germany since 1996 was accounted for by immigrants. In 2006 44% of people with a migration background were in the low-income segment, whereas among the »autochthonous« members of society it was only 20% (Mie-

At the same time, politics itself has also done its bit to weaken the ideal of solidarity. Capital, business revenues and profits have increasingly become exempt from contributing to the mechanisms financing the solidarity system. Many countries have introduced a taxation ceiling on the highest incomes while tacitly tolerating massive tax evasion by the »happy few«. Solidarity, so the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet, today essentially means asking »the relatively poor to support the very poor« (Gauchet/Winock 2008). Under these conditions, the welfare reforms undertaken in the last years also by progressive governments are likely to have had a much more destructive effect than would appear at first sight. These reforms were heavily based on the application of the principle of need and the logic of means-testing, putting the emphasis on alleviating absolute poverty.² At the same time policies of »activation« – like the German Hartz-Reforms – have relativised or reduced the rights of those having paid or paying into the system. Yet, the blurring of the differences between the claims of those who have contributed to the welfare system and those who have not runs counter to a deep-seated sense of fairness as well as to the logic of social segregation that characterises everyday social behaviour. Social acceptance of the idea that people should be able to draw social benefits irrespective of their prior contribution is very low. It is in this context that Richard Sennett speaks of modern societies' »hatred of parasites« and its fears of being drained by »unjustified claims« (Sennett 2004).

»Liberty dies by inches«, the saying goes – and solidarity probably does too. What is at issue in all of these processes is not the total disappearance of social solidarity, but rather its gradual erosion in a series of many small steps. Yet this, too, undermines the acceptance of left-wing politics in the long term. There is no simple way to counter this. »The difficulties of the welfare state«, writes the French sociologist Francois Dubuet, »are rooted in the dissolution of the model of social integration, the end of the solidarity narrative. For it to be resurrected the earth would have to stop rotating ...« (Dubuet 2009). More than ten years ago Jürgen Habermas stated in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*

that the weakening of the nation-state in Europe, combined with the fragmentation of collective identities, was a fundamental problem for left-wing politics in particular. Only by appealing to a »constructed« national identity was it possible to create the cultural substrate on which the concept of solidarity could grow as a political ideal in the first place. However, there will be no return to a traditional, »unconditional« solidarity based on a common identity. The additional heterogeneity brought about by immigration and multi-culturalist policies will certainly not make it easier to preserve the traditional European welfare state in the future. »To what extent immigration societies can remain welfare states«, writes the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, »is one of the unresolved questions determining the fate of Europe«.³ It is currently difficult to say how important this dimension will really be in the long term. But European progressives are warned not to underestimate the issue. Norman Birnbaum – hardly suspect of right-wing populism – writes that the attempts in the 1960s and 1970s by the US Democrats to expand the welfare state in the United States failed not least because of the race relations problem.⁴

As things stand, the European left can still count on a solid political consensus behind the welfare state. Increasingly however – and the electoral results of recent years leave little doubt about this – it will be necessary to adapt its concepts of the welfare state to the changing realities of ever more heterogeneous societies. The Scandinavian example shows that social welfare systems are accepted when many citizens – and especially those who pay taxes and social contributions – benefit from public services and infrastructures and when effective limits to abuse and free-riding are established. Any adaptation strategy should take these facts into account. What seems important here is a consistent adherence to the principles of fairness and justice. This implies first of all preventing abuse and free-riding and strengthening the link between people's entitlements and the contributions they have made to the system (Fehr 2009; Fehr et al. 2006: 217–221). The reflections of the German social philosopher Axel Honneth on the need for recognition as a driver of human behaviour lead to similar conclusions. Honneth argues that the demand for »recognition of achievement« is a dominant feature of

gel/Schulte 2008).

2 Some time ago Antony Giddens stated that New Labour's policy had focused excessively on those at the bottom of the social pile and has done too little for those just above them, who, while still integrated in the system, count just as much among the losers of the economic and social changes of recent years.

3 <http://www.wzb.eu/zkd/mit/>; on this see also Goodhart 2004 and 2006.

