

'REFORMISM YESTERDAY AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY TODAY'

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It is now difficult to imagine that the term 'Social Democracy' once embodied socialism's greatest hopes. Shortly before the First World War, the German labour movement or German *Social Democracy*, which placed itself officially under the banner of Marxism, enjoyed a series of resounding successes that seemed to be full of promise. Within the space of a few years and despite the arsenal of laws and persecutory measures that were directed against it, it had become the major political force in the most powerful state in continental Europe. A membership of one million, the masses who voted for it and the group of deputies who represented it in the Reichstag, where they formed by far the most important group, all testified to its political strength. Its trade union strength could be measured in terms of millions of members. In organisational terms it seemed to embody both the genius of a nation and the irresistible emergence of a class. Its intellectual strength found expression in the voices of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Edouard Bernstein and Rudolf Hilferding, who were rarely in agreement but who were all prestigious figures. In his memoirs Trotsky pays retrospective tribute to its strength: 'For us Russians, German Social Democracy was mother, teacher and living example.'¹

The Russian Socialists were not alone in taking this view. Few people escaped the fascination of the example given by German Social Democracy. Even the term 'Social Democracy' was adopted in Russia, Holland, the Scandinavian countries and, in England, by the Social Democratic Federation.

The victories won by the German labour movement are not in themselves enough to explain the aura of prestige it enjoyed. Other considerations have to be taken into account, even though there is every reason to believe that they are bound up with the movement's victories. Social democracy was a persuasive option. It was both coherent and diverse, a shining example of the future that awaited organised workers in industrial countries. Under its leadership, the workers had been mobilised, educated and supplied with cadres; they seemed to be taking the path that would lead to the transformation of society. Many questions were still unresolved—notably the decisive question of 'reform or revolution'—but the social and political activity of the working class prefigured the develop-

ment of what, in terms of a different context and model, Gramsci was to describe as an irresistible hegemonic force within capitalist society. The anarchist vision of the 'great day' had been completely shattered. Much as its defenders might grumble, the bourgeois citadel was giving ground to its attackers. The only question was how long it would take them to undermine it. It might one day be necessary to make a frontal assault, but the progress of the socialist movement was such that many of its leaders and supporters were under the illusion that this was no more than an academic question. There was considerable tension between reformism, which was often vilified but still influential, and an orthodoxy which seemed radical but which offered only modest possibilities. Rosa Luxemburg eloquently and at times prophetically denounced all collusion with the 'right', as represented by Bernstein and others, and condemned an **organisation** which had already become trapped in the snares of a conservative bureaucratism. But this left-wing critique could itself be seen as further evidence of the theoretical and practical vitality of social democracy as a whole.

All the different currents and tendencies within social democracy agreed that bourgeois society should be undermined from within. The distinction between the reformist and revolutionary tendencies was less clear than it might now seem. It was not simply that the centrist nebula concealed differences by masking the divergences between them. Nor was it simply that the concrete gains the movement had made seemed to suggest that there was no urgent need for truly revolutionary action. What was more important was the general conviction that revolutionary action would take place over a relatively long period. Some argued that a radical break was therefore unlikely to occur, whilst others relegated it to the distant future. For many people the question of reform or revolution was not posed in clear terms, and the changes likely to result from the action of the socialist movement (and those which had already occurred) seemed to guarantee that the world would be completely transformed. Given that this seemed certain, the question of means (legal or otherwise, violent or non-violent) lost much of its relevance.

These developments lend a certain legitimacy to reformism, and particularly to forms of reformism which went by other names. By moderating its tone and avoiding the provocative formulations of men like Bernstein, these forms of reformism persuaded the entire movement to adopt a line which was reformist in everything but name. The term 'reformism' itself was still suspect, if not anathema. Reality was more accommodating.

The nature of the reformism which dominated the European labour movement at this time can be summed up as follows. There was a desire to bring about a profound social change and even to abolish capitalism itself by gradual, legal and peaceful means. It is true that many German

social democrats—notably Kautsky and Bebel—did sometimes state that it might be necessary to resort to more radical means to overcome the resistance of the bourgeoisie, but they did so more and more infrequently. That eventuality seemed to them to be hypothetical, distant and above all abstract. It had no relevance when it came to determining practical policies and strategy. They expected a reactionary counter-offensive, which, in fact, was being prepared. But the social democrats were not even thinking about a real defence against it.

Until the First World War, this choice could be justified in terms of the growing strength of the working class. The working class appeared to be strong enough to use its organisations to take over the state. But even though it had made considerable gains, it seemed unlikely that it would do so in the near future. The exact form which the seizure of power would take was still uncertain. Negatively, Social democratic orthodoxy rejected ministerialism, i.e. the acceptance of governmental responsibilities within a bourgeois executive. Positively, hopes were all the greater for being so vague. There seemed to be little doubt as to which social agent would introduce socialism and Bernstein was one of the few theoreticians to argue that that social agent might be found elsewhere than in the only revolutionary class, namely the industrial proletariat. It was certainly assumed that the party would play a decisive role, particularly in terms of relations with trade union organisations. But no one had examined the role of the state, despite the disturbing questions that its repressive function could and should have raised. Nor did anyone have anything to say about the transitional period. Practically nothing had been done to elaborate the formula 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' since the days when Marx and Engels first referred to it.

1914 and then the final stages of the war changed everything. Patriotic collaboration led to two changes for Social Democracy, or rather for social democrats. Whilst Social Democracy had not lost its working-class base, it now seemed possible to extend that base to take in the middle classes and especially state employees. On the other hand, the presence of socialist ministers in bourgeois governments (or, as in the case of Germany after November 1918, in governments which respected and defended the capitalist system) finally helped to raise the problem of the state in new terms. The war economy had already led to increased administrative intervention into economic life. What was more important, the democratisation of electoral laws and the fact that socialist representatives were regularly present in the highest echelons of the executive inevitably overturned earlier conceptions of strategy. From now on, Social Democracy and, in more general terms, reformism, saw the state as one of the principal instruments of its policy. One of the major tendencies within the labour movement began to see its objectives as gaining more parliamentary power, extending state-run public services, appointing more socialist ministers, working to implement

'progressive' social legislation and bringing trade union organisations under the protection of the state. As a result, reformism came to be redefined. Its gradualism and peaceful legalism were now so blatant that they did not need to be spelled out. Its most obvious characteristic was the phenomenon of *integration into the state apparatus*. At the same time there was a complete break with the international Communist movement, which emerged at precisely the time when Social Democracy was becoming integrated into the state.

