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Willy Brandt and Petra Kelly

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The deaths of Willy Brandt and Petra Kelly in a way mark the end of two successive generations of mass leaders, two eras of the West European Left, spanning more than fifty years. Willy Brandt, a man of very modest beginnings, identified from his earliest youth with the struggle of the organized labour movement for socialism. When resolute resistance to the rise of fascism was demanded in Germany, he broke with social democracy, joined the sap (Socialist Workers Party), became leader of its youth organization, and even participated in a conference with the Trotskyists to prepare a new revolutionary youth international. But from then on he moved steadily to the right. He supported the People's Front policy in Spain, which led to defeat, refused to condemn the Moscow Trials, abandoned the feeble attempt to maintain a '21/2–31/2 International' (the London Bureau), and dissolved his own party. He joined the social-democratic movement in Norway and then in Germany. As mayor of West Berlin, he identified with the Cold War. He became a staunch supporter of the international imperialist alliance, nato.

Having thus given all the necessary guarantees to the West German bourgeoisie, Willy Brandt could then begin to challenge conservative rule. First in a 'great coalition' with them, and subsequently at the head of a 'centre left' government with the liberal fdp, Brandt became the key political statesman of the Federal Republic. His project of modest reform reached its peak after the massive youth rebellion of 1968. He succeeded by and large in transforming the 'extraparliamentary opposition', through the intermediary agency of the sdp, into that of a parliamentary movement. West Germany thereby became, politically and socially, the most stable country of Europe. This relative stability was of course made possible by certain powerful economic and social transformations. West Germany had become the strongest capitalist exporting country in the world, with a per-capita export total three times that of the usa and far in advance of Japan.

During the long postwar boom there occurred a significant shift in the recruitment of the leading political personnel of the mass social-democratic parties in Western Europe. The proportion of labour-movement bureaucrats declined dramatically in favour of functionaries from para-state and state institutions. [1] A wider transformation involving both political personnel and the composition of party membership also took place. Growing numbers of middle-ranking capitalists have subsequently aligned themselves with these parties, especially when they are in power. The symbiosis of these social groups has tended to produce corruption on a growing scale. While it was Willy Brandt who presided over much of this process, he never felt entirely at ease with it. He could not entirely transcend his own social origin and the experience of his youth. He had become in effect a statesman in the service of the bourgeoisie, rather than a thoroughgoing bourgeois statesman like Helmut Schmidt.

In particular, Brandt helped the West German bourgeoisie tackle two major problems that were increasingly weighing upon that powerful capitalist system, although his reforms were to have a considerably wider social impact. Brandt's Ostpolitik was a conscious attempt to undermine politically the weak bureaucratic dictatorship in the gdr by appealing to humanitarian, democratic and national sentiments, and granting economic concessions to the rulers of the gdr. Brandt had an anti-fascist background. He never represented the German bourgeois 'elite' which, by and large, had cynically made the transition from supporting the Third Reich to administering the Federal Republic. His Ostpolitik thus had an anti-fascist, not a fascist character. His famous kneel before the monument to the heroes and victims of the Warsaw ghetto had that precise significance, and its resonance throughout the world was dramatic. The act undoubtedly helped the German bourgeoisie to dispel the impression that it wanted to forget the Nazi crimes and its responsibility for them. But it also created a considerable ideological-political momentum in West Germany, which today constitutes an additional obstacle to the rise of mass neo-fascism in Germany.

Meanwhile, export-oriented German imperialism was increasingly confronted with the perverse economic effects of

the overexploitation of the 'Third World', which exploded concretely with the 'debt crisis'. Brandt's offensive, as president of the Socialist International, in favour of a more 'reasonable' attitude towards this problem was supportive of German industry's export drive. But at the same time it nourished a greater awareness among important layers of the West German population of the problem of Third World overexploitation and misery – indeed, it strengthened solidarity with the 'Third World'. This awareness is probably more widespread today in West Germany than in any other European country.

However, first as leader, then as 'elder statesman', of German social democracy, Willy Brandt was faced with an unresolvable dilemma. In spite of his personal commitment to 'traditional' social-democratic values, the trajectory of spd politics went in the opposite direction and thus tended more and more to undermine these values. Increasingly, policy differences between the centre-right and centre-left dissolved – as was confirmed by the consensus reached between the cdu-led government and the spd-led opposition in favour of restricting the constitutional right of asylum for foreigners.

The absence of real political choice for the mass of the German population has fed political frustration and apathy. It has strengthened the general rightward shift in German society, which in the long run can only encourage the growth of the extreme Right. But not everyone, it must be said, accepted that process as a foregone conclusion. A political void had opened at the left of social democracy, which no social democratic or socialist left was able to fill. However, the Green Party moved audaciously into that void, initially with considerable success. Petra Kelly to a large extent embodied this success and the potential of the Greens to become a significant political force. The expansion started with the parliamentary elections of 1983, when the Green Party won twenty-seven seats in the Bundestag. This triggered the spread of Green parties throughout Western Europe.

