Reformism in a ‘conservative’ system: the European Union and social democratic identity¹

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Introduction

Although the foundations and reference points on which the historical social democratic movement was built have not been completely undermined or exhausted, since the 1970s social democracy has been experiencing considerable change. During the 1990s in particular, social democracy underwent a phase of programmatic renewal. The evidence for this renewal abounds: openness to feminist ideas, minority rights, ecology, the adoption of a more pro-European stance, and, last but not least, the adoption of core neo-liberal policy priorities. It is clear evidence not just of renewal but of a veritable *programmatic fever*. Furthermore, undoubtedly innovative governmental policies, like that of the British Labour Party, to some extent the *Gauche plurielle* in France and the policies of the Scandinavian Social Democrats or – more recently – the Spanish Socialists have set the tone for socialist action in government. However, this programmatic fever has not generated an image of genuine ideological originality. This situation is paradoxical: in a period of rich programmatic developments, social democracy is often perceived as a force bereft of ideas, programmatically exhausted.

There are only apparent paradoxes in politics. The new orientation of the socialist parties has been perceived as a kind of *de-social democratisation* of past programmatic options; as an ideological and programmatic retreat, marked by the adoption of opponents’ ideas. This perception, which is to some extent unjust given the richness and versatility of the new programmatic developments, has its deepest and firmest foundation in the inability of contemporary social democrats to manage effectively the famous ‘social question’, which is the main vector of their historical identity. Accordingly, doubts as to social democratic ‘originality’ seem only natural. But why? Why have today’s social democrats not exploited the revisionist phase to

adopt a modern left-wing *differentia specifica* – a programmatic stance that is closer to the social democratic tradition and, when it comes to Europe, one more oriented towards a ‘social Europe’?

The aim of this chapter is to integrate the issue of social democratic programmatic identity into the new framework constituted by the European Union. Europe is undergoing a major upheaval and, at the same time, a gentle, slow and silent institutional revolution. And just as parties have historically developed in the wake of major institutional changes (e.g. the advent of universal suffrage or the parliamentarisation of formerly authoritarian states), so today the unprecedented character of the EU has a significant impact on party phenomena and party conflict (Magnetite 2001: 58). How does the European framework, particularly its institutional aspects, influence the role and dynamics of political parties (and partisan families)? What are its consequences for the programmatic development and, more generally, the physiognomy and tradition of social democracy? Does the institutional and political system of the EU operate as an obstacle to the re-social democratisation of social democracy’s programmatic options?

The treatment of these questions will be *macroscopic*, the aim being to outline a broad framework of influences and developments, and not to highlight national specificities and variations.

The argument developed here involves three points:

- 1 The multiplicity of power centres of European governance, the conservative logic of the EU institutional architecture and the inability of parties to find a central guiding role in the overall institutional set-up create a huge problem in relation to collective action and coordination for those aspiring to a strategy of policy or regime change in the EU. Social democratic parties are the most affected by institutional developments, because reformist parties are confronted head on by the ‘conservative’ character of the European institutions.
- 2 The extraordinary strengthening of the EU (from 1985 until the end of the 1990s) changed the balance of power between the ‘Brussels complex’ and the member states, thus further increasing the influence of the conservative EU institutional system. This strengthening has functioned as a *double* institutional trap for the future: first, by gridlocking the neo-liberal logic at the EU level and, second, by the weakening of national institutions and the associated difficulty in countering neo-liberal logic at the national level. Social democrats have found themselves in a *non-conjunctural* position of ideological inferiority both within the EU system and at the national level.
- 3 Overall, the EU strengthens the *modern* aspects of the social democratic profile, but it also contributes to the decline of its *historical components*.

With respect to social democratic identity, the EU assumes the role of both an amplifier and an obstacle: it is a factor that contributes to the *consolidation and deepening* of the great identity change of social democracy and, at the same time, an obstacle to the *re-social democratisation* of its programmatic options.

The 'Europe' factor and parties: the weakening of a central institution of political modernity

A fragmented system of powers

A specific feature of the EU institutional architecture is the lack of a clear-cut separation of competences between the Union and the member states and among the Union's central institutions (Bartolini 2006; Chryssochoou 2005: 35). Decisions, within this 'non-state polity', are not made by a dominant organ but instead derive from negotiations between the three pillars of the institutional triangle (Commission, Council, Parliament), on the one hand, and from negotiations between the twenty-seven member states, on the other. Although the European Council has become, in the process, the key motor of integration – also attracting, which is politically important, 'the spotlight of media and public attention' (Tsoukalis 2005) – the Union remains a regime based on continual negotiation between the three pillars, 'none of which manages to monopolize the leadership functions' (Magnet 2005: 65). The consequence of the multiplicity of power centres and the superimposition of decision-making levels is that the EU 'realises a confusion of powers that none of its states would tolerate for itself' (Alliès 2005: 173). The EU suffers from a lack of political leadership (Hix 2006: 13): it is a 'leaderless' superpower.

If we turn from the institutional level of the EU in the *strict* sense to a more general examination of the power structure in Europe (comprising, in addition to EU institutions, the member states and the distribution of powers at national level), if we thus pass from the EU as institutional phenomenon to the *macro-institutional* reality of European public powers, the image of fragmentation becomes even more pronounced. The distribution of power centres – the Council, the Commission, the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, the twenty-seven national governments and administrations, the strengthened local administrations and the independent national or European authorities – is such that the overall cohesion of the system of power is weak. In this 'multilevel governance' no established organ and no official or unofficial administration really controls public authority. In fact, there is no single *central* public authority. In sum, European 'multilevel governance' (conceived as a single, unique power constellation, operating both at the national and the European level) is

profoundly segmented, *without a dominant body* (an institution) and *without a dominant actor* (a state or coalition of states, a political family or coalition of political families). The 'framework of sovereignty' within the macro-system 'Europe' – compared with the model of national sovereignty – is seriously lacking in focus, cohesion and clarity.

