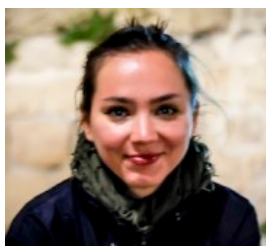


Zygmunt Bauman On Ferdinand Lassalle And Social Democracy

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In Wroclaw on June 22, Zygmunt Bauman, the renowned Polish sociologist, spoke to an audience of 500 people eager to learn his view on the future of social democracy. Invited by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Ferdinand Lassalle Centre for Social Thought to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the modern social democratic movement by Lassalle, who was born in Wroclaw, Bauman referred to the history and drew parallels to contemporary challenges of the left.

He posed the question that the people of the left have been asking themselves for the last few years: why is it so that social democracy has been unable to use the situation of the economic crisis, answer the needs of growing parts of populations experiencing economic hardships, mobilise voters and renew its identity? Whatever the reasons the road forward is not going to be easy: 'We will need 150 years more to achieve the goals set by Ferdinand Lassalle' – he said at the beginning of the lecture.

The most important of these goals was to establish a truly just society. Lassalle called for unification of groups with similar goals and the introduction of universal voting rights. He hoped that workers would then win elections and introduce reforms. Industrialisation, according to him, should go forward but the factories should take the form of cooperatives – 'this was supposed to be an alternative to the industrial society that had been developing at that time' – said Bauman. 'Lassalle's vision of a just society, with people living in peace, cooperating with each other instead of competing and being suspicious towards each other, today is just as valid as it was 150 years ago' – he continued.

But modern social democrats celebrating the anniversary seem helpless as they lose voter support. The chances of the SPD in the coming Bundestag elections are just one example. According to Bauman, the problem is that the party at the same time wants to reach out to those who suffer because of the crisis and sustain the current economic model. He refers to Antonio Gramsci and his idea of culture war – the war, claims Bauman, was won by the right and bourgeois ideology, or, Bauman uses the notion coined by Castoriadis and Deleuze – *imaginaire*. It means the way people perceive themselves and the world around them, the values they stand for, for which sometimes they would be ready to sacrifice something important.

Three elements are crucial in this ideology, said Bauman: the belief that continuous increase of GDP is the only way to the wellbeing of the society; the belief that increasing consumption is the only way to happiness; and finally, that your future depends solely on your capacities and on whether we are willing to work hard. According to this ideology, inequalities are natural and useful for the creation of wealth.

According to Bauman nowadays this is no longer sustainable: 'We have already learned that a continuous increase in production is impossible, the planet will not bear it. We have to think very thoroughly about ways with which to make sure our granddaughters and grandsons will be able to live on this planet'. But the most urgent now is the collapse of meritocracy – the third element of the bourgeois ideology enumerated by Bauman. The young people now are the most educated in history, but never in history has the young generation suffered from unemployment to the extent it is happening now. All generations born after World War II were entering their adult lives convinced that 'what they got from their parents, was just a point of departure. The young generation today is the first to suffer because they are not sure they would be able to sustain the social position inherited from their parents. This is a radical mood change, change of our intergenerational coexistence.'

While these pillars of dominant ideology are being shaken, social democracy does not have a vision of an alternative. Bauman recalled Gerhard Schröder and his endorsement of a 'good economy' (Schröder said there were neither capitalist nor socialist economies any more, only 'bad' and 'good' ones) as the moment of admitting a defeat. What led to this situation?

When the Berlin wall fell, no alternative economic vision threatened the capitalist regimes anymore. Before that, Western governments, afraid that the communist promise might be appealing to their societies, delivered help for the weakest, universal public health care, labor laws etc. Now societies learned again to accept huge inequalities. Why is it so hard for politics to make promises that could be kept? According to Bauman it is because politics lost power. Power meaning the possibility to decide what should be done. Lassalle could hope that the state will deliver what had promised – nowadays states no longer have the power to do that as power lies with other institutions using it in their own interests.

Another reason for the crisis of the left is the shrinkage of the working class that is substituted by a precariat – a new class of people living unstable lives, in unstable working conditions, full of fears about their future. One of the differences between these two classes stems from different working conditions. In the past workers shared not only space, gathered under the roof of a huge factory that does not exist anymore, but they also shared problems and hopes, were organised and cooperated for the sake of the common interest. Nowadays people are hostile towards each other, they know that they have to be competitive. The feeling of solidarity is gone.

What can be done about this? Bauman admitted that there are no easy answers. Following Gramsci he suggested that a new culture war is needed and to win it, social democrats need patience. 'Sometimes I feel like the first social democrats must have felt 150 years ago' – he admitted – 'They were in a minority, on the margins of political life. They were preparing for a long struggle with the popular common sense of their times. (...) The situation of people who today hope that the world can be different, more hospitable to people, is similar. Our task cannot be accomplished before the next elections. We will be successful once we have a long-term perspective and when the hope will live long, or even forever' – he concluded.

During the discussion that followed Bauman answered questions from the audience. He explained the situation of the new class, why it is unable to mobilise – they cannot strike for example, because the business owners can withdraw their capital and move it overseas. Workers are dependent on employers and it is not true the other way round – he explained.

Our goals should be reached through dialogue or 'polilogue' – no one should be confident that he or she found the solution:

It is not in our nature, for we are used to competition – somebody wins, somebody loses. That everyone can win when they try to understand each other is a proposition that is hard to accept. That is why I say that anything less than a long term cultural change, reaching to grassroots, a new analysis of the foundations of our life, will not be enough.

The lecture was unfortunately interrupted at the beginning by a group of right-wing radicals who shouted anticommunist and anti-Semitic slogans against Zygmunt Bauman. The police and organisers reacted accordingly and the meeting could proceed as planned. Zygmunt Bauman reacted gracefully and with patience, as if he wanted to assure the audience that he was ok despite the attack against him. The fact that the lecture could go ahead proved that the radicals are too weak to really threaten democratic values of tolerance, openness towards different views and free speech. They did not manage to stop the lecture and the discussion

that followed. By no means, however, should their actions be downplayed. The incident has had some consequences for the wider debate about right-wing extremism in Poland. Similar interruptions of public events have happened before. But after June 22, public opinion and state authorities seem to be especially concerned. The authorities promise to take action in order to prevent similar incidents in the future. Let us hope they will succeed.

After the discussion at the university, in the Museum of Wrocław, an exhibition presenting the history of Polish and German social democracy was opened. Once again all were reminded of the goals of the first social democrats that today, no less than 150 years ago, still remain to be achieved.