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A Different Government is Possible!

Beyond Europe's Centre-Left Governments

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1 A new strategic situation

1.1 The short social-democratic decade and the return of the conservatives

After the German parliamentary elections in 1998, thirteen of fifteen governments of the then member countries of the European Union were led by social democrats; Spain and Ireland were the only exceptions. Within a decade, this picture has been reversed completely. The centre-left in Europe is everywhere on the defensive.

Self-criticism on the part of the left of its last twenty years is the necessary point of departure for real renewal. For the life goals, the political convictions and the style of politics of the most important social democratic leaders were no longer rooted in the values of the left, the results of their politics no longer had any connection to leftist goals, and the cooperative base for a common left formation had disintegrated. To put it bluntly, *this left no longer knew what it wanted. It no longer wanted what it could do. It could no longer do what would have been good for itself and for the country.*

The political opinions of a whole generation of leftist leadership, too, weren't. Lest we forget, there was the joint paper which Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair presented to the European Union in 1999, at the pinnacle of leftist rule. In it, they announced that economic success and successful employment policy were dependent primarily on a "framework that allows market forces to work properly". The social democrats had, they went on, for much too long overstated the "weakness of the markets", while underestimating their strengths. And, they explained, "the reduction of non-wage labour costs" – i.e., the employers' co-payments for old-age, unemployment and health insurance – "and a more employment friendly tax and contribution structure that looks to the future is therefore of particular importance." And Peter Mendelssohn's statement that "we are utterly relaxed about some people getting filthy rich" was certainly led *ad absurdum* at the point when employees had to pay for the orgy of money-making by others.

The results of this "modern" economic policy in Germany are the focused expression of the miserable plight of a once centre-left politics:

- a growing gap between the lower and upper pay levels: Germany leads the pack in low paid workers in continental Europe, with a share of 22 per cent;
- a level of inequality which climbed to US standards within just a few years: 14 per cent are income-poor, while the upper ten per cent were able to increase their share of net assets from approx. 45 to over 60 per cent between 1993 and 2007;
- stagnating real wages, a declining pension level, stifled domestic demand, the lowest net investment quota of all highly developed countries, and reduced economic growth, with strong export of capital;
- a drop in the wage ratio from 72 to 64 per cent between 2000 and 2007, with a simultaneous reduction by half of the investment quota: thus, contrary to promises, the growing profits and fortunes were not productively invested, but were used for speculation, thus contributing considerably to the financial bubble;

- No real ecological turn-around.

The most depressing aspects of the new lack of concern of social-democratic or even green politics include a readiness to join actively in the new wars of the post-communist era. If the official federal government terminology on Afghanistan is often criticized, let us recall Green Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who announced in connection with the NATO attack on Yugoslavia: "We aren't waging any war; we are offering resistance, defending human rights, freedom and democracy." Bombs, he added were "necessary to stop the Serbian SS."

The result of such policies was ultimately the disintegration of the German left's *ability to cooperate*. Of the once close alliance of SPD and trade unions on the one hand, and of the Greens and the social movements on the other, little remained but bitterness from internecine fights and much alienation. With the demonstrations against-Hartz IV (the social cut-back programme) a mass movement arose against an SPD-led government for the first time since the NATO twin-track decision for missile re-armament after 1980. The formation of the Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice (WASG), a child of left trade unionists, left forces in the SPD and remnants of the independent left, and including those who turned away from the Greens over the Yugoslav War, became an expression of the fact that the societal left no longer had a political counterpart. With the Left Party, formed by the merger of the WASG and the PDS, a third force is now active in the party spectrum which is considered part of the broader left. But every organization and movement concentrated on its own immediate goals – inevitably narrowly. Since the power of fundamental change has been lacking, the disputes have largely been structurally conservative, or stuck in bare negation – a "no" lacking any credible opposite "yes".

That incapacity is an expression of the defensiveness of the left in organizing an actual broad social movement against the crisis policies first of the CDU/CSU (conservative) and SPD coalition, and now under the conservative-liberal government. The crisis of capitalism hit a left which lay in ruins: deeply de-legitimized, frustrated and stymied. As Hans-Jürgen Urban of the Metal-Workers' Union wrote: "Actually, a socio-economic systemic change should be in order. But for that, a functioning actor would be needed, a left willing and capable of action – and none is in sight, far and wide. The left, rather than sucking political honey from the historic confirmation of its critique of capitalism, is displaying symptoms of paralysis."¹ However, this description of the situation in 2009 could now change in 2010 to 2012. From the fragmented, defensive, structurally conservative societal left, an integrated and offensive force for transformation could emerge, and overcome the split between *Realpolitik* and "radical resistance" with a commonality of "radical *Realpolitik*".² To do so, however, the left would have to re-invent itself anew, with great courage and determination.