This broad redeployment of competences and powers, which has occurred on account of the EU and in the framework of its construction, calls into question two closely related aspects of party activity and influence: (a) the problem-solving capacity of the parties, whose ability to harmonise the institutional system – and, hence, to govern efficiently – is diminished; and (b) the centrality of parties in the political system.

A political macro-system without a party coordinator

Historically, one of the important activities of political parties was the *harmonisation* of relations between different institutions within political systems. *Systemic integration*, according to Stefano Bartolini, refers to the ability of parties to harmonise and coordinate relations between different 'institutional orders' within complex political systems: parliamentary assemblies, majorities, government coalitions, executives, ministerial bureaucracies, local authorities, and the judicial branch (Bartolini 2005b: 2). Parties – and parties alone – have prevented the Balkanisation of representation and the autonomisation of subsystems within national political systems (by controlling governments and parliaments, by their ability to discipline governmental and parliamentary coalitions, by a degree of control over administration and local political personnel, even – sometimes – by controlling certain major interest groups) (see Bartolini 2005b: 17). Thus, institutional harmonisation and government is one of the two main contributions of political parties to modern politics (the other being the activity of representation).² The partisan character of institutional harmonisation and government/administration was a specific trait of politics in Europe and contributed to the transition from classical parliamentarianism to *party democracy*.

At the present time, a fundamental institutional dissymmetry – and a major institutional novelty – distinguishes the new state of powers in Europe. In the twenty-seven states, the system of *party government* remains dominant and the *national* political capacity of parties, although reduced, is still important. By contrast, at the EU level the system of *party government* does not really exist and the *European* political capacity of parties (i.e. their ability to influence decisions within the EU) is not – or not yet – really proven.

In fact, in the absence of a European parliamentarian or presidential system and, also, in the absence of partisan competition for executive office, Euro-parties exert neither the function of government (a central

aspect of which is institutional and policy harmonisation) nor the function of political representation. Euro-parties remain, despite their clear reinforcement (mainly since the 1990s), essentially weak structures, an instance of 'second-order parties' (Heidar 2003: 3), hardly likely to function as a true political force in the near future. Moreover, this timidly rising actor (Bardi 2004) in the EU political system assumes neither the role of 'spokesperson' of the system of power in Europe nor the role of 'regulator of meaning', responsible for 'conveying to the collectivity it represents an image of coherence and cohesion' (Smith 2004: 68). At root, the European Union does not constitute a suitable framework for the exercise of partisan authority: 'in its deepest characteristics', Paul Magnette has written, 'the European community model rejects the classical form of the political party' (Magnette 2001: 63). Thus, the reduction of partisan influence in national space remains uncompensated, or without equivalent compensation, at the supranational level (cf. Mair 2005: 14).

Given this fundamental institutional divergence (party government at national level and its absence at a specifically European level),³ the parties can no longer ensure the cohesion of power centres and are no longer identified, as they used to be, with public authority; or, to be more precise: if they take responsibility for the cohesion of power centres at a national level, *they do not ensure this cohesion in the system as a whole* (for the 'Brussels complex', which is *not governed* by parties, now represents a crucial component in the network of European executives). Weakened institutional leaders, though nevertheless still leaders at a national level, but without a clearly defined role at EU level, political parties have lost a significant proportion of their erstwhile influence. At the same time, they have lost most of their credibility, becoming today 'the least trusted of any of the major political institutions in contemporary democracy' (Mair 2008: 330). Parties matter less as problem-solving structures and, because of this, they matter less as representative vehicles.⁴

Of course, political parties are firmly rooted in European representative systems. Parties – in particular, major parties with a governmental vocation – are *ubiquitous*: they direct the national state, they dominate national parliaments, they control local authorities and the European Parliament, they are present in the European Council, and are even indirectly present in the Commission. At first sight, then, the influence of parties remains strong.

However, depending on the particular case, their strong role (in fact, absolute domination) in an institution (e.g. national parliaments, national governments, the European Parliament) is reduced either by their strong but non-compact presence (divided into twenty-seven parts) within a different one (European Council), or by their feeble and indirect power elsewhere (e.g. the Commission), or by an absence of influence in other institutions (e.g. non-

majoritarian institutions like the European Central Bank or, at a national level, independent authorities). In addition, this influence is diminished by competition between the different power centres, national and European. Therefore, even though parties have not lost in presence, they have lost in political centrality and, notably, they have lost their capacity for institutional coordination: they ensure the cohesion of institutions that count (and hence the cohesion of policies) to a much *lesser* extent than they did in the past.

As a consequence, the European macro-system is a system without a party coordinator. No partisan family simultaneously controls national governments, the European Council, the Commission and the European Parliament; and no political family is likely to do so in the future. The possibility of having a Commission–Parliament–Council of the same political colour for a sustained period is ‘simply not realistic’, stresses Stefano Bartolini (2006: 40). At the present state of European affairs, there is no way for any political family to harmonise and manage the fragmented institutional apparatus of European governance. Furthermore, there is no way for any political family to be put together and act as a truly European force (the actions of a party unfold mainly at the national level and are punished or rewarded by the popular vote in national elections).

If, ultimately, the EU poses a ‘role’ problem for each and every party family, the same holds true for social democracy. Only in its case the problem is even more pronounced. Control of the market and capitalism entails – actually, it has always required – both a strong central authority and a strong political force capable of pursuing policies that are different from the market’s. Nowadays, in the framework of multilevel and multi-sites European governance, neither prerequisite is met: no central public authority exists and a powerful transnational social democracy capable of managing European governance is not easy to set up.

Social democratic parties are seriously affected by the fragmentation of European governance and their proper (albeit natural) incapacity for effective coordination of their European action. In reality, they are seriously affected by the deep reach and scope of European integration.

