

## Social Democracy and Socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by Adrian Severin  
Beijing, 17 March 2008

We shall address this topic in a global manner and also in a Chinese manner. I feel obliged to clarify the terminology as well.

In Europe we use this phrase, “socialism” for two quite different realities. The first sees socialism indicating the socialist parties from all over the world. Second, within the Chinese context, we understand by it the Communist Party of China. But this is rather a matter of terminology and not one of substance, in order to understand the way I am going to use this word.

One cannot speak about socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without making reference to the division between the left and the right in ideology and policy. It is a classical and conventional differentiation that some people think to be irrelevant for our contemporary times, yet, I still believe it to be relevant.

### Left and Right in Contemporary Politics

Let me first state what I believe are the main characteristics of the left and then of the right.

One main feature of the left way of thinking is **openness towards change** as a consequence of the political will and not as simple answer to the natural organic development of the reality. So the left is open to change and considers it the result of the political will and not a mere result of natural transformation of the world. From this point of view the attitude of the left towards reality is always critical and the thinkers of the left are adepts of what we might call, without any negative connotations, social engineering. For the whole left, not only for the communists, it is still valid the idea which we can find in the Communist Manifesto: it is important not only to explain reality, but to transform it.

The second feature of the left is **social sensitivity**. In other words the left is open to the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalized and excluded social groups or categories, including of course minorities (not only national but all kinds of minorities).

The third feature to my mind is that the left is **equality seeker** and also **inclusiveness seeker**. Equality was a main value of the left thinkers and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century inclusiveness is a continuation, an update, of the value of equality.

The fourth characteristic of left is **internationalism**. The left is not nationalist, it is basically internationalist. This does not mean that there are no national specificities for the left thinking, but the left believes in its values and these values transcend ethnicity or nationality.

The consequences of all these characteristics are the fact that *any* left (there is a pluralistic left) should give preference to the state against the market, to

labour against markets and capital, to community or society against the individual. Yet, this does not mean that market, capital and individual are not important or that the left is indifferent to them, but that in the last instance, if you put into balance these values, state, labour and community would come first. The differences within the left streams are given by the degree of acceptance and promotion of the second type of elements and entities, according to the role given to the market, the capital and the individual in the doctrines of the left parties. But irrespective of these second types of values, the first type will always be more important for the left parties. This is valid for the socialists, for the social democrats, for the labour parties and for the communists, which are, from this point of view, in the same category.

On the other hand, the right wing parties are **closed towards change**. The only change accepted is “natural” transformation of society and generally speaking the organic change of the reality. The right doesn’t like change. Even the American neo-conservatives, who believe that America is entitled to go everywhere in the world and change regimes, do not believe in social economic They only think change can be brought about by force and not by any social or economic policy. A true right wing thinker would always consider that values could be exported, but not the revolution. A neo-conservative thinker does not believe that values can be exported they could only be imposed. Therefore neo-conservatives always export only counter-revolution and never revolution, never true change but opposition to change.

A second characteristic is the **reduced sensitivity to social issues**. This sensitivity is reduced to the idea of law and order, supervision of free competition and at best an equality of opportunities.

The third characteristic is the **in-equalitarian** of the right wing thinking and parties. Inequality is the engine of progress according to the right wing parties because it would fuel competition and competition is the source progress in this perspective. The bigger the inequalities the better perspectives for progress are according to right wing thinking. Therefore, exclusion is not only avoided but accepted.

The last characteristic is **nationalism**. The state is important as a guardian of identity and as a defender of the nation. Nationalism is important in order to delimitate a group from another group and increase the formers security – through a nil sum game – one nation gains as much as the other are loosing.

### **The Diversity of the Left**

Left has been and will always be diverse till the end of history. If we go to Europe one cannot speak about one single social democracy. Of course, all branches or streams of the left are branches of the same tree, streams of the same ocean, but they are very diverse in themselves. We cannot speak of a unique vision of the European left. Why is the left diverse? Why we do not have a single left movement since there is apparently a common set of values, as a root of the

left as those mentioned above. I think that the variable which explains this diversity is a very obvious one: the geography. I include in the concept of geography the demography as well, and I have in mind at least two elements: the number of people and the level of education. When we go to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the technology available we can understand that the level of education becomes more important for the differences in thinking than in the previous centuries. If we speak only about the element of democracy, the original antique direct democracy was possible for two reasons: human communities were small and their members were equally educated. In bigger communities where people are not equally educated that type of democracy is not possible. People cannot come into contact altogether at the same time, given their numbers and their uneven education.

Speaking about China I think before it would develop, if this is desired at all, a kind of democracy as in Europe, one should educate the people and homogenize the level of information given to the huge population of China. And I do not want to say that democracy functions in Europe today, I don't think it does, but just that the democratic deficit is less visible there because of the smaller size of human communities there. This would be impossible in China.