¹ Hans-Jürgen Urban: Die Mosaik-Linke. Vom Aufbruch der Gewerkschaften zur Erneuerung der Bewegung.[The Left Mosaic. From the upsurge of the trade unions to renewal of the movement] http://hans-juergen-urban.de/archiv/literatur/2009_mosaik_linke_bfduip.pdf, p. 2.

² Michael Brie (ed.): Radikale Realpolitik. Plädoyer für eine andere Politik. [Radical *Realpolitik*. A call for a different politics], Berlin 2009.

1.2 The crisis in the crisis

With the series of crises since 2008, precisely European capitalism has entered into a phase of instability. Particularly because it has developed a balance of capitalism, democracy and the welfare state over the course of a century, it is particularly endangered, for this balance is ever less possible to uphold in an era of financial market capitalism. Strong European capitalism has become a weak link in the chain of global financial market capitalism. Here, the various options of further development seem to collide with particular force: an authoritarian-imperial path to development, a social-democratic multilateral financial market capitalism, a de-civilized capitalism, and emancipative alternatives.³ The rapid change amongst ruling factions, between conservative and social-democratic neo-liberalism, the unstable alliances designed to secure power, the forced incongruence of methods and goals, and especially the ever darkening horizon which contains no more promise, but only the threat of a long march through times of social cutbacks, unemployment and uncertainty – all these herald an epochal break: Business as usual is becoming impossible.⁴ The policy of ever more torturous “muddling through” is reaching its end. But this will only come true if this politics is brought to an end. It won’t be enough – not any more – merely for the rulers to no longer be able and the citizens to no longer be willing. What is needed is feasible alternatives which also have power on their side, the power of conviction, the power of co-operation and the ability to act and, the power of realistic creativity.

Organic societal crises⁵ can be compared with theatre dramas. They consist of *five acts*: (1) the immediate outbreak of the crisis, which profoundly shakes the existing stability and makes extraordinary emergency measures necessary; (2) a crisis within the crisis, in which it becomes obvious that the measures taken will not be able to reduce that instability, but will only sharpen it further; (3) the break-up of the ruling block and the formation of alternative approaches; (4) the experimental pursuit of new, often contradictory development paths; and (5) the implementation of a new mode of development on the basis of a new societal alliance, a ruling alliance.⁶

The years 2008 and 2009 constitute the first act of the present crisis. This first act of a long drama was characterized by the eclectic co-existence of contradictory measures, which was to prove impressively to be a recipe for our rulers to keep control of the crisis.⁷ Monetarism and Keynesianism, European rescue packages and competition between countries, a Green New Deal and a cash-for-clunkers scheme, debt brakes and stimulus programmes, pay restraints and tax gifts, subsidized short-time work and investment pump-priming, sectoral minimum wages and stagnating pensions – all were implemented at the same time. A

³ Cf. In greater detail, Brie, Michael, Op.cit., p. 30 ff.

⁴ Klein, Dieter: *Krisenkapitalismus. Wohin es geht, wenn es so weitergeht* [Crisis capitalism. Where it's going if it keeps going like this]. Berlin 2008.

⁵ Cf. Re the term “organic crisis” and its application to the present development: Candeias, Mario: *Passive Revolutionen vs. sozialistische Transformation*. RLS papers 2010

(http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/rls_papers/rls-paper-Candeias_2010.pdf).

⁶ Cf. Exemplarily for the New Deal in the USA: Fraser, Steve, Gerstle, Gary (eds): *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1999.

