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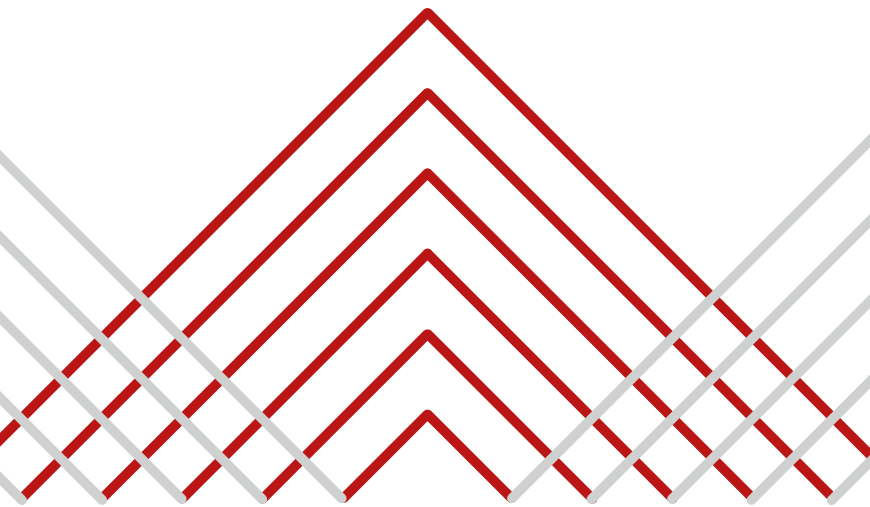
Progressive Ambition: how to shape Europe in the next decade



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PROGRESSIVE AMBITION:

how to shape Europe
in the next decade

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Editors:
A. Schieder, L. Andor,
M. Maltschnig, A. Skrzypek

FEPS project coordinators: A. Skrzypek,
C. Guedes

English language editor:
Rosalyne Cowie
Design, layout and printing:
Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR

Logo and cover design:
Les Marquisettes (V. De Wolf)

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PROGRESSIVE AMBITION:

how to shape Europe in the next decade

Edited by:
Andreas SCHIEDER
László ANDOR
Maria MALTSCHNIG
Ania SKRZYPEK

RI RennerInstitut
European Parliament

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Konstantin VÖSSING

Social democracy between progress and conservation

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

Abstract: The article develops the argument that social democracy has changed from a party of progress to a party of conservation. I argue that this transformation has its roots in the 1970s, and that it intensified during the multiple crises of the past 15 years. Electoral appeals and policies of European social democratic parties during this time were by and large reactions to massive external change designed to conserve prior achievements under extreme pressure. Based on this analysis, I outline the suggestion that social democracy should become a party of progress again, and I show how this can be done by telling a story of progress through the image of building a house together. The article concludes with a discussion of what to keep in mind in different national contexts when switching gears from conservation to progress.

Kew words: Progress vs conservation, a house metaphor for a party, collective action, ability to take sides, convincing narrative

Social democratic parties were born as harbingers of progress. To reform, improve, and move forward used to be the core of their political identity. The most apparent and lasting achievements of the social democratic drive for progress are perhaps the inclusion of workers into democratic institutions[1] and the expansion of the modern welfare state.[2] However, since the 1970s, social democratic parties have gone through a change, and the change has intensified under the pressure of multiple crises during the past 15 years. The change is clearly visible, but it has neither been fully appreciated nor called by its proper name.

Scholars, practitioners, and observers of social democracy talk about the changing socio-demographics of social democratic support, most importantly how the party has grown old.[3] They also talk about social democracy's resistance to embrace new issues, be it the post-materialist concerns of the 1970s or questions of identity in the 2010s.[4] And sometimes, commentators talk about the unwillingness of social democratic parties to engage with new economic developments, be it digitalisation, artificial intelligence, or universal income experiments.

I would argue that the choices social democratic parties have made since the 1970s (and their perception by citizens) are an expression of a broader change in party identity. *Social democracy, once a party of progress, has become a party of conservation.* The transformation of social democracy into a party of conservation has its roots in the 1970s, but it has intensified and reached new heights during the past 15 years. The development is not all-encompassing, of course, as social democrats continue to propose and implement a wide range of progressive policies. It is a dominant tendency, sometimes visible in policies of social democratic parties, often in their electoral appeal, and most often in their public perception (which can be unfair).