A ‘conservative’ political system

The EU, as Simon Hix argues, ‘is perhaps more consensus-oriented in its design than any political system in the history of modern government’ (Hix 2006: 12). In consequence, it is a cumbersome system in its modus operandi, one largely based on concessions and a logic of compromise and small steps. The EU is a profoundly *conservative* system, in the sense that it ‘protects’ the units (the states) that make it up and does not easily revisit institutional and political decisions it has taken.

First of all, changes and adaptations in the EU invariably occur on the

margins, without a fundamental challenge to initial options and ways of operating (gradualism is part of the *acquis communautaire*). Second, the whole community culture is based on the idea that no institution is ruled by majority logic or a stable coalition (decisions being the result of an ongoing process of compromise, in which partisan logics play a limited role) (Costa 2004: 282).

These two logics (gradualism on the one hand, compromises *without parties*, or compromises in which the role of parties is secondary, on the other) are central and represent the apex of the *acquis communautaire*. As described above, the European system, as Tsoukalis has appositely written, 'carries a heavy historical load, which discriminates against newcomers and new political majorities' (Tsoukalis 2005). It also functions at the expense of non-conformist institutional initiatives and daring political coups. The EU's constitutional mandate 'changes through evolution, not revolution' (Moravcsik 2001: 4). The same applies to the policies adopted in different areas: initial policy options tend to persist and shape subsequent policy-making (Johansson and Raunio 2005: 518–19). Once a policy has been adopted, the checks and balances of the EU make it very difficult for this policy to change ('institutional gridlock') (Hix 2006: 8).

In reality, everything in the EU changes slowly, through evolution, not revolution. The micro-mechanisms – the 'nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels' – ⁵ of the European Union do not favour strong (or weak) ⁶ political reformism at an EU level and make a reinstitution of European politics difficult. In this system with segmented powers and competences, with twenty-seven actor-countries, with political parties that are very weak (at the European level) or weakened (at the national level), and without a dominant actor or institution – in this system where the logic of consensus or grand coalition rules, it is very difficult to produce a new master narrative and a new 'frame of action' (Pappas 2006: 19). Political leadership and strategic vision do not easily come out of such a system (Tsoukalis 2005).

The 'conservative' character of the system is further encouraged by the marked tendency to depoliticise sensitive questions, so as to avoid decision-making blockages.⁷ The objective of 'keeping the engine ticking over', in order to maintain a cooperative dynamic, is the key – the real cause of the conservatism (in the sense not of left–right divisions, let us repeat, but of an aversion to change). It is superfluous to add that tendencies to regime preservation have been accentuated by successive enlargements – especially the 'big bang' expansion of 2004.

Basically, with the undermining of the 'strong state' model, with the strengthening of the civil service and the experts at the European level (and to a certain extent at the national level), 'the role of political parties as the main producers of policy-oriented ideology and ideas is challenged'

(Lindvall and Rothstein 2006: 61; quoted in Mair 2008: 228). The ideological and programmatic renewal of social democracy, and of any 'responsible' force operating within such a system, is not encouraged. By contrast, programmatic convergence and the weakening of political cleavages find a more fertile terrain.

That said, Europe should not be thought as an infernal machine that devours its own children. The 'conservative' character (in the sense defined above) of the EU regime and the culture of gradual change have not been established out of perversity. The multinational and multi-state character of the regime requires barriers to prevent one group of countries or actors dominating another (cf. Lord 2001: 43; Hix 2006: 13). To co-administer sovereignties in a pragmatic and moderate fashion, in this polycentric polity where sovereignty is 'participatory' and 'fragmented', is a question of survival for the regime.

Thus, if ideological *parti pris* explains the liberal character of the EU's economic options, it only partially explains the culture of moderation, the gradualism, the pragmatism of its institutions, the complexity of its procedures, the multiplicity of its power centres, and the superimposition of levels of decision-making or the weakness of the Euro-parties. The European Union is the product of a *mechanics of forces* and a *set of structures* and then, but only then, the product of an ideological *parti pris*. The fragmentation of the framework of sovereignty, and the institutional and political culture that accompanies it, are not the result of a 'bad' strategy or a non-strategic conception – and construction – of the European system (any action, by a state, party, or any other agent, contains a strategic calculation). It is the result not of a process 'without an actor', but of a large number of processes with several actors who acted – and are still acting – at local, national or specifically European levels. The actors are the national states, European authorities, parties (national and trans-national), interest groups, lobbies, and even the 'people' (for example, the 'no' votes in the French (2005), Dutch (2005) and Irish (2008) referendums directly influenced the structure or the dynamic of this 'framework of sovereignty'). These actors, who negotiate Europe and fashion Europe, have ended up making this 'conservative' Europe – a consensual elitist system, one without a central core of authority and without a single, unique centre of power. It remains the case that this internally fragmented system, like any system, produces results.

The 'Europe' factor and social democratic identity

Conservative system, coordination problem and social democracy

The segmentation of competences and multiplicity of power centres in European multilevel governance, as well as the structural inability of

parties to find a central guiding role in the overall institutional set-up, create a formidable problem of collective action and coordination for all those aspiring to a strategy of change and ruptures. The institutional reality of the EU is a sizeable obstacle in the path of all actors (national states, left-wing parties, populist right-wing parties, trade unions, pro- or anti-European associations, anti-globalisation or alternative globalisation movements) who aspire to change the EU's economic policy and institutional architecture. This problem of collective action is doubly *strategic*: there is no Winter Palace to occupy or surround in the European political system; there is no royal road for prompting and coordinating the mobilisation of actors with highly diverse sensibilities, cultures and interests.