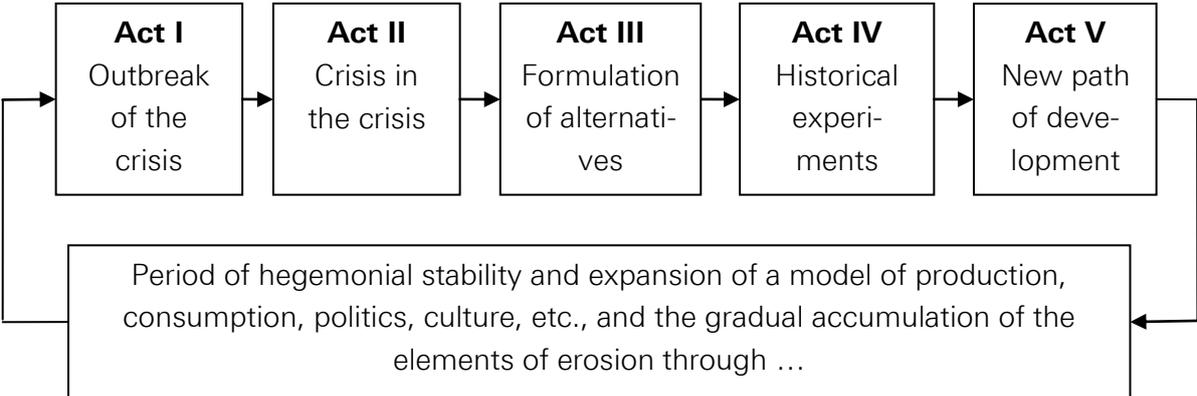
⁷ For a detailed discussion of these strategies: *Die Krise des Finanzmarkt-Kapitalismus* [The crisis of financial market capitalism].

block was forged uniting export-oriented corporations and banks, central structures of the organized workforce and the broad middle strata. This block was held together by a growing national debt and very contradictory policy approaches. Its foundations had already been laid after the electoral defeats of the social democrats and the general discrediting of neo-liberal policies, at the latest since the middle of the nought decade.

The ability to move in different directions at the same time is declining, however. The present crisis coalition is based not on a productive regime of accumulation; the regulatory means being used are completely contradictory; the interests are diverging; and the resources needed to purchase a consensus are being consumed further with every new crisis. The proud masters of the crisis have turned into the pitiful slaves of their own crisis management. "Business-as-usual" appears ever less probable.

The shock effects of 2010 in Europe have raised the curtain on the second act of the crisis, and first of all changed the perception of the situation: It has become undeniable that no improvement can be expected in the foreseeable future on the basis of neo-liberal policies. Yet the recipes put forth by the prevailing political forces against the crisis amount to trying to cure the plague with cholera. The economic and financial crisis has now become a crisis of the nation-states and of the European Union. The nation-states, the lenders of last resort, are themselves endangered – financially, economically, socially and ultimately, too, politically. It is getting ever more difficult to satisfy competing interests. That however will break apart the coalition of forces which had secured stability in the first phase of the crisis. The "crisis in the crisis" is at hand.

Graph 1: The five acts of an organic crisis



Two scenarios are relatively probable in Germany. On the one hand, the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out that the ruling block will somehow manage to hold the crisis coalition together for two or three years. The reserves for this have not yet been completely used up, and more importantly, no attractive feasible alternative has yet emerged. Without such an alternative, even a rather bad situation can last. On the other hand, drastic changes can no longer be ruled out. The instability has grown so great that a rapid change of policy on the part of certain power groups and a reorientation is becoming ever more probable. Further shocks could bring the structure of political stability to collapse. The chances for alternative

approaches are increasing; the gains which members of the ruling block can hope for if they abandon ship are growing larger.

2 Contours of a new hegemony-capable left

“A crisis is a productive condition,” Max Frisch once said. “One must only remove its smack of catastrophe.” The art of accomplishing this “only”, and of doing so primarily for the disadvantaged in society, is the art of leftist crisis control. That is what we need today.

The disintegration of neo-liberal hegemony will not inevitably be replaced by a left counter-hegemony; it will have to be created consciously. Both hegemony and counter-hegemony are contexts, relationships of different elements. There is neither a social nor a political protagonist with whose interests the interests of all other disadvantaged groups “ultimately” coincide. As Laclau and Mouffe have argued, this means “that the relationship between social agents can only become more democratic to the extent than they accept the particularity and the limitation of their claims; that is, only to the extent that they accept their mutual relations as being indispensably permeated with power”⁸. Cooperation presupposes the differences and the self-interests of the participants and does not subsume them – but it can and must change them. Only by a transformation of interests based on solidarity which is at the same time productive will they acquire societal force, and escape from their subordination to the supremacy of the ruling circles. Only in a context in which they change themselves will they acquire the power to be effective, and can they hope for results which would not have been attainable alone. Counter-hegemony has three decisive conditions: (1) new alliances; (2) transformatory projects; and (3) cooperation-capable left forces with a realistic power option, with the strong democratic participation of the citizens.