We will not analyse here either the significance of the Russian Revolution, its worldwide repercussions or its impact upon the world of labour. One point is, however, clear: it was at once a cause and an effect of the deep crisis into which the 1914–18 war had plunged Social Democracy both in Germany and in the rest of Europe. For a while Social Democracy was identified with a patriotism that bordered upon chauvinism and with a reformism that had become counter-revolutionary. Both took the form of class collaboration. As a result of the horrors of the interminable carnage and of the disappointments of an unsatisfactory peace, both revolutionaries and radical socialists regarded this collaboration as something shameful. And due to the fratricidal struggle, the communists obviously took the same view.

Political and above all moral condemnations of Social Democracy did not facilitate understanding of the phenomenon. That much is obvious from the label 'social traitors', which was applied to the social democrats at certain times and in certain milieux. The condemnation of Social Democracy was of course an expression of a polemic filled with hatred. Marxists and radical socialists judged it in terms which combined passion with ethics. Their attitude precluded any serious analysis of the logic and dynamics of reformism and particularly of the contradiction it had to deal with. Opting for legalism and gradualism looked like an easy choice. It seemed to promote prudence as opposed to heroism, a pusillanimous moderation as opposed to heroic energy. There were further differences at a level which is vitally important for socialism: Communism called for mass action whereas Social Democratic reformism at best turned its back on the masses or simply betrayed and crushed them.

This over-simplistic picture of Social Democracy was almost *caricatural*. It is not simply that it was an unfair picture. Matters were much more serious than that; it masked the true nature of Social Democracy by obscuring both its dynamics and its limitations. It failed to see the realities of a contradictory record, a combination of undeniable successes and of exhaustion and anaemia. There was no clear-cut distinction between the 'difficulties of the revolutionary path', and the 'easy option' of Social Democracy. The reformist path meant overcoming a whole series of pitfalls, obstacles and traps. They were very different from those obstructing the revolutionary path, but in their own way they were equally serious.

Overcoming them required more than tactical string-pulling on the part of mediocre politicians or drab bureaucrats; it required infinite resources of boldness and imagination. The issue becomes clearer if we examine the problems posed by relations between Social Democratic parties and the working masses, and clearer still if we look at the period in which reformist² organisations developed and enjoyed their greatest successes. To be more specific, matters become clearer if we grasp the fact that they owed their rise and their successes to the intervention of the proletarian masses. From that point of view, there is a great deal to be learned from the history of the Belgian socialist movement.



It might be argued that this is a somewhat minor example, but the 'Belgian case' was in fact of considerable importance at the turn of the century. It is no accident that both the major theoretical journals of German Social Democracy—Kautsky's *Neue Zeit* and the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*—were frequently involved in bitter controversies over the general strikes in Belgium. The explanation is that Rosa Luxemburg was at the time trying to justify a form of mass action that was distinct from both and not hostile to party action at a European level. In the East, the debate was fuelled by the first convulsions of the Russian Revolution; in the West it was fuelled by a repetition of the mass upheavals for which the Belgian working class had been famous for a decade. A small country and a relatively small party thus posed a serious problem and gave rise to a major debate.

When it was founded in 1885 the *Parti Ouvrier Belge* was little more than a set of political initials, a hypothetical organisation. The contrast between the future it saw for itself, its self-proclaimed vocation and its ambitions, and its real standing was considerable. In a country where industry was developing more rapidly than anywhere else in continental Europe, the proletariat was ill-informed, hyper-exploited and slow to mobilise. Enormous masses of workers were concentrated in the coal mines, the metal-working industries, the glass works and the textile mills. But these hundreds of thousands of illiterate workers could scarcely have been less politicised. In the great centres of economic development in the south of the country, this apoliticism had a very specific meaning. They rejected politics and refused to see that resorting to political means might provide a solution to their poverty, even though they regarded it as unjust and intolerable. This attitude, which was shared by many workers, was not unrelated to the influence of the most radical forms of Proudhonism. There was constant agitation in the industrial areas and in the coalfields, where the First International had enjoyed a certain success in about 1870. The agitation took the form of ill-planned strikes which were called

without any regard for the conjuncture, which were poorly coordinated and badly led, if they were led at all, and which provoked severe repression. At times strikes broke out and spread without any demands ever being put forward. Was this in fact a *social movement*? It was more a matter of cries of protest, which became more violent and more strident than ever in 1886. Whole areas of the country were quite literally in flames. Tens of thousands of workers were involved in tumultuous demonstrations, in the destruction of property and in looting. All this was a prelude to a massacre in which the 'forces of law and order' displayed an unbridled savagery. It would have been difficult to imagine anything less political than these riots. The young **Parti Ouvrier** stood by passively, worried and unhappy. It took the view that any repetition of these events would be disastrous.

The young party, which was still little more than an embryo, saw its future in terms of the gradual and systematic organisation of a class which, under its leadership, would be able to win reforms that would improve or even transform workers' conditions. It believed that such transformations would not take place without social legislation which the state systematically refused to implement because of its rigid non-interventionism. How could the state be forced to shrug off a passivity which the bourgeoisie was doing its best to encourage? The only solution lay in political action. In other words, pressure had to be brought to bear upon governmental and parliamentary institutions. Obviously, the **Parti Ouvrier** did also encourage the workers to protect themselves by means of friendly societies, cooperatives and unions. But its strategy was primarily directed towards overcoming state resistance. *Universal suffrage* therefore became the emerging movement's primary objective. Unfortunately, conservative obstinacy was not the only obstacle it had to face. The workers themselves were not interested; their anarchistic tendencies made them sceptical about the virtues of political action, which they identified with institutional action.

