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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE NEW LEFT IN THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES *The case of the German Radical Left*

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ABSTRACT: The new form of the social and political conflict cannot be explained by the traditional categories of right and left, but it articulates to them on two plans, that of the establishment, intended like plan of the structured political conflict from the traditional actors, and that of the anti-establishment, in which new representations of politics emerge. The New Left is characterized by type of intermittent participation and new perspectives on mobilization inside the parties and the social movements. This type of parties differs moreover from the traditional ones left of the socialist and social democratic left in not arranging of organizations collaterals placed under the direction of the leadership of the same party. The mobilization that spontaneously assumes not conventional forms of active participation of the citizens, or is primed by the action of an associative network of which the same parties take part, than however does not monopolize the collective action. In this regard, the attention will be dedicated to the study of Die Linke: an anti-establishment party of the non-socialist German left-wing, heir to the communist tradition. The choice was affected to the German model because: 1) Germany is a country with a strong social democratic tradition, but 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the German political system identifies a new antagonist political party; 2) Die Linke represents an interesting case in the political landscape of the European radical left because is a one-party that gives up at the federation of parties to try to unify the political parties of German radical left-wing.

KEYWORDS: Political Parties, Cleavages, Crisis, Welfare State, Non-Established.

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1. Introduction

Beginning with the late 1960s the European left found itself faced with the processes of social change that progressively eroded the traditional class structures resulting from the process of industrialization. This led to a redefinition of values and issues that is still going on. Since these social changes play an active role in the development of those changes in the societies in which they operate, the perspective adopted here does not consider them as independent variables that play a role in the transformation of both right and left-wing political parties.

In other words, social and political changes are taken on as continuously interacting dynamics, with the one influencing the other. At the same time the varying interpretations of the forms taken on by the new politics must be discerned, with a redefinition of the contents, actions and actors of democratic politics. This includes the new left, as an inherent aspect of the development of the modernization processes of European societies. The passage from materialist to post-materialist values, the outbreak in the public sphere of political generations such as those of 1968 and 1977, the relevance of themes such as environmentalism, civil rights, women's rights, the dynamics that can be ascribed to the postmodern society, the transformation of the productive system of the post-industrial society, constitute an itinerary of the development of the new parties of the new left that is anything but linear and lacking in contradictions. A situation that varies from one country to another, on the basis of the actions of political entrepreneurs, in the Weberian perspective, who make the new interests and values politically relevant and active, organizing and representing them in the political system. In this sense, the discriminating factor in the emergence of social movements and parties of this type is the decision whether or not to participate in elections. The new left also relates in time with other phenomena such as the process of individualization, the reflexive citizenry and, more recently the creation of an anti-establishment type opposition, aimed at the various elite components of society and in particular of politics. The theoretical context regarding the evolution of the new left is there applied to an analysis of the German case, to verify how much and how the structure of the extant political opportunities in Germany have a bearing on the characteristic features of these parties. We therefore propose to consider the specific German institutional context and the choices made by the leaders of the PDS/Die Linke, as well as the social macro-processes, as key elements in our analysis.

2. Old and new social cleavages in contemporary democracies

Political parties are organizations that do not submit tout court to the structure of the political opportunities within which they operate. The parties actively participate in the relationship between social and political changes, not only in terms of how they adapt and react from an organizational and functional point of view, but by helping make the social cleavages generated in the various processes of democratization and modernization (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Lipset 2009) politically active. A closer investigation of the role of social cleavages and the modalities of their political activation by the elite and the leaders, allows us to take on the phenomenon of the new left-wing parties in Europe, in particular that of the German radical Left (dealt with in the second part of the article), inserting it into a process of change that developed in the Western societies at the end of the 1960s. As Flora notes, cleavages emerge in periods of crisis, as critical junctures resulting from the cleavage of a pre-existent equilibrium. As such they can assume the dynamics of revolutions and civil wars, on the one hand, or, on the other, of long-term structural changes (Flora 2002, 61). However, unless there is an action of politicization, the relevance of these cleavages with regards to the conflict they can trigger in a given polity remains unexpressed. In this sense Bartolini (2000) highlights the need for a process through which the rise and crystallization of a line of conflict in the society becomes politically active with political entrepreneurs mobilizing followers thanks to the organization and choice of the electoral contest. This is what distinguishes the birth of a party from other forms such as social or trade union movements.

