

A light gray world map is in the background. A red square is placed over Zagreb, Croatia, with a thin black line connecting it to the 'Zagreb' text in the header.

From Humanist Marxism to the Future of Social Democracy

A Summary of the Conference's Discussions

FILIP MILAČIĆ

November 2018

- The major trends in European political systems are moving in a perilous direction. A rise of populist, radical-right political parties is looming above the overall decline of Social Democracy
- Since a generous welfare state with universal health, education, and pensions has undoubtedly improved the lives of generations of Europeans, the future of Social Democracy is a topic definitely worth reconnecting with the ideas of the famous Korčula Summer School
- The journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School were expressions of Yugoslav academia's will to be a part of global debates, offering a radical examination of the current problems facing Yugoslav socialism and the contemporary world
- The focus is now set on two important nodes: firstly, a discussion on the framework in which a decline of Social Democracy occurs; secondly, the reasons for its decline and on proposals for the "way out"
- The current crisis of Social Democracy and major challenges to democratic politics require answers to new major controversies, such as the conflict between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism
- The political remedies for contemporary crisis must be sought in innovative new institutions and discourses which may be created by cherishing the original motto of the *Praxis* and Korčula Summer School, a "relentless critique of all existing conditions"

In the last few years, if one would talk about the tectonic shifts in European political systems, one would usually refer to the rise of the populist, radical-right political parties. Yet we have also been witnessing another shift in European party systems, which is at least as significant as the rise of populism. One of the pillars of European democracy in the post-Second World War world – Social Democracy – is in danger of collapsing. And while in the year 2000, social democrats or socialists were part of the government in 10 out of the 15 countries that made up the European Union at the time, today they are part of only six EU governments out of 28 member state governments, viz. in Germany, Sweden, Malta, Portugal, Romania, and Slovakia. This number could soon be lowered to just five since the participation of the Swedish social democrats in the new Swedish government is very uncertain. Such a negative trend is naturally accompanied by the decline of the average vote share of the main social-democratic parties, which now amounts to less than 25% in Western Europe.

Due to the realisation of its founding ideal – a generous welfare state with universal health, education, and pensions – through which the lives of generations of Europeans were significantly improved, the future of Social Democracy is a topic that was definitely worthy of trying to reconnect with the ideas of the

famous Korčula Summer School. The summer school was organised by the publishers of the journal *Praxis* and was a meeting place for philosophers and social critics across the entire world, thereby including many prominent participants such as Ernst Bloch, Eugen Fink, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and Henri Lefebvre. The topics of their debates were, among others, the meaning and perspectives of socialism, freedom and equality, utopia and reality. As pointed out by Snježana Prijčić-Samaržija from the University of Rijeka, Yugoslav academia did not want to be isolated and the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School were thus established.

Accordingly, in the first panel of the conference, the last living member of the editorial board of the *Praxis* journal Žarko Puhovski talked about the legacy and current relevance of the Korčula Summer School and *Praxis* group today. In the remaining two panels, and in the spirit of the Korčula Summer School's debates regarding the future of the Left ideology, the conference, then, contributed to the issue of the future of Social Democracy by focusing on two important nodes: firstly, a discussion on the framework in which a decline of Social Democracy occurs, marked by democratic malaise; secondly, the reasons for its decline and on proposals for the “way out”.



Participants of the conference

The role of the Korčula Summer School and the Praxis Group

As already mentioned, the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School were expressions of Yugoslav academia's rejection of its periphery status, and of its will to be a part of global debates. Belgrade was considered as the third centre of the world and, therefore, it was perfectly natural for the group to discuss something in Yugoslavia, which was not a problem in Yugoslavia. In order to name concrete aims and the role of *Praxis*, Puhovski cited the response of Gajo Petrović, the editor-in-chief, to the question 'Why Praxis?', which appeared in the editorial of the very first issue of the journal in September 1964. In it, Petrović openly stated that the goal of the new journal would be the "relentless critique of all existing conditions" and hence a radical examination of the current problems facing Yugoslav socialism, the contemporary world, and man. In other words, *Praxis* was to be a philosophical journal that is not only philosophical, but that "debates about the current problems of Yugoslav socialism, the modern world, and man." Finally, the issues to be discussed "go beyond the frameworks of philosophy as a profession. These are the issues that confront philosophy, science, art, and social action".