2.1 New alliances

Class societies are pyramids of property and power. However, precisely because the burdens are so unevenly distributed, those on top need a certain degree of consensus around their rule. But how can this be ensured when the divisions in society are so forcefully aggravated? It was long supposed in the Marxist-inspired tradition that large social groups (classes and strata) had fixed interests, which they expressed more or less adequately, but that they could be hindered in doing so by “false consciousness”. However, the real contradictory nature of their social condition and the possibility of being able to take different roads make it possible for one and the same social group to pursue very different strategies, and in so doing, to concretely determine their interests in the first place. To mention only two examples: wage workers can seek to defend their interests through a nationalistically or even racially articulated defence against immigrants – and therefore vote for such parties as the Italian Lega Nord or the Austrian FPÖ, or else by developing a social state based on solidarity. Highly qualified women can be interested in maintaining a low-wage sector, so that such can be personally relieved of such tasks of reproduction as housekeep-

⁸ Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London, 2001.

ing and child care at minimal expensive, or else they can advocate highly qualified tax-financed public services.

Table 1: Socio-political milieus in Germany

Market-economy oriented middle strata	Established or upwardly mobile qualified and highly qualified people with middle to high managerial responsibility, especially in private industry
Social-libertarian middle strata	Groups in social, cultural and human-services oriented fields, as well as the cultural economy, with high-levels of education, largely based in the public or publicly-supported sector
Satisfied upwardly mobile	People with middle-level qualification who have achieved considerable social advancement and can practice a high degree of individual initiative, often craft professionals, or self-employed workers
Threatened core employees	Core groups of industrial and industry-related wage dependent people with mid-level qualification. threatened by restructuring and the crisis
Sub-proletarian groups	Modern discriminated groups, such as the unemployed, the working poor, etc., the so-called lower precariat
Traditional lower groups	People with low qualification, doing simple activities, often pensioners

Source: based on Neugebauer 2006 and simplified

The great majority of the population of Germany can, in a somewhat simplified way, be divided into six large groups (see Table 1). They are differentiated first according to their position in the social process of reproduction (the diagonal arrow pointing from bottom left to the top right symbolizes increasing access to property, assets and power). Depending on their place in this system, the social groups relate more positively to the social state, or tend to support “free markets” (the horizontal dimension); and are especially oriented toward individual self-determination (libertarian values), or to communality (vertical dimension) (Graph 2). The upper strata with a higher degree of access to resources are divided because they are active in either of two sectors: the private sector – i.e., business – or the more publicly-characterized state sector, in the socially, culturally and human services oriented fields. The first sector is represented by market economy oriented and moderately authoritarian outlooks. Competition and directives are their guiding principles. On the other hand, the second group have a rather libertarian and social-state oriented values. They know about the importance of negotiation and compromise. Those who are excluded from access to property, assets and power want a strong social state and have to some extent solidarity-based, communal or authoritarian, or even racist outlooks. These distinctions are frequently modified by such further factors as gender or age; political orientation changes accordingly.

To win majorities, three alliances are possible. Each group can be actively present in two or three alliances and see its interests represented there: (1) an alliance of the better-off, those who by qualification and position can have access to a relatively secure position and realize an above-average income; (2) a market-liberal authoritarian alliance; and, finally (3) a solidar-