With that disclaimer in mind, I will further develop the argument that social democratic parties have become forces of conservation in the following second part of this chapter. In part three, I suggest that social democracy should become a party of progress again, and I show how this can be done by telling a story of progress based on the image of building a house together. I conclude in part four with a discussion of what to keep in mind when switching gears from conservation to progress.

1. Social democracy has become a party of conservation

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social democracy advocated for economic progress through socialism and political progress through democracy. All social democratic parties shared these goals as well as a notion of progress that borrowed heavily from the religious concept of salvation. Economic exploitation combined with less than full political inclusion in all (and heavy repression in most) industrialising countries explain the wide appeal of quasi-religious promises of *progress as a road to salvation* through socialism.[5]

One emblematic image of progress during this period is the rising sun, the promise of a bright future on the horizon that is there for the taking (see Figure 1). The extent to which social democratic parties used this image and emphasized salvation rhetoric varies between countries. The quasi-revolutionary type of social democracy (for instance, in Germany) used it more than the evolutionary type (for instance, in Britain). However, as Figure 2 illustrates, the quasi-religious notion of progress captured by the image of the rising sun was universal; it appears even in Canada, where social democrats pursued a pragmatic evolutionary approach in an environment that was more inclusive than most other industrialising countries.

Figure 1. Social democratic progress as quasi-religious salvation (Germany, 1919).

After their formative periods during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social democratic parties increasingly embraced an earthlier vision of progress. The new vision was more policy-oriented, more evolutionary, more reformist, and more pragmatic. It entailed a *mechanical view of progress* that sustained and reflected the transformation of social democracy into an evolutionary[6] and reformist[7] political party. The visual epitome of mechanical progress is the cog wheel, which tirelessly moves machines forward (see Figure 3). By propelling

Figure 2. Social democratic progress as quasi-religious salvation (Canada, 1933).

Figure 3. The mechanical view of social democratic progress (Norway, 1949).

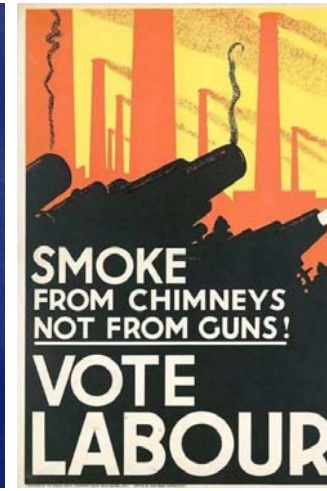

Figure 4. The mechanical view of social democratic progress (Britain, 1935).

machines, the cog wheel facilitates the satisfaction of human needs for work, income, sustenance, and consumption. It propels history in the direction of a better future, making it the perfect representation of the mechanical view of progress.

In social democratic images of mechanical progress, the cog wheel is accompanied by representations of chimneys (Figure 4) as well as integrated ensembles of factories, logistics, administration, transport, and production, in which one (metaphorical) cog wheel is perfectly aligned and integrated with the others (Figure 5). While the rising sun and the quasi-religious view of progress for which it stands are intertwined with the achievement of fundamental political and economic rights for workers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the mechanical view of progress is closely connected to the golden age

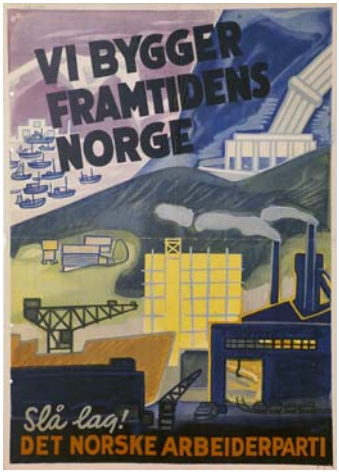

Figure 5. The mechanical view of social democratic progress (Norway, 1945).

of welfare capitalism from 1945 to the 1970s. It represents an image and the requisite policies of progress that emphasise the benefits of technology, the satisfaction of material needs, and the creation of insurance against risk and adversity. During this time, social democrats turned the idea of progress into practice by establishing (and expanding) the modern welfare state.