Naturally, this problem of collective action and coordination is common to all political parties and families. Nevertheless, it particularly affects social democratic parties (and, more generally, left-wing parties): parties that aim to correct – or change – the dominant economic paradigm are more in need of strong institutional (and societal) resources. This problem affects more specifically the social democratic parties, because it is mainly they who, as essentially governmental parties, are confronted head on with the 'conservative' character of the European institutions. It is they who participate in the Council and contribute to the formation of the majorities in the Parliament; it is also they who appoint some of the Commissioners. By contrast, the smaller parties of the radical left (or the Green parties), as parties of opposition, are the ones that benefit electorally from the conservatism of the system. Conservatism, forcing the social democrats to adopt pragmatist positions and thus to convergence with the centre-right parties, widens the competitive space for outsiders and new parties (see Richard Luther and Muller-Rommel 2002: 334).

Everything that has been said so far confronts socialists or at least those who wish – assuming they do wish – to 'change' Europe, with a very delicate problem: how to change a system that is 'closed' to the logic of change, without blocking it? How to be radical (in the sense of promoting new policies and new operating frameworks) in a system that, by its very nature (complex and cumbersome decision-making mechanism, twenty-seven players-countries), is easily weakened under the pressure of change? And, consequently, how to change European policies without breaking the European 'machine' that generates them? This is what all those who aspire to reform the economic policy and institutional architecture of the EU – and the actual direction of the reforms is of little moment here – come up against.

Social democracy is not obliged to respect what has gone before (if it does, it will have difficulty affirming its social democratic identity). However, it cannot ignore it (if it does, it ceases to be 'European' in the sense of searching

for solutions at the EU level). This condemns it to treading a very thin line; and, often, to taking refuge in rhetoric (e.g. the rhetoric of 'social Europe').

Basically, the adoption of a more aggressive approach (institutional and/or political) by socialists would be liable to explode the largely 'consensual' physiognomy of the EU. It would be liable to affect its essence: compromise, the step-by-step approach, marginal adjustments.

Here, Bartolini's analysis is wholly apposite. Bartolini formulates the issue as follows:

If a political mandate emerged from more open and partisan debates in the Council, Commission, and Parliament – say, for example, a mandate involving expansionary monetary policies, European social welfare minima, active occupational or fiscal policies, or a radical alteration of agricultural policy – could it be implemented? The answer is NO. Such a political mandate would be frustrated by the autonomy of the European Central Bank, by the case law of the ECJ, by the blocking vetoes in the Council. (Bartolini 2006: 39)

In truth, this type of mandate is impossible today because of socialist divisions. It would be difficult for social democrats to formulate or implement a set – this or any other – of left-wing initiatives: first of all, because there are parties belonging to the social democratic family that would block the process in its early stages (e.g. in the PES) and next because, somewhere in the system's many cogs (the most plausible being the ECJ or the Council), such initiatives would be halted. They would not be in accordance with European *policy style* – that is, the selection of issues for the political agenda and the standard operating procedures for handling them.

Preventive renunciation: the exorbitant cost of divisions, the liability of grand coalitions

Two political examples, presented briefly here, may illustrate the problem of collective action confronted or, rather, avoided by the social democrats. The first example relates to the 'opportunity of the 1990s' and the second to the perennial problem of a 'social Europe'. In both cases, the failure of the social democrats should be attributed, in addition to ideological factors, to: (a) the consensual or almost consensual character of the system; and (b) the disagreements and divisions that were evidenced within the social democratic family.

The 'lost' opportunity of the 1990s

The inability of social democracy in the late 1990s, when twelve out of the fifteen European states elected leftist governments, to produce more explicit left-wing policies and to exploit this politically unique – even if brief – moment of electoral convergence illustrates the two factors mentioned above.

A plausible explanation for this failure is a lack of will: 'they didn't

want to [produce more left-wing policies] because they weren't really left anymore' (Allen 2002). In a sense, the 'forced' resignation of Oscar Lafontaine, whose expansionary economic proposals ran counter to the economic mainstream, illustrated this 'lack of will' on the part of social democratic leaderships (or of some of them) faced with a change of orientation in economic policy (Moschonas, 2002: 265–8). However, European social democrats had at the time no common programme for economic regulation at EU level (Notermans 2001: 269; Ross 2009). Beyond the presumed 'lack of will', the economic strategies of the twelve socialist governments and the interest constellations in the member states have been, from the very beginning, too heterogeneous for effective coordination. Thus, the cumulative effects of both lack of will (for some) and national differences (for all)⁸ produced – in a system with high institutional hurdles for any policy reorientation – a problem of coordination. Naturally, the coordination problem, or *anticipation* of such a problem, multiplied the effects of the absence of will and of the divisions inside the social democratic family. This generated uncertainty and indecision regarding which policies to pursue and what kind of orientation to take. Divisions and the EU institutional configuration weakened any realistic prospect of success.

Without a realistic prospect of success, actors always prefer the status quo: the option of 'change' in this case seems like a 'hopeless vain struggle', a net cost without a reasonable anticipation of profit. At the time, for social democratic leaders, given the institutional barriers and the disparate positions of socialist governments, supporting the status quo was a rational choice.

Certainly, according to Christopher Allen, the 'fundamental failure of imagination' was the main factor behind social democratic inaction (Allen 2002). Ideas and imagination, however, are not constraint free. European institutional arrangements (the scale of majorities required) and social democratic divisions, by *lowering* expectations, inhibited imagination and inventiveness. Diminished expectations impeded the production of 'creative political entrepreneurs'. Overall, the coordination problem prevented socialists from supporting more *dirigiste* and expansionary policies at the European level. If the challenge of the late 1990s was great, the opportunity was less 'historical' than it appeared.

European social policy

The strategy of the 1980s erected a structural asymmetry between market integration and positive welfare integration, hence endowing the EU with an institutional and legal framework in aid of 'Market Europe' and at the expense of 'Social Europe' (Hansen 2005: 47–9). In fact, compared to national political systems, the capacity of the EU to redistribute resources

between individuals, groups, regions or states through taxation and public spending is limited. The EU has no real fiscal powers and very few means for implementing redistributive policies.⁹ The residual character of the EU's social policy, besides the powerful market-making bias of the EU, is due to the differences in social philosophy between the member states (the 'clash of national interests'), but also to the extreme heterogeneity of the national welfare states, which renders the construction of a genuine European welfare state extremely difficult (Majone 1996).