As further emphasised by Puhovski, *Praxis*, at first, appeared as a child of social – and above all party – turmoil from the beginning of the sixties of the last century. The beginning of the journal's work was thus a part of the public debate – as far as this was allowed – in preparations for the eighth Congress of the League of Communists. As Puhovski further noted, the members of the first journal editorial team were, unquestionably, members of the League of Communists and, quite undoubtedly, confident that their task is to continue and deepen (primarily philosophical) criticism of Stalinism on which the Yugoslav regime's legitimacy was based on that period. This point was also made in the discussion by Božo Kovačević from Dag Hammarskjöld University College of International Relations and Diplomacy, who argued that anti-Stalinism was a common denominator of *Praxis* and League of Communists.

Yet as Puhovski argues, the real political role of *Praxis* was simply a matter of the public activity of a group of philosophers and sociologists who, immanently, introduced suspicion of "the leading role of the League

of Communists of Yugoslavia in ideology". For the first (and last) time thus the League of Communists was "attacked" from the left. In the words of Rudolf Rizman from University of Ljubljana: "After Djilas there was a desert in critical thinking and then *Praxis* came". This was, according to Puhovski, particularly visible in 1968, when the world tide of student protests came to Yugoslavia, and rebellious students (especially in Belgrade, where the demonstrations were strongest) obviously considered *Praxis* to be their (alternative) inspiration.

Therefore, it would be wrong to consider *Praxis* as the proponent of liberalism. As argued by Puhovski, liberal political practices in the community were demanded, but without bearing liberal values in society. The ideas of being wealthy and private ownership were despised. Liberalism was considered a tool that makes the capitalist world nicer. Few of them accepted party pluralism, and only then after they were victims of the system. Accordingly, *Praxis* clearly set itself against the social basis of liberal practice, which was the liberalisation of the 1965 economic reform market. Nevertheless, Puhovski pointed out that the original Marxian ambition of social intervention and the departure from philosophy pushed this orientation into the political context as a liberalising element of the Yugoslav reality. However, as already depicted above, the liberalising effect of *Praxis* was certainly not in line with the intentions of its main actors.

Despite that, the fact that the above mentioned prominent world philosophers and sociologists (mostly, but not exclusively, of Marxism) participated in the Korčula Summer School and collaborated in a journal, had, for a while a certain protective role in relation to the Yugoslav government. But at the same time, Puhovski argued, the emphasis on internationalism of *Praxis* was also a challenge for the international position of the Yugoslav state, which sought to maintain its delicate non-alignment position.

Eleven years after its establishment, the official Yugoslav news agency TANJUG announced on February 20, 1975, the news that "the *Praxis* journal, which has been criticised by socio-political and scientific circles for many years now, ceases to exist". Even though this was not the truth, it was a public sign that the journal's days were over. The same thing happened with the Korčula Summer School, which

existed in parallel with the journal. This was executed in a very subtle manner by the official refusal of its co-financing, without which the School was not possible. This was not only a decision of a financial nature, but also a political sign for all the relevant local actors not to allow any type of such activity on the island.

Despite the depicted role of the Praxis Group, Puhovski claimed, that after 1990 one version of the interpretation of the recent past became dominant, according to which the Communists were opposed only by nationalists and by those who did it “from within” and then immediately after the break up joined the nationalists. All others were perceived as pro-regime individuals or groups. In other words, the critic from the left was regarded as a mere family dispute.

Is contemporary democracy in crisis?

In the last few years there has been a lot of a talk about the alleged crisis of democracy. In the introduction of the second panel, Žiga Vodovnik from University of Ljubljana quoted John Keane and elaborated on three dimensions of the crisis of democracy: representation, participation, and legitimacy. In his comment, Dieter Segert from University of Vienna shared Keane’s pessimistic view and emphasised the problem of an oligarchic reading of democracy. According to him, democracy is also in crisis in its core, namely in Western Europe.