The history of the first decades in the life of the **Parti Ouvrier** is the history of a double victory. It succeeded in awakening the political consciousness of the industrial proletariat and in channelling its militancy towards the conquest of universal suffrage. It also brought pressure to bear on successive governments and forced them to make major concessions both in the socio-economic domain and at the political level. The bourgeois state's unconditional *laissez-faire* attitude was overcome and the people were finally granted the right to take part in elections on a mass scale.

Both these developments—the politicisation of the working class, which went hand in hand with the establishment of an autonomous working-class organisation, and the reforms won from the government—resulted from a dynamic which was painful and frequently contradictory. It was, however, a real and very efficacious dynamic in that it allowed the relationship

articulating party and masses to be outlined. As a result, a movement which, despite its occasional use of revolutionary rhetoric, made no secret of its basic reformism was able to force through major and promising reforms. They may well have been limited, but their importance could not be denied. Insofar as it was a 'classic' social democratic organisation, the **Parti Ouvrier** provides a very good illustration of the logic of reformism, of its workings, its development and of how it can become blocked.

The logic of the **Parti Ouvrier** was essentially *dialectical*. Its founders (a 'general staff without troops', as one of the leaders put it) feared, perhaps more than anything else, a repetition of the popular disturbances of 1886. Many of its leaders enjoyed privileged relationships, both personal and political, with the Liberals. They shared their anti-clericalism and often regarded them as intermediaries between themselves and the government, which was in the hands of the Catholics. Most of the **party** leadership wanted the state to adopt a more flexible attitude and to negotiate. But their opponents harsh moderates refused to do so. The 'agitators' and 'speech-makers' had no access to ministers and therefore looked ridiculous rather than dangerous. If it was to be taken seriously, the social democratic leadership had to make its presence felt, either directly or indirectly. Unless the leaders of the **Parti Ouvrier** could show that they had a winning card in their hand neither contacts with the government nor direct or indirect negotiations could produce even modest gains. The leaders soon realised that without the presence of the organised masses and without mass action they could do nothing and were nothing. They had no support from any influential group; the only secret weapon in their arsenal was a humanist rhetoric. They could conceive of no initiative that would sway or even impress the government. Reform was their very *raison d'être*, but they could **not** convince the government of the need for reform. They therefore had to rely upon threats, and their threats soon took a very concrete form: the threat of a *general strike*.

There is something of a paradox or rather a contradiction here. The only way in which a party of *moderates* could pursue its *moderate*, gradualist and basically *reformist* strategy was *to become radicalised* and to bare its teeth. The threat of a general strike, which was borrowed from the slogans and myths of the anarchists, frightened the social democrats as much as it frightened the bourgeoisie, if not more so. It suggested all the dangers or mirages of an anti-political strategy. It meant **calling** upon the proletariat to free itself by laying down its tools rather than by using the ballot box. It meant calling upon it to use its *economic* power (even if it was the power of inertia) rather than using or demanding the *political rights* which the **Parti Ouvrier** thought were essential.

There were also more serious problems. Assuming that it was possible to use this weapon, how could a general strike be controlled in such a way

as to prevent 'extremists' taking over? The threat of a general strike was seen as a means of bringing pressure to bear in negotiations, but would the negotiators be able to control it? If they could not do so, the threat was useless and might backfire against the would-be negotiators. And although the Social Democratic leadership did state in **1889** that it was in *the last resort* ready to call a general strike in order to win universal suffrage, it qualified its ultimatum with reservations that expressed both its hopes and its fears. It was reluctant to take what looked like a leap into the unknown. It was afraid that it would lose the troops it had only just begun to recruit, that they would become discouraged and depoliticised. It hoped that its threats would be enough to make the government give way and that there would be no need to draw this double-edged weapon. But unless the militants were mobilised, the general strike organised and the demonstrations planned, such ultimatums would impress no one. And how could those preparations be made unless at least a verbal radicalism stirred up working-class anger?

For years, the social democratic leaders had no alternative but to oscillate between very moderate statements and increasingly rash calls for action. Elsewhere, I describe the life-giving but dangerous contradiction that social democratic reformism had to face, no matter how reluctantly, *if it was to become a true political force*: 'Between **1885** and the First World War, a whole generation of leaders and militants had to wrestle with contradictory demands. They had to maintain a demand and a virtual myth (universal suffrage). They had to inspire enthusiasm and at the same time keep it in check. They had to take one step at a time and to negotiate, sometimes displaying intransigence but usually recommending compromise. They had to build up hopes and at the same time call for realism. They had to whip up idealism and then temper it with reason. They had to rely upon both quasi-revolutionary energy and quasi-conservative common sense, to inspire passion and quell impatience. They had to vilify their adversaries without making enemies of them; they had to be considerate to their allies and had to chivvy them along at the same time. They had to recruit forces they hoped they would never have to use. They had to compromise and at the same time give the impression that they represented the inevitability of electoral reform, or even that of revolution. What a programme! And what skill, suppleness and intelligence were needed to implement a continuous programme of action that was continually threatened by the obstinacy of the bourgeoisie and continually placed in jeopardy by pressure from the **proletariat!**³

Obviously, the social democratic option, as opposed to the revolutionary choice, was not an easy option! An examination of the general strikes organised by the **Parti Ouvrier** in **1893**, **1902** and **1913** provides adequate proof of that. Let us look briefly at the events and at the lessons to be learned from them.