This problem of collective action and coordination became evident with the pre-election appeal (in the 2004 European elections) for a 'Social Europe' by certain socialist leaders (including Rasmussen, head of the PES, and Antonio Guterres, President at the time of the Socialist International). Labour's third way policies and the 'Agenda 2010' of the SPD (see Chapters 1, 2 and 7 in this book) did not allow Blair and Schröder to give their endorsements to such an initiative. For their part, the Scandinavian social democrats, who continue to represent a 'social' version of social democracy, were not ready to accept the harmonisation by Brussels of national regulations on social issues – something that could imperil their welfare states. As national parties were moving in different, even opposite, directions, the constellation of political interests and approaches within the PES made impossible the construction of a majority coalition to promulgate a genuinely *common* social programme.

In general, due partly to socialist divisions and, to a greater extent, to the interest constellations within the member states (the systems of national security being 'too heterogeneous'), *concrete* proposals for promoting a social Europe are rare, even 'undesirable' (Notermans 2001: 269). Social Europe has become a 'shibboleth' (Bellec 2005: 275) without any impact – other than rhetorical – on the political priorities of the national socialist parties or the PES. The absence of a substantive social democratic output on such a central matter for the social democratic political and ideological profile illustrates the formidable problem of coordination and collective action in a supranational framework. It is important to notice that the problem of coordination of 'Social Europe' has been accentuated by successive enlargements. Distrust of any development of a 'Social Europe' on the part of social democratic parties from central and eastern Europe presents a characteristic example of how the new countries could strengthen divisions within the social democratic family.

So, to the question: why has contemporary social democracy's great capacity for adaptation not produced a left-wing *differentia specifica*, a programmatic stance more oriented towards Social Europe and a left-wing style of market regulation? The institutional structure and operational logic of the EU on the one hand, and differences in economic and social philosophy

within the socialist family on the other, offer a partial answer. Socialist divisions are the common denominator underlying, notwithstanding some minor successes, the ideological inertia of the socialist family (Ross 2009).

Yet divisions are nothing new in the long social democratic tradition in Europe; they are a constant. In a sense, European socialism has never been as unified as it is today. In the past, the distance between left- and right-wing alternatives within the social democratic family was greater than it is today, and the contrasts were noticeably stronger. In a world *without* the EU, these divisions, which are perfectly natural and ultimately weak, would have simply constituted the basis for different national roads. However, we live in a world *with* the EU. Accordingly, these divisions, when transferred to the European level, entail – *as managed by the EU institutional apparatus and mediated by it* – the political paralysis of the socialist family. Divisions, because of the EU, because of the high institutional hurdles for any policy reorientation, are more important today than, let us say, in the 1960s or 1930s. The EU compels member states or national parties (in the Euro-parties or in the European Parliament) either to construct grand coalitions or to abandon their policy. In reality, social democratic disagreements on the institutional and economic construction of Europe lead to indecision or to the preventive abandonment of any ‘transformational’ aim outside the mainstream. Disagreements and divisions undermine, above the ordinary, partisan control of the Union’s central institutions. The cost of divisions has become exorbitant.

Conservative system, ideational spillover and national politics

The institutional (and economic) logic of the Union does not have only European consequences, restricted to the level of the EU. It has an important influence on the policy proposals and governmental action of national parties and in this respect defines largely the content of reformism at a national level. The political and programmatic horizon being considerably narrowed, any kind of national social democratic reformism which appears ‘disrespectful’ of the EU’s options seems eccentric (and rightly so!); the attitude of Laurent Fabius in favor of the ‘no’ vote in the French referendum (2005) is a case in point. The claim by politicians that ‘Brussels made me do it’ is in perfect accord with the institutional and political pragmatism dominating the European political system. It is also in conformity with the perception that Europe sets important limits on any programmatic alternative and policy innovation (see Ladrech 2000: 31). National party elites anticipate what is possible and what is not. Here too, as in the case of the Brussels elites, the logic of *preventive* renunciation cuts deep. Programmatic elites (party or ministerial, national or European), specialising in the production of policy-oriented ideas, adapt to the European political style.¹⁰

As long as a significant number of decisions are taken in Brussels, as long as the argument 'it is the EU that decided' corresponds to the reality of decision-making – and is not merely an alibi on the part of national elites – it is rather risky (and often, pointless) to pursue 'extraordinary politics' at the national level. The incentives and constraints imposed by the European Union, *as well as the expectations that form around them*, have an important impact on national policies.¹¹ By a kind of 'ideational spill-over' (Thomas Risse, quoted by Hooghe and Marks 2008: 120), Brussels gradualism spreads to the totality of national established political forces.

A double institutional trap and social democratic identity

In the current state of European affairs, the exercise of national sovereignty is impeded by political rules jointly decided within the EU, while, at the same time, in the name of national sovereignty a federal sovereignty has been prevented from emerging (Fitoussi 2005: 99).¹² To paraphrase and extend a conclusion of Simon Lightfoot's regarding the PES (Lightfoot 2005: 147), the present situation falls between two stools: the EU is neither a truly supranational entity nor does it allow the member states to pursue a national road. Thus, the EU functions as a relatively strong impediment and as a relatively weak incentive.

How has this developed, and how is this process linked to the neo-liberalisation of Europe (and of social democracy)? Historically, European integration was conceived and developed on the basis of economic principles which can be described as 'liberal', even if [these principles] 'were not apparent for the first two decades', even if they left 'enough space for governments to pursue social democratic policies' (McGowan 2001: 75, 78), at least until the middle of the 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s something important happened at the heart of Europe that was comparable in its impact to the creation of the Common Market in 1957. The Single Market, the enlargement of the scope of liberalisation in new areas, the reinforcement of majority voting in the Council of Ministers, the more active role and the new dynamics of the Court and Commission (notably under Jacques Delors), the strengthening of the European Parliament, the foundation of the European Central Bank and, more generally, the impact of the Maastricht Treaty, took integration to a new level (Ferenczi 2008: 56–62; Ross 2009). It was something of a 'second foundation' of the European community (Ryner 2007: 8).