4 Birnbaum 2003: 403; see also Alesina/Glaser/Sacerdoce 2001.

capitalist society. With regard to social welfare arrangements, this would imply that the level of contribution to the system should be taken into account when determining the level of individual entitlements. Yet, in the current welfare state debate this »principle of merit« is increasingly competing with another principle – namely, the right of all members of society to basic provision irrespective of their individual contributions (Fraser/Honneth 2003). In heterogeneous societies where solidarity is weak, the growing significance of the principle of »universalism« is probably one of the main reasons for the rampant acceptance crisis of parts of social transfer systems. Progressive politicians would hence be well advised to refocus social policy concepts on the meritocratic principle of »recognition of achievement«, immunising such the welfare state against the political consequences of weakening social cohesion. The tricky question of »who deserves what in a socially diverse society«, long time eluded by the centre-left, has finally to be addressed (Diamond 2009: 231).

4 An Active Rather Than an Activating State

One of the challenges facing the centre-left is to redefine its attitude to the state. It has to tell voters clearly for what purpose and in what form it intends to use the state's ability to shape society in the future. The last few years have seen a considerable degree of scepticism towards the state, with the neo-liberal view that »state failure« is the chief problem of western economies and societies leaving a deep imprint on the parties of the centre-left. Especially in Third Way thinking the state's role as a direct supplier of public goods and public policy outcomes has become markedly reduced. Instead, these tasks have been assigned as far as possible to the allegedly more efficient forces of the free market and »civil society« (Blackwater 2009). In this period, the state withdrew at all levels from the production of goods and services. Yet, this privatisation zeal was by no ways a privilege of the Third Way: The Jospin government, for instance, privatised more public property than all conservative French governments either before or since.

For the time being, the current crisis of financial capitalism is likely to have put paid to the conviction that state failure is the only real problem of western market economies. »The mother of all meltdowns« (Martin Wolf) has really happened and the costs of

bailing out the banking sector will be felt for decades to come. After twenty years of privatisation it is clear today that the results are mixed at best. Replacing public with private monopolies (or oligopolies) has not necessarily improved the quality of services or the cost/benefit ratio – British railway passengers can tell a tale of woe just as German electricity consumers can. Moreover, in many cases privatisation has gone hand in hand with a worsening of wages and working conditions, deregulation of employment and the dismantling of regular jobs. The capacities of public supervisory agencies to ensure competition and comprehensive provision have in many cases proved to be limited (Hirschel 2009: 281-282). Moreover, it has proven much more difficult to impose ecological criteria on private companies than on public ones, particularly at the local level.

With the spectacular return of »market failure« into the public debate, the left must seize the opportunity to present a modern concept for an active state that gives itself the necessary means to pursue public interest as efficiently as possible. This active state must appeal especially to the »average citizens« who finance it and who have no interest in a mere »social transfer state« from which they don't profit and to which the really well-off contribute less and less.⁵ The tasks and responsibilities of this active state have to be determined at both a local and a national level and should reach well beyond the typical areas of modern state intervention: education, research, infrastructure and health. They may range from social housing to providing local public transport, setting up car-sharing schemes in urban conglomerations, supporting cooperatives or securing the »freedom of movement« and the citizen's right to privacy also in the virtual spaces of the internet, fighting cybercrime and putting limits to personal data collection by private firms. The growing demand for personal care in aging societies offers large areas of growth for public services: compared with the range of services offered by the public sector in Scandinavia, the potential in many parts of Western Europe is far from exhausted. Indeed, by creating or preserving regular jobs for which social security contributions must be paid,

⁵ It is here that the core of the strategy of the »new« conservatives à la Cameron, Merkel and Sarkozy towards the welfare state will be found in the next few years. It will no longer take the form of a neo-liberal full-frontal attack on the welfare state, but rather consist in policies that preserve the main pillars of the welfare state while as far as possible exempting the electoral clientele of the conservative and liberal parties from financing it.

ensuring decent wages and eliminating precarious employment conditions the state may well succeed in re-establishing standards in that area of the labour market where the downward spiral in working conditions and wages has been strongest: in the lower end of the service sector.