On all three occasions, the initiative behind the strike movement came from the anger and impatience of the masses. The **Parti Ouvrier** had succeeded only too well in convincing them of the importance of universal suffrage. The industrial proletariat mobilised and became politicised because it came to see electoral reform as more than a mere objective: it was a sacred cause which embodied its greatest hopes and for which no sacrifice was too great. The social democratic party and its leaders temporised for as long as possible and only called for a general strike when large sectors of the working class had already taken spontaneous strike action. In **1893** and **1902**, the strikes were accompanied by serious disorders, which the party's cadres tried in vain to prevent. When the police savagely repressed the popular agitation, the social democratic leaders hastily called off the strikes before their objectives had been won. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out at the time, on both occasions they entered into secret negotiations with the Liberal party, which acted as an intermediary with the government, and had become its hostages. Both strikes were called off without the appropriate party bodies being consulted. The more resolute workers bitterly protested that their leaders had betrayed them. When, in **1893**, the conservatives agreed to a major concession and granted 'universal suffrage tempered by multiple votes'⁴ the leadership described a partial victory as a complete triumph. The defeat of **1902** was put down to the influence of 'extremists' and the **Parti Ouvrier** began to concentrate on 'taming' the general strike by taking exclusive control. It succeeded in doing so in **1913**, but it was less successful when it came to dealing with the government, which refused to grant universal suffrage pure and simple.

It is, however, true that, in these circumstances, the action of tens of thousands of workers did paralyse the industrial regions of the country on all three occasions. It is also true to say that the Belgian bourgeoisie found itself coming under almost constant pressure from a proletariat which had been both radicalised *and* held back by Social Democracy, which was both increasingly militant *and* increasingly contained. Social Democracy depended for its political credibility upon the power of a movement it distrusted and which it wanted to hold back; its ability to negotiate was determined by actions which both gave it its strength and threatened its reformist strategy.

The result of this kind of practice by European Social Democracy was very contradictory. Social Democracy had organised and radicalised workers. It had made a major contribution to the process whereby the working class became an agent of social change. It had forced the state to make major concessions which did improve the condition and status of the proletariat. But its accomplishments were also very limited; whatever anyone may have said, or sometimes feared, the social democrats had been reluctant to enter the struggle and had rapidly entered into negotiations, and the reforms secured by these methods did not constitute a step

towards the abolition of capitalism. In this sense, while Social Democracy had been very successful when it came to organising the working class and strengthening it, it was a failure. It betrayed the aims of classic reformism in two ways: it owed its successes to methods which were much more brutal than those implied by its moderate philosophy and its legalism; and, valuable as they may have been, its successes did not open up the road to socialism. On the contrary, the fact that it had occupied a certain territory within the state apparatus meant that Social Democracy was rapidly integrated into that apparatus. As a result, it assumed that it no longer needed to rely upon the powerful but compromising weapon of mass action.

Until 1914, Social Democracy saw the assault upon the state as a necessary evil. After the First World War, a 'governmental' or 'responsible' social democracy developed, and assaults on the state were seen as an absolute evil. In the 1920s and 1930s no reformist party in Europe encouraged or even allowed the masses to take offensive action. In that sense, the Popular Front was never anything more than a defensive strategy designed to restrict the working class to a supporting role, to being an electoral auxiliary. It is not surprising that Social Democracy lost its oppositional strength. The resources of reformism, partly as a result of the effects of the economic crisis but also because the old strategy of *simultaneously encouraging and holding back* the most active workers, gave way to purely institutional action. Social Democracy had been discredited in 1914 and defeated in the 1930s and when, after the Second World War, a wind of reform began to sweep across Europe, it was only by deluding itself as to its strength and its future that it could hope for a renaissance. Obviously, it did derive some prestige from nationalisations and from the establishment of a social insurance system which was somewhat hastily baptised the 'welfare state'. Its representatives were often given important posts within the state, sometimes with temporary Communist support. But these successes were temporary, and Social Democracy was not being rewarded for its own merits. They represented the provisional defeat of a right wing which had been discredited by the fascist adventure and which had been forced on to the defensive by the joint victories of the Soviet Union and the Resistance.



A new era was opening up for Social Democracy. In its original or classic form, it was now a thing of the past. There was no longer any question of implementing a sequence of reforms so 'as' to transform the state by legal means. Still less was there any question of abolishing capitalism. The reformism of the past, as incarnated by Kautsky, was dead. It was replaced by a strategy which owed its real inspiration to Keynes, who was no

socialist, and which pursued objectives whose modesty would have astonished Bernstein himself. The foreign policy adopted by its various leaders is the best illustration of the profound change in social democratic ambitions. Prior to 1914, when it still represented a viable option, Social Democracy mobilised the working class to defend peace against imperialism, which Lenin was not alone in seeing as 'the highest stage of capitalism'. It inspired great hopes and when it failed to fulfil its promise, it attracted equally great opprobrium. Between the wars, it adopted more modest ambitions. It was merely an impotent, passive participant in the fight against fascism. The immediate post-war period was even more disastrous. Social Democratic foreign policy was increasingly effective, but it worked to the advantage of American capitalism, especially when men like Spaak, Blum and Bevin gave it the cachet of democracy. And whilst the aberrations of Soviet policy justified its harshest critics, no neo-reformist leader was every tempted by neutralism. In terms of the colonial question, the 'classic reformist' tendency within the Second International had never resolved the controversy between those who systematically opposed colonialism and those who wanted primarily to **humanise** it. Between the wars, Social Democracy paid little attention to a problem that had yet to come to the front of the political stage. During the Cold War period, its representatives enthusiastically took the side of the United States, and as the old reformism degenerated many social democratic parties lent their support to colonialism. Their supposed loathing for violence did not prevent them from taking part in the most bloody adventures, an area in which Prance's Guy Mollet particularly distinguished himself.

Foreign policy was merely one aspect of social democratic politics. Whereas the old socialist humanism had placed its hopes in international arbitration and the League of Nations, the neo-reformists invested NATO with a democratic mission, if not a **civilising** mission. In terms of domestic politics, neo-reformism collapsed into an unequivocal statism. Certain of its representatives had long been susceptible to the appeal of a 'strong state', but the defeat of the authoritarian regimes in 1945 had put an end to those suicidal temptations. After the war, however, and lasting for a whole generation, statism took the form of the defence of a policy of collaboration between labour and capital, with the state intervening if the balance of power seemed to be shifting rather too blatantly towards the employers. Social democrats introduced protective social legislation which was, in theory, designed to protect the weak and a taxation policy which was designed to redistribute wealth. They argued that the state should have a major role in the task of economic modernisation. But when it came to putting their plans into practice, the social democrats showed no hesitation in introducing an incomes policy and in putting pressure on their 'social partners', and in that respect they showed no indulgence towards the trade unions.