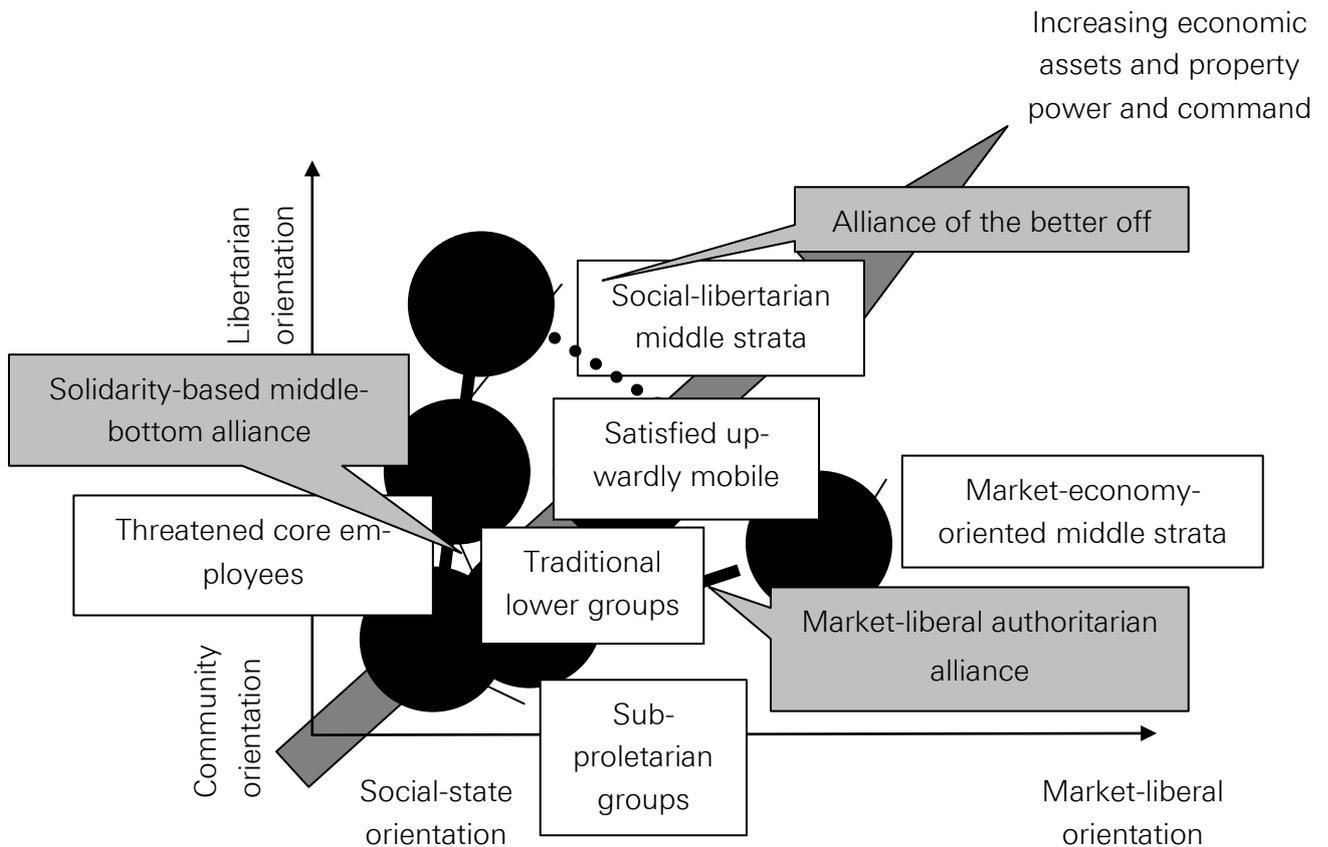
ity-based middle-bottom alliance (for more detail, see Brie 2007). None of these alliances is in a position to homogenize the various interests, values and goals it contains, but it must try to interconnect them differently in each instance. They are therefore also unstable and always contested. Since the social-libertarian middle strata tend to vote for the SPD, the Greens or in part for the Left Party, and the market-economy oriented middle strata tend to the FDP and CDU, the SPD and CDU must try especially to win over the bottom middle and lower social groups, if they want to become parties of government. If not, they need partners who have strong bastions among these groups. The party system forces them to not completely forget the social question.

The alliance of the better off is a class alliance of the ruling market-centred elites and the upper middle strata. Schröder and Fischer geared the red-green government to a politics of the *Neue Mitte* (new middle), which politically wrote off wage workers and the lower groups, and took the interests of the wealthy and of the “top achievers” as their guideline. The Greens’ “Green New Deal” project for a new social contract also exhibits the essential features of an alliance of the better off in the framework of ecological modernization.

The market-liberal authoritarian alliance unites, under the predominance of the same elites, the private market-economy oriented middle strata, and ties them to the strata of the upper-middle and the marginalized, who hope that by excluding others (immigrants, “free-loaders”, etc.), they can improve their own position and receive state support. The new conservatism in Germany, France and Italy aims at winning over the threatened sectors of the wage dependents and traditional lower strata for such a market-liberal authoritarian alliance, the hallmark of which is economic nationalism oriented towards the core EU countries. Competing for the same group are also the representatives of a “folk-nationalist anti-capitalism” (see Kaindl 2007).

