

Christian Democracy, Conservatism
and the Challenge of the Extremes

Christian Democracy, Conservatism and the Challenge of the Extremes

Klaus Welle & Federico Ottavio Reho (Eds.)



This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

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ISBN 978-94-6301-524-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-94-6301-540-0 (ebook)

Eburon Academic Publishers, Utrecht, The Netherlands

www.eburon.nl

Cover design: Textcetera, The Hague

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Facing the Challenge of the Extremes: The Future of the Centre–Right in Europe

Klaus Welle

Introduction

The European Parliament elections in June 2024 marked a watershed moment. For the first time since direct elections began in 1979, the Parliament comprises three distinct components of broadly equal size: roughly one-third of members are on the left, in the Green, Socialist and Left political groups; a good third sit in the liberal Renew and the European People's Party (EPP) groups, together occupying the centre space in the hemicycle; and a 'small' third sits on the right, including those who, because of their extreme views, cannot secure any group affiliation.

The right has grown consistently in size since 2009. In the process the EPP has gradually lost the gains of its successful enlargement strategy of expanding to encompass both liberal and conservative parties in the 1990s and is again confronted with the same structural challenges in France and Italy that it was facing then. The left has been in serious decline since it peaked, with more than 50% of the European Parliament's seats, in 1989.

European elections give a good insight and snapshot of how the party-political landscape all over the continent is changing. This allows one to identify long-term trends that might or might not continue into the future. Given that many of the parties on the extreme right can be identified as anti-system parties, serious questions about the continued viability of the post-1945 political order, based on European integration, transatlantic partnership and parliamentary democracy, have to be addressed.

Our political order is being challenged simultaneously from the inside, in the form of anti-system parties on the extreme right, and from the outside, by aggressive, authoritarian regimes, and often these forces entertain friendly relations towards one another. It is therefore urgent to better understand what is driving the changing political landscape in Europe and to assess the strategies and policies that could be used to protect our system.

In this context, the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the political foundation of the EPP, has decided to initiate an in-depth discussion on the topic. Building upon my own article 'The Future of the Centre–Right in Europe and the

7Ds' (Welle 2023),¹ Academic Council members Stefan Lunte, Steven Van Hecke and Anthony Teasdale provided their own reflections on the topic for an initial in-depth internal exchange in late 2023.

To further deepen that debate, the Martens Centre then took the initiative of inviting more than 20 leading academics, politicians and practitioners to write on the topic 'Beyond centre-right: Christian Democracy and conservatism for the twenty-first century', to provide different perspectives on the issue. The texts were presented and jointly debated at an authors' conference organised by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and held on 18 March 2024 in Brussels, and updated in the light of that discussion by the authors themselves thereafter. We made a conscious choice to involve both experienced political leaders and practitioners, on the one hand, and some of the best academic experts on the political traditions and challenges that interested us, on the other. Among the latter, some might identify with the political traditions considered in this volume, but others might well not. What we were interested in was not their personal political affiliation, but their ability to engage, based on their recognised scholarly expertise, in a dialogue among themselves, with us and with the political practitioners involved, to sharpen our collective understanding of the problems at hand. Each author remains therefore solely responsible for what he or she has written and signed, and there is certainly a considerable diversity of views that makes the reading of each chapter worthwhile. I would like to thank Sara Pini for her valuable assistance at all stages of this project, Federico Ottavio Reho for helping to conceptualise the project and for acting as the book's co-editor, and Michele Pertosa for his diligent editorial assistance.

After the present introduction, the reader will find a number of chapters organised into five sections. The first offers the perspective of EPP-affiliated political figures and practitioners, including Mikuláš Dzurinda (President of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and former Prime Minister of Slovakia), Manfred Weber (EPP President and EPP Group Chairman), Antonio Tajani (Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Italy, and former President of the European Parliament), Gunnar Hökmark (former Member of the European Parliament) and myself. The following two sections allow a mixture of qualified scholars and practitioners to reflect, from their specific perspectives, on the meaning of Christian Democracy and conservatism, respectively, and on some of the key challenges with which they are confronted. The fourth section zooms in on the radical right's populist challenge to mainstream

1. The article was first published in French by *Le Grand Continent* in spring 2023 with the title 'Le nouveau visage des droites en Europe et le conservatisme du futur'. It then appeared in English in the *European View* (2023), the policy journal of the Martens Centre, with the current title. With minor adjustments, it is now reproduced in this volume as the chapter in my name.

Christian Democracy and conservatism. Finally, a fifth section devotes attention to selective aspects and themes within the Christian Democratic tradition. The remainder of this introduction offers some of my own takeaways for the EPP, based on my reading of the various contributions to the volume.

In most contributions, the challenge of the extreme right looms large in the background. We currently see a mushrooming of new organisations engaged in a major effort at ‘political identity theft’, claiming the mantle of conservatism and Christian Democracy for the extreme right. Faced with this phenomenon it seems to me that there are basically three questions before us:

1. What is in fact the essence of Christian Democracy and conservatism, how do they come together in the EPP, and where are the systematic dividing lines with the extreme right that cannot be crossed?
2. What exactly constitutes the challenge of the extremes and why are these parties of the extreme right gaining so much ground electorally? The main focus is on the extreme right, given that the extreme left is currently much less successful and close to a historical low in electoral performance.
3. What can traditional Christian Democratic and conservative parties do to stop and potentially reverse this trend? And if the parties of the extreme right are ‘reactionary’, to what are they actually reacting?

Christian Democracy, conservatism and the EPP

What is Christian Democracy?

In my chapter for this volume, I argue that all Christian Democratic concepts—personalism, subsidiarity, social market economy, federalism, people’s party, party of the centre—are attempts to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. Logically, Christian Democracy should therefore also embrace sustainability, reconciling the present and the future, as well as the legitimate expectations of different generations, as outlined in our programmatic document ‘*The 7Ds for Sustainability: In Depth*’ (Hefele, Welle et al. 2024). In its post–Second World War German tradition, Christian Democracy has also overcome the confessional divide of Protestants and Catholics by creating a union based on Christian-social, free–liberal and value–conservative ideas which are understood as complementary and not mutually exclusive.

As explained in Steven van Hecke’s contribution to this volume, Christian Democracy is pragmatic in the sense of advocating consensus, compromise and social harmony, as well as being anti-statist in character (all features that are also emphasised in Manfred Weber’s contribution). It insists that religion has a role to play in the public

space. Christian Democracy also shares conservatism's aversion to social blueprints, its functional view of the economy, and its respect for social norms and traditions, whilst also representing a special view of humankind.

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's chapter adds that Christian Democracy built the modern European welfare state and has a preferential option for the poor, while Tim Bale's contribution explains that its special welfare regime privileges families over the individual, is charitable and internationalist, and is socially traditionalist. Stefan Lunte clarifies how Christian Democracy could be built on very old Christian traditions, while Rosario Forlenza underlines that it is a distinct and developed political concept, far from just a method to execute power.

Finally, as elucidated by Martin Conway, Christian Democracy is also distinct from the Catholic pre-Second World War tradition, among other aspects, by fully embracing parliamentary democracy. Illiberal and authoritarian concepts cannot therefore claim the mantle of Christian Democracy but have to go back about a hundred years to refer to older concepts of religious political engagement that were not reconciled with pluralism.

What is conservatism?

Conservatism has been strongly moulded by the British Conservative experience, although continental European countries also possess distinctive strands of conservative thought and practice. In his contribution, David Willetts explains that the Conservative Party is an electoral coalition of a peasants' party focused on commitment, service and tradition, and a free-trade liberal party defending the market, choice and dynamism. It is held together by a strong and consistent urge to govern and prefers incremental reform over grand design. We could add that 'one-nation' conservatism adds a strong social component as well.

I believe that conservatives need to choose: what do they want to preserve? My view is that we need to identify what is not sustainable so that we can preserve the political order created after 1945 largely by Christian Democratic politicians in Europe, that which is based on European integration, transatlantic partnership and parliamentary democracy. Not every change is progress. This approach is fundamentally different from the 'revolutionary conservatism' of the 1920s and 1930s, which advocated authoritarianism and the undermining of parliamentary democracy, as I argue in my contribution. Giovanni Orsina's complements this by cautioning that, after decades of deconstructing traditional concepts, conservatism is both intellectually impossible and still a practical necessity.

How do things come together in the EPP?

Over the last quarter of a century, the collaboration between the Christian Democratic, conservative and liberal traditions in the enlarged EPP has shown that there are no real dividing lines among them in practice. The current composition of the EPP follows the German model of Christian Democracy developed after the Second World War. And, as Wolfram Kaiser argues in his contribution, Germany's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union) was fundamental to giving the EPP its current form. 'Pro-European versus nationalist' is the real line of separation, as the departures of both the British Conservatives and Fidesz have shown. Illiberalism is not compatible with the position of the EPP. As I explain in my chapter, the EPP essentially strives to preserve the political order established after 1945 that is based on European integration, transatlantic partnership and parliamentary democracy, and is therefore 'conservative' in a structural and systemic sense; that is, it is the party structurally committed to conserving the system.

The strongest and most successful EPP parties can be considered 'fusion parties', in the sense of bringing the three traditions mentioned above together, having started from different points of departure: the German Christian Democratic Union from the tradition of political Catholicism and Protestantism, the Spanish People's Party (Partido Popular) from conservatism, and the Polish Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) from a liberal core.

The EPP is therefore the political space where liberals who respect religion, conservatives who defend freedom against authoritarianism and Christian Democrats who embrace pluralism complement each other to build a Union of citizens and states, functionally complementing the nation state based on objective necessity.

The challenge of the extremes

The challenge of the populist right

As explained by Tim Bale in this volume, the populist right is built on nativism, authoritarianism and populism. The 'people' is understood by them as a closed, ethnic concept, implying that nobody else but they are legitimated to govern. As argued by Invernizzi Accetti, this approach of the populist right therefore endangers democracy and, in the understanding of Conway, invites parallels to the 1920s and 1930s, when that movement was called 'revolutionary conservatism', as Reho reminds us.

Edmund Fawcett's chapter explains that, content-wise, the populist right can be understood as a tactical alliance of otherwise discordant free-market globalists,

our-nation-first welfarists and ethno-cultural traditionalists, with the liberal elite as a common enemy. Invernizzi Accetti underlines how religious conservatism positively correlates with the vote for extreme-right parties, while Forlenza and Dzurinda recognise the centrality of the Schmittian concept of the enemy at work within them. The latter also insists on these parties' demagogic tendencies and the recurrent absence of a factual basis in their rhetoric and proposals. As I argue in my chapter, the populist right promotes 'social nationalism' rather than 'liberal internationalism' and is opposed to the system as such, essentially striving to destroy what Christian Democrats have built after the Second World War.

Why is the populist right rising? And if the populist right is reactionary, then, to what is it reacting?

If the composition of the European Parliament can be taken as an indicator of the development of political forces across the continent, then we see the growth of the extreme right starting in 2009 and continuing ever since. That year marks the early phase of the financial crisis and the debate about the viability of the euro. The crisis lingered until at least 2015 and can explain the creation of new parties such as the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) and others. What started as a subprime crisis in the US made the costs of global economic interdependence visible. Accordingly, one line of argument to explain the rise of the extreme right is economic and social, as we would expect.

Conway, Forlenza and Orsina refer to the effects of globalisation. Fawcett argues that confidence in globalisation has been badly shaken, and Teasdale that the lower middle class has been alienated. In the same sense, right-wing populist parties have been described in the past as non-conventional workers' parties that bring together citizens in a weaker social position, with lower salaries and pensions, and traditionalist values.

The second line of argument is cultural. Ignacio Cosidó Gutiérrez claims that we are seeing the reaction to aggressive culture wars from the left. Fawcett states that the illiberals of the left threaten the norms of free thought and expression, and adds that this is complemented by problems of cultural assimilation and acceptance of liberal-democratic norms in immigrant communities. As argued by Bale, the moderate right is therefore caught between a 'silent revolution' and a 'silent counter-revolution' in the cultural sphere. Dzurinda additionally underlines the cultural impact of the development of social media, which he sees as a game-changer favouring extremes.

Mass migratory flows, as well as the waves of refugees provoked by Putin's bombardment of Aleppo and his war of aggression against Ukraine, are also associated with periods of growth on the extreme right, as they can be understood as an economic and sometimes even cultural challenge. Overall, we seem to be confronted with a rebellion of the less well off, holding traditional values, incited by the experience of crisis and facilitated by the growing importance of social media.

Serious damage done

Whatever the causes of this phenomenon, serious damage has already been done. Donald Trump has transformed the Republican Party in the US into a populist political force, has shown his disrespect for basic democratic procedures and has endangered the transatlantic alliance. As well, as explained by Willetts, Brexit was made possible by an unlikely alliance between the socially excluded, on the one hand, and holders of generous pensions and property wealth who do not earn their income from paid work, on the other, both lured by false promises. The damage done will prove impossible to correct for at least a generation. Moreover, both Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) in Poland and Victor Orbán in Hungary have attempted to introduce authoritarian forms of government in their respective member states.

What can now be done?

Establishing a *cordon sanitaire* against the populist right has so far not worked. Attempting to erode extreme political forces by allowing them to participate in government—or, as Orsina argues, to ‘Romanise the Barbarians’—is a possibility, but, as explained by Invernizzi Accetti, is probably not enough and presents its own dangers. Conversely, Madalena Meyer Resende’s chapter recounts how Donald Tusk has been successful with a Schmittian strategy of maximum confrontation and the forging of a wide alliance that divided the votes of the religious right. In the end, as argued by both Hökmark and Teasdale, practical political action, including against a sense of disintegration and decline, will be crucial.

Conway, Forlenza and Orsina all argue that successful concepts and actions against decline will need to address the economic and social issues caused by globalisation that create angry politics, while Franck Debié advocates restrengthening the social tradition of Christian Democracy, and Willetts favours providing economic prospects for the younger generations. My chapter insists that the sustainability principle can help to future-proof policies and come up with that convincing narrative for the globalised world advocated by Fawcett, while Orsina emphasises the need to privilege the traditional conservative preference for the concrete over the abstract.

Bale underlines the need to manage migration, with Fawcett addressing the lack of liberal-democratic norms in immigrant communities and Alojz Peterle insisting on the importance of identity, culture, family and religion. Reho insists on the need to rediscover an understanding of Europe as a civilisation, and Orsina on the necessity of roots, though he wonders if there can be a ‘new conservatism’ after 50 years of deconstruction. Dzurinda underlines that the origins of Europe are Judeo-Christian, with tolerance

and respect for religious minorities, the outcome of free elections and support for the weaker all seen as essential values. Meanwhile, Lunte recommends defending cultural diversity and pluralism with an active reference to the Christian tradition, and Reho and I take a stance against cultural centralism at the EU level. Somewhat in the same vein, Ján Figel stresses action to protect religious minorities, and Fawcett suggests more openly challenging the illiberalism of the left.

Finally both Reho and I emphasise that federalism is to be understood as a mechanism to protect and complement nations and nation states, addressing their functional shortcomings, not replacing them, while Meyer Resende suggests giving a more prominent role to the nation, defined by the civic allegiance of citizens, rather than by ethnicities.

Conclusion: the responsibility of the EPP

How, then, should the EPP respond to the challenge we have outlined? A few overall considerations seem justified to me.

- The EPP is well placed strategically in the moderate centre of the political system, occupying in the new European Parliament hemicycle the space from the ‘centre to the centre–right’. From there, it can both attempt to counter the divisive cultural exaggerations of the left and fight the dangers of the right, while trying to keep the overall system stable.
- The EPP should continue to seek to integrate conservative political forces that are not anti-system and liberals that are not anti-religious, and gain strength following this expansion model, as it did successfully in the 1990s, following the idea of a ‘fusion party’ with Christian social, ‘value conservative’ and liberal ideas of freedom being equally respected as a common base and seen as complementary.
- Attempts by other parties to moderate more radical positions should be welcomed, because the stability of the system depends on it. The Greek Syriza finally took responsible decisions when in government in order to stay in the eurozone. Sinn Féin has moderated its stance, understanding that the best hope for Northern Ireland lies in its linkage to the EU. So far, Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni has played a more than constructive role in finding common solutions within and for the EU.
- The extreme right is growing because an increasing part of the population no longer feels represented by the traditional parties under changed economic, social and cultural conditions. Parties on the extreme right are becoming successful by offering ‘protection through closure’, but are endangering the political system established after 1945. Therefore, how can we ‘protect’ in an open society? As elaborated above,

the EPP must address the twin challenges of economic decline and societal and cultural disintegration.

- The economic challenges faced by citizens are real. Growth has been in steady decline for decades. Debt-to-GDP ratios are worsening. Leading innovation is happening outside Europe. European companies have largely disappeared from the top 10 in their respective sectors. Net investment is flowing out of the EU, while social mobility is made more difficult by the gap opening between those who inherit and those who do not, who are confronted with an increasingly inaccessible property market. Older properties are themselves devalued by the need for environmental upgrades, while inflation is hitting the lowest earners extra hard. At any time, a financial crisis could erupt, while ageing populations place an additional burden on our prospects for decades to come.
- Societal and cultural challenges are real as well. The advent of ghettos of immigrant populations in many big cities is not a sign of successful integration. Moreover, incoming migrants are still largely competing with the unskilled, rather than the skilled. Also, with the abolition of internal borders, the EU needs functioning external borders that can provide comparable levels of control and security—and they do not yet exist. Therefore, there is a reason why Central and Eastern Europeans are not convinced that we are on the right track on immigration policy. None of this, however, changes the fact that Europe is still the place where most people around the world would like to live.
- So how do we reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable? The core target group of the extreme right are disadvantaged citizens with traditional cultural views, especially those living in rural and former industrial areas. For those citizens, a functioning state is of the utmost importance, and this can only exist with a vibrant economy and a degree of cultural self-confidence. In 2023 the Martens Centre made its contribution to this agenda with its *The 7Ds for Sustainability: 175 Proposals for the Next Legislature*, which presents 175 proposals for the 2024–9 legislature (Hefele, Welle et al. 2023). We identified debt, defence, democracy, demography, decarbonisation, de-risking globalisation and digitalisation as the key areas where urgent action is required. In 2024 the 7Ds were elaborated further and published in extended form (Hefele, Welle et al. 2024). This was done with the help of external experts and with the aim of inspiring the debate about the political agenda for the rest of this decade. This provides us with an excellent starting position to make our society more future-proof and provide answers to the challenge of the extremes. Sustainability in a sustainable way.

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**THE EUROPEAN
PEOPLE'S PARTY**

The Soul of the Centre–Right: Christian Democracy in a Divided Age

Mikuláš Dzurinda

Summary

This chapter discusses the challenges and future of the European People's Party (EPP) in a turbulent world marked by social media influence, rising populism and cultural wars. I argue that the future of the EPP depends on balancing its conservative values and adapting them to new realities. This includes accepting different cultures and religions while maintaining universal values, regardless of individual religious beliefs. In this article, I warn against two contradictory traps: accepting prejudice against minority religions and succumbing to extreme progressivism. Instead, the EPP should walk a middle path and discern where necessary change turns into reckless modernism. This requires honest assessment to distinguish progress from harmful trends.

Introduction

Quo vadis, EPP, in a changing, turbulent world? We will no doubt agree that, over the last two decades, the world has seen profound shifts. From peace to turbulence, from global order to disorder and disorganisation. People may also wonder where leaders of the calibre of Ronald Reagan, Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher or François Mitterrand have gone these days.

A clear response is hard to find. It is, however, unquestionable that social media have played a significant role in this global confusion. It is also due to their influence that the structure of political parties, their orientation, focus and communication with voters has changed. A textbook example is Italy. Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana), the party that had ruled the country for nearly half a century, virtually vanished towards the end of the last millennium. Two decades and many changes after that, there emerged a new party whose ideological foundations were impossible to identify, the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle), which captivated Italians with its 'direct democracy'—the decision-making of sympathisers on social media.

Examples of the rapid emergence (and equally rapid demise) of such parties in twenty-first century Europe are numerous. The characteristic feature of these parties is their

propensity to close themselves off in their own ‘bubble’, and the absence of traditional party structures and of a conceptual or ideological basis. Instead of pursuing serious political debate and an argumentative approach, they prefer to wage a fierce struggle underpinned by hostility and hatred towards members of other political bubbles that pass themselves off as political parties. Instead of focusing on substance, they lay particular emphasis on marketing, on communication strategies designed not to offer sustainable solutions but to overwhelm potential voters and destroy political rivals. The dividing line is no longer the party’s orientation towards the right or the left, for lower or higher taxation, budgetary responsibility or debt. Such political parties are involved primarily in creating party bubbles, clans or gangs, divided on the basis of cultural wars, opinions on vaccination or climate protection, or on the basis of who is to blame for Russia’s war against Ukraine. Facts and arguments play a diminishing role. Becoming ever more significant are disinformation and propaganda, for which social media provide unlimited space.

These developments are giving rise to an unprecedented polarisation of the population, not only in the EU but also in the US and on other continents. The political configurations causing this polarisation have no choice but to continue to escalate it, fearing that the aroused voters would otherwise turn to another, more assertive, more aggressive clan.

And this is how the extremes are born and strengthened. Even though the extremes meet the demand of ‘crying for blood’, they do not meet the demand of producing a politics capable of addressing important issues for people and responding to current challenges. But how, then, should traditional political parties and their formations behave in this ‘new world’?

What position should the heirs of Europe’s founding fathers take in facing current developments?

The EPP, as the family of Christian Democratic and conservative–liberal parties across the EU, is holding its own against the pressures coming from all sides. Pressure is coming from progressive cultural revolutionaries as well as from national sovereigntists. It is coming from European centralists, environmental extremists, immigration enthusiasts, security pacifists, hard-line nationalists and populists. Is it possible to successfully ward off such pressure? Is there a firm spot on which the EPP member parties’ formations can lean, even while facing the digital tsunami, the advent of artificial intelligence, or the upending of the perception of cultural and ethical norms? What should they hold on to and what should they leave behind?

I am convinced that the world would be better off if political actors adhered to verifiable facts. The big challenge for the EPP is to put an end to the spread of lies,

disinformation and propaganda on social media. The dissemination of fake news or false accusations must be met by a call for accountability. The EPP must not fall for the misconception that striving for truth means attacking freedom of expression. If, until recently, we thought this might be the case, Russia's war against Ukraine has forced us to open our eyes wide.

Naturally, there are areas which are very sensitive and delicate, where the verification of facts is difficult or even impossible. There are also themes subject to one's own perceptions, taste and worldview. These areas require tolerance and respect for the opinions of others, but also the courage to confront one's own opinions, beliefs or convictions when considering those of others.

Current and future challenges for the EPP

The EPP has been and will be challenged mainly from two sides: from the progressive left striving for endless progress and relying on political activism, and from the national conservatives seeking to disseminate principles derived from a mixture of populism, self-serving interests, lack of education and religious dogmatism.

Where does the EPP stand in this struggle? Must the EPP go along with either of these antagonistic groups, or must it avoid the resulting dilemma, which in itself is a trap?

I am convinced that the latter is the correct course of action. The EPP can offer Europe a lot if it maintains and makes creative use of its conservative–liberal character. Throughout the entire existence of the parties forming the EPP, their conservative character has been manifested in the recognition of the Judeo-Christian origins of Europe and trust in those foundations, with the parties' political decisions being inspired by the principles deriving from them.

The liberal character of EPP parties has always been evident in their tolerance for the opinions of others, provided that they respected verifiable facts and generally agreed rules. The core rule has been acceptance of the outcome of free elections, but also important is the principle of checks and balances, including the positive discrimination of the smaller, weaker and more vulnerable in society.

The conservatism of the EPP in a new era

In my view, the future of the EPP depends on its ability to preserve both these liberal and conservative attributes in this new phase. This is not and will not be easy. The conservatism of EPP parties is and will be increasingly tested by its ability to properly process

various phenomena, including long-term immigration, which is admittedly controllable but unavoidable, and the resultant mixing of inhabitants of different cultures, religions and worldviews. It will have to be accepted that, to be a democrat and a European, one does not necessarily need to be a Christian, but may also be a Jew or a Muslim, for example. At the same time, we will be uncontestedly bound by the essential premise, that is, a scale of shared values, rather than by religious dogmas. There will be not only Christian democrats, but also Jewish democrats or Muslim democrats. However, we will all be from the EPP family. It should be natural for us, in the EPP, to have in our midst also non-religious people, those who have no religious affiliation but recognise the meaningfulness of universal values. Bringing us close to one another, these values will guide our minds in political deliberations and our hands in political voting.

The EPP will be able to hold its own through the chaos and pressure of the times provided it succeeds in avoiding a trap that is even more dangerous than that of prejudice against Islam, Hinduism or other religions. This trap is an increasingly aggressive progressivism and transhumanism. Those who do not want to jump on the wild wave of modernism are facing ridicule, scorn or wrath. The current, new phase of 'progress' is empowering new 'crusaders', who are organising a counter-offensive under the guise of conservatism. The EPP may feel a growing pressure to choose among these two warring gangs. But that is precisely what the EPP should not do. The EPP must make an honest effort to ascertain the point at which the necessary and useful change, the reform, becomes a gamble taken in the name of modernism, progress and progressivism. That will be the point where courage starts turning into madness.

A particular phenomenon of our era is cultural wars, such as the activism of groups fighting for the 'rights' of LGBTQIA+ people. Here, too, the EPP is under pressure to choose between activists and homophobes. I think we should belong to neither side. The problem with the former is that they articulate their demands as basic human rights. For instance, those who argue that entering marriage is not a right but a possibility enabled by the socio-political consensus and laid down in the relevant legislation, are quite often labelled as homophobes by progressive activists. The EPP must resist falling in line with this. Sexual orientation is a very private matter for each person. If a group of citizens decide to strive for the relationships of homosexual couples to be regulated by law, no one can prevent them from doing so, nor can anyone condemn these people or discriminate against them. If these citizens garner the support of members of a legislature for their proposal, the law will be up to democratic parliaments to decide. The EPP should consistently make sure that its members are free to make individual decisions on such matters according to each one's own judgement and conscience; it should avoid adopting 'recommendations' or, even worse, binding party resolutions.

In other words, even when it comes to these sensitive and emotionally charged issues, the EPP must not succumb to fashions or to the pressure of activist groups

or progressivist media. Only in this way will it retain respect, authority and thus its attractiveness to voters. Most voters understand very well that culture wars usually serve as a proxy agenda for those who strive to attain political power but do not know how to achieve it or are afraid to address the real issues of voters. On the contrary, the EPP has always been a formation focused on solving problems and achieving positive change. It should preserve this character at all costs, even in this tumultuously changing world.

Where we need to remain liberal

I have explained why and how the EPP is and should remain conservative. But why is it and should it also remain liberal?

Each political party can be characterised not only by the programme which reflects its conceptual and ideological premises, but also by how it perceives politics and its execution. Accordingly, we can speak about a party having a democratic or liberal character, or an authoritarian or dictatorial character.

A practice has been established in the EPP environment of making decisions by the broadest possible consensus, after the widest possible free debate. Naturally, where a choice must be made (e.g. between two candidates for one post), it is put to a vote. Every decision is taken with due regard also for the interests and voices of minority opinions. I remember a German friend reporting to me Helmut Kohl's remark to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) that, if a decision had to be taken between the interests of a large country and those of a small one, Germany should generally side with the smaller country. Chancellor Kohl obviously had a very good understanding of the principle of cohesion and inclusion.

In opposition to decision-making by consensus, and to having regard for minority opinion, there is the approach according to which if you win an election, you are empowered to do whatever you wish. This may be technically democratic, but it is certainly not liberal. This kind of authoritarian decision-making is not a rare occurrence, even in political parties within EU countries.

The EPP should not give up its liberal decision-making style; it is one that fosters participation, inclusiveness and trust. Decisions taken in this way are not only closer to the truth but they are also more sustainable. The robust politics that accompanies authoritarian decision-making may be more attractive to its consumers or voters but it is dangerous for the country because it suppresses opposition to those in power and the consideration of alternative proposals. This approach to politics often encompasses challenging the outcome of elections without any evidence, reluctance to hand over power, restrictions on the freedom of media and educational institutions and,

sometimes, even the persecution of political opponents. This is ultimately detrimental to countries so illiberally governed.

The EPP as a formation of the broad centre and centre–right

I have outlined the reasons and arguments for why the EPP is and should remain the formation of conservative–liberal parties. It is necessary also to answer the question of what its centre–right positioning on the European political map means.

The EPP's centrist nature defines its approach to cultural and ethical issues whereby it does not want to (and in my opinion should not) join any of the warring parties (nativists versus progressivists). The reasons for this have been outlined above. This centrist character of the EPP also stems from its ideas concerning the future shape of the EU. The EPP rejects the centralisation advocated by progressives, but it also rejects the status quo, where the EU is largely paralysed by the unanimity principle in decisions on key foreign and security policy issues.

The key method that the EPP must apply in its decisions on the future shape of the EU rests on the subsidiarity principle. The consistent application of this principle means that the EPP defends the sovereignty of member states in decisions concerning cultural and ethical matters, as well as those in education. On the other hand, the EPP advocates for decisions in foreign policy and defence to be made by qualified or super-qualified majority voting.

The EPP is not only uniquely but also correctly positioned on the issue of the future shape of the EU. While progressivists and leftists foster an ever-closer union, conservatives defend the status quo, and nationalists call for returning some competences to member states or even for the outright dissolution of the EU, the EPP offers a forward-looking and sustainable solution, which is optimal for the member states and for the EU.

Where the EPP leans to the right and why this is correct

One of the core features of the EPP and of its DNA is the belief in free economic competition and the market economy with an emphasis on its social dimension, as well as on responsible fiscal management. EPP parties give priority to the principle of saving and investing over the principle of borrowing and spending. They should retain this principle as a distinctive feature. However, exceptional events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, have demonstrated the EPP's flexibility in situations that are truly extraordinary and which affect all member states. The decision to issue, for the first time, common European bonds and to accept joint responsibility for this liability attests to

the character and responsiveness not only of the European institutions, in which the EPP is very strongly represented, but also of the member states.

Another highly distinctive ‘right-wing’ feature of the EPP and of its DNA is its strong emphasis on defence and security. In a changing global geopolitical context, pressure is growing on the EU to take ever-greater responsibility for the defence and stability of its neighbourhood. The EPP has not only grasped that challenge but has become a protagonist for the rapid building of a European Defence Union which is to become an organic part of the transatlantic alliance.

Finally, there is the challenge of the unrelenting immigration pressure on Europe. The EPP should recognise the fact that the EU’s capacity to absorb immigrants is limited. We should promote measures that make a distinction between refugees and immigrants pursuing their own individual goals. These objectives have to be harmonised with the labour market needs of our countries. However, restrictions must be imposed on those whose aim is only to take advantage of the social schemes of our countries and those who refuse to integrate into our communities and societies, not to mention those with a criminal record. The EPP should also have the necessary courage to support the ‘externalisation’ of immigration procedures wherever possible.

Conclusion

The example of Italy, and also that of Spain and perhaps most strikingly of Greece, demonstrates that, while parties built on values and ideas have brought long-term prosperity and prospects to their countries or managed to steer them away from disaster, ‘digital’ and progressivist parties, which consider progress as an absolute value, as well as nationalist parties, initially catch the attention of the media but ultimately bring their countries only minimal benefits, even if falling short of causing disaster. This is why the EPP has an obligation to avoid traps, resist the pressures and wrath of extreme forces on either side, and hold fast to its enduring values.

The Future of Christian Democracy in Europe

Manfred Weber

Summary

This chapter provides a political perspective on the contemporary relevance of Christian Democracy. It highlights Christian Democrats' commitment to party democracy within the EU, emphasising the role of Christian Democrats in promoting political identity, bridging diverse groups, and acting as a people's party and a stabilising force for democratic allies. It also highlights the usefulness of a positive political narrative such as that of Christian Democracy in building a party's identity.

Why address the issue of Christian democracy?

As President of the European People's Party (EPP) and Chairman of the EPP Group in the European Parliament, I am well aware that, beyond the fast-paced day-to-day politics, it is important for political parties and leaders to ask fundamental questions about what characterises and animates their political identity and future. Being a politician and not a political scientist, I drafted this contribution to formulate what I consider important questions for scholars from a political perspective.

Political parties need researchers from all academic disciplines. Researchers hold up a mirror for parties and open options for action. However, party research loses its political relevance if it focuses too much on the loss of relevance of parties, without pointing out possible options and avenues for action. Political parties have never been and are not static entities; they are subject to constant change as they move in the triangular relationship between political decisions, social anchoring and public acceptance. Analysing their transformation and identifying possible paths for the future makes research on parties politically relevant. This is especially true for the EPP.

The EPP is not a purely Christian Democratic party, but Christian Democracy is an important, arguably the main, pillar of our political family. Many programmatic, organisational and strategic considerations from Christian Democratic traditions still shape our political work today. Since Stathis Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen (2010) have argued that research on Christian Democracy—especially from a comparative

perspective—is underexposed, I am delighted by the growing interest in the phenomenon of ‘Christian Democracy’, especially among young academics.

Christian Democratic parties have shaped today’s EU like no other party formation. This is not only encouraging for my political work, but I also find it interesting from an academic point of view. Why has Christian Democracy shaped the EU, and what elements have been so important to its success that we need to build on them today to make Christian Democracy fit for the future? The success of Christian Democracy is not a historical anomaly, but the fruitful result of a programmatic, strategic and organisational approach. European Christian Democracy has left deep traces in today’s political reality, for example, in the social market economy and the development of many of our welfare states, as well as in European integration. As Christian Democrats, we can still draw on this tradition for further political success. We do not need to reinvent the wheel; we need to develop the car, to stay with the metaphor.

In my contribution, I would like to offer a political perspective on what I consider important for the future of Christian Democracy. I will do so by developing five theses: first, Christian Democrats believe in EU party democracy; second, Christian Democracy creates political identity; third, Christian Democracy builds bridges between different electoral groups; fourth, Christian Democracy is a people’s party; and fifth, Christian Democracy is an anchor for democratic allies. Each of the following sections develops one of these theses.

Christian Democracy nurtures party democracy at EU level

Representative democracy needs parties, and so does the EU. Citizens will never accept a purely intergovernmental Europe. Democratic legitimacy transferred solely via the nation states leads to backroom deals and thus, as Fritz Scharpf (1999) aptly described, to a trap of political entanglement. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process is crucial for the democratic acceptance of the EU. It is important that the people have a say in the final decisions: in parliaments as well as in governments. Voters must be able to decide who governs and who does not. That is why elections need programmes and candidates. The *Spitzenkandidaten* principle guarantees not only that parliamentarians are elected in the European elections but also that the head of the Commission seeks a mandate. The 2024 European elections took on a new dimension, as the sitting President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, decided not only to stand for re-election but also to commit herself to a clear programme, and she won thanks to both these elements. Furthermore, the EPP Group in the European Parliament and the EPP members in the Council and the Commission committed themselves to a common programme for the next five years. What is the norm in the member states is now also becoming the

rule at the EU level. At the same time, the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle gives party families a political goal, which is what makes them a political party in the first place. They compete in elections. This distinguishes them from interest groups, political circles or umbrella structures of large social organisations. Political identities are important for a stable party democracy, and European Christian Democracy provides it.

Christian Democracy creates political identity

A party is a political home and not merely an association rationally organised for the attainment of political office. Parties and party families cannot develop a long-term identity from the here and now of the current party competition. Joining a party may be a rational decision, but the sense of belonging is more than that. Every party needs its identity, which is more than its current successes, leaders or election campaigns. ‘Left’ and ‘right’ may be useful for differentiating political currents, but these labels are of little use for internal integration.

A clear identity can never be achieved by merely distinguishing oneself from others or by striving to hold a single office. In the long run, it is only a positive political narrative that creates the basis for a stable and successful organisation, because collective action needs to unite around common ideas. For policymakers, it is therefore interesting to learn from scholars how the original narratives emerged, what characterised them and which factors were decisive for their further development. These questions are currently under-explored in political party research and probably do not exist in a comparative perspective. Politically, they are important for three main reasons. First, in the long term, political integration—especially for European parties—can be neither charismatic nor purely functional, but only programmatic. Parties are not just cheerleading squads, nor are they just career networks. Narratives give parties ideas and require a programmatic identity. Second, narratives give parties not only political but also social relevance. This function of narratives is of enormous importance to the parties, as they are the link between the social and the political, two interdependent but non-overlapping worlds. The question of how parties need to adapt their narratives to social change, in order not to just follow change but to shape it, is therefore crucial to their future strength. Third, a narrative is not a party constitution, but it does provide an understanding of how a party family views politics as such and structures its internal party life, including the decision-making process.

In today’s party research, the end of these narratives is often described as the centrepiece of the decline of the people’s parties (Walter 2009). Yet, compelling stories are still in high demand in our societies. ‘I came to realise that people don’t vote based on policy, not even on facts. They vote on stories. And I became president, frankly,

because I told a pretty-good story about what America could be and should be', says Barack Obama in his autobiography (Obama 2020). This quote illustrates the dilemma of today's party politics. It relies too much on stories and not enough on narratives. Stories give a compelling explanation for why one does something, while narratives try to justify different social interests in a concept of society and shape it politically. In his story, Obama has certainly talked about values, political goals and programmatic points. His campaign story creates identification with a political project, such as his election as US president, but not a long-term identity. However, this is not a purely American phenomenon, applying only to this country with its much looser parties. We also find it in Europe: Macron's party On the Move! (En Marche!)/Renaissance, for example, has certainly created an identification, but not a profound political identity. The same applies to any personalised party, as such parties lack a common identity that is rooted in society.

The *familles spirituelles* attempted not only to formulate political responses to social and economic change processes and make claims to power, but also to identify social interests, to translate them into social values and to bridge social divides in common visions of the future (Beyme 1984). These values do not have to result automatically in grand ideologies, but they have to be more than personal or institutional ambitions. Otherwise, they can neither shape society in the long term nor move it in a particular direction. Consequently, Christian Democracy as a *famille spirituelle* is not just a political phenomenon that exists in different European countries, but a transnational idea that has developed a common vision of the future and that is socially anchored in very different countries. This distinguishes our *famille spirituelle* not only politically and programmatically, but also conceptually from right-wing populist or other personalised parties, for example.

Christian Democracy builds bridges

Some populists misuse Christian symbolism in their rhetoric as an element of demarcation from others. This has nothing to do with Christian Democracy. Christian Democracy did not arise from Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, but gradually developed through the formation of interdenominational parties. At a time when there were still Catholic and Protestant primary schools, Adenauer and other Christian Democrats were already working together on an interdenominational basis. They developed a unifying economic and social policy based on their Christian values. It was by no means arbitrary, and it was not built on social polarisation, but on social integration. Kees van Kersbergen (1995), as well as Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2019) and Rosario Forlenza (2017), have aptly described this in their works. Shaping and holding societies together

was and is the leitmotif of Christian Democratic politics. In the last 30 years, with the proclamation of the end of history and the rise of the technocratic process of policy formulation—Germany’s Hartz Commission being a good example—social negotiation processes have been pushed into the background. These times are now coming to an end. Today’s parties need again to develop a greater appetite for bringing societies together rather than simply trying to educate them. Christian Democracy has a head start in this respect. It has never had a social ideology, but has always emphasised the value of communities (Dierickx 1994).

In heterogeneous societies, this political approach is an advantage. Our European societies are heterogeneous, not only internally, but also in relation to each other. The delocalisation and centralisation of politics is the wrong approach. Building bridges requires reliance on the principle of subsidiarity; otherwise, the pillars of the bridge have no foundation. Christian Democracy has always believed in vibrant regions and capable nations, while focusing on small communities at the same time. For Christian Democrats, the economy has never been an autonomous entity, but a place to provide fulfilment for every individual. What does this mean for the organisation of the digital single market, for new trade agreements or for the development of artificial intelligence? These issues must first be discussed within the society before they are regulated. For example, the digital single market must work for the Amazon driver and the start-up founder as well as for the established industry and its employees.

Christian Democracy is a people’s party

How can such a negotiation process take place? Macron is trying to do it with citizens’ panels. Citizens’ panels may be a helpful tool for municipal projects, but they are of little use for complex social negotiation processes. They are also unable to allocate, select and aggregate interests and simply lack social legitimacy and accountability. The argument that they are a good complement to party democracy, as the latter should only give citizens the vote in elections, is simply wrong. Vibrant party democracy is exactly the opposite. It involves citizens, especially in between elections. That is the concept of the people’s parties. We should look back to the post–Second World War decades through to the 1980s, the heyday of the previous people’s parties. We need to learn from the model that existed then and transpose its key elements into the future, namely, inclusion, moderation, constant connection with people on the ground and openness to finding compromises.

The charm of the people’s party was always characterised by giving a voice to the under-represented and not wiping away their interests with a majority vote. Currently, politics is determined too much by the educated middle class (Krastev 2017). While

this phenomenon has been present since the twentieth century, what is new is that the educated middle class is now predominantly recruited from within its own ranks. As a result, its members often do not recognise, even from their childhood experiences, the everyday lives of other groups such as the working class, or those involved in agriculture. This lack of social knowledge inevitably leads to political uncertainty. We can see this in the political misjudgements that led to the yellow-vest movement in Paris or the farmers' protests in Brussels. Many politicians—especially those not from people's parties—are caught off guard by these forms of protest and find it difficult to meet them with adequate responses.

At the same time, we need to politicise our internal life as a European party even more. With the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle and the election programme, we already have two important components, but they are not enough. We must ask ourselves what other methods a European party can use to initiate opportunities for participation and political debate within the party. Organisational branches are important precisely because European societies are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Artificial intelligence can be helpful in breaking down language barriers, and digital technologies can significantly shorten geographical distances. Innovation will be necessary in the coming years, especially in organisational issues, in order to strengthen the logic of the people's parties. This is precisely where organisational research is needed more than ever.

Christian Democracy is an anchor for democratic allies

I would like to highlight the role of Christian Democracy in party competition. Christian Democracy has been strong when it has not avoided conflict, while also not escalating a conflict without good reason. In essence, Christian Democracy must be and always has been open to political cooperation with all democratic parties. This is the lesson of the inter-war period (Nipperdey 1986). It is not without reason that the EPP is the supporting core of the strategic centre in the European Parliament (Bardi et al. 2020). Yet, although Christian Democracy has always occupied and dominated the centre, it has never just been stuck there. Especially in the immediate post-war period, the 'educational achievement' of Christian Democracy was enormous. Christian Democracy has always sought and still seeks a clear demarcation from xenophobic, radical and/or authoritarian parties, its aim always being to intervene in both the liberal and the democratic right camps. It is precisely this strategic approach that distinguishes confessional parties from Christian Democratic ones.

Many European party systems are currently in a state of upheaval, which is leading to a reorientation of the democratic right. We cannot drive the parties and, above all, their voters into the arms of the right-wing populists. Yet, those who want to be open

to other parties must also have the courage to say who cannot be part of them. The very successful examples of past EPP expansion strategies, such as with the Spanish People's Party (Partido Popular) or the Italian Forward Italy (Forza Italia), as well as the negative example of the Hungarian Fidesz, show that the red lines I have described are not arbitrary, but are based on historical experience. For example, a pro-European stance, a transatlantic commitment to Ukraine, and a clear stance in favour of democracy and rule of law are fundamental. Ultimately, the red lines are about ensuring that the basic principles of Christian Democracy are not called into question in European cooperation. This also includes consensus orientation. For example, Forlenza has convincingly shown in a working paper (Forlenza 2021) that parties that focus on national egoism are limited in their European cooperation.

At the same time, European party families are by no means static. They must be able to adapt to developments in national party systems to continue to be relevant across Europe. However, a bold expansion strategy will only happen if it is politically, strategically, programmatically and organisationally attractive for both sides. The debate on the future of European Christian Democracy opens up this possibility.

Conclusion

The EPP's rich tradition of Christian Democratic principles provides a robust foundation from which to address today's challenges. By examining the programmatic, organisational and strategic elements that have historically contributed to Christian Democracy's success, we can find ways to adapt and innovate for the future.

Christian Democrats' success has always depended on our ability to build bridges between different parts of society. Our political tradition provides a blueprint for future success. Upholding party democracy, constructing a compelling political narrative, bridging societal divides and anchoring democratic principles will ensure the EPP's continued success in building a more democratic and a more prosperous Europe for the people.

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A European Identity for a More Democratic and United Union

Antonio Tajani

Summary

The European project and our common values are under attack as never before, as visible in Ukraine and in the Middle East. Christian Democratic thought can be of great help to navigate present and future challenges. Key elements for developing a vision of the future of Europe inspired by this thought include reflecting on identity and heritage; citizenship and institutions; migration and the economy; foreign and defence policy; leadership and sustainability; and finally, demography, the environment and artificial intelligence. The path towards a more competitive, secure and democratic EU ultimately requires a clear vision and sense of identity, where every reform and idea is embedded in this vision and aligned with the core values that inspire our action.

Introduction

In 2024 more voters than ever in history have voted in elections—around one half of the entire global population, including citizens of the EU, the US and India. The results of this unique year for democracy will prove consequential for years to come. The unjustified Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East and the humanitarian emergency in Gaza, following the heinous attacks by Hamas in Israel, as well as the activities of the Houthi terrorists in the Red Sea, highlight a geopolitical picture of great instability in Europe's vicinity. The European project and our common values are under attack as never before.

Asked to reflect on the relevance of Christian Democracy for today's Europe, it seemed appropriate to me to do so by sketching what I consider to be the key elements of a Christian Democratic vision and agenda for the future of Europe. Indirectly, this will hopefully also help readers to grasp more clearly the great difference between the values and priorities that I associate with European Christian Democracy and those promoted by alternative political forces, be they on the left, right or far right of the political spectrum.