This is not to say that public or state-owned companies should be created at any price. Past experience has been far too mixed for that. Big state is by no means an end in itself. But the taboos on state ownership should at least be removed, so as to restore it as a legitimate instrument of left-wing politics. Probably far more important would be for left-wing politics to take cooperatives and the non-profit-sector far more seriously than it has in recent decades. There is a third option between state and private profit that offers considerable potential for environmentally friendly and humane economic activity (Rickens 2009).

5 Beyond Consumerism: What Is a Good Society?

In a recently published book, the Italian cultural philosopher Raffaele Simone declares that the left will for a long time be unable to win political majorities because its ideology of sacrifice and sharing contradicts the prevailing ideology of consumerism. Rather, he writes, the future will belong to the »gentle monster« of a formally democratic, hedonistic brand of capitalism, of which the rule of Silvio Berlusconi is the most perfect expression (Simone 2008; Hillebrand 2009). This thesis seems at least debatable. But it is correct to observe that social identities are increasingly determined by people's status as consumers. The extent of »belonging« to society, of »full citizenship« is increasingly measured in terms of participation in the status consumption portrayed as socially »normal« by the mass media and the advertising industry. The promise of consumerism, according to Zygmunt Baumann, is no more and no less than »happiness«: »The society of consumers is perhaps the only society in human history to promise happiness in earthly life, and happiness here and now and in every successive now; in short, an instant and perpetual happiness« (Baumann 2007).

The problem that the European centre left has with consumerism, however, is not, as Simone suggests, that it offers instead an austere ideology of renunciation or that it tries to liberate people from the »hedonistic treadmill« of consumption.

The problem is rather that the centre-left has itself largely adopted the one-dimensional consumerist image of human beings and society. Technical progress and productivity gains are not to be used to win autonomy and to free people from the drudgery of material production, but are simply the means to an end of constantly increasing economic performance – i.e., the consumption of material goods. »Growth« has become the central political fetish of the centre-left and it still tends to measure »progress« primarily in terms of economic indicators.

Prisoners of an essentially economic mindset, the progressive governments of the 1990s and early 2000s scarcely took an interest in questions of quality of life and people's psychological well-being. The questions of people's happiness and the social conditions for a »good life« have never really been asked. The dark side of hyper-capitalism and »liquid modernity« – growing instability of living and professional conditions, fear of loss of status and social decline reaching well into the middle classes, alienation and loss of identity, intensification of work, stress and fear of being unable to cope, increasing consumption of neuro-psychotropic and recreational drugs – were barely registered and did rarely find their way onto the political agenda. Issues like individual emancipation and self-fulfilment, winning quality time for social and family contacts or the development of people's personal potential (beyond the ever welcome enhancement of their »employability«) have never received any serious attention in centre-left politics in recent decades.

This is all the more disappointing as a series of studies – above all the works of Richard Layard – has shown clearly that material prosperity alone does not lead to happiness. Beyond a certain level of consumption – far exceeded in Western Europe – individual happiness is actually largely independent of the accumulation of material goods and financial assets. What is important, however, is a sense of having received a fair share of material production (Layard 2005). Empirical studies have shown that secure jobs, good physical and mental health, social relationships that give a sense of belonging, a meaningful view of the world, an intact environment and political freedom are the main factors determining human happiness and contentment (Haubl 2009). Even the most benign observer would have problems to claim that progressive governments have paid much attention to all of these issues in recent years. Seen in this light, labour market reforms, deregulation and the flexibility discourse are hardly contributions to social well-being. This also

applies to other elements of the left-liberal elite consensus. What, for instance, do the findings of Robert Putnam on the effects of ethnic diversity mean to the European left? Putnam was forced to admit that trust, social capital and interpersonal contacts diminish the more ethnically diverse a community is. Indeed, ethnically heterogeneous communities are dominated by an »anomie« of social isolation that has a negative impact on all areas of life. People living in ethnically diverse communities report »less happiness and lower perceived quality of life« (Putnam 2007: 150).