There is no escaping the conclusion that the *new-style reformism* means *reformism without reforms*. Whilst reformism is only too ready to boast of its realism, as opposed to the 'dreams' of its detractors, it has for years been showing all the symptoms of chronic anaemia, particularly in terms of its stated aims of implementing far-reaching reforms leading to socialism and of making electoral gains.

There are many reasons why social democracy finds itself in this impasse and why it has betrayed itself. Only one such reason will be discussed here. It is important because it brings out the differences between the social democracy of the past and that of today. The social democrats of the past played a historical role whose inadequacy was revealed in **1914**. Whilst that cannot be denied, this negative judgment is not in itself enough. Social democracy appeared at a time when the proletariat was just beginning to be concentrated and when its awakening class consciousness was still low. At a time when the great inadequacies of its emergent institutions made it a docile instrument of the bourgeoisie, social democracy (the reformist majority and the revolutionary minority alike) led the proletariat out of the political desert. It thus had the considerable merit of helping to constitute workers into a class. Although it was tangled up in thousands of contradictions, classic social democracy brought together the talents of journalists, agitators and administrators, united men of culture, militants and organisers and provided the proletariat with the many institutions without which it would have been impossible to develop the class independence essential to the development of any class consciousness. It provided the necessary but inadequate basis for the victory of socialism. This is why the working class identified so closely with social democracy, even though there was still considerable friction and tension.

The war was a moment of truth which left no room for hesitations or for confusion and it clearly revealed that the institutional base provided by these social, political, economic and cultural organisations did not provide a springboard for more decisive victories. On the contrary, whenever an increasingly organised working class became capable of making an assault on capitalist positions, they acted as so many brakes on the movement. The reformers' heirs had proved themselves efficient managers of socialist organisations and they now proved themselves to be aggressive managers of the bourgeois state. When the actions of the proletariat threatened the established order, they showed no compunction about resorting to violence. Noske, who had played the role of the 'bloody dog' in dealing with the Spartakists, almost met his match in the person of Salengro, the French social democrat who threatened to use force against striking workers in **1936**. Almost ten years later, his compatriot and comrade Jules Moch matched action to words by using the police and gendarmerie against the miners of northern France.

Extra-parliamentary action was deemed not only dangerous but even sacrilegious. The most important effect of this development was to deprive Social Democracy of a weapon which was difficult to wield and which was rarely used, but which was at least theoretically available to it, namely mass action. Once that had been abandoned, the only weapon left in the arsenal of neo-reformism was the blunt sword of electoral pressure. A few exceptional periods aside, the desire for electoral success led to the dilution of the social democratic programme. Attempts to win over 'floating voters' inevitably led to a timid centrism. Statements of principle and party programmes of course sometimes used a rhetoric which evoked past epics, but that semblance of fidelity was itself a more or less centrist tactic designed to retain the loyalty of those workers and voters who were nostalgic for the real or imaginary audacity of the past.

If we compare the old social democracy with the modern version, we reach the following conclusions:

1. The reformists of the past, or at least such of them who preferred the discreet influence of Kautsky to the compromising patronage of Bernstein, still thought of themselves as radicals. They still thought that it might be possible to use the weapon of revolution, albeit in a hypothetical and distant future. In this context, it should be noted that revolution was seen as a possible response to initiatives from a reactionary bourgeoisie. Revolution was a possibility. But not in the foreseeable future.
2. With the exception of openly rightist elements, the reformists of the past realised that if they were to be able to exert pressure or even to become a serious political force, they had to rely upon working-class organisations or even upon the active and militant political intervention of the working class. The problem of how to use and control the masses was one of the main elements influencing the problematic **and dynamics** of social democracy. This was particularly important in terms of actions affecting the bourgeois state. Once it had forced its way into the state, social democracy increasingly acted within it and gradually abandoned any idea of transforming it, arguing that the state should in fact have a greater role, especially in the economic domain. Once it had abandoned the call to the masses and even the threat of making such a call, social democratic tactics were designed to make gains within a neo-capitalist society in which the mixed economy gave the administrators who had emerged from its ranks a relatively important role. This was the positional warfare described by Gramsci. . . without the fighting.
3. This development meant more than the end of any vision of socialism in the sense that the founders of socialism and the early reformists understood the term. Having lost its trump cards, this new version of social democracy has lost its ability to reform the capitalist

system in any real or lasting sense. At best, it hopes to hold parliamentary power for a period of office. This means that the right can simply undo what the left has done if its initiatives go against the interests of the ruling classes. Usually, the right leaves intact those measures implemented by its timid adversary which appear to be in its own long term interests. When the left is 'in power', its insistence on moderation and its desire for appeasement normally lead it to adopt policies which the more lucid or less demagogic elements on the right would never seriously dream of rejecting.



The current Mitterrand experiment in France is a typical example. French reformism, which has always rejected the pejorative label of 'social democracy' and which describes itself simply as 'socialism', is the heir to a complex heritage, in which the spirit of the revolution is still present. It has recently displayed evidence both of its remaining energy and of the poor use it makes of it. The experiment which began when François Mitterrand won the presidential election in May 1981 is still going on. Without wishing to speculate as to its final outcome, it is possible to put forward certain considerations and hypotheses as to its significance. All these considerations relate to the problem which concerns us here: the nature of modern social democracy and its historical links with classic reformism.

