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Thoughts on the concept of Freedom through Socialism

My talk begins with two episodes, which we might also call ‘disturbances’. They involve a brief journey into the past. Before embarking on that journey, I must emphasise that I am a practising politician, not a researching theorist. That does not mean, of course, that I blindly do whatever comes to me out of the blue – or perhaps I should say out of the red. I do have guidelines. But now to my stories from history.

In August 1900, Wilhelm Liebknecht was buried in Berlin. Tens of thousands came out to bid farewell to the co-founder of the SPD. Other well-known Social Democrats were subsequently interred in the same cemetery at Friedrichsfelde, including Paul Singer. Since then, even before the First World War, the burial ground was known as the ‘Socialist cemetery’.

In 1924, a monument was erected there to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who had been assassinated in 1919. This was followed in 1926 by a large memorial. The Nazis demolished that structure and had the graves of notable Socialists and Communists razed to the ground. In 1951, in the GDR era, a new Socialists’ Memorial was dedicated. The memorial still exists, along with others.

Every year on the second Sunday in January, a commemorative ceremony is held for the public figures who have been buried there, particularly Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the GDR era, this degenerated into a display of public homage to party and government leaders. This authoritarian ceremony was discontinued in 1990. The GDR disappeared, but the commemoration has continued to the present day.

The first of the ‘disturbances’ occurred in 1988, when a group of East German civil-rights activists demonstrated on the fringe of the official ceremony, displaying a quotation from Rosa Luxemburg. “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”. The state security forces intervened. Rosa Luxemburg’s words were perceived as a provocation. Since then they have been on everyone’s lips.

In 2006 came a more recent ‘disturbance’. In the immediate vicinity of the Socialist Memorial another commemorative stone was erected. It bears the inscription *Den Opfern des Stalinismus* – ‘To the victims of Stalinism’. In no time at all, it had the intended effect and became a ‘stumbling block’. The controversy over the new monument raged again this year among a wide variety of figures who see themselves on the left of the political spectrum.

In retrospect, I would say that the disturbance of 1988 revealed a great deal about the intellectual paralysis of the GDR. On the one hand, Rosa Luxemburg was made a Socialist icon in the government’s own cause. On the other hand, quoting her was regarded as a betrayal of Socialism. The civil-rights activists were holding a mirror to my country. What it



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showed was an authoritarian state.

Let me clear up any misunderstanding by stating that I was not one of the civil-rights campaigners at that time. Year after year, following what I regarded as a cherished tradition, I attended the official commemoration of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Despite having studied and obtained a degree, I was even unfamiliar with the quotation “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”.

I know now, of course, that Rosa Luxemburg formulated that pregnant statement in 1917 in connection with the October Revolution in Russia. It was a warning against false sources of authority, against new establishment cliques, against overweening abuses of power, all of which ultimately lead to despotic subjugation instead of offering the prospect of more democracy.

Rosa Luxemburg strove for a democratic kind of Socialism. What precise form it could take was still somewhat sketchy. What certainly seems to have been clear to her was that the new age must not see the reversal of any of the achievements of the French Revolution. On the contrary, she wanted a revolutionary extension of the civil rights and fundamental freedoms that had been secured in 1789.

This is precisely why she was sceptical about Lenin and the course pursued by the Bolsheviks. She expressed great admiration for their revolutionary zeal. She conceded that there was no prescribed guide anywhere to effecting major transformations which would guarantee their success, but she warned against making a virtue of errors committed under pressure and compounding such errors by enshrining them in binding decrees. She was referring especially to disdain for democracy and for achievements such as free speech and freedom of the press. Her favourable view of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” included “the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy.” Without that element, to paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg, the entire new revolution would ultimately amount to a backward somersault.

In the same vein, she also criticised the electoral law, which restricted the right of suffrage in revolutionary Russia to those who lived from the work of their own hands. CDU politicians in the Federal Republic of Germany, by the way, recently came up with similar ideas. With this in mind, it was a good thing for me to re-read Rosa Luxemburg, otherwise it would have escaped me that our Conservatives, of all people, were embracing the policy of Lenin.

Rosa Luxemburg could only have surmised then where that would lead in practice. Regrettably, the chequered history of Soviet-style Socialism proved her right. The initial errors of the Bolsheviks – particularly their denial of civil rights and fundamental freedoms – led to obstructions with vast implications. These systemic flaws finally resulted in the sea change of 1989/90.

Be that as it may, there remains one question that keeps surfacing among adherents of the Left. It concerns the relationship between social rights on the one hand and individual freedoms on the other. This question was also one of the grey areas that were identified in



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2007, when The Left Party was founded in Germany. This can be seen from a reading of the key points of its political programme.