For a party that was born under the banner of progress and that managed to transform the idea of progress into policies, social democracy has become curiously averse to progress since the 1970s. This is not to say that social democratic parties have abandoned progressive policies. In addition to a progressive socio-economic agenda, social democracy also promoted socio-cultural progress during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s by advancing democracy, inclusion, and tolerance for diverse lifestyles. Then, social democracy pioneered the integration of economic and ecological concerns during the 1980s and outlined an agenda of technocratic progress under the banner of the "third way" during the 1990s. Moreover, in many specific policy areas, even seemingly unlikely candidates such as digitalization, social democrats continue to develop, propose, and implement progressive policies.

However, already during the 1970s, internal opposition to socio-cultural change in some social democratic parties was indicative of a critical view of progress. Contestation of the idea of progress in-

tensified when social democrats developed first ecological and then technocratic agendas during the 1980s and 1990s. Eventually, the idea of progress was all but abandoned as the dominant party line. Social democrats became defenders of the welfare state and economic prosperity rather than purveyors of progress, and social democracy changed from a party of progress into a party of conservation. One reason for why this has happened is arguably the fact that the welfare state really has been under attack from different sides and another reason might be that defending the welfare state has become the one issue on which disparate party factions can still agree.

The transformation from party of progress to party of conservation has become particularly apparent under the crisis-ridden circumstances of the past 15 years. Politics and policies of European social democratic parties during this time were by and large reactions to massive external change, designed to conserve prior achievements under extreme pressure. First, the financial and economic crises of the 2010s threatened the architecture of private and public finance and the very core of the welfare state in the most strongly affected European countries. Social democratic parties responded by standing the middle ground between strict austerity and the populist backlash against it. While objectively convincing as a policy agenda, the social democratic response abstained from projecting positive improvement. It emphasised conservation of the status quo under difficult circumstances, and it led to electoral losses, the rise of populism, and stalled programmatic development.

Second, the covid crisis between 2020 and 2023 prompted the deployment of a massive amount of public resources to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on health and economic activity. Social democratic parties supported restrictive anti-covid measures. Whenever possible, they made efforts to protect the most physically and economically vulnerable and to apply principles of social justice to

the covid response. This clearly made a difference in many people's lives. However, it only contributed marginally to clarifying the unique programmatic agenda of social democracy to the public, and by its very nature, the covid response was about preventing harm rather than pursuing progress.

Third, the crisis of physical integrity unleashed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine kills European citizens, and it threatens the very survival and security of many more across the European continent. Social democrats support and, in many cases, actively advance the military and political response of NATO and the EU and their member states, in some cases (most notably Germany, Finland, and Sweden) as a complete reversal of prior convictions and commitments. These policies are urgently necessary, and I would argue that they also contribute positively to programmatic development. However, by its very nature, the investment in defence, security, and reconstruction is designed to preserve the physical status quo and prevent future negative impact. It is not about improving peoples' lives compared to what they used to be before the war.

Fourth, the ongoing and intensifying climate crisis destroys people's livelihoods, and it threatens the mode of production entrenched in Western industrial societies. Social democratic parties endorse and pursue climate action while highlighting the needs of workers in carbon-dependent industries and the importance of socially balanced climate change policies. Their approach to climate change is consistent with their response to the financial crises and the covid emergency, but the political impact of this approach (on electoral politics and political competition) in connection with the climate change debate remains to be seen. What is clear already is the fact that climate mitigation as well, by its very nature, is not about improving people's lives. It is geared at preserving a physical status quo and preventing future harm and disruption.

2. A new story of progress

I believe that social democratic parties should emphasize their role as parties of progress again. Before discussing the intricacies of such decisions in different national circumstances, I would first like to make a suggestion for what a social democratic story of progress could look like, in broad strokes. The story that I think social democratic parties can tell is the story of *progress as building a house together*. I believe that this story and the image on which it is based have desirable properties as an electoral strategy, but most importantly, they stand for a story that I personally would like to hear from social democratic parties. Sebastian Jobelius and I previously argued that social democracy needs to become better at listening *and* more convinced of its mission.[8] Listening should be used to better understand the problems and ideas of neighbours and fellow citizens, but not as a tool for pandering. Instead, listening and learning allow social democrats to develop better policies and communicate their plans and ideas more effectively.