The formation of the parties of the new radical left, and of the new extreme right, begins in the sphere of what has been a long process of unfreezing, with the progressive affirmation of post materialistic values, and the formation and the subsequent recent risk of the decline of the middle class. The new scenario appeared after 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the opposition between blocks, which played a decisive role in maintaining order and freezing the political system in the Western as well as Eastern European countries. While 1989 has been fully analyzed with regards to the evolution of the third wave of democratization, and of the parties and leaderships in the former Soviet-bloc countries, historical, political and cultural variables of this type have not always been adequately studied with reference to European politics. The so-called freezing hypothesis, the survival of the cleavages of the 1920s throughout the 1960s (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), still encountered in a more recent phase thanks to studies by Bartolini and Mair (1990), presents what is only an apparent paradox, with social conflicts that have already been solved occurring side by side with still operative

traditional political forms. While the political force of traditional cleavages is inversely proportional to their solution (Franklin et al. 1992), it is also true that the parties themselves in their capacity of modifying and neutralizing the new conflicts, as well as the historical consequences of the international cleavages brought about by the conflicts of the Cold War, play a part in these dynamics. In line with Luther and Muller-Rommel's analysis (2002, 7-10), the challenges the processes of social and political change present to the traditional parties correspond to the following six macro-processes: socio-economic transformations; political values and cultures; the structure of political communication; the relevant issues and transformations of the political agenda; the role of European integration; the reforms that have modified the constitutional systems. In this perspective the emergence of the parties of the new left cannot be ascribed simply to the nature of the production system and changes in the organizational system of work but are also the result of more complex changes in values, with traditional parties that have long "protected" themselves from new cleavages and social conflicts, such as environmentalism and the demands of youth and feminist movements. Even so, in the advanced modern societies the evident absence of the "straitjacket to apply to society" by means of the political representation organized by parties of mass integration (Pizzorno 1996, 1028-1029) is not the end of the political conflict between interests and values. The emergence of the parties of the new politics constitutes one of the expressions of the process that increases the political conflict between social groups that no longer find themselves represented and the traditional parties, giving rise to a new level of conflict with those defined, on the one side, as the GAL parties (Green/Alternative/Libertarian) and, on the other, the TAN parties (Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2004; Viviani 2009).

The developments of the new left and the new right therefore make reference to a phenomenon that can fall under the broader heading of anti-establishment, or better anti-political establishment parties (Schedler 1996; Abedi 2004). In the advanced European democracies a cleavage is gradually created between one part of the society and the ruling class. This applies in particular to the political class, but the resulting phenomena are too often imprecise or superimposed, in particular in their anti-political, anti-party politics, populist concepts, as well as the tendency to identify the process of personalization of the leadership at the vertex of the new parties as tout court "charismatic" (Viviani 2015). In the first place the distinction must be made between these parties and Sartori's anti-system parties. The opposition of the latter does not come to the fore in a confrontation of the political and non-political establishment, but of the entire structure of the democratic system. In contesting its legitimacy at the roots, the entire institutional setup, and not only the political party system, is called into ques-

tion. Two different phenomena can be identified in the case of the anti-political establishment parties: opposition by the citizens to the dominant political class and the politicization of the new line of conflict by the new political entrepreneurs (Schedler 1996). The rise of anti-politics and anti-party politics can be ascribed to a general break in the pact of trust and political representation that, as Mastropaolo (2005, 72-73) observes, recalls formulas of “anti-parliamentarism” in the name of direct participation. We might also add, in the name of a principle of communitarian belonging anchored in the traditional values of identity, within which the populist parties can also be placed. In this context the politicization of the discontent is magnified by political variables such as corruption, the inadequate capacity of the institutions to face up to the government, the perception of a distant political class hostile to the citizens, whose political form can be ascribed to the rise of the cartel party. As early as the studies in the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century, sociological and politological literature has demonstrated the crisis not of the parties as such, but of the particular mass model (Ignazi 2012), with the decline in trust and attachment to parties, with a decreasing membership, with the increase in electoral unpredictability and the drop in electoral turnout (Dalton and Watteberg 2000; Luther and Muller-Rommel 2002; Mair and Van Biezen 2001).

