

Future challenges for the renovation of social democracy*

*‘European Social Democracy must come up with an encompassing project of renewal, a project that is able to meet today’s challenges and that appeals to a heterogeneous majority of the population’
(A. Pfaller, December 2009)*

The recent context of this multiple crisis –financial, economic, social and environmental– has immersed capitalism into a process of deep transformation in modern societies. Under these circumstances, the first challenge that European social democracy needs to face up to is, precisely, taking advantage of this situation as an opportunity to reflect thoroughly and find adequate responses to the real current and future problems. These responses to the crisis must necessarily be complex, so it proves crucial to properly isolate them, make them operational and explain them accordingly, especially to fight the vulnerability of a part of left-wing voters –working classes and, in particular, those with low education and scarce resources– who have been the most severely affected by the devastating effects of the crisis.

The possible evolution of the prevailing paradigm through the combination of social justice, economic dynamism and social modernization must inspire an ambitious agenda for social democratic reforms, undertaken around three main interrelated categories.

1. Values and principles: loyalty and resizing

The inherent values of social democracy are still in force under the current situation. Therefore, since they have not lost validity and applicability, they just need to be reaffirmed as reference principles to direct political action. At the same time, it is possible to update and resize some aspects, include new ones or give priority to certain objectives to effectively respond to the changing reality.

The first of these values is the search for equality. Its application consists not only in correcting inequality, which has been widening over the last decades, but also in positively promoting equality of treatment and opportunities. It is necessary to actively engage in the fight against any form of discrimination –for ethnic, religious, conviction, gender, sexual orientation/identity, age or disability reasons–, all of which, despite being protected by the European communitarian Law, still persist as a cause of social segregation. On the other hand, in the last years, some national laws and initiatives¹ have recognized equality of

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¹ Among them, the Law for Effective Equality between Men and Women of 2007 and the Strategic Plan for Equality of Opportunities 2008-2011 are noteworthy.

opportunities in employment, education, promotion as well as in work conditions to make progress towards real equality. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to revise the existing policies in order to assess their compliance with these norms, the permanence of factors which were not counteracted as well as the emergence of new social demands.

In turn, the Welfare State has become an indisputable achievement. Therefore, we must defend its consolidation with a broad network of public services, especially in two fundamental areas, health and education, in order to narrow inequalities. In addition, education has become a key sector in the new knowledge society, which requires a better skilled workforce, labor flexibility and mobility. In any case, the reinforcement of the Welfare State as a collective achievement cannot be taken for granted nor make us forget its protection by social democrat positions. Moreover, beyond mitigating and rescue measures in times of crisis, it is essential to make progress towards an agenda for an alternative socio economic paradigm.

Similarly, efforts are also needed to keep social policies for the sake of cohesion and social justice as a distinctive feature of the social democrat approaches to promote the access of the underprivileged to socioeconomic welfare. Among such policies, the guarantee of suitable economic security levels for middle classes must be included together with employment expectations and future development. In close relation with these approaches, solidarity remains a rising value to face the accentuation of individualistic behaviors and the predominance of competitiveness and consumerism, with a short term vision. Besides, the neoliberal growth model prompted the polarization of middle classes between those who are better-off and those who are not, causing a lack of expectations for social mobility among the latter.

Among the various forms of equality, gender equality is crucial because until no decisive progress is made in this direction we will not achieve full social development and there is still much room for improvement. It is necessary to rise women employment rates², effectively favor work-life balance, equal access to executive positions, non-discrimination in salary and very specially, the promotion of a deep social and cultural change to definitely banish disrespectful behaviors towards women. Another group that requires special attention is that of immigrants, aiming to prevent populist forces from making use of fear against them in times of uncertainty. This can be feasible through the implementation of broad measures to foster tolerance, education for diversity and social integration.

The resolute defense of civil, political and socioeconomic rights entails the development of efficient protection mechanisms and the extension of rights and freedoms to various social groups, where appropriate. Social democracy, as opposed to other ideologies, firmly advocates for citizens' participation in order

² According to the estimate of some experts, raising the level of women's employment in Spain to the level of that of Scandinavian countries could account for 15% increase of the GDP.

to facilitate their inclusion in decision-making processes through administrative transparency, social dialogue and institutional accountability.

In the midst of this adverse situation, the social democrat movement reemerges to inspire prosperity based on solidarity, in sheer contrast with conservatism and the upholding of outmoded and exclusive social privileges. This direction wagers clearly for an optimal combination of economic, social and environmental sustainability. Sustainability in its three aspects means dynamism, a step forward and an alternative with future and potential to achieve welfare for the next generations through the implementation of public policies that effectively redistribute resources and results.

2. Policies and instruments: adaptation to a changing situation

Regarding policies and instruments to develop such values, these must be flexible enough so they can be reviewed and, in this way, to adequately adapt to a changing situation.