Christian Democrats have always been staunch believers in the European project. I have therefore asked myself the following questions: how can the EU be a protagonist of peace in these turbulent times, and what direction should the integration process take to ensure the security and prosperity of our democracy? To answer them, in tune with the importance that Christian Democrats have always attached to culture, we should start by reflecting on what defines Europe.

European identity and heritage

Before being proclaimed, Trajan, who was of Hispanic origin, asked his father whether a foreigner could ever become the Roman emperor. 'By all means', was the answer, 'Rome is not a city, Rome is an ideal!' Paraphrasing these words, we could say that the EU is first and foremost an ideal that is rooted in our common values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and human rights. Europe is our way of life, the unity of people with different identities who choose to build a common path of peace and freedom. Europe is the only continent where capital punishment has been completely abolished, where human dignity is non-negotiable. Europe is a society based on the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, and on the ability to find effective compromises in the interest of all citizens; it is a Union where citizens cherish their unique national identities, and all these identities contribute to a common European identity. Even though we speak different languages and at times might have interests that are partly different, these values constitute the strong common denominator that allows us to move forward, united in diversity.

Our common history is based on three pillars: our Christian roots; Roman law, the ancestor of our rule of law; and democracy: Jerusalem, Rome and Athens. We have gone through positive and less positive phases, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, from the French Revolution to the reconstruction after two fratricidal wars. This rich history unites us to a large extent. Should we lose sight of all the historical and cultural elements that bring us together, we risk ending up thinking that Europe is made only of capable and authoritative officials who decide our destinies without ever having plunged their hands into the problems of everyday reality, a sort of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered machine that can produce some economically desirable effects but is not capable of protecting citizens and creating the best conditions for each European to follow their aspirations and dreams.

The contrary is true, and there are many examples of European integration starting centuries before the EU was even conceived. Is the Strasbourg Cathedral a work of French heritage or European heritage? Was Dante Alighieri an Italian poet—or was he the first great European citizen, who looked at our continent as one entity?

Are Beethoven, Cervantes and the Flemish painters national or European treasures? Together with our common values, cultural heritage constitutes the foundation of a European identity that is not in competition with our national identities but completes and enriches them.

Citizenship and institutions

In a world characterised by intensifying international competition and polarisation, the EU needs to play a stronger role, not only economically but also politically. Today more than ever, we realise that no single member state can guarantee the safety and well-being of its citizens on its own. Conflict situations require unitary solutions shared with international partners, as do the economic and energy crises, migration, the fight against climate change and digitalisation, with the increasingly pervasive evolution of AI and the risks linked to misinformation and fake news. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU demonstrated the ability to find new common solutions when they are most needed. The creation of tools such as the ‘Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency’ (SURE) (European Council 2020) was effective in saving jobs across the Union, and the NextGenerationEU fund (European Commission 2020), financed through an unprecedented joint issuance of common debt bonds, is helping member states to repair the immediate economic and social damage and pushing forward reforms that will make the Union more innovative, sustainable and inclusive.

However, there cannot be a stronger Union without a stronger common identity. Active European citizenship must be incentivised to escape the trap where funds and subsidies are the only concrete aspects of the EU that our citizens see. This starts with a more democratic Union. I have always advocated strengthening the role of the European Parliament, for instance, by granting it the power of initiative. It is the institution where citizens exercise direct democracy by electing representatives who defend the interests of the various European constituencies. The role of the Parliament is crucial to avoiding the administrative and bureaucratic excesses that unfortunately still occur, as even the most competent civil servants sometimes lack the proximity needed to understand all the specificities of a large and complex territory such as our Union. Such power as proposed must be coupled with a far-reaching cultural reform, the sense of being part of a common project inspired by the same passion that animated our founders, and which has recently been fading. De Gasperi, Adenauer, Schuman and Spinelli came from different countries and different cultural backgrounds but they felt themselves to be part of a common peace project. We have to revive this spirit to face the growing threats to our unique democratic model.

Migration and the economy

Our values need to translate into concrete policies that address the concerns of our citizens in their daily lives. This is how we show the benefit of the EU. The relationship with Africa and the issue of immigration have been on top of the list for years. The new pact on migration and asylum (European Parliament and Council 2024) is a step forward which took us several years to achieve because there is always a fear that we will not be strong enough to manage migrants and integrate legal ones in a way that allows them too to contribute positively to the European project. This is another example of why we need a stronger European identity. The fear that leads to the rejection of another human being and the excessive willingness to accept everyone without conditions are two opposite effects of the lack of identity. One needs to have a strong identity to be able to integrate without being afraid of a different culture. At the same time, one should never renounce one's identity in the name of integration. This would be a terrible mistake. Based on our common values and identity we need to work on concrete models because neither of these extreme approaches offers real solutions.

When it comes to the economy, we must have the courage to complete our work and implement crucial reforms concerning, for instance, the banking union, capital markets and fiscal harmonisation. There is a consensus that the single market has created sizeable economic benefits for European companies and for its 450 million consumers, who enjoy the highest standards of quality and safety in the world. The same goes for trade agreements, which have been a fundamental instrument for our economies. However, it just does not make sense to have a single market, a great single currency, and to stop there. Today, partner countries and large multinationals still look at us as an economic giant with feet of clay, while we are capable of greater economic strength and political weight. There is a need for state-of-the-art rules, for instance, on competition. We should ensure that European companies are in the best position to operate on a global level, the more so if we want to maintain an industrial base and have a truly competitive, real economy.

Competition is a fundamental pillar of our social market economy, but most of our competition rules were written when China and India were not major economies and the Iron Curtain still existed. Ensuring competitiveness for the coming decades, therefore, requires a modernisation of our rules. We also need a real industrial policy, with European champions that can occupy spaces on the global markets and compete with Chinese, American, Indian or even Russian companies, when the ongoing war finally ends with a just peace for Ukraine. More needs to be done for the almost 23 million small and medium-sized businesses that represent the backbone of our economy, as it is primarily they that create growth and well-paid jobs. To obtain results, a social dialogue between unions and employers is necessary, as is curbing bureaucracy by identifying and amending those EU rules that burden firms with little to no benefit for consumers.

Foreign and defence policy

A Union with more economic and political power is the way to protect our citizens. We cannot keep waiting for our American allies to intervene and decide what needs to be done to protect us. I have always been and will always be a great supporter of transatlantic relations and of NATO. Europe and the US are two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, we must have the strength politically to be allies on a more equal footing. We cannot risk only discovering that the king is naked on the day when the US turns out to be unwilling or unable to protect us. In foreign affairs, the EU has to improve its decision-making if we want to become more central actors. Moving away from unanimity voting in favour of more qualified majority voting in the Council is already possible under the current Treaties. It is fundamental to progress on this topic if we want to play a more political role regionally and globally.

A common European defence is equally needed. De Gasperi and Einaudi were among the earliest supporters of a common defence. Today EU countries in the aggregate spend a third of the defence budget of the US but our collective deterrence is not quite proportionate to that. A lot of money is bringing poor results for our citizens. A European defence will require the implementation of several steps, from enhanced coordination to an industrial defence policy, from harmonisation of weapons systems to greater integration projects between national armed forces. I am also in favour of appointing a European defence commissioner, which would be a positive step forward. What is urgent is to set the EU on such a path now, so that results can be seen in the forthcoming institutional mandate. Flying the EU flag with a military presence, within the NATO framework, does not constitute warmongering; rather, it means having the capabilities to bring help to people in need, to secure international trade, or to react when calamities and natural disasters hit. In the end, it would mean also taking a stronger role in NATO economically, more in balance with respect to our Atlantic partners.

Leadership and subsidiarity

Another reform that should be seriously considered is to establish a single leader for the EU, elected directly by the citizens and encompassing the roles of president of both the European Commission and the Council. Citizens would feel more empowered, and the Union would avoid situations in which we could be exposed politically, as we have witnessed on several occasions. It is more than a question of protocol; it is profoundly political, and we must have the courage to move our Union forward. Finally, it is crucial to also keep looking at opportunities for enlargement. We should double our efforts and work together with the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova,

as accompanying these countries on their paths to accession would strengthen our continent.

Reforms require far-sighted political parties and appropriate resources. European election campaigns should be seen as crucial occasions to talk about what we want our Europe to do and how to do it. Otherwise, we cannot blame people for not turning up to vote. While it is natural that citizens tend to give priority to local issues closest to them, we have the responsibility to explain that the stakes of European elections are also important. Do we want a more democratic or a less democratic Europe? Do we want a safer Union? In which direction should we orient negotiations on the Union's budget? These are examples of questions that are shaped by the outcome of European elections.

I am a staunch supporter of the principle of subsidiarity. Europe does not have to deal with everything. Mayors and regional councils have a crucial role in our multilevel governance and their role should be enhanced in the EU. However, there are common challenges and global trends that must be addressed urgently and the nation states, the regions and the municipalities cannot provide effective solutions in isolation. We have to explain to citizens that in many cases the Union is probably best placed to decide, and introduce the debate on these issues across Europe.

Demography, environment and AI

Demography is a major issue, politically and economically. Ageing and population decline will have a profound impact on the entire social fabric, including our social security and health care systems. The first thing to do in this field is to ensure that no woman is forced to choose between motherhood and work. We have to support families with children, ensuring accessible and high-quality care for our new generations. In addition, we have to boost proximity and digital health care services to improve the quality of life of our elderly residents and those who live in less densely inhabited areas, while also lowering the pressure on our hospitals. The European People's Party has already launched a very successful European cancer plan (European Commission 2021) and shown that Europe can be there for its citizens, when in need. Today we must launch a plan to prevent deaths from cardiovascular diseases. We can also do more to help families dealing with mental health issues. I envisage a Europe that leaves no one behind, starting with the most fragile, including people with disabilities.

Protecting our planet and addressing climate change is also a key priority if we want to deliver a better world for the next generations. However, I am sceptical of certain ideological decisions regarding environmental policy. Our farmers and our entrepreneurs are telling us that this approach is not workable for them, as it makes it impossible for them to go on producing our food. At the same time, they are willing to work towards

environmental objectives, and listening to their grievances is indeed the only way to achieve the ambitious results that we are aiming for. We need to work together with our productive sectors to develop solutions as opposed to merely imposing bans and constraints. We should continue, for instance, our efforts to complete the European energy market, with the objective of having more strategic autonomy, less dependency on third countries, and greener but also cheaper energy sources, including clean nuclear energy.

Finally, AI represents an opportunity that must be seized and regulated intelligently. Prudence must inspire our action, as this new technology will have an impact on all aspects of society, and it brings not only great opportunities but also risks, notably with regard to employment. It is crucial that we avoid turning AI into a kind of deity dominating every sector. All choices must put individuals at the centre. AI too must be at the service of individuals and society at large, not vice versa.

Conclusion

The path towards a more democratic and united Union ultimately requires a clear vision and sense of European identity. Every reform, every idea needs to be part of this vision, to fit with the core values that inspire our action. Having Christian values at the core of our policies is neither a theological nor a religious matter. I am a Christian and I believe in the separation between the state and the church: 'Réddite quae sunt Caésaris Caésari et quae sunt Dei Deo'. It was indeed Roman law that established the centrality of the person on our continent, in the same way that the Romans built the first European 'highways', such as the Via Francigena, or issued the first coins that were exchanged across Europe. It is crucial that Christian Democrats pursue a model where the human being, as opposed to the state, is at the centre of the political and social orders. Our values, history and cultural heritage are the essential elements of our common identity. With this common denominator in mind, we must work together to unleash the full potential of our economic and political strength. A European identity based on our values is the trigger to revive the spirit of the Christian Democratic founders; to move forward with necessary reforms; and to build a flourishing, more democratic and stronger EU that protects the next generations of Europeans and enables them to prosper.

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The Future of the Centre–Right in Europe and the 7Ds

Klaus Welle

Summary

The party political structure in Europe is in full transition, with a slow but consistent strengthening of the right and extreme right on the continent. This poses important questions not only about the political dividing lines that separate these spaces but also about what constitutes the dividing line that sets the European People's Party apart from both. The key argument is that the European People's Party can be understood as the political space that defends European integration, the transatlantic partnership and the democratic order that was established after 1945, and is the political project for reconciliation in society, reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable through concepts such as the social market economy, subsidiarity, personalism and federalism. Sustainability across policy areas, reconciling the present and the future, is thus the necessary complement.

Introduction

Does the party political structure on the centre–right and right in Europe follow logic? And if the answer is yes, how could it be described more precisely? What are the hard-content borders between political families that cannot be crossed?

There are evidently different perspectives from which these questions can be answered. Mine is the perspective of a practitioner who has dealt with or at least closely observed these issues for more than 30 years: as president of the umbrella organisation of the European Young Christian Democrats and Conservatives in the early 1990s, as secretary general of the European People's Party (EPP), as secretary general of its parliamentary group in the European Parliament and then for more than a decade as secretary general of the European Parliament itself.

In the second half of the 1990s my prime responsibility as secretary general of the EPP was to establish the party for the first time in direct elections as the leading force in Europe. Through a policy of 'mergers and acquisitions', this aim was achieved in the European elections of 1999, laying the foundations for the dominant position of the EPP in the EU for the next quarter of a century. This was an indispensable precondition

for the successive presidencies of the European Commission held by José Manuel Durão Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen.

Political parties joined the EPP on the basis of its political programme as adopted in Athens in 1992 (Jansen and Van Hecke 2011, 283–317). They came from both the liberal and the conservative sides of the political spectrum and their respective European political organisations.

The Portuguese Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata) as well as the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége) from Hungary left the Liberal International and its European branch and switched to the EPP. The Nordic conservatives and the French Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la République) had long cooperated in the European Democrat Union before they fully integrated into the EPP and that Union was dissolved. Similarly, Forward Italy (Forza Italia) was also admitted to this enlarged EPP.

The EPP thus branched out in two directions at the same time and absorbed parts of both the liberal and the conservative families in Europe. Ultimately the party's development followed the model of German Christian Democracy, which had become established after the Second World War as a union of Catholics and Protestants and therefore needed to embrace both the Catholic Christian-social and the Protestant conservative and liberal traditions.

This branching out also marked the departure from nominalism. To be admitted, it was no longer sufficient to have Christian or Catholic in the party's name. Consequently, a number of applicants from Central and Eastern Europe which had labelled themselves Christian or Catholic, such as the Polish Christian National Union (Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe), were rejected on the basis of their hostility to European integration.

This departure was a practical necessity. Law-making in the European Parliament requires the formulation of common positions, especially on European integration.

How did things work out in practice?

All the new partners integrated well in terms of parliamentary work. Liberal, Christian Democrat and conservative did not prove to be fundamental dividing lines in daily practice, but useful complements in the widened EPP. Forward Italy even became the most loyal delegation in the group, based on voting patterns. The enlargement strategy was vindicated, but the question of European integration did ultimately prove to be a hard demarcation line.

Both the British Conservatives and the Hungarian Fidesz national leaderships turned increasingly against European integration. It is accurate to say that they were

hostile more than sceptical. The British Conservatives left the parliamentary group in 2009, taking a nationalist turn as a prelude to the country leaving the EU after the referendum in 2016. Viktor Orbán’s campaign of hatred against Jean-Claude Juncker and his cosying up to Vladimir Putin and Marine Le Pen made Fidesz’s relationship with the EPP untenable. Orbán’s undermining of democratic checks and balances inside Hungary itself completed the picture.

The real dividing line, therefore, is not conservative, liberal or Christian Democrat, but European or nationalist.

The nationalist space divided

Within that nationalist space, the real dividing line has principally been between pro-American and pro-Putinist positions in the external dimension, as well as—largely linked—between constructive engagement with the EU or systematic opposition to it in the internal dimension. This has resulted in the creation of two separate political groups within the European Parliament.

The extreme right within that nationalist space can therefore be characterised as a double-system opposition: undermining both the transatlantic partnership and European integration. The political order established after 1945, with democracy, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of the press, pluralism, the transatlantic partnership and European integration as its key components, has more than proven its value. After more than 70 years, questioning this can no longer qualify as conservative. If a claim to conservatism can be made on the extreme right, then it is only in the sense of pre–Second World War concepts. That is, conservatism as authoritarianism and illiberalism.

It is a nationalism that promises to protect through closure and is attractive to those left behind. It is how Donald Trump won his majority the first time around, by appealing to coal and steel workers. It is why Marine Le Pen is elected in the former Communist heartland of coal-mining northern France. And it is how Boris Johnson broke the ‘red wall’ of former Labour constituencies in industrialised northern England. It is social nationalism.

Is change possible?

Following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this division in the nationalist space might be overcome and a larger bloc emerge. Putinism is no longer a viable option in civilised Europe.

But equally, the necessities of government can lead to moderation and learning and a more open attitude towards European integration. This is where the leading parties of both the Czech and the new Italian government seem to be heading. Thirty years after the collapse of Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana), the Italian political landscape is still in full transition with an undecided outcome.

Political parties have moved to the nationalist right, as explained above. But the opposite is equally true, has happened and remains a possibility for the future. The successful transformation of the Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular) in the post-Franco era into the moderate and pro-European People's Party (Partido Popular) is the most striking example. José María Aznar restructured the Spanish political space by uniting his conservative party with smaller Christian Democrat and liberal formations. The full embrace of the post-1945 political order, including European integration, is the necessary precondition.

The stability of the EU's political system depends on the self-moderation of more radical political movements towards the centre, both on the left and the right, and such moves should therefore be encouraged and welcomed. Greece's Syriza, which originated on the far left, did this during the financial crisis, accepting the need to conduct the necessary reforms to allow Greece to stay in the eurozone. Sinn Féin will have to do this as well, if it ever wants to govern Ireland.

In practice, the transformation into a constructive player equally opens up the possibility of addressing legitimate questions more successfully. The importance of the external border of the Union and its protection, limits to migration and the lack of public services in rural areas are just some of them.

Why is acceptance of European integration so essential?

The European continent nowadays is structured by two principles and two principles only: empire in the east as the expression of Russian imperial and colonial ambitions, and the EU as a union of citizens and states in the centre and the west, providing shelter and protection and a relationship based on the rule of law. It is no wonder that states such as Ukraine and Moldova are desperate to join the EU as a safe haven. And even those states that have never wanted or no longer want to be members still feel the need to enter into close contractual relationships with the EU.

Empire is not an attractive option for Russia's neighbours, because it is linked necessarily to violence and submission. The concept of empire is an attempt to reintroduce the rules of the nineteenth century to our continent in the twenty-first century. For all Central and Eastern European countries, the EU is, in a very direct sense, the rescuer of the nation state and the precondition for its survival.

But beyond that, the EU provides all the 27 member states with mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution and functionalities that they cannot establish themselves. The EU is the necessary complement to the nation state, allowing it to thrive and prosper, as even the British have belatedly started to realise. Together we can defend our interests in a world that is becoming increasingly dangerous again. The EU is our daily *modus vivendi* and *operandi*.

Can the EU protect?

If populist political forces are more correctly described as social nationalists that respond to requests for protection through closure, this raises the question of whether the EU can also protect, but in an open political system.

The recent history of crisis can also be understood as a process of giving the EU the necessary tools to protect. As a consequence of the financial crisis, the European Central Bank can now oversee the most important systemic banks across the member states. It successfully enlarged its toolkit to avoid deflationary pressures. Following the 2015 crisis of uncontrolled migration, the EU now has a European Border and Coast Guard and has managed to enter into well-functioning agreements with neighbouring states to better control migration flows. After the first six weeks of national governments trying to manage the Covid-19 pandemic on their own, setting up border controls and export restrictions, the European Commission successfully took over and ensured that all member states, rich or poor, big or small, received equal access to the necessary materials, especially vaccinations. Furthermore, the NextGenerationEU programme has provided all member states, but especially those most affected by Covid-19, with the financial means to transform their economies (EU 2023). Russia's aggression against Ukraine has seen the EU taking a leadership role in supporting Ukraine and therefore protecting its Eastern member states, including implementing very severe sanctions, financing weapons and taking bold measures to revitalise the European defence industry. The EU is now undertaking to secure its access to the critical raw materials and technology needed to protect European industry. All of the above examples show that Europe is increasingly demonstrating that it can complement the liberalisation efforts of the internal market with the effective protection of its citizens.

What could the programmatic base of the modern EPP look like?

The enlarged EPP brings Christian Democrat, conservative and liberal political ideas together in an integrated political platform. The EPP fully embraces the liberal political

order as firmly established after 1945, including parliamentary democracy, pluralism, the rule of law and minority rights, as well as a general preference for the market over the state, and therefore, it can never support illiberalism.

Modern conservatism continues to provide a number of eternal truths: not every reform is progress. There is the wisdom of many generations stored in the existing institutions. Revolutions and extremism have more often than not been recipes for violence, hardship, and the disrespect of human rights and life. Pragmatism and common sense are to be preferred over ideology.

The key conservative ambition is to preserve. Sustainability is the precondition for preservation. What is not sustainable violates justice among generations and endangers our common future. If conservatives want to preserve, sustainability is the way forward.

Christian Democracy is based in essence on a number of concepts for reconciliation of the seemingly irreconcilable in society: the social market economy, personalism, subsidiarity, federalism, the people's party and the party of the centre. Establishing a fair balance in society is the political vocation of Christian Democracy.

There is always a danger that societies give preference to the present over the future. But we have also experienced Communist regimes that destroyed the present in the name of a brilliant future that never came. Sustainability requires reconciling both, today and the future.

Sustainability therefore has to be the key ambition, uniting generations. Sustainability cuts across political domains, is visibly endangered today and needs to address the '7Ds' as elaborated and published by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, along with 175 precise political proposals (Hefele, Welle et al. 2023). The 'D's are as follows:

- *Debt* sustainability ensures that we are not living at the expense of future generations.
- Our *defence* needs urgent upgrading and an increase in Europe's capacity to at least defend ourselves conventionally in order to guarantee our freedom and lives tomorrow.
- Achieving carbon neutrality through a process of *decarbonisation* while preserving energy security and competitiveness is critical.
- Fair burden sharing between the generations needs to balance out the changing *demography*.
- Our *democracy* is endangered by totalitarian regimes, executive overreach, and the control of traditional and new social media by the few, and it needs active strengthening.
- We need to more fully embrace the *digital* revolution if we want to remain competitive.
- The collapse of the Soviet Union made price the dominant paradigm. This has now been replaced by security considerations; thus, we need to *de-risk globalisation*.

Max Weber taught us that politicians need passion (*Leidenschaft*) and balanced judgement (*Augenmaß*). Sustainability will therefore need to be implemented in a sustainable way (Weber 1926).

Conclusion

The EPP is a political project defined by European integration, transatlantic partnership and the defence of the democratic order established after 1945. The EPP brings together people's parties, which aim to be the force of reconciliation in society and are underpinned by integrative concepts such as the social market economy, subsidiarity, personalism and federalism. These necessarily have to be complemented by the pursuit of sustainability across policy areas, thus reconciling the present and the future.

Note

This article was first published in French in *Le Grand Continent* (spring 2023) with the title 'Le nouveau visage des droites en Europe et le conservatisme du futur' and then in English in the *European View*, the policy journal of the Martens Centre, as 'The Future of the Centre–Right in Europe and the 7Ds'.

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Strong in the World but Limited in Our Daily Life: Some Reflections on the EU and the Centre–Right at a Defining Moment for Both

Gunnar Hökmark

Summary

To understand the Europe of today, recognising the role of European centre–right parties is crucial. These parties were pivotal to building European institutions and to advancing freedom and democracy, from the ruins of the Second World War to the challenges of the 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall and beyond. Despite important nuances between the various centre–right traditions in Europe, their overall ideological and political unity today appears strong. Looking forward, the centre–right’s focus should be on building a robust EU while limiting its intervention in citizens’ lives. A strong EU is needed to defend basic freedoms and the rule of law, as well as to address external threats, especially Russia’s aggression, which requires a united response. At the same time, EU interference in the decisions of individuals, families, communities, member states and the economy must be limited in order to develop a resilient, pluralistic, competitive and united Europe where freedom allows societies to flourish. The goal must be a political agenda that dominates the centre of the political spectrum, addresses Europe’s fundamental challenges, and unmask the lack of answers from extremists and populist forces. In setting such an agenda, the European centre–right will emerge as an even stronger political alternative, able to attract not only the votes of today’s frustrated voters leaning towards populist and nationalistic parties—which lack political solutions but are riding on people’s discontent in a time of new challenges—but also the vast majority of Europeans looking for a better and secure future.

Introduction: the path to a united Europe has never been straight

When looking back, the line of history seems straight and foreseeable. But it is not really so when the future is still open and a choice must be made between various possible courses of action. Thus, today the destiny of Europe lies in our hands, just as it did

for Churchill, Schuman, Adenauer, De Gaulle, Kohl (Churchill 1946; Schuman 2020; Blume and Zündorf 2016; Kudascheff 2017) and several other leaders who faced the challenges of their time. For us today, just as for them in the past, it is about our choices and priorities, the solutions we offer to the fundamental challenges that our societies are facing and the way that we stand up for the Europe we believe in.

If one looks back to the year of 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, one might similarly get the impression that the path towards freedom and democracy was unavoidable. But it was not so at all, starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall itself, which in reality never just fell but was torn down and destroyed by people who triggered the events resulting in the reunification of Germany and the fall of the Eastern European dictatorships. Even earlier in that summer, two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians had joined hands, from the southernmost parts of Lithuania to the northernmost corner of Estonia, in a hugely symbolic demonstration of civic strength.

I could multiply the examples of earlier and later decisions that were not inevitable but were made at certain specific moments by brave people, enabling the path towards democracy and freedom that now seems so self-evident but might never have occurred: from the decisions that laid the groundwork for the economic success of Western market economies and the economic failure of Eastern socialist ones, to the many steps—each requiring enormous effort—towards the gradual integration of the newly liberated states into Euro-Atlantic structures, culminating in the EU enlargements from 2004 to 2013, when Croatia became a member.

I should also mention that the obstacles to freedom and a united Europe were numerous throughout. For example, during the 1980s, the left and Social Democratic parties in Western Europe, with only a few exceptions, campaigned for unilateral disarmament in response to the deployment of Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe, entertaining the illusion that the Communist regimes would be peaceful dictatorships (Fox 1982). Had Western Europe disarmed at that time, Communist regimes would have militarily dominated Europe, and their dictatorships would have been further consolidated domestically. Social Democratic parties would then have advanced their plans for common security agreements with the Eastern regimes, naively believing this to be a path to peace.

It was centre-right parties that stood up to the Soviet Union, the movement for unilateral disarmament in our own countries and the notion of accepting dictatorships as partners for peace (Hökmark 1983). Centre-right forces also rejected the idea of planned economies and promoted the development of free markets. Had they given in, it is unlikely that the crisis and implosion of the Eastern bloc would have occurred. Centre-right parties were united in this, almost regardless of their political traditions—whether conservative or Christian Democratic—because they ultimately shared a common identity.

Natural convergence and synthesis between Christian Democrats and conservatives

The common ground among centre-right parties—conservative, Christian Democratic, even Gaullists—had already become evident in the immediate post-war period, when they laid the foundation for the modern institutions of the new Europe in their respective countries. They also established the European institutions that kick-started the unification of Europe. Moreover, all these parties, including my own, fought against the socialists and Communists who wanted to abandon the market economy and experiment with planned economies.

Despite important nuances, on the most decisive issues shaping post-Second World War Europe, our parties stood together: we defended the freedom of our nations, while also standing up for Europe's freedom; we embraced the rule of law and democracy; we understood that dictatorships are always governed by a logic of violence, suppression and hostility towards democracies; we recognised that only free societies characterised by individual freedom, a market economy and entrepreneurship can defeat poverty and generate prosperity; and we believed that only in open societies can humane values, norms and traditions survive and thrive, enriching culture and civilisation.

Largely thanks to these ideals championed by centre-right parties, from the ruins of 1945 Europe became the free and prosperous continent of today, where millions around the world would like to resettle and live. This seems to me to be the synthesis of Christian Democracy and conservatism, both grounded in the ideals of liberal democracy, which justified the convergence between these two movements. In my experience, they have always been closer to each other than we are accustomed to think, despite stemming from different political, cultural and religious heritages.

No doubt, Christian Democracy and conservatism have different histories. For example, in European countries with a Protestant state church, we tend to have conservative parties that defend the ties between church and state as well as traditional values. But in other countries, mainly in Continental Europe, where church and state came into conflict, Christian Democratic parties emerged to defend the role and values of the church in society, often in opposition to liberal forces seeking to curb the church's influence. In these latter countries, liberal and Christian Democratic parties were often opposed to each other, while in Northern Europe, conservative parties had adopted liberal principles as their own, particularly in economics and in believing in a strong but limited state. The history of former Communist countries is, of course, different still. With all political parties but the Communist Party forbidden, the church played the role of the only public agora where people could gather and hope for a better future, without too strong restrictions from the regime. Thus, after the fall of the Communist regimes,

the church had a much broader role and more legitimacy in these societies, serving as a foundation for a new social order in which the state was no longer the dominant force.

Despite differences in their historical developments, however, centre-right and conservative parties are more alike than we are inclined to believe. They have all played a similar role, though in different national contexts. In other words, it seems to me that they have different histories but relatively similar policies and that they have been moving in the same direction.

The future of Europe

With regard to the best vision of Europe's future for centre-right parties—Christian Democratic, conservative and moderate liberals—we must strive for an EU that is strong and competent in safeguarding security and fighting crime, developing economic prosperity and global leadership, addressing climate change and facing other common challenges. However, the EU should be limited so as not to interfere with the decisions and actions that belong to business and civil society, as well as those better taken at the national, regional and local levels, or even directly by citizens and families. Freedom is under threat in the contemporary world, and defending freedom requires a strong Europe. In the past, European integration has been about uniting Europe's nations within a security system that would make war between European states impossible, bridge the rift between the Eastern and Western halves of the continent, and end centuries of antagonism in the Balkans. Today, European integration must also be about mobilising Europe's strength to consolidate our strategic alliances, reinforce our strategic capabilities and confront external threats (Hökmark 2015).

For the foreseeable future, the heart of this matter will be Ukraine. The way we defend Ukraine's right to freedom, peace and EU membership will shape the European continent for decades to come. It will define whether we have the unity needed to act together and defend European borders from aggressive regimes like today's Russia, and whether we can sustain enough cooperation and integration to be a geopolitical force underpinned by a robust and innovative economy. We are experiencing a defining moment for Europe—one of those moments when politicians need to make the right decisions to steer the course of history in a desirable direction. Today, this means doing everything necessary to ensure that Russia is defeated and that the crimes against humanity and the rule of law perpetrated by Putin and his collaborators are punished.

It also means ensuring that Ukraine and Moldova can enter into a genuine negotiating process in their quest for EU accession, with the understanding that, in countries at war or facing an imminent threat of war, the normal process will have to be adjusted and directed towards functional integration, where EU authorities will play a larger role

in the negotiating country than in any past accession process. More broadly, the door to the EU must be kept open to all the other countries of the Balkans and southern Caucasus, and accession negotiations must be initiated whenever possible.

We should not turn a blind eye to developments in Georgia, where a ‘Russification’ of the political system is occurring, characterised by new legislation undermining the free formation of opinions and the harsh treatment of political opponents like Mikhail Saakashvili by the current regime. Mikhail Saakashvili must be set free, as we cannot allow another murder like that of Alexei Navalny in Russia.

All this is ultimately about the peace and security of Europe, which is the essence of European integration.

Given the uncertain strategic posture of future US administrations, European security also requires strengthening the European pillar of NATO and increasing the responsibility of Europeans for our own defence. This necessitates significant increases in defence spending, a common policy and internal market for the defence industry, the development of an effective common security policy (Oksanen and Hökmark 2023) and a foreign policy with decision-making based on qualified majority voting. It also includes developing the rapid deployment capacity of the EU through effective battle groups capable of projecting military force outside of Europe whenever needed. However, we will not be able to defend Europe against the threats of Russia, China (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2023) or Iran by military means alone. Europe also needs a functioning cybersecurity infrastructure, effective investment screening regarding strategic assets and knowledge, and a well-developed dynamic internal market in order to resist political pressure, blackmail, corruption and money-laundering attempts.

From this broader security perspective, we also need to give growth and competitiveness in Europe a new start by attracting and stimulating investments in profitable businesses, establishing an open and competitive capital markets union, and promoting structural reforms. At the beginning of the last decade, the EU and the US were of roughly the same economic size, with the EU being marginally larger than the US, while China accounted for only a quarter of our common transatlantic economy. Over the last decade, both China and the US have outperformed the EU, with the US now being by far the largest global economy, while the EU has fallen to third place. This is a failure, undermining prosperity, welfare and vital labour markets, and, worst of all, damaging our ability to act as a geopolitical force at the global level.

Centre-right parties must continue to advocate for more entrepreneurial economies where companies can develop into global leaders—not through protectionism, but through competitiveness. From this perspective, the currently fashionable idea of strategic autonomy, often a fig leaf for protectionism, is, in reality, a hurdle to Europe becoming a global leader. Regardless of what the US does, the EU should continue to champion open trade, conclude new trade agreements and strengthen the WTO.

As achieving all these goals requires a strong Europe, centre–right parties should champion European unity while rejecting uniformity and centralisation. The EU must develop the internal market much further and deeper in order to create a dynamic European economy, secure our efforts to fight climate change, and position ourselves as leaders in the digital transformation (Fölster 2023; Neretnieks et al. 2022) with deep and broad capital markets. It should also create an effective common policy for security and defence. However, we do not need common rules for, for example, social security or workers' rights—matters on which different societies prefer different standards and which are therefore best left to each member state.

This programme, it seems to me, is also our best hope of defeating the many internal adversaries of free societies, often extremists of different kinds who reject the fundamentals of freedom—whether from the extreme right, the extreme left or due to religious fanaticism. Their policies will not move our societies forward but will only create conflict and polarisation.

The extreme right is not right at all; it exploits fears and prejudices, ignoring the fact that isolated nation states would be exposed to the influence of external powers such as Russia, China and Iran. Those on the extreme right could never deal with the challenges of today. Disunity would harm economic growth, undermine the rule of law and empower the state at the expense of a vital civil society.

The extreme left belongs to the past, when the state wielded immense power over citizens and civil society, instead of serving them. An economy characterised by high interventionism, a dirigiste approach and protectionism would only weaken us, limit freedom and hinder economic growth.

Finally, Islamists deny individual freedom, disrespect basic human rights, and spread hate instead of the tolerance and love that must characterise free societies. Against all these forces that, in various degrees and ways, endanger the fundamentals of free societies, we must strengthen moderate positions, champion democracy and freedom, and show that welfare and prosperity go hand in hand with these values.

Conclusion

Against extremists of both the right and the left, therefore, for the European centre–right the right approach remains winning over and maintaining the centre of the political spectrum at the same time as manifesting a policy that can attract all those who, out of frustration and a lack of political leadership, are attracted to the messages of discontent from opportunists and extremists. For Christian Democrats, conservatives and moderate liberals, this concretely means striving for the EU to be strong in the world but limited in its reach into the daily life of European citizens.

Strong in order to uphold security and defence, the rule of law and an internal market accessible to all citizens, yet limited to respect the autonomy of member states, civil societies, citizens, entrepreneurs and businesses, as well as their right to develop freely. Only in open societies can traditional values be nurtured, people's welfare ensured and cultural advancement promoted. Only by ensuring that the EU institutions respect subsidiarity can member states develop policies in line with the preferences shaped by different traditions, histories and levels of economic development in fields such as social security, labour market rules and health care. In the coming decades, maintaining European freedom and peace will depend on our economic strength and our capacity to be a global leader, which requires an ability to strike this balance, defend these principles and implement this programme.

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CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY

Return to an Uncertain Past: Christian Democratic Politics From the 2020s to the 1920s

Martin Conway

Summary

To understand the present-day challenges faced by Christian Democracy, it no longer seems useful to refer back to the heyday of Christian Democratic influence in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, it is more instructive to explore the much more volatile history of Catholic political parties in the inter-war years. Political fragmentation within confessional ranks, the disruptive impact of socio-economic conflicts and the lure of extremist political movements during the 1920s and 1930s all suggest instructive points of comparison with the politics of the present.

Introduction

In response to the manifold uncertainties which surround the present and near future of centre-right politics in Europe, it is understandable to turn towards the past. But which past? The self-identity of Christian Democratic political forces in Europe has long been characterised by a strong sense of their historical evolution from founding moments at the end of the nineteenth century, through the upheavals of the mid-twentieth century to the establishment of the model of the people's party after 1945. This form of political organisation—as Pepijn Corduwener's recent excellent survey history has indicated (Corduwener 2023)—proved to be a durable presence in Western Europe across the second half of the twentieth century until the 1990s. In this way, Christian Democracy became embedded within the processes of modernisation of European politics, economy and society, and in turn was able to place its imprint upon the social and political structures, including transnational European cooperation, which developed.

This long-term historical narrative of Christian Democracy has many strengths, not least because of how it has influenced the ways in which historians have come to explain the ascendancy of a particular model of democracy in Western Europe across the second half of the twentieth century (Conway 2020). As little as 30 years ago, it was commonplace to bemoan the absence of substantial scholarship on Christian

Democracy. Instead, the dominant narratives of contemporary European history were emphatically secular ones, which focused on the rise of Communism and Fascism, and the impact on Europe of two world wars and the subsequent Cold War. This narrative of the short twentieth century, epitomised by Eric Hobsbawm's highly influential synthetic account (1994), has, however, receded markedly in recent years. In its place, there has been a new interest in the more durable realities of Europe across the twentieth century, symbolised by a series of substantial volumes that have placed Christian Democracy since the 1890s at the centre of scholarly accounts of twentieth-century Europe (e.g. Buchanan and Conway 1996; Gehler and Kaiser 2004). The history of Christian Democratic parties and their electorates, and of the archipelago of social movements—of youth movements, women's organisations, trade unions, farmers' leagues and business organisations—which were always a strong feature of their political world, as well as the rich heritage of Catholic social and political ideas developed by clerical and lay intellectuals, have all received serious study (see, notably, Letamendia 1995; Chappel 2018).

These studies have taught us much about the evolution of Christian Democratic politics, but also provide a new way of reading the wider history of the European twentieth century. By redirecting attention from the abrupt disjunctures of regime changes and wars, the noisy rhetorics of left and right, and the rather misleading teleologies of a remorseless secularisation of European hearts and minds, Christian Democracy highlights the centrality of a more slow-moving river of political adaptation across the European twentieth century, rooted in nuances of social class, subnational political cultures and the resilience of confessional identities.

However, these studies provide little help in navigating the more volatile politics of the European present. Those volumes which in recent years have sought to stitch together the present and past, by reflecting on what Christian Democratic politics might now stand for—most notably Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's account (2019)—have served on the whole only to demonstrate the gulf that divides the parties of the centre-right in present-day Europe from those of the latter decades of the twentieth century. Much, indeed, has changed, and irreversibly so. Christian Democratic parties have become minority components of the politics of most European states, confined within diminishing pools of electoral support, and obliged to choose between the impotence of opposition or entering into dependent alliances with new political forces with very different heritages. This generalised sense of political crisis has origins much wider than Christian Democracy. It forms part of the transition that has occurred in European politics since the 1990s, and which has generated a European present largely unmoored from that of the twentieth century (Conway, Donert and Patel 2022). Changes in state authorities, the impact of the neoliberal fragilisation of individual and collective living standards, and the social and cultural fragmentation experienced by many European

nation states have created a much more volatile and angry European politics, built on social resentments, exclusionary nationalist languages and the erosion of the culture of democratic legitimacy which had developed in Western Europe since the end of the 1940s. Most especially, the pillarised loyalties of the recent past have largely disappeared, on both the left and the right, creating a much less predictable electoral politics in which large numbers of voters shift their party loyalties between elections, and between different levels of governance.

None of this implies the end of Christian Democracy. There will be for the foreseeable future a functional need for a politics of the centre-right. And, as times get hard, one might anticipate that voters may tire of the performative politics of display and the glib slogans articulated by the populist movements of the right, reverting, at least in elections for the more senior levels of governance, to the criteria of predictability and reliability that have served Christian Democratic parties well in the past. But none of this presages a return to the fixed political frontiers of the second half of the twentieth century. The dominant reality of the present—as the recent elections in Poland and the Netherlands and for the European Parliament have well demonstrated—is a chronically fractured political landscape in which minority groupings have become the norm, and where sudden surges in support for new groupings and charismatic individuals will render electoral politics less predictable and the construction of viable majority governments much more difficult.

Back to the future

Where, then, should Christian Democratic parties turn for inspiration in negotiating this new reality? The answer, one is tempted to suggest, lies in the politics of inter-war Europe. The 20-year period between the peace treaties at the end of the First World War and the new war that developed on multiple fronts towards the end of the 1930s has long had a bad reputation. However, the gloomy narrative taught in school history courses, of economic crises, political extremism and social suffering, does not do justice to the complexity of the politics of the era. Revolutions, border wars, and the emergence of movements of the authoritarian and Fascist right were indeed prominent features of the age; but so too were the construction of democratic constitutions, the liberation of subordinate ethnic groups from overarching imperial structures, and the initiation of policies of welfare and rights (Gerwarth 2007).

Few of these more positive changes survived the generalised destruction wrought by the Second World War; but that, of course, is the point of this exercise in comparison. What makes the inter-war years seem so relevant to the politics of the 2020s is the common element of uncertainty. The disruptive impact of new political forces, the

volatile actions of crowds and social movements in response to economic crises, and the threatening sound worlds generated by wars of territorial revision and of civil and ethnic conflicts on the borderlands of Europe all provide ample points of reflection for the politics of today. We are, it seems, all citizens of Weimar now.

Three features in particular of the confessional politics of the 1920s and 1930s stand out as bridges to the present day. The first is *fragmentation*. In contrast to the unitary party organisations of the post-1945 era, the diverse Catholic and Christian political movements of the inter-war years always operated within a much more fractured institutional and social world. The Centre Party (Zentrumspartei) in Weimar Germany, the Italian People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano) established in Italy in 1919, and the Christian Socials of the first Austrian Republic were all Catholic-inspired movements which achieved significant levels of electoral support, but which were always deeply divided between the various groupings and ideological currents. There was no agreed norm of Catholic politics, which incorporated nostalgics for some imaginary *ancien régime*, the advocates of the more militant spiritual Catholicism disseminated by the Papacy, and the local cultures of engaged social Catholicism which had developed within certain industrial and rural regions of Europe since the late nineteenth century. Insofar as these parties were able to retain their formal unity, their policies were often those of the lowest common denominator—notably a rejection of the threats posed by atheistic liberalism and militant Communism—rather than the articulation of a social and political message that could reach out beyond a core confessional electorate (see, notably, Conway 1997).

The second characteristic was the durable vulnerability of confessional political parties to *social and regional divisions*. Divisions of class and of economic interest poked awkwardly through the bonds of confessional loyalty throughout the inter-war years. Industrial conflicts—unmitigated by the shock absorbers of corporatist negotiation—placed Catholic employers and the expanding ranks of Christian trade unions in stark opposition to each other. Lower-middle-class shopkeepers and civil servants sought to defend their interests against an invasive retail capitalism and the savage cuts in state expenditure implemented during the austerity of the Great Depression. Europe's small-scale agricultural producers—and the regional cultures within which they operated—were radicalised by the threats posed by foreign commercial competition and the perceived failure of urban-based national governments to protect their material interests. The consequence was a volatile and often angry politics which took place out of doors, conducted through town-square meetings, conflicts between strikers and the police at factory gates, and the street theatre of mass demonstrations. This anger focused on the perceived failure of the established Catholic parties to protect the interests of their electors, which enabled the emergence of Catholic populist movements such as the Rexist movement in 1930s Belgium, as well as regional and separatist movements

such as Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana) (Étienne 1968; Lorman 2019).

The third consequence was the *lure of the extremes*. It was never entirely clear where Catholic and other confessional political parties belonged on the chequerboard of inter-war European politics. While the heritage of hostility to the revolution of 1789 gave many Catholic movements a strongly rightward and often anti-republican and anti-liberal character, the incentives of participation in coalition governments, at the national and local levels, also drew them towards the centre ground of politics (see, e.g. Jones 1988). In response to the economic depression and political upheavals of the 1930s, Catholic parties and their electorates moved towards the left and, more especially, the right. In France, an emphatically left-oriented Catholic political party, the Popular Democratic Party (Parti Démocrate Populaire) established for the first time a presence in French politics; while on the extreme right, groupings such as de la Rocque's French Social Party (Parti Social Français) drew Catholic voters towards a paramilitary and authoritarian politics which prefigured the themes of Vichy's war-time Révolution Nationale (Passmore 2013). This momentum towards the extremes was a generalised phenomenon. It reflected the disruptive impact of revisionist nationalism and Fascism, as well as the broader discredit which came to surround parliamentary politics in many European states during the 1930s. But it also came from within Catholic ranks. The convergence which occurred after 1945 between Christian Democratic parties and the practices and values of a self-consciously moderate democratic politics, was almost entirely absent in the inter-war years. Catholic parties identified themselves as the opponents of the political status quo, advocating the need for a Catholic 'Third Way', which would combine the values of a certain social Catholicism with support for the sort of authoritarian political regimes that emerged in Austria during the Dollfuss era of the 1930s, or more durably in Portugal with the establishment of Salazar's dictatorship.