Numerous protagonists of the new Left Party took the view that, in case of doubt, social rights must take precedence over freedom. “What use is freedom of the press to an impoverished African infected with AIDS?” was only one of the hackneyed arguments that were advanced in favour of that position. The fundamental truth underlying these arguments, however, is that freedom is a human right which cannot be exercised in the absence of social justice.

The down side of the same line of argument is that civil rights and individual freedoms become negotiable if their denial is deemed to serve the cause of social justice. The converse of this situation, incidentally, is seen in the attitude to freedom of the parties of the liberal Centre-Right, which regard freedom as the supreme value and, for its sake, are prepared to let social justice wither away throughout the world.

Rosa Luxemburg certainly had her eyes fixed on both goals – social justice anyway, but freedom too. Both of them for everyone. That would have been the new departure. Ninety years have passed since then, but we are truly no further forward. Individual freedom and social security are degenerating once again, and increasingly so, into exclusive rights. Even in the 21st century, capitalism continues to possess these barbaric traits.

Besides, the impoverished AIDS-infected African is in particularly urgent need of civil liberties, for without them he can do scarcely anything to rid himself of his poverty. And without them he is powerless to tackle the profiteering indifference of the pharmaceutical giants. There are therefore good social reasons why adherents of the Left should always uphold civil rights and fundamental freedoms.

That, however, is only one side of the coin. In the German version of that well-known anthem of the working classes, we sing *Die Internationale erkämpft das Menschenrecht*, which translates as ‘The Internationale will fight for human rights’. But what are human rights? One definition can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 1948. It describes 30 rights that belong to all human beings merely by virtue of their humanity.

According to this school of thought, the universal entitlement to human rights, fundamental freedoms and civil rights does not depend on the goodwill of any system of government or social order but on the human condition itself. Accordingly, any system of government and social order must serve all the people, treating them equally as free individuals, otherwise it is simply not a free democratic society.

Within this philosophy, there are evidently various ideological currents. We find it based on religious beliefs. The Centre-Right Liberals see it as a link between themselves and the Age of Enlightenment. The Left, on the other hand, invokes Karl Marx, who believed that the freedom of each individual was the prerequisite for universal freedom. As we see, there is obviously a broad alliance, ranging from Jesus through Voltaire to Rosa Luxemburg.

Here, in fact, is another test that Soviet-style Socialism failed. Individual freedom was



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subordinated to the 'great cause'. The quotation from Marx was stood on its head. His aim of freedom was shelved until the attainment of a Communist Utopia. Until then, other rules applied. What is more, this headstand was even sold as dialectics.

There is, nevertheless, a clear dividing line that separates the liberal Centre-Right from the libertarian Left on the freedom issue. The former defines freedom as an individual human right that no state may curtail. The latter defines freedom as an individual right that the state must guarantee. These perceptions are poles apart; above all, they are based on diametrically opposed understandings of the state.

Centre-Right Liberals want less government and more individualism in the name of freedom. The libertarian Left wants fair government and more society in the name of freedom. That is a fundamental difference. Both agree on the need to defend the rule of law. They are divided in their attitudes to the concept of socially just government based on solidarity and to the primacy of society.

This means that, in German federal politics today, the real opposites in terms of substance are the FDP and The Left Party rather than the CDU/CSU on one side and the SPD on the other. This, indeed, is clearly observable in the context of the current financial and economic crisis too, and I am not referring to opinions on the rights and wrongs of government recovery packages costing hundreds of billions in tax revenue.

What interests me are the political views on the direction in which these huge amounts should be channelled. The position of the FDP is clear: hands off private property! And they defend this position all the more vehemently the more the SPD, and even the CDU, reflect on nationalisations as a means of saving jobs. Many people think that they are actually singing The Left Party's signature tune, but they are not.

Our position is this: if tax revenue has to be used to save private enterprises, the *quid pro quo* must be that the staff of these enterprises are given an ever-increasing share in them. That, in fact, would not be nationalisation but a form of socialisation. Moreover, it would give workers a greater say in the running of their companies and would therefore entail more democracy.

In this context I was reminded of a quotation from Wolfgang F. Haug, an internationally acclaimed expert on Marx. In 1999, in his book entitled *Politisch richtig oder richtig politisch* ('Politically correct or correctly political'), he wrote; "Leftism is all action that recovers a bit of world from the empire of private property without surrendering it to the empire of the state apparatus".

This reflection is not all that new, incidentally. The same basic idea also underlay the founding of the *kibbutzim*. They were to be communities based on solidarity with a distinctly democratic character. Their democracy was a civil right, the exercise of which was not confined to elections. Freedom and social justice for all were established as their trade marks. In the great wide world, however, things look very different.