But what are the concrete symptoms of the alleged crisis? A few were named, such as the alienation between politicians and the people, a decrease of trust in institutions, lower turnout at the elections, and the rise of populist, radical-right political parties, which

favour majoritarian democracy. All non-majoritarian institutions, which contest the populist, radical-right’s claim that it alone speaks for the ‘true people’ are delegitimised as obstacles to the will of the people. Yet as emphasised by Claus Offe from the Hertie School of Governance, the will of the people is always plural, despite what populists say. Offe furthermore pointed out that the Right is mystifying the past and wants to restore it (“make America great again”). It is based in the past, i.e., it emphasises roots and focuses on majority identity issues. Offe sees this development as a reaction to the Left’s focus on minority identity issues. As a result, we now have identity based political conflicts, which are “either or” and cause deep polarisation.

Then the question of what should be done to counter this depicted development, arose. Segert argued that direct democracy, as a method to assess the will of the people, is not an alternative. We should strengthen the cultural resources for participation (education) and democratise institutions. Democracy also needs responsible and better informed citizens. However, it is very questionable if social media can contribute to this ambition. Social media may empower citizens but it leads to a deeper polarisation since there are no more “gate keepers” to decide what can be published or not, and the likeminded can more easily organise, which is not necessarily a good thing.

Yet Dejan Jović, from the University of Zagreb, raised his doubts if people are really interested in participating in political processes since power does not only lie in the hands of the politicians, but somewhere else. Donald Sassoon, from Queen Mary, University of London, answered that if real power were somewhere



The last living member of the editorial board of the *Praxis* journal **Žarko Puhovski**



Discussion about the The Legacy and Current Relevance of the Korčula Summer School and Praxis Group Today

else, then “Brexit” would not have happened since the elite was predominantly against it. Offe acknowledged Jović’s remarks by claiming that what you can accomplish by voting is indeed perceived as low. However, in line with Sassoon’s argument, Offe argued that corporations and supranational institutions do not tell as how to think, rather they set the agenda, which is also very important.

However, Wolfgang Merkel, from the Social Science Centre WZB Berlin, offered another perspective on the debates about the alleged crisis of democracy. He agreed that we are at a crossroads, but also argued that this may not be a real crisis. The state of democracy is much better than it was 50 years ago and we should put this debate in more of a historical context. Social movements from the 1970s have led to more rights for minorities and significantly improved the quality of democracy. With respect to the alleged crisis of representation, Merkel claimed that this is much more a class question since the lower third is not represented, additionally posing the question whether or not the lower third has ever been represented? This is clearly different in the case of the young and educated, who actually monitor democracy as a part of the NGO scene.

Regarding the rise of the populist, radical-right, Merkel also asked if this is to be regarded as a threat to democracy, or is democracy showing again its ability to adapt by closing the gap in representation, which is caused by established parties, with new

parties. Merkel also pointed out that we should be more precise when we talk about democracy, thereby adding that voter turnout actually increased in the last two years. For Vodovnik, however, this is only the consequence of the successful political mobilisation of the enemies of democracy.

Reasons for decline of SD and the way out

Already, on the first day of the conference, Wolfgang Merkel asked the question if the crisis of Social Democracy is the fate or a consequence of choices. In other words: is Social Democracy the victim of its own successes, and does its decline mark, in words of Ralf Dahrendorf, an end of the social democratic century? Or is its decline caused by the wrong choices and, therefore, could it have been prevented?

In an answer to this question, Wolfgang Merkel, in his presentation at the third panel, claimed that it is a *mélange* of both. On the one hand, as fate, Merkel regards globalisation and the dominance of markets, a neoliberal EU, the secular decline of catch all parties, and the decline of trade unions. Part of his argumentation was disputed by Rizman, who argued that globalisation is not gravitation, but a human invention.