These are all questions that the European centre left never really addressed. Yet it is urgent to oppose the one-dimensional promise of happiness of consumerism with a properly progressive vision of a »good society«: A society of emancipated individuals, disposing of the necessary time and material resources to realise their ideal of a fulfilled, »happy« life. The right to a »pursuit of happiness« formulated in the US Declaration of Independence of 1776 is one of the greatest political principles of all time. In our post-industrial age, the competition of ideas should concentrate increasingly on this central question: which model – that of consumerism or that of a relatively egalitarian society of autonomous citizens – is more suitable to create the conditions for human happiness and ecological sustainability?

6 Enhancing Democracy

The most surprising omission in the centre-left discourse is without any doubt its almost complete silence on the crisis of representative democracy. Survey after survey shows that only a minority of citizens believe that the existing channels for political participation give them any power to influence politics or governmental action. Indeed, traditional centre-left voters are particularly sceptical: a survey conducted by Forsa in May 2009 showed that 0% – yes, zero percent – of workers in Germany believe they can have a significant impact on how policy in Germany is shaped via the ballot box.⁶

This crisis of confidence in representative democracy has grown worse in recent years. The creation of a multi-level political system in the EU and the corresponding disempowerment of national, regional and local parliaments have probably

accelerated this development. More important, however, seem to be processes that Colin Crouch has categorised under the term »post-democracy«: the loss of influence of major social institutions like the Church or the trade unions, which in the post-war formation were additional factors of collective representation in the political power relations of western democracies; the professionalisation of politics, whereby politicians come from a more limited range of backgrounds and recruitment paths have become narrower; the decline of mass membership parties and their functional replacement by one-way communication via the mass media; the cultural disembedding of professional elites from the national context as a transnational elite ideology comes to the fore (Crouch 2004). Of course Crouch's portrayal is one-sided; his idealisation of a »democratic moment« in post-war societies appears rather surprising if we remember the subordinated position of women, the underdeveloped legal control of state institutions, the treatment of dissent and the discrimination against sexual and cultural minorities. Are we really nostalgic for the 1950s? Yet many of his observations are correct and are confirmed by both opinion surveys and sociological analyses. Many people's lives are dominated by a feeling of disempowerment, of a loss of control over their own lives, of being at the mercy of the anonymous forces of the market and of politics that is seen as ever more remote from people (Sennett 2006).

The most important reaction to the crisis of traditional parliamentary and bureaucratic systems has been the development of concepts of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1999). The integration of the professional and expert knowledge into the »concentric circles« of policy formulation does of course represent progress. Yet this development has not only failed to change the social representation deficit of politics, but has actually made things worse. »Ordinary people« are largely excluded from these political negotiation arenas as other social interests, capable of articulating themselves more powerfully, have a far stronger impact than the weakly organised interests of average citizens. In his discussion with Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth points out how dependent the perception of political problems is on the filter function of the media; a mechanism that leads to most »everyday misery« being excluded from the public debate (Honneth in Fraser/Honneth 2003: 140ff.). At the same time, the expert-oriented government by commission has led to a weakening of the role of parliaments in day-to-day politics.

⁶ Forsa survey commissioned by the magazine *Stern* and conducted on 19 and 20 May 2009.