Christian Democracy was therefore a contested and often marginal political force in the inter-war years. Especially after the rapid—and seemingly definitive—military success of the Third Reich in the military campaigns of 1939 to 1941, many Catholic political leaders and social organisations believed that the future lay not in parliamentary or democratic politics but in a New Order (e.g. Hellman 1993) based on corporatist organisations and authoritarian governmental structures. This, however, did not endure. The evolution in the military fortunes of war, as well as the repression engaged in by the Third Reich and its local allies prompted a reversal in the current of Catholic and confessional politics. Catholic social organisations moved towards policies of resistance to Nazi persecution, while a younger generation of Catholic intellectuals drew up manifestos which formed the basis for a consciously democratic Catholic politics.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to make connections between the volatile history of Catholic and Christian Democratic politics in the inter-war years, and the politics of today. Many of the same characteristics of factional division, socio-economic divisions and the erosion of the political centre ground have re-emerged over the last two decades. This does not imply that Europe is doomed to relive the political conflicts and ideological polarisation of the mid-twentieth century. The structures of representative politics and of state institutions are much more firmly rooted in contemporary Europe, as has been indicated by the pragmatic evolution of certain movements of the populist right towards a more conciliatory politics of coalition.

But the challenge to maintain a viable politics of the centre-right will not go away. Simply because Christian Democratic politics was so successful in the second half of the twentieth century, and consequently became associated in the national and transnational politics of Western Europe with a certain model of governance, it has been one of the foremost losers of Europe's transition out of the politics of the second half of the twentieth century. The challenges that Christian Democratic parties face are ones of political organisation, but also more profoundly of socio-economic change and ideological orientation. The historic electorate of Christian Democratic parties rested, for the most part, on the in-between strata of the European social model that emerged after 1945: small-scale businesses, farmers and other rural interests, and the expanding ranks of university-educated professions, including many women. It is these groups that have been most directly impacted by the turn since the 1990s towards a neoliberal European economic model, as well as the consequent processes of globalisation, leading many to turn to alternative voices of right-wing politics. In addition, the relevance of the key tenets of Christian Democracy to their core constituencies has diminished substantially in recent years. In part, this reflects the broader transition towards more secular lifestyles, and the consequent waning of identification with a distinctive Catholic heritage. But it also reflects the ways in which the values of social solidarity, corporatist forms of socio-economic organisation, political subsidiarity and the family, which formerly had a distinctly Christian Democratic character, have migrated towards other political movements. Social Democrats, green parties, neoliberal groups and a diverse range of populist movements have all adopted (or exploited) elements of the ideological reference points of Christian Democratic parties, thereby succeeding in wooing significant proportions of their former electorates. If, therefore, Christian Democratic parties are to adapt to this new electoral and political landscape, they will need to embrace this new uncertainty. The future of Christian Democracy might lie, it seems, in learning from the experience of the 1920s and 1930s.

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Rethinking Christian Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: The Futures of the Past

Rosario Forlenza

Summary

This chapter presents two interrelated arguments. First, it argues that in recent decades there has been a startling interruption in the transmission of the memory of Christian Democracy; a political force that had a central influence on Continental Europe in the second half of the twentieth century has to a surprising extent faded into oblivion. Second, it argues that Christian Democracy was not simply a constellation of ideas and concepts but a distinct form of political spirituality and a political model that reincorporated transcendence as a legitimate perspective of truth and reason, re-anchoring democracy, justice and freedom in a religiously argued ethos. The proposition defended here is that the Christian Democratic search for a meaningful politics imbued with spiritual significance is relevant as never before.

Introduction

This chapter takes its departure from a series of questions: Is a Catholic-inspired Christian Democracy relevant today, in Europe and beyond, vis-à-vis the complex challenge of today's global politics? Can we use Christian Democracy to mirror the increasing concerns about a body politic disillusioned with representative democratic politics and prey to trickster-like politicians? My answer is hesitantly affirmative—though what the mirror throws back is anything but straightforward—but needs to be qualified with a clear understanding of what Christian Democracy was in European politics after the experience of war and totalitarianism. The main argument here is that Christian Democracy might be understood, *pace* Michel Foucault, as a distinct form of political spirituality. Such an existential and spiritual dimension, neglected by scholars and forgotten by politicians, was a decisive factor in the shaping of Christian Democratic politics and might still be a resource for rethinking a meaningful politics in a world driven by global capitalism and populist anti-globalisation.

Forgetting Christian Democracy?

The heyday of Christian Democracy has long gone (Conway 2003). The European People's Party (EPP), which has its roots in Christian Democracy, describes itself as a 'centre-right' party and is often described as 'conservative'. It encompasses national parties that either never identified as Christian Democratic or no longer do. The ideological identity of the EPP has been watered down, and the process accelerated with the successive waves of expansion of the EU.

However, somewhat paradoxically, politicians from the centre to the extreme right of the political spectrum have in recent times appropriated and adopted the symbolism, language and ideology of Christian Democracy. Most notably, Viktor Orbán has time and again made his claim on it. In 2018, at a conference held in memory of Helmut Kohl, he said: 'For us Central Europeans, Helmut Kohl is the exemplar for the Christian European. He represented the Christian Europe to which we have always belonged, and after forty years of communism his political will paved the way for our return to the community of the peoples of Europe' (Orbán 2018).

On this occasion, Orbán announced his decision to 'continue standing' within the EPP, thus abandoning the idea of establishing 'a new formation from like-minded Central European parties—or indeed, a pan-European anti-immigration formation'. He continued: 'But I suggest that we resist this temptation and stand by Helmut Kohl's ideals and party family. Instead of desertion, we should take on the more difficult task of renewing the European People's Party, and helping it to find its way back to its Christian democratic roots.'

He then concluded, calling for 'a Christian democratic renaissance' and for a Christian politics 'able to protect people, our nations, families, our culture rooted in Christianity, and equality between men and women', in short, 'our European way of life'.

However, in February 2020, after Fidesz left the EPP just before it was kicked out,¹ Orbán drafted a three-page memorandum for the European Christian Democrats. This is a remarkable document for anyone interested in political ideologies, which fully reflects the political and ideological confusion of today's European and global politics. Instead of addressing internal procedures, Orbán argued for a series of values and principles that should motivate the EPP, and that the EPP had abandoned.

He wrote:

Instead of stepping up against communism and Marxism, which left behind a painful legacy in Europe, we are applauding Fidel Castro and Karl Marx. Instead

1. The EPP had suspended Fidesz since 2019 but their lawmakers had continued to enjoy rights and privileges as members of the EPP's European Parliament faction.

of the Christian-social Rhine model, we embrace egalitarian, socialistic social theories. . . . [W]e gave up the family model based on the matrimony of one woman and one man, and fell into the arms of gender ideology. Instead of supporting the birth of children, we see mass migration as the solution to our demographic problems. . . . We don't stand up for ourselves as old and great Europeans, and don't take on the fight against left-liberal intellectual forces and the media they influence and control. . . . We are not raising our voice loud enough against the socialists who are helping the radical anarchist communist left into government. We have created an impression that we are afraid to declare and openly accept who we are and what we want. (Orbán, cited in Paternotte and Verloo 2021, 556–7)

In short, against the ethical capitulation to the liberal left, Orbán urged the leaders of the EPP to reclaim its Christian values, to remain faithful to its ideals that prevent the sliding of the Christian right towards the left and to ensure the salvation of Europe against its enemies.

Undoubtedly, the appeal to preserve the pure, uncontaminated Christian values of Christian Democracy might be seen as instrumental. In reality, Christian Democracy, which slowly emerged from late-nineteenth-century attempts to reconcile Christianity (particularly Catholicism) with political modernity, has never been a political weapon of the Vatican or a confessional party. Christian Democrats never declared Catholicism the religion of state and often foiled some of the Vatican's hope, such as its request that only Catholic marriages would be legalised. They instead carved a space for political action independent from the church, descending from Christian beliefs but directed to the temporal common good, that did not always dovetail with the demands of the Holy See. Morality and strictly confessional beliefs were confined to individual choices. After the Second World War, Christian Democracy articulated and developed political–institutional and socio-economic platforms that ushered Continental Europe into a stable democratic age. It implemented a welfare state and articulated a specific response to the challenge of post-Fascist democracy. It significantly contributed to the founding of the European Community. The establishment of strong Christian Democratic parties in Europe ended up affirming the principle of secularity within politics, at both the national and European levels, and establishing that while religion in general—and Catholicism in particular—can serve as a cultural mould and moral ground for acting in politics, it can never determine its actual outcome.

Yet, what is particularly relevant and puzzling in the quarrels between Orbán and the EPP is the thorough mystification of Christian Democracy and its political and cultural tradition. At the basis of Orbán's argument, there is a very selective and biased, and ultimately wrong, idea of what Christian Democracy is.

The appropriation of the language and symbolism of Christian Democracy by Orbán and other nativist right-wing politicians has much to do with a process of forgetting. The history and politics of Christian Democracy, a political force which had a critical influence on Continental Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, has to a surprising extent disappeared into oblivion. This forgetting has two sources. First, it is 'passively' produced by the heirs of Christian Democracy itself, that is, the EPP; to my knowledge, nobody from within the ranks of the EPP confronted Orbán, rejecting his problematic, to say the least, reading. Second, it is 'actively' produced by politicians who operate through trickster-like modalities of power that leave the past without any trace, artfully creating a political vacuum through erasure. This interruption of memory has problematically allowed Orbán and others to present themselves as the ultimate heirs of Christian Democracy as well as the Christian saviours of Europe.

What is Christian Democracy?

Scholars and commentators continue to neglect or misunderstand Christian Democracy. They see Christian Democracy as a form of sheer conservatism or a cover for liberalism and capitalism, or an expedient combination of conservatism, socialism and liberalism. They often adopt a strategic perspective that ultimately sees Christian Democracy as instrumental in stabilising the post-war democratic order in a conservative and moderate vein, thus proposing an overly secular and political ideological reading of its emergence in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Others write that Christian Democracy 'lacks a conceptual anchor that distinguishes it clearly from other strands of political thought' (Müller 2020), a claim that is highly problematic and fundamentally wrong.

Luckily, other scholars have recognised the need to understand Christian Democracy and Catholic politics in a deeper way. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2019) has explored the key concepts elaborated through time by Catholic social thought and philosophy that became the essential platform on which Christian Democracy created the European post-war order. Subsidiarity (the idea that decision-making should be taken as closely as possible to the citizens) and personalism (the view of the 'person', as opposed to the individual, as a creature embedded in multiple communities: from the family to the workplace, from the town to the nation to the supranational community, and to humanity) were two of the most crucial of these concepts.

Furthermore, the Christian Democratic effort at building a modern welfare state was tightly linked to the notion of a 'social market economy' (*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*) which, unlike the Scandinavian and Northern European model, had a *remedial* structure. It was based on an organic conception in which the various sections of society had different roles and functions to fulfil; if they were incapable of fulfilling the roles, the

state should step in, creating the conditions for establishing their social functions for the benefit of the temporal common good. The ultimate function of such a specific type of social welfare was to promote harmony and reconciliation between social classes. Therefore, the overcoming of divisions and fractures within society pervaded the social market economy in Germany as designed by its main proponent Ludwig Erhard (West German minister for economic affairs from 1949 to 1963). Erhard and his advisors wanted to transcend the idea of endemic conflict in economic activity—conflict which he dubbed as ‘pointless quarreling’. Erhard wrote: ‘[T]he reshaping of our economic order had to work towards two things: to bring to an end this division, which hampered progressive development, and to end with it ill-feeling between the rich and the poor’ (Erhard 1958, 2–3). This effort towards a socially progressive politics was based on what Christian Democratic thinkers and politicians called the ‘preferential option for the poor’ or, in the words of Giorgio La Pira (mayor of Florence in the 1950s) ‘the expectations of poor people’.

Finally, Christian Democrats came to elaborate specific notions of ‘nation’ and ‘people’ that stand in palpable contrast with the ‘nation’ and the ‘people’ as defended and proposed by nativist and nationalistic politicians. The former are not defined by their opposite and therefore do not have confrontational, exclusionary and ethnic meanings, tied to land and blood. The Christian Democratic concepts of nations and people refer to an epistemology and cosmology of inclusion, solidarity and commonality—in short to a set of positive values that come from within the body politic and promote reconciliation and the overcoming of fractures and divisions at all levels of the political community (see also Forlenza 2017).

As Invernizzi Accetti has further argued, the real values and principles of Christian Democracy—particularly the ‘people/popularism’ as opposed to the ‘people/populism’—might be a better reference point for the social and political demands of religious and conservative constituencies. In this view, Christian Democracy, a force more committed to the health and stability of democracy, should compete for support with far-right nationalist movements. This means that Christian Democracy should claim back and re-appropriate its language and symbolism, recovering its history.

Christian Democracy as political spirituality

Yet Christian Democracy was much more than a set of concepts and policies. It was also, as Danish social theorist Bjørn Thomassen and I have written, a distinct form of ‘political spirituality’ (Forlenza and Thomassen 2024a; 2024b). By political spirituality, we refer to the much-contested concept introduced in the late 1970s by Michel Foucault. Foucault wrote a series of articles for Italian and French newspapers,

reporting from the spot on the revolutionary situation in Iran in the autumn of 1978. In an article written for *Le Novel Observateur* in October 1978 and titled ‘What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?’, he described the political imaginaries of the protesters as tied to a ‘political spirituality’. Foucault was fiercely criticised for this and other writings on Iran (not least because of the subsequent political developments under Khomeini).

Leaving aside these criticisms relating to the Iranian context, we intend ‘political spirituality’ as a search for new foundations and a new way to establish a regime of truth and government of the self and others. Political spirituality does not imply a predefined set of religious beliefs that can be applied to the political realm, a politics informed by religious conviction or a political action grounded in religious faith. It is something other than basing political action on religious doctrine. Political spirituality, instead, involves a reflexive searching for a ‘new way’, but one that draws on pre-existing repertoires of tradition and cultural meanings, from which an endogenous political project can be formulated. It is a transformative activity that involves an open searching, moving beyond itself: a challenge to the status quo that, while anchored in ‘traditions’, at the same time calls into question one’s own lifestyle, convictions and epistemological regimes. In the historical juncture which we examine, this rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual invested Catholic politics with a new intensity; it was not just about changing society, but about changing people, starting with themselves.

Conclusion

At a first glance, Christian Democracy in the post-war period might be seen as a useful container, or a hodgepodge of conservatism, liberalism and socialism. This reading fails to recognise the spiritual sources that guided the political measures taken by Christian Democrats—measures that may have appeared to be merely pragmatic and relativistic but were not. The spiritual inspiration of Christian Democracy provided the foundational basis for a new democracy and a meaningful politics, without reverting to a pre-liberal order that had simply proved itself defenceless against the threat of totalitarianism and aggressive nationalism. The transcendent inspiration at the centre of this political spirituality—also in the secular sense of overcoming fractures and divisions within society, healing the maladies of the world—emerged as a new marker of certainty that could ground and direct the democratic experience of post-Second World War and post-Fascist Europe.

I am fully aware that historical analogies are broadly problematic for obvious reasons. Each historical situation is unique. Yet, the disaffection with democratic politics, the socio-economic and existential crisis, and the loss of sense of home pervading large swathes of European people—what unimaginative commentators define with

the analytically obfuscating and theoretically disabling notion of populism—are eerily resemblant of tragic moments in European history. As in many times in the past, we are living not simply in a socio-economic crisis but in a historical situation where the sentiments of fear, confusion and existential uncertainty are real enough. To tackle seriously the resentment of the losers of cosmopolitan neoliberal globalisation—those left behind; strangers at home; protagonists of deep stories of resentment, loss and fear—requires changing the conversation from the neoliberal concerns of the past 50 years. It requires finding alternative and different visions of the social than those provided by the empty shell of ‘neoliberalism’ to give direction to society, the economy and politics.

The likelihood of the rebirth of a strong and hegemonic Christian Democracy is minimal. Arguably, Christian Democracy is a project of the past, no longer possible to revitalise in a post-secular, multicultural society, in today’s global world. Yet, the need for a political thought transcending liberalism and socialism without succumbing to problematic forms of nationalism and trickster politics could be argued to be relevant today as never before. Revisiting the relevance of Christian Democracy in the twenty-first century, in light of its history in the short but dramatic twentieth century, is the ideal place to start the search for a meaningful politics.

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Some Reflections on the DNA of Christian Democracy

Steven Van Hecke

Summary

Christian Democracy has philosophical and historical roots that go back to political events that happened in Western Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Since then, political parties have developed everywhere in Europe due to specific as well as generic changing circumstances. Nonetheless, the core of a political ideology remains the same. Making the DNA explicit contributes to defining how Christian Democracy should face the current challenge of far-right populism.

Introduction

What Christian Democratic parties urgently need to do to secure their future is to invest in their political thinking by educating their political personnel and translating their core values and principles into contemporary politics at the local, subnational, national and European levels. Irrespective of time and place, there is always a need in contemporary politics for a better understanding of Christian Democratic thought (Martens 2014).

In his last written publication, issued after his death in 2013, Wilfried Martens, President of the European People's Party (EPP), formulated clearly what is needed within the member parties: a straightforward definition of what Christian Democracy is about. Familiar with this particular ideology, he knew that the pluralism of ideas within his own political family could pose a threat to its political homogeneity. At the same time, he was aware of the vital tension between the world of (pure) ideas and the world of (practical) politics, citing the French philosopher Paul Ricœur:

for if we conflate the ethics of conviction with the ethics of responsibility, we will relapse into Realpolitik, into a form of Machiavellianism that stems from a continual confusion of ends and means. On the other hand, if we allow the ethics

of conviction to meddle in the other we will only succumb to the numerous illusions or moralism and clericalism (Martens 2008, 29).

This chapter focuses on the historical and philosophical origins of Christian Democracy in (Western) Europe. Based on Van Hecke (2008), it further discusses the DNA of Christian Democracy vis-à-vis other political ideologies. Recently the rise of the populist radical right (or far right) has challenged Christian Democratic parties. By making the DNA of Christian Democracy explicit, it becomes clear how different it is from the far right and how Christian Democratic politicians should and should not act.

The historical and philosophical origins of Christian Democracy

The term Christian Democracy originally referred to a nineteenth-century movement of Catholics who were concerned with social issues, and particularly, the fate of the people (e.g. workers, farmers). The 1891 Papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) inspired the emergence of a number of new Catholic organisations which joined existing confessional parties in promoting social justice and alleviating poverty. As Christian Democrats began to become more politically engaged, the term acquired political connotations (particularly prior to the Second World War). Then, Christian Democracy referred to the labour wing of the Catholic parties. Following the Second World War, the term Christian Democracy began to appear in the names of various Western European parties that built upon the foundations laid by the (often exclusively Catholic) confessional parties which had preceded them.

Christianity is obviously the most basic element of Christian Democracy. It naturally follows that Christianity plays a key role in influencing political beliefs. However, Christianity (or more precisely, the gospel) should not be seen as a rigid guide for informing which social or political policies should be implemented. Some make direct references to the Bible. Others are more pragmatic, adopting a contemporary, evolving understanding and interpretation of Christian teachings. Traditionally, Christian Democrats were expected to act out of Christian convictions. Growing religious pluralism and secularisation have changed that: Christian Democracy no longer exclusively represents Christianity; rather, it welcomes those of all faiths as well as non-believers that subscribe to its core values.

Defining Christian Democratic ideology usually requires referring to the concept of personalism. In the broadest sense, personalism refers to all sources that have contributed to the development of Christian Democratic ideology since the end of the Second World War. This includes neo-Thomism (based on the teachings of Thomas

Aquinas), the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Catholic solidarism and the broader understanding of personalism. The latter refers to a stream of intellectual thought that was produced in France, primarily during the 1930s and 1940s. This interpretation of personalism developed a new sense of community that was intended as a response to the crises of the 1930s and was dominated by the thinking of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier.

In contrast to capitalism and Communism, the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) focuses on the individual. The process of humanisation takes place through the Christian faith (in contrast to the atheist humanism of socialism/Communism and Fascism), within the realm of the spiritual (*le spirituel*), and precedes the social and political humanisation of the temporal (*le temporel*). Integral humanism can be achieved only through the synthesis of the spiritual and the temporal. Within the temporal, Maritain makes a distinction between the state (*état*) and political society (*société politique*). The state has the sole task of creating the conditions within which the human person can achieve spiritual perfection and social engagement. The state can never be an end in itself, and it is subordinate to political society. The latter is focused on the common good (*bonum commune*). An individual cannot be detached from the community. It is only within that community that the individual becomes a person and is able to develop fully. Maritain further underscores the autonomy of the various communities within society. This means that each private community governs itself according to its own rights, liberties and responsibilities (subsidiarity, whereas Protestants tend to use the terms dispersed responsibility and sovereignty of one's own circle). With his communitarian personalism Emmanuel Mounier (1905–50) advocates for a renaissance, a rebirth of the individual and the community. He does not look towards the emergence of a new person (as in Fascism and Communism) but towards a reinstatement of the absolute value of the human person. To this end, Mounier proposes a third way that goes beyond the opposition between liberalism/capitalism and Marxism/Communism/collectivism. It was only in the 1990s that the expression the Third Way (*Die Neue Mitte*, in its German version) was used by Social Democrats, inspired by Giddens (1998).

Core elements of Christian Democracy

A number of elements from the thinking of Maritain and Mounier are evident in Christian Democracy, including the integration of the spiritual/transcendent in the view of the individual, the primacy of society, over the state, social democracy (understood as social concertation), civic engagement (from freedom to responsibility), the indivisible dual concept of individual and society and the concept of the Third Way (which took on a life of its own and was later adopted by non-Christian Democrats).

Not all Christian Democratic parties, however, have been influenced to the same extent by personalistic thought. After Maritain and Mounier, the development of personalism came to a halt. This explains why a number of Christian Democratic parties have found more inspiration in communitarianism.

These issues did not prevent post-war Christian Democracy from adapting a number of the basic tenets of personalism to its own ends. First and foremost, the individual human (person) has been assigned a central role within Christian Democracy. The individual is free, and this freedom demands civic action, responsibility. For this reason, considerable importance is attached to communities: religious communities (churches) and other such natural communities as the nuclear and extended family, local community, occupational organisation and country. The individual can achieve full development only through active and passive participation in this community life. Its primary implication is that the economy is in the service of the individual and the community. It also entails a radical critique of capitalism, which requires structural adjustment through the socially corrected market economy. In general, Christian Democracy is characterised by a certain degree of pragmatism (oriented towards consensus, compromise and social harmony), especially in matters related to economics. In the political arena, Christian Democracy advocates anti-statism. The government should do no more than create the conditions within which individuals can develop themselves through their communities. The government never acts in the place of the community. State power is necessary, although purely functional and dispersed over multiple layers (decentralisation and subsidiarity). In other words, political power should always be bounded. Christian Democracy is obviously characterised by the emphasis it places on the ethical and religious (Christian) aspects of personal and civic life.

Christian Democracy shares conservatism's aversion to social blueprints, its functional interpretation of the economy, and its respect for communal norms and traditions. However, in contrast to (Anglo-Saxon) conservatism, Christian Democracy assumes a positive image of the individual. It does not limit the role of religion to its social utility, it does not restrict the political structure to the local and state levels, and it defines capitalism in more social terms. In contrast to socialism, Christian Democracy is sceptical of forced forms of governmental intervention. However, Christian Democracy is equally unwilling to believe that society can be held hostage by the invisible hand of the free-market economy. Christian Democracy advocates a middle ground by specifying a restricted, regulatory role for the state, which should support the free (and usually small-scale) initiatives of citizens and intermediary structures (e.g. associations, labour unions, hospitals, schools).

The populist challenge

Whereas in previous decades Christian Democracy was first and foremost in opposition to the left (Van Hecke and Gerard 2004), in the past two decades the rise of the far right has become of paramount concern, for electoral and ideological reasons. Five main strategies have been applied to counter the success of the far right (Van Hecke and Andrione-Moylan 2018). The first strategy is indifference, which designates instances where the lack of activity indicates the limited salience of the rise of populism. The second is denial, or the downplaying of the populist tendencies of political parties and politicians. The third is collaboration with populist parties, trying to undermine them by involving them in government. The fourth strategy is demarcation, which refers to defining the confines of Christian Democracy as a political family, both among its members and vis-à-vis political opponents. The fifth and final strategy is confrontation, when there is no will to engage with populist parties and the aim is to defeat opposing views.

Christian Democrats have struggled to find the right strategy, both at national and EU levels, and to define their own values and principles (Tensen et al. 2014). However, since the Hungarian member party Fidesz left the EPP in 2021, it has become clearer again what Christian Democracy stands for. A turning point was the fact that in the autumn of 2019 former European Council President Donald Tusk became the new EPP president. The former Polish prime minister had for a long time been very critical of the Hungarian party leader and prime minister, Viktor Orbán. At the 2018 EPP congress in Helsinki he proclaimed the following:

If you are against the rule of law and independent judiciary, you are not a Christian Democrat. If you don't like the free press and NGOs, if you tolerate xenophobia, homophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism, you are not a Christian Democrat. If you place the state and the nation against, or above, the freedom and dignity of the individual, you are not a Christian Democrat. If you wish for conflict and divisions globally and inside the European Union, you are not a Christian Democrat. If you support Putin and attack Ukraine, if you are in favour of the aggressor and against the victim, you are not a Christian Democrat. If you want to replace the Western model of liberal democracy with an Eastern model of 'authoritarian democracy', you are not a Christian Democrat. (Tusk 2018)

What distinguishes the far right from Christian Democracy and like-minded forces (Welle 2023), is the support (or not) for the post-Second World War democratic order, transatlantic cooperation and European integration. The litmus test, where the three come together, is the attitude vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. It is up to the current political leaders of Christian Democracy to bring this into practice in the coming

years. At least during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was very clear:

Our peaceful and united Europe is being challenged like never before by populists, nationalists, and demagogues. Whether it is the far right or the far left. Whether it is the AfD, the Rassemblement National, the confederatia or Wasraschdene. The names may be different, but the goal is the same: They want to trample on our values, and they want to destroy our Europe. But we, the EPP, will never let that happen. (von der Leyen 2024)

Conclusion

Given its specific philosophical and historical roots, the DNA of Christian Democracy consists of a specific view of humanity, leading to, among other things, the recognition that religion is not only a private affair but has a public role to play. Furthermore, the capitalist system should be at the service of men, women and children (and not vice versa), leading to the concept of the social market economy. Finally, in organising society and politics, the principle of subsidiarity should be applied. Vertical subsidiarity emphasises the unique role of local communities and prefers federalism over centralism. Horizontal subsidiarity implies a strong role for civil society organisations instead of statism. In other words, freedom implies responsibility, for every individual but also for the ways in which individuals organise society (and government).

Currently, the biggest electoral and ideological challenge for Christian Democracy comes from the far right, and the dominant strategies chosen seem to be ones of demarcation and confrontation. It remains to be seen, however, if the fight against populism can be won. In any case, the ideology of Christian Democracy is incompatible with populism, whether at the level of parties, politicians, politics or policies. In other words, demarcation and confrontation should also be an internal political strategy.

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A German CDU/CSU-Dominated Empire-by-Invitation: Transnational Cooperation of Centre–Right Parties in Post-War Europe

Wolfram Kaiser

Summary

Christian Democratic and centre–right parties have for the longest time dominated the transnational politics of European integration. This chapter argues that the formation of the European People’s Party (EPP) in 1976 and the associated expansion of the EPP Group in the European Parliament constituted the formation of an empire-by-invitation dominated by the German Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern, CDU/CSU). The CDU/CSU’s project for broadly based centre–right party cooperation in their own image and under their dominant influence has been hugely successful in giving the EPP and EPP Group power and influence in the EU. However, they have also become internally heterogeneous to the point where their programmatic identity and alliance options and preferences are increasingly unclear. In addition to internal and external policy challenges, populism as well as nationalism, as ghosts from the past of Catholic- and Protestant-inspired politics, could fundamentally endanger the CDU/CSU-dominated empire.

Introduction

When the British Labour Party won an absolute majority in the House of Commons for the first time in 1945, Social Democratic and socialist parties in Continental Europe expected to follow suit. It was not to be. When French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman presented the proposal for the integration of the French and German coal and steel industries on 9 May 1950, Christian Democrats, being the new, organised political force in post-war Western Europe, dominated the governments in all six founding member states of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) formed in 1951–2 (Gehler and Kaiser 2004).

The Christian Democrats' dominant position in the evolving transnational party system of the European Communities (EC) began to erode from the 1960s onwards, however, due to a fragmenting voter base, relative electoral decline and EC enlargements to countries without an explicit Christian Democratic tradition. In the mid-1970s, electorally strong but not in power at the national level, the German Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) under the leadership of Helmut Kohl—egged on by its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern, CSU)—conceived a new long-term strategy for the integration of Christian Democratic and conservative parties. This strategy was designed to lead to a new centre-right political dominance in the EC, which in turn would make governing without or against socialist parties possible.

The new centre-right formation in the EC constituted, as argued here, a transnational political empire largely dominated by the CDU/CSU at the invitation of most of its sister parties, which largely regarded it as a benign hegemon. As support for Christian Democratic parties in the ECSC's 'core Europe' began to decline, the CDU/CSU seemed to constitute the ideal template for broad-based centre-right cooperation. As a people's party, it remained electorally successful for longer than most Christian Democratic sister parties. It was also able and willing to invest significant political and financial resources to achieve its objectives. Moreover, the EPP lacked alternative power centres or programmatic options.

The CDU/CSU project has proved to be incredibly successful at maximising power for the centre-right in the present-day EU. This has come at a heavy cost, however. Following subsequent enlargements and transformations of member parties, the EPP and the EPP Group have become so internally heterogeneous that it is no longer always clear for what purpose they exercise power. In an ever more insecure world with numerous novel internal and external challenges, since the 2000s they have increasingly lacked the clearer programmatic orientation of the Christian Democratic parties of early post-war Western Europe. Moreover, populism and nationalism, as ghosts from the past of Catholic- and Protestant-inspired politics, could prove highly disruptive in uncertain times.

Christian Democratic cooperation and European integration

After 1945 the newly created Christian Democratic parties rejected what they called state corporatism and instead embraced varieties of personalist thinking which put the family, localities and regions centre stage and advocated the politics of solidarity and subsidiarity (Corduener 2023). This shift made their programmes easily compatible with subsidiary state intervention in the creation of new welfare states. It also

strengthened their advocacy of European cooperation, creating closer ties through market integration and common transnational policies, especially the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which put farmers on European welfare during the 1960s.

Thus, most Christian Democrats had more in common (and were sometimes in coalition) with moderate Social Democratic parties than with Ludwig Erhard, the German CDU economics minister, who advocated ordoliberal forms of market-making and opposed interventionist common policies. He preferred a free-trade and geographically larger Europe including the UK. In the 1950s, Erhard's concept of 'social market economy' was on the economically liberal margins of Christian Democracy.

Despite the mostly new party names and programmatic orientation, the Christian Democrats were also characterised by important continuities in Catholic politics across the Second World War. One was their voter base. Even the self-declared non-confessional French Popular Republican Movement (*Mouvement Républicain Populaire*) received most of its support from practising Catholics. In the Netherlands, the Catholic People's Party (*Katholieke Volkspartij*) even managed to mobilise 90% of all Dutch Catholics until into the 1960s. Ideologically, the Christian Democrats remained staunchly anti-Communist after 1945, which strengthened their commitment to a mixed economy, to European integration and to NATO, created in 1949, as the three main planks of their transnational programmatic platform.

From the start, the Christian Democrats utilised their cross-border cooperation to become dominant in the new transnational politics of European integration. For this, they used the informal Geneva Circle meetings until the mid-1950s; the *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales*, (New International Teams), created in 1947–8, which became the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD) in 1965; and the EPP and its associated Christian Democratic/EPP Group in the European Parliament, first directly elected in 1979. In these different forums, they developed guiding programmatic principles, networked to facilitate intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in the newly created European institutions, socialised younger members including Giulio Andreotti and Helmut Kohl into the transnational Christian Democratic politics of European integration, and set agendas and developed policy initiatives in the European Parliament. There, the Christian Democratic Group nearly possessed an absolute majority until the Italian and French Communists gained representation in 1969 and 1972, respectively, and the EC became enlarged by the UK, Denmark and Ireland in 1973.

In 1976 the EPP was the only transnational party federation that (despite no possibility of direct individual membership) called itself a single 'party' for one European 'people'. This choice indicated that, unlike the socialists, the EPP and the EPP Group were largely united behind their demand to deepen European integration in a broadly federalist direction. In the European Parliament, the EPP Group dominated the Political Affairs Committee and strongly influenced the early debates about European 'union'.

Their policy for democratising the EC had an ideational and economic rationale. After the war, the Christian Democrats saw in European integration a new ideal for young people to strive for after their disillusionment with totalitarian ideologies. They also believed strongly that transnational economic integration would facilitate reconstructing Europe and competing with the technologically advanced US. Well into the 1980s, moreover, the Christian Democratic/EPP Group supported more European-level redistribution in the form of the CAP and structural and regional policies to compensate for the side effects of market integration at a time when some member parties were already beginning to adopt more *ordo-* or neoliberal agendas at the national level.

From Christian Democracy to centre–right

In 1970 Christian Democrats from the Netherlands and Luxembourg first suggested the strengthening of transnational cooperation among parties from the EC only. At the time, the heads of state and government had met at the summit of The Hague in late 1969 and charged two working groups with developing plans for economic and monetary union and foreign policy cooperation. In 1972 EC leaders loosely postulated the aim of European ‘union’ to combine the deepening of the EC with their first enlargement at the start of 1973. These steps, and the prospect of direct elections to the European Parliament, seemed to demand greater formal integration of cooperation, excluding parties from outside of the EC that were still members of the EUCD, like the Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and the Spanish ‘*équipe*’ of exiles.

While the CDU, under the leadership of Kohl since 1973, supported the creation of the EPP in 1976 for these reasons, it was not entirely at ease within it. Since its creation after the war, the CDU, as an interconfessional people’s party, had sought to integrate left-leaning Catholics and Catholic and Protestant conservatives, as well as liberals such as Erhard. Its programmatic profile included a strongly confrontational positioning vis-à-vis the Social Democrats, as reflected in its aggressive denouncing of Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik and its 1976 campaign slogan, ‘*Freiheit statt Sozialismus*’ (Freedom, Not Socialism). In contrast, in this period Christian Democrats in the Netherlands and in Italy were working closely with the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid) and the Eurocommunists, respectively. While the CDU succeeded in inserting a reference to the term ‘social market economy’ into the EPP programme, large sections of these parties were substantially to the left of the CDU on socio-economic policy issues and resented what they regarded as its rightward, not centrist, programmatic identity. In fact, Dries van Agt, Dutch prime minister from 1977 to 1982, at one point even claimed in communicating with a domestic audience that his Christian Democratic Appeal

(Christen-Demokratisch Appèl, CDA) had nothing in common with the CDU but the name.

Confronted in 1976 with the temporary political threat of the nationwide expansion of the Bavarian CSU under the leadership of Minister President Franz Josef Strauß as a more right-wing conservative party, Kohl felt the urgent need to reconcile centrist Christian Democratic political tendencies with more right-wing conservative tendencies and parties at the European as well as the national level. After all, secularisation was undermining the Christian Democratic voter base. Far-right parties had sprung up on the margins of conservative politics, like the National Democratic Party (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in Germany, which nearly gained representation in the Bundestag in 1969, or the National Front (Front National) in France, created in 1972. Socialist parties appeared to be profiting from dynamic societal change and new policy challenges such as the environment. EC enlargement even made them the largest political group in the European Parliament in 1975, when the British Labour Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) took their seats following the decisive referendum result for remaining in the EC.

Towards CDU/CSU-dominated centre-right party cooperation

The CDU strategy under Kohl's leadership included various building blocks. One was the creation of an 'International Office' in the CDU headquarters to coordinate transnational party cooperation. A second was intensifying bilateral contacts with conservative parties, especially the British Tories, which had only developed since the 1960s. The CDU also had to walk a tightrope when the ÖVP and the Tories, with the support of the CSU, pushed for a broader conservative alliance, which later led to the creation in 1978 of the European Democratic Union (EDU) including parties from outside of the EC. Despite criticism from Catholics on the left and its own youth wing, as well as calls from sections of the Italian Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) and the CDA to declare membership of the EPP incompatible with that of conservative alliances, the CDU (and CSU) in the end joined both the EPP and the EDU as an intermediate step to their hoped-for integration, with the EDU eventually dissolving in 2002.

In 1976 the CDU/CSU nearly won the German elections outright, while the DC and the CDA were struggling electorally, and the Flemish Christian Democrats were beginning to come under fire from Flemish nationalism. The French Christian Democrats were marginal within Giscard d'Estaing's centrist alliance and had few members in the EPP Group. Meanwhile, the CDU had comparatively huge financial resources, and the affiliated Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which allowed it to build and dominate networking among Christian Democratic and conservative parties. For example, during

the transition to democracy in Spain, the CDU and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation together played a crucial role in bringing together and funding the various Christian Democratic and regionalist political parties in that country.

Not everything worked according to plan. Despite the external support, the Spanish Christian Democrats only gained 1.7% of the vote in the first free elections in 1977. After this dismal result, the CDU, after much hesitation, eventually followed the lead of the CSU and the British Tories in investing in the Europeanisation of the post-Francoist People's Alliance (Alianza Popular) and its transformation into the People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) under the new leadership of José Maria Aznar. In the European Parliament, moreover, despite a numerical centre-right majority, the EPP Group failed to win the presidency for its group chair Egon Klepsch in 1982. Following the 1986 southern enlargement, Klepsch, who was then once more EPP group chair, advised Kohl that his 'theory centre-right' would no longer work for the European Parliament for lack of a majority without the socialists as the largest group. Instead, Klepsch coordinated closely with the socialists after 1986 to secure majorities for splitting the presidency, including his own election to the presidency in 1992, and for Parliament's demands for far-reaching institutional and policy reforms following the end of the Cold War (Bardi et al. 2020).

The end of the Cold War and the expansion of the empire

Kohl, the CDU/CSU, the EPP and the EPP Group experienced the fall of the Iron Curtain as a kind of 'end of history' for European party politics. It seemed to vindicate all key components of their programmatic platform: their traditional anti-Communism; the social market economy, reinterpreted in a less liberal direction since Erhard with the expansion of the welfare state at the national and European levels; and European integration as the institutional platform for governing transnational issues and guaranteeing peace and prosperity. Moreover, those Christian Democratic parties that had sceptically eyed the CDU/CSU's centre-right project and creation of the EPP in the 1970s either collapsed, like the Italian DC, or entered a sharp electoral decline, like the CDA. Spain's PP in turn could not fully replace the DC as the CDU/CSU's largest and most important partner in the EPP Group. As a result, the German Christian Democrats were more easily able to dominate their transnational political empire.

For some time, everything seemed to go the EPP's way. The Scandinavian conservative parties favoured European integration as a framework for economic reforms and collective security. Other parties were apparently becoming socialised into the Christian Democratic way of governing Europe, such as the reformed PP with its Christian Democratic figurehead José Maria Gil Robles, or were lured into the EPP

by the offer of resources in the form of posts and influence, as was the case for the Portuguese liberal-conservative Social Democrats. The British Conservatives even ousted Margaret Thatcher, as she was becoming too Eurosceptic during the Maastricht Treaty negotiations, and finally joined a common group in the European Parliament to have a share in power. The EPP justified the accession of Forward Italy (Forza Italia) among some centre-right Christian Democrats, on the basis of its compatible programmatic orientation, and excused its leader Silvio Berlusconi's political style as embodying the theatrical nature of Italian political culture.

To consolidate the centre-right project, the CDU/CSU was instrumental in placing key actors in central European roles, with Wilfried Martens in the EPP and EPP Group, and Klaus Welle first replacing the more centrist Italophile Thomas Jansen as EPP secretary general before becoming EPP Group secretary general. For them, shaping the evolving party landscape in the future EU member states in East-Central Europe through funding and networking in a political environment conducive to centre-right electoral success, following the abject failure of Communism, for some time seemed to be a seamless process. The EPP initially propped up revived Christian Democratic parties in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, for example. When this proved largely unsuccessful, the EPP supported new liberal-conservative political parties, so that its political dominance in most new EU member states appeared guaranteed when they joined during 2004–13.

This strategy focused primarily on maximising power and influence in intergovernmental relations and in the European Parliament. And to this extent, it was hugely successful. The EPP Group became the largest in Parliament once more in 1999, which made decisions against its preferences practically impossible. Since 2004 the EPP has also filled the post of European Commission president. Moreover, the CDU/CSU has continued to dominate the EPP and the EPP Group by coming from the largest member state, with substantial influence in the European Council and Council; being blessed for a long time with only slow electoral decline; being endowed with strong financial resources; and boasting trusted European office holders with long service, much experience and significant influence. Measured somewhat crudely in terms of posts held within the group, the bureau and the committees, even in the period from 2019 to 2024, when the German delegation only constituted 15% of the EPP Group after a bad election result, the CDU/CSU delegation nevertheless exercised 25% influence (Bardi et al. 2020). Its partners largely continue to consider the Germans, with the associated Konrad Adenauer Foundation, as the benevolent hegemon in their transnational political empire.

Natural European party of government?

Paradoxically, just as David Cameron pulled the increasingly divided and national populist British Tories out of the joint group with the EPP in the European Parliament in 2009, the EPP and the EPP Group were becoming more like them. They have increasingly turned into a programmatically highly heterogeneous force, increasingly divided over many political issues. They are now held together mainly by a strong belief in being the natural transnational party of government in the EU, intent on retaining power at nearly any price at a time when all three key planks of their post-war programmatic platform are being challenged.

The first key plank of Christian Democracy's post-war transnational programmatic platform was continued opposition to Communism, which as a threat has been replaced by a range of authoritarian to totalitarian twenty-first-century forms of rule. Even after the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán withdrew the Fidesz MEPs from the EPP Group after a long, drawn-out and acrimonious internal conflict in March 2021, however, elements of his vision of 'illiberal democracy' remain attractive to some EPP parties or sections in these parties. In contrast, while Christian Democracy after 1945 had initially neo-corporatist inclinations and had not yet been fully reconciled with practices of pluralist democracy, its leaders had learned their lesson from the experience of authoritarian rulers, including in clerical dictatorships in inter-war Europe, as in Portugal and Slovakia, for example (Conway 2020).

The second key plank after 1945 was support for a mixed economy. At the time, however, external pressures to converge on a more aligned socio-economic model were limited, and redistribution through European integration was largely confined to the CAP and structural and regional policies with initially limited budgetary implications. The EPP's formal commitment to the concept of a social market economy (and its later inclusion in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty) was ill-defined and allowed room for differing priorities. More recently, however, convergence pressures from globalisation and demands for greater fiscal redistribution to deal with challenges like migration or the Covid-19 pandemic have aggravated the internal fault lines in the EPP on socio-economic matters, with explosive potential in domestic politics.

Lastly, the EPP no longer has a coherent shared constitutional vision for the EU beyond maintaining the post-war consensus on the general desirability of European integration and the need for the organisation's legal coherence. It can be taken as a sign of its lack of support for the EU's deepening in a broadly federalist direction that in 2023 the EPP Group failed to find any MEP willing to take the rotating chair of the Spinelli Intergroup, which has been the network of federalist-minded MEPs since its creation in this form in 2010. Although the Austrian EPP MEP Lukas Mandl finally took over

its presidency after the 2024 European elections, the Spinelli Group is now dominated by MEPs from the Socialists and Democrats, Renew and Green groups.

Imagining these challenges as transient could prove delusory. In these uncertain times, ghosts from the past could well return and spell more trouble for the EPP and the EPP Group. For one thing, populist politics has only been redefined but not invented by the likes of Marine le Pen or Victor Orbán on the far right. Historically, it was already a feature of varieties of politics of mass mobilisation (see e.g. Kosicki 2018) that were either largely supported by (rural) Catholics, as in the case of the Boulangists in France until 1889, or explicitly Catholic, as with Karl Lueger's Christian Social Party (Christlichsoziale Partei) in Austria at the turn of the century, which was also strongly anti-Semitic.

This kind of populism was often linked to rabid nationalism, as in the case of Boulangism. In inter-war Europe, the Action française mobilised many Catholics around its programme of extreme nationalism, support for corporatism and opposition to the parliamentary political system. At the same time, conservative protestants in Weimar Germany supported right-wing nationalist parties like the German National People's Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei) and were more prone to go over to the National Socialists before or after 1933, or, like Franz von Papen, as far-right Catholics in the Centre Party (Zentrum), de facto facilitated Adolf Hitler's rise to power. In Hungary, Orbán connects organically with the rabid nationalism of the second half of the nineteenth century which contributed in a major way to the fracturing of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after 1867.

The Christian Democrats and centre-right parties have largely managed to contain or suppress these political ideas and associated practices in the transnational moderate consensus politics of welfare expansion and European integration. Such movements have remained virulent subcutaneously, however. Appeasing those seeking to revive such ideas within or outside the EPP and the EPP Group could well spell the end of the CDU/CSU-dominated transnational political empire.

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Christian Democracy, Conservatism and the Challenge of European Unity: Some Reflections on a Possible Convergence

Federico Ottavio Reho

Summary

This chapter reflects on certain aspects of how Christian Democracy and conservatism have historically approached the challenge of European unification. It focuses on three possible areas of convergence of some contemporary salience: a culturally and historically grounded conception of European unity, an anti-centralist and subsidiary European federalism, and a ‘restrained anti-majoritarianism’. It also underlines the relevance of Catholic conservatism as the most accomplished doctrinal and political synthesis between Christian Democracy and conservatism, and the risks entailed by its growing estrangement from Christian Democracy and attraction to national conservatism. Against a powerful recent trend that has seen increasing tensions and conflicts between conservatism and Europeanism—unlike in the first decades of European integration, when they were often perceived as mutually reinforcing—the chapter argues that ways must and can be found to reconcile them. A renewed convergence between Christian Democracy and conservatism to foster a conservative Europeanism is seen as necessary to counter the growing influence of national conservatism.