Social democrats, both politicians reporting input from their constituency and political operatives citing the latest survey results, often talk about how something *must* be done (or something else *cannot* be done) because of public demand (and the allegedly unassailable evidence they have for it). Not only is the evidence necessarily selective, flawed, and to be treated with caution. Much more importantly, an approach that only panders to (one's own perception of) the latest trends can suppress the ability of social democrats to tell a story of what they want. Listening is critical, and social democrats need to become better at it, but they also need to tell more stories of what they want and fewer stories of what they think others want to hear.

The story of progress as building a house together is a story and an image that appeal to me and that I would like to hear from social democracy. In this story, people who have faced adversity work to-

Figure 6. Progress as building together (Denmark, 1947).

gether for a common goal. They cooperate for progress, not only for the better future it promises but also for the benefits of working together in the here and now. Building a house together creates value and satisfies fundamental social and economic human needs. It shows the benefits of work and the importance of it, but it also represents a different idea of how we want to work. The image of mechanical progress from the post-war period captured by the factory and interconnected logistics emphasises progress at the system level, and it treats individuals as part of an integrated machinery. The image of building a house emphasises the individual level and the interaction of individuals in completing a critical task together. It conveys a positive view of technology, but one that submits technology to human needs.

There is precedent in the history of social democracy for using the image of collaboratively building something, as the examples from Denmark (image 6), Switzerland (image 7), and Norway (image 8) show. The new story of progress and the new image of building a house are similar but different. Not only do they emphasise more explicitly the intrinsic benefits of the process of working together (as explained above). They also highlight diversity and inclusiveness. Building a house is a project for everyone, not because some are forced to work with others, but more than that, because the project needs the skills and experiences of everyone. In this image, social democracy

Figure 7. Progress as building together (Switzerland, 1942).

Image 8. Progress as building together (Norway, 1936).

does not have to make choices between old and young voters, conservation and progress, or security and future. Building a house leads to progress (and embodies progress), and it needs a diverse set of skills, dispositions, and experiences.

Typical social democratic appeals are often combinations of two stories for two disparate social groups (connected by little more than a grammatical conjunction and moral appeals to social cohesion), such as innovation (for the liberal middle classes) and social justice (for the traditional social democratic constituencies). However, when someone is telling two unrelated stories, often neither one of them is very memorable nor convincing, especially when they contradict one another. By contrast, the story of progress as building a house that I have in mind does not distinguish the dynamic people that want progress from the

static ones that need to be carried along (just because this is social democracy, after all). The story of building a house treats everyone as a valuable contributor. Questions of security and insurance against risk can (and should) be woven into this story – not as an unfortunate obligation, but as part of the investment into progress, the present, and the future that is required to build the house and build it well.

3. When and whether to switch gears from conservation to progress

The focus on conservation during the past 15 years was reasonable policy-wise and adequate politically. However, an agenda of conservation and defence contradicts the programmatic core of social democratic parties as agents of progress and it carries the risk of further undermining the electoral viability of social democrats, especially among younger generations. Moreover, there is a strong normative argument to be made that progress should come in a social democratic shade. A focus on conservation might be necessary in specific historical periods, but social democrats should have the ambition to do more than just conserve.

Ralf Dahrendorf argued in 1983 that the social democratic century was over because social democracy had achieved its mission of political and social inclusion.[9] This view is based on a view of political achievement that emphasizes specific policies and institutions, specifically voting rights and the welfare state. However, while specific policies and institutions are clearly important, they should be judged in the context of a broader view of the need for social democratic action. From a value-based point of departure, social democracy's mission is never over for as long as there is room for improving the implementation and performance of social democratic values, most importantly liberty, justice, and solidarity.[10] Voting rights, the welfare state, and other

established policies and institutions play an important role in achieving these objectives, but they should not be the ultimate measure of accomplishment.