The revitalisation of European integration during the 1980s and 1990s¹³ had and continues to have large-scale effects on both Europe and social democratic parties. There are three reasons for this: (a) national policy is severely constrained in its problem-solving capacity (and national parties in their influence), whereas the EU has become strong, but not sufficiently

strong to pursue a genuinely supranational politics; (b) the new balance of forces between the 'Brussels complex' and the member states *increased* the impact of the conservative EU institutional system (EU conservatism is powerful only in the case of offering no escape route at the national level); (c) as a result, EU liberal policies have been constraining national social democratic options more than vice versa (McGowan 2001: 85).

Given this new framework, the 'Brussels complex', which has passed from a 'primitive site of collective government' to a densely institutionalised system of interrelationships (Caporaso and Sweet 2001: 221), has functioned as a *double* institutional trap for the future: first, by the institutional gridlocking of neo-liberal logic and the difficulty in countering liberal solutions at the European level; and, second, by the weakening of national institutions and parties and the associated difficulty in countering neo-liberal logic at the national level. Thus, what may have been initially an institutional event may produce enduring ideological results. The blind mechanics of strong complementarity and mutual neutralisation between European and national institutions (a product of the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s) made virtually inevitable the almost 'unconditional surrender' to liberal solutions. As a result, the new 'asymmetric dynamic' (to use McGowan's term) between social democracy and European integration (with the EU's liberal policies contributing to a reorientation of national social democratic options more than vice versa) was not only the consequence of liberal ideas becoming locked in at the EU level (McGowan 2001: 85); it was also the result of the weakening of parties and institutions at the national level, which made this locking in more solid and powerful. This double trap gave liberal economic solutions a long-term advantage.

The significance of the events of this period (the 1980s and 1990s) has been invariably neglected or has only been appreciated in retrospect. The 'second project of integration' (Ryner 2007) was a turning point in the history of Europe. It also was a key moment in the history of social democracy over the last thirty years. Elsewhere we have referred to the major change in contemporary social democracy as a 'great transformation' (Moschonas 2002). Today, *ex-post*, we believe that in this great transformation there was a key period of extension and consolidation when disorderly effervescence took on a more stable structure, more depth and solidity. This period and the extraordinary strengthening of the EU from 1985 until the end of the 1990s are intimately linked (in part chronologically, more so qualitatively). George Ross perceptively shows this critical influence: 'The EU took the lead in enjoining its members to conform to a new world where Keynesianism was anachronistic and welfare states and industrial relations systems needed serious reform . . . These were the European conditions in which "lefts" would become "center-lefts"' (Ross

2009). In essence, the EU contributed a great deal to the greater political depth and solidity of social democracy's new profile. It exerted powerful, often indirect and silent, influence, both as *support* and as *constraint*, on the new social democratic programmatic stance. With the second project of integration, social democrats have found themselves in a *non-conjunctural* position of ideological inferiority in European political space. They have lost ground as well as a great part of their programmatic freedom of manoeuvre. Social democracy exhibited strong signs of programmatic destabilisation and exhaustion.

Trapped in Europe? The EU and the identity dilemma of social democracy

If socio-economic and cultural evolution do not represent 'a particular drama for social democracy' in the sense that they affect all political parties to some degree (Callaghan 2005: 190), European integration affects social democratic parties more than conservative, liberal, Left radical, or right-wing populist parties (cf. Ladrech 2000: 73). The EU, in its current form, is not the ideal place for socialist ideologies, moderate or radical. It is not supportive of more economic regulation, a more encompassing welfare state, or Keynesian deficit spending. At root, the EU is undermining three of the *most* essential elements in the formation of social democracy's historical identity: (a) the state-oriented culture of social democratic appeal; (b) welfare politics and, therefore, the link with the working class; (c) the broad primacy of politics orientation.

In particular, fragmentation and segmentation of decision-making within the macro-system 'Europe' do not fit the traditional social democratic 'love affair with centralized control' (Sassoon 2006: 24). Most importantly, the fact that the EU 'seeks to promote wider and deeper markets without establishing a correspondingly full range of compensating and counterbalancing social and regulatory policies' (Moravcsik and Sangiovanni [n.d.]: 1) is at odds with the principle of welfarism, a central ideological pillar of *modern* social democratic culture. Moreover, the EU's conservative institutional logic and the decline in the role played by political parties in generating policy-oriented ideas are also at odds with the 'belief' in the primacy of politics (over economics) that, historically, has underpinned social democratic action (Berman 2006) and has made social democracy a transformative political force. Today, the mechanisms of the Brussels system impede social democratic action *politically*, through collectively decided rules, and *not through economic constraints* (Fitoussi 2005: 99). As a result, social democratic parties have to face not only 'markets against politics' but also 'institutions against politics': their policies are conditioned not only by economics ('globalisation as constraint'), but also by politics (the EU as constraint). This unprecedented situation, without any real equivalent in

the national state, constitutes a 'hidden' aspect of Europeanisation or (to borrow Colin Hay's term) 'EU-isation' (Hay 2002); and it partially explains the extreme moderation of social democratic programmatic options as well as the ideological and programmatic convergence of government parties of the right and left. Social democratic parties 'as carriers of ideology' (Berman 2006: 204) are under extreme pressure.

