

The New Left (June 2005)

Abstract

According to journalist Jens Bisky, the “strange East-West alliance” between the PDS and the Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice [*Wahlalternative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit* or WASG] marked a caesura in the history of unification and the development of the party system in the Federal Republic. Despite all their differences, these two groups were linked by a fear of social decline and by the feeling that their interests were being neglected. Bisky (born in 1966) is the oldest son of the East German politician Lothar Bisky (PDS/the Left Party).

Source

The Agitated Ones

The Nostalgic Left Fits Perfectly into the Present

As yet, it is impossible to know if the combination of two political divas – Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi – will turn into a kind of GDR nostalgia show with a Saarlander^[1] as a special guest, or if the cunning of reason left these two publicity hounds no alternative but to merge their parties. Until a few days ago, at least, a pan-German party to the left of Red-Green^[2] seemed impossible. The new lifestyle rebels, who avail themselves of the globalized market of worldviews and participate in Attac events every now and then, shy away from organizational structures that are too clearly defined. The country’s revolutionary avant-garde already had its swan song fifteen years ago. On May 12, 1990, around 11 o’clock, they gathered in front of the Old Opera in Frankfurt am Main to march up to the Römerberg, the main square. “Never again, Germany!” was the slogan. In those days, that could only mean: No monetary union! No unification! There were banners with the slogan “No to the imperialistic annexation – yes to a socialist Germany.”

To writer Gerd Koenen, the demonstration seemed like a carnival parade of revenants, a final gathering of everyone who had been keeping the revolutionary flame. The protest march also included a block of people in the blue shirts of the Free German Youth,^[3] but it was the Left from the West who set the tone, albeit in borrowed costumes. A shawm band played, and one float showed Lenin, dressed as a proletarian, standing on a giant globe, sweeping the exploitative scum from the earth. This was followed by heavy-metal chanting from the Black Block.

Water cannons were in position, rocks flew. Riots, injuries, and arrests confirmed the worldview of the world redeemers. The Left from the West had discussed emancipation and liberation strategies in never-ending seminars and dozens of magazines. As soon as the East German citizenry had shaken off despotism and freed itself from a state of [political] immaturity, the revolutionary avant-garde could hardly think of anything better to do than to drone on about the master strategies of capital.

At that time, the PDS, too, had rejected unification according to Helmut Kohl’s plan. Their Communist Platform was present in Frankfurt, but it would have been political suicide for the party to join the marching columns of the small groups en bloc. In the end, Hans Modrow also demanded “Germany – united fatherland,” and the brighter of the remaining SED comrades knew that they couldn’t keep feeding East Germans the abstract war game of “proletariat versus bourgeoisie.” Having an ear for their fears of loss and everyday hardship was more important than any major historico-philosophical scenario.

For a long time, Oskar Lafontaine balked at the monetary union and a speedy accession of the new federal states. Early on, he had fuelled the mood against the East German citizens who moved westward in droves after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and he called for cutting payments to them. Contemporaries attest to his having wanted to prevent unification. The Greens sulked about the course of events. Like many moderate leftists, they developed a sudden nostalgia for the republic in Bonn. Yet neither uproar nor withdrawal helped. In the 1990s, everyone who had gotten comfortable left of the SPD was concerned about the unexpected end of the Cold War. It was the hour of the renegades and the revisionists. In both the SPD and the Green Party, the pragmatists and the realists were the winners. It seemed like only sectarians or young rebels were cavorting around farther to the left. Or the regional PDS party, which everyone assumed was going to disappear very quickly.

A young East German who had set out in the early 1990s to get to know the Western Left outside of the SPD and the Greens encountered not only critical spirits but also many ideas that were all too familiar. He met orthodox leftists, for whom the doctrine in pure form was more important than a look out the window. He ran into distrustful people who smelled a Nazi around every corner and even promptly suspected him of nationalistic sentiments. Older gentlemen and ladies delighted in recalling heroic deeds from their rebellious youth, back when they started cheekily running across lawns. And they responded testily if he didn't buy the subversiveness of their attitudes.