The modalities that make the establishment/anti-establishment cleavage politically active and relevant once more call into question the various dynamics of relation and interaction between the mass-level and the elite-level of the area of protest. The crisis in trust and legitimacy in politics may not therefore automatically produce an apathetic withdrawal of citizens from participation in the public sphere, but can trigger a form of protest, a voice in Hirschman’s terms (1970), through the actions of the parties and of the anti-political establishment leaders. By means of this process the counter-elite manipulate the discontent of the citizens in an attempt to replace the traditional political elite (Poguntke 1996). The possibility of an institutionalization and cooptation in the system of the challenging actors by means of the traditional political plan (Bardi 1996, 359) however remains. Populism itself, as a particular version of the anti-establishment, can manipulate the anti-elite feelings of the electors, with a leadership that challenges the political class appealing to a plebiscitarian principle in the name of the unity and centrality of the “people” (Taggart 2000). While anti-party politics is the feature shared by the phenomena analyzed so far, it cannot be thought of as the product of the crisis of advanced democracies. Nor can anti-party politics be thought of in monolithic terms, for it is a composite including the general refusal of the party as actor responsible for the disintegration of the common good, the refusal of a particular party model, the refusal of a particular party system, and finally the party as redundant in

the post-integration mass society (Daalder 1992, 39). The anti-party feeling mentioned with regards to the anti-political establishment new left parties is therefore not a generic refusal of the party as an actor in democracy, but a reaction when faced with a self-referential system incapable of representing the new social demands. It has been turned into an alternative political force, weakly institutionalized as organization, with increasing importance given to leadership. This arrangement is shared, albeit with differences in its politicization, by the parties of the new left, those of the new right, the populist parties, as well as the outsider leaders who challenge the leadership of the mainstream parties from within (Mudde 1996), engendering a challenge of the dominant coalition, particularly after electoral defeats (Panebianco 1988).

3. The changes in the European left

The affirmation of the new politics constitutes a perspective of study which must take into account the various phases of the social changes previously observed, as well as the individual features of the political, cultural and institutional systems of each country. In this sense, any interpretation of the development of a “new libertarian left” (Poguntke 1987; Kitschelt, 1988, 1994) must keep in mind the different types of mobilization and organizational modalities adopted in each case. Speaking of parties as the result of a silent counter-revolution, of anti-political establishment parties of the new left, or of the forms of direct democracy, of participatory democracy, of deliberative democracy, allows for the creation, in the Weberian sense, of ideal types, although stopping short of trying to get them to coincide perfectly with the different typologies of the various European parties. In general, therefore, the common denominator is an “unfreezing” of the traditional cleavages. On the one hand this constitutes an incentive for the birth of second generation social movements and of new parties, committed on the whole to the promotion of single issues, and, on the other, can turn out to be a phenomenon with a limited electoral following but one that can give life to real flash parties (Kitschelt 1988, 195). As Poguntke observes (1987) the social basis of the parties of the new left, contrary to those of the new right, is to be found in the middle class composed of young people, of individuals with an elevated cultural and social capital, on the whole active in the service sector. It is no longer the expression of the productive processes of the industrial society.

Kitschelt (1988, 209-210) notes that parallel to the affirmation of the catch-all party (Kirchheimer 1966), an organization characterized by a process of de-ideologization and the absence of an electoral stronghold of a specific *classe gardée*, there is an op-

position by the new left parties to the protection of the corporative interests, promoted by financial and sectorial lobbies, as well as to the parties of the traditional left that are gradually becoming part of the governments, thus liberation new channels for expression and mobilization. This first type of new politics party does not necessarily emerge in correspondence to the phases of crisis of the capitalist system, but as a call for a new direction to give to the developmental dynamics. In this sense, Kitschelt (1988, 204) highlights the fact that in the European democracies and post-industrial societies the social movements and left-libertarian parties are deployed to denounce the risks human life is subject to as a result of the capitalist model of economic development, to affirm the people's right to self-determination in the choices they make in their private life, to promote a different democratic governance of social change. In other words themes extraneous to the traditional political representation, such as ecology, disarming, pacifism, the Third World, the revision of the capitalist economy (Poguntke 1987, 78-79), activate the political conflict, breaking down, or proposing to break down, the equilibrium of the socialist, social democrat or communist parties. The politicization of these themes does not come about as it does with the mass integration parties, where the territory was penetrated by a bureaucratic organization in line with the concentric circles described by Duverger (1951), and which were set at the center of a system of collateral association directly emanated by them. Political participation itself assumes intermittent and selective forms outside the parties, according to the model identified at the end of the 1970s with the passage from conventional/institutionalized forms to non-conventional/non institutionalized forms of participation. These included the signing of petitions, referenda, boycotting consumer products, sit-ins, wildcat strikes, pacific manifestations (but also demonstrations where violence was approved), letters to newspapers, the occupation of buildings, and other activities not promoted by political parties or trade unions (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Fuchs and Klingemann 1995).