Introduction

Without any claim to exhaustively addressing a complex and multifaceted problem, this chapter reflects on how Christian Democracy and conservatism—both as ideologies and political practices—have historically approached the challenge of European unification. It focuses on certain areas of overlap and elements of convergence between these two ideological and political traditions that can still be tapped today to secure the unity of Europe and counter the growing influence of not only progressive but also nationalist and radical right-wing movements. The latter increasingly claim for themselves the conservative label—and, more rarely, even the Christian Democratic one. In reality, their

intellectual ancestry seems closer to what has been called the ‘European New Right’ and—further back still—to the inter-war ‘revolutionary conservative’ movement, than to anything resembling traditional European conservatism (Sunic 2011; Klemperer 2015). Although studying the ideological morphology of this old–new strand of the radical right goes beyond the remit of this chapter and only occasional references can be made to it, the resurgence and growing influence of revolutionary conservatism under the guise of national conservatism is an important background factor to these reflections.

Throughout the chapter, I assume, as opposed to argue, the desirability of securing the unity of Europe and of containing the rise and influence of national(ist) conservatism, without losing sight of the challenge represented by progressive forces on the other side of the political spectrum. I see a renewed convergence between Christian Democracy and conservatism as a necessary step to achieving these goals. And I draw inspiration concerning some of the themes that could favour this convergence from what I consider the historically most salient encounter between these two traditions: that of Catholic conservatism, most prominent and visible in German-speaking Christian Democracy but also present in elements of Christian Democracy and conservatism elsewhere.

For reasons of space, attention is only paid to three possible areas of convergence of great contemporary salience, though other relevant ones certainly exist and deserve to be considered: the historical narrative underpinning European unity, the constitutional conception characterising it and, relatedly, the balance between democratic choice and non-majoritarian institutions within it.

Culturally and historically grounded Europeanism

In current scholarly and political debates, the ‘Europeanism’ of Christian Democrats—their commitment to an integrated supranational European order—is almost invariably treated as a core element of their ideology. Conservatives, on the contrary, are typically seen as more ‘Eurosceptic’ and attached to the preservation of national sovereignty. Although this might correspond to the reality and perception of the last decades, looking further into the history of these political and intellectual traditions offers a more nuanced picture of convergence and overlaps. One area of convergence is a culturally and historically grounded conception of European unity, which separates both Christian Democrats and conservatives from all other political forces.

From the French Revolution to German unification, nationalism was largely a progressive and revolutionary ideology, which conservatives predominantly rejected as such. Early conservatives typically expounded a cosmopolitan view of Europe as a

commonwealth of diverse peoples bound by a common civilisation and by a common European public law, often tinged with various shades of Christianity (Lok 2023). Edmund Burke, commonly seen as the founder of Anglo-Saxon conservatism, spoke fondly of the ‘Commonwealth of Europe’ and had an integrated view of European order (Welsh 1995). He was anything but an ancestor of the national conservatism that is recently propagated in his name, most notably by the Washington, DC-based Edmund Burke Foundation and at the prominent NatCon conferences it organises across the US and Europe. Prince Metternich, one of the founders of continental European conservatism, famously proclaimed Europe his fatherland, held nationalism in horror and was the architect of the first modern form of integrated European governance after the Congress of Vienna. From the early nineteenth century until the Second World War, in its various incarnations and despite obvious geographical and temporal variations, political Catholicism—the ancestor of Christian Democracy—put forward similar concepts of supranational European unity, often inspired by the memory of the Holy Roman Empire (especially in German-speaking Central Europe) and of medieval Christendom. They consciously aimed to counter the old continent’s disintegration into competing national states and power blocs, in ways that were often prescient, despite the backward-looking historical imagination that typically powered them.

Such long-standing historical experiences and intellectual elaborations were not shed but only adapted when, after the Second World War, Christian Democrats and conservatives started to concretely plan and shape the first steps of European integration. Indeed, Rosario Forlenza, among others, showed how the inter-war notion of a Catholic ‘Occident’, based on an idealisation of medieval Christian Europe and a rejection of modern nationalism, ‘played an important role in the political revamping of post-Second World War Western Europe’ and in the Europeanist thought and commitment of Christian Democracy (Forlenza 2017, 262; Conze 2005). Overall, especially in the early decades of European integration, conservatives and Christian Democrats shared a culturally and historically grounded conception of European unity. They did not see European integration as a radical break with Europe’s past, but as the restoration of an older European tradition of continental unity in diversity that would end the revolutionary epoch of unbridled nationalisms. As a consequence, Europeanism and conservatism were not in conflict, as they increasingly tend to be construed in our time, but mutually reinforcing. Interestingly, contemporary conservatism seems to have been better able to retain a commitment to Europe’s historical identity compared to contemporary Christian Democracy. This is perhaps attributable to the fact that in conservatism this commitment tends to be culturally grounded, while in Christian Democracy it is mostly faith-based. As a consequence, secularisation has affected Christian Democracy much more directly and profoundly than it has conservatism.

Be that as it may, although the strictly hierarchical, anti-liberal and confessional views implicit in most variations of these early conceptions are unserviceable in today's liberalised and secularised Europe, recent developments seem to lend new relevance to more historically and culturally grounded conceptions of European integration. The last decades have witnessed something of an 'identitarian reawakening' of Europe's nations and regions, which a variety of national conservative movements have capitalised on in most EU member states. The EU itself is routinely portrayed as a remote post-national technocracy bent on overcoming separate national identities and lacking a commitment to the continent's common historical heritage. Indeed, despite their strong nationalist commitment, these movements also tend to profess allegiance to a shared European heritage with markedly exclusionary traits towards a variety of non-European 'others'. This weaponisation of heritage against the EU could be at least partly defused by recovering and updating a culturally grounded conception of European unity that would not merely acknowledge and celebrate the internal diversity of European societies from a gender and ethnic perspective, as the EU increasingly does, but also their specific national and regional historical heritages, as well as the common heritage that they share with each other as a civilisation.

Anti-centralist and subsidiary European federalism

Most historical experiences of encounter between Christian Democrats and conservatives, however, do bring to light a difference between the federalist views of the former and the more 'confederalist' or 'Gaullist' views of the latter. The most recent, the European People's Party–European Democrats group that existed in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2008, is no exception as, among other reasons, it also foundered over fundamental disagreements concerning the constitutional *finalité* of European unity. Future attempts at institutionalised cooperation would therefore be well-advised to openly address this issue. The good news is that, within the Christian Democratic tradition, particularly as understood by Catholic conservatives, one finds helpful intellectual resources to bridge this divide.

As Klaus Welle underlines in his chapter in this volume (pp. 45–51), acceptance of and support for European integration—let us call this attitude 'Europeanism'—must be considered a fundamental requirement for a viable conservatism in our time. However, as always, the devil is in the details. What kind of Europeanism, among the various possible ones, should conservatives and Christian Democrats expound? For, in this very advanced stage of European integration, it surely is no longer enough to generally support a united Europe and proclaim oneself 'Europeanist'. One must be able to pin down what exactly distinguishes the Europeanism of Christian Democrats from

that of conservatives, and then both of them from those of other ideological families. This is a matter of some importance, first of all, because it can cast some light on the conditions required for a doctrinal convergence between conservatives and Christian Democrats, and second of all, because a functioning EU democracy necessarily requires alternative visions of European unity competing for popular support and the exercise of supranational powers.

We have already mentioned that the prevalent approach to European integration within Christian Democracy can be defined as federalist, while conservatism's can be summarised as confederalist or Gaullist. In between, there have historically been the positions of Catholic conservatives, which tended to be more federalist and supranational than those of other conservatives, but also more attentive to the prerogatives of the lower levels and to the protection of diversity compared to mainstream Christian Democracy, within which they were usually anchored. They could exhibit such nuances because there are obviously many different types of, and approaches to, federalism. It would perhaps be more correct to place federal and confederal visions of European unity along a continuum, instead of casting them as a polarity. At one extreme of this continuum there are the most centralised forms of federalism, such as that historically propounded by Altiero Spinelli and still defended by many Europeanist socialists and liberals, which advocate for a very consolidated and interventionist EU pursuing high economic redistribution, equality, liberal lifestyles and multicultural societies. At the other extreme there are the most 'sovereigntist' forms of confederalism, which would like the EU to essentially be a league of sovereign nations, with its supranational institutions reduced to a merely executive function and its intergovernmental ones elevated to sole decision-makers.¹ It seems to me that sovereigntist forms of conservative confederalism are by now untenable and fundamentally subversive, as the EU is already so much more than a confederation of sovereign states. An increasing number of confederalist conservatives who have come to power in recent years have been forced to come to terms with that reality, although they have typically been at a loss to articulate a coherent doctrine that would justify their acceptance of European integration without jettisoning their previous emphasis on the value of diversity and the protection of national prerogatives.

Such a doctrine could be precisely the polycentric and subsidiary conception of supranational federation that characterises the Christian Democratic and Catholic conservative tradition, most explicitly in the early decades of European integration and most strongly in its most openly conservative circles and figures. One of its sources within

1. I am purposely excluding unitary—i.e. totally centralised at the European level—and anarchical—i.e. based on the absence of any permanent interstate framework—approaches to European order, for reasons of convenience and because it seems to me that almost no serious political thinker and force is advocating either.

Christian Democracy was certainly the philosophy of personalism and the 'integral federalism' coterminous with it, which favoured bottom-up, federalist arrangements both within nation states and at interstate level. This justifies an emphasis on respecting cultural diversity as well as national and regional autonomy within the framework of a putative European federation, shaping a much more anti-centralist brand of federalism than the one advocated by Spinelli and his contemporary admirers (Reho 2018). It is not difficult to see that this multilayered and polycentric conception of European unity could serve as a bridge towards the conservative defence of national prerogatives from the encroachment of supranational institutions. It allows one to take subsidiarity seriously as a principle 'guaranteeing the integrity of Europe's historically developed nations and regions' and primarily casting the Union 'as the protector of its members' integrity, autonomy, independence and identity, and not as an agent of uniformity and centralisation'. In other words, it allows one to identify the Union's primary role as protecting each European people's 'right to an autonomous existence in a world in which each of them in isolation would become the vassal of extra-European powers' (Reho 2019). I therefore share the spirit of Welle's claim that 'the EU is the necessary complement to the nation state, allowing it to thrive and prosper', and that '[t]ogether we can defend our interests in a world that is becoming increasingly dangerous again' (in this volume, p. 49). However, I believe that a much more polycentric and 'diversitarian' ethos should guide our operationalisation of it. Gunnar Hökmark's plea in this volume for a strong but strictly limited Union seems to point in the same direction.

Still, in the early 1990s, a prominent historian famously interpreted European integration as a process that did not undermine but rescued the nation state, helping it to survive and thrive in the post-war era (Milward 1992). The book, however, was published in the very year when the Maastricht Treaty was signed. That treaty extended European integration into areas that had until then been considered the hallmark of national sovereignty, most prominently monetary policy, but also, to a lesser extent, justice and home affairs as well as foreign, security and defence matters. Also for that reason, it was the first European treaty to elicit considerable opposition, to be rejected by the electorate of a member state (Denmark, while French citizens narrowly approved it, after a very polarised campaign), and to fundamentally change the nature and magnitude of right-wing opposition to European integration. The now defunct UK Independence Party, which played so prominent a role in making Brexit a reality two and a half decades later, was first established to campaign against that treaty, and the Conservative Party itself was profoundly split on its ratification. In France, it was during that heated ratification campaign that some of the sovereignty-minded Gaullist right and the radical right of the National Front (Front National) found each other on the same side of the fence for the first time. The re-emergence and consolidation of this political constellation first seen back then partly accounts for Marine Le Pen's successes in recent years, most strikingly

at the 2024 European and national parliamentary elections. Regardless of whether these fears for the fate of Europe's nation states had or still have any justification, they seem to partly account for the current successes of national conservatism. It would seem wise to assuage them within the European framework in order to prevent them from festering and feeding into anti-system Eurosceptic forces, as they certainly have done in recent years.

In his chapter, Stefan Lunte observes, with reference to the doctrinal underpinning of Christian Democracy, that 'the world is not black and white, but colourful. There are extreme positions, but there are also mediating ones, and one of them is occupied by Christian Democracy' (in this volume, p. 212). This is an important statement, with solid theological underpinnings. Lunte rightly emphasises how a refusal of the Manichean view of politics as a battle between absolute good and absolute evil, increasingly dominant in our societies polarised by identity politics, is an obvious implication of this observation. I would here underline another, perhaps less obvious, one, directly relevant to my argument. For Christian Democrats and especially Catholic conservatives, the created world's 'colourfulness' also confers inherent value to all historically developed diversities. Their disappearance within a unitary European order would therefore have to be seen as a profound impoverishment, just as the eradication of many such diversities within unitary national orders was. The ultimate root of the Christian Democratic and Catholic conservative concern for protecting polycentricity and diversity, rejecting unitary and centralised forms of European order, is ultimately the same as that which led them to reject the exclusionary forms of order favoured by nationalism. This conception is also not far at all from the emphasis that genuine conservatives since Edmund Burke have placed on the value of 'spontaneity', and on the worth of all political and social arrangements that protect and nurture it. That the EU should be precisely one such arrangement—at the most a decentralised federal union and never a centralised federal state on the model of the post-Civil War and especially the post-New Deal US—is therefore a stance on which Christian Democrats and conservatives should be able to converge on the basis of the polycentric and subsidiary federalism I have outlined above. This federalism is yet another manifestation of Christian Democracy's nature as a 'third way' and a 'mediating position', as it rejects both the European centralism of progressive forces and the nationalism of the radical right. Christian Democracy's aim has never been to criminalise and eliminate the nation, but to transcend and sublimate it within a broader order (Forlenza 2024).

Restrained anti-majoritarianism

In the immediate post-Second World War period, prominent conservatives and Christian Democrats played a leading role in the first practical steps of European

integration. We are all familiar, of course, with Robert Schuman's, Konrad Adenauer's and Alcide de Gasperi's promotion of the European Communities. On the contrary, we are rather less aware of the 'conservative' origins of the European Convention on Human Rights. Recent scholarship has rediscovered how various conservative constituencies, particularly French and British, with transnational links converged on the need to enshrine some basic liberties that were deemed threatened by national progressive forces at the supranational level, thereby constraining the ability of democratically elected governments to implement left-wing policies (from the restrictions to private property sought by Clement Atlee's Labour Party to the secularist educational reforms favoured by the French left; see Duranti 2017). This certainly seems ironic, in light of the bogeyman status acquired by supranational courts in general, and by the European Court of Human Rights in particular, in contemporary (national) conservative discourse, not least the one underpinning Brexit.

Conservatives and Christian Democrats, therefore, also shared a distrust of unbridled democratic majorities and support for non-majoritarian institutions, including supranational ones, limiting their powers. This implied acceptance of supranational authorities that enjoyed some degree of agency and constrained the prerogatives of the nation states that had created them. Moreover, while Christian Democracy had a predominantly middle-class ethos, conservatism had aristocratic origins and, until relatively recently, elitist views on political and social order that made it even more sceptical of majoritarianism and supportive of cultural, social and administrative limits to it. Comprehensively tracing how broad sectors of conservatism shed their traditional anti-majoritarian reflex and came under the influence of national conservatism's plebiscitarian leanings lies beyond the scope of this short contribution. One factor favouring this shift, however, must be mentioned here, as it directly relates to what Welle identifies as the third substantive dimension of what contemporary conservatism should, in his opinion, 'conserve': the post-1945 democratic order, with its fundamental rights and freedoms constitutionally enshrined and judicially enforced.

Nobody should question the constitutive importance of these legal safeguards for free and well-ordered societies *in principle*. And yet there is no doubt that, under the convenient veneer of defending 'conservative' values, in recent years the governments of some EU member states have taken measures that undermined them. However, it is equally clear that in recent decades the scope of these safeguards has often been enlarged by judicial interpretation, as opposed to political deliberations, and that their *content* has increasingly shifted in a direction broadly unfavourable to substantively conservative positions. Even Joseph Weiler, a refined jurist who cannot be remotely suspected of 'illiberal' sympathies, noted how the growing emphasis on 'rights' in today's political discourse is accompanied by constant attempts to 'turn any political action into a legal action about rights and entitlements, and to use the courts, again and again, to achieve

our political objectives'. And he warned against the risks of a democratic backlash against such practices (Weiler 2020, 97). As I have argued elsewhere, EU institutions but also the European Court of Human Rights 'have increasingly embraced an expansive and progressive interpretation of fundamental values that restricts member states' ability to pursue conservative policies on such matters as family, gender and education' (Reho 2024). This is one reason why even a moderate and anti-Brexit conservative jurist and former justice of the UK Supreme Court such as Lord Jonathan Sumption now supports the UK leaving the European Convention on Human Rights. Through its 'living instrument doctrine', he argues, 'the court claims the right to develop the convention by recognising new rights thought to be in the spirit of the original treaty although never envisaged in it', which in practice means the power 'to make us accept rights which we may not want and for which there may be no democratic mandate' (Sumption 2023).

The post-1945 democratic order of which Welle speaks, therefore, is not an unchanging constitutional set-up but a moving and evolving object constantly reshaped by cultural changes, political transformations and shifting judicial doctrines, some of which conservatives must remain entitled to find objectionable. Positions and policies undermining the basic checks, balances and rights traditionally associated with it do appear indefensible from a conservative perspective today. However, Christian Democrats and conservatives should at least be able to agree that constantly widening the scope and reinterpreting the content of fundamental rights, freedoms and values in a progressive direction by judicial fiat is equally undesirable, especially so at the supranational level, where subsidiarity seems the best approach to handle controversial moral disagreements. In other words, here too, conservatives and Christian Democrats should be able to converge on a mediating, 'third way' position that strikes 'the correct balance between the EU's necessary responsibility to protect the core dimensions of the rule of law and fundamental rights across the member states and those states' legitimate desires to filter their interpretations through the specific lenses of their societies' histories, values and democratic preferences' (Reho 2024). This is what I would call a 'restrained anti-majoritarianism', on which Christian Democrats and conservatives should try to find consensus.

Conclusion: towards a Europeanist conservatism

As this chapter has tried to convey, there are important intellectual resources and political experiences conducive to convergence in the historical trajectories of Christian Democracy and conservatism concerning the challenge of European unity. The analysis has focused on three areas with high contemporary political salience where this convergence has already been partly realised in the past and could therefore be recreated today,

although others certainly exist. The first area is a culturally and historically grounded conception of European unity that, unlike Spinellian and progressive Europeanism, values the heritage of Europe as a civilisation and considers the EU as the modern political framework necessary to nurture it. The second is an anti-centralist and subsidiary European federalism under which both the predominantly confederalist views of conservatives and the mainly federalist (though, in practice, less and less so) preferences of Christian Democrats can find their place. The third is a restrained anti-majoritarianism that, on the one hand, rejects the plebiscitarian leanings of national conservatism and rediscovers the traditional conservative and Christian Democratic support for non-majoritarian institutions at the national and supranational levels but also, on the other hand, counters widespread tendencies to widen the scope and reinterpret the content of fundamental rights, freedoms and values in a progressive direction.

The analysis emphasised how, for understandable reasons, it was especially in the thought and experience of Catholic conservatives that the convergence between Christian Democracy and conservatism achieved its most harmonious synthesis. The importance of this constituency for the success of post-Second World War Christian Democracy is not always fully recognised. In the early post-war decades, the anchoring within Christian Democratic movements of Catholic conservatives that, in the inter-war period, had clearly possessed authoritarian leanings and had at times been instrumental in bringing Fascists to power, was an important factor in Christian Democracy's ability to gradually commit the more conservative religious elites and electorate to the new democratic systems. Besides playing an important role in internal democratic stabilisation, it also allowed Christian Democrats to discreetly maintain channels of communication with personalities within authoritarian conservative regimes such as Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, something that later made it possible for them to help foster a democratic transition on the conservative side of the political spectrum after these regimes' fall. The separation of Catholic conservatives from Christian Democracy and their gravitation towards more nationalist forces is therefore always a dangerous development and an ominous sign.

Unfortunately, this is precisely the tendency we have witnessed in recent decades and which has been gathering speed in the last few years in a number of EU countries, without Christian Democratic leaders being fully aware of its implications or taking any countermeasures. Aspects of this development are valuably touched upon in the contributions to the present volume by Invernizzi Accetti and Meyer Resende. Despite its declining electoral importance, when Catholic conservatism abandons Christian Democracy and joins the emerging national conservative constellation, as it increasingly is doing, it enormously boosts this constellation by lending to a dubious movement still suspected of radicalism the credibility of figures and ideas that possess an impeccable conservative pedigree and a long history of influence within the mainstream

centre–right. This is particularly unfortunate because Catholic conservatism (unlike Protestant and evangelical conservatism) is anything but nationalist in spirit, and is being pushed into the arms of national conservatism by what it perceives as Christian Democracy’s growing indifference to, if not open embarrassment about, the defence of a traditional Christian anthropology. I therefore agree with Invernizzi Accetti (in this volume) that preventing the secession of Catholic conservatism and, more broadly, of the conservative religious elites and electorate from Christian Democracy and mainstream conservatism will be important to preserve the viability of centre–right forces and to stabilise moderate democratic politics in our countries.

The other important, and related, task of the coming years will be reconciling Europeanism and conservatism more broadly. Unlike in the first decades of European integration—when, as partly explained above, they were often perceived as mutually reinforcing—today Europeanism and conservatism are typically seen as being in tension and in conflict. This is the result of a gradual growing apart between them that started decades ago but has intensified in recent years. On the one hand, conservatism has become increasingly nationalist and Eurosceptic, being, for example, at the forefront of efforts to take the UK out of the EU, half a century after having been at the forefront of efforts to bring it into the European Economic Community. Ideologically, as mentioned, the new ‘national conservatism’ extolls ‘the virtue of nationalism’ (Hazony 2018) and is fundamentally dismissive of supranational European integration, in ways that seem difficult to reconcile with the original spirit of conservatism, which was patriotic but also cosmopolitan. On the other hand, Europeanism and European integration are increasingly dominated by a progressive liberal ethos that refuses to acknowledge the cultural and historical foundations of Europe’s unity and appears programmatically hostile to conservative forces and values.

This situation is unfortunate because the EU is here to stay, and European unity is today an inescapable historical necessity for the continent’s peoples. In some sense, it could even be seen as the latest historical manifestation of a quest for continental unity that has characterised European history for more than a millennium. The real question, therefore, is whether conservative and Christian forces and ideas of order will contribute to shaping its next steps or will condemn themselves to a pointless opposition by embracing nationalist and anti-EU positions. To favour a new convergence between Europeanism and conservatism and to revive a tradition, a vision and a practice of Europeanist and supranational conservatism, conservatives and Christian Democrats must again find a space to meet, exchange and forge a common understanding of the EU’s future. If the EPP ecosystem alone is deemed to be no longer enough, then broader and looser spaces can be imagined to pursue such goals. Some of these already existed in the past and are well-described in Wolfram Kaiser’s contribution to this volume. What must be avoided is conservatism becoming permanently colonised and hegemonised

by nationalist and radical ideas largely alien to its tradition and contrary to its ethos; and, inversely, Europeanism becoming identified with progressive values and policies that tend to marginalise or altogether exclude conservative and Christian positions.

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CONSERVATISM

Centre–Right Politics Decoded: Conservatism and Christian Democracy in Europe Today

Anthony Teasdale

Summary

This chapter seeks to identify similarities and differences between the conservative and Christian Democrat traditions in modern European politics, asking whether they are positioned at different points on a continuous spectrum or are themselves different in kind. It looks at the relationship between Christian Democracy and the post-war settlement in Europe and analyses the nature of conservatism, with special reference to the British Conservative experience. It discusses the importance of notions of ‘nation’ and ‘state’ to centre–right thinking and assesses the degree of convergence in attitudes towards European integration, both in theory and in practice. It contrasts the assumptions and propositions of the centre–right with those of the populist right in Europe and traces the emergence of a new ‘national conservatism’ seemingly located somewhere between these two political forces.

Christian Democracy and the post-war settlement

In a series of recent papers, Klaus Welle, former Secretary General of both the transnational European People’s Party (EPP) and the EPP political group in the European Parliament, has argued that Christian Democracy in Europe is essentially ‘conservative’ in the sense that it favours the maintenance and survival of the post–Second World War political and economic settlement (Welle 2023a; Welle 2023b; Welle 2023c). At its core, this settlement, which was pioneered in different forms by new centre–right parties calling themselves Christian Democrat—notably in Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, and for a while in France, after 1945—comprises not only support for representative democracy as the foundation of the political system, but also simultaneous commitments to European integration, the transatlantic alliance and some form of social-market economy.

In the immediate post-war period, Christian Democrats in power constructed a series of institutions and policies that largely defined the new status quo, and since then,

their successors in Christian Democrat and other mainstream centre–right parties have sought to safeguard and build on that settlement. In doing so, they have displayed a versatile capacity to reconcile what sometimes might appear to be competing positions or principles, forging a sophisticated amalgam that has largely been accepted by the governing elites in many countries, across the political spectrum. They have also shaped thinking at the heart of the institutions of the EU, where, from the start, the Christian Democratic parties of ‘the Six’ (founding member states) exercised considerable influence over the evolution of the emerging European political system.

If Christian Democracy is ‘conservative’ in the sense of wanting to defend the existing, post-1945 system—essentially a democratic order designed to bring peace and prosperity in Europe, which Christian Democrats themselves played a key part in establishing—how does that relate to its longer-term evolution as a political philosophy from the nineteenth century onwards? In his recent history of the movement, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti argues that Christian Democratic support for supranational integration in post-war Europe is a reflection of a bigger and longer-term commitment to internationalism and cooperation in global affairs (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). The proponents of Christian Democracy in Europe after 1945 were making a conscious attempt to transcend nationalism, to which some Catholic forces in particular had sadly succumbed in the inter-war years, on a continent that had no choice but to ‘start again’.

Two other recurrent themes in Christian Democratic thinking have been a belief in the inherent dignity of the human ‘person’ and a scepticism towards the promotion of materialism or consumerism as a goal for policy or politics. These principles are linked, in that Catholic social teaching and the French notion of ‘personalism’, both favoured by some early post-war Christian Democrats, conceive of the individual as a responsible, even spiritual, figure with many dimensions—in contrast to the emphasis on the individual as an economic agent, to be found in classical liberalism, or as a figure subordinate to the collective interests of class or state, to be found in Marxism (Zaccaria 2023). Hence the ‘conservative’ disposition of Christian Democrats towards traditional social or family values, and their more ‘progressive’ attitude towards the welfare state. Christian Democracy has been reluctant to accept an inherent divide between capital and labour in society—perhaps reflecting the teaching of the Catholic Church that there is a strong mutual obligation between rich and poor—let alone concede the concept of class conflict, which has tended to differentiate it from political forces either to its left or right. The existence of Christian Democratic trade-union organisations in Italy, France and the Benelux countries, for example, has sometimes been a source of curiosity to outside observers.

Where does all this place Christian Democracy in relation to the (big ‘C’) Conservative tradition which has existed in the Anglo-Saxon world for even longer, notably in Britain? Are Christian Democracy and Conservatism located at different

points on a continuous spectrum, or are they different in kind? How does Conservatism differ in turn from what is now known as ‘populism’? Were attempts to widen the historic Christian Democratic group in the European Parliament, the EPP Group—pioneered notably by Wilfried Martens and Klaus Welle in the 1990s—a natural development, working with the grain of both partners, or were they always destined to fail?

Conservatism: a successful but restless tradition

Whereas Christian Democracy appears to have a fairly clear sense of its own principles and values—reflected, for example, in the fact that the trypic of policy positions identified by Welle has been consistently followed by Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands), the single most continuously successful political party in continental Europe since the Second World War—Conservatism, by contrast, has always been a more amorphous, complex, organic and contested tradition, constantly evolving over time, and one which it is less easy to capture and define. Many writers and commentators have, over the years, pointed to a reluctance among Conservatives to be unequivocal in asserting any timeless political doctrine or set of fixed principles. As David Willetts has observed, characteristically, ‘Conservatives are wary of grand statements of principles and beliefs’, and although they do have political principles, they have tended to emerge more from practice than from theory (Willetts 1992, 3–4).

One recurrent feature of Conservatism has been its repeated ability, often with surprisingly little enthusiasm, successfully to govern a society about which it harbours serious criticisms, misgivings or reservations. Conservatism has been characterised less by a strong and confident defence of an attractive ‘status quo’ than by a routine pattern of disquiet about the present, and to some degree a fear of the future, that reflects a basic insecurity, defensiveness and restlessness about the world around it. At any given time, many Conservatives have tended to regret or deplore many of the social changes or trends that have marked out the society or culture of the moment, and they have seen it as their mission to advocate and try to introduce alternative policies that might make the society and economy operate in (what they would consider) a saner, better balanced and more sustainable way.

This disquiet at the heart of Conservatism has, however, been matched by a strong and consistent urge to govern. Such an instinct may originate in the fact that Conservatism as a political force emerged historically as the reaction of a displaced or embattled governing class—usually developing ‘when traditional structures were challenged by the rising bourgeoisie and its liberal parties’, as Klaus von Beyme (1987) has put it—and that Conservatives thus harboured a deep anxiety about the potential consequences

of others being in power and making mistakes in government that it would then fall to them somehow to correct. So, whilst Conservatives usually feel comfortable about governing, they rarely display a complacent approach to politics. They more often believe that something is going wrong in the world around them, something which needs to be contained or corrected, without always being sure about how best to do so.

Conservatives do not share the ambition to remake or reorder society that is often found on the left, and whilst some may be nostalgic about a 'lost' past, they are conscious of the limitations of politics to change society, usually looking to practical or incremental reforms designed to make the present work better, rather than to build an entirely new future on radically different lines. Conservatives harbour a fear of what they see as 'utopian fictions' about possible futures and tend to the conviction that 'good things are more easily destroyed than created', as Roger Scruton has put it, and generally wish to 'hold on to those good things in the face of politically engineered change' (Scruton 2017, 121).

This underlying tendency to anxiety and caution is not always apparent to observers, opponents or critics of Conservatism, who usually assume it to be a much more coherent and self-assured political philosophy than it is. After all, Conservative parties have often been in power in Anglo-Saxon countries and have therefore played an important role in shaping the politics, policies and culture of any given time. In Britain, most notably, the Conservatives have proved the most resilient party of government for much of the last two centuries, and they have been in power, on their own or with others, for 67 of the last 100 years. But, as Edmund Fawcett (2020, 66) has noted, 'Running through the conservative story is a contrast between political success and intellectual uncertainty.'

The British experience of Conservatism

In Britain, at least, Conservatism developed largely as a defensive reaction of rural forces against liberal modernity and its attempts to pluralise property and political rights and to secularise the state. It was sceptical or hostile to the widening of voting rights, the growth of government and unnecessary foreign entanglements. Although the group that became known as the 'Conservatives' fought largely a losing battle against political and social change, in practice they proved much more successful than expected in winning power in parliamentary elections and in governing the new society and polity that was emerging—and one which, ironically, they had largely resisted.

As Edmund Fawcett (2020, 62) has argued, 'Conservatives began as natural-born rulers who had lost authority, but they rewon it by compromising with the liberals and democrats they had started out opposing. They found themselves in command of a modern world they could not love in their hearts'. So whilst Edmund Burke had

suggested that ‘we must reform in order to conserve’, Benjamin Disraeli, the most successive Conservative leader of the mid- to late nineteenth century in Britain, famously posed the ‘awkward question’, in his novel, *Coningsby*, of ‘what will you conserve?’

Building on the experience of Robert Peel, ‘Disraelian’ Conservatism accepted the process of social change—notably the emergence of a new middle class—and sought to guide it towards a model that both landed and business interests could tolerate, based on a notion of national pride and the reality of economic success. The rise of the labour movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a repeat of this pattern, with—after a period of rapid fluctuation between the political parties—the division of liberal and socialist forces allowing the Conservatives to hold office for nearly the whole of the period between the First and Second World Wars. Ironically, despite their intellectual defensiveness and insecurity about the trajectory of the country, as the rise of the trade unions and the Labour Party relentlessly restructured British politics, the Conservatives became the party of both national symbols and popular prosperity, whilst pragmatically accepting the need for limited reform in health, education and welfare. The ‘safety first’ instinct embodied in the reassuring figure of Stanley Baldwin became a potent political anchor for Britain in a turbulent and dangerous world.

Winston Churchill’s war-time government accepted a large part of the Labour Party’s domestic reform agenda—even though most Conservatives disliked it and many had previously opposed it as quasi-Communist—as the price of national unity in the face of potential catastrophe. After the Second World War, the Conservatives reluctantly adjusted to Labour’s introduction of a strong welfare state, based on collectivised health care and higher social spending, and the nationalisation of all public services, whilst remaining deeply anxious about the economic consequences of this huge policy change. Back in power from 1951, they hesitatingly sought to shift the balance towards enterprise and opportunity, fearing a popular backlash, even as they were able to reap a major political dividend from growing prosperity and material progress in a way that was to keep them in office for the next 13 years.

With the passage of time, however, certain limitations and contradictions became apparent in the core compromise that successive British governments were engaged in between the early 1950s and 1970s. The credibility of the so-called Social Democratic consensus—which had been pioneered by the Labour Party in the 1940s and accepted by the Conservatives in the 1950s—was tested to breaking-point in the 1970s by a combination of excessive spending, high inflation, poor productivity and low growth. The process ended in the bailing-out of James Callaghan’s Labour government by the International Monetary Fund in 1976 and that government’s final collapse three years later after a ‘winter of discontent’ driven by militant trade union power.

Margaret Thatcher’s ‘conviction politics’ of the 1980s was a reaction to the perception that ‘triangulation’ by Conservatives with their political opponents had not only ended in

national humiliation but had resulted in consistent and growing underperformance of the economy, in turn fuelling failure in society more widely. In this sense, the Conservatism of the ‘Thatcher revolution’ was not so much the product of a sudden conversion to a more extreme or radical ideology, as many now tend to assume, as it was a continuation, by different and tougher means, of the ill-fated ‘Quiet Revolution’ that her predecessor as party leader, Edward Heath, had embarked on but abandoned a decade earlier.

The striking overlap in membership between the Heath and early Thatcher governments underlines that ‘Thatcherism’ was the unhappy reaction of a party that felt that all other approaches had been exhausted and that more hard-edged and unpopular decisions now had to be made—in a long and recurrent process of reform designed to contain inflation, incentivise work, end the coercive power of trade unions, and restore a sense of pride and achievement to a country whose psychological health had been seriously damaged. After a difficult start, this strategy—although very different to the one pursued by the Conservatives in the 1950s—was also (unexpectedly) electorally highly successful, leading to the party’s re-election to office in 1983, 1987 and 1992.

Politics of nation and state

When modern Conservatism has been electorally successful in the Anglo-Saxon world—as notably in the 1950s and 1980s—it has usually managed to make two appeals to the public at once. The dominant Conservative Party has succeeded in embodying the twin imperatives of the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’—of representing and celebrating national institutions and patriotism, on the one hand, and of exercising the will to power and addressing the need to make difficult choices in government, on the other. The first appeal has depended on a measure of rhetoric and mystique; the second, on a hard-headed sense of *raison d’état*.

This distinction, first sketched in the writing of Andrew Gamble (1974, 1994), helps explain the political success of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. It also adds to an understanding of the political ascendancy of another important figure in post-war European politics, outside the Christian Democratic or Anglo-Saxon Conservative traditions, namely, Charles de Gaulle in France, as he built a Fifth Republic in the 1960s based on the twin foundations of the imagery of the nation and the interests of the state. All three of these figures—Reagan, Thatcher and de Gaulle—enjoyed exceptional political skills, notably in their ability to identify and communicate a strong political vision of the change they wanted to bring about, a capacity to reorder political choices around their personal agendas, and a practical gift for generating an attractive narrative of why national success depended on them, rather than their opponents, holding power.

When the imagery of the nation and the interests of the state are closely aligned, or at least appear to be so, this happy conjuncture helps to offset, and perhaps even overcome, the natural restlessness or feeling of being ‘ill at ease’ with contemporary society that is one of the recurrent hallmarks of Conservatism. It offers the possibility instead of a Conservatism that can feel comfortable with itself and with the wider world. In different ways, Reagan, Thatcher and de Gaulle each managed to achieve this, at least for the larger part of their respective periods in power.

The success of these figures was confirmed by the fact that, even though each had already held office for at least two terms, they were followed by successors who had served in key positions in their own governments—in the forms of George Bush Sr, John Major and Georges Pompidou—and who were each seen as offering staging posts in the continued transformation of their countries in the mould set by their predecessors in office. In the event, however, Bush and Major found it difficult to maintain the momentum that their patrons and predecessors had established, partly because they lacked the instinctive ability to project an arresting vision, or find the right language or imagery, to shape the political debates in their countries.

In France, too, although Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing were between them able to sustain the centre-right in power for another 12 years, their parties gradually became divided, and they lost the political initiative to opponents on the left. Pompidou was unhappy with the ‘new society’ that his own reformist prime minister, Jacques Chaban Delmas, sought to introduce in the early 1970s, commenting wryly: ‘As to building a new society, I have already got more than enough problems with the old one!’ (Cotta 2023, 240). Giscard’s attempt to shift the centre-right from the Gaullist party to his own new, more centrist Union for French Democracy (Union pour la démocratie française) simply led to his own loss of power in 1981, with his socialist rival, François Mitterrand, then occupying the French presidency for the next 14 years.

From the early 1990s onwards, Conservatism in Britain and America started to fall back into a mood of uncertainty, fractiousness and discontent, reflected in growing internal division, and even in a loss of the will to govern. This in turn was to offer the opportunity for new challengers from the right, starting with a form of ‘populism’ embodied in the Tea Party movement in the US. Just as contradictions had become apparent in the post-war settlements in both countries in the 1970s, so in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the balancing act of ‘nation and state’ that Thatcher and Reagan (and then Major and Bush) had managed for a while became increasingly difficult to carry off. Successive crises during the 2000s and 2010s—notably the ‘Great Recession’ starting in 2008 and the eurozone debt crisis that followed in Europe—led to an increasing number of working-class and lower-middle-class voters feeling alienated and detached from the economic system, as they and their children faced

diminished chances of prosperity and self-improvement in the years ahead. A wider form of populism was to feed on this new mood of discontent.²

Populism and the centre–right

As Heather Grabbe has defined it, drawing on the work of Cas Mudde (2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), populism is primarily a ‘view of the world and of the structure of society, with a central claim that society and indeed politics are divided into a corrupt elite and a pure people’. The populist leader or party presents itself as the ‘representative of the pure people’ who is ‘directly in touch with the will of that people and does not therefore need the checks and balances of democratic institutions and the rule of law’ (Grabbe 2019). Moreover, right-wing populists, at least, generally define ‘the pure people’ in some kind of ethno-nationalist or ‘nativist’ way. They hold that their traditional national community is under active or potential threat—externally, from immigration and free trade, and internally, from an unrepresentative and detached elite group driven by ‘liberal internationalist’ values—and that such threats can best be resisted by exclusionary policies that protect citizens at home and abroad.

The views of such populists are not simply an angrier, less content and more right-wing version of classic Conservatism, as they themselves sometimes like to claim. Rather they are different in kind. No authentic Conservative could talk in terms of a ‘pure’ or ‘true’ people who had an automatic or proprietorial right to govern. The implication is undemocratic, in the sense that the populist view appears to value some citizens as being more authentic than others and to believe that one section of society, a static majority, ought permanently to be in power. This ‘civic inequality’ contravenes the normal assumption in democracies that you get different electoral outcomes, benefitting various political parties, over time, and that no one party or political force has a predetermined right to rule. In taking this view, right-wing populists diverge considerably from the whole of the post-war centre–right in Europe, with both Christian Democracy and Conservatism having favoured, in varying degrees, open societies and market economies, underpinned by international cooperation and interdependence, all working in a democratic framework of alternation in government.

Logically, the process of European integration represents the antithesis of right-wing populist politics—as an internationalist project operating above the level of the nation state, driven by transnational economics and administered by (what populists like to present as) a remote, disconnected, technocratic elite. Right-wing populist leaders seek to promote a form of identity politics that resists globalisation and the erosion of borders, whether through markets or European integration. In doing so, they wish to exploit a sense of loss among many voters—a loss felt in or through economic failure,

immigration, declining social status, and/or a sense of being alienated from and ignored by the political system.

Left-wing populism is less xenophobic and less hostile to liberal internationalism, and more trusting of the potential role of the state, but among its central beliefs are that society is divided into '99% versus 1%' and that an unrepresentative elite group often betrays the masses through pursuit of its own self-interest. These are propositions it basically shares with the populist right. Left-wing populism crystallised in the 'Occupy' movement in 2011–12, when young protesters engaged in sit-ins, starting in Wall Street and then spreading across the democratic world. Both right- and left-wing populists think less in terms of classic political programmes or of party structures than of redefining the relationship between the 'governing' and the 'governed'. Populist forces thus represent a systemic challenge to the classic notion of politics as a left–right electoral competition for swing votes in the centre, driven by traditional socio-economic issues and interests, and leading to an alternation of centre–right and centre–left parties or coalitions in power—the pattern seen in most democratic political systems in Europe since the Second World War.

Centre-right politics: policy propositions versus state of mind?

If both Conservatism and Christian Democracy are different in kind to populism, how do they compare with one another? Both Conservative and Christian Democratic traditions take it as axiomatic that politics and public policy should, indeed must, be conducted through constitutional and democratic institutions. Both accept the notion of a citizenry that is something wider than any ideological, ethnic, social or other demographic group. Even if some current Christian Democrat or other mainstream centre–right parties in Europe call themselves 'people's parties', this title reflects an aspiration to represent and govern in the interests of all the people; it is not an assertion that they somehow embody an exclusive or 'true' people—as in Communist states past and present (or as with populist parties today)—or that they enjoy any special legitimacy in that respect. Even if their ambition might sometimes be 'universalist', they understand that necessarily they can represent only part of society, not its totality, and that transient majorities will emerge and rotate or alternate over time, ensuring that the same party or coalition cannot expect always to be in power. In short, they accept the legitimacy of the peaceful transfer of power and expect it to happen as a normal part of the political process.

However, modern Conservatism cannot trace its origins to any recent moment in political history—in the way that modern Christian Democracy largely dates from the refounding of democratic states after the Second World War—representing a longer,

more amorphous history. As a result, conservatism is less dependent on a set of core policy propositions of the kind developed in Continental Europe after the war, such as Christian Democratic positions on European integration, the transatlantic alliance, or the mix or structure of a social market economy, than it is essentially a political 'state of mind'.

What is this Conservative state of mind? Reflecting a certain pessimism about the nature of the human condition, the Conservative disposition is sceptical about the potential of government action to solve socio-economic problems, whilst also accepting that government intervention is necessary and desirable to provide or underpin certain collective disciplines and collective public goods that otherwise would not exist. At the most basic, Conservatives see government intervention as essential for the maintenance of contracts, the rule of law, law and order, and collective defence—the so-called night-watchman state. Whilst preferring market solutions to government-provided ones, they generally recognise that strong competition policy and effective regulation are required to make markets work in a way that prevents restrictive practices and excessive concentrations of power and spreads the benefits of prosperity to society as a whole.

Beyond that minimal provision, Conservatives have accepted an active role for government in health, education and welfare, but they have done so, as Willetts puts it, without 'warmth or vision'. Eschewing both the high-mindedness of liberals and the egalitarianism of socialists, Conservatives have been torn between conceding the need to provide a social safety net, to support those unable to survive in a market setting, and fearing that too much support will undermine social cohesion and a sense of community, rather than promote or strengthen it. As Willetts explains, Conservatives fear that excessive action to avert or remedy social ills can have the reverse effect, not least by giving 'short-term financial rewards to behaviour which is in the long term destructive both of the individuals involved and of society at large' (Willetts 1992, 139–49).

As a result, Conservatives generally place less emphasis than Christian Democrats on pursuing reconciliation between interests or maintaining 'social peace', just as they fear the effect of welfare in disincentivising people from work and they worry about 'big government' pre-empting productive resources and reducing competitiveness. Even if both Conservatives and Christian Democrats tend to the view that, as Tim Bale has put it, 'the main inequalities within society are natural and largely (if not completely) outside the purview of the state' (in this volume, p. 158), Conservatives are more likely to see market disciplines as the best means to encourage virtuous and responsible behaviour in society, as opposed to relying on people's 'goodwill' or guidance from the state. For Conservatives, the balance in the phrase 'social market economy' is thus tilted more towards the 'market' and less toward the 'social' than it is for Christian Democrats.

These attitudes also mean that, except in times of war or some other national emergency, most Conservatives would (unlike many Christian Democrats) find it difficult

to imagine governing jointly in coalition with any parties of the left. Conservatives are more likely to see the left-right divide on economic and social policy as the most important organising principle and dividing line in modern politics. In consequence, Christian Democrats have always enjoyed more options in the choice of coalition partners in government and (initially, at least) they were somewhat less disoriented than Conservatives by the recent shift in Western democracies towards what Bale calls 'an increasingly polarised and fragmented electoral arena in which socio-cultural issues have assumed as much importance as economic ones' (in this volume, p. 160).

With occasional exceptions, Conservatives believe in strong defence, both for individual countries and through collective action with other countries of like mind. Concretely, this means that Conservatives and Christian Democrats usually converge in their support for collective defence through the post-war transatlantic alliance, embodied in NATO. Most Conservatives view the US as a force for good in the world—whether politically, economically or culturally—and whilst sometimes disagreeing with, or on, specific aspects of US foreign policy, they have a 'default setting' in favour of Washington playing an activist and internationalist, rather than passive or isolationist, role in world affairs. Not all Christian Democrats share this view, displaying a wider spectrum of views on US foreign policy, even if they appear to be united in support of the provision of a US security umbrella for Europe through the NATO system.