Interestingly, by sticking to a focus on conservation, social democrats would prove Dahrendorf right that social democracy has completed its mission and now has nothing left to do than to defend it. However, I would argue that the social democratic century is only over if social democracy thinks of its mission as one that is specific to certain institutions and policies, such as the welfare state. If social democrats think of their mission as one that is about promoting values, the mission arguably is never over, as it always faces new challenges.

To revive the social democratic mission (and to stay electorally viable), it is time for social democratic parties to present themselves forcefully as parties of progress again (with the requisite policies, strategies, and messages) after more than a decade in crisis response mode with a focus on conservation. The pragmatic pursuit of conservation, the shared experiences of defending accomplishments, and the successes in crisis management are assets and foundations (rather than contradictions) of a new agenda of progress. Both the crisis response of the past and a renewed focus on progress would be indicative of the ability of social democratic parties to expertly understand their environment and seize opportunities to improve people's lives.

When switching gears from conservation to progress, it is critical to keep specific national circumstances in mind. An immediate switch might be beneficial in some cases but premature in others. For instance, there are national differences in the experience and perception of crisis, variation in the policy record of social democratic parties, as well as variation in public demand and the composition of the social democratic electorate that need to be considered. In some countries, social democratic parties were in government, while in others they were in opposition for all or most of the past 15 years. All of that mat-

ters for the decision of whether (and how) to switch gears from conservation to progress. However, even more importantly, there needs to be an appetite for progress and a desire to tell a story about it. As I argued above, social democratic parties should tell their own story with more conviction. So, quite naturally, a story of progress (whether represented by the image of building a house or something else) requires a national party that is convinced of that story and the image on which it is based.

I became convinced of the importance of telling a story of progress (even or especially in the face of adversity) during a visit to Warsaw from 11 to 13 May 2023. The trip was organised by FEPS as part of the Next Left Focus Group program, and it allowed participants to meet a wide range of (then) oppositional politicians and political operatives from the entire democratic spectrum. One of the many inspiring conversations was with Marcin Duma, CEO of IBRIS (Institute for Social and Market Research). Marcin told us about the appetite that Poles have for progress, and he used a naturalist painting of a depressed, rainy, and desolate countryside scene to illustrate not how people in his country are currently feeling, but rather what it is that they actively wish to leave behind. I would imagine that this mood is quite widespread all over Europe, and that a story of progress and the image of progress as building a house together might be a good way to describe to voters how social democratic parties imagine a better future after difficult times.

Figures

Figure 1: Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany), poster used for elections to the National Constitutional Convention in 1919; "Wählt die Mehrheits-Sozialdemokraten" ("Vote for the majority social democrats").

Figure 2: Cooperative Commonwealth Federation; image used on several occa-

sions, including the "Regina Manifesto" in 1933 and a brochure published by the Saskatchewan section in 1939.

Figure 3: Det Norske Arbeiderparti (Norwegian Labour Party), poster for parliamentary elections 1949; "Vi viser vei" ("We show the way")

Figure 4: British Labour Party, poster issued for the General Elections of 1935; on record at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 5: Det Norske Arbeiderparti (Norwegian Labour Party), poster for parliamentary elections 1945; in the top part, "Vi bygger framtidens Norge" ("We are building the Norway of the future"), and in the bottom part, "sla lag" ("join up") and "Det Norske Arbeiderparti" (The Norwegian Labour Party"); artist: Dagfin Peikli, photo: Arbark.

Figure 6: Socialdemokratiet (Social Democracy), Denmark, poster for parliamentary elections 1947; in the top part, "Loft i flok" ("Lift together"), and in the bottom part, "Socialdemokratiet" ("Social Democracy").

Figure 7: Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz (Social Democratic Party of Switzerland), poster issued in 1942; in the top part, "witer baue am soziale Züri" ("continue to build the social Zurich"), and in the bottom part, "wählt Sozialdemokraten" ("vote social democrats"); artist: Carl Scherer, photo and copyright: Museum für Gestaltung Zürich.

Figure 8: Det Norske Arbeiderparti (Norwegian Labour Party), poster for parliamentary elections 1936; in the top part, "Ungdommen skal i arbeid" ("The youth need work"), and in the bottom part, "stem med det Norske Arbeiderparti" ("Vote for the Norwegian Labour Party"); artist: Sverre Ørn-Evensen, photo: Arbark.

Endnotes

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