

Europe's Specter of Americanization

Saturday 16 August 2008, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: September 2002).

A SPECTER IS haunting Europe — and despite the disquietingly high vote for the far right in some recent elections, it is not really the specter of fascism. It looks more like the specter of Americanization.

Of course, the reshaping of European politics along lines similar to the United States, with blatantly reactionary parties on the right and middle-of-the-road neoliberal parties on the “left,” is being fiercely resisted. More than one possible variant, particularly with outright fascist parties on the right and/or resurgent radical socialist parties on the left, is not only imaginable and possible but a real and present prospect.

Still, in recent months a number of European countries have moved further and faster than anyone had foreseen toward political landscapes with Republican-like parties on one side and almost quasi-Democratic parties on the other. This was barely imaginable a decade ago.

During the Cold War years Western Europe had a substantially different political spectrum than the United States. The strongest force on the left was social democracy, which had reconciled itself to a so-called mixed economy, parliamentary democracy and U.S. hegemony over the capitalist world, but maintained a close relationship with the trade union movement, defended European welfare states and occasionally even resorted to nationalizations and flirted with various kinds of structural reforms.

In southern Europe Communist parties were serious competition for social democracy, though in hindsight CP domestic programs were not all that different from social democratic ones.

On the right European politics varied more from country to country, with national peculiarities like Gaullism in France diversifying the landscape. But the strongest single force on the right in much of Europe was Christian democracy, which shared some key features with social democracy.

In some countries (Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and into the 1960s even in France) Christian democracy had its own wing of the trade union movement, which played a significant role in its policy debates. It also defended, and in some countries helped to shape, European welfare states. Christian democracy was in many ways as different from the U.S. Republican Party as European social democracy was from the U.S. Democratic Party.

This distinctive European political setup rested on a somewhat distinctive social model. By the 1970s the European social safety net was visibly more solid than in the United States. Health care was universally guaranteed, for decades unemployment rates were lower than in the United States, and even the few long-term unemployed could count on some sort of minimum social benefit.

Military spending was at a fraction of U.S. levels, yet overall European public sectors were bigger. Though non-European immigrants grew as a percentage of the work force from the 1950s on, in the first couple of decades racism was nowhere as big a political factor as in the United States.

Well into the 1990s even many right-wing politicians insisted that Europe would not give up the “European social model” or “Rhineland model” that distinguished it from the American one.

The 1980s and 90s changed much of that. By the mid-1980s Reaganomics and Thatcherism had improved the U.S. and British economic positions relative to the European mainland. Unemployment, once a fraction of U.S. levels, rose to several times higher. Racism, once marginal in politics if not in society, became a major political contender as native workers blamed immigrants for job losses. From defenders of the welfare state, social democrats and Christian democrats turned to chipping away at it in order to boost profitability. But in most European countries the major parties nonetheless made it to the end of the century relatively unscathed. Britain was the first exception. From the mid-1970s on Margaret Thatcher managed to transform the Conservative party from a paternalist, quasi-Christian Democratic force to a kindred spirit for Reagan's Republicans, crushing union power and shredding the social safety net. By the mid-1990s New Labor under Tony Blair reconciled itself to Thatcherism; far from moderating Thatcherism, New Labor in power since 1997 has pushed ahead in tearing up the social fabric. In the early 1990s Italy became the second European country to go through a major political sea change. Christian democracy collapsed under the weight of forty-five years of corruption and was shoved aside on the right by millionaire businessman Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the post-fascist National Alliance and regionalist Northern Leagues. The Italian CP, once Europe's strongest, renamed itself a couple of times, shed its left wing in a split and ended up as the Left Democrats, with half its former vote and a profile somewhere on the right wing of European social democracy. Nevertheless, these were the exceptions. In 2000 social democracy was in office in thirteen of the fifteen member countries of the European Union. A consensus around a sort of neoliberalism with a pale social face seemed the foundation of feasible politics on the European Continent, from the traditional right to the no-longer-reformist left. In several countries -- France, Belgium and the Netherlands -- the left and right were governing more or less jointly, fighting more over spoils and personalities than over policies. As the movement against capitalist globalization grew after Seattle, with bigger and bigger echoes in Prague, Nice and Genoa, the major parties seemed more or less equivalent adversaries for most of the young demonstrators. Society was getting more interesting, but politics seemed as boring as ever. {{{Creeping Landslide}}} We can see now that twenty years of austerity had hollowed out Europe's major parties and left them without much of a social base. In recent months they have cracked and slid down the hillside in one country after another. The biggest loser has been social democracy, leaving a question mark over its character and survival as a major political player. On the right extremist, in some cases arguably fascist parties have made gains. But many of the biggest winners on the right look more like the standard-issue pro-law-and-order, anti-immigrant, anti-big-government, anti-union, anti-welfare politicians with which U.S. voters have been so long familiar. Hard right parties of this kind have been winning elections recently in one European country after another. Spanish Prime Minister Aznar's People's Party has won the last two elections. In Austria the Christian Democrats ended a half-century of cooperation with social democracy when they formed a coalition government with Jorg Haider's far right Freedom Party. Berlusconi and the Italian right, thrown out in the mid-1990s in a wave of determined social opposition to their plans for pension cutbacks, returned to office in 2001. In the past year social