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I like to consider these matters from the perspective of the two and a half social systems I have experienced: the reality of Socialism in the GDR, the reality of capitalism in the FRG and, between the two, what we call the *Wendezeit* – the time of change. Long after that period had ended, the wall of a building in Berlin remained daubed with the words ‘The chaos has run its course – it was the best of times!’.

Now I have no intention of wallowing in nostalgia about that transitional period. What is true is that it was an extremely eventful time, a very democratic time, a hugely politicised time and a golden age for civil-rights activists, the likes of which I have never seen again. What is also true, however, is that it essentially lasted only three months, from mid-December 1989 until the middle of March 1990. By then the chaos had run its course.

Returning to social rights and fundamental freedoms, my experiences tell me that, in the reality of the Socialist system, social rights were favoured and, indeed, as far as economic resources permitted, were put into practice. Let me cite three indicators by way of example: society was not plagued by mass unemployment or by abject poverty, and there was blanket provision of educational child care, free of charge.

Essential civil rights and individual freedoms, on the other hand, were neglected or suspended. This applied to freedom of the press, freedom to travel, freedom of assembly, free speech and other rights. Although almost all of them were guaranteed in some way in the constitution, the leading role of the Socialist Unity Party and government practice almost always held sway in the end.

In the reality of the capitalist system, both social rights and individual freedoms are proclaimed, and both are observed as far as the strength of the political opposition permits. In practice, however, the fundamental social rights are always the first to be abandoned, which accounts for the grim indicators of mass unemployment, epidemic poverty and young people with no prospects.

But individual freedoms too – the hallmark of capitalism and its ‘liberal democratic order’ – are increasingly being eroded. Remember that I am speaking about one of the countries at the heart of the capitalist world, the Federal Republic of Germany, and not about some of the backwaters of the capitalist system in Africa, Asia, South America or Eastern Europe.

The lesson I have learned from the deserved failure of the Soviet-style experiment in Socialism is that social rights on the one hand and individual freedoms and civil rights on the other must be neither ranked nor traded off against each other. That is why it is not enough for the political Left to involve itself in social issues and anti-war protests. We must also be out there campaigning for civil rights.

I spoke about all of these things last December at an event organised by The Left Party in Baden-Württemberg. At that time there were festive events all over the place to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As far as was possible, I also tried to compare the speeches that were held at that time and the gist of their respective messages.



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The interesting thing was that all the speakers, whether they were from the CDU, the SPD or the FDP, focused on Articles 1 to 21 at most. Those articles deal with such important principles as free speech, freedom of assembly, democracy, co-determination and the protection of individuals from arbitrary actions of the state as well as with the rule of law in general.

Yet the subsequent articles were never mentioned. To explain my criticism, let me quote from Article 22: *“Everyone (...) has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort (...), of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for (...) the free development of his personality.”*

Article 23 includes the following provisions: *“(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment (...) and to protection against unemployment.
(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity (...).”*

Why the speakers from these other parties omitted these social human rights is something they would have to answer for themselves. I make this point because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself, which is a UN declaration, refers to the binding link between individual freedoms and social human rights.

The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) drew up its second party programme of 2003 in full accordance with this principle. The programme states that *“Freedom is the focal point of Socialist policy”* – not a focal point, but *the* focal point. You may be sure that this will be ignored in the cut and thrust of party politics, but it was regarded as a cornerstone of the political programme of the Left.

The authors of the draft, who happened to belong to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, engaged in a piece of bold linguistic creativity. I would like to mention by name Professor Dieter Klein and Professor Michael Brie, for it was they who coined the term *Freiheitsgüter* – ‘assets of freedom’, meaning the assets that all individuals must enjoy if they are to live a free and dignified life.

These assets include the right to live in peace, people’s daily bread, work, justice, education, health care and so on. “Access to these assets”, the text went on, “determines whether or not people are free”. These words also emphasised that freedom is more than an individual human right. It is also a challenge to the whole of society.

That brings me back to Rosa Luxemburg. “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently”. We have – I have – learned this lesson. Freedom, though, is always the freedom of the one who lives differently too, because, if it is not a privilege but a universal human right, it cannot be divorced from global social and environmental developments.



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I said before that social rights should not be ranked above individual freedoms and civil rights or *vice versa*. That is also why I endorse this sentence from the key points of The Left Party's political programme: "*Equality without individual freedom culminates in incapacitation and subjugation. Freedom without equality is freedom for the wealthy alone*".

I am occasionally asked which particular country or society I have in mind when I expound these principles. My answer is simply that no such country or society has ever existed. In other words, I am speaking of the Utopia that I call Democratic Socialism. That is my Leftist vision. And that is what I shall take with me when I return next year to the Socialists' Memorial, to Karl and Rosa.