I think that geography at first was related mainly to the possibility of people to feed themselves. Certainly, speaking about agriculture it makes a difference if it is done on large surfaces or on a small plain or if it was done by the owner of the land or by the people hired by the owner. It made a difference if the people hired worked with their families or individually, if they were paid with money or if they were paid with products and so on and so forth. Geography was the one determining all these differences and I am going to explain why these aspects influenced ideologies and political action.

Geography determined the way families were organised and this model of organisation in the end created the anthropological tradition of the societies. It is one thing if parents are living together with grandparents and children in the same house and it is different if children, once they grow up, live separately and start to earn their own living, or if the fortune is divided in equal shares between the children or unequally, one of them taking almost all and the others nothing. These ways of organizing the family are the roots of differences in the anthropological tradition of the societies and these differences are crucial for the difference of thinking in the left and also within the right; but today we only deal with the left thinking.

To come to present times, nowadays in Germany, Sweden or Austria the anthropological background of the society is authoritarian and in-equalitarian and there social democracy is well developed. In those countries social democrats admit that inequality is unavoidable, but they use the role of the state to make it bearable, to redistribute the wealth.

In countries like France, Spain and Italy we find socialist parties, whenever we have left wing parties, and these countries have a liberal and

equalitarian anthropological background. Since liberty and equality are difficult to combine as values, we can see that all these parties are radical and nervous. In these countries the socialist mentality also influences the right wing parties. Therefore, Mr. Chirac is in his speeches more left oriented than Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, although the latter belongs to a left wing party.

In countries like the United Kingdom or Norway, the anthropological background is liberal and in-equalitarian and therefore we have there the labourism, a different stream of the left wing thinking. The way for promoting the social agenda of the labour parties is by allowing workers to form trade unions and then to compete and bargain freely. I would not say that the British Labour Party is in favour of inequality but that it accepts it or they are indifferent to it and that it accepts the market society.

Finally, in countries where the background is authoritarian and equalitarian we can see that the communist parties are flourishing. Or, if not communist parties, a communist way of thinking. I would say countries with such an anthropological background are the majority in the world: Russia, almost all other Slavic countries, also Romania and China. The result is that this coupling of an authoritarian anthropological background limited by an equalitarian outcome leads towards some kind of an autocratic way of organizing the society. This autocratic way of organization should be also divided into a totalitarian and an authoritarian way. I think we can no longer find totalitarian ways of ruling a society in important countries of the world. But we can see an attempt of combining the guided way of organizing a society and the market economy in many countries and this is a specific way to build whatever you want, socialism or social democracy, in various countries, including China and Romania for instance. I think all these aspects are necessary to be remembered before going into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The enemies of the left**

The enemies of the leftist ideology should be considered **consumerism** and **technocracy**.

Consumerism or the market society is at the origin of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism. Everything is about consumption and nothing about values, or the values should serve consumption. The values have, in this context, a utilitarian role to play and not a moral or social one.

Speaking about technocracy, I am referring to those trends which tend to say that ideologies are not any longer necessary, but the only important thing is good management or "good governance", as the Americans call it. For instance, while the consumerist say that social economy is not good but market society is good, and from this point of view they clash intellectually with the left, the technocrats say that no ideology is good, because any ideology is useless and the only important thing is to be able to insure the good management of the various existential problems.

### **The democratic and the non-democratic left**

I don't think "democracy" is well used in this context, but I use it because it is customary. I would prefer to speak about the pluralistic and participative left, versus the guided and unitary or centralized left, not about the democratic and non-democratic left. I would not characterize China, or Chinese socialism, as a non-democratic left, I would characterize it as guided, ordered, unitary or maybe centralized left.

But what is democracy? We, in Europe, could not find a definition yet. Even the most famous European organizations dealing with democracy were not able to come to a common conclusion about what democracy is. We in Europe, we are terribly narcissistic about our democracy but we avoid very much to talk about it because we understand that once we start talking about it we cannot agree on almost anything.

I would say that democracy is a way of organizing the society which is based on three elements: 1. the capacity to adopt and change decisions without violence, 2. the institutional checks and balances; 3. a certain (not complete) access of the people to political decisions. The degree of access varies very much, from one place to another. Normally, this kind of democracy will require transparency, accountability, openness and pluralism.

I must add to that the fact that democracy is in crisis everywhere in the world. Those who are usually criticizing the level of democracy or the democratic deficit of China do not speak of the huge democratic deficit in their own societies.

The main enemies of democracy are totalitarianism, oligarchy and populism. While, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, democracy was able to defeat totalitarianism, it became more vulnerable than ever to oligarchy and populism. In fact, in most famous democratic countries in Europe and North America, democracy is a system of rules and procedures disguising an oligarchic structure of the society. We have the oligarchy of the rich, without whose money nobody could devise any policy, the oligarchy of the media, of the bureaucrats, of the international financial organizations, of the NGOs also. Probably, the solution for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be, because the challenge is to defeat oligarchies, not to destroy oligarchs, as we do not have enough power for that, but by multiplying them, in such way as to pulverize their total power. Because people understand that democracy became manipulative since, in fact, it covers an oligarchic structure, people do not trust any longer the leaders, so we have a democracy without trustful leaders, without trustful people. Therefore, people are looking for saviour leaders, they think the Apocalypse is coming, that the end of the world is coming, an somebody should save them or else civilization would vanish. In these feelings, both populism and terrorism are enrooted. In fact terrorism is an expression of the populist approach.