The new libertarian left is based on a conflict of values and representance between the actions of the political class and the demands that come from a middle class that is in the process of being redefined and increasingly subject to a "relative deprivation", that is an inconsistency between the social and cultural status on the one hand, and the political status on the other (Davis 1959; Runciman 1966). Still another phenomenon to keep in mind is the process of the personalization of politics, in the sense of a progressive conquest of autonomy in the formation of individual political identities with respect to that of the group, and the creation of a direct relationship between the subject and politics (Cavalli 1994, 2001; Calise 2010). Associated with the new left, the use of the term personalization does not contradict the horizontal public nature of par-

ticipation, since the personalization of politics is not the same as the personalization of the leadership at the vertex (Cavalli 2001). The latter concerns the acquisition of power by the leader of the government or the party and which the militants of the new left tend to oppose, even if the leadership theme varies from one case to the other.

As previously observed with regards to the first parties of the new left, literature makes no reference to the need for the rise of a crisis. The context changes in the second phase of the new politics, both with regards to the parties of the new right and for the movements and parties of the libertarian and radical left. The political-international evolution subsequent to the fall of the Wall of Berlin, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, is progressively intersected by economic and financial crises, making the re-definition of the traditional welfare system necessary, and with the erosion of the middle class. In the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, sociological literature observed the effect on politics of the radicalization of the capacity of the individual to reflexively activate a "life politics" or a "sub-politics", recovering a centrality of the subject in playing (doing) politics beginning with daily life (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994). Subsequently the combination of phenomena such as globalization, the characterization of the principal parties as semi-agencies of the State, the economic and financial crisis, as well as the cession by the national governments of areas of intervention to international organizations, often of a non-majoritarian and technocratic nature as in the case of the European Union, constitute the foundation for the emergence of anti-establishment forces. While the anti-establishment cleavage, political or not, is a common feature of the parties of the new right, of the new left, and of the populist parties, there are also aspects and characteristics that do not overlap, such as different reactions to a shared phenomenon. In this sense Rosanvallon (2008, 2011) notes that the reaction of the new left is marked by the demand for a broader democratic participation and an empowerment of the civil society, substantiated in the activation of the "counter-democracy". The significance of the latter contrasts with a generic antipolitical reaction, since in the "counter-democracy" the citizen can not only express himself and give his opinion on governmental policies, but construct horizontal, unmediated, non institutionalized connections with other individuals, is thus empowered to monitor the political system.

As presented so far there is more to the allover picture of the opportunities for the development of parties of the new left, including their anti-establishment connotation. Just to what extent these institutions can influence the construction of social and political identities and the forms taken on by democracy (March and Olsen 1989) must be taken into consideration. The theoretical frame for the study of the evolution of the parties of the new left therefore has to be compared with the different routes taken by

one State or another. In this context Germany provides a unique historical-political example with regards to the evolution of the left. In the congress of 1959 at Bad Godensberg, the principal left party, the German social democratic Party (SPD), had already abandoned the ideological reference to Marxism. In 2007, in the non-mainstream German left, in addition to the Greens, another party related to the new left, Die Linke, the result of aggregating preceding extreme left parties, appeared. The specific nature of this political party can draw attention to the way in which the radical left can evolve. On the one hand, its features seem to differ from those of the classical left-libertarian party, on the other, characteristics belonging to the radical new left anti-establishment parties come to the fore. The case of Die Linke lets us evaluate how much the specificity of a particular historical, political and economic context, the evolution of the parties, the restrictions and institutional opportunities, the effects of the Fall of the Wall of Berlin, the choices made by the leaders of this party and of the founding parties, have influenced and can have a bearing on the nature and development of a non-traditional left-wing party.