Therefore, efficient management is in growing demand. Social democratic parties are expected to increase their credibility as good managers of the economy. This is not a trivial issue since socioeconomic results are set up as determinant factors of perception and social support.

From a social democrat viewpoint, the crisis has highlighted the fact that the State still plays a determinant regulating role to avoid the excesses of the – financial, economic and labor– market. Nevertheless, the exercise of such authority calls for supranational coordination. As a matter of fact, there is a pressing need within the EU to agree on incentives and economic sanctions, stimulus as well as corrective elements; all these reforms are necessary to attain sustainable development.

On the other hand, keeping investment in public key sectors such as infrastructures, health and R&D, turns decisive in order to make progress towards economic, social and environmental sustainability; for example, with better conditions for sustainable good quality jobs generation. This task is the responsibility of the government at all levels –national, regional and local– in their corresponding fields of competence, whose actions must be undertaken methodically in coordination. At the same time, it is not possible to decrease the level of social protection if we wish to achieve economic and social development that is founded on solidarity and social cohesion. The social component of public expenditure becomes a crucial guarantee of social mobility.

A step further in the welfare State is the so-called *Dynamic State* as an actor that sets off new instruments to cover new risks generated by change, increasing their preventive nature, but also their active role in sharing positive externalities and supporting sustainable development.

Clearly in accordance with and as a complement to what precedes, the social democrat project should not renounce to the implementation of democratizing reforms from and within social and political institutions which, besides positively affecting opening-up, transparency and the control of excesses of power, will earn it greater recognition and support from citizens.

However, all these objectives cannot be successfully attained without social and stable alliances with other agents belonging to several groups –green, students and pacifist movements, neighbors, associations, NGOs, social service and development aid providers, etc.–. Therefore, it proves essential to restore and strengthen such links. In particular, collaboration and consensus within the triangle formed by policy-makers, civil society and the private sector can give decisive and constructive impetus to boost the situation. The organization and the reinforcement of civil society, together with public-private cooperation as well as the joint involvement of trade unions and business organizations become substantial elements in the economic restructuring process, lifelong training of workers and the adaptation of the productive activity to a new sustainable model.

3. Discourse: reformulation for communication and mobilization

However, the existence of robust ideological values and their combination with active policies and a forward-looking approach will not suffice if they are not accompanied by a clear message and a strong and reliable leadership from European social democracy. Both the message and leadership will need to address generational change-over, in order to communicate with social bases, and achieve mobilization.

By a reformulation of our discourse that makes it appealing to a wider share of the population, which is based on strong theoretical foundations as well as able to deal with the more pragmatic aspects of citizens' concerns, we will contribute to fighting disillusion, social apathy and political disaffection, especially among the younger generations. It is vital to do the utmost to provide a new impulse and send an encouraging message to generate illusion anew, by transmitting values that get through to citizens.

For this, we must start with a good account of the real situation, draft a good message, very well articulated, interpretative, explanatory, purposeful and distinguishing. The argument must coherently set the objectives pursued and present without affectation the policies that we consider necessary to achieve them. Only in this way can we demonstrate that we are facing up to the social change trends –crisis, globalization, individualism, demographic ageing, environmental problems, etc. – with a future plan that is convincing.

The presentation of the values, the agenda and the new challenges that social democracy faces aim to reach an increasingly heterogeneous audience. For this reason, the discourse must be set within cognitive frameworks for collective

reference. The use of political marketing techniques and, exceptionally its adaptation to the digital era, with continuously emerging formats and scenarios –websites, emails, blogs, forums, videos, content syndication, podcasts, social networks, mobile phones etc.–, can contribute to the expansion of the message and permit a specialized direct communication with the citizen-Internet user as well as with new increasingly demanding and interactive audiences.

Finally, let's note that European social democracy is faced with a broad renewal process to satisfy the demands resulting from the social changes and the new socioeconomic challenges that the *Third Way* failed to tackle. This movement contributed to blurring the borders between conservatism and social democracy, thus presenting us with additional challenge. The agenda of social democrat reforms stems from the reaffirmation and the validity of the values that identify the social democratic movement. These are resized in some aspects and are completed with a firm future wager on prosperity and three-folded sustainability –economic, social and environmental–. Secondly, policies and modernization programs adapt institutions and mechanisms to changing conditions while keeping the protection level to mid-low income classes. All this requires, ultimately, the reformulation of the discourse to favor communication and social mobilization. In short, the reforming social democrat ideology is still prevalent as a reference to support a gradual and progressive transformation of our societies based on the fundamental criteria of equality and social justice to make progress towards a new socioeconomic paradigm.

Irene Ramos Vielba, Head of the Area of 'Politics, Citizenship and Equality' of IDEAS Foundation.