On the other hand, Merkel pointed to the following wrong choices: Third Way mistakes; the disempowerment of the nation state, i.e., the belief that the national state



In the spirit of the Korčula Summer School’s debates regarding the future of the Left ideology

is obsolete; the overestimation of civil society, i.e., the belief that civil society can perform functions instead of the state; and a cultural/identitarian turn whereby progress is increasingly understood from a cultural perspective. The strong and damaging focus on minority identity issues was also emphasised by Offe; the fragmentation of the left political space, whereby the Greens, the Left, and populist radical-right emerged as direct competitors. In this context, Social Democracy lost voters to left parties amid economic reasons, to ecological parties amid cultural reasons, and to populist, radical-right parties amid both economic and cultural reasons. This new development regarding the populist, radical-right parties was in particular emphasised in the discussion since they are increasingly becoming new workers' parties. Even though they used to have predominantly neoliberal economic programs, now they are in favour of the welfare state, but only for "true" members of the nation. Being a "true" member of the nation thereby usually means having the "right" ethnic and cultural background. In this context of the loss of the votes from the working class, Philippe Marlière, from University College London, emphasised the fact that the Social Democracy missed a great opportunity after the financial crisis. It is now discredited and must give a proper responses before it is too late.

In his presentation, Merkel also pointed out the so-called electoral dilemma of social-democratic parties, which was already emphasised by Adam Przeworski in 1985. The electoral dilemma namely implies the question of whether social-democratic parties should focus on the middle class or on the working class. This was always an important question since middle class voters are less interested in redistribution. However, this dilemma became pivotal after the emergence of the new cleavage in the party systems, which Merkel labeled cosmopolitanism (winners of globalisation, who are in favour of the opening of borders) vs. communitarianism (losers of globalisation, who reject the opening of borders). The former are in general members of the middle class while the latter are members of the working class.

For Donald Sassoon, who commented on Merkel's presentation, we are currently witnessing the old world crisis, i.e., the crises not only of Social Democracy, but of its enemies as well. The nation state is not in charge anymore since many of its functions, such as public spending, regulation, and taxation depend on global

activities. This fact has been hurting Social Democracy since the nation state enabled it to prosper. Moreover, according to Sassoon, every initiative that appears to be old is losing. In line with this argument, he further claimed that the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, was perceived as anti-establishment political actor and that is precisely why he gained so many votes in the last parliamentary election. In other words, a new world is appearing and we do not know how it will look like. According to Marlière, this new world will mean more fragmentation and more coalition governments.

Social Democracy thus finds itself in a very difficult situation. It lost its profile and has no compelling economic strategy. Is there a way out of this? Merkel answered this question positively, and offered the following measures: a move to the left in terms of socio-economic policies; a re-strengthening of the (nation) state; democratising and "socialising" the EU; a democratic social vision against the hegemonic libertarian utopianism of silicon valley; dealing with the housing question; labour market re-regulation; a balance between cosmopolitan and communitarian identity; forming a progressive majority of all those marginalised; and an open and fair society with controlled borders.

Merkel's argumentation that social-democratic parties, in order to stop the declining trend, need to take into account the emergence of the new cosmopolitanism vs. communitarianism cleavage, caused interesting discussions since many participants asked whether social-democratic parties really need to choose between these opposite poles. Offe disagreed by saying that supranational cooperation is a functional imperative and, therefore, one must convince people that it is good for them to cooperate beyond borders. Marlière also criticised Merkel's standpoint by saying that a pro-immigration policy must be maintained. In his answer, Merkel argued that the cleavage is there whether we like it or not. This, however, does not mean that social-democratic parties must choose between "either or", i.e., between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, but that they have to position themselves along the new cleavage and thereby have in mind both groups of voters. In other words, Merkel argued that there is a tradeoff and social-democratic parties need to find a balance between the nation state and supranationalism, as well as between minorities and the majority.

About the author

Filip Milačić obtained his PhD from the Humboldt University, Berlin, and was thereby a fellow of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. He worked at the University of Montenegro and University of Rijeka. He is the author of the book *Nationalstaatsbildung, Krieg und Konsolidierung der Demokratie: Kroatien, Serbien und Montenegro* (Nation-State Building, War, and Consolidation of Democracy: Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro) (Springer: Wiesbaden, 2017).

Imprint

Published by:
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Regional Office for Croatia and Slovenia, Praška 8, HR 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

For the Publisher:
Dr. Max Brändle, E-mail: max.braendle@fes.hr
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