A solidarity-based middle-bottom alliance would orient itself above all towards the interests of three groups: (a) the middle strata active especially in the public sector, but also as self-employed workers; (b) workers threatened by neoliberal policies; and (c) those affected by de-classing who are looking for solidarity-based solutions. They would need partners in that part of the political elites which, due to their anchoring in the state sector, wants to accommodate the general interest. This alliance would seek to tie together the various interests through entry projects of a social-ecological transformation.

Graph 2: Value Orientations and Possible Social Alliances



2.2 Transformatory projects

The situation of a structurally conservative individualization of defensive struggles can only be overcome by means of a common goal perspective which can provide all in common with better opportunities – be it greater social security, new development opportunities, or social advancement. Wolfgang Fritz Haug writes, with reference to Gramsci, “A class formation is ‘historically progressive’ thanks to its historical ‘productivity’, i.e., its life prospects thanks to the expansivity of a concrete political-economic regime which it supports, thanks to which ‘it advances all of society by not only satisfying existential requirements, but enlarges its leadership by the continual occupation of new industrial-productive areas of activity,’ and thus feeds the credible expectations of individual life perspectives.”⁹ In the following, I will very briefly examine several such approaches.

They are not representative of the entirety of the left, but they refer to new developments which differ considerably from those after 2005.¹⁰ The common origin of these concepts

⁹ Haug, Wolfgang Fritz: Hegemonie. In: HKWM, Vol. 6/I, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Cf. On the position at that time: Michael Brie: Segeln gegen den Wind. Bedingungen eines politischen Richtungswechsels in Deutschland [Sailing against the wind. Conditions of a political change of direction in Germany]. In: Michael Brie; Cornelia Hildebrandt; Meinhard Meuche-Mäker: *DIE LINKE. Wohin verändert sie die Republik?* [The Left Party. In which direction will it change the republic?] Berlin 2007, pp. 259 – 318.

was the 2009 Bundestag elections, and the efforts to introduce alternative positions into the discussion.

Let us take as an example the strategy “Germany 2020” developed by the SPD-associated Friedrich Ebert Foundation before the parliamentary elections. It is based on the approach of “social growth”, which is counterposed to neo-liberal growth policy, and is supposed to combine sustainability and justice. Securing demand and increasing productivity are central, but they are to be designed completely anew. This model too is built on four columns:

- **Increased productivity** through investment in education; free and universal qualified child care; special support for people with immigrant backgrounds; above average public investment, etc.;
- **Increased employment** by massive expansion of a strong public and private service sector with high qualifications, particularly in the areas of education and health; active labour market policies, and steps for improved compatibility of work and family life, etc.;
- **Ensuring domestic demand** by a more just distribution of income and an expansionist financial policy by the ECB, and a tax and wage policy coordinated at the European level;
- **Improvement in distribution** by adjusting pay to match productivity increases, and a growing wage share based on high employment, adequate minimum wages and tax relief for lower incomes.¹¹

This concept is also methodologically interesting in that it counterposes the “basic scenario” to a “social growth” scenario, and arrives at the conclusion that the considerably higher growth rate engendered by the social reorientation of economic policy should make possible a very low unemployment rate, a balanced national budget and considerably greater participation of the poorer sectors in prosperity, with shorter work weeks (Table 2). The horror scenarios of the collapse of the social security systems is continued *ad absurdum*, since social growth would also lead to a lower social insurance rates, even with improved output. While the lower and middle strata would profit to an above average degree from such social growth, the upper twenty per cent, too, would not be negatively affected, thanks to the overall increase in income.

¹¹ Eine soziale Zukunft für Deutschland. Strategische Optionen für mehr Wohlstand für alle [A social future for Germany. Strategic options for greater prosperity for all], *Wiso Diskurs*, FES, February 2009.

Table 2: Comparison of different scenarios of economic development

“Business as usual” vs. a “policy of social growth”¹-

Key figures for the basic scenario and for the “social growth” scenario

	Basic figures, 2008	Basic scenario, 2020	“Social growth” scenario, 2020
Per capita GDP, in thousand €*	29.5	34.3	37.9
Productivity per hour, in thousand €*	52.0	67.8	83.5
Employees in thousands	40,424	37,487	42,116
Effective annual working hours per employee, in h	1,318	1,309	1,064
Employees in social-insurance-paying jobs, in thousands	28,579	24,340	30,522
Unemployment rate, in %	7.6	9.3	1.3
Real domestic demand, in billion €*	2,157	2,414	2,760
Private consumption per capita, in thousand €*	15.7	17.8	19.8
Real government demand, in billion €*	419	488	547
Net export rate, in %	9.9	11.2	8.3
Wage rate, non-adjusted, in %	66.8	60.6	67.6
Real net annual wage, in thousand €*	16.1	17.0	21.0
Income share of the poorest fifth, in %	8.8	8.1	10.3
Income share of the richest fifth, in %	37.0	38.6	35.2
Government expenditure ratio in %	39.1	36.6	36.3
Aggregate social rate in %	38.4	42.4	33.2