Petra Kelly was a typical product of the sixties and early-seventies youth protest movement in the USA. She became an anti-establishment rebel on the basis of personal experience and a politics of individual choice rather than through involvement in the class struggle and identification with the cause of the exploited and the oppressed. Her father abandoned his wife and children. Her mother then married an American colonel and took her family to the USA, where Petra stayed for twelve years. She became deeply influenced by the civil-rights movement and involved with the Democratic Party, moving among the Kennedy and Humphrey coteries. But at the same time, she was increasingly influenced by the anti-nuclear movement (her sister died of cancer and she attributed the death to the effects of radiation), the anti-war movement and feminism. This political experience subsequently enabled her in West Germany to fuse these currents with the ecological issues on which the Greens had originally concentrated. There followed spectacular mass actions against the building of nuclear power stations and the stationing of nuclear missiles, which established the German Greens as the driving force of a powerful Europe-wide anti-nuclear mass movement. Even in smaller European countries like Holland and Belgium, up to half a million people took to the streets on that key issue.

Petra Kelly was a charismatic personality with great political intelligence, moral authority and outstanding personal courage. When the GDR bureaucracy tried to make gains from the growth of the West German peace movement, she instinctively found the correct response: to take up the cause of the East German dissidents – initially, the pacifists but also dissident communists. A demonstration that she staged single-handedly in East Berlin's Alexanderplatz caught the public imagination. This was politically more outspoken and honest than Brandt's manoeuvring with the SED leadership. Whether or not in the long run it contributed as much as the Ostpolitik to the final downfall of the SED dictatorship will have to be judged by history.

But like Brandt, Petra Kelly was confronted with an unresolvable political dilemma, as the result of the Green Party's success. Lacking both programmatic and political resources, she could not solve the problem of power sharing. When the Green Party achieved a breakthrough at municipal and regional level, the question inevitably arose of its supporting SDP administrations or of forming coalition administrations with the SDP. The Greens succumbed to the temptation. What it took social democracy thirty years and the mass (increasingly socialdemocratized) communist

parties fifteen years to do, the Green Party achieved in five years. Doubtless intentions were honourable and the choice agonizing ; [2] nevertheless, the end result was clearâ€”they would become increasingly drawn into the logic of reformism. This indeed proved to be the case, and organizational strength and moral authority began to decline. The party finally split following a factional struggle, the violence and strident tone of which ran directly contrary to the slogan proclaimed by the Greens' parliamentary group as they entered the Bundestag : 'Let us humanize the practice of politics'. In the November 1991 congress of the Green Party, Petra Kelly only received 30 out of a possible 1,000 votes for the post of National Executive Committee Spokesperson. This demoralized her greatly.

The political and organizational failure of the Greens and the other 'new social movements' has a deeper cause. These movements cannot be dismissed as merely 'petty bourgeois' as is sometimes done. The majority of their members and sympathizers are wage earners. The ground on which they fightâ€”embracing ecological, anti-war and feminist issues, the defence of human rights, solidarity with the Third World, and today the politics of anti-racism and anti-fascismâ€”corresponds to the interests of working people the world over. These movements are part and parcel of the new socialist programme at the end of the twentieth century. However, one key component is missing from the thrust of the 'new social movements', a component central to the socialist project, and to any consistent challenge to the Establishment, and a fundamental reason for rejecting myopic realpolitik. This is the challenge to the institution of wage labour, with all its alienating implications for hundreds of millions of people the world over. A refusal to include the abolition of wage labour as part of the 'final goal', and to organize to this end, is not only morally repulsive because it condones the perpetuation of terrible and widespread human suffering ; it is also totally unrealistic, as it ignores the key concrete socioeconomic facts of life. The wage-earning class is the only social force which has at least the potential power to eliminate bourgeois society. Without its elimination, none of the goals that the 'new social movements' are correctly pursuing will be realized.

Thus the failure of the Greens and the personal tragedy of Petra Kelly, like the failure of social democracy and the personal tragedy of Willy Brandt, is in the final analysis rooted in an incapacity to integrate the actually existing working class into a new conception of the socialist movement, not to say a renewal of the credibility of socialism. Without that reintegration, there will be no such renewal. Whatever the difficulties of this projectâ€”difficulties about which we should harbour no illusionsâ€”and whatever time it takes to achieve important successes in that direction, one name testifies symbolically to the fact that there exists an alternative to the failure of Brandt and Kelly : that of Chico Mendez. In the heart of the Amazon forest, Chico built the rubbertappers trade union, organized the local unit of the Workers Party, the regional ecological movement, and the regional defence movement of the oppressed Indians. A picture of Leon Trotsky hung in his modest wooden hut. Chico was killed by armed gunmen hired by rich cattle owners who, allied to exporters of 'valuable wood', continue to destroy the tropical forests and endanger the earth's survival for the pursuit of sordid private gain. Sooner or later the Brazilian workers and peasants, inspired by Chico's example, will show that the rebirth of hope and belief in the future of socialism is possible on a mass scale.

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[1] I deal more extensively with that problem in chapter 4 of my recent book *Power and Money*â€”A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy, London 1992.

[2] The agonizing choices are nicely summarizedâ€”together with all the wrong conclusionsâ€”by one of the main leaders of the West German Greens and office holder in the Land of Hesse, Joschka Fischer, in *Der Umbau der Industrie-Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt 1989.