Given these influences, it is scarcely surprising that current popular anxieties and growing Euro-scepticism remain without an effective political response on the left.¹⁴ The European programmatic stance of social democrats, bereft of alternative economic ideas, incapable of articulating Europe-wide political alternatives, is scarcely capable – despite the revisionist fever of the 1990s – of structuring the politics of the European Union differently.¹⁵ Moreover, sociological analysis of support for European integration yields a picture of a social democracy incapable of creating a genuine *popular Europeanism* (see Cautrès and Grunberg 2008). The Euro-scepticism of the lower classes and the lack of a European social policy, closely related to each other, are traumatising the social democratic profile and, in part, the electoral dynamics of social democratic parties (Grunberg and Moschonas 2005). Europe is weakening the sociological specificity of social democracy and is becoming an additional factor in its change of identity.

However, if the EU is a factor of ideological disarray for social democrats, it is also a factor of modernisation. It is an open window on the world and a mechanism, though doubtless a cumbersome, slow and conservative one, that has gradually transformed the image of the continent. As the territorial nation-state loses control over national economies and social democracy faces challenges it cannot easily meet, the EU becomes a polity – and a player – that counts for more in the new complex environment. It is also a mechanism that allows social democracy, which has become pro-European, to connect better with the salaried and educated middle strata of the population. Social democracy's commitment to European integration reinforces its link with these strata, strongly 'attached' to cultural liberalism and post-materialist values, as well as with the segment of the population frequently considered to be the 'integration winners', who are attached to the dynamic of cosmopolitan modernisation. This attachment sustains electorally the modernised aspects of the social democratic profile. It is worth noting that the programmatic social democratic renewal on cultural liberalism as well as on ecological matters (Callaghan 2006) has been *remarkable* and, at least in some countries, it is now the only programmatic area where social democracy clearly dominates the centre-right. The social democratic electoral gains among educated middle strata are largely explained by the social democratic domination in the domain of cultural liberalism. Europe reinforces this tendency.

Overall, the EU strengthens the modern aspects of the social democratic profile while it contributes to the decline of its historical components, which are part of the profoundest political specificity of centre-left parties. The EU, both as a polity in the making and as a market-oriented entity, weakens the ideological distinctiveness of contemporary social democratic parties – already undermined by such factors as the economic slowdown, the financial limits of Keynesianism, globalisation, change in the model of economic production, and catch-all politics. The EU is an autonomous cause of change. It reinforces trends that are *already* operative and account for the redefinition of historical social democratic identity (programmatic, but also sociological). The EU assumes the role of both an amplifier and an obstacle: it is a factor that contributes to the *consolidation* and *deepening* of the great identity change of social democracy and, at the same time, an obstacle to the *re-social democratisation* of its programmatic options.¹⁶

So why has contemporary social democracy's great capacity for adaptation not produced a left-wing *differentia specifica*, an agenda more orientated towards social Europe and a left-wing style of market regulation? The EU offers a partial answer that invokes both the institutional structure and operational logic of the EU system, as well as the differences in economic and social philosophy within the socialist family. The great programmatic flexibility of contemporary social democratic parties, which has allowed them to produce a large number of new ideas and policy proposals at the national level, is at bottom a flexibility respectful of the basic economic orientations of the Brussels mainstream. Not to respect this mainstream would be to block or destabilise the EU (and 'explode' the ideological and electoral stability of the social democratic parties, a majority of which have made Europe a fundamental aspect of their new ideological profile). To respect it is to further destabilise social democracy's historical identity. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, which is both a policy dilemma and a problem of identity.

Ironically, trapped in this dilemma is the new Europeanised social democracy, a social democracy that is no longer trailing behind integration and is 're-promoting traditional social democratic intervention at the European level' (Bale 2005: 18). If a social democratic strategy of a left-wing re-regulation passes through Europe, the EU renders this strategy more difficult to achieve.

Afterword: social democracy's dilemma and the future

Are the constraints upon social democracy primarily a result of globalisation or of European integration? Today, perhaps, there is no point trying to identify which factor came first, and which factor prevailed in the

neo-liberalisation of politics at a European level and beyond. In general, the thesis that neo-liberalism initially came to dominance as a result of the collapse of the post-war boom and the limitations of Keynesianism is fairly convincing (Lavelle 2008). A neo-liberal turn occurred well before the Maastricht Treaty and was not restricted to Europe (in this respect, Australia and New Zealand are two good examples). The neo-liberalisation of social democracy pre-dates the European Union (Lavelle 2008: 23–4, 121, 151 and Chapter 1 in this collection). Even so, the Single European Market and implementation of the Maastricht Treaty converged to create a specific trend in Europe, an accelerated and focused adjustment that made the neo-liberalisation of European social democracy deeper and more coherent. As Francis McGowan wrote, ‘European integration involves member states committing themselves to a much more robust set of rules than those which might be regarded as framing globalization (WTO, IMF, etc.). Moreover, in the detail of reforms, the imprint of the EU is much clearer than that of global pressures’ (2001: 98).

It is not impossible that there will be a change of direction in European politics. According to Gary Marks, as European integration has been transformed from a market-creating and market-enabling process to a polity-making process, the focus of debate will probably shift from creating a market to regulating it (Marks 2004: 258). Of course, Europeanisation is a ‘matrix of powerful pressures not always pulling in the same direction’ (Hanley 2002: 479). Thus, in the future we will probably see two parallel drives operating simultaneously: one pushing the EU to integrate itself further into the paradigm of economic liberalism; and another one adjusting this paradigm by instilling into it elements derived from a largely non-liberal perspective. In a sense, this process, as ‘the needs for both regulation and social protection are increasingly understood’ (Shaw 2001: 24), is already under way. In a system, however, in which ‘the standardization of the internal market regulation and the centralization of the jurisdictional activities have developed before and without the centralization of political power . . . and the creation of political agencies’ (Bartolini 2005a: 247), any such correction will rather occur on the margins, without fundamentally altering methods of operation.