4. PDS-Die Linke: The parties of the radical German left

In the following pages we shall attempt to verify on an empirical level the considerations advanced so far. After reconstructing the theoretical frame within which the constituent process of the European new left was developing, we will attempt to show some of the variations on an institutional level, with reference to Germany. In the beginning of the 21st century Germany was one of the most interesting examples in the panorama of the radical left, for it initiated a process of aggregation of political forces referring to the non-traditional left, eventually constituting a unified political actor. This is why, in the same period, many of the European new left parties said that they wanted to follow the German model and to “do as in Germany”. Even so, in the country that directly witnessed the fall of the Berlin wall, the story of the maximalist left parties is rather complex. What we hope to verify, already fully expressed in the preceding paragraphs, is whether the German radical left-wing parties, in the sense of ideal types of the European new left, can really be thought of as belonging to the category of anti-establishment parties, harshly critical of the neo-liberal political models although not opposed to a liberal democracy, or do they interpret

the role of anti-system political forces (Sartori 1976), aimed at changing (if possible) not only the government but the form of democratic government as well .

Back to the case in question. After the post-89 reunification, one of the leading innovations in the political system in Germany is represented by the disbanding of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) and the creation of the PDS (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus), a political formation and heir to Erich Honecker's party, but which when it saw the light decided to abandon the Communist ideology and iconography to adhere to the principles of democratic socialism. After a first transitional phase, the PDS officially saw the light on February 4, 1990, when Gregor Gysi (former Communist leader, one of those most receptive to the reforms begun by Gorbachev in the years of glasnost and perestroika) becomes the leader of the renewal process (Neugebauer 2010). This was the beginning of a long period of self-criticism among the leaders of the newborn political formation, leading its top executives to stand apart from the events of the DDR, although with the intentions of constructing a new anticapitalist party (Neugebauer 1997). From the very beginning however the principal feature of the PDS was also an insuperable limit. Indeed, faced with an outstanding capacity for electoral penetration in the eastern Länder, in the western territories the new German radical left formation met with little success. This led to its definition as a regional (or regionalist) party, established prevalently in East Germany (Hough 2000; Olsen 2002, 2007; Hough, Koß and Olsen 2007).

Despite the initial difficulties, the process of institutional inclusion begun by the PDS did not stop. The democratic transition of the party moved in three consecutive and complementary stages: i) a drastic reduction in the number of party functionaries, which passed from 14,000 to around 250 between December 1989 to the end of 1991 (Moreau 2008); ii) the removal of many management members (executive) compromised with the communist regime; iii) the replacement of the old "democratic centralism" with a decision-making model characterized by the "dictatorship of the expanded management" of the party. A fundamental passage in the life of the PDS was in 1993 when Lothar Bisky was elected chairman to replace the founder, Gregor Gysi. From that moment on, Bisky – who had also been an enlightened manager of the SED from his earliest years – exercised a decisive influence within the party, accelerating the pro-

cess of reform begun in the preceding years (Hüning and Neugebauer 1996). Under his direction the PDS attempted a constructive opposition within the democratic regime, even if it did not succeed in bringing the internal divisions of the party to a halt.

In the mid 1990s the German social democratic party was still divided in two. Internal dynamics comparable to those encountered in the radical left parties in Spain, France and Italy can be identified (March 2001; Backes and Moreau 2008; Damiani 2013). As with the *Izquierda unida*, the *Parti communiste français* and the *Rifondazione comunista*, in the PDS there was also a decided contrast between the «renovadores» and the «conservadores». In other words between those who were aiming at the construction of an autonomous party excluding a priori the possibility of alliances with the socialist and social democratic political formations and those, to the contrary, who proposed constructing a governance platform together with the parties of the progressive left. The clashes in the PDS continued under the direction of Gabriele Zimmer, president of the party from 2000 to 2003.

In the meanwhile, within the most complex dynamics encountered in Germany's political history, after the federal elections of 2002, with disastrous results for the PDS (see next paragraph), a new "red-green" government was formed in Germany. The SPD and Grünen (the Greens) majority, was led for the second consecutive time by Gerhard Schröder, former president of Lower Saxony and a leading figure in the social democratic party. Despite this, on account of the limited political majority in support of the executive branch and the internal conflicts in the government as a whole, the Chancellor decided to present his resignation, opening the way to the early elections of September 2005. The conditions for the beginning of a new historical course were thus determined within the German radical left party.