If we wish to grasp the limitations of the 'Mitterrand experiment', 1936 is a more relevant point of comparison than the dynamic reformism of the pre-1914 period. In 1936 a coalition similar to that led by the present head of state came to power in Paris: a coalition of socialists, communists and 'radical socialists', even if the latter were stronger than the modern 'left radicals'. There is one other point of comparison: in both 1936 and 1981 the programme which the left proposed to implement when it gained power was modest. In both cases, it was designed to put an end to abuses, and its reforms were a defensive reaction to the policies of the previous government. In both cases, the left's electoral victory was a response to a situation which the majority, albeit a slender majority, found intolerable. Despite these similarities, there are many differences between the government of Léon Blum and that of François Mitterrand. The conjunctures they were elected to change were also very different. In 1936, the political climate was dominated by a serious European crisis, with deflation providing a dismal response to the poverty resulting from the crisis. The left felt that it was faced with an active threat from the right and from the fascist groups, and was convinced that the republic was in danger and that unity was the way to defend it.

None of this applied in 1981. The victory of the left took place in a

very different context. It was certainly a response to the right, but it had less to do with fear and anger than with exasperation and exhaustion. The right (and not merely the Giscardian right) was criticised because it had been in power for so long and because it was incapable of resolving the crisis. The President of the Republic had asked Raymond Barre, reputedly 'the best economist in France', to form a government. But the eminent professor was no more effective than the least distinguished of his students. Inflation was running at over **10%**; there were over two million unemployed. Moreover, people were increasingly disenchanted with the authoritarianism of the right and increasingly outraged by the recurrent scandals.

There was one other crucial difference between **1936** and **1981**. In **1936**, the union of the left was the expression at the electoral level of a vast popular mobilisation which forced political leaders—and especially those of the Communist and Socialist parties—to put an end to their old quarrels. Hundreds of parliamentary candidates were backed up by millions of workers inspired by the call for unity. In **1981**, the socialist-communist left, which had rallied together between **1974** and **1977**, was more disunited than ever. The socialists did all they could to weaken the communists, who lapsed back into an extreme sectarianism which everyone thought had gone for ever. Thanks to their internal squabbles, both parties succeeded in demoralising their troops, who were in any case very passive.

The difference between **1936** and **1981** is astonishing. The left-wing government of **1936** came to power for two reasons: it won the elections, but there was also a gigantic offensive on the part of the masses. Not content with going on strike, two million workers occupied thousands of factories and other workplaces. Some of them believed that the revolution had begun. And the battle certainly unleashed the accumulated anger, joy and energy of the working class. The employers had to give way and the government had to radicalise a programme which had been designed to reassure.

Nothing of the kind happened on **10 May 1981**, when **51.75%** of the population of France dismissed Giscard from office. There were many elements involved in the spontaneous celebrations which lit up Paris that night. But they did not include social demands. This was a celebration, not a mobilisation. If we compare it with the unrest and tumult of **1936**, Mitterrand's victory looks almost like an administrative measure or a phenomenon of electoral arithmetic. It was the culmination of a campaign which the future president had waged under the slogan '*la force tranquille*' with the accent falling on the adjective rather than the noun.

A month later the legislative elections resulted in a new victory. The Socialist Party (and its minority allies the Left Radicals) enjoyed a real triumph by winning **37.5%** of the vote and a comfortable and unusual majority of **285** seats in the *Assemblée Nationale*. The stage was set for

Pierre Mauroy's government. The presence of four Communist ministers was some comfort to their party, and it also helped to stifle the debate that the Communist Party's defeat **should** have provoked. The stage was set for a second phase of 'socialist action' under the leadership of François Mitterrand, a past master of political tactics with an almost Florentine understanding of the arts of political manoeuvring. He had always courageously fought against De Gaulle's personal power and had worked skilfully for Socialist-Communist unity. Mitterrand is not even a social democrat. He is descended from the radical socialist line (defined in the broadest of terms), and simply claims to be a pragmatist with a wish for democracy. He joined the ranks of the Socialist Party without having any doctrinal convictions and without even trying to acquire any.

The government's first year has somewhat pompously been described as a 'state of grace'. This was a reforming government rather than what Kautsky or even Blum would have described as a reformist government. As soon as he took power, Mitterrand made it quite clear that his vocation was to unite the nation rather than to construct socialism, no matter how gradually. Even so, the balance sheet for the first year is far from negligible. A number of social measures helped to reduce the gap between rich and poor: the **SMIG**,⁶ housing allowances and old age pensions were all increased, and a more rigorous wealth tax was introduced. Liberal policies did away with or restricted the effects of repressive measures taken by previous governments. It took a certain courage for the new government to abolish the death penalty and to **regularise** the situation of tens of thousands of foreign workers in the face of right-wing pressure and a strong current of reactionary populism. The government also introduced reforms prefiguring the 'Auroux law' and designed to increase trade union-power and to give workers the right to express their views inside the workplace. The working week was reduced to thirty-nine hours and holidays were extended to five weeks. This was not all. In accordance with the promises it had given, the Mauroy government introduced a plan for **de**-centralisation which gave the regions considerably greater powers. Finally, it implemented a series of nationalisations which, at a cost of thirty-two billion francs compensation, brought twelve industrial giants—some of which, like Pétrobrás and Thomson, were on the verge of bankruptcy—and virtually all the banking system into the public sector. Whilst these measures were certainly impressive, they simply represented a further stage in a policy which had already been implemented by previous governments and they did not imply any major change in relations between the State and the private sector. It was no secret that the main aim of the reform was to make the public sector a major instrument, if not the principal locomotive, behind a policy of growth.

Even if we take into account the promises that were not kept (reducing

the length of military service and more generally, commitments in matters of nuclear policy) and certain measures that were worthy of a conservative government (a temporary wage freeze in a period of inflation), the left and the working class had some reason to be pleased with the first year's record. There had been a real break with the attitudes of the right-wing government which the French electorate had voted out of office. This could have been the *beginning* of a policy of democratic or even socialist renewal.