Any *radical* correction would necessitate revising some of the most deeply rooted elements of the workings of the EU, requiring all, or almost all, of the major European players to sign up. This would mean formulating a new ideological mainstream and creating a new ‘grand coalition’ within the EU. The ‘secret combination’ of EU operations (segmented powers, high institutional hurdles for any policy reorientation, jurisdictional *acquis*, a small EU budget, the difficulty of conducting partisan politics, social democratic divisions, and, last but not least, the absence of a distinctively left-wing

agenda for the EU) makes a social democratic reorientation of the EU difficult to implement. However much socialists and social democrats want a powerful, more left-oriented Europe,¹⁷ they do not possess the requisite institutional and political means, perhaps not even the ideas, for refocusing integration. Although conducive to bargains, the dilemma of destabilising the EU or further destabilising social democratic identity is here to stay.

The entire history of social democracy, from the Erfurt Programme to the Stockholm School, from Austro-Keynesianism to the more recent achievements of socialists in southern Europe, demonstrates that social democratic parties established themselves as central, majority forces when they took an *ideological lead* over their right-wing opponents; when they generated or adopted ideas which the latter were not yet ready to accept or implement (such as universal suffrage, the political rights of the working class, the welfare state, Keynesianism, or, more recently, the deepening of democracy and cultural modernisation in southern Europe). Ideas count; this is clearly shown in the history of social democracy.

Institutions count, too. We have tried to show that, in the new European environment, institutions have to be taken into consideration much more than in the past. Institutions without actors, however, explain neither change nor stagnation (cf. Merkel and Petring 2007: 140). Institutions are obstacles or weapons, they do not generate policies by themselves. Today, in the EU, the problem posed for social democrats is that of the primacy of politics in a 'conservative' institutional terrain. How is the ideological and programmatic ascendancy of social democracy to be restored in this difficult terrain? The great issue here is not, as is often claimed, ideological loyalty (social democracy has virtually never been faithful to its ideology) but programmatic innovation: left-wing programmes must be attuned to the needs of a new European stage. Social democracy, which has not long had a pro-European orientation, needs to achieve 'tangible results' (Telo 2005: 129). Such results are even more politically important because the electoral and ideological pressure being put upon social democracy from political parties to its left has increased.

It is however extraordinarily difficult for social democratic parties to achieve 'tangible results' – and to restore their programmatic ascendancy – without effectively coordinating their efforts across national borders. The ineffectiveness, if not the paralysis, of social democratic action in Europe, because of disagreements and poor collaboration, has shown how important transnational cooperation has become for national parties. Programmatic innovation and effective cooperation in a European (and global) context of reduced programmatic autonomy is a puzzle that contemporary social democratic parties are called upon to resolve. As both these targets are difficult to achieve, pessimism is justified.

Notes

- 1 A part of this text was written in French. I wish to thank Gregory Elliott who has translated it into English. I alone, though, am responsible for any weaknesses that remain, especially in those parts of the text that were written directly in English.
- 2 According to Stefano Bartolini (2005b: 2), 'political and systemic integration have been the two main contributions of political parties to modern politics'. I adopt a slightly different terminology here.
- 3 This dimension is largely neglected by specialists on political parties. More generally, the issue of party government is not the preferred subject of research on parties. Among the small number of exceptions, see the comprehensive study by Peter Mair (2008). Mair shows that party government remains strong, although some of the conditions for its maintenance are slipping away. In this work, Mair, though a researcher who is very familiar with European issues, neglects these divergent institutional realities (party government at national level and its absence at a specifically European level).
- 4 The impact of Europeanisation (and globalisation) undermines the generally accepted thesis that the partisan 'change' is attributable to an alteration in the balance between the function of representation and the function of governance, in favour of the latter. Today, analysis of the 'crisis' of parties would gain in relevance by switching perspectives: it is the decline in parties' governmental capacity (a deficit of governmental effectiveness) that reduces their social representativeness (a deficit of social support), and thereby deepens the discredit of the party organisations.
- 5 A formula used in a different context by Jon Elster (quoted in Pappas 2006: 13).
- 6 These terms are taken from Richard Dunphy, who distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' reformism (2004: 5–6).
- 7 Unquestionably, it is the Commission, more than any other institution that displays a tendency to depoliticise decisions (Alliès 2005: 165).
- 8 *Neue Mitte* in Germany and Third Way in Britain, *Gauche Plurielle* in France.
- 9 The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) represents, however, a kind of 'welfare policy for farmers', while the common regional policy represents a welfare policy for territories (Demertzis 2005).
- 10 The term 'programmatic elites' is taken from William Genieys (2008).
- 11 For a general and comprehensive survey of the impact of EMU on domestic social models, see Featherstone (2004).
- 12 'National policy is severely restrained in its problem-solving capacity, while European policy is constrained by the lack of intergovernmental agreement', wrote Fritz Scharpf (1996: 15).
- 13 Although the majority of European leaders who contributed to the renewal of the European dynamic came from the ranks of the centre-right, the transition from Euro-pessimism to the Euro-euphoria of 1989–99 owes much to French socialists. On the important role of President Mitterrand and Jacques Delors, see the detailed analysis by George Ross (2001 and 2009).

- 14 81 per cent of workers voted 'no' in the French referendum on 29 May 2005 (see Perrineau 2005: 241–2). This massive negative working-class vote, in a period of decline in working-class culture and political cohesion, indicates the profound frustration among the lower classes in relation to the EU.
- 15 An aspect of social democratic 'modesty' concerns its political contribution within the EU. The influence of social democracy on the process of European construction and on EU policies is perceptible but 'minimal' (see Ladrech (2003: 112–24); Ladrech (2000); Kulahci (2003); Lightfoot (2006)).
- 16 In relation to social democratic organisations, the thesis of amplification also seems pertinent in accounting for the strengthening of the role of the party leader and the party elites vis-à-vis the rest of the organisation. Nevertheless, the organisational change induced by European integration has been 'limited and patchy' (Aylott *et al.* 2007: 208).
- 17 Despite its neo-liberalisation, social democracy has not turned its back on the logic and politics of solidarity; and it continues to defend left-wing values, albeit redefined (Stjerno, 2004).

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