It all began with the creation of a political formation in the space between the PDS and the SPD. It is in this context that the WASG (*Wahlalternative Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit*) was created in July 2004, an electoral alternative for work and social justice. It is an assemblage, with a heterogeneous group composed of some of the executives of IG Metall, the trade union close to the social democratic party, critical figures of the SPD, including Thomas Händel and Klaus Ernst, former members of the PDS and Grünen, as well as a few intellectuals of

the legendary Working Group for an alternative economic policy. In addition there were few militants of social movements, including those of the Attac, organizations and minority parties of the extra-parliamentary left and other formations of Trotskyite and anarchical origins (Neugebauer 2010). Minimum common denominator: delusion with the leadership of the second Schröder government.

With the creation of the WASG and the difficulties encountered in those years by the PDS, in view of the lack of political space for the survival of both parties, the one and the other initiated a rapid course of approach. The union between the PDS and the WASG also allowed for the formation of a national party well entrenched established in all the German Länder. While the PDS was able to make a great organizational capacity available for the project of political unification in the former DDR, the WASG demonstrated a high potentiality of penetration in the territories of the former RFT (Hough, Koss, Olsen 2007). The acceleration of this process of merger took place a few months later when a leading exponent, Oskar Lafontaine, arrived at the WASG. He was a former chairman of the SPD, and had left the Social Democratic party in 2005 on account of personal and political disagreements with the German Chancellor at the time. The turning point was on the occasion of the 2005 federal elections, when the two formations presented candidatures in common under the name of Linkspartei (Party of the Left; in the western Länder the lists were called Linkspartei.PDS). The results of those elections is an electoral fragmentation that led to the inauguration of the first government of the Große Koalition led by Angela Merkel and supported by a composite majority of the CDU and the SPD. At the time, the radical left list received 8.7% of the consensus and 54 seats, forming a unified parliamentary group with solid bases and electoral assignments both in the territories of East Germany and in those of West Germany.

After two years of experimentation and considerable organizational difficulties, which risked calling into question the work undertaken so far, the fusion of the two parties continued. In June 2007 Die Linke saw the light (from now on to be indicated by the acronym: DL), meaning simply The left.

The specific characteristic of the German case study, which distinguishes DL from all the other radical European left formations, is that of renouncing the hypothesis of the political federation as a form of organizational architecture (in

Spain and France this modality characterizes the Izquierda unida and the Front de gauche, while in Italy, less positively, we have the experiments of: Sinistra arcobaleno, Federazione della sinistra, Rivoluzione civile e L'Altra Europa con Tsipras), and to construct a single unified party. This decision is both endogenous in nature (a political interest in forming a national left-wing party of the SPD) and exogenous. With regards to political jurisdiction, it must be remembered that the German legislature forbids the formation of federations, imposing the founding of unified subjects that can be presented in federal elections only if presented by a reunited in a single actor. This norm was meant to provide the national political system with greater stability, with the aim of furnishing a long average life to the federal governments, shielding them as much as possible from the dynamics within the parties that compose the cabinet?

The birth of the DL did not however resolve the problems regarding internal conflicts. The party therefore decided to form a two-headed leadership, naming two spokesmen, corresponding to the interests of the main founding principles . In the meanwhile the international economic crisis (otherwise known as of the great recession) came to a head. In 2009, in Germany, the liberal-conservative government under the guidance of Angela Merkel brought the great coalition between Demo Christians and social democrats to an end, installing the first center right German government since the times of Helmut Kohl . In this context, less than a year from the installation of the new party presidency, the internal balance of the DL was on the whole positive. To be noted, after the federal elections of 2013 and the European elections of 2014, twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the persistence of a radical left party in Germany, representing an institutional constant within the German democratic system.