Unfortunately, during the second half of **1982** it became obvious that what should have been a beginning had been a short-lived period of euphoria and that 'realism' had put an end to it. Most of the projected reforms were judged inopportune. Although the socialist leaders had said again and again that the fight against unemployment was their top priority, energetic measures soon gave way to resignation. The unemployment rate rose from two million to **2.2 million** in **1983** and to **2.5 million** in **1984**. Reluctantly and not without some agonising hesitations, a government in which the Communists were still represented (though one wonders whether they were collaborators or hostages) put 'left-wing rigour' on the agenda. Amongst other things, this meant restrictions on social spending and the end of index-linked wages. The effects of the U-turn were soon reflected by public opinion. The Mitterrand–Mauroy tandem failed to win over the right, which effectively regarded the government as 'illegitimate', but it rapidly lost popularity with its own electorate. Neither the President's repeated calls for national unity, or 'harmony within the body social' as he put it, nor the attempts of the trade unions, including the pro-Communist CGT to spare the government from criticism did anything to prevent the Mauroy government and the President himself from making an increasingly bad showing in the opinion polls.

From **1983** onwards, it was no longer even a question of 'left-wing rigour'. In an attempt to respond to conservative pressure and to keep up with the new mood of liberal conservatism, Mitterrand forced his ministers to take an even more right-wing line. Taking their inspiration from fashionable ideologies and giving in to pressure from the employers and the middle classes, ministers unexpectedly made 'statism' the object of their attacks. In a remarkable speech made in September **1983**, the President of the Republic adopted the language of the employers' federations and declared that France was suffering from 'excessive taxation which is suffocating the economy'. The government's objectives were redefined. The inflation rate had to fall. The franc was devalued to make industry more competitive. The austerity policy was tightened up: ordinary households were asked to make greater efforts, but at the same time taxation policy was overhauled to placate industry. Appalled at what was happening, the Force Ouvrière union federation, which can scarcely be accused of radicalism, claimed that the socialist government

was looking to Mrs Thatcher for inspiration. Policy hardened still further when the 'liberal' Fabius took over from the 'doctrinaire' Mauroy in July **1984**. With few exceptions, the general policy was now to cut state spending (especially social spending) in order to balance the budget and to restore financial orthodoxy (bringing the rate of inflation down to 8% by the end of **1984**). One of the exceptions was spending on law and order, which was actually increased so as to avoid an open conflict with the ideology of 'security' stirred up by the right and the extreme right, which was not above pointing out that Robert Badinter, the over-liberal Minister for Justice, came from a Jewish background.

The days of 'everything for the State' were over, declared Laurent Fabius, as though France were emerging from an era in which the entire private sector of the economy had been sacrificed at the altar of a Leviathan-like state. By now the Communists had left the government which, according to one commentator, continued to make ordinary households swallow 'a bitter pill' and kept all the 'sweets' for the business world by cutting direct taxation and increasing indirect taxation. In **1984**, net wages fell by an average of 2.5%, whilst those of civil servants fell even more. At the same time, the revenue of certain big companies was increasing by leaps and bounds. As a result, social spending fell even further.

Gratitude not being a political virtue, the right, the rich and the middle classes never dreamed of thanking François Mitterrand. On the contrary, student organisations, the medical and pharmaceutical professions, associations of managers and even police officers mobilised against the government and showed no hesitation about 'taking to the streets' in the immediate area of the *Elysée* itself. The demonstrations put constant pressure on the government and forced it on to the defensive. And when in **1983** the left tried to fulfil one of its election promises by turning the entire educational system (non-denominational and church schools alike) into a major public service, a groundswell of public opinion swept through *la France profonde* (in other words Catholic France) which united to defend its doctrine, its teachers, its financial privileges and its freedom, which were yet again being threatened by the 'statist left'. In June **1984** between a million and one and a half million gathered in the capital. Mitterrand gave in to their blackmail, converted to liberalism, abandoned his programme and turned his back on his electoral base.

His electorate returned the compliment. Since **1983**, the left has met with one defeat after another at the polls. In the **1983** municipal elections it lost control of **31** towns with a population of over 30,000. Worse still, in the European elections of June **1984**, the socialists and communists fell to only **21%** and **11%** of the vote respectively (Giscard and Chirac together polled **43%**). The Communist Party won the same share of the vote as Jean-Marie Le Pen's 'National Front', the far right grouping which

benefited more than any other party from the disillusionment provoked by Mitterrand's policies. The legislative elections of **1986** will probably produce another and more serious anti-socialist and anti-communist landslide. The only solution Mitterrand could think of was an electoral reform inspired by proportional representation and to force it upon all parties, his own included. The most likely outcome will be the emergence of a centre-left coalition which will put an end to France's 'socialist experiment'.

Even this schematic account would be incomplete without some discussion of foreign policy. Mitterrand's Atlanticism, combined with his liking for personal power, sowed even more confusion in the ranks of the left than his social and economic policies. His seven-year period of office had scarcely begun when Washington realised that the presence of Communist ministers in the government in no way altered France's diplomatic stance. In the State Department, there was even talk of a 'divine surprise'. Far from promoting a thaw in the Cold War, under Mitterrand's leadership Paris took a strong anti-Soviet position and the new President denounced his predecessor's servile attitude towards Moscow. In frequent and shamefully cordial meetings with Reagan, Mitterrand let it be known that he would not normalise relations with Moscow until Soviet troops were pulled out of Afghanistan. America was regarded as an ally, even though Mitterrand did have certain reservations about its attitude towards Latin America and, more generally, towards the Third World as a whole. The USSR, on the other hand, was more or less openly seen as a potential enemy. In terms of the arms race and particularly in terms of SS20, cruise and Pershing missiles, Mitterrand soon received the dubious accolade of being a 'model ally' of the Americans. The French head of state did all he could to influence the attitude of those European countries which had doubts about Reagan's policies. In **1983** he visited Bonn and then Brussels. On both occasions, he lent his support to the Atlanticist conformism of the right and criticised the socialist opposition for their slight leaning towards neutralism. 'Pacifism is in the West and missiles are in the East', he declared in Brussels, to the delight of the right and the consternation of the left.