democrats have been thrown out of government in Denmark, Portugal, France and the Netherlands, in often devastating defeats. The French Socialist Party was most famously humiliated when its presidential candidate Jospin came in third, after the Gaullist Chirac and fascist Le Pen. In Denmark and the Netherlands social democrats did worse than they had in decades, with their vote cut in half in the Netherlands and down to 1920s levels in Denmark. The rightward trend may well continue. In the run-up to German elections in September, the social democrats are trailing behind the Christian Democrats, who themselves have turned sharply rightward by choosing the leader of the hard right Bavarian Christian Social Union, Stoiber, as their candidate for chancellor. If the right wins in Germany, Finland, Sweden and Greece would be the only EU member countries remaining with social democratic prime ministers. The social consequences of these right-wing victories can be far worse than past rightward electoral shifts in Europe. The new governments plan to push through attacks already sketched out and endorsed by the European Round Table of Industrialists and often by the European Commission. These include wholesale privatization of public services like energy, public transit and even much of health care and education, and gutting of public pension plans. Job security is also a key target: The Italian right aims to repeal Article 18 of the Labor Code that restricts dismissals, while Germany's Harz Commission is proposing a gamut of measures to increase "labor flexibility." Less consensual among employers, but a major priority of right-wing politicians, are further restrictions in already draconian immigration laws. The new Dutch right-wing government for example plans to deny children over the age of twelve the right to join their parents in Holland, and to deny the poorest 40% of the Dutch population the right to live in Holland with non-citizen spouses. Anti-immigrant and law-and-order measures may please many of the voters who brought these right-wing governments to office, but the cutbacks and privatizations will doubtless come as an unpleasant surprise to much of the right's own electorate. The right won many votes by stressing social democrats' failures to provide quality health care and education. Social democracy in power dug its own grave with its penny-pinching approach to the welfare state, as waiting lists for operations swelled and class sizes rose. Social democrats' proudest achievements, on the other hand, often left its own voters cold. The Italian Left Democrats were thrilled to get Italy into the European Monetary Union, for example, but ordinary Italians mainly felt the consequences of budget cuts required to qualify Italy for inclusion. The French center-left prided itself on introducing a 35-hour work week; but this was in fact an "annualized" 35-hour work week, which could mean sixty hours work one week, ten hours the next, no overtime, no right to say no and few new hires. Workers, overworked and overstressed, were unimpressed. This helps explain why the reformist left's electorate has been staying home in droves on election day. In polls before the French presidential elections 75% saw no difference between the traditional right and center-left. Only 11% of French workers voted for Socialist Jospin, while 24% voted for fascist Le Pen. The SP's ally, the Communist Party, also fell to a new record low, barely three percent -- it used to get 25% in election after election. In the Dutch elections the right-wing Pim Fortuyn List replaced social democracy as the biggest party in decades-old working-class strongholds like Rotterdam. Green parties have been holding their own better than social democracy, but their role in center-left

governments in Germany, France, Italy and Belgium and support for U.S. wars have shaken their electoral base. {{{Fading Solidarity}}} Perhaps social democratic parties could learn from their defeats, at least dust off some of their old class rhetoric and start winning elections again in the next few years. But disquieting, deeper social trends also underlie reformist electoral debacles. A whole new working class generation has grown up in the 1980s and 90s, much of which has had little chance to pick up old habits of social solidarity. In a risky, atomized society, many working people can more easily imagine holding on to what they have by turning on immigrants and “welfare cheats” than by taking on powerful corporations.

In the past whole sectors of the working class were bound together by nationally negotiated, nationally binding contracts; now they are being broken up one by one.

British New Labor is leading a push to save social democracy by pushing it further to the right rather than back a bit to the left. Labor has survived in Britain, Blair argues, by being as tough as the right on immigrants, welfare and crime. This is a prescription for even further attenuating the links that still bind European social democracy to the workers’ movement.

This process has been going on for decades; as long ago as 1959 the German Social Democrats announced that they were no longer a workers’ party but a “people’s party.” Proclamations like this, however, do not in themselves cut social democracy loose from its structural ties to organized labor. Even Blair’s success in junking the Labor Party’s socialist Clause 4 was not the final step. But many European union federations, like the British Trades Union Congress and Italian CGIL, are questioning their relationship to social democracy more openly than ever before. In southern Europe unions linked to social democracy are increasingly under pressure from independent unions to their left, like the Italian COBAS and French public sector unions called SUD (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy).

The weaker attraction of class solidarity for many workers is all too familiar to U.S. progressives. The paradox is that while Europe and the United States seem to be drifting apart on global issues, from the Kyoto protocol to the International Criminal Court to Iraq and Palestine, their societies may be drifting closer together.