*1995 prices, Source: Bartsch, K. et al. (2009)

The common key elements of these and other strategies of left forces in Germany are (albeit with differing weightings):

- the centrality of socio-ecological reconstruction
- the development of a highly qualified service sector with strong public funding in the areas of education, health care and old-age care
- the strengthening of the codetermination by the state and by staff in business enterprises (economic democracy)
- the strict regulation of the financial markets, their subordination to the real economy, and the strengthening of public financial institutions, as well as a massive redistribution from top to bottom and from the private to the public sector
- an orientation towards employees in the industrial and especially the service sectors, and towards disadvantaged societal groups, such as young people, the unem-

ployed, pensioners and people of immigrant background, and also towards the sectors of an ecological transformation and information society.

All these approaches assume that the result will be a different model of development which can overcome the present scarcity of resources for social and ecological tasks and for global solidarity. These are conceptions of the expansion of economic efficiency in the area of services and resource productivity, particularly on the basis of socio ecological transformation. The implementation of these concepts requires *first*, a willingness to accept a relatively high level of national debt, so as to be able to initiate and consolidate the reconstruction process, and to realize rapid social effects. Only in this way can the social basis for such a transformation be secured. Like the New Deal or neo-liberalism, the socio-ecological transformation will have to write an uncovered cheque on the future for its initial phase. *Second*, tough intervention in the relations of distribution is inevitable – both for financial reasons and out of consideration for legitimacy and justice. Wage levels in Germany must be rapidly raised by concerted action, primarily in the service sector and for the lower wage groups, and excess fortunes made accessible to the public good by a moderate level of expropriation (“millionaires’ tax”, “death duty”, etc.), and an effective restriction on speculative transactions. The enormous economic, political and cultural influence of the financial elite and the rich must be overcome. *Third*, the coordination of economic and social policy, and of tax and wage policy, would be necessary, at least within the European Union and especially between France and Germany. Corridors should be created to compensate for imbalances of exports over imports, bind social payments to the development standard – a higher standard would mandate the expansion of the welfare state – and link wages to a country’s relative productivity. The Europe of negatives, of mere market integration,¹² is at an end. It has become obvious that the European Union cannot be had without an economic, social and environmental union. *Fourth*, the left must talk about the enormous possibilities which a socio-ecological reconstruction would provide for living together in solidarity and for an emancipative way of life. Producing differently and living differently must stop being a threat, and become a hope. The real scandal is that we live beneath our human potential, that we constrict new technological and cultural potentials through the market and through consumerism. Today’s wealth condemns many to poverty and impoverishes humanity – through bad jobs, relationships without solidarity, the compulsion of the market, exclusion and precarity.

During this second act of the crisis, there are a number of entry projects¹³ which permit social and political protagonists to re-define their interests in the light of a possible new development path. A concrete alternative space is created, without which no real transformation is possible. But this space will remain only an abstract possibility, unless there is a fulfilment option. Only with the power to organize this space will a centre be created to which the various protagonists can refer.

¹² Karrass, Anne; Schmidt, Ingo; Huffscheid, Jörg; Deppe, Frank: *Europa: lieber sozial als neoliberal*. Hamburg [Europe: rather social than neoliberal], 2004.

¹³ On the concept of the initial projects, cf. Brangsch, Lutz: “Der Unterschied liegt nicht im Was, wohl aber in dem Wie”. Einstiegsprojekte als Problem von Zielen und Mitteln im Handeln linker Bewegungen [“The difference is not in the what, but in the how.” Initial projects as a problem of ends and means in the action of left movements], In: Brie, Michael (ed.): *Op. cit.* 2009, pp. 39 - 52.