Centre-right perspectives on Europe

Traditionally, Conservatives and Christian Democrats have taken differing approaches to Europe, although these approaches have often diverged more in theory than in practice. A very strong belief in the desirability of building a united Europe after the Second World War—and doing so by overcoming and superseding the confines and logic of the classic nation state—was from the start, and has remained, fundamental to Christian Democracy as a political philosophy. The idea that the countries of Europe could and should enjoy a 'destiny shared in common', forming in effect a new transnational political community, was central to the thinking of all Christian Democrat leaders in the immediate post-war period, notably Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schuman. Advocacy of 'federalism' in Europe—in the sense of developing a common 'supranational' layer of government, with its own free-standing institutions, located above the nation state—held few fears for the standard-bearers of the new Christian Democratic tradition.

By contrast, Conservative, Gaullist and other centre-right leaders (then and since) have generally eschewed the language of federalism and have tended to view Europe as a more pragmatic and practical construct, designed to help resolve 'problems shared

in common' through the economies of scale and added value that can be generated by joint action on a continental scale. The building of such a new Europe has been seen less as an end in itself than as a means of safeguarding and empowering the participating countries, what Alan Milward (1992) once called the 'European rescue of the nation state'. So, in Britain and some Nordic countries, the emphasis has been upon the benefits of a single market, which, by definition, could never be achieved by individual countries acting on their own. In France, the opportunity to advance established national policy goals through European action, notably in the fields of agricultural, foreign-trade or monetary policy, has more frequently been highlighted on the centre-right, in a pattern evident from the de Gaulle-Pompidou years through to the presidencies of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy. Conservatives and Gaullists have also tended to welcome innovations that underline the centrality of member state governments in the work of the EU system, through the European Council and Council of Ministers, rather than ones that enhance the role of the more supranational European Commission or European Parliament.

In practice, however, such differences of philosophy have not prevented the development of a distinctive pattern of strong, convergent political action by most of the forces of the mainstream centre-right in Europe. The twin structures of the EPP transnational party and its political group in the European Parliament have together provided an effective framework in which Christian Democrat, Conservative, Gaullist and other centre-right parties and politicians have been able to cooperate successfully on literally thousands of EU legislative proposals over the years, as well as to evolve a broadly-based common view of how in practice the Union should develop in the future.

During the 1990s EPP leaders and strategists, guided by Martens and Welle, pursued a deliberate strategy of 'mergers and acquisitions' of other centre-right parties, within both the existing EU and the accession states of Central and Eastern Europe, in effect choosing to dilute the classic Christian Democrat core. In Western Europe, this expansion strategy—mainly, but not only, to the right—embraced most famously the British Conservatives, but also the Danish, Finnish and Swedish Conservative parties, Jacques Chirac's Gaullists and Silvio Berlusconi's Forward Italy (Forza Italia) (see Welle 1997). The result was that by the 1999 European elections, even before the Eastern enlargement of the Union, the EPP had managed to displace the Socialist group as the largest political force in the European Parliament (with around 37% of all Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), a position which (albeit with a declining share of members) it has maintained ever since.

During the 17 years when the British Conservatives operated within the EPP framework, from 1992 to 2009, they enjoyed an unusually advantageous arrangement, known as 'allied membership' of the EPP Group. They could and did contribute fully to the setting of the group's positions on all policy issues coming before the European

Parliament—and held about a third of the group’s coordinator positions on the 20 parliamentary committees—but they remained free to diverge from group policy whenever it might conflict with the domestic manifesto commitments on which they had been elected (as they chose to interpret them). It was, as successive Conservative Party leaders at the time called it, ‘the best of both worlds’, with their MEPs fully embedded at the heart of Europe’s centre-right without necessarily being bound by its collective positions. In practice, Conservative MEPs voted with their EPP Group colleagues around 85% of the time, with overall group loyalty (excluding the British) coming in at around 95%.

The British Conservatives’ decision to leave the EPP Group—a body which was even renamed the EPP–European Democrat Group for a decade (1999 to 2009) in order to highlight the distinctiveness and freedom of action of its ‘European Democrat’ allied members—was an entirely ideological one, deeply regretted by the majority of the Conservative MEPs themselves. This schism was effected by David Cameron, who became leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, as a concession towards domestic party opponents of EU membership, and one which he wrongly believed would have no wider consequences. It was an example of a tendency sometimes witnessed in politics—more often on the left than the centre-right—to destroy something which works in practice, on the grounds that it cannot work or should not work in theory. So, as well as being a serious political error in its own right, Cameron’s decision to leave the EPP Group was also a profoundly ‘un-Conservative’ act. Nor was it mirrored in the reactions of any of the other forces to the right of the old EPP family that had joined them in the 1990s or 2000s, other than by the Law and Justice party in Poland, which had unexpectedly started its own journey towards a new kind of ‘national conservatism’ on the right.

The spectre of National Conservatism

Since the departure of the Conservative MEPs from the EPP Group in 2009, followed by the public’s vote for the UK to leave the EU seven years later, British Conservatism, at least, has been in an increasing state of flux, as rival factions and currents have fought for advantage, dominance and, to some degree, revenge. The shift to the populist right in the US Republican Party, following Donald Trump’s takeover of that party in 2016, seems to be being replicated in slow motion in Britain, with the pragmatic ‘governing’ wing of the party in retreat. No party leader—and the party was to have five different leaders and thus prime ministers during its last eight years in power—has proved able to ride the twin horses of ‘nation and state’, in the way that Margaret Thatcher had managed to do in the 1980s. Throughout his short time in office, Rishi Sunak, prime minister from October 2022 to July 2024, looked more like a ring-holder between rival

concepts of Conservatism (and their respective factions) than an authoritative figure able to shape the politics of the party he led and the country he governed.

At the same time, however, the right-wing alternative to the governing wing of the Conservative Party has shown itself seriously divided. Riven by differences on a whole series of issues—notably whether to shrink, freeze or expand the size and role of the state, whether to prioritise tax cuts over deficit reduction, to reform or dismantle of the welfare system, to accept or oppose further immigration, to highlight ‘pocket-book’ concerns or sharpen identity politics, and/or to engage in an activist foreign policy or to retreat from the world stage—Sunak’s internal critics and rivals always faced in multiple directions, unable to present themselves as a coherent political force. The combined effect of a defensive centre–right government and a divided right-wing internal opposition was such that each side largely gridlocked the other, handing the political initiative to their rivals on the left. This situation could not continue indefinitely, and the outcome of the recent general election in Britain is likely to shift the balance of forces one way or another over the coming year.

Now that the Conservatives have lost power in Britain, the fear must be that if the Republicans regain the US presidency under Donald Trump, the ‘Trump effect’ will quickly cross the Atlantic, infecting and reformatting the Conservative Party in opposition. If this does happen, we are most likely to see a form of muscular ‘national conservatism’, located closer to the right-wing populism that has been emerging in Continental European countries in recent years than to traditional governing Conservatism in Britain. The new continuum could then be between Trumpism in America, opposition Conservatism in Britain and some components of right-wing populism inside the EU.

Certain features of a nascent national conservatism in Britain—sometimes also styled ‘popular conservatism’ (‘pop-con’) or the ‘new conservatism’—are already coming into relief. Whereas most traditional Conservatives think that the left–right divide in politics is essentially economic, with a heavy emphasis on incentivising individuals and building an enterprise culture, the new national conservatives tend to attach much more importance to divisions on issues of identity, culture and community. Central is their fear that an entrenched, left–liberal establishment is casually allowing potentially irreversible changes to take place in the composition and values of society, discussion of which (they say) that same establishment is attempting to suppress. The emerging charge sheet encompasses a whole range of issues, including notably immigration, radical Islam, law and order, free speech, gender politics, political correctness and other features of the so-called ‘culture wars’. As with populism, underlying this shift is often a sense of loss, through declining economic or social status, and a more general feeling of being ignored by the political system. Rather than see themselves as a governing force that tries to balance the imperatives of nation and state, in the classic way, the likely trajectory for national conservatives would be to cast themselves as the political

leadership of a social 'resistance' movement that defends and protects a way of life that they believe to be disappearing or seriously under threat.

The rise of national conservatism poses a major challenge not only to traditional centre-right politics in Britain, but potentially to Christian Democrat and other mainstream centre-right forces in Continental Europe too. Many of the political parties that now comprise the political group in the European Parliament that David Cameron established in 2009, but which ironically the British Conservatives have since left—the Group of European Conservatives and Reformists—already display features of a national conservative approach, diluting the 'decentralist, free-market and Atlanticist' philosophy that the alliance claimed initially to espouse. Without intending to do so, Cameron may have helped implant and give organisational form to a new political movement located in the space between the mainstream centre-right (of which he professed still to be a part) and right-wing populism.

Although national conservatism encompasses some residual features of both 'neoliberalism' and 'neoconservatism', it is (like populism) less free-market and less internationalist than either of those strands of Conservatism which increasingly held sway at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially between September 2001 and September 2008. It is a more defensive and introverted, and less positive and outward-looking, form of Conservatism, reflecting the downbeat mood of battered, straightened and chastened times. It is inclined to inhabit what Geoffrey Howe once called a 'ghetto of sentimentality' about an imagined or irretrievable past, in which a sense of collective loss and disappointment is currently reflected, as Fawcett explains, in a resurgence of Conservatism's 'original unresolved ambivalence towards capitalist modernity' (in this volume, p. 152). In the specific case of Britain, Fawcett notes, this unease is compounded, post Brexit, by the strange irony that 'without the EU to blame for the country's ills', many on the right have lost a scapegoat. 'Delivered from European captivity', they now lack a 'strategic compass', making them angrier still (in this volume, p. 151).

The struggle for the future of Conservatism in Britain, echoing the battle that has already been raging in the US, is likely to revolve around whether and how far it renounces the classic tenets of the Reagan-Thatcher triptych of economic liberalism, Western internationalism and moderate social reform—and embraces instead, in varying degrees, interventionism, protectionism, nationalism, isolationism and reactionary social change. The corresponding challenge for mainstream centre-right politicians across Europe, whether they are Conservatives or Christian Democrats, will be how to respond to the spectre of national conservatism, coming on top of the existing threat of populism located even further to the right.

To regain the initiative, the centre-right will need to find ways of reversing the 'politics of loss and fear' that is becoming increasingly endemic in Western societies,

and of projecting an attractive vision of a better future under its political leadership. That will require it to show that it is, or can be, competent and credible in government, that it has policies for prosperity that can and will transform people's lives for the better (with benefits that are widely shared), and that it is serious about addressing the causes of (what too many of its past or potential voters see as) disintegration and decline in the society around them.

Although regaining the political initiative in this way will not be an easy process, one should not be entirely pessimistic about the possibility of it happening. The history of mainstream centre-right forces in Europe since the Second World War has generally been one of resilience and pragmatic renewal. Through versatility, intuition and innovation, they have rebranded, reformatted and refreshed themselves many times, in many countries, usually managing to retain or return to power. Serious reflection, clear thinking and a willingness to make hard choices should enable them to do so again.

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Problems With Progressive Liberalism and the Future of Liberal Conservatism

Giovanni Orsina

Summary

This chapter aims to present some reflections on the destiny of conservative thought and politics in late modernity. The first section argues that conservatism has now become theoretically impossible, at the end of a decades-long effort to deconstruct the values on which it was traditionally based, but that at the same time it has become politically indispensable as an answer to the profound discomfort generated by living in a deconstructed world. The second section focuses precisely on this discomfort, on the inability of traditional centre-right parties to fully represent it and, consequently, on the emergence of new political forces—which we unsatisfactorily call populist—that have embodied the rebellion of the ‘vistocgliocchi’ (seen first-hand) against the ‘sentitodire’ (hearsay), to use the expressions of one of the countless characters of Stefano d’Arrigo’s majestic novel *Horcynus Orca*. The third and final section sketches the outline of a possible conservatism for the twenty-first century, a ‘conservatism of the seen first-hand’ that, starting from the so-called populist rebellion against globalist anthropology, acts politically on the basis of an alternative anthropology, more respectful of the pluralistic and contradictory nature of what Simone Weil called ‘the vital needs of the human soul’.

The impossibility and indispensability of conservatism in late modernity

It is difficult, in 2024, not to think that conservatism’s two-century-old effort to halt, or at least slow down, the advance of modernity has failed and that conservatism has therefore become theoretically impossible today. I certainly do not intend to engage here in the rich debate on the nature of conservatism. It seems clear to me, however, that an ideology cannot be called ‘conservative’ if it does not start from a robustly sceptical attitude about the ability of human reason to understand and improve the world, and therefore, about the possibility that perfection will ever be achieved on this earth. Consequently, the term ‘conservative’ cannot be applied to an ideology that does not anchor the political and social order to a ‘minimum dogma’: principles that are accepted

a priori and at least partially removed from the critique of reason, whether they are based on religion (God), history (fatherland) or nature (family). Finally, there is no conservatism without an acute sensitivity to temporal continuity, the conviction that from the past comes a tradition which can indeed be modified, but which has nevertheless proved its value by resisting time and which must therefore be handled with great respect and caution, and handed down to posterity (among the latest publications, see Fawcett 2020; Hazony 2022; Gervasoni 2022).

In the West, the last 50 years of history have swept away the conditions that made this way of thinking about the world possible. Since the 1960s whatever parts of traditional social structures that had managed to survive have been delegitimised and dismantled. The fundamental concepts of conservative thinking have been subjected to a ruthless logical and historical critique, which, of course, they have not survived: it has been discovered that nations are imagined communities and traditions are invented, that individual and collective identities are multiple and malleable, that nothing is as artificial as nature. That God is a figment of the human imagination is certainly not a conviction of the last 50 years—Friedrich Nietzsche, as is well known, announced his death in 1882—but at the end of the twentieth century the process of secularisation has undergone an impressive acceleration. In the meantime, the utopian aspiration that characterises modernity has not withered away. In some ways it has even been further strengthened; only, it has reacted to the crisis of Communism by entrusting its own destiny to the economy, technology and law instead of politics.¹ (On the utopian character of modernity, see also Voegelin 1987; Steiner 1997; on anti-political utopias, see Orsina 2018). Temporal continuity, finally, has dissolved: the past has little to say to the present, and consequently the present has little to pass on to the future (see Chabot 2021). All of this has made conservatism unsustainable. Hence, the almost mocking attitude that the progressives, not by chance hegemonic in the world of culture, reserve for the conservatives, accused in essence of carrying water with a sieve. Progressives feel that conservatives have been hopelessly overtaken by history, that they yearn for an unthinkable as well as undesirable return to the Middle Ages.

The discussion could also end here, were it not for the fact that, in the meantime, the very same late modernity which has made conservatism impossible has in its turn proved to be very difficult to inhabit for a not insignificant part of the citizens of Western democracies. After 1989, for a long decade marked by a certain Panglossian optimism, intellectuals and politicians deluded themselves about the possibility of building a perfect political and social order structured in a reflexive form, that is, folded on and supported by itself: capable of doing without absolute values, ‘hard’ concepts

1. ‘If a simple definition of western civilization could be formulated, it would have to be framed in terms of the central role of millenarian thinking’ (Gray 2008).

and pre-established identities; crossed as little as possible by power relations; focused on formal and procedural rationality; and based on abstract systems (see Giddens 1991; Beck et al. 1994). The first two decades of the twenty-first century proved that this was, in fact, an illusion. The post-1989 order, which in reality was legitimised above all by its credibility in promising a future of progress, peace, order and well-being, has been hit hard by a series of severe historical refutations, from 11 September 2001 to 7 October 2023, passing through the Great Recession, the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Thus, though impossible in principle, conservatism has become indispensable in practice, at a time when the inhabitants of advanced democracies, alarmed by the illegibility of the future and less and less convinced of the fatality of progress, have begun to demand that the frenzied pace of historical change slow down and that some minimum point of reference be restored, however precarious and temporary. Too often prisoners of their own abstract schemes, as well as of their beautiful apartments in city centres, progressive intellectuals continue to wonder in amazement how citizens can vote for people who rave about a natural family that—of course!—is not natural, or a fatherland that was invented by a handful of literati. While they scoff at the speck of others' unawareness, they are not aware of their own plank. And yet it would be enough for them to re-read Simone Weil with a minimum of attention: 'Rootedness is perhaps the most important and most misunderstood need of the human soul' (Weil 1949).² A need that, by definition, a late modernity committed to systematic, universal uprooting will never be able to satisfy.

The people's parties and the populists

The crisis of progressive optimism that marked the end of the 'long' 1990s caught centre-right parties unprepared, these being the very political forces that were supposed to respond to the demand, coming from the depths of advanced democracies, that the processes of historical transformation be brought under control. Why those parties were caught unprepared is a crucial question that would require a much more in-depth analysis than can be offered here. The main lines of that analysis, however, could be the following. The problem of the historical inadequacy of conservatism in the face of modernity, first of all, has grown dramatically in the last half century, but it arose much earlier. It is possible to argue that the success of Christian Democratic parties in the

2. 'L'enracinement est peut-être le besoin le plus important et le plus méconnu de l'âme humaine.' Haidt (2012) provides a convincing neuro-psychological argument about the complexity of human moralities.

aftermath of the Second World War depended not so much on their intrinsic strength as on the widespread need for stability and reassurance; on the important role played by the churches, increased by the post-war crisis of the state; and on the absence of credible right-wing competitors, traditional conservatism having been mortally wounded by its excessive contiguity with Nazi Fascism (see Kaiser 2017).

From the 1960s onwards, the processes of secularisation, the further withering of traditional social structures and the crisis of Communism increased the pressure on the already fragile political and cultural structures of right-wing parties, forcing them to rethink themselves and adapt to the new historical conjuncture. With their usual pragmatism, they have in fact adapted and rethought: in essence, they have accepted late modernity, attempting every now and again to slow it down by mobilising the remnants of tradition, and above all, striving to identify the new ordering principle that was internal to late modernity itself. They found that principle in the market, enthusiastically espoused first by the Anglo-Saxon right, and then—in a much less direct and ideological form, encapsulated within the process of European integration—also by the Continental right-wing parties. Once reconciled with late modernity, centre–right political forces ended up sharing—indeed, they contributed to generating—the climate of depoliticised optimism that characterised the ‘long’ 1990s (see Fawcett 2020).

Let us take the three following statements as an example of the process sketched above. (1) ‘These commitments reflect our shared values . . . Democracy, freedom and human rights. Solidarity, social justice and equal opportunity. Common civic rights and responsibilities, and respect for international law.’ (2) Our ‘Europe will strive for human rights, social justice and economic opportunity worldwide . . . will work to enhance the global environment . . . will offer peace, stability and liberty to those threatened by war or oppression.’ (3) ‘Unalienable human rights, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, solidarity, justice, equal opportunities, and the equality of women and men, are the cornerstones of our values.’ These three passages are taken from the European socialist manifesto of 1999, the European liberal manifesto of the same year and the European People’s Party manifesto of 2004, respectively. But it would not be easy even for the experienced reader to tell which is which. To be sure, if one looks closely at them, the three excerpts are not identical. The same word, for example, ‘opportunity’, takes a different meaning beside ‘equal’ than beside ‘economic’. On the other hand, the three are ideologically very close to one another. And one cannot fail to notice that the socialists (first excerpt) and the people’s party (third excerpt) mention freedom before the liberals (second excerpt), the liberals mention social justice before the socialists and all attribute great prominence to individual rights (Schmitt et al. 2021).

At the end of the process described above, centre–right parties have largely lost the ability to carry out the function of controlling historical change and defending the fragile residual points of reference which, in the previous section, we have declared to

be indispensable. But if a function is indispensable, someone will have to perform it. In the space partially vacated by the people's or conservative parties, new political forces have thus crept in, which for lack of better definitions, and with a considerable dose of intellectual laziness, we have called populist. So-called populism, in the interpretation I am proposing here, is therefore the political fruit of the widespread rebellion against late modernity—against the dissolution of every point of reference, the frenzied acceleration of historical time, the increasingly rapid process of planetary integration and the globalist ideology that has accompanied and legitimised it (globalist, not neoliberal: neoliberalism is only one component, however important, of globalism).

The populist insurrection has a sociological and an anthropological component. On the sociological terrain, it has arisen from the new class division created by globalisation, which has separated those who think they can take advantage of it from those who are convinced that they will be penalised by it (see Guilluy 2014; Goodhart 2017; Guilluy 2018; Hanson 2019; Lind 2020). And then it has turned against the simplified anthropology of globalism, a conception of the human being that emphasises the sacrosanct desire for individual autonomy, at the cost, however, of neglecting all the other, equally sacrosanct, 'vital needs of the human soul': in addition to rootedness—to stay with Weil—order, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchy, honour, punishment, security, collective property, truth.³ In short, so-called populism stems from a paradox, from the rebellion of substantial segments of public opinion against an ideology centred on the individual in such an obsessive way that it lost contact with individuals as they really are. 'Well grubbed, old mole!', one might say ironically—the mole in this case being, of course, not that of the revolution but, on the contrary, that of the stubborn resistance of human nature to revolutionary efforts.

Both in its sociological component and, even more so, in its anthropological one, the populist wave has ultimately sprung from a revolt of the small against the large, of the concrete against the abstract, of the nearby against the far away, of the present against the future, of the world that is lived in against the world that is thought of. Or even—if we want to resort to a literary metaphor and put it in the words of one of d'Arrigo's characters—of the *vistocogliocchi* against the *sentitodire*: '[Q]uale concetto di mondo si potevano mai fare col sentitodire? Tiravano la riffa e basta, bevevano allo scuro,' the old beach wanderer tells *Horcynus Orca*'s protagonist 'Ndria Cambria.

Il vistocogliocchi invece, eh, quello, quello era un altro paio di maniche; con quello, un concetto, un conto, se lo potevano fare, un paro e disparo, senza sgar-rare troppo, potevano tirarselo; insomma, sul vistocogliocchi ci si poteva basare

3. I quote from the index of Weil (1949). The formula 'vital needs of the human soul' is repeated several times in the book.

e fondare: anche se non ce n'erano miria in giro, verissimo questo, e quelli che c'erano, ci voleva bella costanza e bellezza di vista, per ignedarli. (D'Arrigo 1975, 120)⁴

That migrants will pay pensions to Europeans is hearsay—that you meet them on the thresholds of supermarkets with their hats in their hands is seen first-hand. Italy's risk of default is hearsay, while unemployment and poverty are seen first-hand. Even that the vaccine prevents Covid is hearsay, while the inoculation of healthy patients is seen first-hand.

Given that late modernity has demolished all a priori reference points and deconstructed all narratives, populism cannot propose a coherent political project that rests on solid theoretical foundations. Since the vast majority of the intellectual class has accepted late modernity, and indeed spends much of its time deluding itself that modernity can correct itself and finally produce the miraculous results it promised, populism does not attract intellectuals and can only have an anti-intellectual profile. And since it is a question of expressing rebellion and protest, multiple political and ideological forms can do the job: right, left, neither right nor left, libertarian and statist, cosmopolitan and nationalist. For this reason, those who have tried to understand populism on the basis of its content rather than its origins have produced unsatisfactory results. We see also a certain volatility of the populist vote, its ability to move quickly from one party to another, despite the fact that those parties may seem very distant from each other. With the disconcerting clairvoyance of the poet, Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale had already described the phenomenon with surgical precision 60 years ago:

When protest becomes a profitable career, the spark is extinguished. Our delegate, our elected one, the man to whom we had entrusted the courage we lacked, is quickly replaced by another. In any case, the fact of a universal protest that does not strike at this or that political or social regime, but at the unnaturalness of our way of life, remains irrefutable (Montale 1963, 250; translation mine).

Despite its predominantly oppositional nature, however, the populist insurrection has at least served to bear witness to the presence and endurance of an existential reality

4. D'Arrigo's novel is impossible to translate. More or less, this is the meaning of the quotation above: What concept of the world could they possibly form by hearsay? They were just drawing at the raffle, they drank in the dark. The seen first-hand, on the contrary, eh, that, that was another kettle of fish; with that, they could get an idea, do some maths, they could make a guess, give or take, without going too much astray; in short, it was possible to base and found oneself on the seen first-hand: even if there were not a myriad of them around, this is very true; and those that were there, it took beautiful constancy and beauty of vision, to trigger them.

that has proved tenaciously refractory to the anthropology of the global citizen. This testimony has thus opened the space for rethinking conservatism so as to make it suitable for the twenty-first century: a post-populist conservatism not only because it comes after the populist rebellion, but above all, because it builds on it, using it as a historical demonstration of the possibility, indeed necessity, of building and valuing an 'alternative' anthropology.

Conservatism after populism

'If you see the decline of a city, the mutation of a government, the augmentation of a new empire and other similar things going on', Francesco Guicciardini warns, 'be careful not to deceive yourselves about the timing: because the motions of things are by their nature and by various impediments much slower than men imagine' (Guicciardini 1997; translation mine). In short, we would be imprudent if, in the course of this year or the next, we were to declare the so-called populist phase to be over, because the indications that it is coming to a close are recent and not unequivocal, and the path of history more tortuous than we would like. That said, the signs that the prevailing mood is changing are quite robust. These signs, however, do not seem to indicate so much that the populist wave has died down—if anything, the opposite is happening—but rather that it has flooded the institutions and has settled there permanently. Since the populist 'barbarians' did not have the strength to demolish the established order, but were too numerous and noisy to ignore, the story had only one possible outcome: that those barbarians would be 'Romanised', that is, de-radicalised as much as possible and integrated into the mechanisms of power (Valentini 2018). In Italy, a country where the populist insurrection began earlier than elsewhere, the 'Romanisation' has now reached a very advanced stage: the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle) is a permanent feature of the political landscape, which in turn has changed to accommodate it, while the right-wing government led by Giorgia Meloni, which is a belated child of the protest wave that began in 2013, has rapidly, though not always peacefully, come to terms with European and international constraints.

The political protest of the last decade, despite its heterogeneity and chaotic nature, has in fact disproved the one-dimensional anthropology of globalism, the assumption that people could adapt to a 'liquid' world centred on individual autonomy at the expense of the other 'vital needs of the human soul'. One can, of course, imagine, as continues to be done by globalists, that this disapproval is only temporary, that the liquefaction of the world is an inevitable destiny to which human beings will have to adapt, and that it is no coincidence that the younger generations are already farther ahead on this path than the older ones (see Inglehart and Norris 2019). It can also be argued,

in my opinion with greater reason, that for a not insignificant part of those who live in advanced democracies, the globalist anthropology that denies the value of roots has itself become a new form of rootedness: the rejection of all identity as a new identity, statelessness as a new form of citizenship, the refusal of all fatherlands as a new patriotism. At least for the moment, however, the populist insurrection demonstrates that substantial segments of Western societies reject, albeit in a confused and chaotic way, the Procrustean bed of the globalist anthropology.

In its 200-year struggle against modernity, conservatism has always shown itself to be opportunistic and pragmatic, exploiting from time to time the tools that contingencies presented to it in order to slow down the course of historical change. The populist revolt which is now being 'Romanised' could represent the tool that conservatism uses today, the tool that, in the current conjuncture, has demonstrated the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a new anthropology that attempts to limit and counterbalance the destructive potential of the processes of planetary integration. Exploiting populism does not mean that its reasons should not be taken seriously. On the contrary: a post-populist conservatism will have to fully understand those reasons and give them more politically structured, realistic and lasting answers than those provided so far by the protest parties and movements.

Conservatism has always been an ideology or, if you prefer, a culture of the seen first-hand: hostile to abstractions and fond of contingencies, empirical data, the injunctions of the here and now⁵ (Oakeshott 1962). For decades, the contingencies that conservatives valued included historical memory, territorial identities, religious faiths and traditional customs. But, as we said at the beginning of this chapter, late modernity has radically transformed the landscape in which human beings move. Memories, identities, faiths and customs are no longer seen first-hand—they are no longer prominent in the daily life of concrete persons. Should conservatism pretend today to start again from tradition, it would discover that for many that tradition has become, at least to an extent, hearsay. Against itself, conservatism would thus be forced to work on an abstraction. People are unhappy, frightened and bewildered in a very tangible way, though, and their unhappiness, bewilderment and fear are, so to speak, 'certified' by the populist insurgency. A conservatism that wants, as per its tradition, to work on contingencies will therefore have to ask itself what the human beings of late modernity need, here and now. It will have to build an anthropological profile that represents them as faithfully as possible and then act politically on the basis of that profile.

5. 'To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss' (Oakeshott 1962, 169).

This ‘micro’ approach is the only one that can work in a liquid and hyperindividualistic modernity. Liquefaction, to put it another way, has actually reached such an advanced stage that it can only be countered by working on it from within, by drawing strength from its own contradictions, or rather, from its inhumanity. Precisely because it hinges on the human person and his/her needs, the micro approach is not at odds with liberalism, or better, with an anti-Jacobin version of liberalism that accepts human beings as they actually are and does not pretend to conform them to an abstract model. The rejection of globalist anthropology, which must remain absolute because it represents the starting point of post-populist conservatism, does not necessarily have to translate into a priori opposition to the processes of global integration, which in their own way can also satisfy some fundamental needs of the human soul—freedom, freedom of opinion, risk, to stay with Simone Weil’s list. The problem is not globalisation, but the Panglossian conviction that it is naturally and necessarily at the service of human beings, *sic et simpliciter*, and that therefore it should not be adapted to what human beings are, but, on the contrary, that human beings must adapt to what it is. The micro approach also does not exclude the recovery of traditional values. That recovery, however, must take place downstream of the process of reconnaissance of the needs of human beings in flesh and blood, immersed in their historical contingencies: traditional values must prove capable of concretely satisfying those needs and thus move on from hearsay to seen first-hand.

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The Future of the Centre–Right: The British Case

David Willetts

Summary

The chapter argues that the first-past-the-post electoral system has provided strong incentives for British political parties to create effective intra-party coalitions before elections rather than interparty coalitions after elections. British Conservatives in particular have been very successful in bringing together two potentially different political approaches which have historically been separate in many Continental political systems—a rooted, traditionalist, communitarian rural party and a mobile, liberal, pro-business urban party. The party has also been successful at incorporating insurgent outsiders into mainstream parliamentary politics. But Brexit has broken up the old Conservative coalition and seen the insurgents first shift the Conservative Party’s policy on Europe and then challenge it again on migration. This has left the Conservative Party focused very much on older voters. To recover from its recent landslide defeat, the party needs to appeal to younger voters.

Background and current context

Democratic political parties build coalitions to win elections. In Britain the first-past-the-post electoral system has historically rewarded the capacity to create sizeable, broad coalitions within a single political party. With proportional representation, the incentives change. It is easier for new entrants to come in with a distinctive appeal and the coalitions needed to create a government formed across different political parties.

The British Conservative Party has been Europe’s most successful example of building a single-party coalition on the centre–right. It combines two political forces often to be found in distinct political entities on the Continent. On the one hand, there is a predominantly rural, confessional peasants’ party, with links to land ownership and the Church. It stands for tradition, roots, belonging. The landowners who often lead this may often also bring values of public service—from service in the military through to roles in the community as local squires, justices of the peace, chairs of school governing bodies or members of local councils. In England, they were often closely tied to the

Church of England. The Conservative Party of the mid-nineteenth century, the old Tory Party, stood for these values against free trade, especially in agriculture, and a London elite focused on the court and the City. It traced its origins back to the old Country Party. There is also a very different urban anti-clerical, pro-business Liberal Party. It stands for free trade and political and economic reform. Nineteenth-century Britain had a separate party embodying those values: the Liberals represented free trade, the City of London and the big cities driving the Industrial Revolution. But the Liberals split over Home Rule for Ireland, and those who believed in the union of Britain and Ireland joined in creating the modern Conservative and Unionist Party. The merger was completed in 1912.

One of the great projects of this Conservative coalition in the past 50 years was joining and then shaping the EU. This reinforced Western cultural identity in an increasingly global and turbulent world. It also proved to be a vehicle for the great Thatcherite project of tearing down trade barriers and creating the world's largest single market. Brexit and mass immigration have proved to be big threats to that coalition, as shown in the Conservative Party's historic election defeat in 2024, reducing it to 121 Members of Parliament—even worse than its landslide defeats of 1906, 1945 and 1997. Just 16% of people who voted Remain in the 2016 Referendum voted Conservative in 2024. But the Brexit supporters, whom Conservatives won over in 2019, proved to be very fickle, with 30% voting for Reform. Indeed, 63% of Remainers who voted Conservative in 2019 also voted Conservative in 2024, whereas only 51% of Leavers did. (McDonnell 2024).

The rise of Labour in the first-past-the-post system created powerful forces that helped this centre-right coalition to stick together. Indeed, successive groups of free-market liberals joined it. Winston Churchill himself was one of these, and his premiership was marked by a range of different liberal groups joining the Conservative Party, which Churchill wanted to rename the Union Party as part of creating a united front against socialism. Hogg (1947) set out the case very clearly: 'In fighting socialism in the twentieth as they fought Liberalism in the nineteenth century, Conservatives will be found to have changed their front to meet a new danger, but not the ground they are defending.'

Klaus Welle understands all this very well. Indeed, he practised such a strategy with great skill and success to successfully 'complete' the centre-right in the European Parliament. He calls it creating a political grouping through 'mergers and acquisitions'. It is one of the tragedies of modern British Conservatism that just when Welle had created such a centre-right group, the European People's Party, embodying the historical experience of British Conservatives, the party withdrew from it. It was a fatal precursor of Brexit.

This coalition gives extraordinary ideological flexibility, combining two different political principles in one party. Conservatives can talk of both commitment, service

and tradition and also markets, choice and dynamism. The party represents both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. These are not just abstract political principles but also contrasting emotions and instincts in our own lives—to go or to stay, to belong or to challenge. And it gives the party the capacity to draw on a broad range of political arguments in any situation, key to its pragmatic political effectiveness. Conservatives will need to draw on these two strands in their tradition as the work of reconstruction begins again.

Conservatives have in the past skilfully incorporated insurgent political movements within their broadly based party. It is part of the logic of first past the post as well as the breadth of modern Conservative appeal that it can incorporate not just liberal free traders but also communitarians and nationalists.

Scepticism about foreign commitments and international obligations, especially free trade and now the European Court of Human Rights, is part of this tradition. Just as the Labour Party incorporated some of those out on the far left, so Conservatives have incorporated some out on the far right. Indeed, some of these right-wing groups, with their belief in the power of the state and their hostility to markets when they threaten traditional values, appear to be on the extreme left of the extreme right. Britain's two main political parties used to pride themselves on this incorporation of extreme groupuscules into established parliamentary groups. It seems so much better than the Macron model of a great big centrist blob with fringe parties out on the extremes: voters may have to turn to them when they want to change the government.

The 2017 election saw the revival of these old, integrationist strategies. From the high point of 96% of the vote being shared between the two main parties in 1951, this share fell steadily to a low of 65% in 2010. But in 2017, the per cent of the total vote represented by the two main parties reached a new peak of 82%. A Tory Party reaching out to the Brexit right and a Labour Party reaching out to the left managed to capture an extraordinarily high proportion of the total vote. The last time it had been above 80% was in 1970. And in 2019, Conservatives won with 44% of the vote, their highest level since 1979. Both parties achieved incorporation by reaching out to the insurgent movements whilst assuming that they could continue to rely on the sustained loyalty of their established and more centrist supporters.

The 2024 election result shows a significant weakening of the British two-party model. The shift of the Conservative Party to embracing Brexit created new threats to the Conservative coalition. Brexit was itself a coalition—of the excluded and the insulated. The excluded are people unhappy with poor living standards and loss of status. But on their own they are not an election-winning majority. In addition, there is a substantial group of older voters who own their homes without a mortgage and who have a funded pension as well. They are insulated from the risks of poorer economic performance as a result of Brexit. This Brexit coalition successfully straddled class barriers,

like many nationalist parties. But it also has big gaps. It does badly in globalist, diverse London. It resembles the older Country Party in its hostility to what it sees as a rootless, unpatriotic elite, which leads it to attack institutions such as the BBC, the Church and even the National Trust, which have historically been associated with a patriotic pride in institutions and hence a certain sort of conservatism. The new Brexit coalition does less well among graduates, appealing particularly to non-graduates. Indeed, sometimes its hostility to higher education comes close to President Trump's remark 'I love the poorly educated' in his Nevada caucus victory speech in February 2016. It does badly among the young.

From David Cameron's offer of a referendum on Brexit through to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) standing aside in Conservative seats in the 2019 election, the Conservative Party strove to incorporate this political movement embodied in a series of distinct parties—UKIP, then the Brexit Party. Indeed, incorporating them was all too successful, as the Conservative Party found itself delivering Brexit, which the Brexit Party would never have been able to do on its own. But the Brexiteers were never going to be satisfied, and UKIP re-emerged as Reform and did great damage to the Conservative Party in 2024. If the Conservative Party tries to form an alliance with it (and there can be no certainty Nigel Farage would even be up for a deal), then the Conservatives could lose even more of their business-oriented prosperous voters to other more centrist parties.

Even Labour's centre-left coalition looks more fragile than its formidable number of parliamentary seats suggests. Labour had a fall in its total vote to a 33% voter share, caused by strong performances from the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, in particular. Labour may in future face problems maintaining the distinctive coalition in which London-based cultural progressives ally with a wider swathe of ageing working-class voters. But they are in much better shape than the Conservative Brexit coalition.

The new divide in British politics is age. My former tutor, the late Peter Pulzer (1967), famously observed that 'Class is the basis of British politics. All else is embellishment and detail.' But now it is age. This age divide has been opening up steadily. In their 1992 election victory, the Conservatives won 40% of the vote of 25- to 34-year-olds. In their next election victory on a similar scale, 2019, that was down to 27%. It continues to fall. The data analytics firm YouGov estimates that just 8% of under-30s voted Conservative in 2024, increasing to 46% of 70-year-olds or older. Labour got 45% of younger voters, kept that vote share up to voters aged 50, and then saw a dramatic fall to 20% of over-70s. The median age of a Labour voter is now 46 years and the median age of a Conservative voter is 63.

This age divide runs deep, incorporating both economic and cultural issues. It is much harder for young people to get started on the housing ladder and to build up a

decent funded pension—the two key assets which the older generation of post-war boomers enjoy. Spreading these assets across successive generations was a key part of the successful Conservative strategy of creating a ‘property-owning democracy’. The optimistic interpretation is that working through the stages of the life cycle to full adult independence is taking longer. Modern life is so slow. The implication is that perhaps these generations will turn out to be Conservatives in the end. The hard-core Conservative vote is indeed voters who own their own home with the mortgage paid off—37% of whom voted Conservative.

The total value of assets, which are mainly owned by the older generation, has risen from three times stagnating incomes to seven times. Wealth is distributed twice as unequally as income. So, even if there were no change in the distribution of either income or of wealth, society feels less equitable (Leslie and Shah 2022, 8). Acquiring an asset through earnings becomes harder. Inherited wealth matters more. Social mobility weakens. This makes younger voters susceptible to appeals from the left such as those of Jeremy Corbyn in 2017 and 2019. Now it means that not just Labour but also the Green Party is ahead of Conservatives among younger voters.

These problems are exacerbated by the allocation of public resources to older people at the expense of the young. Broome et al. from the Resolution Foundation (2023, 8–9) noted that ‘The combined impact of these personal tax and benefit changes implemented since 2010 has left non-pensioners more than £2,200 a year worse off on average, while pensioners are less than £200 a year worse off. . . . [P]ensioner incomes may now exceed working age incomes across the income distribution.’ This creates new problems for the Conservative message as it continues to try to appeal to economic liberalism and scepticism about the state, whilst growing public spending programmes such as state pensions which benefit Conservative supporters.

It could be argued that the economic gap between young and old is more significant than the cultural divide. After all, the baby boomers were youthful rebels against their parents and delivered a big shift to liberal attitudes. The cultural gap is between boomers and their parents, whereas the economic gap is between boomers and their children. Nevertheless, some cultural issues are overlaid on the generational economic divide—attitudes on transgender issues, for example. But cultural changes do not neatly map onto the party-political divide. Young people are less likely to drink. They are sceptical of the state—perhaps because it appears to do so little for them. Indeed, in many Continental European countries younger voters are swinging to the right, unlike in the UK. There is a significant group of young people who are socially conservative. Twenge (2023) points out that ‘twice as many Gen Zers identify as very conservative as Gen X high school seniors in the Reagan era late 1980s.’ Perhaps the most worrying indicator is regarding attitudes towards the political system itself—an increasing number appear to prefer benevolent dictatorship and are less keen on freedom of speech.

Options for the centre–right

We have seen how the centre–right’s 2019 electoral coalition has collapsed. There are now a range of options for the centre–right as it tries to get back to an election-winning coalition.

One option is to go libertarian. The party became rather used to wielding the power of government and was increasingly comfortable with it. However, when it is a different political programme being implemented by a Labour government there is much more scepticism about whether such state power can possibly be right.

The libertarian message won Liz Truss the Party leadership in 2022, though her premiership showed the difficulty of delivering it in practice. Tax cuts are the most popular part of the programme, though there are still a few fiscal conservatives who are wary when public borrowing is running at about 4% of GDP. There is a deeper problem, too. The Conservative Party’s old supporters are themselves heavy users of public services. They receive state pensions which are rising sharply, boosted by the ‘triple lock’ first proposed in the Conservative manifesto of 2010 and repeated since. They are also heavy users of the National Health Service. So, cutting back the state in reality means reshaping it so that it is a granny state in which spending on the old grows, and spending on families and education is cut. This is not ideologically coherent and makes recruiting younger people into this coalition harder.

Moreover, Conservatives increasingly used state power to fight culture wars. A culturally conservative strategy is hard to reconcile with economic libertarianism, though, as Andrew Gamble and others have shown, a skilful blend of a free economy and a strong state is not impossible. The rise of defence and security concerns would certainly promote such an agenda. Already, new powers have been brought in to control foreign investment—the security imperative trumping the push for an open market in company ownership. These tensions have led to an interesting and useful debate amongst cultural conservatives about the role of government, going beyond the account of it as a ‘necessary evil’.

An embrace of the state as powerful protector of national sovereignty and traditional cultural identities leads to a full-blown nationalist political strategy. Classic Conservatism does, of course, understand this appeal, but with one crucial difference: it is not blood and soil nationalism. It is instead a celebration of a wide range of institutions which are key to Britain’s distinct identity—not just the monarchy, the armed forces and the Church of England, but also civic institutions such as universities and charities. It is what I call ‘civic conservatism’. But cultural conservatives fear that many of these institutions have been captured by a woke elite, resulting in their nationalism being unusually hostile to many civic institutions.

They claim that the balance of the argument is being changed by the long-term effect of Labour’s 2010 Equalities Act, with its identification of protected characteristics.

Some characteristics are protected and others are not. Having embraced identity politics, the left should not be surprised that identities which do not appear to get special attention are then celebrated by the right—such as white working-class young men or older conservative traditionalists. They are less likely to go to university than many ethnic groups. The new right can cheekily use the left’s language of oppression and exclusion on their behalf.

Migration is also shifting the argument about the role of the state. Identity cards would help enable effective policing of migration: a shift in approach here would show the Conservative Party to be serious about this strategy. It could also shift towards requiring contributory benefits, reinforcing the message that access to the welfare state is for members of the national community.

The way forward: fairness for younger generations

These possible approaches do, however, risk alienating other parts of the Conservatives’ coalition. The party appeared in the recent election to suffer from the Australian problem of alienating prosperous, educated middle-class voters who are not socialists but are more accepting of cultural diversity and worried about issues such as climate change.

The biggest challenge and also the biggest opportunity is winning over younger voters. ‘Young’ has rather a broad meaning for the centre–right. There are younger people in their 20s. But as the stages of the life cycle are indeed slowing up, it could mean people in their 30s and 40s when they get their own homes and are raising children. At some point these cohorts need to be recruited to the centre–right. It is possible to have a political strategy of appealing to people when they get to the age of 50, but if 10 years later the party finds it is appealing to the over-60s then it has a problem—what it hoped was a life-cycle strategy has become a cohort strategy.

The key objective must be to help younger people get a stake in society. Building more houses and liberating access to mortgage finance is key. There is also an excellent opportunity to be had from the success of automatic enrolment in personal pension pots. There may not be much money in these but at least they provide a framework for saving. Conservatives could suggest putting more money into this. The Resolution Foundation’s Intergenerational Commission, which I chaired, proposed a capital grant of £10,000, paid on reaching the age of 30. It could be used for a deposit on a first property or to fund education or starting a business.

Such an agenda would not just appeal to young people themselves. Parents and grandparents are worried about the prospects of their own children and grandchildren. Some of them are so worried that the issue sways their votes. Grant et al. (2023, 4) noted: ‘Majorities of those aged 60 and over support increased spending on policies

aimed at young adults (even at the cost of higher taxes) with more free vocational education (65% support) and local affordable housing (61% support) being most popular. Support is similarly strong among those aged 40–59.’

Behind this, there is a truly conservative theme of the links between the generations, as we all engage in a deeply satisfying project of trying to pass on our country and our world to the next generation in better shape than we found it. It is captured above all by Burke (1967, 80): ‘Society is indeed a contract . . . a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.’ The recreation of the centre–right conservative coalition depends on understanding those wise words.

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Three Days in May: Reflections on National Conservatism in Britain

Edmund Fawcett

Summary

Despite differences of tone and history, Britain's illiberal hard right shares essential features with its present-day counterparts in the rest of Europe and the US. It is a tactical alliance of otherwise discordant free-market globalists, our-nation-first welfarists and ethico-cultural traditionalists. Masking those differences is a seductive rhetoric of common enemy (a supposed 'liberal elite') and common themes (national decline, hostile capture, victimhood and deliverance). Britain's hard right is not new. Illiberalism has always been there in the Conservative Party. It has come to dominate the party now, in part due to liberal silence and uncertainty, to left and right. The strengths and weaknesses of the British hard right were on exemplary display at a National Conservatism conference in London last spring, which the author attended as an observer.

