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Heading straight for the abyss

Why the German grass-roots movement 'Aufstehen' will deepen rather than solve the problems of the centre-left

Read this article in German or Russian.

'The world as it is is not the world as it should be', Barack Obama once exclaimed. The way things are is not how things should remain. This dissatisfaction about the gulf between the circumstances experienced and those sought is the driving force of all progressive politics. We need progress, renewal, change. To not resign oneself to existing circumstances but to improve them instead, ideally enabling all people to lead a 'liveable' life – this is the common purpose of all progressives.

More freedom, justice and life chances for all, less inequality and exploitation, more vibrant democracy and social liberality, less racism and discrimination, all efforts necessary to prevent global ecological and climate collapse. Without question, there will always be multiple opinions about priorities, strategies and instruments. But there should essentially be no big debates regarding the basic aims and values of progressive politics.

In the 21st century the fundamental principles of freedom, justice and solidarity are under threat. In the US, virulent right-wing authoritarianism is already in power. But not only there. In a number of European nations too – in Poland, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Italy, the Czech Republic – leader-centred authoritarian movements have now penetrated the state and administrative structures as governing or co-governing parties. They did so with the clear intention of systematically undermining and terminating these liberal-constitutional structures from within.

And wherever they are, these ravagers of liberal democracy can rely on the active support of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian kleptocracy. Therefore the situation is darn serious and becoming increasingly dangerous. In Germany, people might only begin to realise this with the results of three regional elections in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg in the coming year. Maybe the recent events in Chemnitz are already helping people

understand how serious the situation actually is.

There's no going back to the past

Against this bleak background, any progressive movement that can help mobilise more and more people for the renewal and revitalisation of liberal and social democracy seems welcome at first sight. The very practical work of mobilising people is decisive now. That's because those who, in one way or another, struggle with the divide emerging between our reality and a liveable world for all people of all backgrounds may well represent (depending on how you count it) a vague *societal* majority in Germany. However, they do not yet constitute a majority that can be *organised politically*. Anything that promises to increase the weight and clout of these forces can only be welcomed with open arms by progressives of every stripe.

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German social democracy in particular could well use strong allies, as the decline of German and European social democracy has been going on for a very long time. It is structural in nature and driven by external changes in the economy and technology, communication and political culture, things over which a party itself can only exert minimal influence. Of course, all efforts to renew the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) are meaningful and right. They strengthen the party and make it more attractive again. Parties are always facing the choice of whether to keep engaging with ever-changing circumstances or lose influence and relevance: *adapt or die*, that's nothing really new.

In polls the SPD is persistently on less than 20 per cent across Germany. Having become a political and cultural 'brand' over many decades, social democracy is simply no longer in sync with the diffuse, current mood of a society that clearly sees no greater value anymore in being politically represented by two large parties right and left of 'centre', as well as a handful of smaller groups that help them achieve a majority. With the rise of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) as the *social movement from hell*, the German party system has finally reached a tipping point, from which there is just no going back to past, 'normal' circumstances.

Do not pit freedom against social justice

In this situation, all efforts to constrict the SPD to the supposed preferences of a structurally shrinking milieu of ethnic German, male, skilled workers in the western federal states will just backfire spectacularly. It might be tempting to pursue this kind of old-fashioned approach. But some people, for example, simply sweep aside the profound post-war social democratic commitment to internationalism and openness, European unity and social liberty as the deluded 'cosmopolitan' 'hypermoralism' of a 'postmodern', 'neo-liberal', urban 'establishment' in the name of a so-called 'left-wing realism'. This is to misunderstand, quash or forget pretty much everything that is essential to the wellbeing of the SPD.

No, no one in Germany *has to* value openness and liberality – *it's a free country, after all.* But anyone who thinks, in all seriousness, that the SPD can only get back on the road to success without – or even whilst fighting against – openness and social liberality is sending the party straight to the sectarian abyss. As Karl Adam observes wholly accurately: 'The fearful, disheartened strategy of adjusting to the right-wing populists will never take the wind out of their sails and will, in the end, simply keep confirming and reinforcing their own interpretative framework.' To pit the principles of freedom and social justice against one another is by far the most insane idea that social democrats could come up with in their present crisis.

Yes, the situation is serious, and the stakes are high. And this is precisely why the formation of new, progressive centre-left alliances in society and politics is so important.

But of course when the situation is dire, the temptation of a panacea increases at some point or another. Obviously social democrats should not rule out any idea in advance. But they should be able to calculate. And they should always ask whether or not suggestions are suitable for expanding the possibilities and scope of progressive alliances in society and politics. To put it another way: anyone who fairly desperately needs new progressive alliances, as social democracy does, should not come up with screening criteria for these alliances that will effectively deepen the dividing lines within their own party and electorate as well as between the SPD and important potential partners.

The ‘grass-roots’ movement ‘Aufstehen’

For instance, this holds true for Sahra Wagenknecht, parliamentary chairperson of the German Left Party (Die Linke). Now, in her capacity as founder and mastermind of the national-social, and therefore already profoundly anti-progressive, initiative ‘Aufstehen’ (literally ‘Get up’), Wagenknecht is not concerned with gathering together, uniting, integrating and generally strengthening the left-of-centre social and political spectrum. It is no coincidence that people in her own party, as opposed to other more gullible social democratic circles, perceive her ‘Aufstehen’ maneouvre as power politics. In fact, the situation within the politically deadlocked Left Party is somewhat of a mess. In her party, Wagenknecht has not been capable of achieving a majority already for years. It’s neither going forward nor backward. So now, with the simulation of a grass-roots movement, she wants to gather together useful people from outside the Left Party to put pressure on the Left Party’s decision-making body and finally shift the balance of power towards the Wagenknecht wing.

Perhaps Wagenknecht really does believe that, with the Left Party heading in her chosen direction, she would be in a good position to entice back voters from the AfD camp. It is highly likely that this is not the case, however, as the horrifying signs from Chemnitz suggest. But whether she is successful or not, a Wagenknecht ‘Left’ Party would be without doubt less *progressive* in any sense of the word. When it comes to the decisive social conflict line of our time between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, between openness and isolationism, she would be on the wrong side.

This brings us back to our initial point. Yes, the situation is serious, and the stakes are high. And this is precisely why the formation of new, progressive centre-left alliances in society and politics is so important. With everyone on their own, neither weakened Social Democrats nor strengthened Greens, neither socially liberal Free Democrats nor liberal-minded democratic socialists or even open-minded Christian democrats will quell the authoritarian wave that is heading directly towards them. If these and other forces want to come together effectively, then they will have to exhibit quite specific ‘progressive secondary virtues’ in dealing with one another. These include generosity, goodwill and kindness, as well as the unconditional willingness to cooperate and compromise – for the sake of a superior value, the defence of which should be of paramount importance to all progressives together today. For freedom, if nothing else.

Read the counterpoint to this article here.



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