Once upon a time in the 1980s the ideology for European unification was based partly on European Commission President Jacques Delors’ promise that a “Social Europe” would be built on the foundation of a unified economic market. That promise is now virtually forgotten. To some extent September 11 pulled Europe and the United States together; anti-Muslim feelings have run rampant in Europe, and helped swell the right-wing vote.

To the extent that European elites still differentiate themselves now, it is less on the basis of stronger welfare states and unions than on the basis of “immaterial” human rights — secularism, gay rights and opposition to the death penalty — all of which even the new European hard right (unlike traditional Christian democracy) is now more likely to endorse.

New Left

The string of right-wing electoral victories has been sobering to European radicals, who had been riding high on the rapid growth of the global justice movement and an apparent upturn in social struggles. September 11 had hardly slowed the European movement’s momentum; big mobilizations in Brussels, Barcelona and Seville have followed last year’s hugely successful protests in Genoa.

In southern Europe the new activism is increasingly infecting some of the unions. Following metalworkers' strikes and participation in the Genoa protests, Italy's largest union federation CGIL mobilized three million people against the right's labor law proposals. Spanish and Greek federations have led general strikes.

The World March for Women has become a focus for an uncertain, uneven revival of the women's movement in a number of European countries. In another momentous development, immigrants are becoming a bigger and bigger base for mobilizations. In Britain they helped form a powerful movement against the Afghanistan war.

In France and Holland, as in the United States on April 20, Arab and Muslim communities have turned out massively for Palestinian solidarity demonstrations; the one in Amsterdam was Holland's single biggest progressive demonstration in well over a decade.

Until now, however, these protesters have had no strong, consistent allies in European parliaments. It is becoming clear that unless they can solve this problem of political representation they will face even tougher battles against very heavy odds with the new right-wing governments.

A successful challenge to Europe's political and social Americanization seems less likely to come from a new radicalization of social democracy than from new radical left parties that are now emerging in a series of countries.

As the remaining Communist and ex-Communist parties wither and die, a new European force to the left of social democracy and the Greens may be poised to stake out the far left of the serious political landscape, and provide the clearest political voice for the global justice movement in Europe.

This new left is coming from different traditions in different countries. In some countries, like Denmark (the Red-Green Alliance) and Portugal (the Left Bloc) it is a coalition of ex-Communists, ex-Maoists and Trotskyists.

In other countries a single current of the revolutionary, anti-Stalinist left has played a decisive role: for example in Scotland, where one Trotskyist current has built the Scottish Socialist Party; in England, where the Socialist Workers Party is by far the strongest force in the Socialist Alliance; and in France, where the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) is now rivaling the electoral strength of the rival Trotskyist group Lutte Ouvriere (LO) and pushing for the formation of a much broader, more pluralist party of the radical left.

In all these cases a lasting breakthrough for the radical left depends on building a pluralist party broader than any one current, in fact broader than all the revolutionary groups put together. The new parties tend not to define themselves as revolutionary. As one Scottish radical notes, they are "strategically un-delimited."

Italy is the one country so far where a party from the pro-Moscow Communist tradition has played a key role in this process. The Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), having already absorbed most of the country's far left, declared at its congress this spring a decisive break not only with Stalinism but also with the traditional "historical compromise" politics of the Italian Communist Party going back to Togliatti.

Seeing all these parties as parts of a single European radical left force is not just an outside observer's analysis; it is the conclusion that they are increasingly drawing themselves and putting into practice.

Over the past two years Conferences of the European Anti-Capitalist Left have met every six months, in Lisbon, Paris, Brussels and Madrid. The conferences have registered steady progress toward

common political positions: against the war in Afghanistan (and next in Iraq), for building the global justice movement, for immigrants' rights and against racism, for a fight for social rights on a European level and a different kind of European unification in a different kind of world.

The Madrid conference this June was the first where the Italian PRC formally joined the Conference of the European Anti-Capitalist Left (without burning its bridges to other European CPs), becoming the largest organization taking part. It was also the first conference to begin planning joint European campaigns, starting with a campaign against racism.

Even before the next Conference, to be held December 2002 in Copenhagen, the organizations will gather again in Italy at the PRC's call, in a conference of the alternative left to be co-organized by the French LCR. Discussions are now under way on a common campaign for the 2004 elections for the European parliament.

The links between this emerging political new left and the growing social left are far from automatic. A key test will be the European Social Forum to be held in Florence, Italy, in November, a continental sequel to the second World Social Forum held last February in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

In Porto Alegre the left wing of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) not only had credibility in the social movements but could also provide the Forum's infrastructure, thanks to PT control of city and state governments.

In Italy the PRC is by far the most credible party involved in the social movements united in the Italian Social Forum (Europe's strongest); but the Forum infrastructure depends on help from the Florence city government and Tuscan regional government, both of which the social democratic Left Democrats dominate.

The radical left's ability to play a leadership role in the Forum without tearing it apart may be a portent for its capacity in the coming years to transform — de-Americanize — Europe's political and social landscape.

P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 100, Sept./Oct. 2002.