ERWIN C. HARGROVE

Introduction

The purpose of this issue is to explore the possible political futures of parties and movements of the "democratic left" in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the European Union, Poland, and Russia. The task could not proceed without clear definition, or definitions, of the "democratic left" because of national variations. There is "liberalism" or "progressivism" in the United States of many hues, but with no "social democracy" or politically viable socialism to the left. Socialism, in the old sense, of ownership of the means of production, has died in Britain, and the present government of "New Labour" refers to itself as the "Third Way" between capitalism and socialism. But there is much controversy at home whether "social democracy" has been also jettisoned in favor of a kind of "neoliberalism" that has embraced markets and trimmed social security. The large, democratic parties of the left in France and Germany derive from traditions of "social democracy" that have challenged many capitalist values and institutions, whether from Marxist or non-Marxist perspectives, and sought to establish a state and society organized around principles of social justice. These parties may win national elections but are torn between old left politics and the need to form larger coalitions in order to win. One might ask, Why include Poland and Russia? The purpose was to ask if new democratic forms of "social democracy" could be discerned in the ashes of defunct communist systems that might bear some resemblance to the politics of Western Europe.

So we are dealing with a sliding scale of definitions, but this is permissible so long as we are clear what we talking about. For example, to say "liberal" to Europeans may connote Margaret Thatcher and other free-market politicians who are not at all "conservative"

THE JOURNAL OF POLICY HISTORY, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2003.
Copyright © 2003 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

https://doi.org/10.1353/jph.2003.0004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the traditional European sense. But "conservatives" in the United States are indeed Thatcherites in many ways. Definitions thus push us toward questions about American "exceptionalism" in the sense that the center of political gravity is further to the right in the United States than in Europe. But one must also ask whether the "Third Way" as seen in Britain, and in the Clinton presidency, and in its inroads into "social democracy" on the Continent, is not the converging future for democratic politics of the left.

As the editor, I posed a number of questions to the authors, recognizing that each question might not apply to all, but I aimed to hit a central theme in the politics of the democratic left:

1. If the traditional social bases of left parties are now too limited for winning in majoritarian politics, what kind of coalitions and ideas, which reach beyond those bases and yet retain them, may be effective?
2. If the answer to the first question is that such umbrella coalitions are too torn to be workable, what is the alternative? What is gained and lost in moves toward the center or further to the left?
3. Are coalition politics sufficient for governance in terms of both policy and the long-term political health of a party, or must there be a central, guiding set of ideas around which coalitions are formed?
4. What are the inherent weaknesses of market-oriented parties against which parties of the democratic left might appeal and win?
5. To what extent do national histories and political cultures both provide resources and set constraints and limits upon what parties may creatively do with political appeals and policies?

In the conclusion to the essays, I address these questions again and explore what a comparative analysis suggests about the future of the politics of the democratic left.

Vanderbilt University

https://doi.org/10.1353/jph.2003.0004 Published online by Cambridge University Press