Despite this, Die Linke still had unresolved problems. In the first place, was the non-irrelevant presence of electors and executives of PDS extraction with a social-communist nostalgia that was hard to reconcile with the mostly reformist positions of the ex WASG exponents. This was complicated by a generational problem represented by an older more conservative population and a population of more progressive young people, as well as personal rivalries and antipathies between individual politicians. Secondly there was the East-West relationship. From this point of view, the principal risk was that the ex PDS component continued to thematize the eastern problems in highly identitarian terms, while

the leaders of the ex WASG tended to treat them as political issues of a general nature. Thirdly, the party was divided on the positions to assume regarding the formation of a hypothetical progressist government: in other words whether to exercise the role of ideological force of opposition, or the more pragmatic role of a minority party willing and able to collaborate in governing the country. Within the DL a current more inclined to a policy of alliances with the reformist forces persisted, convinced that that was the only possible direction, and a more intransigent spirit that called for a total political autonomy with respect to the governments with an SPD matrix. Lastly there was the problem of the identity dilemma with respect to the principles of democratic socialism. Indeed, the DL faction proposing the construction of a political identity tending to overcome the principles of democratic socialism (so as to come closer to the relative majority party of the national left) was strongly opposed by many ex PDS leaders, who claimed autonomy in the field of political and identitarian elaboration. The resolution of all these problems was to determine, in one way or the other, the destiny of Die Linke and, thus its collocation in the German political system as a national party.

The only certain thing is that the DL cannot turn back, since it cannot (even if it wanted to) conduct an anti-systemic role within the confines of the democratic regime. The German electors, in particular those resident in East Germany, would not be favorable to a possibility of this sort, just as they had not (except in limited form) accepted it with regards to the PDS, since the social democratic Party was still compared to the ex DDR. Currently, the only space in which Die Linke can maneuver – true of most of the European new left parties –, is the possibility of attempting to exercise a “radical” political action aimed at shifting left (as much as possible) the barycenter of a possible progressist government. In achieving this objective, the only possible way seems to be a growth of the electorate within the democratic institutions. In the next section we will show the force exercised by the PDS-DL in the course of the twenty-five years subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall, attempting to show that this is by now a political force that has permanently become part of the German democratic regime.

5. Twenty-five years from the fall of the Berlin Wall. An electoral analysis

In the reunited Germany, the post-89 period opened with the democratic elections called in December 1990. In those circumstances, a newly constituted PDS succeeded in gaining more than a million votes, sending a cohort of seventeen deputies to the Bundestag (table 1). The party program was centered above all on the critical situation of the reunification process and the modalities of its realization. This is why the electoral success of the German radical left in the eastern Länder, where its objective was that of representing its specific interests in Parliament (Neugebauer 2010), was positive. The results in the western regions however were poor, with in some cases a percentage of barely more than zero .

Tab. 1. Electoral results

<i>Federal election</i>					<i>European election</i>				
<i>Year</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Seats</i>
1990	PDS	1.129.578	2,4	17	–	–	–	–	–
1994	PDS	2.066.176	4,4	30	1994	PDS	1.670.316	4,0	0
1998	PDS	2.515.454	5,1	36	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	1999	PDS	1.567.745	5,8	6
2002	PDS	1.916.702	4,0	2	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	2004	PDS	1.579.109	6,1	7
2005	LP*	4.118.194	8,7	54	–	–	–	–	–
2009	DL	5.155.933	11,9	76	2009	DL	1.969.239	7,5	8
2013	DL	3.755.699	8,6	64	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	2014	DL	2.167.641	7,4	7

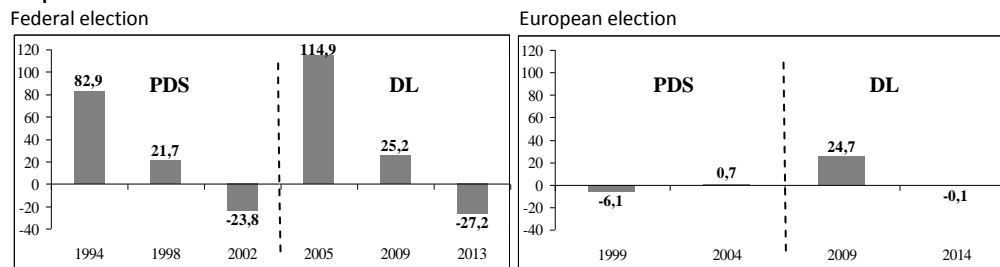
Source: Ministero dell'Interno

* Before of DL, the German Radical Left in 2005 presents under the label of Linkspartei (Left Party)