Introduction

Two handicaps ought to bar me from contributing a chapter on the European centre-right. By temperament and allegiance, I belong to the liberal left. What political knowledge I have now comes from reading, mostly oldish or academic books, not from talking to players or taking part in the game. Against the first of those drawbacks, my allegiance makes me share worries about democratic liberalism's poor health among liberals, left or right. As for bookish angles, they can help when talking about a contested item like the nation or an 'ism' like conservatism, which we recognise by sight but commonly claim not to be able to pin down in words.

Setting, then, both handicaps aside, it may be useful to share impressions from three days as an observer at London's National Conservatism conference in May 2023 at Emmanuel Hall in Westminster. Taking part were top politicians and star intellectuals of the illiberal force vying to dominate the Conservative Party: Britain's own hard right. It is often taken for exceptional and undeserving of the label 'hard'. Differences of

history and tone ought not to obscure a simple truth. Britain's hard right today shares essential features with its present-day counterparts in the rest of Europe and in the US.¹

Like them, the British hard right is an unstable alliance of three tribes. These are free-market globalists, national welfarists and ethico-cultural traditionalists. Globalists want a small, nightwatchman state, with undemocratic freedom for foreign capital to come and go as it pleases. Welfarists want an effective state that cares for the national people and protects them from immigration. The first two disagree with each other on heavy matters of taxes, regulation and trade. They combine smoothly enough with the traditionalists, whose sermons about the decay of morals and national culture they mimic or sit through out of tactical courtesy.

Holding the hard right together is a rhetorical enemy: the liberal elite. Globalists blame it for the post-1945 welfarist ballooning of the state. Welfarists blame it for the post-1990 undemocratic indifference to people and nation. Traditionalists blame it for the post-1960s moral confusion, personal indiscipline and social decay. Disagree as they may about policies and priorities, the three tribes share the same fighting talk against their common foe. Convergence of rhetoric distracts from divergence of interest. Four recurring themes—familiar on the hard right across Europe and the US since the nineteenth century—are decline, hostile capture, victimhood and deliverance.

National Conservatism conference

The hard right's strengths and strains were on vivid display at the London conference. It was run and paid for by the five-year-old Edmund Burke Foundation, a small but seemingly well-provided-for public affairs think tank in Washington, DC. Its chairman is Yoram Hazony, an Israeli-American political thinker who has revived the label 'national conservatism'. His best-known book is *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (Hazony

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1. Four verbal fusses to get my canoe in the water. First, I use 'conservatism' and 'the right' interchangeably. Two objections to that are, one, that conservatism belongs to but does not exhaust the right; and, two, that conservatism and the right are not the same kind of thing, the first being a body of ideas, the second a zone on the left-right party spectrum. Conservatism, to me, is a historical practice or tradition, which has ideas but is not itself a body of ideas. In party space, it spans the right but has liberal and illiberal wings, which are respectively nearer or farther from the left. Second, I use 'hard right' not 'new right' because its themes and appeals go back to conservatives' never-resolved ambivalence about capitalist modernity and its early nineteenth-century standard bearer, liberalism. 'Hard' is better than 'far' or 'extreme' because the hard right has left the fringe to join the mainstream. Third, I leave uncorrected the slipshod use throughout the conference of 'nation' to mean by turns also 'state', 'people', 'population' or 'country'. Four, by 'illiberal' and 'anti-liberal' I mark hostility to key elements of democratic liberalism, that is, liberalism for all we call liberal democracy.

2022), of which more later. He was the intellectual driver for the London conference, one of others under the same name in the US, Rome and Brussels. He also steered the drafting of National Conservatism's Statement of Principles (National Conservatism 2024). They repay textual study for the art with which hard-right disagreements can be blurred or reconciled.² Far from a Mosaic endowment, the Ten Principles seemed to fall on the London conference as an un-British, or at any rate un-Burkean, exercise in doctrinal explicitness. They were hardly mentioned.

The 40-odd speakers included mainly British stars of the conservative commentariat, university dons (theology was strong), conservative think-tankers, ex-officials (Sir Richard Dearlove of MI6 and Lord Frost of the foreign office), and Conservative backbenchers and ministers or former ministers. These were Suella Braverman, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Michael Gove. When interviewed on stage, Gove had diplomatic praise for each of the hard right's tribes and stayed genially neutral about national conservatism itself. The striking absence of economists, political philosophers or social scientists hardly mattered. The speakers were neither drafting a policy 'to-do' list, nor making stump promises for election. They were after something more elusive and more interesting: an all-in narrative for present-day conservatism that most of them felt it had lost.

One disagreement on policy was impossible to ignore: protection and free trade. It had split British Toryism in the 1840s and again in the 1920s. It was not about to disrupt the conference. On the first morning, Yoram Hazony spoke up for protection. 'What is good for Britain is what matters,' he said. 'If free trade is good, then it should be free trade. If it's protection, then it should be protection'.³ Rees-Mogg, in his speech after, disagreed. Conservatives had disagreed before, he said, but were now squarely for free trade. Assertion and counter-assertion once made, the topic was barely heard of.

Hard-right themes

Hazony spoke to the theme of 'disintegration and decline'. Liberal society, he said, was marked by moral decay within and loss of sovereignty without. In national-welfarist

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2. Here are the Ten: National independence, with defensive alliances against imperialist aggression; rejection of imperialism, including liberal imperialism; national-minded government, with curbing of 'administrative state' and 'activist courts'; public life to reflect the majority faith, protection for minority observance and non-interference for 'ideological or religious' reasons on private life; rule of law; free enterprise, with state protection against low-cost imports, drug-trafficking and pornography; more public research, especially for defence; public support for families and children; end to 'uncontrolled and unassimilated immigration'; condemnation of 'the use of state and private institutions to discriminate and divide us against one another on the basis of race'.
 3. Speakers' words from my own notes. The conference was filmed. Its sessions are available at National Conservatism (2023).

mode, the political thinker Matthew Goodwin spoke of a 'national community' of 'ordinary working people' captured by a 'new and increasingly narcissistic elite' which imposed an 'economic liberalism of the right and cultural liberalism of the left'.

Against the liberal enemy inside, Miriam Cates, a natalist Red Wall Conservative Member of Parliament, made a heartfelt appeal for bigger families. Climate change, Russia, China or 'Marxist ideology' were none of them Britain's larger threat. That, she pressed, was 'liberal individualism', which had 'failed to deliver babies'. For Theodore Dalrymple, liberalism's morality rested on an inconsistent triple: we were our own moral guides, answerable for our actions and subject to bossy liberal moralising.

Liberal enemies of the nation outside were not just international commitments that cramped national sovereignty. They included newcomers who did not share the national identity. Rather than spell out what the nation was, what it owed its members and what its members owed the nation, speakers were more preoccupied by who belonged in the nation and who might be kept out of the nation. James Orr, a chair of the conference and assistant theology professor at Cambridge, welcomed the prospect of returning to 'control' over who was 'part of the national family and who did not belong to our national feeling'.

A few voices of moderation relieved the generally harsh and aggrieved tone. The communitarian David Goodhart spoke up for an open-minded love of country. The historian of US politics and witty *Daily Telegraph* columnist, Tim Stanley, asked us 'to put every prejudice including our own under the microscope'. Rather than blame only liberals for society's present troubles, he stressed conservatives' own divided loyalties to capitalism and tradition. Thatcherism's 'radical economic programme', he said, had undermined its cultural vision for society. Against Hazon's national values, Stanley spoke for universal values, called for 'a dash of socialism' in conservatism and insisted that conservatives must find haven for refugees. It could have been Angela Merkel talking.

The pitfalls of ethico-cultural critique

Much of the rest was hard going, especially the ethico-cultural preaching. Treating culture as morals or politics mixes love with duty, admiration with obligation. The trick is hard to turn without sounding crude or banal. The best conservative writers knew that. Agree with them or disagree, among cultural critics of modernity, they take the palm: Chateaubriand, Burke, Maistre, Rehberg, Coleridge, Baudelaire, Bradley, Gierke, Eliot, Voegelin, Weaver, Oakeshott, MacIntyre and Scruton. They mocked and reprovved, but did not as a rule hector or browbeat. They knew how to divert, persuade or seduce. Who among conservatives now has such a voice or pen?

Treating culture as a uniform lump and typing it as national caused trouble throughout. It offered no useful answer to the old conservative puzzle of what to keep and what to destroy. One speaker got a laugh by mocking a town council that had destroyed a Victorian church on the grounds that, left up, it would be prey to vandals. Another got a cheer by calling for destruction of new buildings that had blighted the country for the past half century.

A related trouble for the ‘cultural’ hard right is talking angrily but obliquely. Problems of cultural assimilation and commitment to liberal-democratic norms undoubtedly exist in immigrant communities. Illiberals of the left (but not only them) do threaten liberal norms of free thought and expression. Both problems need facing, with frank words and practical answers. The hard right turns them instead into ammunition against a phantom liberal enemy.

Puzzles of a national conservative International

Sessions on foreign strategy brought matters back to earth but gave no answer as to where on earth, after Brexit, Britain belonged now. In response to Russia’s and China’s quiet but persistent hostilities, Richard Dearlove called for ‘active measures’ by the West—spy talk for political warfare and disinformation. David Frost shared the gnomism: ‘Let us confine government to its proper role in building . . . a free country.’

Part of the problem for a national conservatism in Britain is that with Brexit it both won and lost. For decades, it could deflect to Brussels local discontent with Whitehall and treat the EU as the nation’s captor. Now, without the EU to blame for the country’s ills, the hard right has lost its scapegoat. Delivered from European captivity, it has lost strategic compass. Rees-Mogg, a free-market globalist, was frank, at least: having escaped the EU, the enemy, he said, was now Whitehall.

Still puzzled about national conservatism’s international outlook, I sought clues in Hazony’s *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. He posed, without answering, a root difficulty. Which of conservatism or nation does the driving? Is national conservatism about making national sovereignty an overriding aim and defending national values, whatever they are? Or is it about fostering universal conservative values, whatever the nation? The first would make many conservatisms, each strategically unilateral and morally local. The second would create a Conservative International—call it ‘the Conintern’—presumably to defend universal conservative values against the imperialism of the Libintern.

Politically, Hazony’s national-minded foundation is forging international links, in London, Brussels and Budapest, where national conservatism is a state-led project with the publicly endowed Mathias Corvinus Collegium, which promotes education and anti-liberal causes. Despite the hard right’s rise across Europe and the US, it is doubtful

that shared hostility to liberalism reliably creates by itself shared national interests. Intellectually, Hazony seems to sense the problem.

In *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, he recommends in effect a localised utilitarianism. Each country, in his view, should do the best for its people's well-being in its own way. Well-being here is ethico-cultural, as well as material. It includes comfort in a secure, cherished tradition. Like states, traditions must not interfere with each other. Such a national conservatism would conserve only local conservative values. For none is universal. Liberalism's sin is to think any values could be.

Perhaps I have blunted Hazony's subtleties. I kept thinking, all the same, of a recent English politician who relished bluntness and who summed up national conservatism of the local kind better than anything I heard in London: Enoch Powell. In 1983, he astounded Margaret Thatcher by telling her, 'I would fight for this country even if it had a Communist government' (Casey 2007). Powell disgraced himself with racism, but he was the true herald of Britain's present hard right. By the 1960s he had hardened Stanley Baldwin's loose, romantic label of 'one-nation conservatism' into interlocking geopolitical, socio-political and national claims. Post-imperial Britain, for Powell, was alone in the world: America was a bully, not a friend; the Commonwealth was a sham and Europe a trap. The post-war liberal British state was at odds with an alienated British society, and Britain itself was special and unique. Those three ideas of his—aleness, alienation and specialness—came into their own after 2010 as the leading motifs of a conservative English patria.

Conclusion: into a vacuum

Reviewing National Conservatism's three days in London as a stage performance or marking it as if it were an exam would be a serious mistake. It would miss the hard right's enduring appeal, which critical or sceptical minds seem determined to miss. Mockery came easily from the press. So did dismissal from centrist Tories. For anyone troubled by the hard right, the suggestion from pollsters that cultural warfare had lost its traction, especially with the young, was not reassuring either. Polling in Britain shows overwhelming support for democracy in principle but rising discontent with how democracy is working in practice. When discontent is diffuse and wide enough, who knows where it leads. Brexit should have taught us that.

Britain's hard right is not a novelty but a re-emergence. Although it comes, to borrow Anthony Teasdale's words volume (p. 117), amid recent 'uncertainty, fractiousness and discontent' on the right, the hard right's roots are old. They are there in conservatism's original, unresolved ambivalence towards capitalist modernity. Conservatism began in reaction to bourgeois revolutions as a foe of market capitalism and its liberal

standard bearers. It compromised with both, indeed in time with democracy at the polls and to a degree with democracy at work, as well as with cultural democracy. Conservatives became, or allied with, right-wing liberals; mastered the modern political game; and having first resisted, came to dominate liberal democracy. No political tradition could manage that feat without great inner complexity and strategic flexibility. Historians of the party are right to warn us not to be misled by the Tory taste for civil war but to focus on its nose for office. They are a party that has held or shared office in 70 of the past 100 years. Luck, competence and compromise have all played a part in that success. Is a Brexitised, hard-right conservatism, however, still able to compromise? Was the shrill demonising in London just theatre?

A good historical case can be made that, when successful, liberalism of a democratic kind—what we have come to call liberal democracy—has depended for success on a complaisant, self-assured right. It has depended on liberal conservatives, that is, on those who were ready to work with left-wing liberals and progressives provided the things modern conservatives most cared about, property, social order, and open opportunity, remained in dependably safe hands.

At times of failure (let us overlook catastrophe), liberals of right and left have lost their voice and their way. Now feels like such a time. Far from being the deluders and disrupters of hard-right caricature, liberals are probably too truthful and too honest. The economic and social changes of the past half century have been bewildering. They are understood in their deeper effects by nobody: rapid technological change, death of old industries, explosive growth in higher education, shrinkage of unions, creation of a precariat, new personal norms, disruption of old hierarchies. Internationally, the scene is as fluid. Briefly after the end of the Cold War, economic globalisation and liberal values seemed to offer countries a win-win in market exchange and mutual tolerance. Confidence in such a promise is now badly shaken, if not gone.

That is the evident bad news. But politics also needs good news, or at any rate a story and a path. Nowhere that I can see are there thinkers or speech writers of the liberal right who can yet make sense of such turmoil, tell a convincing historic story of where we should be headed and of the strategy that will help us get there. The hard right is heard, thanks to that silence of the liberal right. This is not a partisan point. No convincing narrative with rhetorical appeal is on offer, either, from the liberal left. Well-identified problems and intelligent offers for their solution abound in the troubled liberal world, but the defences of that world itself are timid or barely heard. Into the resulting silence floats the mood music of the hard right. The liberal right's answer is yet to come. But that, I reflected as I left Emmanuel Hall, was for a different conference.

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THE POPULIST CHALLENGE

Europe's Mainstream Right and the Populist Challenge

Tim Bale

Summary

Europe's mainstream right is in electoral trouble, even if some parties are faring better than others. This matters because Christian Democrats, conservatives and liberals are not only integral to the governance of so many European countries, but are also essential to ensuring those countries uphold the values and the norms of liberal democracy that are under attack from far-right parties peddling nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Support for those parties has risen in the wake of a backlash against the progressive and post-materialist 'silent revolution' that, in itself, was already proving a challenge for the mainstream right. At the cutting edge of the 'silent counter-revolution' is a politics of immigration that poses serious policy problems for all three of the mainstream right's party families. Adopting the policies of, and doing deals with, the far right might seem attractive in the short term but, in the long term could well prove a dangerous dead end.

Introduction

Europe's mainstream right parties are in trouble, but neither the media nor academia, it seems, has fully woken up to the fact yet. That may well be because the electoral decline these parties have experienced has generally been rather more gradual than the decline suffered by many of the continent's centre-left parties—possibly because they have been able to appeal to voters for whom their economic programmes hold relatively little attraction but who nevertheless respond to their respect for supposedly 'traditional' values (Gidron 2020). It may also be because, since they tend to enjoy a greater choice of coalition partners, they have been better able to hang onto office. And it probably owes something, too, to the fact that, rightly or wrongly (and with a few notable exceptions), they tend to be regarded as dependably dull and dependably stable.

This lack of attention should be a cause for concern, given how big a role the mainstream right has played and continues to play in governments throughout Europe. As such, its role in preserving the liberal order in a continent struggling with the changes brought about by the gradual erosion (and subsequent demand for the reimposition)

of national borders is a vital one. One only need look across the Atlantic to see what happens when the mainstream right abandons support for that liberal order in pursuit of electoral salvation. Donald Trump's rise to the American presidency, and the apparently unquestioning support given to him by so many Republicans, not only casts doubt on whether they can be considered a mainstream right party anymore but also has potentially profound consequences for the current state and future of democracy in the US.

The three party families of the mainstream right—and the populist radical right challenge

On this side of the Atlantic, mainstream right parties are drawn from one of three party families: the Christian Democrats, the conservatives and the liberals—or at least the liberals of the 'market' rather than the 'social' variety. While that means they constitute 'a coalition of heterogeneous political currents with distinct, and at times clashing, ideological visions and social bases of support' (Gidron and Ziblatt 2019, 23), all of them believe, to a greater or lesser degree, that the main inequalities within society are natural and largely (if not completely) outside of the purview of the state, whether those inequalities are framed in socio-cultural or socio-economic terms. However, to defend and promote that stance they adopt only fairly moderate programmatic positions, as well as supporting existing norms and values that are intrinsic to the liberal–democratic regime—a commitment which distinguishes them from parties on the far right.

The first of these three party families—the Christian Democrats—is characterised not only by the promotion of European integration, class compromise, accommodation, reconciliation and pluralism, but also by the development of a particular welfare regime that, amongst other things, privileges families over individuals and is based on the principle of subsidiarity.

Members of the second party family, the conservatives, are sometimes (often to their advantage) harder to pin down and pigeonhole, not least because (some would say slightly disingenuously) they profess pragmatic scepticism towards all things supposedly 'ideological' and 'abstract'. Typically, they promote a rather more residual welfare state, even if relatively few of them go so far as to advocate (or at least implement) the neoliberalism most associated with the family's eponymous British representative. They also take a notably more nationalistic line, being palpably less enthusiastic, for instance, about European integration—a process in which Christian Democrats have, from its earliest beginnings, played a vital role.

Members of the third party family, the liberals, are generally more internationalist, as well as more concerned with the promotion and protection not just of the free

market but of pluralism and individual rights, as opposed to the preservation of 'traditional' values.

Virtually all the above distinguishes parties belonging to any of the mainstream right's three party families from the far right, including its most electorally competitive component, the populist radical right. The latter has three main attributes. The first is nativism, which 'holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state' (Mudde 2007, 22). The second attribute is authoritarianism—the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which authority should be respected and deviant behaviour should be severely punished. The third attribute is populism, which alludes to a specific set of ideas that not only claims that society is based on the moral distinction between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (an 'establishment' that more often than not is said to include the mainstream right), but also argues that politics should be about respecting popular sovereignty—even where it might clash with representative democracy and the rule of law.

The electoral record

When we look at how conservative, Christian Democrat and market liberal parties have fared electorally over the last three decades, not least relative to their more radical competitors on the right, three things become obvious.

First, parties on the far right (which for the most part means *populist radical right* rather than *extreme right*) have become more popular over time and have begun to participate in national government alongside mainstream/centre-right parties, either as full-blown coalition partners (in Austria, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland) or as support parties (in Denmark and Sweden)—and all this in spite of the fact that they have not, as many complacently expected them to, become more moderate as a result. Second, liberal parties have held fairly steady. And third, while things have not been plain sailing for conservative parties, it is Europe's Christian Democrats who, at least in general, have fared worst of all.

Coping with the silent revolution—and the silent counter-revolution

The reasons for all this are myriad and complex, and obviously, each country has its own story to tell. However, a useful way to frame the difficulties faced by the mainstream right more generally is to think of its members as facing two ongoing challenges which

have accompanied the transformation of the European party system (driven to no small degree by de-industrialisation and partisan de-alignment) from a unidimensional to a multidimensional conflict space (Bornschiefer 2010)—an increasingly polarised and fragmented electoral arena in which socio-cultural issues have assumed as much importance as economic issues.

One is the so-called *silent revolution* (Inglehart 1977), which, since the 1970s, has seen more and more people in Europe adopt the cosmopolitan, progressive-individualist values that helped kick-start the Greens and new left parties and which stand in marked contrast to the more traditional, and sometimes nationalistic and authoritarian, values associated (rightly or wrongly) with the right of the political spectrum.

The other challenge is the so-called *silent counter-revolution* (Ignazi 1992), the ‘cultural backlash’ (Norris and Inglehart 2019) against that value shift that has gathered pace from the 1990s onwards, helping to fuel the rise of populist radical right parties which, ever since, have threatened to eat into the support of their more conventional counterparts.

The very appearance of these two revolutions means that managing the trade-offs between office-seeking, policy-seeking and vote-seeking objectives (Strøm and Müller 1999) is becoming harder and harder for the mainstream right across Europe. In effect, mainstream right parties face a tension between, on the one hand, their continued need to attract better-off and better-educated voters, many of whom now express the liberal and progressive values associated with the silent revolution and, on the other, their desire—for some of them a desire that borders on desperation—to attract often (but not always) less well-off and less well-educated voters sympathetic to the authoritarian and nativist appeals associated with the silent counter-revolution.

At the cutting edge of this dilemma—indeed, trilemma—are the issues of migration and multiculturalism. Anti-immigration attitudes remain relatively widespread across certain segments of the electorate in Western Europe, providing fertile breeding ground for those parties wishing to exploit it. This is particularly problematic for the mainstream right, not just because, generally speaking, it approves of a degree of business-friendly labour market flexibility, but because, ideologically, it is all about defending right-wing ideas yet adopting moderate policy positions and adhering to liberal democratic values. So, while it can advance an ‘accommodative strategy’ towards more nativist, radical rivals (see Bale 2008), there are limits to this approach. As well as posing a threat to the immediate economic interests of some businesses, the adoption of harsh positions on immigration can hurt the image and reputation of mainstream right parties among those voters who for the most part approve of markets but not authoritarianism and might therefore withdraw their support. Moreover, since the populist radical right has in many countries effectively seized ‘issue ownership’ of migration and multiculturalism, a focus on those issues risks driving up their electoral salience

for those voters who *are* particularly concerned about those issues, thereby doing the members of that 'challenger' party family a huge favour.

But if immigration represents a challenge to the mainstream right, it affects its component party families in dissimilar ways. In the case of the Christian Democrats, the adoption of harsh anti-immigrant positions may chime with the public mood, but remains at odds with the humanitarian values held by at least some of their voters as well as many of those politicians who claim to represent them.

For conservatives, on the other hand, moral arguments against restricting immigration are likely to play less of a role. Indeed, their unapologetic nationalism, along with their emphasis on 'law and order', renders hard-line stances on immigration rhetorically unproblematic. Then again, business actors supporting conservative parties, alongside zealous free marketeers, may well favour relatively open borders in order to keep labour costs down and/or reduce skill shortages, resulting in a mismatch between that hard-line rhetoric and the reality of a country's more liberal migration regime—a mismatch which has, over the last decade and a half (but especially since Brexit has signally failed to deliver the 'control' voters were crying out for), proved particularly costly for Britain's Tories.

Finally, liberal parties should in theory find themselves at odds with hard-line immigration policies, since they are in favour of both the free market and the very idea of tolerating different cultures. True, by presenting Islam as a religion at odds with pluralistic values, radical right parties, most obviously in the Netherlands, can and have disrupted that logic. Nevertheless, the fact that the liberal party family has suffered fewer losses than its mainstream right counterparts may well have something to do with it picking up former conservative voters alienated by anti-immigrant (and 'anti-woke') politics trumping economic common sense.

The mainstream right has struggled to adapt to those challenges—although some parties have coped better than others (see Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021). But it is perhaps little surprise that, since that response has often involved adopting, over time, more socially liberal policies on issues like gender and sexuality while taking an increasingly nationalistic and restrictive stance on immigration (see Abou-Chadi and Krause 2021), Christian Democratic parties—socially traditional but inherently charitable and internationalist, and already coping with the decline of religious observance—have struggled more than their liberal and conservative counterparts. Whether they have experienced spectacular collapse, as in Italy, or gradual attrition, as in the Netherlands, Christian Democrats, operating in an increasingly secular environment and finding it harder and harder to hold on to working-class voters, have been haemorrhaging votes and losing office (see Bale and Krouwel 2013). Even the apparent exceptions to the rule—the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern)

in Germany and the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei) in Austria—are not what they once were. True, the European People's Party (EPP) Group remains one of the strongest in the European Parliament, but only because it contains parties from Western Europe that are clearly conservative rather than Christian Democratic, such as the Spanish People's Party (Partido Popular) and parties from Eastern Europe that cannot meaningfully be classified as such (see Grzymala-Busse 2013).

But are conservative parties really that much better off? For one thing, although their electoral record is currently slightly superior to that of Christian Democratic parties, it is hardly stellar; nor will it necessarily last. For another, the relative ease with which some of them seem to have adopted some of the tropes and trappings of the populist radical right risks turning what has been a difference in kind into one simply of degree, thereby crossing, or at least blurring, a dividing line that should not be crossed or blurred, as argued by Anthony Teasdale in his contribution to this volume (pp. 111–127).

Not so long ago, for instance, the Conservatives in the UK could claim to have weathered both the silent and counter-silent revolutions relatively well. But, like the Austrian Christian Democrats perhaps, they have only been able to do so by coming awfully close, particularly since the Brexit referendum in 2016, to becoming an *ersatz* populist radical right party. Boris Johnson's potent combination of Europhobia, his hostility to immigration and to all things 'politically correct', allied to his promises of supposedly huge spending increases, may have helped win the Tories the 2019 general election, but his flirting with something akin to what Welle (2023, 4) calls 'Social Nationalism' was arguably a long way removed from both the 'one nation' and the Thatcherite Conservatism historically associated with the party. And it may be no coincidence that it has been unravelling as an office- and vote-seeking, as well as a policy-seeking, strategy ever since.

An uncertain future

All of the three party families that make up Europe's mainstream right, be they Christian Democrats, conservatives or liberals, then, are caught between the post-materialistic/progressive silent revolution and the more recent backlash that is the silent counter-revolution. By taking one side or the other, they risk alienating voters who back the other and vice versa. When confronting this dilemma, there are some parties that have succeeded in achieving office-seeking and vote-seeking objectives, but almost always at the expense of the policy-seeking dimension. Moreover, that 'winning formula' is, in any case, deeply problematic. Not only does it risk eroding the distinction between the mainstream and the far right—raising the possibility that parties which have hitherto

buttressed liberal democracy (and the norms that underpin it) will instead begin to undermine it by indulging in the kind of 'democratic backsliding' that has become all too familiar in Hungary, Poland and the US—but it often fails on its own terms, too.

The British Conservative Party under Johnson (and his successors), the Christian Democratic Austrian People's Party under Sebastian Kurz, and the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie) under Mark Rutte in the Netherlands all went some way (as has the self-styled centre-right in France) to endorsing and employing the language and the policies of the populist radical right. But much good, some would say, it has done them. Reform UK, the Brexit Party, (to give it its updated full name) cost the Conservatives myriad seats at the 2024 general election, not by winning them itself but by taking vote share from Tory candidates. The Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) topped the poll in Austria's federal election in September 2024. And Geert Wilders won over almost a quarter of those who voted in the Netherlands in November 2023. In short—and with the possible exception, some may argue, of Spain's People's Party in July of that year—adapting to the far-right by adopting its positions rarely, if ever, seems to achieve its oft-stated aim, namely, to kill off (or at least reduce) the electoral threat it poses. The impressive performance of a number of far-right parties in the 2024 European Parliament elections would seem to bear this out.

Whether all this will serve as a warning to the mainstream right in Europe's biggest democracy remains to be seen. Germany's tragic past might have operated as something of a constraint both on support for the far right and the advocacy of anything resembling a far-right message on immigration by the mainstream right. Yet over the years politicians from the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union have made interventions on the issue, ostensibly to prevent the rise of a serious rival on their right flank. At a time when many of them look upon Angela Merkel's generous response to the refugee crisis as a historic mistake that will boost support for the party that surely now qualifies as such—the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland)—they may well prove themselves keener than ever to emphasise that they are no soft touch.

Understandable, perhaps. But effective? Unlikely. And then there are the potential losses on the other side of the ledger—losses which should not be underestimated, given research that shows that the mainstream right's electorate continues, for good or ill, to be mainly composed of those whose occupations and incomes mean that their main concern is what they would regard as economic good sense (Harteveld 2021).

None of this, of course, necessarily precludes governing with the help of the populist radical right. Indeed, it is possible to imagine a division of labour developing whereby the challenger party picks up the votes of the less-educated, ethno-nationalist 10%–20% of the electorate while the more established, more mainstream parties pick up their

more well-heeled, possibly more educated compatriots, facilitating the formation of a right-wing government either via a coalition or via a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement. We should never forget, however, that Christian Democratic, conservative and liberal parties are considered mainstream because they not only take relatively moderate positions but also (and perhaps more importantly) because they are committed to respecting liberal and representative democracy. Should mainstream right parties provide frequent access to power to their far-right rivals, let alone end up evolving to the point that they finally transform themselves into an *ersatz* version of them, then we should start to seriously worry. Clearly, it would be premature, even alarmist, right now to group any of those we have mentioned together with the Trump-era Republican Party, Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary, and Kaczyński’s Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) in Poland. But in the future—imagine, for a moment, a British Conservative Party taken over and led by Nigel Farage—who knows?

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Christian Democracy Versus Far-Right Populism: Elements for a Political Strategy

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti

Summary

This chapter explores the resources available within the Christian Democratic political tradition to counter the rise of far-right populism in the EU and its member states. The argument advanced is that centre-right parties could develop an effective anti-populist strategy by proceeding in the following two ways. The first is a recovery of and renewed emphasis on the Christian Democratic notion of *popularism*. This would involve a firm commitment to democratic procedures and norms, a rejection of ethnic nationalism in favour of a more inclusive universalism, and a ‘preferential option for the poor’ manifested through the defence and perhaps even expansion of existing welfare regimes. The second is a return to a more pronounced form of *religious conservatism*. This would require cultivating closer connections with established religious authorities and organisations through the adoption of sharper anti-liberal stances on cultural and symbolic issues pertaining to the domain of traditional values.

The tension between constitutional democracy and far-right populism

This brief reflection aims to explore the resources available within the Christian Democratic political tradition—construed as both a set of ideas and a group of partisan organisations—to counter the rise of far-right populism in the EU and its member states. That this is a desirable goal should not require much elaboration. An extensive academic literature has already identified the reasons why far-right populism constitutes a threat to the health and stability of constitutional democratic regimes (see Mudde 2007; Muller 2017; Urbinati 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2020).

Far-right populism is predicated on a substantive conception of ‘the people’, ultimately reducible to a national or ethnic identity, which is assumed to be represented ‘directly’ and ‘without remainder’ by a single leader or partisan organisation (on this

point, see, in particular, Urbinati 2019). For this reason, far-right populism is at odds with a core principle of the constitutional democratic regimes that were established throughout most of Continental Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, that is, that the ‘popular will’ is something that needs to be constructed, in a perpetually fallible and revisable way, out of the multitude of conflicting interests and values in society, through a set of institutionalised (but themselves revisable) procedures of representation.

Concretely, this tension between far-right populism and constitutional democracy manifests itself in the attitude taken by far-right populists with regard to two core aspects of contemporary constitutional regimes: the *formal procedures of political representation*, which far-right populists consider legitimate only when they validate the specific political outcome they already independently assume to be correct (i.e. that far-right populists themselves should rule, since they assume themselves to be the only legitimate representatives of ‘the people’); and the *constitutional protections for political and social minorities* that are in place to guarantee an ongoing dialectical confrontation between government and opposition within representative institutions, reflecting the fragmentary and constantly shifting nature of modern societies.

Over the course of the past two decades, far-right populists in Europe—from Italy’s Northern League (Lega Nord) to France’s National Rally (Rassemblement National), the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid), Spain’s Vox, Hungary’s Fidesz and the contemporary Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland)—have consistently proven themselves to be inimical to the formal procedures of political representation and the constitutional protections for political and social minorities that have been in place since the beginning of the post-war order. For this reason, they represent a threat to the health and stability of existing democratic regimes, including at the level of the EU as a whole.

The need for a new anti-populist strategy

The main anti-populist strategies that have been adopted by mainstream parties over the course of the past two decades can be broadly classed in two categories. One approach has been to *exclude* exponents of far-right populism from access to governmental positions by forming broad parliamentary coalitions without them: the so-called *cordon sanitaire* strategy that was originally experimented with in Belgium to keep the Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang) party out of power and is arguably still in place in Germany and at the level of the European Parliament as a whole. The other

approach has been to *co-opt* far-right populist parties within centre–right and far-right coalitions, aiming to ‘tame’ their authoritarian tendencies by inducing them to participate in, and therefore comply with, established democratic and governmental norms.

A common weakness of both these political strategies is that they do not really address the underlying reasons for far-right populism’s political success. Far-right populism’s constantly growing basis of electoral support is merely treated as a given fact, which is only managed at the level of post-electoral parliamentary engineering. The obvious limit is that if (or rather when) far-right populism ends up obtaining a sufficient electoral majority (as has already happened in a number of European countries and looks increasingly likely in many others, too), neither the *cordon sanitaire* nor co-optation would be able to prevent it from undermining the very framework of constitutional democracy itself.

To keep far-right populism out of power, it is therefore necessary to defeat it at the polls. This requires advancing a credible political alternative capable of addressing and at least mitigating the underlying reasons for its electoral success. In other words, what is needed is a competing political platform, capable of diverting at least some of the electoral support that has recently been secured by far-right populist parties in a different direction, more compatible with the health and stability of existing democratic regimes.

Of course, to remain consistent with the overarching conception of constitutional democracy I have proposed above, this alternative political platform cannot itself lay claim to exclusive representation of ‘the people’ as a whole. From the point of view of the health and stability of existing democratic regimes, it is necessary for there to be a *plurality* of alternative political platforms, representing the diversity of competing political interests and values within contemporary European societies.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will nonetheless be focusing exclusively on a possible political strategy to be adopted by centre–right political parties, drawing on the intellectual and organisational resources available from within the Christian Democratic ideological tradition. What centre–left (or even just left-wing) political parties can also do to contribute to countering the rise of far-right populism in Continental Europe is a separate discussion. But it is important to clarify that the proposals I advance here are to be situated within the framework of a *competitive* conception of constitutional democracy, in which there needs to be space for multiple alternative political platforms to compete with one another for electoral support.

At the most general level, it is precisely this dimension of substantive political competition within the framework of established procedures that distinguishes constitutional democracy from far-right populism and that must therefore be preserved—and indeed reinvigorated—as a strategy against the latter.

The difference between populism and ‘popularism’

At the ideational or discursive level, I submit that a powerful intellectual resource for centre–right parties to counter far-right populism can be found in the Christian Democratic notion of popularism. This has been a central notion within the Christian Democratic political tradition from the very beginning, as evidenced by the several Christian Democratic people’s parties that have been created across Continental Europe over the course of the past century and a half. These include the Italian People’s Party (Partito Popolare Italiano), the Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei), Spain’s People’s Party (Partido Popular) and, of course, the European People’s Party as a whole. The notion of ‘popularism’ has also been the topic of a rich and enduring intellectual elaboration in the work of many leading Christian Democratic thinkers and political exponents over the past century and a half, from Luigi Sturzo to Jacques Maritain and Konrad Adenauer. (For further elaboration on the meaning historically assigned to this concept in the Christian Democratic intellectual tradition, see also Invernizzi Accetti 2019; Hanley 1994; Kalyvas 1996; Kselman and Buttigieg 2003; Kaiser 2007.)

In the present context, popularism’s primary source of appeal lies in the fact that it contains an implicit reference to the notion of ‘the people’, which invites a comparison with the specific conception of the same notion that is at the heart of far-right populism. By such inclusion, popularism already problematises the idea that there is a single, monolithic and self-evident conception of ‘the people’ to which populists can lay claim. Instead, the very fact of grounding a political project in an alternative conception of ‘the people’ opens this notion to a political contestation over its accepted meaning, which *ipso facto* undercuts the populists’ claim to be the only legitimate representatives of ‘the people’. The suggestion is therefore that, instead of simply conceding to the populists that they speak in the name of ‘the people’ (as opposed to ‘elites’ or any other ‘constitutive other’), centre–right parties should seek to reclaim their traditional self-presentation as ‘people’s parties’ to challenge the populists’ claim to exclusive representation. Who gets to actually represent the people is the very essence of democratic political contestation, so nobody can afford to let the populists monopolise that notion.

The concrete meaning that has historically been attached to the Christian Democratic notion of popularism provides further grounds for both differentiation from and critique of far-right populism. To begin with, the specific conception of ‘the people’ on which popularism has been predicated is inclusive rather than exclusive. Whereas populists define ‘the people’ primarily by opposition to some other sociological entity—such as immigrants or privileged elites—the Christian Democratic conception of ‘the people’ is at least in principle open to anyone who is willing to agree to its core values, in conformity with the broader Christian aspiration towards universality. For this reason,

popularism does not necessarily have populism's exclusionary implications, which populists themselves are often at pains to either hide or deny, since they are manifestly in contradiction with their overarching claim to represent 'the people' as a whole.

This is something that can be strategically mobilised in political discourse, by constantly reminding the electorate that, despite their claims to the contrary, populists do not—and indeed, cannot—represent the *whole* people, because of the way in which they understand the people in the first place. In contrast, the Christian Democratic notion of popularism contains an aspiration towards universality which ends up making it more inclusive than far-right populism can ever be. Here, too, popularism can therefore succeed in mobilising populism's own discursive resources against it, by highlighting its internal contradictions.

Another distinctive and politically attractive feature of the specific conception of 'the people' implicit in the Christian Democratic notion of popularism is that it is *internally differentiated*, rather than abstractly monolithic. In the thought of all the most important Christian Democratic theorists of the past century, but also in the concrete political practice of Christian Democratic coalition formation, the people have always been construed as a composite entity, made up of a plurality of organised subgroups, from professional organisations such as trade unions to civil society associations such as neighbourhood alliances or church parishes, up to family units and individuals. This contrasts with the populist presumption that the people are essentially all the same, inasmuch as what defines them as a collective entity is ultimately only their common opposition to the 'constitutive other' represented by immigrants or elites.

This distinction is politically significant because it lends itself to the polemical claim that popularism is more respectful of individual and group differences *within* the people than is far-right populism. This, in turn, can be a way of highlighting the latter's homogenising, and therefore ultimately authoritarian, tendencies. Put another way, popularism can be plausibly presented as tied to a conception of 'consociational democracy' that values compromise and accommodation as means for resolving social conflict, while respecting individual and group particularities. In contrast, populism exacerbates social conflict in a way that can ultimately only result in a 'tyranny of the majority' over particular social groups and identities. To the extent that far-right populism draws at least a part of its appeal from the claim to defend national (but also local and religious) particularities, this can constitute another way of turning its own discursive resources against it. As well as being more inclusive than far-right populism, the Christian Democratic concept of popularism can also be presented as more protective of particular identities.

Finally, a third distinctive and politically attractive feature of the Christian Democratic concept of popularism is that it has also been tied to a concrete concern for the substantive well-being of the most disadvantaged members of society, in conformity

with the broader Christian, and in particular, Catholic, orientation towards a 'preferential option for the poor'. This has been historically manifested through the European Christian Democratic parties' decisive roles in the construction of national welfare state regimes, as well as the broader European social model of regulated capitalism captured in the idea of a 'social market economy'. In contrast, European far-right populism has been by and large tied to a more libertarian conception of the market economy, focused on lowering taxes and cutting bureaucratic impediments. To the extent that they have developed an economic platform at all, far-right populists have therefore pretty much acquiesced to neoliberal orthodoxy.

This is another glaring contradiction that can be usefully highlighted by a strategic redeployment of the Christian Democratic notion of popularism. Whereas far-right populists claim to stand for the interests of the politically excluded and economically marginalised 'people', their actual economic policy platforms are socially regressive in the sense that they tendentiously lead to an exacerbation of the already massive social and economic inequalities of the past few decades. In contrast, the Christian Democratic notion of popularism can be credibly associated with a more robust defence of national welfare state regimes and the broader European social model to which European electorates have consistently proven themselves deeply attached.

To be sure, there is also some mending to do in this regard. Over the course of the period roughly spanning from the end of the 1970s to the middle of the 2010s, Christian Democratic political parties and actors have themselves severely weakened the historic association between the notions of popularism and welfarism, by also broadly acquiescing to the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxies of the time. Nonetheless, a recovery of the more economically redistributive aspects of the historic concept of popularism is at least plausible on the grounds that it was, after all, Christian Democrats who built the national welfare state regimes that European citizens are now so widely attached to.

Barring the UK and the Nordic countries, which have always been to some extent exceptional, Social Democratic and, of course, Communist parties remained quite far from political power in most Continental European countries for most of the early post-war period. Christian Democratic people's parties could therefore be credibly presented as the true originators and architects of the European social model, provided, that is, that they were willing to substantiate such a discursive self-presentation with concrete policy platforms.

Recapturing the conservative religious electorate

Electoral battles cannot be won on the plane of ideas alone. To develop a comprehensive anti-populist strategy, it is also necessary to identify the specific sector(s) of the

electorate that the discursive recovery of the notion of populism proposed above could possibly appeal to. In this regard, I submit that one key target constituency centre-right parties can aim to recapture from far-right populists is that of the conservative religious electorate.

The starting point for this proposition is a recognition of the fact that, in all the Continental European countries in which far-right populism has succeeded in establishing a significant electoral presence over the course of the past few decades, it has also been able to attract a disproportionate share of the religious conservative vote. The most obvious examples are Hungary and Poland, where Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) have long presented themselves as staunch exponents of 'Christian values' alongside their other commitments to ethnic nationalism and populist (or 'illiberal') democracy. Something similar can also be said of Italy's Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) and Spain's Vox. In France and Germany, as well as in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and most Nordic European countries, the mobilisation of a conservatively tinged Christian identity in support of far-right populism has instead tended to be mediated primarily through opposition to foreign—and in particular Muslim—immigration. Quantitative survey data also show that markers of religious conservatism tend to be positively correlated with support for far-right populist parties in most Continental European countries (see, for instance, Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonville 2021).

This electoral alliance between religious conservatism and far-right populism has nothing necessary about it. On the contrary, there are good reasons to suppose that both Christianity and conservatism are, by nature, deeply at odds with far-right populism. Some of these points of tension are already implicit in what I have suggested above. Far-right populism is predicated on an ethnically exclusive conception of national identity, which clashes with Christianity's fundamental aspiration towards universalism. It also has internally homogenising and ultimately authoritarian dimensions, which cut against Christianity's historic commitment to personal rights and the defence of local particularities. Nor does far-right populism's acquiescence to neoliberal economic orthodoxies square well with Christianity's 'preferential option for the poor'.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, the very notion of conservatism is profoundly at odds with far-right populism's anti-establishment political appeal. As the former secretary general of the European Parliament and long-time exponent of the European People's Party, Klaus Welle, points out in his contribution to this volume (pp. 45–51), to the extent that the democratic constitutional regimes that were established in most Continental European states (as well as at the level of the EU as a whole) now constitute a core component of the established political order in Europe, a minimal requirement of genuine political conservatism in the present context must be an orientation towards *conserving* this order itself. In contrast, far-right populism is

both rhetorically disparaging and de facto subversive of this overarching political order. It therefore effectively amounts to a form of anti-establishment radicalism, which is the very opposite of political conservatism.

In light of this, it appears that the only substantive basis for the electoral alliance between religious conservatism and far-right populism consists in the latter's adoption of a flaunted (if superficial, and in some respects also inconsistent) conservative stance on a variety of 'culture war' issues that ultimately have to do with the regulation of individual freedom over matters such as gender norms, reproductive rights and the display of religious symbols in the public sphere. Whereas, during the second half of the twentieth century, centre-right, and in particular Christian Democratic, parties were widely regarded as the main bulwark in the defence of 'traditional values' against 'liberal permissivism', today far-right populism has managed to occupy that political space, in part because of a dilution of the centre-right's historic stances on these issues, and in part because of far-right populism's successful elision of its own previous anti-bourgeois and libertarian inclinations.

This suggests that a possible avenue for centre-right parties to recover their historical ties with the conservative religious electorate lies in sharpening their stances on these 'culture war' issues. In this regard, the explicit support (or at least implicit validation) of established religious authorities, such as the Catholic Church's hierarchy and prominent Protestant leaders, is, of course, important. However, that can only be secured by adopting more traditionally conservative—and in some respects also more explicitly anti-liberal—stances on matters such as foetal rights, gender and family politics, and the display of religious symbols in public spaces. Whereas there is no denying that prevailing attitudes on all these matters have been evolving rapidly over the past few decades, there is still a significant and often underestimated portion of the electorate that longs for traditional values to put a check on this rate of change. For the sake of their own electoral prospects, but also to channel these enduring value orientations towards a form of political expression that is less inimical to the health and stability of constitutional democratic regimes than far-right populism, centre-right parties would do well to both listen and speak to this portion of the electorate, too.