The question is whether a low-intensity democracy, regarded with growing scepticism by its citizens, is really an appropriate form of political organisation for the societies of the twenty-first century? Nearly everything indicates that the answer is »no«: the general level of education and knowledge, the very character of politics in the age of »reflexive modernity«, the dominating ideological discourse and the inevitable »desecration« of politics (and politicians) in the age of 24/7-media surveillance. Never have people been as educated and well informed as they are today: In the EU, the proportion of the population having completed higher education has increased steadily through the generations. In 2007, 30% of those aged 25-34 had graduated from tertiary education, compared with 25% of those aged 35-44 and 19% of those aged 45-64 (Eurostat 2009). Whereas in 1945 only 5% of young Germans left school with an university entrance qualification, this number stands today at 45%. The Internet has made information accessible as never before in human history. The new communication networks of Web 2.0 have opened up completely new channels for the exchange of information and for the formation of private and public opinion beyond the control and normative power of the mass media. Already back in the mid-1990s James Rosenau spoke of western society as a »society of the smart people« (Rosenau 1997). The growing scepticism about representative democracy is arguably also an expression of the frustration on the part of these »smart people« at the fact that their demand for political participation is still largely confined to areas that Ulrich Beck qualified as »sub-politics« (Beck 1993). Finally, the passive political role representative democracy assigns to citizens does not align well with one of the central ideological developments of recent decades: the rise of an »entrepreneurial« vision of human beings and their behaviour, exhorting people to permanent »self-realisation« and a relentless activation of their individual »potentials«. Why on earth should societies that are thoroughly marked by an individualistic ideology of self-realisation renounce to extend the reach of the »entrepreneurial mind« of its citizens also to the sphere of politics (Bröckling 2007)?

The only appropriate form of democracy for the »society of the smart people« of the twenty-first century is one that drastically expands the opportunities for popular participation.⁷ An important ele-

ment here would be the strengthening of elements of direct democracy – at local, regional and national levels. These might take a variety of forms: referenda, popular legislative initiatives (as in Switzerland and California), plebiscites on individual political decisions, the possibility to »recall« office- or mandate-holders via a qualified majority (as in various US federal states and British Columbia), direct voting on framework budgets at all administrative levels and – as is already standard practice in a number of countries, especially in Brazil – the participatory formulation of the budgets of cities and communities. This would represent a quantum leap in the quality of democratic participation: from voting on persons to voting on the contents of politics itself (Batt 2006). Alongside elements of direct democracy, there are a large number of other conceivable ways to slow down the rampant sclerotisation of western democracy. Phillipe Schmitter was commissioned by the Council of Europe in 2005 to produce a Green Paper on the future of democracy in Europe, which contains many suggestions of this kind: from voting rights for children (to be exercised by their parents) to citizens' juries to consider important draft legislation, direct elections to public office, the introduction of tax vouchers for voters (allowing them to decide on the allocation of subsidies to civil society organisations) there are a large number of possibilities that would be worth testing and that could breathe new life into our aging democracies (Schmitter/Trechsel 2005).

⁷ An important argument here is the potential superiority of collective decision-making: if organised sensibly, the »ma-

ny« tend to be smarter than the »few« (Surowiecki 2004).

7 Conclusion

A modern social democratic project must counter the neo-liberal image of »homo economicus« with a genuinely progressive vision of an empowered citizen. Such a strategy of systematic social and political empowerment would include a strengthening of political participation via direct democracy, an improvement in the economic and legal situation of labour and a strengthening of the rights of consumers. The manifest dilemma between the »globalism« of the elites and the »communitarian« desires of large parts of the population will have to be treated in a very different manner than today. The same goes for our societies' obsession with growth and its ecological consequences.

The task is certainly not a simple one. But without making these adjustments social democratic parties will remain stuck in a kind of »pre-Godesberg situation«: in principle majoritarian, but in practice well away from power. In the 1950s, as today, there existed a large political consensus on the welfare state and a rejection of an unregulated laissez-faire capitalism. Yet despite this »social democratic moment«, Western Europe was dominated by conservative parties that had incorporated elements of the welfare state and Keynesian thinking into their programmes. The left was unable to counter the promise of a paternalistic »society of affluence« with an equally attractive political vision of its own. Anti-communism mobilised anti-leftist reflexes deep within working and middle class communities, not dissimilar to the effects that the issues of multi-culturalism and immigration produce today. As Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle (Diamond/Liddle 2009) write: »The return of the economy to the forefront of political debate can only temporarily conceal serious tensions und unresolved dilemmas in the social democratic coalition between what we term »cosmopolitan« and »communitarian« world views.

These – and other – unresolved dilemmas can only be overcome if the parties of the centre-left do some serious work on their political programmes. One should be under no illusions about what will happen if this renewal fails to take place. Political organisations are not, after all, immortal.

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