In confirmation of what has previously been affirmed, the presence of the German social democratic party in the eastern part of Germany was well established throughout the 1994-2004 decade while in the western territories there was an almost total absence of an electorate. Altogether, the electoral presence was relatively low, although in progressive growth (table 1). For the PDS the best result was achieved in the federal elections of 1998, with over two and a half million votes, and in the European elections the following year, with preferences of almost 6%. This fact was confirmed five years later, in the 2004 European elections. The change however dated to 2005 when, left of the SPD, the combined lists of the PDS and the WASG were presented under the name of Linkspartei. On this occasion the electoral coalition of the radical left succeeded in gaining over four million votes, doubling the numbers registered up to then. It was in those circumstances that the “regionalist” experience of the German

radical left party was concluded, marking a political change in direction that was fundamental for the entire national political system (Saalfeld 2002). Chart 1 shows the variations in percentages between the legislatures that followed each other after 1989, with a decided positive peak in 2005.

Graph. 1. Var. % of PDS-DL



Source: our processing of Ministero dell'Interno data

After narrowly escaping the threat of a disappearing PDS in 2002, with the federal elections of 2005 the party system of the German “quadrille”, composed of the CDU and the liberals of the FDP (right) and the SPD and the Greens (left), was destined to be replaced by a “fluid penta-party system” (Niedermayer 2002). This was characterized by the presence of five majority parties, all capable of passing the minimum 5% electoral threshold established by law for access to the Bundestag. Some observers note that this was when the German political system was “Europeanized”, demonstrating – only then, on a par with all the other great western democracies – that it was possible to institutionalize a political force of the radical left (Meyer 2005). This then is the confirmation of the recognition of the non-anti-systemic identity of Die Linke, to be considered to all effects a political party of the European new left, highly critical of the neo-liberal policies of finance capitalism, but completely uninterested in (overthrowing?, prevailing over? modifying?) overcoming the national democratic system (Capocchia 2002).

After freeing itself from the label of heir to the East German party, from 2005 Die Linke was on the whole increasing in importance, both on a national and European level. From the point of view of numbers, the record was achieved in the federal elections of 2009, with a percentual explosion that brought the party to touch on 12% of the votes with seventy-six deputies elected. In the same year there was also a good electoral success in the European elections. In both circumstances (federal and European elections 2009) chart 1 shows a positive percentage variation of around 25% with regards to the important electoral success registered four years earlier.

The beginning of the second decade of the 21st century confirms the national importance of Die Linke, which affirmed its stable presence within the national political system despite registering a relative setback in the 2013 elections. For the second consecutive time it topped the Green party both in the number of votes and the percentage of seats in Parliament. In the 2014 European elections Die Linke confirmed the results obtained five years earlier.

6. Conclusion

In concluding this analysis, aimed at examining the processes involved in the forging of the European new left, with particular attention to the German case, a brief final consideration seems to be in order. Far from being anti-system parties, in the twenty five years subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall the radical left parties, including the PDS/DL, can better be defined as anti-political establishment parties, highly critical of the political leader classes and the relative economic policies, without however programming a conjectural change in the political system.

As anti-political establishment parties, the objective of these political forces is opposition to the predominant class and the politicization of the cleavage between the establishment and the anti-establishment. In Germany too both these formations attempt to provide an institutional back-up, calling for the constitution of a new elite leadership, capable of replacing the traditional leadership with demands for greater popular participation, redistribution of wealth, recognition of civil rights for ever broader categories of the population, attention to environmental and energy policies. All this involves the setting in motion of a process of political institutionalization, after which the challenging actors often end up by being co-opted in the pre-existing system. This is what happened in Italy and France, when in the years between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century Rifondazione comunista and the Parti communiste français participated in the national governments of their countries together with the principal reform parties. In an interim period this might also hold for the German situation, if the interests of the SPD and those of Die Linke should come together in composing a progressive executive branch in alternative to the conservative. Currently, however, within the German political balances, as a party capable of uniting critical portions of the social democratic left and the communist political culture of former East Germany in a single container, Die Linke is a national political force with considerable capacities of entrenchment both in the eastern and in the western Länder. The aim of the German new left is to construct an image of a democratic politi-

cal actor, without any anti-systemic aspirations, although highly critical of the neoliberal economic policies of the post-89 European governments.

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