The role of popular conservatism in constitutional democracies

In sum, the main argument I have sought to advance in this brief reflection is that two core elements of a potentially successful anti-populist strategy for centre-right political parties could be a recovery and renewed emphasis on the Christian Democratic notion of *popularism*, which involves a formal commitment to democratic procedures and norms, a rejection of ethnic nationalism in favour of a more inclusive universalism, and a

‘preferential option for the poor’ manifested through the defence and perhaps even expansion of existing welfare regimes, together with a return to a more pronounced form of *religious conservatism*, which requires cultivating closer connections with established religious authorities and organisations through the adoption of sharper anti-liberal stances on cultural and symbolic issues pertaining to the domain of traditional values.

That these two elements have nowadays come to be regarded as unrelated, or perhaps even at odds with one another, may well be one of the main reasons for the centre–right’s relative electoral decline, as well as far-right populism’s recent electoral successes. Yet, one way of thinking of the Christian Democratic political identity is precisely as the area of intersection—or even better, *reconciliation*—between them, inasmuch as both can be understood as expressions of fundamental Christian values. It was, after all, a recipe that combined both these elements that enabled Christian Democratic parties to achieve the historically unprecedented levels of electoral success they obtained during the first few decades of the post-war era, while at the same time contributing to the decisive marginalisation of far-right populism from European politics for a while. Now that far-right populism appears to be on the offensive again it may be high time to return to this tried and tested recipe.

I end by also reiterating another key point I have sought to make clear from the start. The reassertion of a more sharply Christian Democratic political identity by centre–right political parties cannot be the *only* ingredient of a comprehensive anti-populist strategy in contemporary democratic regimes. To the extent that constitutional democracy is predicated on a competitive conception of political representation, which seeks to give expression to the plurality of conflicting interests and value orientations within society, this centre–right strategy must also be matched by a competing centre–left strategy that can hopefully contribute to undercutting other aspects of far-right populism’s political appeal. Since the main reason that far-right populism constitutes a threat to the health and stability of existing democratic regimes is that it undermines the very idea of a legitimate democratic dialectic between competing political platforms and parties, that is ultimately the most important thing to be protected and reinvigorated against it.

So, in the final analysis, the struggle against far-right populism is not something that the centre–right can win alone, but paradoxically is also something that it can only win by sharpening its differences with its political rivals on both the right and the left.

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Civic Nationalism and the Strengthening of the Centre–Right: Lessons From Warsaw

Madalena Meyer Resende

Summary

At yet another cross-roads, the European People's Party faces the challenge of integrating part of the nationalist right into the centre–right fold. Finding the right criteria for this process is crucial. This chapter argues that distinguishing civic and open nationalism from the anti-Europeanism of ethnic nationalists is a good starting point. However, this implies that the federalist opposition between nationalism and European integration needs to be revised by admitting that civic nationalism is compatible with Euro-Atlantic integration. The discussion then turns to the Polish case, where a successful formula was found to divide and defeat the autocratic nationalism of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) government while strengthening the centre–right. A civic pro-European platform was the basis for the coalition of liberals, progressive Catholics and farmers that defeated the Law and Justice government in the 2023 elections. It is a formula to be followed at the European level.

Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections have posed a major challenge for the European People's Party (EPP): how to resist and reverse the autocratic, anti-European wave that threatens Europe. For the EPP, this means that it must formulate a strategy for engaging with nationalist parties that were previously considered untouchable.

The discussion on the criteria for this new enlargement of the EPP has followed both tactical and ideological criteria. Here we suggest that the distinction between civic nationalisms, which are open to shared sovereignty, and ethnic and closed nationalisms, which are anti-European (Kohn 1955), is a sound criterion for drawing the dividing line between nationalist parties to be included in the centre–right and those to be excluded.

As the Polish parliamentary elections of 2023 showed, a broad alliance based on a reformed nationalist tradition brought together the liberal pro-European forces with the softly Eurosceptic camp of the Peasants' Party (Partia Chłopska), the Polish People's

Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) and the progressive Catholics (Poland 2050, led by Szymon Hołownia). This recipe helped to reconfigure the Polish centre-right and return it to power. In government, the same formula continues to divide and weaken the autocratic Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS).

Civic nationalism and the reconfiguration of Western Europe

After the Second World War, European post-state federalists created a narrative that wrote off nationalism as anti-democratic and anti-European, a political ideology to be excluded from democratic politics. In retrospect, nationalism appears to be a more complex phenomenon. At the onset of the Cold War, the extreme forms of nationalism of the 1930s in Western Europe evolved into a civic and open formula that saw nations as based on willing citizens rather than as eternal communities held together by ethnic ties. Post-war Christian Democracy, through the synthesis of Catholic universalism and nationalism, established a formula that combined the restoration of democratic nation states with strong multilateralist institutions (Kaiser 2007). In this process, the centre-right reformed nationalism along civic and democratic lines. This reformist movement was heralded by E. H. Carr (1944, 66): ‘Just as the movement for religious toleration emerged from the religious wars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, so the movement for national toleration . . . could emerge from the destructive nationalist wars of the twentieth century.’

The generation that reconstructed the European state order used the synthesis of nationalism, universalism and liberal democracy as its analytical and prescriptive framework. Civic nationalism, based on the idea that nations are created by willing citizens and not by ethnic ties, supported a form of European integration based on the premise that nations have common interests and that states can therefore exercise their sovereignty together with other states in supranational institutions.

At a time in history when Europe’s security crisis demanded creative solutions from its political actors, this formula opened up new channels of action to unite nationalist, liberal and religious identities against the Communist threat. The synthesis then served as a roadmap for the restoration of the German state and its reconciliation with France, and provided a formula for the integration of Western Europe’s liberal democracies (Meyer Resende 2023, 635).

The transformation of centre-right nationalism has taken place at different speeds in Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe ethnic nationalism has traditionally been the dominant form, while in France and the UK a tradition of civic nationalism has developed since the nineteenth century (Brubaker 1992). In Germany, where the ethnic tradition is historically deep-rooted, the Federal Republic did not change its citizenship

law until 1999, when citizenship by birth was added to *jus sanguinis* as a criterion for granting German citizenship.

Ethnic nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe: lessons from Warsaw

In Communist Central and Eastern Europe, the tradition of ethnic nationalism lived on, unreformed (Diamant and Gardner 2017). After 1989, ethnic nationalism came to the fore as a political identity available to the political parties emerging across the region. Nationalist parties became divisive forces, especially in the context of these countries' accession to the EU (1997–2004). From the mid-1990s, ethnic nationalism made it particularly difficult to build winning and reliable coalitions on the right. The political divide created by anti-European ethnic nationalists was a factor that destabilised party systems across the region. An example of such a phenomenon was the Polish Christian National Union (Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe), a party that, despite its outspoken anti-Europeanism, ran the Ministry of European Affairs in the late 1990s.

In Poland the party system began to stabilise in the mid-2000s, with the division between pro-European civic nationalist forces and anti-European ethnic nationalism becoming the basis of the main conflict between the two party blocs. The emergence of two new dominant parties in 2001, PiS and Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), reflected this division, which emerged as the main cleavage organising the party system. PiS embodied Catholic nationalism, traditionally associated with the defence of ethnic Polishness of and distrust and hostility towards Poland's neighbours. Civic Platform embodied a civic nationalism open to cooperation with Germany and pro-European integration.

After regaining power in 2015, PiS not only pursued the autocratisation of the regime through control of the judiciary and the media, but also implemented a polarising cultural policy to reinforce the divide between traditionalist Catholic anti-Europeanism and liberal civic nationalism. In gaining and maintaining power, PiS benefited from a strong ally: the Catholic Church. Paradoxically, the same Church that supported Solidarity and the path to democracy and Europe from 1980 to 2004 has been co-opted by the autocratic nationalism of PiS since 2015. Divided between a liberal and a nationalist wing, Polish Catholicism became hostage to a government that granted it privileges in exchange for support. This alliance made it possible to form a regime that proclaimed itself master of the nation's soul and silenced its enemies by politicising the courts and the media. PiS's foreign policy reflected its strong ethno-nationalist enmity towards its neighbours, expressed as hostility towards Germany and a deep antagonism

towards European supranationalism. Bilateral relations with the US flourished during the Trump administration (2016–20), making Poland a strong US ally.

Polish elections in October 2023

Twice, in less than half a century, in 1989 and 2023, have opposition victories in Poland resonated across Europe as symbols of the resilience of the spirit of liberal democracy and freedom. Faced with a regime deeply entrenched through institutional capture and social polarisation (2015–23), the Polish opposition developed a strategy to regain power. Civic Platform and the Third Way, running separately and each appealing to different constituencies, shared a common platform of pro-democratic Europeanism.

The Third Way (a coalition of Poland 2050 and the Polish People's Party) acted as a divider in the Catholic national bloc, mobilising farmers and a younger generation of Catholics. Conservative in their moral positions but firm in their commitment to liberal democracy, this generation's politics differs from both the autocratic nationalism of PiS and the social and economic liberalism of Civic Platform. Led by former seminarian, TV personality and author Hołownia, the coalition spearheaded this turnaround and reshaped the Polish political landscape, managing not only to cut into the PiS vote but also to prevent the predicted growth of the far-right party Confederation (Konfederacja). The Third Way, with 14.4% of the vote, and Civic Platform, with 30.4%, together achieved a majority sufficient to form a government and dethrone PiS. The opposition strategy was a winning formula. First, it strengthened the centre–right by keeping the liberal–conservative party separate from Catholic progressives and farmers. Second, by bringing these social groups into the pro-European civic nationalist camp, it split the Catholic vote and weakened PiS.

The new government's divisive strategy towards PiS continues to show signs of working. Former PiS Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who led the government that oversaw the introduction of Poland's near-total abortion ban, now says that he and many PiS colleagues would vote in favour of a centrist abortion law proposed by the Third Way. In the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections, Jarosław Kaszyński led the radicalisation of the party when he replaced moderate PiS candidates with hard-line anti-Europeans.

Conclusion

Poland is not only a major country in Central and Eastern Europe and a political leader in the region, but it has also established itself as a bridge nation between East and West. Since February 2022 its role in the war in Ukraine has enhanced all three of these aspects, but the democratic backsliding that the country suffered after 2015 complicated its relationship with its European and North American allies.

The parliamentary elections of October 2023 returned Poland to the Western liberal camp through a formula that strengthened the centre while splitting the nationalist right. This formula relied on a broad alliance based on a civic and pro-European nationalism that denounced and opposed the ethnic nationalism of PiS. The EPP should draw inspiration from this development in its mission to strengthen the centre and divide and weaken the far right.

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Alternative Right or Right-Wing Alliance? The Spanish Case

Ignacio Cosidó Gutiérrez

Summary

The Spanish right-wing political landscape has historically been divided between moderate liberal conservatism and anti-liberal nationalism. Today, the People's Party (Partido Popular) represents the centre-right, while Vox embodies a more traditional, identitarian right. These parties differ on issues such as national identity, state decentralisation, the EU, environmental policies, and social issues like abortion and immigration, but share essential principles such as the defence of the constitution, the unity of Spain and Western democratic values. The radical left-wing government led by Pedro Sánchez, supported by a parliamentary alliance of socialists, Communists and independence forces, has broken all political consensus, exacerbated social divisions and threatened the rule of law in Spain. The People's Party aims to attract centrist voters who reject President Sánchez's radical drift. In these circumstances, however, only an understanding between the liberal centre-right and the conservative right will make possible the alternative government that Spain urgently needs. In the longer term, we cannot rule out a collapse of the left and the rise of the identity-based radical right.

Introduction

The Spanish right-wing has historically been divided into two often antagonistic factions: a moderate liberal conservatism and an anti-liberal, radical and largely nationalist right. One of the successes of the democratic transition at the end of the twentieth century in Spain was the disappearance of the extreme right from the parliamentary map and the emergence of a democratic, reformist and pro-European right that integrated all the major conservative, liberal and Christian Democratic currents into a single party. The People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) today represents that Spanish democratic right, fully comparable to the other major parties of the centre-right in Europe. This party has been alternating in government with a socialist party that was also comparable to the great European Social Democratic parties. This political order, anchored in the constitution of 1978, has guaranteed a period of almost half a century

of stability, democracy, growth and progress practically unprecedented in the history of Spain. However, the regime of 1978 is being threatened by a growing radicalisation of the left in power, the rise of peripheral nationalisms that have questioned the unity of Spain and a new fragmentation of the right.

The midland crisis of the 1978 constitutional order

The great merit of José María Aznar was the convergence of the centre–right into a large party capable of offering a successful alternative to the socialism that had ruled Spain for 14 years. The refounded PP brought together all the Spanish conservative, liberal and Christian Democratic currents, becoming a centrist party more closely resembling the Union of the Democratic Centre (Unión de Centro Democrático) at the time than the People’s Alliance (Alianza Popular) from which it was born. The Spanish PP was also a pillar of the creation of the current European People’s Party, with which it is fully identified and currently integrated.

The PP of the 1990s identified more with a conservative–liberal ideology than with Christian Democracy. Formally, the party avoided ideological labels and defined itself as a centrist party in which everyone fitted. But Aznar’s governments were characterised by a liberal economic policy based on budgetary rigour, low taxes and privatisation; by a foreign policy based on the defence of Spain’s interests in Europe, a profound Atlanticism, and the special relationship between Spain and the Ibero-American countries; and by an acceptance of the new, more liberal, social consensus on matters such as abortion and divorce.

Aznar imposed a two-term limit on himself and in 2004 ceded the leadership of the PP to Mariano Rajoy. However, the terrorist attacks of 11 March provoked an unexpected victory for the left that dislodged the PP from the government for eight years. The new socialist Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero initiated a process of historical revision, questioning concord as a fundamental principle of the democratic transition and seeking to delegitimise the right, disqualifying it as heir to Francoism. The left also abandoned its traditional economic and social policies in favour of equality and solidarity, which showed its failure, and built a new progressive agenda based on feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights and environmentalism. Its strategy was to divide society and seek confrontation.

Rajoy’s PP further diluted its ideological profile by defining itself as a centrist party based on pragmatism, moderation and common sense. The PP avoided ideological confrontation with the left and expressly renounced any cultural battle. Rajoy’s governments, in power from 2011 to 2018, were technocratic, focused on successfully pulling Spain out of the economic bankruptcy into which Zapatero had plunged it,

but they did not initiate any far-reaching political reforms, nor did they revise any of the ideological laws of the left, including those on historical memory, abortion and the independence of the judiciary.

The main challenge to Rajoy's government, however, did not come from the left, but from separatism. The progressive radicalisation of the ruling nationalist forces in Catalonia led in October 2017 to an illegal referendum and the subsequent unilateral declaration of independence. The policy of permanent concessions to nationalism that had been practised by all the ruling parties in Spain since the transition, either as payments for their parliamentary support to guarantee the governability of Spain, or as a way of appeasing their independence impulses, had failed. Only the leadership of the king, the actions of the judiciary, the institutions of the state and the temporary suspension of autonomy made it possible to restore constitutional order.

In this context of the radicalisation of the left, the challenge of secessionist parties and the weakness of the PP, there also emerged a fragmentation of the centre-right space that, given the Spanish electoral system, made it unfeasible to form a majority government. In this new situation, two new political forces arose. On the one hand, a liberal party, Citizens (*Ciudadanos*), emerged in Catalonia, initially centre-left and profoundly anti-nationalist, it later established itself across the whole of Spain and sought to lead the centre-right space. It was on the verge of achieving this, winning the regional elections in Catalonia and being close to overtaking Pablo Casado's PP in the 2017 elections. However, strategic mistakes and internal tensions have now led to the virtual disappearance of that party, allowing the PP to recover its status of hegemonic force on the centre-right.

On the other hand, a new alt-right party was also born, which became the third political force and managed to capture up to 10% of the votes, exceeding 50 seats in the November 2019 elections. The party was born as the result of a split of the most right-wing factions of the PP, which were dissatisfied with a response that they judged insufficient to the secessionist challenge, the abandonment of traditional values and a perceived capitulation to the ideological impositions of the left. Vox's doctrinal bases are changing, but we can say that we are facing a traditionalist, identitarian and, to a certain extent, anti-system party. Its political programme involves an uncompromising defence of the unity of Spain; a recentralisation of the state; a discourse critical of the EU; an anti-globalisation, anti-immigration position; opposition to gender ideology; and defence of traditional Catholic values and of the rural world. Its radicalism has been growing as its electoral support wanes. Vox currently has 33 seats in the Congress of Deputies and is a partner of the PP in several regional governments.

The motion of no confidence won in 2018 by the new leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE), Pedro Sánchez, brought together a parliamentary majority of separatists, socialists and Communists, forming a

dangerously radical government. Sánchez is heir to Zapatero's most radical agenda, but he has taken it to the extreme. His reforms on social issues, such as the trans law and the *sí es sí* law ('yes is yes', concerning sexual consent), are extremely radical and are generating disastrous effects. His Democratic Memory Law, his ideological rhetoric (which is reminiscent of the 1936–9 civil war), and his definition of a *fachoesfera*¹ (which includes anyone who does not agree with his ideas) are generating a structural division in an already fractured society. His concessions to pro-independence parties in exchange for supporting his remaining in power, such as the proposed Amnesty Law, the suppression of the crime of sedition, the reduction of embezzlement and funding privileges, mean the liquidation of the rule of law and the breakdown of the principle of equality nationwide.

Moreover, beyond the periodic sharing of power between left and right that has characterised the political game in Spain since the transition, the impression is that we are now witnessing a moment of rupture between two roughly equivalent blocs: on the one hand, a bloc of nationalists, socialists and Communists who want a change from the regime of 1978 and the transformation of Spain into a kind of confederal republic and, on the other, a bloc made up of the liberal centre–right and the identitarian right that is committed to maintaining Spanish unity and the existing constitutional regime.

Where is the Spanish right today?

According to its current statutes, the PP defines itself as a reformist political formation that stands for human dignity, democracy, the rule of law, a sustainable market economy, territorial solidarity, equal opportunities, respect for the environment and European integration. Its internal organisation is based on citizen participation, transparency, discipline as an ethical commitment and the promotion of healthy internal debate.

According to its founding manifesto, Vox is based on the defence of the freedom of opinion and expression of its members, the renewal and strengthening of Spanish democratic life, critical and ambitious patriotism, and the promotion of a unitary state. Its project can be summarised as defending Spain, the family and life; reducing the size of the state; guaranteeing equality among Spaniards; and expelling the government from citizens' private life.

Therefore, there is no a priori incompatibility of principles, although there is a profound programmatic divergence between the PP and Vox. Both defend freedom, democracy, the market economy, the unity of Spain and the constitution as fundamental

1. This is a pejorative term that is used to refer to people who sympathise with right-wing political ideologies. This term is the noun used to refer to a supporter of Fascist or authoritarian regimes. In recent years it has also been used to refer to a right-wing voter who is not necessarily a Fascist.

principles of their political action. The exclusion barrier or *cordon sanitaire* that the Spanish left intends to erect around Vox is not justified by an anti-democratic, violent, racist or unconstitutional character in the identitarian right in Spain. Moreover, some nationalist partners of the current socialist government do have supremacist traits, defend manifestly unconstitutional postulates and even have historical links with terrorist organisations.

The main ideological difference between this new identitarian right and the traditional centre–right is that between a Spanish nationalist party and a party with a more liberal discourse. For Vox, the Spanish nation is represented not only by the current people but by all those who preceded them and all those who will come. This implies that the nation is an immutable reality that is above the democratic will. On the contrary, the PP defends a constitutional patriotism in which the nation is defined based on a constituent will that only a qualified majority of the Spanish people could modify. Because of its idea of the nation, Vox defends a model of the state with a single political power, with a recentralisation of essential policies such as education and health, and admitting only administrative decentralisation. In contrast, the PP defends the current model of the ‘State of Autonomies’, the most decentralised state in Western Europe. The debate remains open on the growing level of asymmetry in political decentralisation and the effective limits of a dynamic of decentralisation that threatens to reduce the presence and action of the state, particularly in certain territories.

There are also no substantial differences in the definition of Spanish foreign policy between the PP and Vox, except in the vision of the EU. Both have unequivocally condemned Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, defended the need to arm Ukraine so that it can defend itself against that aggression and, in the case of Vox, repeatedly criticised the Spanish socialist government for the lack of greater commitment to supporting the Ukrainian cause. Nor are there any differences in the positions of the two parties on the conflict in the Middle East. The PP and Vox roundly condemned the terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October last year and have defended Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself. By contrast, important members of the Spanish government and parliamentarians supporting it have accused Israel of genocide, while Sánchez himself advocated the suspension of the agreement between Israel and the EU and recognised a Palestinian state. Both Hamas and the Houthis have shown gratitude to Sánchez’s government for its support.

Meanwhile the two parties defend Spain’s historical and strategic anchoring in the West, and Spain’s membership of NATO and the EU. However, they have different views on the latter. The PP is a profoundly pro-European party that defends the historic success of the European project and is in favour of continuing towards greater political and economic integration of the Union. Especially at a time when the commitment of the US to European security is being questioned, the party deems it essential to

develop a common defence to address the growing threat from Russia and the security challenges on the southern flank.

In contrast, Vox maintains a critical position towards the EU for what it considers a dissolution of the sovereignty of the member states and a submission to radical environmental and ideological lobbies. It calls for a Europe of free and sovereign nations, freely cooperating with each other through EU institutions in the service of the prosperity and cooperation of the member states. In addition, the party proposes rejecting European initiatives that it considers harmful to Spain, such as 'green' obligations that reduce productivity and increase costs. Vox also does not recognise the subjection of national legislation to the EU legal framework. However, Vox's membership of the Group of European Conservatives and Reformists and not the more radical Group of Identity and Democracy arguably makes it possible to find compromise solutions at a European level.

One area where Vox shows a marked radicalism is in environmental matters. In a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference held in Washington on 23 February 2024, the leader of the party, Santiago Abascal, harshly attacked 'the 2030 Agenda, the European Green Deal and all policies that, from climate fanaticism, have as their main objective to destroy the prosperity and wealth of nations and at the same time benefit large corporations and false philanthropists' (Abascal 2024). However, beyond the radically anti-globalist tone, these positions are not entirely incompatible. The European People's Party itself has, in fact, contested various aspects of the European Green Deal which, especially in the current geopolitical situation, are harming our farmers and putting our strategic interests at risk. Overall, traditional positions in favour of globalisation are being tempered by the geopolitical risks posed by dependence on countries such as Russia or China.

There are no insurmountable incompatibilities regarding economic policy, either. Both parties defend the market economy, support companies as generators of wealth, and are in favour of reducing taxes and social contributions and limiting public spending. However, Vox is drifting towards autarkic positions that have historically proven incompatible with sustainable economic growth.

Finally, differences are greatest on societal issues. The difference between a Catholic right and a secular centre-right translates into distant positions on some particularly sensitive ideological issues such as abortion, the concept of family and gender ideology. The new right claims to represent the traditional values of Catholicism, while the PP has moved away from any religious position. Vox thus intends to repeal laws on abortion, euthanasia and so-called surrogacy, returning to policies that punish these practices as criminal. It also proposes the repeal of the Law on Gender Violence and all legislation that recognises the rights of the LGBTQIA+ constituency. By contrast, the PP is in favour of maintaining the social consensus reached, proposing policies that support life

rather than merely coercive ones, and guaranteeing the rights and dignity of all people regardless of their sexual orientation.

Another bone of contention is the issue of immigration. In Spain this issue does not yet have the relevance and virulence in the political debate that it has reached in other states of the EU. At this point, positions on this appear substantially different. Vox's discourse is markedly anti-immigration, with the party proposing measures such as the immediate expulsion of undocumented immigrants, the requirement of legal residence to access public services and the protection of Spanish nationality. This discourse tends to emphasise the negative aspects of immigration, especially when the migrants come from Muslim countries, linking insecurity or the difficulties of the welfare state with the migratory phenomenon. The PP is in favour of greater border control, a more effective fight against illegal immigration networks, policies for the full integration of immigrants who come to our country, and legal immigration to cover the demographic deficit and promote economic development.

Conclusion

This analysis concludes that, despite obvious programmatic differences, there is no ideological incompatibility that makes the understanding between the traditional centre-right and the new identitarian right unfeasible in Spain. The fundamental principles enunciated by Vox are not vastly different from those of the PP: the defence of freedom, family and life, as well as the defence of Spain and the strengthening of democracy. Nor are there any major discrepancies concerning the country's membership of NATO or the EU, the war in Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East. There are, however, substantial programmatic differences in terms of the state model, the European project and societal issues. There are also conflicting discourses regarding globalisation, climate change and immigration.

At the same time, it should be noted that Vox is currently suffering from a process of further radicalisation. The elements closest to liberal conservatism are leaving the party, and the current leadership is leaning towards more radical, nationalist, autarkic and anti-establishment positions. If this trend consolidates, it could make any future collaboration with the PP more complicated.

The Spanish political landscape has two characteristics that differentiate it from other European countries. One is the growth of various peripheral nationalisms, especially in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, which call into question the very unity of the nation. The other is a very radicalised governing left that makes it impossible to reach any kind of consensus. The coalition of this radical left with pro-independence nationalism also poses a serious challenge to the survival of the constitutional settlement

and political regime of 1978, which emerged from the Spanish democratic transition. In this political context, the possibility of a grand coalition between the two major forces that traditionally occupied the political centre, the PSOE on the centre–left and the PP on the centre–right, is for the time being unfortunately out of the question. The Spanish political debate no longer moves so much on the traditional axis between left and right, but pivots between those who are committed to maintaining the constitutional framework and those who, from pro-independence or radical positions, intend to undermine it.

The division of the right in Spain, a constant in its democratic history except for Aznar's mandates, also makes it more difficult to achieve alternative parliamentary majorities to the current nationalist–left alliance. The radicalisation of the PSOE has generated a reaction on the right that has deliberately favoured the emergence of an alternative right, which in turn has reinforced the campaign by the left to delegitimise the whole of the right as heirs to Francoism and Fascism.

Under this predicament, the core strategy of the PP led by Alberto Núñez Feijóo has been to deepen the shift to the centre to try to expand its electoral base with those socialist voters dissatisfied with Sánchez's alliance with the radicals and independentists. To do this, it has been necessary to redefine the ideological profile of the party so as not to generate rejection in that sector of the electorate. However, in the July 2023 elections the PP could not win a majority for two reasons: first, the alliance with Vox in several regional governments contradicted the discourse of moderation and, second, its campaign having accepted the mental framework designed by the left, it paradoxically increased the fear of a coalition with the radical right.

The results of recent elections seem to point towards the consolidation of three existing trends: first, the erosion of the socialist–Communist government of Sánchez, not only of the PSOE but more so of its radical left allies, which have suffered a major electoral setback. Second, in Galicia and the Basque Country there has been a significant growth of pro-independence nationalism, which has taken up most of the vote ceded by the left, although in Catalonia there is a certain fatigue among the pro-independence forces, which led to a victory for the socialist candidate (Generalitat de Catalunya 2024). Third and finally, in the right-wing bloc, the PP imposes itself as a hegemonic force with a Vox that is left out of the Galician parliament (Xunta de Galicia 2024), as it did not reach the 5% required minimum, and retains a single seat in the Basque Country parliament and 11 seats in Catalonia, in contrast to the PP, which quintupled its share, reaching 15 seats in that community. The long-term scenario may be a collapse of the left in Spain like the one we have already seen in other European countries, and the growth of an identity-based right-wing alternative.

The elections to the European Parliament held in June 2024 consolidated some of these trends. The victory of the PP with almost 35% of the votes consolidated the party

as the hegemonic force of the centre–right and the only possible alternative government in Spain. The defeat of the PSOE, more than four points behind the PP, shows the progressive erosion of Sánchez’s government, although it also shows that electoral support for the party is still high. The consolidation of Vox as a third force with almost 10% of the votes shows that this party has a consolidated electorate, different from that which supports the PP. The identitarian right in Spain is growing less than in other countries, such as France or Italy, where it has displaced the traditional centre–right. But today it constitutes a necessary component for an alternative to the Sánchez government. Finally, the collapse of the radical left allied with the socialist government calls into question the latter’s long-term prospects. Combined with the stagnation of the nationalist forces, this makes it almost impossible to repeat the creation of a majority government of socialists, Communists and independentists.

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SOME CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC THEMES

Roots Are Not the Past

Alojz Peterle

Summary

In a geopolitically and culturally changing world that is facing wars, tensions and new ideologies, the European peace project and the European way of life are in danger. Europe appears to be at a turning point again. Successive EU enlargements have not yet built a truly united Europe. A new chapter of the European project can be achieved only by establishing a new quality of the European togetherness. Acting together requires building a community based on shared values and principles. At its most fundamental level, this necessitates agreement concerning our attitude towards life, truth and identity, as well as a shared diagnosis of what has been happening to our societies, also in cultural and civilisational terms. To strengthen the EU's internal cohesiveness and resilience in economic, defence and other fields, therefore, we need to reconsider, in continuity with the Christian Democratic tradition, what it means to respect the human dignity of everyone in today's circumstances and what we really wish to do together.

Introduction

The EU is facing a critical moment, exactly two decades after its historic enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries. Compared to 20 or even just a few years ago, we are now facing a different world and a different EU. In a world of growing uncertainty in which many speak of the 'decline of the West', the EU's economy is suffering and being outcompeted by those of other players in innovation. Moreover, we are facing a demographic winter, two regional wars with global implications and an inability to defend ourselves. Not only are we facing wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, but there are also signs of possible conflictual developments in the Western Balkans. Thus, the European peace project and the European way of life appear to be in danger, and we have to defend them.

In opening a new chapter for the European project, inventing new rights and putting forward progressive slogans seems misguided, and it could even fuel divisions. I suggest focusing on two key ideas of the Christian Democratic founding fathers of the EU. The first, which is identified with their overall philosophical approach to politics and policies, is respecting human dignity. Concretely, this means reflecting and agreeing on

what it means to respect the human dignity of everyone, in the context of today's technological, social, political, demographic and ideological challenges, in order to build a new European togetherness. The second idea, which can be considered the Christian Democratic founding fathers' method for tackling challenges, is pragmatically finding common ground and working together, avoiding excessive polarisations. In general, my remarks stem from the conviction that our roots are not the past, but the sources from which we draw our nourishment to build a better future. I consider dangerous those ideologies that want to establish a 'new man' and 'new societies' by ignoring the roots and nature of humankind. Communism failed because of that approach.

Human dignity and Christianity

Each society has to find an answer to the difficult question of how to live together in the presence of considerable diversity. Totalitarian ideologies, for example, try to 'perfect' societies by disqualifying, marginalising and liquidating those who think differently, who are treated as public enemies.

The founding fathers of the EU chose another way: they founded a new European house on the respect for human dignity and the will to reconcile and act together. The European project began by placing the notion of human dignity back at the centre and by turning it into the foundation of a community sharing the same values and principles.

From a Christian Democratic perspective, an adequate understanding of the meaning of human dignity is impossible without a reference to the soul of Europe: Christianity. This word does not seem very popular today, despite the Christian inspiration of Schuman, Adenauer, De Gasperi and the other EU founding fathers. We do not seem to remember or understand what Schuman meant by saying that 'democracy will be Christian or will not exist'. He translated Christ's teaching, 'love thy neighbour as you yourself', into a political language of dignity and founded European democracy on it. No other theory or movement for human rights has made a stronger case for equality and mutual respect, which require dialogue, compromise and cooperation. Later on, it was Roman Herzog, another Christian Democrat, who, in his capacity as chairman of the first European Convention, insisted on adding an article on dignity as the first in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, now a legally binding part of the Lisbon Treaty (see Jones 2012). This is not about ideology but about the foundations of our togetherness. If this fundamental principle disappears, Europe is in danger of repeating the tragic experiences of totalitarianism. This is my understanding of Schuman's words.

One cannot do without a Christian inspiration in this regard, and must, on the contrary, be proud of it and apply it in our daily political life. Influenced by progressive

cultural wars, an increasingly sociological understanding of religion and the anti-religious inspiration of contemporary secularism, we are now on the defensive and have lost awareness of what Christianity means for Europe in the realm of culture and beyond. We should also remember that it was Christian-inspired political movements such as *Solidarność* that strongly contributed to the democratic change on the Eastern side of what was once the Iron Curtain. Christians made a decisive contribution to preserving European values in Communist Eastern and Central Europe. In this regard, there is certainly a difference of historical experience between the citizens of Western and of Eastern Europe. The countries and citizens who faced Communism, therefore, tend to have a different understanding of and approach to problems of identity, culture, religion, family life and like matters.

For example, the second article of the European Convention on Human Rights stipulates that ‘everyone has the right to life’. This sounds good, but the tricky question, of course, is what is meant by ‘everyone’. Is, for example, an unborn child to be considered a human being? There are, obviously, different views on that. My understanding, however, is that proclaiming abortion as a fundamental right is in direct opposition to the above-quoted article and means creating one more dividing line within the EU. It also violates the ruling of the European Court in the *Brüstle* case (Court of Justice of the European Union 2011), concerning the interpretation of Directive 98/44/EC (European Parliament and Council 1998) on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions. The ruling emphasised that while the directive seeks to promote investment in biotechnology, it must also respect fundamental rights and the dignity of the person. Therefore, any invention that requires the destruction of human embryos or their use as base material is excluded from patentability, regardless of the stage at which that takes place.

We should pay attention not only to developments between EU member states, but also to changes within our societies. New ideologies increasingly tend to fragment them and a new, radical and unbridled understanding of freedom undermines the idea of the EU as a community in which the varying cultural and moral preferences of different states and citizens are respected.

Pragmatism and collaboration: the EU as a community

The EU began as a European (Economic) Community based on human dignity.

Our Union still needs a spirit of community—of mutual respect and understanding of differences, as opposed to attempts at one-sided impositions—in order to grow and survive. Community also entails attention to Europe’s soul and culture of togetherness. A Union that is just a power structure cannot be sustainable, as Schuman and even Delors clearly believed.

It is time for a new togetherness, going beyond slogans about digitalisation or green transformation and taking human dignity seriously once again. A movement 'back to our roots', so to say. This entails assigning a central importance to the family, which some ideologies now consider a questionable notion, but which constitutes an important asset in our measures to overcome Europe's demographic winter. It also requires a more holistic understanding of sustainability, one that rejects the leftist quest for a 'new man' and that does not neglect roots and traditions. After all, 'conserving' is the true enabler of any well-conceived growth.

The geopolitical situation also requires this new togetherness. We were unable to consolidate our partnership with Russia, which now considers the EU its collective enemy and is drifting away from Europe and towards Asia. How far the new isolationism of the US will go is also unclear, as is its impact on NATO. However, it is clear that China is well positioned to profit from the new situation.

All this pushes high on our agenda the need to be able to protect ourselves. For this purpose, soft power is no longer sufficient, we need hard power too, which raises the thorny question of whether European citizens are ready to die for Europe, if need be.

Challenges for the EPP

The European People's Party (EPP) has for decades played a leading political role at the EU level in many fields. It has been considered as the centre because it understands politics as culture, not just as power. We can be proud of our historic achievements, but we have also been co-responsible for developments that must raise critical questions.

Broad coalitions have allowed us to stay in power for decades, but they have not always strengthened our identity. We were instrumental in all the major EU enlargements, including the truly historic one of 2004. However, those enlargements did not produce a truly united Europe. Moreover, the accession process of the countries of the Western Balkans has been slowed down, and other enlargements beyond them are far from self-evident. One cannot expect a strong European outlook in candidate countries without a real commitment from Brussels institutions.

What is more, when, in the 1990s, the European Democratic Union and the European Union of Christian Democrats were merged to allow a convergence between Christian Democrats and conservatives within the EPP, we did not really deal with the significant programmatic differences between them. Instead we had to face them when liberal and other ideological streams joined the original EPP. We became stronger in numbers and power, but we had to make compromises and paper over existing divisions, even on essential matters, which has led to a less clear identity and has recently favoured parties to the right of the EPP.

We also lost a great deal of credibility in the eyes of voters with our late and purely tactical or even ideological approach to the question of migration. The idea to strictly identify all migrants at the border and prevent any illegal crossings was strongly criticised a few years ago, but it is now widely shared. Many European cities face acute safety and crime issues, which encourages frustrated citizens to support new parties. The related problem of our societies' collective identity has also been culpably neglected, especially in the leftist camp. The EU, of course, was established as a community of many identities, all of which deserve protection, including minorities.

Conclusion

June 2024 was not any European election. After it, 'more of the same' clearly cannot be the answer, including for Christian Democrats and conservatives. Let us open a debate and try to agree on a diagnosis and a therapy. My opinion is that a 'back to the roots' mindset can help us in strengthening the sustainability of the European project. Beyond election slogans, what we need are a comprehensive approach and determination, as well as clarity on fundamental values and principles.

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Christian Democracy as a Living Source of European Values and Policy Inspiration

Ján Figel'

Summary

The main legacy of Christian Democratic thought encompasses the protection of universal human rights, the concept of a 'social market economy' and the establishment of the European integration process. These are pillars of the European way of life. However, contemporary challenges, among them populism and new political divisions, are threatening the solidity of these achievements. To save these pillars of the Christian Democratic heritage, this chapter suggests a way forward that consists of the deepening and enlargement of European cooperation, the development of the concept of human dignity for all and a culture of industrial innovation.

Introduction

The European People's Party (EPP) is the continent-wide organisation of European Christian Democracy. It has stood as a core European party for more than half a century and as the leading European political force for a quarter of a century. It has continuously been the largest political group in the European Parliament since 1999, gathering a great number (often a majority) of EU heads of state and government around one party table. Its member parties participate in or lead many national governments in today's EU. Against this background, what follows briefly reflects on the past achievements, current challenges and future prospects of European Christian Democracy and the EPP.

Past achievements

The decisive historical legacy and contributions of European Christian Democracy are especially evident in three pillars of the contemporary West and, indeed, of the broader system of international law and relations.

The first is protection of universal human rights. From a Christian Democratic perspective, world peace can only be based on justice, and the core of justice must be respect for the human dignity of each person. Human dignity is not merely a right: it is the reality from which all our rights and duties derive. Human dignity is inherent to the Christian concept of the person as created in the image and likeness of God, the Creator. It is foundational to Judeo-Christian ethics, and it entails that dignity is the inherent source of our inalienable rights, which the state and other public institutions must acknowledge and respect. Before the Second World War and the ascendance of Christian Democracy, this concept of dignity was recognised by the legal and constitutional orders of only a handful of countries.

The second major contribution of Christian Democracy is the concept of a 'social market economy' with environmental responsibility (the notion of 'stewardship' traditionally present in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church). The social market economy is based on the free competition of market forces enabled by a framework of rules against the abuse of dominant positions and the formation of monopolies. Most of all this means that the economy is at the service of society and operates based on proportional regulations and incentives set by the state. This subordination of the economy to society's needs confers a humane purpose to the market's quest for profit and growth. In doing so, the social market economy with environmental protection offers the prospect of overall sustainable development.

The third most significant contribution of Christian Democrats is that the Christian Democratic founding fathers established European integration, a unique, unprecedented process aiming to secure peace, stability and prosperity on the old continent. Robert Schuman, a true father of Europe, and his partners Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and others, were able to agree among themselves and offer their respective war-torn and embittered countries a vision of practical European solidarity, cooperation and integration based on justified interests and values. Their mature leadership combined human compassion with a vision for the future and balanced decision-making. They were able to reconcile belligerent nations, initiating the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom and the European Economic Community. They also established the Euro-Atlantic security alliance formalised in NATO and contributed to a new, rules-based international system.

Creative minorities make history. Governments under Christian Democratic leadership in the 1950s were able to create a unique community of democratic states in Europe that, by its soft power of attraction, became the nucleus of a united and integrated Europe.

Current challenges

If we consider those three decisive pillars of the Christian Democratic legacy, we must acknowledge several problems in each of them. Their strength is undermined by the pressure of new ideologies, the rise of populism, and also by increasing political divisions and judicial activism.

In the area of human rights, we have not been able to agree on a universally shared notion. New trends such as political feminism, militant secularism and gender ideology have brought about deep divisions in international and European institutions, provoking conflicts within democratic Western countries as well as among them.

The social market economy has made European countries very successful, competitive and export-oriented. The euro as a common currency has withstood both external and internal pressures on its stability and credibility. The EU has become a major standard setter for industrial norms and rules globally. However, this successful conception of the social market economy is currently undermined by the disproportionality of the objectives set by the European Commission's 'Green Deal'. Efforts to counter climate change cannot become a beauty contest of unrealistic measures and self-serving ideological exhibitionism that brings about Europe's de-industrialisation. Realistic policymaking must prevail over ideological naivety.

In the area of European integration, the period of important achievements appears to be over. The most visible setback of the thrust towards 'ever-closer Union' was probably Brexit, after the 2016 referendum in the UK. Reasons accounting for the victory of the 'Leave' camp go beyond the growth of the UK Independence Party and the rise of populism. One may, for example, cite the departure of the Conservative Party from the EPP Group in the European Parliament. The enlargement of the EU after the end of the Cold War was not a dynamic, satisfactory and impactful process. Moreover, bloody wars during and after the break-up of Yugoslavia confirmed that the EU was not capable of preventing conflict in its neighbourhood or of securing peace on the continent. More recently, the Russian aggression against and large-scale invasion of Ukraine represents an enormous political and military challenge, a humanitarian and solidarity test for the Union's 27 members.

Future prospects

If the EU is to remain a cohesive, effective and attractive community of values, a defender of human rights and a promoter of the social market economy with environmental responsibility, it must both deepen and enlarge its cooperation. The stability and strength of the future community requires a reinforcement of both dimensions:

the vertical dimension of common values and political commitment, as well as the horizontal one of a more active enlargement and neighbourhood policy.

In the field of human rights, I would recommend deepening a shared understanding and a balanced approach by insisting on human dignity, the foremost European value, also listed in the preamble of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. As explained above, dignity is the reality from which both human rights and duties derive. The predominant culture of human rights today tends to forget and completely abandon human duties, the duties one has, for example, as a father or mother, husband or wife, citizen and patriot. If we neglect our duties, how can we claim our rights? Freedom without responsibility is unbalanced, unsustainable and self-destructive. There are various ways to promote education about and respect for the dignity of all. A recent example is the 'Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere', a document with a growing number of signatories (Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere 2023). There is also an initiative to adopt a UN General Assembly resolution on a Human Dignity Day. It goes without saying that the EPP and its member parties would be natural promoters of this concept of human dignity for all.

As to the social market economy, the challenge of climate change calls for the proportionality and efficiency of mitigating measures. The true solution seems to be the sharing of costs and responsibilities internationally. The EU should focus on becoming exemplary in this regard through a general innovation culture and, in particular, a culture of industrial innovation. This requires connecting education, research, development and business within a collaborative knowledge community. A good example of EPP-led innovation is the founding of the European Institute for Innovation and Technology in 2008. As the then Commissioner for Education, I was tasked by European Commission President José Manuel Barroso with establishing a 'European MIT'. Although at a time of budgetary retrenchment and in the face of general opposition this was an uphill struggle, after 15 years the European Institute of Innovation and Technology has become the largest innovation ecosystem on the European continent, with over 2,400 partners including universities, research centres and companies. Strategic challenges such as innovative energy, climate change, digitalisation, urban mobility, raw materials, food, health, water, culture and creativity, artificial intelligence and biotechnology are important not only for smaller economies, but also for bigger ones. The EPP should take the lead on building an innovation-friendly and supportive EU. The very emergence and existence of the EU itself is the quintessential result of political innovation.

European integration, too, is far from complete. The EU enlargement process must continue based on transparent conditions, as well as more political support and dynamism. The EU should become a peace producer, not merely a peace consumer. For that purpose, basic defence capabilities and a more effective security policy—including the

protection of external borders required for the respect of internal freedoms—are necessary. In the wake of the outbreak of Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022, traditionally neutral Sweden and Finland have joined NATO. Despite some internal differences, the EU has been active in supporting Ukraine in this conflict. This security crisis is costly and challenging, but it can be used to develop Europe for the sake of peace and security in the twenty-first century. The dream of a ‘Europe whole and free’, which would have certainly been shared by the Christian Democratic founding fathers, still remains a mission ahead of us.

Conclusion

Christian Democratic ideas, principles and values were critical for the launch of the first European Community and for the birth of a united Europe. Then and again today, Europe needs those who have the courage and perseverance to actively defend them as necessary for our responsible future. We know that the future of this common Europe started in the past. Roots are indispensable to good fruits. This moment in time calls for the vitality of Europe’s Christian Democratic roots and legacy.

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Drawing From Christian Sources: The Impetus for Christian Democracy

Stefan Lunte

Summary

The political family of the European People's Party is currently reflecting on its Christian Democratic identity. In particular, the meaning of its 'Christian' dimension is again receiving positive attention. Drawing on the Christian tradition, this chapter presents a selection of themes that could still prove fruitful for contemporary Christian Democracy. These include 'existential freedom', which lies at the heart of Christian Democracy, but also the concept of meekness/orthopathy, which may inform the drive to strengthen European citizenship. It comprises the pragmatic solidarity that can be derived as a general orientation from a 'political' reading of basic Christian theology, as well as an Augustinian anthropology that helps to avoid the 'black and white trap'. Moreover, the attitude towards migration and integration policies can find inspiration in the Benedictine rule, while the teaching of Saint Bernardino of Siena justifies policies in favour of the market economy that include support for its key actor: the entrepreneur. Finally, the early-twentieth-century warning of the Christian poet T. S. Eliot against capitalism's unbridled maximisation of profit and the threatening exhaustion of natural resources remains relevant today.

Introduction

A reflection is ongoing within the European People's Party (EPP) to position centre-right parties more clearly among political competitors. Klaus Welle, for example, insists on a broad concept of 'sustainability' to recapture the idea of preservation as a genuinely conservative one across various European policy fields, including *democracy* (see the section on democracy in Hefele, Welle et al. 2024). This, of course, entails that those who bear responsibility for the democratic legitimacy and accountability of European institutions should adapt these aspects of the institutions in light of the expanding competences of the EU. It also means that European institutions and politicians should face the reality of the general loss of trust in democracy among citizens. From a Christian

Democratic perspective, however, this also requires a reflection on the meaning that the Christian dimension can have in contemporary democratic politics.