People who considered themselves leftists gave him unsolicited hugs and welcomed him into a community of people who all seemed to share the same consensual, unspoken convictions. They didn't understand why, for him, it was irrelevant whether someone could reconcile the buying of South African grapes with his conscience. As different as they were, they attached great importance to those differences. But they were virtually unanimous in the importance they ascribed to not having anything in common with the philistines and functionaries of the PDS. East German socialists were the counter-image, against which they assured themselves of their own superiority.

If Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi now come together to run against Red-Green, then, whether we like it or not, this marks a caesura in the history of the German Left and the history of unification. This is not simply a matter of two old rivals of Helmut Kohl forming an odd

East-West alliance. Socialists outside of the SPD are experiencing a renaissance. Those from whom one would have least expected it – those long written off – are performing a new piece with the same old actors.

So far, the public has reacted to the mere announcement with attempts at exorcism and defensive tactics consisting of horror and fascination in equal parts. While some declared the new Left alliance anachronistic and thus stillborn, others said the time had come for a true, genuine left-wing party, though unfortunately not the one we ended up with. Yet there is some indication that the alliance might prompt Germany's party system to start adapting to the changed conditions.

As early as September 2003, Oskar Lafontaine had offered food for thought by wondering whether it would make sense for the SPD in the new federal states^[4] and the PDS to join together to form an East German SPD. This would be for Social Democracy what the CSU^[5] is for Christian Democrats: a regional party that is a bit more demanding and ideological. The suggestion – which was quickly dismissed by the Social Democrats as a crazy notion – shows most of all how little Lafontaine understood the East. In any case, he kept at it, and spoke at a rally in Leipzig in the summer of the Hartz IV^[6] hysteria, though he never really achieved the desired effect. The Monday demonstrations in the East had mostly been organized spontaneously by local coalitions as an articulation of popular disgruntlement with politics in general. Under new democratic conditions, the well-chosen slogan from the struggle against dictatorship – “We are the people” – quickly turns into an anti-parliamentarian message. Integrating enraged peers into the political system is a traditional task of the left-wing parties, the SPD and the

Greens. The authors of the Hartz legislation of course have difficulty reaching their opponents.

Hartz IV marked the beginning of a period of agitation, without which the alliance could neither have come about in the first place nor been successful in elections. After the strenuous departure from revolutionary intentions or from strategies for overcoming the system, what is needed is excitement and the special feeling that this moment is a turning point. Today, a socialist organization left of Red-Green can only thrive in a situation where people fear harm to the system as a whole but still believe that change is possible.

The success of the PDS, for which only five percent of East Germans wanted to vote in December 1991, is at least halfway dependent on such sentiments. With its “red sock campaign”^[7] of 1994, the CDU made sure that the impression arose in the East that we were in the midst of a cultural struggle and had to decide between black and white. All the PDS had to do was to distribute hand-knit red socks as a symbol of East German defiance – and it became established as a lasting political force.

At the same time, Lafontaine had a much harder time of it. He had to create the necessary fervor himself and conjure up a state of emergency at the Mannheim party conference in 1995. He promised that there were still visions worth fighting for, but remained vague when it came to defining them. It is to this politics of pugnacious gestures that he owes his greatest triumph – Rudolf Scharping’s being voted out of office.

Gysi’s greatest success, too, presumed a kind of state of emergency. In 2001, the PDS almost achieved an absolute majority in the eastern part of Berlin; the city had been ruined once and for all by the machinations of the previous Senate;^[8] Schröder’s declared belief in “unrestricted solidarity” with the United States had stirred up old fears in the East; and anti-Communist campaigns put the PDS in a glaring light once again. Gysi’s previous posture closely resembled his present one: I am ready in the hour of need and decision-making. When the harsh attacks never came in the 2002 Bundestag elections, and when resignation outstripped defiance in the East, the PDS’s heretofore stable milieu didn’t help all that much. They lost even though they were well-anchored in East German society.