It is true of course that Mitterrand's France also pleaded the case for the Third World and argued for concrete development aid. But such pious wishes did nothing to alter either American intransigence or France's pro-American position. Having savagely criticised Giscard for giving financial and military support to some of the most corrupt regimes in Africa, Mitterrand adopted a 'realistic' policy in that area too and soon became one of Mobutu's most reliable allies. J.P. Cot, his Minister for Cooperation, was so disillusioned that he resigned rather than support his policies.

In the last analysis, four years of 'socialist management' in France have

resulted in two disasters. The right is stronger than ever, and the left has been demoralised. The case of the Communist Party needs little elaboration here: a combination of populist sectarianism, extreme opportunism and extreme bureaucratism have drained it of its life-blood. Whereas it once succeeded in maintaining close links with the organised working class and in inspiring its most active sectors, it is now little more than a secondary force. But how different the socialist movement's prospects had seemed! It has resurfaced in the early seventies, recruited members on a massive scale, strengthened its organisation, re-established its credibility and stood for government on the basis of policies which promised a break with capitalism. The accidents of the socio-economic conjuncture and the mysteries of electoral alchemy brought it a double triumph in **1981**, when it occupied both the Elysée and the benches of the Palais-Bourbon. Changing politics was not enough. As its official anthem proclaimed the point was to 'change life'.

The 'state of grace' lasted for a year—and it was followed by three years of rapid decline, during which the heir to Jaurès and Leon Blum took Charles de Gaulle as his only model. Unfortunately, he did not adopt De Gaulle's anti-Americanism. But he did share his love of secrecy and rapidly conquered and consolidated a 'private domain' in which the personal authority of François Mitterrand was absolute. Dumbfounded and unhappy, the Socialist Party obeyed its leader, but wept over its past and present setbacks and foresaw the defeats of the future. It was incapable of reacting or even of formulating an autonomous policy.

The left wing provides a sadly eloquent example. The left wing was identified with CERES (Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Socialistes) and was led by J.P. Chevènement; for a long time it sustained a current that was critical of François Mitterrand, accusing him of being reluctant to unite with the communists and of displaying an excessive opportunism and pragmatism that left little room for socialism. Chevènement and his friends did, however, go into battle to support the future president and the socialist majority. In the early Mauroy governments, Chevènement was given the Research and Technology portfolio. He supported a demanded policy of economic recovery, even though his policies implied a measure of protectionism. He opposed the 'new line' (austerity, devaluation and left-wing rigour), left the government in **1983**, but refrained from making any overt attack on its policies. A year later, he became a member of Laurent Fabius's cabinet, which was far to the right of the cabinet he had criticised for its excessive caution. When a minority current which claims to represent the oppositional forces within the party proves incapable of maintaining a coherent position; when its criticisms become muted and sybilline; when it wavers over its programme, becomes primarily concerned with unity and discipline and is prepared to endorse actions which take it further away from its objectives and closer to power; then its weaknesses

affect the whole party and it reveals the sickness of the organisation as a whole. When it goes in for petty politicking and wheeling and dealing instead of uniting, educating and mobilising its leading militants, it leaves them directionless, sceptical and demoralised. And the Socialist Party does now look like a directionless, sceptical and demoralised party.

It retains the old reformist label. But its socialism had been diluted by a programme which is *in no sense* socialist and which is little more than a programme for *modernisation*. It retains the democratic pretensions of the old reformism. But whereas the internal party life of social democracy once thrived upon the open discussion of conflicting ideas, in Mitterrand's party obedience is regarded as the supreme virtue. It has been transformed into an apparatus in which unanimity is a pretence, in which dissidents keep quiet and which is almost totally obedient to orders from above. The one exception to the rule is Michel Rocard, who is more of a centrist than his comrades, more ambitious than his colleagues and who, it is said, has plans to use his talents outside the party organisation.

The Socialist Party was always an ambiguous quantity: it raised brief hopes but always refused to tap popular dynamism, to say nothing of calling for mass action. It has failed to deliver what might, in theory, have been expected of a party which claimed to be a reformist party, let alone a true reformist party with radical pretensions. It has now reached the point of exhaustion.



To conclude. The political skill which 'classic reformism' displayed when it articulated offensives on the part of social democratic parties, on the basis of the pressure exerted by a united and organised working class which it had to control if it was to have any autonomy in its negotiations with the bourgeoisie, has now degenerated into mere politicking. It is therefore impossible to elaborate any real programme or to raise any real hopes. The purpose of all the politicking is to strengthen centres of sectorial power within the state apparatus by maintaining the fiction that the party has broader ambitions and by appealing to the authority of a history which has lost all meaning.

Even the accomplishments of the old social democracy—the precious but limited reforms which did not even challenge the capitalist order—are beyond the grasp of contemporary reformism. Whilst tradition obliges us to use labels like 'reformism' and 'social democracy', only those who stand to gain from them are fooled by them. It should be quite clear to attentive readers, careful **observers**, informed critics and lucid participants in the political battle that the reformism of the past has fulfilled its historical mission, that it has lost its dynamism and that its narrow limitations are now obvious. It is no more than a shadow of its former self, a ghost, a

form of nostalgia. A nostalgia, ridiculous and poignant, for something which once existed and will **never** exist again.

NOTES

1. **Trotsky**, *My Life* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960), p. 212.
2. Unless otherwise stated, the terms 'reformism' and 'social democracy' are used synonymously in the present article at least for a certain period.
3. Marcel **Liebman**, *Les Socialistes belges (1885-1914): La Rkvolte et l'organization* (Brussels, 1979), p. 76.
4. Under this system, the entire population had the right to vote, but multiple votes were also granted to property owners and heads of family.
5. Shortly before the Second World War this was true of both Henri de Man in **Belgium** and of **François Déat** in France. Significantly enough, both engaged in collaboration with the Nazis.
6. *Salaire Minimum Interprofessionel Garanti* (Guaranteed Minimum Wage).

Translated by David Macey