China, if we look around us, from my point of view, is no longer communist, as the United States of America is not any longer democratic from the perspective of their relation to democracy. One can find as little totalitarianism in China as little democracy we can find in the United States.

For now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the central values have several dilemmas that have to be solved. One dilemma, the most important one, is “equality versus liberty”. For the guided left, supporting a guided democracy, equality is in the results. For the centrists left (which some would call the “liberal left”, but which could also be called the “liberal right”) equality is or should be in the opportunities. For the participative left equality is in the inclusion. Individuals should be equally included in the communities and there, through solidarity, they should contribute to the progress of the society and also they should solve their existential, intellectual and spiritual problems.

From this point of view, if the left started from equality, as a central value, in this century integration, inclusion, integrative society became the main value of the left. For the right, democracy and liberty do not go together. For the autocratic left equality and liberty do not go together. For the participative left equality, democracy and liberty are compatible.

In fact, we must say that originally the authoritarian left tried to achieve equality by transforming everyone in proletariat. So, people had only the labor force as their fortune. This didn't work, because, if everybody has only one single fortune and this is the labour force, the competition disappears and it is replaced by apathy. Apathy leads to stagnation.

The big question, which the left has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is: what was wrong with the authoritarian and the guided left? Was the policy wrong, the political dimension, meaning the lack of democracy, or the economic dimension, the lack of market economy? If only one was wrong, could one be changed without changing the other one? These are the main questions for the left in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In my words, should communism be changed only because of the wrong way to conceive its economic dimension or could we have a political authoritarian regime and a free market? We may say that the worst in the communist society or in the command leftist society was the economic dimension. This didn't function and from that all troubles and weaknesses of the regime started. One cannot simply introduce a market economy without transparency, pluralism and competition on the political side. One cannot simply make an economic reform without a political reform. The question is what kind of political reform should be considered?

### **The political reform for the transformation of the authoritarian left**

The transformation of the authoritarian left could follow the same route everywhere in the world. One could not adopt the market economy through the same political reforms everywhere in the world.

Since the left is diverse, as we said, the ways towards enrooting the same values should be diverse. This leads us to the issue of democracy in mega-societies. Demography matters, numbers are important and relevant: it's something to build social democracy in Malta and something else to build it in China. While doing that, we must understand that people need not only food, but also a sense of purpose – they are led not only by the prices of commodities but also by values and symbols. In a secular society, which is any modern democracy, the leaders should replace the myths but their failure to do so leads to an epistemological crisis, leading then to an apocalyptic and millenarian vision, to societal fears.

Therefore, the leaders (the collective leaders in the CPC, in our case) should be able to provide that kind of symbols and leadership which keep people united and, therefore, they have to guide the democracy, but at the same time they should ensure a self-control, a feed-back system from within the power. I think that China is precisely following this way I have indicated last. In China the collective leaders, the party, are controlled by a system of checks and balances which is developed and functions inside the party providing the people the comfort of continuity and security, allowing for the functioning of the free market economy.

We in Europe say that the European Union will be either social or it will not be at all. This is valid also for China. China will be either social or it will collapse in a way which will determine the collapse of the whole world, because of China's size. The size of the redistribution we need in China is huge because the society is huge. A huge redistribution as an expression of a very complex type of solidarity requires a strong type of political power. However, to control all power is leading to corruption. We know the famous saying that any power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. In order to avoid this corruption we need a control. The problem is if the control is coming from outside or from inside the leadership circle. And for such a type of task China has I believe that the way is to insure the control inside the party, before insuring the control from outside the party.

The conclusions are: 1) there is not a unique left, there is only a left or socialism, and a social oriented ideology with variable geometry and local specificity even if the basic values are common. From this point of view, socialism of Chinese type is legitimate because there are these types of socialisms with local specificities; 2) in a guided society, the market economy could only function if the system of checks and balances functions, within the power circles at least. From this point of view, political reforms taking place in China without abandoning the left values are deeper than some would understand or are ready to believe. These political reforms are done in a different way, of course, than political reforms are done in Europe or in other parts of the world. To me, what it was in the past called "Chinese communism" was perhaps a military Confucianism and what it is today is perhaps a market Confucianism. The

cultural and philosophical background has an impact and should have an impact on the reforms enhanced in each country; 3) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need perhaps to reinvent democracy and to do that in different ways as a reality with a variable geometry following the variability of our cultures. If we succeed in doing that, I believe our world will be much happier.