The socialist Left party made up of the WASG^[9] and the PDS cannot succeed without creating a fuss. Right now, they don’t have to worry about it. The conservatives have long since committed themselves to revolutionary rhetoric. In the fall of 2002, contemporary historian Arnulf Baring called citizens to action in order to prevent the Federal Republic from petrifying into a Western GDR at the last minute. The CDU has announced radical reforms. There is already great anger towards the new alliance. The necessary operating temperature thus appears to have been reached, and the auto-suggestion of “historical opportunity” will take care of the rest.

In programmatic terms, the new Left attracts notice for its run-of-the-mill slogans like “labor” and “justice” – the CDU and the SPD promise the same. Even the struggle against Hartz IV is not a special new Left issue. After all, in August 2004 Saxon minister president Georg Milbradt considered participating in the Monday demonstrations himself. This probably explains the public gesture of defense. The alliance works with issues, concepts, and slogans from the center of society and ties them to an oppositional impulse.

The programmatic void – to which the other parties are hardly responding with plenty – allows the WASG and the PDS to be relaxed in dealing with East-West differences. Even if one might appear bourgeois and the other superficial, one self-righteous and the other indulging in guilt, they are united by a fear of decline or the real experience of being demoted. They are united in the conviction that they will not be among the winners of the reforms, which they agree come at the expense of the ordinary people. They are united in the conviction that no other party represents their interests. Whoever responds by invoking harmonious and conflict-free social circumstances does not improve the situation. Guido Westerwelle

claims that liberal economic policies are good for everyone, that, after all, *Prosperity for All* [*Wohlstand für alle*] was the name of Ludwig Erhardt's book. That is no less nostalgic than Oskar Lafontaine's romance with the social welfare state that promises "politics for all." The supposedly neoliberal zeitgeist and its opponents aren't very far apart. Both hope that by turning the right screws they will get the Germany-machine working again and be able to carry everyone along. An illusion.

Thus far, the Left alliance seems quite nostalgic. If it came to pass, it would undertake to promise to represent those social figures who seem anachronistic: the long-term unemployed, residents of marginal regions, poor retirees. Protecting their interests would mean opposing those who are younger, more affluent, and flexible, who object that it is unjust to live at the expense of others, and who maintain that the welfare state as we know it is unduly limiting freedom. This is an issue that should be debated in parliament, not at SPD party conferences.

Despite Lafontaine's megalomania, the alliance will not be a party for everyone left of center. The SPD and the Greens have by no means sold themselves out to the ominous neoliberalism. But calling out with exorcistic fervor to disappointed leftists in the West, union officials, and members of works councils, saying they have abandoned reason, is naïve and dangerous. If the country needs to be changed, if the talk of reform is more than just hysteria, then the losers need to be represented in the parliament. A tactical leftward shift of the SPD would only hide the conflicts temporarily and frustrate parts of the new center. An open, differentiated society needs multiple small parties. Anyone who regards the agitated ones as the norm forces them to follow up their gestural politics with honest, clientele-serving politics.

NOTES

- [1] Gregor Gysi (PDS) is from the GDR, and Lafontaine (WASG) is from Saarland – eds.
- [2] The coalition government consisting of the SPD and the Greens – eds.
- [3] The youth organization of the Socialist Unity Party – eds.
- [4] Reference to the federal states in the former GDR – eds.
- [5] The Christian Social Union only exists in Bavaria, but it always joins the CDU at the national level – eds.
- [6] Hartz IV is part of the package to reform the labor market. See Chapter 12, Document 13 – eds.
- [7] Reference to one of the CDU/CSU campaign slogans in the 1994 federal elections – eds.
- [8] Governing body in the city-state of Berlin – eds.
- [9] WASG is the acronym for *Wahlalternative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit*, or the Electoral Alternative for Labor and Social Justice. WASG was founded in 2005; it emerged from an organization with a similar name – eds.

Source: Jens Bisky, "Die Aufgeregten," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 25–26, 2005.

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