2.3 Cooperation capable left protagonists, a realistic power option, and broad democratic movements

The trade unions and the social and political forces are dependent on a twin strategy of measured conflict and cooperation with the rulers, as long as no other option is recognizable. Protest and arrangement, all the way to participation and subordination, are unavoidable, if no change of direction seems possible. The gap between radicalism and political realism is widening. One and the same organizations follow contrary approaches in an almost schizophrenic way. Mobilization “from below” runs up against narrow limits, beyond such single actions as demonstrations against cuts in the social system or the G8 summits. Apart from the modest subcultures of convinced activists, which are held together by a high level of internal group dynamics, the willingness to act is determined by short-term indignation and recognizable chances of success. The potential available in Germany for the rejection of neo-liberal policies is therefore being unleashed only to a limited extent, due to the fact that the traditions of public protest are particularly weak here, and there are hardly any positive experiences. The “long march through the institutions” is the main path to political change in this country, and has at the same time repeatedly proved to be a dead end. Violence can emerge from such frustration.

Extra-parliamentary protest can only be effective if it changes the conditions of the protagonists within the political system, and be it as a credible threat of the strengthening of competitors, or of being voted out. There is thus no either-or alternative – extra-parliamentary or parliamentary; rather, there is only the question of designing it, of the *how*. As Albrecht von Lucke has formulated it: “One thing is certain: Without a perspective of formulation – which ultimately means an orientation towards government – voters who are actually sympathetic and potential coalition partners will succumb to the enticement of power. ... Without the connection of political ideas and concrete power options, the left wing faces political insignificance as a result of a structural inability to govern. That would spell the definite end of the social-democratic century.”¹⁴

Power options are always *also* governmental options. Especially when basic change and a change of direction in politics is at issue, the problem arises as to who is to bear the costs of such a transformation, including the costs of overcoming the resistance against such change. Only rarely are there privileged protagonists who are both powerful enough and have enough material interest in radical change that they are willing to bear these costs alone. Institutional reforms require the state to distribute the costs of a transformation broadly, and at the same time make long-term binding decisions towards which the behaviour of protagonists can permanently reorient itself. Even policies of “destructuring the state”¹⁵ presuppose a state as the instance which defines the line between state and society.

¹⁴ Albrecht von Lucke: Europa und die Krise der Linken [Europe and the Crisis of the Left], In: Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik, No. 7/2009 (<http://www.linksnet.de/de/artikel/24780>).

¹⁵ Entstaatlichung; lit: “de-state-ization”; usually, it means “de-nationalization”, but here, it refers more to pushing back the state in favour of grassroots self-organization, rather than capitalist ownership.

Cautious attempts are emerging from various quarters to explore the opportunities for an opening of the political agenda. Political crossover projects between parties are becoming popular, but are still far removed from options for political power. Trade unions and social movements are continually trying to test the reaction to a policy of resistance. The anti-nuke issue has demonstrated the mass support that can be mobilized for extra-parliamentary protest, if it can be seen to be able to influence policy effectively. What has not yet emerged however, is any broad, mutually reinforcing movement of movements. The interaction of party politics, trade unions, social initiatives and citizens has yet to become a common "Yes we can!" A social and democratic hegemony is possible, but not all the necessary conditions for it are yet present.

3 Outlook

The centre-left governments of the last ten or fifteen years were by and large governments based on neo-liberalism and financial market capitalism. To some extent, they tried to soften its effects – and were thus the "lesser evil" – or they endeavoured to slow down the policy of neo-liberalism. To some extent however, they became the virtual engines of the perfection of financial market capitalism. It was precisely then that they (1) inevitably undermined their own social base; (2) carried out projects which were in fundamental contradiction to the values of equality and social justice, as well as, often, of peace; and (3) split the left deeply and durably.

To the extent that the third act of the crisis is ripening, and that it is becoming inevitable that the course be set, the possibility of a new and different type of government is also becoming possible – a *left* government. It should contribute to starting on the way to a really politics of social solidarity, ecology and peace, based on a different economic, social and societal policy. The contours of such a politics are getting ever clearer.

The forces of the fragmented left must make up their minds: Are they convinced that a different politics is really possible? Do they have the courage to back a true change of direction? Are they ready to do everything necessary to ensure that the social and political alliances required for that purpose can be forged? Do they have the determination to themselves pay the price for such alliances, and not to overtax partners? Can they find a basis for cooperation beyond the "lowest common denominator"?¹⁶ After twenty years of an unbridled, destructive financial market capitalism, now is the time: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

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¹⁶ Cf. Michael Brie: Jenseits des kleinsten gemeinsamen Nenners [Beyond the lowest common denominator], In: *Neue Gesellschaft - Frankfurter Hefte*, no, 4/2010, pp. 46 – 48.