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“Towards a European Social-Democratic Party for the 21st century: Challenges and Prospects”

The identification of the modernized character of Social Democracy is the focal point of this analysis. This article, will try to offer some ideas on how we can modernize and cultivate a viable European social democratic party for the 21st century. The material that is used derives from empirical study of social democratic parties in Europe within a comparative perspective.

The transformation of the character of the parties in the field of ideas, programs, initiatives, message, symbols and political rhetoric constitutes an expression of societal response in different periods of time. It is an important signal that relates with the historical route, the priorities and perspectives of every country, the class structure and the perspectives of its society, with the credibility and reliability of politics and of democracy in every socio-political framework.

In an era of great transformations and communications revolution that is taking place on a global level the modernization and the qualitative makeover of the structure and functions of the nature of the European Social-Democratic parties is imperative. These changes have a strong entry in the ideas, the values and morals, the desires and needs of the citizens and especially of the younger generations. It is crucial, therefore, that this radical “wind of change” touches upon the party structure and signifies a qualitatively new way for the future of the social democratic party structure in the national, European and global level (Moschonas, 2002: 287-313).

Parties and party systems form the basic component of modern representative democracy, the necessary entity for political representation and the crucial component that binds together citizens and political power in the quest for political interaction and active participation in the political sphere. Moving from the industrial to the post-industrial model of political membership, the party is undergoing a crisis of representation. (Spourdalakis, 1998: 25-50).

The model of the “catch-all” structure is going through a crisis of function, identity, and adjustment to the new circumstances. It needs, therefore, a new, modern analytical perspective focusing on its basic functions, structure and its dynamic capabilities. That “new” type of party appears capable and ready to welcome and to organize politically the post-industrial information society. The new organizational model of the collective political subjects of the post-industrial era is the “open” party (Mair, 1997).

The open party determines an intense organizational eclecticism, overcomes and synthesizes the old classical distinctions and schisms of the party phenomenon and signifies a new dynamic potential according to the left intelligencia (Bobbio, Giddens, Beck, J. Alexander, Katz etc.). It is a party with high level of organizational structure and of a decentralized base of active members that are carefully divided into different cells of political participation and can generate clear political outcome. The “open party” is a party that can function based on a clear communicative strategy within the framework of information society closely linked with monothematic political organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and civic societal unions in order to formulate and create a polycentric political identity. It has clearly a citizen-orientated approach. It is, therefore, synonym to the “network-party” thesis, the “party of the citizens”.

The open party idea clearly indicates that political parties cannot be seen as passive reflective mechanisms of class and class interests. On the contrary, parties are active organizations for the development, solidification and universalization of class interests and generally the interests of the citizens. They are par excellence voluntaristic institutions, which intervene actively in the relations and the conflict between classes, and social interests in general, and as such should be examined.

We could argue, though, that class participation is not enough to characterize or categorize a party along class lines (today we do not have solid class born entities anymore as we had in the past). The social nature of modern political parties should be interpreted as the result of the analysis of three variables: class participation, organizational effectiveness and political discourse.

A “network party” is a party with breadth, mass integration and elasticity. It is at the same time a party with identity, autonomous ideological cell and cohesion that safeguards and guarantees a viable, clear political message and a socially credible-well aimed political orientation that targets the needs of the 21st century citizen.

The new structures that have to underline the modernized social democratic party of the future have to be against the “a-political” populist logic of a neutral meaningless political rhetoric that can guarantee a “short march to power”. On the contrary, the party has to introduce a new modernized, innovative and socially just political discourse (i.e. the ideological and practical confrontation of issues when social interests are articulated). (Lyrintzis 1998, 2001). The party as an organization of citizens functions well and has meaning only when it operates as a collective organizer trying to integrate to its structures as many social forces as it can, synthesizing their views and creating a formula of dialogic democracy within party lines. The last indicates that a set of radical changes have to occur in order to achieve the desirable transformation as well as to establish new relationship between party members and party structures. Party organizational bases have to incorporate all the necessary personnel that can effectively implement the above and create a new modern party mentality. The reorganization of the old party mechanism together with the strengthening of the pedagogical role of the party will reinforce that transition and will create new party-member mentality necessary to generate genuine, modern and up to date political strategy and program (Ware, 1996: 20-50). With this new modernized party mentality we can guarantee the collective identity of the party as well as the personal political contribution of the individual party member. The point of the modern social democratic party project is to retrieve the power of the party. It is not to deny the power of the party.

Within this framework we should also reflect to the processes for the election of the party leader and the organizational team. It is obvious that these proceedings have to take place overcoming old shortcomings and giving the entire party base the role of the direct selector. The collective role of the leadership can safeguard a transparent, meritocratic organizational structure capable of creating new, fresh, democratic and important political outcome for the party and for the whole society.

The new physiognomy of social democracy is supported by a triple coherence: between its discourse in opposition and practice in government; between its resolutely catch-all programmatic/ideological profile and the interclassist structure of its organization and electorate; and finally between programmatic minimalism and ‘electoral maximalism’. Contemporary social democracy is a force in equilibrium. And in all likelihood, because it is based on this ‘triple’ coherence, the new social-democratic identity is not merely conjectural in character (Moschonas, 2002) and (Tsatsos, D. Schefold, H.P. Schneider, *Parteinrecht im europaischer Vergleich. Die Parteien in den demokratischen Gemeinschaft*, Nomos 1992.)

Furthermore, Socialist efforts to strengthen their co-operation and presence at the European level can be interpreted as a contribution to European political integration. Nevertheless, political

and partisan conflict in Europe remains primarily and profoundly 'national-territorial'. The socialist parties have neither defined a social democratic road to the European construction, nor hit upon the means to insert their combined weight in the variety of policy openings within the European Union. For its part, the PES (Party of European Socialists) (see M. Spourdalakis: *European Socialist Party: Tasks and Challenges. ISTAME-Athens-2001.*) despite reinforcement, remains at the 'project' stage – a project which, to this day, is vague, modest and uncertain in its contours; a project that lacks radicalism either for Europe, or for Socialism. European Socialism in its entirety still lacks an effective transnational structure capable of coordinating the activities of the national socialist parties in hegemonic fashion. The 'European internationalism' of the PES is too respectful of liberal logic and national interests; its organizational structure, directed from above is problematic and its implantation in the European societies virtually non-existent. The social democrats therefore, have to strengthen PES role and to put forward a social democratic project for Europe, implementing individual membership directly to PES and encouraging citizens to participate and to form its organizational schema from below and not from above.

Finally, it is apparent from the above that modern social democracy has to reestablish a new Social Center capable of connecting organically and collectively all the social democratic parties with renewed goals, alliances and values. The dynamism of the Center Left has to override the neo-liberal political rhetoric that is apparent and strong today and to envisage a new political project with "self-luminous" (not borrowed by the neo-liberal market logic) characteristics and impetus that can play the protagonistic role in the European and the global level spreading the ideas of social justice, equality and social democracy to all.

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