This chapter first shows that, after the rather minimalistic and conventional positions on the topic that can be found in the programmatic texts of the EPP approved in 2012, a reconsideration of the EPP family's Christian and Christian Democratic roots can be observed. A text published in December 2020 by the EPP Group in the European Parliament (EPP 2020) serves as evidence of this. Accordingly, this chapter discusses the 'Christian' component, this discussion being necessary for a re-evaluation and strengthening of the concept of democracy. It then offers a few examples to show how it is possible to creatively reinforce the Christian dimension and so generate an impetus that may inspire voters despite the apparent decline in religious practice and the exhaustion of church structures. Recourse to those aspects of the Christian teaching and tradition that can offer political orientation around the central concept of sustainability is suggested as an option to overcome a minimalist approach to the Christian foundation of the EPP.

The Christian Democratic identity of the EPP family

Since its inception the EPP family has continuously referred to Christian Democracy to describe its origins and aspirations. A lot depends, however, on the solidity and vitality of such references. In the last decade or so, for reasons of electoral tactics, the EPP has been content with listing some basic principles of Christian social teaching—mostly personal dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity—before quickly proceeding to a detailed presentation of programmatic proposals. The adjective 'Christian' has not been suppressed but has received less and less attention or has been relativised by being positioned alongside other religious, ideological or civilisational references. For example, anyone who reads the manifesto of the 2012 EPP Bucharest Congress will note in the very first sentences that the EPP was founded in 1976 by Christian Democrats but has since become a centre and centre-right party: 'Our political family is the driving force of European integration. The European Christian Democrats were founded in 1976 as the first European party—the European People's Party. We have since become the party of the centre and the centre right' (EPP 2012a, 1).

Then, as the basis for the party's convictions, the document draws on the commitment to the innate natural dignity of human beings, to which all party members subscribe, whether they believe in God or claim other sources for their beliefs. The text thus picks up on the historical formula of the Polish constitution of 1997 (Poland 1997), drafted by Tadeusz Mazowiecki. The authors of the manifesto also acknowledge as sources of our civilisation our Greek and Roman heritage, Jewish and Christian values, and the Enlightenment. The topic is only slightly more detailed in the platform of the EPP, also

adopted in 2012 (EPP 2012b), which updated the Athens Basic Programme, formulated in 1992. The platform explains Christian anthropology as the starting point for the values claimed by the party (point no. 6). Elsewhere, reference is made to human fallibility in order to oppose totalitarian, artificial utopias (no. 105). In a further—not very clear—section, a connection is made between Christian values based on the Gospel and the Christian heritage, on the one hand, and the democratic values of freedom, equality of all people, social justice and solidarity, on the other. This is followed by a commitment to the separation of church and state, which, however, ‘should not justify the exclusion of churches from the public domain or lead to devalue the need for constant dialogue and interaction between the political and the religious spheres’ (no. 140).

However, in December 2020 the EPP Group of the European Parliament published a text entitled *The Future of Christian Democracy: A Compass for Future Generations*, which can be read as an attempt to bring the Christian Democratic legacy back to the fore and to appreciate it anew as a source of hope in difficult times. ‘We stick to our Christian Democratic heritage, especially to the Catholic and Protestant social teaching time-tested for two thousand years, based on stewardship, personalism, subsidiarity, responsibility and solidarity’ (EPP 2020, 1). It goes on to say: ‘This means that Christian Democracy embraces all Christians, believers of any other religion as well as non-believers. Christian Democracy is more than a label; it is our magnetic compass to navigate the world. We need to re-learn and to devise new ways to speak up for the core identity of the EPP Group.’ (EPP 2020, 1). This formulation should be the starting point of our effort.

Christian: a positive content to democracy

Democracy must be cultivated, renewed and protected. It is, however, not an end in itself but the political system that best corresponds to human dignity and freedom and that therefore can be developed into the most effective system of government. Democracy is first and foremost a formal set of rules within which different interests and opinions can clash and compromises can be negotiated. This set of rules is often complex and not easy to convey, not least on the European multilingual level. Furthermore, an accelerating media culture, heated up by social networks, has made it even more difficult to generate the necessary positive energies to build and sustain citizenship. Without such energy, without citizenship, democratic processes, however, cannot survive. Without sound civic foundations and roots, lengthy parliamentary processes become boring, if not repugnant, and may provoke populist backlash. Herein, the factual justification for the conceptual weakness of democracy may be found. The poet and Nobel Prize winner T. S. Eliot wrote as early as 1937 that ‘the term democracy does not contain enough positive content to stand alone’ (Eliot 1939, 63).

The term ‘democracy’ needs an addition, a qualification, in order to mobilise political forces and establish a party-political identity. ‘Christian’ is one such determinant that many democrats have invoked over the past 150 or so years. For a long time, however, it was not only undisputed but also self-explanatory. That is no longer the case. In today’s kaleidoscope of political parties, anyone who wants to maintain a democratic party for Christian reasons must take care of this Christian character, explain it, illustrate it and cultivate it.

The impetus for Christian Democracy from Christian sources

With reference to Welle’s sustainability concept, anyone who wants to make Christian Democracy more sustainable as a political party must be prepared to rearticulate the identity-forming power of Christianity. One must refrain from suppressing the Christian faith and Christian traditions, or from paying lip service to them with a short preamble sentence. Trusting in their meaningfulness and pertinence for our world and times, they should be spelled out in a new and creative way. The following sets forth some key themes showing how Christian inspiration can still orient policies.

‘Freedom is the breath of life’

The letter to the Galatians is one of the oldest parts of the New Testament. Probably written by Saint Paul about 15 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, its primary concern is whether Christian faith should be open to non-Jews or not. Saint Paul affirms that the oppressing Mosaic law has lost its critical relevance for salvation. Christ liberated us from a sinful existence to become free and to freely turn to God: ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’ (Galatians 5:1, New English Translation). Paul affirmed that central role of freedom at the outset of the Christian tradition and so freedom becomes a key feature of Christian anthropology. The Christian vocation is freedom: ‘For you were called for freedom, brothers’ (5:13). This ground-breaking opening by Saint Paul may not be the only but it is certainly one of the roots of modern liberalism. The Pauline liberalism is, however, not a utopian and libertarian form of freedom. It is a realistic and personalistic version, which recognises our existence in personal relationships. This theological concept of freedom has always inspired Christian Democracy. It underpins political and economic freedom, but above all it offers the ultimate justification for supporting free societies and their defence at the cost of the highest imaginable price. Since February 2022 we have learned again what this means. Ukrainians are defending their and our aspiration to live in a free society against a brutal war of aggression initiated by the Russian regime. They prefer to risk their lives rather than returning to

life under the domination of an imperialistic regime. With many sacrifices, including the highest possible one, they vindicate anew the fundamental Christian Democratic concept of freedom. In December 1944, facing a show trial and a few weeks before his execution on 2 February 1945 by the Nazis, the German Jesuit Alfred Delp wrote: ‘Freedom is the breath of life’ (Delp 2019, 173, author’s translation). It is important to remember that the exercise, espousal and defence of this freedom must be the first calling of Christian Democrats.

Práos: a public virtue

In her studies on the emergence of Greek democracy, the great French Hellenist Jacqueline de Romilly placed a third concept that was central for her, alongside the values of freedom and equality (see Romilly and Grandazzi 2003, 123–7). It is the ancient Greek word *πραῖος* (*práos*), which she translates as ‘meekness’, ‘gentleness’, ‘forbearance’, ‘understanding’ and so forth, and with which she emphasises the importance of mutual benevolence and civic virtue for the functioning of the democratic polis. Democracy does not work without gentleness, according to the ancient Greeks. Surprisingly, the same ancient Greek term *práos* is also found at the centre of the Christian Beatitudes, the New Testament charter of ethics par excellence. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5: 5)—understood within the classical Greek tradition—is not an invitation to a lax and timid retreat into the private and intimate, but rather a call to Christians to heed a virtue that is central to the community. The antique concept of meekness, adopted in the Gospel, may inform and reinvigorate the modern idea of citizenship. The Czech theologian Thomas Halik recently introduced the notion of *orthopathy* to describe the ‘right passion, desire, inner experience—spirituality’ as a third dimension of living in truth next to orthodoxy and ‘orthopraxy’—right action (Halik 2023, 4). It underlines a capacity for empathetic analysis and response to the human condition, in both the personal and the societal context. *Orthopathy* may capture for today’s society the force of *práos* as a civic virtue.

The Christological and Trinitarian dogma: two basic impulses

In the first centuries after Christ, the early church succeeded—often after hard and sometimes violent arguments—in formulating the two truths of faith that are still central today: the Christological dogma, according to which God became human in Christ, and the Trinitarian dogma of the existence of God in the three persons. In addition to their central importance for the Christian presentation of the religious question, both dogmas also have highly political implications. Anyone who believes that God does not

turn away from the world and is not indifferent to his own creation but has assumed human form in a certain place and at a certain point in time will never accept politics as an abstract and metaphysical dispute. Rather, such a person will want to concretise principles and incarnate values in institutions, laws, budgets and so forth. Christian Democracy is inherently pragmatic and solution oriented. Referring explicitly to the Christological dogma of the incarnation of God in the human person of Jesus, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis asserted that ‘Realities are more important than ideas’ (Pope Francis 2013, nos. 231–3). The Trinitarian dogma inevitably raised the theological question of the quality of the relationships among the three divine persons. The Second Vatican Council, in response to this question, underlined the surpassing love of the divine persons and at the same time pointed prophetically to ‘a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity’ (Second Vatican Council 1965, no. 24). For Christians, the mandate for caring love and comprehensive solidarity follows from belief in the Trinity, and for Christian Democratic politics, it raises the question of appropriate social complements to strengthen the market economy order.

The world is not black and white, but colourful

From the second to the fourth century AD, Manichaeism found wide appeal among the insecure contemporaries of the Roman Empire. Its dualistic teachings represented the idea of a cosmic struggle between the opposing forces of good and evil, of light and darkness. Saint Augustine was also fascinated by this teaching and even became a follower before his conversion to the Christian faith. As a Christian he became a major apologist of the faith against Manichaeism and a thinker regarding the dialectic of human existence and of society. Everything that is, is good in principle, but the shadows, the dark, are also an integral part of human existence. Grey areas are part of reality. Accordingly, while intellectually seductive, a rigid division of good and evil fails the reality test, in both human life experience and politics. In the political discourse of recent years, the image of the polarisation of society has been increasingly used, according to which two poles face each other, continue to repel each other and reject each other according to the pattern of good and evil. Middle and mediating positions are thus dissolved. With Augustine, the Doctor of the Church and author of the ‘City of God’, the Christian Democratic family can and should insist that this view does not correspond to reality and that the human person, life, society and politics are more complex. The world is not black and white, but colourful. There are extreme positions, but there are also mediating ones, and one of them is occupied by Christian Democracy.

Benedictine hospitality as a compass for migration policy

At the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, Saint Benedict of Nursia witnessed the dissolution of late antiquity, the shock caused by migration movements and the military conflicts between the Huns and the Ostrogoths on the Italian peninsula. In this time of fear and terror, Benedict became the founder of occidental monasticism, and to this day Benedict's *Rule* is one of the fundamental texts of our civilisation. Chapter 53 of the *Rule* deals with hospitality, which remains a cornerstone of Benedictine life even today. It also has something to say about dealing with other cultures and peoples, including in the present day. The principle itself opens the chapter: 'All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ did, for he himself will say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me"' (Benedict 1981). This principle is then qualified, because as much as hospitality—characterised by respect, humility and humanity—applies to everyone, the founder of the order emphasises in the further course of the chapter that the identity of the monastery must not be abandoned. In a subtle way, the guests should be invited to adapt to the applicable rule and to become involved in the rhythm of life of the monastery. Thus, the chapter on hospitality can be read as a parable of how to deal properly with today's migration movements and as an invitation to become more aware of one's own European identity.

The Christian praise of the entrepreneur

Nine hundred years later, the Franciscan missionary, reformer and 'Apostle of Italy' Saint Bernardino of Siena wrote a treatise, *On Contracts and Usury*, which made him one of the very few scholastic economists. A well-known and popular preacher, he was the first theologian since Peter John Olivi to write an entire work devoted to economics. *On Contracts and Usury* dealt with the justification of private property, the ethics of trade, the determination of value and price, and the question of usury. His greatest contribution to economics, however, may have been his defence of the entrepreneur. He observed that the entrepreneur is endowed by God with a certain and special combination of gifts that enable him to carry out these useful tasks. In particular, he identified four entrepreneurial gifts: efficiency or diligence (*industria*), responsibility (*solicitudine*), labour (*labores*) and assumption of risks (*pericula*). Furthermore, Bernardino argued that the entrepreneur properly earns the profits which keep him in business and compensate him for his hardships. These are a legitimate return to the entrepreneur for his labour and expenses and the risks that he undertakes (Rothbard 2015). Saint Bernardino's praise for the figure of the entrepreneur may inspire contemporary economic and educational policies.

T. S. Eliot, poet and prophet of sustainability

A final reference, dating from the last century, may come from the already quoted Christian convert, poet and Nobel Prize winner T. S. Eliot. In his essay 'The Idea of a Christian Society', written shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, he criticises Communist and National Socialist totalitarianism, but also the excesses of liberalism:

... [T]he lines of thought ... for the realisation of a Christian society, must lead us inevitably to face such problems as the hypertrophy of the motive of Profit into a social ideal, the distinction between the *use* of natural resources and their exploitation, the use of labour and its exploitation, the advantages unfairly accruing to the trader in contrast to the primary producer, the misdirection of the financial machine, the iniquity of usury, and other features of a commercialised society which must be scrutinised on Christian principles. (Eliot 1939, 32–3)

In addition to the social question, he also raises the ecological question. Profit maximisation as the sole compass for the organisation of society 'is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly' (Eliot 1939, 61). Unbridled, unregulated capitalism deforms humanity and depletes natural resources. Future generations will pay the price for it. Read positively, this radical criticism morphs into a plea for sustainability, the very term proposed by Welle in his reflection. Sustainability is indeed a good term for the renewal of Christian Democracy.

Conclusion

In the past the EPP family has relied on a restricted number of principles to express its identity. The themes developed above illustrate that Christianity and the Christian tradition can provide much more input for the reflection about a specific Christian Democratic identity. Further discussing these themes and enlarging the list could help to render the doctrine of the EPP family more contextualised and vivid.

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The Genesis of the Political Categories of the French Christian Democrats (1944–6)

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Summary

This chapter explores the evolution of French Christian Democracy during the Liberation period (1944–6). This was a critical time, during which French Christian Democrats abandoned or maintained certain political traditions. The French Christian Democrats navigated the post-war period by shedding traditionalism, reactionism, all kinds of nationalism, paternalism and corporatism. Instead, they continued to embrace moderation, pluralism, subsidiarity and social engagement as their principles for action. They were proud to uphold the strong social reformist tradition derived from social Catholicism and to gain inspiration from their connection with the Christian trade union and the Catholic youth organisations, which both had played an important role in the Resistance. This redefined their political ideology, prioritising the poor and cooperation with European neighbours. They combined the popularist tradition of Don Sturzo with Maritain's and Mounier's political philosophies. Through this selection, they managed to establish the foundations for their political identity in the French political landscape and their long-term influence within the European centre–right. The choices made at that time continue to define for them the boundaries of cooperation with other political forces today.

Introduction

When asked about the French Christian Democratic tradition, I found little evidence of its visible presence within the Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire) in 2002. Similarly, the European People's Party (EPP) Group in 2008, despite a larger contingent of French Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) than in the past, seemed devoid of significant traces of this tradition. This raised the question: had the French Christian Democrats all stayed behind or had they relocated

¹ The author wishes to thank Dr Isabelle Ioannides and Dr Anastasia Mitronatsiou for their contributions to the content of this paper.

to other political entities?² However, I wondered if there were not still at least implicit remnants of their own tradition that persisted, accounting for certain specific preferences, reluctances and differences. What was this tradition, after all? Turning to the library shelves, I embarked on a journey of reading, immersing myself in books, texts and speeches spanning over 150 years of political and intellectual history. Rather than taking a position on a rich and evolving political historiographical debate, given that I am not a historian, I centred my analysis on the political figures' texts, trying to gain an understanding of how their ideas fitted into categories which could still inspire the European centre-right's choices today.³ The liberation period (1944–6) was clearly a pivotal moment. It was a time when certain traditions were abandoned while others persisted and were shared at the European level. These decisions, made long ago, have continued to shape the boundaries of cooperation to this day.

Year zero—French Christian Democracy in 1945

During the 'liberation' period in France (1944–6), a distinction emerged between acceptable right-wing traditions and those condemned to anathema or destined to marginalisation. The right as a whole faced severe criticism because of its participation in the authoritarian, traditionalist and Fascist-leaning Vichy regime.

In 1945 the right seemed annihilated, excluded from any participation in the ideological debates of the immediate post-war period. The very word 'right-wing'

2 Starting in the 1950s, representatives of the French Christian Democrats naturally aligned with the Christian Democrat Group in the European Parliament, which later evolved into the EPP Group. These French Christian Democrats were also the founding members of pan-European political movements or parties, initially also including the New International Teams and the European Union of Christian Democrats. In 2002 a significant part of the French Christian Democrats left the Union for French Democracy (Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF) to join a new party, the Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire), the predecessor of The Republicans (Les Républicains). This new party became part of the EPP Group and the EPP. As a result, MEPs from those former political constellations continued to sit together as EPP backbenchers for a while. However, at the time of the 2004 European election, François Bayrou took the responsibility of asking the MEPs who had remained in the UDF to leave the EPP Group and the EPP. The new MEPs elected on the list of the smaller UDF—soon to become the nucleus of the Democratic Movement (Mouvement Démocrate)—finally joined the Liberals. As Pascal Fontaine notes (2009, 349–50), 'this decision is taken mainly for reasons related to French internal politics. But undoubtedly it came as a surprise and disappointment to all the EPP Group, who saw that political party [the UDF] as the heir of French democracy, with its brilliant past figures in the Group's history: Robert Schuman, Alain Poher and Jean Lecanuet.'

3 The historiography on French Christian Democracy is quite considerable; two key references in this extensive literature are Mayeur (1986) and the extensive collection of testimonies in Irvin (1973).

stigmatised those who were labelled as such. Collaborators, or at least Vichy supporters, right-wingers in the years after the Liberation, were suspect, if not cursed. The condemnation and vindictiveness that befell individuals implied a global condemnation that sanctioned not only the organisations deemed to be right-wing (parties and leagues, etc.) but also the spiritual families and cultural and ideological traditions to which these different families belonged (Bourricaud 1992, 568).

Political factions seeking to engage in public debate had not only to demonstrate their participation in the Resistance but also to purge, self-censor and suppress aspects of their tradition.

This applied to the Christian Democrats and the social Catholics, some of whom had participated in the Vichy ‘Social Revolution’ out of opportunism or conviction. Their new party, the Popular Republican Movement (Mouvement Républicain Populaire, 1944–66), was only deemed acceptable on the condition that it showed loyalty to General de Gaulle and the spirit of the Resistance. Additionally, it had to position itself as a centrist movement, willing to transcend the old left–right divide, be open to all and give clear signs that it was not ‘conservative’.⁴

The question arose as to which ‘conservatism’ had to be rejected and suppressed to enable the Popular Republican Movement to re-enter the political arena in the face of the two Marxist-inspired parties. This question is relevant beyond its historical context. The choices made during the Liberation period constructed a political identity from which it would be difficult to deviate in the future.

For instance, French Christian Democrats would never be able to find common ground with Pierre Poujade’s (1920–2003) supporters in the 1950s,⁵ the traditionalist Christians of the 1970s or the far right led by Jean-Marie Le Pen (1928–). This was because they were all ready to recycle fragments of the pre-war period’s corporatist, reactionary and nationalist ideologies. Christian Democrats would even come into

4 The case of Robert Schuman himself is revealing of the post-liberation atmosphere in France. Schuman, a Christian Democrat Member of the French National Assembly—for the Popular Democratic Party (Parti Démocrate Populaire)—voted for the Pétain regime and kept his previous ministerial seat in the first days of Pétain’s first government. As a result, André Diethelm, the powerful minister of war during the liberation period, demanded that Schuman be immediately thrown out of the National Assembly, accusing him of being a ‘product of Vichy’. Schuman, who had escaped from the Gestapo and organised a clandestine network in Lyon, had to write to de Gaulle and appear in front of the Haute Cour in 1945 to be cleared of these accusations and to be able to re-engage in politics, becoming a Popular Republican Movement member of parliament from 1946 to 1962. He soon became minister of finance, in 1946, then président du conseil (prime minister), in 1947, and minister of foreign affairs from 1948 to 1952. Schuman’s ‘bumpy landing’ in the political landscape of the Liberation illustrates the climate of suspicion against the Christian Democrats on the part of the new establishment, but also their leverage within the political system.

5 On Pierre Poujade and the electoral damage his Union for the Defence of Tradesmen and Artisans (Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans) caused for the Gaullists, see Pinol (1992).

conflict with the Gaullists when the latter showed themselves to be too close to a sort of Bonapartist-inspired Caesarism, or too narrowly nationalistic regarding European integration. In fact, the choices made at the time of the liberation defined, in the long term, the margins of possibility for the French Christian Democrats and the red lines in their cooperation with other political forces.

Political traditions left behind

In 1945 the French Christian Democrats had to renounce—or risk exclusion from political modernity—any remnants of political traditionalism or reactionist claims. Their primary goal was to distance themselves from elements that, at one time or another, had brought some of them closer to Maurice Barrès or Charles Maurras. By rejecting these affiliations, the French Christian Democrats aimed to redefine their political identity, aligning themselves with the principles of the Resistance and the spirit of democratic renewal that characterised the post-war period. This distancing was essential for their acceptance into the new political order and their participation in shaping a modern, more centrist political landscape in France.

Traditionalism

Drawing inspiration from Hyppolyte Taine (1828–93), a synthetic type of political traditionalism emerged in the second part of the nineteenth century. It was deterministic, inegalitarian and, to a certain extent, anti-intellectual. Taine argued that one should not derive political action from grand theories or abstract ideologies, viewing these as curses of modernity since the Enlightenment. Instead, he believed in practical policy-making, emphasising the need for small changes, transactions and compromises. He rejected the notion of reinventing society from the top, arguing that ‘thick democracy’, when overloaded with a large number of conflicting demands, is doomed to fail. He openly expressed disdain for the pretentious, abstract and bloody Jacobins, who, in his view, had ruined the French Revolution, and warned that other utopians or ‘reformists in cabinet’—from the left or the right—could be equally dangerous if one let them follow in their footsteps.

Taine advocated for a small government, arguing that a good government should mainly serve as a watchdog. Its social action, if any, should be limited to increasing citizens’ education as a prerequisite for their participation in democratic life. It should be ready to play the card of meritocracy and encourage local initiatives and civil society self-organisation. Taine (1871) confessed his admiration for British-style conservatism in his *Notes sur l’Angleterre*. At the same time, imperial Britain offered a vivid contrast

with the 1870–1 French bloody defeat. Taine (2011) tried to understand the deep roots of this collective failure in his massive *Origines de la France contemporaine* (1875–93). His historical analysis became a reference for many conservative and moderate politicians, including Catholic ones, for almost a century. Even after the Second World War, the anglophile Gaullist Georges Pompidou (1947) edited a part of Taine's historical work. At this time, one could still consider the social side of traditionalism as the cradle of acceptable political traditions such as regionalism. The potentially more contentious part of Taine's ideas had to do more with his political traditionalism, the rigid attachment to past forms of organisation and/or the excessive focus on 'values'.

Among the social Catholics and the Christian Democrats, who participated actively in the Vichy Regime, many did so in the name of returning to tradition—the *mos majorum*, the good old way—believing that its weakening had brought decline, defeat and collapse in 1815, 1871 and 1940. Traditionalism was one of the Vichy regime's most salient features, the others being nationalism, and progressively, Fascism. During the Nazi occupation of France, Louis Salleron, for instance, dreamed of re-establishing the old professional corporation system in order to abolish the class struggle. Gustave Thibon portrayed himself as a peasant philosopher advocating for a 'return to reality', in a kind of rural and organicist traditionalism. Similarly, a part of the clergy, which had suffered heavily from anti-clericalism, advocated for the reconstruction of the nation based on peasant and family values (Hilaire 1992, 555).

*Reactionism*⁶

Some traditionalists ended up accusing the elites of treason and promising to restore normality. 'The image of the decline became at the end of the 19th century—and has stayed until today—one of the central tenets underpinning far-right ideology, the glue between its two main matrices: firstly, the national-populist derived to a certain degree from Jacobinism and, secondly, the counter-revolutionary traditionalism' (Milza 1992, 720).

In many cases, reactionist politicians attempted to demonstrate that the corrupt elite had abandoned tradition, its value system and its norms, allowing disrespect to flourish without reaction. According to them, the elite's *laissez-faire* attitude had not only permitted free riders to break the rules but also lent credence to the idea that one could consider the underpinning value system obsolete. Restoring good practices, unanimity in the community and trust in beliefs would require significant effort. Therefore, restoration efforts would need to start with a strong leader and a small group of fully

6 Contemporary English-speaking scholars more frequently use the expression 'reactionary populism'.

convinced activists, forming a new vanguard.⁷ After the Second World War, Christian Democrats were eager to break free from this matrix of discontent and accusation.

*Nationalism/national populism*⁸

Maurice Barrès (1862–1923), a prolific journalist born in the Lorraine region, had a much more flamboyant style than the academic Taine and most of the reactionary pamphlet writers. After 1870 Barrès became known as the ‘Chateaubriand of the French nationalist school’ and remained a classical author read long after his death. An assiduous member of the French Parliament in 1889–93 and 1906–23, he accepted the republic but criticised the corruption associated with the excess of party arrangements in the Parliament. He advocated for a military regime with a strong leader elected by the nation and confirmed by regular plebiscites. He criticised the Third Republic’s Jacobin centralism and its contempt for the regions, local traditions and languages.

Barrès’s nationalism was xenophobic, protectionist, irredentist and anti-Semitic. He considered the legacy of the past as a hidden source of energy for the individual and the nation, proposing that the past should be the starting point of a ‘Roman de l’énergie nationale’.⁹ Barrès (1919) played an important role in supporting the war effort during 1914–18, expressing pity for the different families of the lost generation who died together in the trenches.¹⁰ After 1918 he defended the hard line against Germany, while advocating for reconciliation among the younger generation. He pleaded for another reconciliation between the church and the republic and obtained public support to celebrate Joan of Arc. According to the historian Yves-Marie Hilaire (1992, 528), ‘Barrès political conceptions, inspired by Bonapartism and Boulangism have inspired Gaullism: Charles de Gaulle, born in 1890, belongs to the “sacrificed generation” of 1910, the one most influenced by the reading of Barrès’ works.’

Charles Maurras’s nationalism (1868–1952) and his newspaper *Action française* stretched far beyond other nationalists. Maurras simultaneously rejected the French Revolution and the republican regime, advocating for a ‘dictator king’ who would

7 See Bourricaud (1992, 585).

8 Jean Touchard provided this definition of modern nationalism as ‘national populism’ in his classic *Histoire des idées politiques* (1996, 695–9). Pierre Milza proposed the more precise term ‘national populism’, also used by Pierre-André Taguieff, to describe this tradition. According to Milza, this is the political tradition to which Jean-Marie Le Pen has given a new impetus and on which he built his political success. See Milza (1992, 714).

9 *Le Roman d’énergie nationale* is a trilogy of Maurice Barrès’s political novels and essays, starting with *Les Déracinés* (1897), followed by *L’Appel au soldat* (1900) and *Leurs figures* (1902), the latter being a pamphlet against political opportunism, clientelism and corruption.

10 For an in-depth analysis of this complex work and its influence, see the seminal work of Sternhell (1972).

cleanse the nation of everything he deemed ‘anti-France’. Against what he viewed as dangerous illusions of egalitarianism, social mobility and democracy, Maurras supported the principle of continuity, which he believed could only be provided in France by hereditary monarchy, the aristocracy and the formal Catholic religion. He even wished for a ‘Catholicism without Christianity’, rejecting the entire modern age, and more precisely the three *Rs*—reform, revolution and Romanticism—three evils he attributed to Germany, the ‘homeland of barbarism’.

The Catholic Church ultimately condemned the *Action française* in 1926, making it Maurras’s new target alongside his usual adversaries: the foreigners, secular teachers, Christian Democrats, freemasons, capitalists, Protestants and Jews (Touchard 2014, 695–9). After the liberation, Maurras was sentenced to life in prison for his violent writings against all of those during the Vichy regime and for his collaboration with the Nazis.

When it came to the economy and the organisation of society, Christian Democrats as well as the social Catholics from whom they had derived inspiration had, in the eyes of the post-war majority, a respected record in social action and reforms. They were not asked to set aside their social activism but rather any remnants of paternalistic, patriarchal, corporatist or utopian views, echoing ideas held by Frédéric Le Play, Albert de Mun or René de La Tour du Pin, as analysed below.

Paternalism

A central reference for second-generation social Catholic politicians was Le Play’s (1806–82) influential work, including his two massive works, *Les Ouvriers européens* (1855) and *La Réforme sociale* (1864). Through his advocacy group, *La Société d’Economie Sociale*, Le Play called for a new deal with the working class based on a two-layer strategy.

The paternalists’ aim was to simultaneously bring a ‘higher level of comfort’ to the ‘less affluent’ and provide immediate minimum material support to the poor and the most deprived, those on the edge of social exclusion. Le Play and his friends expected that the improvement in workers’ daily lives would lead them back to religious practice. The sincere care displayed by the elites and the state would foster increased legitimacy for the authority of the father figurehead in the family, the boss’s authority in social relations, and finally, the state itself. However, the state itself would have to self-limit its involvement and intervention, relying as much as possible on local communities’ self-organisation capacity.

Corporatism

Around 1870, de Mun (1841–1914), de La Tour du Pin (1834–1924) and the participants in the *Cercles catholiques ouvriers* saw their purpose as being organised social action against poverty, illiteracy and exclusion. Their social engagement received

significant support from Pope Leon XIII, in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). The Pope denounced the misery created by economic liberalism and called for strong state intervention. He pleaded for the establishment of social laws, the institutionalisation of trade unions and social dialogue, and even the creation of a fair wage, allowing all workers to meet their families' living costs. Between 1884 and 1891, de Mun and his friends, partly inspired by the German model, proposed various social reforms. These included a pension system for workers too old to work, a cap on daily working hours, insurance for workplace accidents and even a minimum wage.

The efforts exerted by some social Catholics went beyond social activism. They aimed at progressively establishing a kind of 'Christian social order', perceived as fairer than the one that economic liberalism had produced and less conflictual than the class struggle that the socialists advocated (de La Tour du Pin 1917).¹¹ They sought to re-establish collaborative social dialogue within each profession and each sector of activity, akin to the *Ancien Régime's* 'corporations'. Some of them, such as de La Tour du Pin, who progressively drifted towards the more nationalistic *Action française*, continued to reject the revolution and the republic.

Political traditions maintained

The Christian Democrats' strongest legitimacy factor after the Second World War was their leaders' unflinching determination, courage and effectiveness, such as that of Georges Bidault (1899–1983), in the Resistance and the Free French movement. Other appealing points included their long social tradition inspired by social Catholicism, which demonstrated their care for the poor, proposed social reforms based on serious social surveys, and respected pluralism during a time of mutual exclusion and monopolistic parties. In the long run, the combination of political moderation with strong social engagement, the priority given to social activism over party politics and their constant readiness to work on complex reforms provided them with a survival card. This blend of attributes allowed Christian Democrats to navigate the political terrain effectively and maintain their relevance.

The link with the influential Christian trade union movement—the *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens*—which had refused to be drawn into the Vichy corporatist movement, became another important asset for the French Christian Democrats. The same held true for their links with the potent Catholic youth organisations, such as the Scouts et Guides de France, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne and the Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne. These large

11 See also Murat (2009).

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) served as privileged observatories of a rapidly changing society and as breeding grounds for political, trade union and administrative executives who were well aware of the realities on the ground and well accustomed to consultation and stakeholder dialogue. This close-knit network offered Christian Democrats the capacity to modernise a long tradition of direct social engagement and to propose largely consensual social reforms.

Priority for the poor

As early as 1840, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam (1813–53, beatified by John Paul II in 1997), and his collaborators at the journal *L'Ere Nouvelle* defined their objective as a form of liberal democracy committed to addressing the needs of the poor. In their writings, these precursors of French Christian Democracy became associated with the rejection of the 'camp of the Kings'. At the same time, they defined themselves by refusing the regime's authoritarian and militarised style that the Bonapartists still advocated for. From this very early start, the mainstream leaders of what would later become French Christian Democracy belonged to what can be called the third family of the French right, the liberal 'Orléanists', the other two being the legitimists and the Bonapartists. However, they also placed from the start great emphasis on connecting with people themselves, listening to them, alleviating workers' misery, and preventing the social clash between the rich and the poor (Bénichou 1996).

TABLE 1. The three families of the political right in France

	Orléanists	Bonapartists Republican nationalists ¹²	Legitimists Counter-revolutionary traditionalists Radical nationalists
Attitude towards the French Revolution	Partial acceptance	Partial acceptance	Rejection
Attitude towards the economy	Laissez-faire state Structural reforms to unleash growth and innovation potential Free trade	Strong state intervention in the economy Mercantilism	Small state Regionalism Rejection of the capital- ist market economy Protection of the family household and the estab- lished professions

12 Touchard (1996) makes the distinction between nationalism as conceived by Barrès and Péguy, both supportive of the republic, and Maurras's 'integral nationalism', which is hostile to the republic and modernity and builds exclusively on the principle of continuity.

	Orléanists	Bonapartists Republican nationalists¹²	Legitimists Counter-revolutionary traditionalists Radical nationalists
Attitude towards political authority	Authority controlled by checks and balances, decentralised according to the subsidiarity principle Self-organisation of society	Anti-parliamentarism Authority based on strong personal charisma and regular plebiscite Trust in the military	Authority based on social hierarchy, dignity, collective identity and tradition
Attitude in foreign policy	Cooperation European concert Colonialism	Militarism Power politics Imperialism	Nationalism Protectionism Irredentism Criticism of colonialism

Source: Rémond (1982).

Social activism

In 1901, Pope Leon XIII (1810–1903) defined the concept of ‘Christian Democracy’ in the encyclical *Graves de Communi Re*. With great care, the Pope indicated two possibilities, outlined below. The majority in Europe built its Christian Democracy on the first definition, while the French Christian Democrats adhered more closely to the second one.

In the first definition, the modernist Pope contrasted ‘Christian Democracy’ with the materialist and class-antagonising ‘Social Democracy’. Unlike Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, he wrote, believe in transcendence and, therefore, must remember the need for religious freedom and education. They also believe in justice, property rights, and the distinction and cooperation between social classes in a well-balanced society. Opposition to secularist Social Democracy could therefore legitimise the creation of well-structured political parties able to compete with the Social Democrats. These Christian or Catholic parties typically referred to themselves as ‘centrist or ‘popular’, partly because the Pope warned against distorting the term ‘Christian Democracy’ for partisan purposes. The Pope’s second definition described Christian Democracy as a form of beneficial Christian action within society itself. This approach could accommodate engaging with various political systems, on the condition that they accept the principles of honesty and justice. This second definition was more prevalent in the French context: it meant that the Christian activists could work in the framework of the Third Republic, following practical social action rather than the utopian restoration of monarchy.

Following the encyclical, the French Jesuits established the Action populaire in 1903, which served as a locus for social studies and advocacy for social reforms. To address

major social issues, social Christians proposed a kind of mobile forum—*les Semaines sociales*—which ran from 1904 to 1939. Two Christian organisations immediately enjoyed large popular success, outnumbering the militants of many political parties of the time: the Federation Nationale d'Action Catholique, led by conservative General Edouard de Castlenau (1851–1994); and the Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Française, a Catholic youth movement created in 1886 and reorganised in the 1900s by Henri Bazire, advocating for economic 'mutualism'. By 1914, the movement counted 140,000 members, organised into 3,000 local groups. After 1926, it became a pillar of the French Action Catholique with five specialised movements, including the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne and the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne; and the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens, a Catholic trade union created in 1919 and representing Christian workers. The latter competed ideologically with Marxist trade unions, and within 20 years had gained 500,000 members, achieving significant victories in social conflicts.

Social reformism

As early as the 1900s, Marc Sangnier (1873–1950) exemplified the type of a 'social Catholic' politician capable of delivering what is best from the combination of social engagement and political participation. Later, in the 1920s, with his more secular Mouvement Jeune-Republic, Marc Sangnier delved deeper into politics, adding a genuine political agenda to the Church's 'social doctrine'. He pleaded for a proportional voting system, political equality between men and women, the establishment of a complete system of social laws and the principle of 'education for all'. He finally allied with the left and became part of the Front Populaire in 1936, before again joining the Popular Republican Movement in the liberation period.

Despite their limited political potential, self-declared Christian Democrat politicians of the late Third Republic made significant strides in adopting and implementing social reforms. With only 14 members of the Christian Popular Democratic Party (Parti Démocrate Populaire) in the National Assembly of 1924, this small party's ambitious 1928 legislative programme, drafted by Raymond Laurent and Marcel Prélot, was fully implemented between 1928 and 1945. The Front Populaire in 1936 and the brief Gaullist/Communist coalition of the early days of the liberation period finally implemented a large part of their programme. Based on the ideas of Laurent and Prélot, the government created a third assembly for social partners and established an eight-hour working day, paid holidays, family benefits and social security. Much later, in 1972, a Gaullist-led government recognised the workers' right to partake in a company's profit. The Popular Democratic Party's 'success on content' illustrates Christian Democrat politicians' ability to navigate the Third Republic's complex parliamentary landscape, enter into beneficial coalitions, retain meaningful executive positions and punch above

their weight. They learned to focus on concrete projects, be satisfied with incremental progress, and rely on the power of patience and long-term agendas.

Pluralism

The French Christian Democrats inherited their respect for pluralism and social dialogue from a distinctive feature of the emerging pan-European Christian Democratic movement. After the traumatic First World War, Don Luigi Sturzo (1871–1959) had established the successful Italian People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, with 100 members of parliament elected in 1919). He emerged as the leading ideologue of a Christian Democracy that was competing with other political forces. Sturzo pleaded for a smaller state, genuine decentralisation, proportional voting and 'horizontal pluralism', where families, professional organisations, local and regional NGOs, youth organisations and trade unions would all have a role to play alongside political parties. Complementing this was 'vertical pluralism', fostering mutual respect for different schools of thought and interest groups.

An extension of this concept, international pluralism, called for the creation of functional supranational organisations at different levels to facilitate respectful international debate between politicians, trade unions and social movements to define common interests and action. The small party of French Christian Democrats was highly influenced by Sturzo's ideas. By prioritising pluralism, Christian Democrats found themselves in intellectual opposition to authoritarian nationalists and in political opposition to Fascists and Stalinists. Consequently, during the Vichy regime, many Christian Democrats faced suspicion, exclusion from political life and attacks from a violent, extremist press.

Subsidiarity

The integral pluralism that the Italian Christian Democrats advocated was a way to integrate another distinctive idea that social Catholics abided by in a larger framework: subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity is mentioned in Leon XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* before the definition of Christian Democracy itself. Subsidiarity consists of allowing the community closest to an issue to self-determine and self-organise, unless it is considered more efficient to elevate the issue to a larger community with more adequate capabilities. Moreover, it ensures that the interests of those most immediately impacted are prioritised, as they are likely to be the actors most involved. This principle emphasises that those directly affected should participate as much as possible in decision-making, implementation and oversight processes. For instance, parents and families rather than the state alone should define the priorities in schools and contribute to school life and to school management and decisions.

The subsidiarity principle accommodates requests from various streams: the reformists' request for a larger role for social partners at the workplace, the regionalists' request for less centralisation, and the social activists' request for a larger role for NGOs and civil society. A whole series of principles follows: diversity, local empowerment and proportionality of action between the levels. Proportionality should in turn improve the efficiency of public action, with a swift response at the local level while coordinating complementary executive actions at higher levels. Consequently, the subsidiarity principle fosters ownership, participation and resilience within communities. Following these ideas, federal systems and modern social democracies now all have some form of established social dialogue and provide effective implementation of the subsidiarity principle at the constitutional level.

Spirit of the Resistance

In the 1950s Georges Bidault (1899–1983), Robert Schuman (1886–1963), the feminist Germaine Poinso-Chapuis (1901–81, who became the first female minister in 1947), Eugène Claudius-Petit (1907–89, successively minister of reconstruction and minister of housing) and Joseph Fontanet (1921–80, successively minister of industry, labour, health and education) were all former members of the Resistance to the Nazi occupation. They belonged to a 'new aristocracy' forged during the Second World War through shared threats on the battlefield, escapes from prisoners' camps, or fights against the Gestapo and the French collaborationist Milice. This experience gave them access to a wide network of peers in which solidarity was irrespective of political colour.

These new French Christian Democracy leaders had occasionally different views, particularly on the fate of Algeria, but they generally agreed on the core doctrine. They believed that the Soviet threat and totalitarian regimes of any kind could not be appeased but must be denounced, confronted from the start, weakened and hopefully defeated by a constant and organised effort, mobilising all economic, scientific and media resources. Their central values were courage, commitment, effort, camaraderie and 'transcending one's limits'.

The post-war Christian Democracy's political ideal was a pluralistic parliamentary democracy that respected religious freedom and advocated for a modern welfare state. This modernised state was willing to decentralise further and share competences with supranational organisations able to create an effective dialogue and solidarity between peoples. All were committed to French–German reconciliation and the European integration process. They bitterly reproached their Gaullist political allies and competitors for failing to come to an agreement on a European Defence Community, in 1954.

Integral humanism

Another strength of post-war French Christian Democrats was their ability to combine practical social action with the clarity of a new political philosophy. This philosophy was a mix of Jacques Maritain's humanism and Emmanuel Mounier's personalism, both theories formulated in the 1930s.

In opposition to a rather opportunistic approach of doing politics that promotes a social agenda for workers and the poor, a more critical intellectual wing focused on the fundamentals defined in *Graves de Communi Re*. This wing grappled with profound questions: What is justice? What is honesty? How should Christians act in society, as Christians and members of the Church—'en tant que Chrétiens'—or just as citizens belonging to the Christian faith, 'en Chrétiens'?

The philosopher Maritain (1882–1973) cautioned against any direct political engagement in the name of Christianity. His ethical work, therefore, did not directly influence the shaping of a 'Christian' political offer. In his *Christianisme et Démocratie* (1943), Maritain articulated principles that resonated with European integration and later influenced Pope Paul VI, including the principle of human dignity, the primacy of the common good, a non-missionary Christian engagement in society, the necessity of a Christian philosophy that would influence societal principles and the concept of social justice as the republic's mission, viewing community as the 'nature of democracy'. Maritain's work underscored a commitment to human dignity, the common good and a socially responsible state, setting out the philosophical foundations that support French Christian Democracy's broader goals, without direct political proselytism.

Personalism

Mounier (1905–50) and his journal *Esprit* (founded in 1932) reinforced the prevailing scepticism concerning any attempt to institutionalise a Christian policy in party politics. He bitterly criticised liberal individualism, the financial world's dominance and the government's excessive role. Mounier advocated for a 'community of communities', envisaging a revolution that would establish an organised economy and the socialisation of means of production. He was a strong opponent of Francoists and Fascists. His most significant and lasting contribution to the development of modern French Christian Democracy was his emphasis on the respect for the dignity of people and his call to not treat citizens as numbers, that is, as a 'statistics individual', an element within the mass, a tool or an instrument. Instead, each person should be conceived as a unique project, able to change, redefine oneself and be creative in the pursuit of fulfilment. According to Mounier, overarching solutions imposed from the top, based on statistical analysis, are the opposite of what genuine modernity should aim for. Functioning communities

in society, from the family to the council of ministers, require citizens ready to recognise each other, able to accept their differences and rights. This vision of personalism underscored the importance of personal recognition and individuals' ethical treatment within any social or political framework. In the context of the Liberation, a period intellectually dominated by the left, Mounier's criticism of individualism and capitalism was obviously quite welcome—more so since it came from a non-Marxist.

The intellectual foundations established by Maritain and Mounier allowed French Christian Democrats to position themselves as a viable alternative to both traditional conservatism and Marxism, advocating for a more humane and socially responsible approach to politics and society.

Conclusion

Since 1945 the rejection of nationalism and the promotion of a modern social agenda have been ingrained in the French Christian Democratic tradition. These two founding principles of their political identity have led the French Christian Democrats to purge counter-revolutionary traditionalism, reactionism, various forms of national populism and xenophobia from their programme, but also to abstain from religious proselytism, paternalism and corporatism.

These principles have rendered impossible a coalition between the French Christian Democrats and successive traditionalist or nationalist groups who claimed to fight for the 'Algérie française', and mobilised against the Second Vatican Council, liberal laws inspired by the spirit of May 1968 and all steps towards European integration. Like most French parties, the French Christian Democrats have resisted being labelled as 'conservatives', upholding the 'centrist' identity defined in the Liberation period.

At European level, their humanistic philosophy, their commitment to fighting against totalitarianism and their advocacy for pluralism made them natural allies of other Christian Democrats, but also of new centre-right parties committed to bringing back pluralism and the rule of law in Southern and Eastern Europe. At that level too, the French Christian Democrats have called for caution in coalition building, continuing to voice their concerns regarding nationalists 'in disguise' and the Eurosceptic discourse.

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