

# The decline of Austrian social democracy

## Norbert Leser's *The Decline of the Eagle*

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Norbert Leser: *Der Sturz des Adlers. 120 Jahre österreichische Sozialdemokratie*, Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau, 2008 (*The decline of the Eagle: 120 years of Austrian social democracy*, Kremayr & Scheriau publishing house, 2008)

Like all reformist organizations, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) has moved considerably to the right politically. As a result of its evolution to the right, the party has lost three quarters of its membership since the 1970s and has suffered serious defeats in recent elections. According to opinion polls, less than 20 percent of Austrians would now trust a social democratic government to improve the social situation.

While the party leadership continues steadfastly with their rightwing business-friendly course, there are those who regard this development with concern. They are afraid that an increasing radicalization of workers and young people could take place outside the control of the party.

One of the most well-known representatives of this tendency is the political scientist and social philosopher Norbert Leser. *The Decline of the Eagle* is his third book dealing with Austrian social democracy. In 1968 his book *Between Reformism and Bolshevism - Austro-Marxism in Theory and Practice* was published, followed twenty years later by *Salt of the Earth - Essence and Change in Austrian Socialism*.

Leser's new book is meant to present a kind of balance sheet of the present policies of the SPÖ. On the dust jacket, the publishers claim it takes "a hard look at today's SPÖ." However, the criticism remains superficial. Leser patently fails to examine why, under conditions of globalization, the social reformist programme of the SPÖ has failed. Instead, he explains the decline of the party on the basis of purely subjective factors—such as the lack of internal party democracy. At the same time he counterposes the SPÖ of the 1970s as a shining example compared to today's SPÖ—thus encouraging the illusion that this degenerate party could be revived.

Leser's central critique runs: "The SPÖ is and for a long time has not been a democratic party." He ascribes to it "an oligarchic structure," in which "a small circle of top officials" take important decisions. As an example, he cites the election of former Federal Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer as party chief, a nomination decided upon by a few top officials in Vienna's city hall.

In particular, Leser accuses the party bigwigs who have led the SPÖ since 1983—Alfred Sinowatz, Franz Vranitzky, today's Federal President Heinz Fischer and Gusenbauer himself—of having eliminated internal party democracy, functioning according to the motto "if possible, hush it all up." Accordingly, he says there has been no open discussion about the party's numerous defeats at the polls and the reasons for them. The current chancellor and party leader Werner Faymann is hardly mentioned in this regard, but this is only because the book had already gone to the printers in June.

### The Kreisky era

It is no accident that Leser's criticism begins in 1983. This was the year

in which ended the era of Bruno Kreisky, the man who had governed the party and the country unchallenged for the previous 13 years. Kreisky is described as an "outstanding personality, only seldom seen in politics," writes Leser, who has previously depicted the political reign of the "Sun King" Kreisky in his earlier books, essays and speeches as the "SPÖ's golden era."

Kreisky was carried to power by a wave of social protests, which went back to the 1950s and a further radicalisation at the end of the 1960s under the influence of the events in France. In 1970, he replaced the conservative Josef Klaus (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP) as Federal Chancellor. Klaus was a fanatical anti-communist, who brutally opposed the protests and strikes. In the 1930s, Klaus had been a leading member of the "Deutsche Studentenschaft," an anti-Semitic organization that rejected parliamentary democracy.

As chancellor, Kreisky initiated so-called "Austro-Keynesian" economic and social policies. Through social and democratic reforms—such as improved labour laws, higher social security benefits, the legalization of abortion—and the opening up of the universities to broader social layers, he temporarily succeeded in winning many rebellious workers and young people to the SPÖ and the trade unions. He was elected four times, on each occasion by larger majorities. Under him, SPÖ membership reached its peak.

In foreign policy, Kreisky maintained good relations with Arab heads of state such as Gaddafi and Sadat, and openly criticized Israel's policies towards the Palestinians. He was the first Western government leader to visit East Germany.

Kreisky is often compared with Willy Brandt, who was German Chancellor from 1969 to 1974 and who is also regarded as a role model by self styled "left" social democrats.

But Brandt's and Kreisky's politics were actually built on sand. Their reforms served to bring under control the revolt by workers and youth. When this had succeeded, the ruling class turned to a counter-offensive. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher came to power in the US and Britain and attacked the working class. In a weaker form, this also happened in Germany and Austria.

Kreisky had financed social reforms exclusively by increasing the national debt. As a result, he came under fire from inside the party, particularly in the last years of his government. His successor Fred Sinowatz used the debt as grounds for implementing deep-going cuts. Since then the SPÖ has moved continuously to the right.

Today, under conditions of globalization and a world-wide economic crisis, neither the economic nor the political conditions for a revival of the reformist politics of the 1970s exist.

### Austro-Marxism

The Kreisky era was itself the result of the long standing degeneration of the SPÖ. In order to argue that the SPÖ can still be reformed, Leser stands this history on its head.

This is seen most clearly in the first part of the book, which describes the history of the party from its beginnings in 1888-89 up to 1934. It is no coincidence that this section begins with a quotation by the empiricist thinker and opponent of Marxism, Karl Popper. "Marxism," he writes, "led Austrian social democracy in particular into a dead end and into a situation where the real problems were displaced by others."

Leser's demonization of Marxism runs like a thread throughout the entire book. He denies Marxism any scientific basis by saying that it did not work in practice. He equates the collapse of the Stalinist regimes at the end of the 1980s with the failure of "socialism" or the "communist economic system."

On the other hand, he praises Austro-Marxism, that specifically Austrian version of reformism, which clothes itself in Marxist clichés but rejects all revolutionary initiatives. The Austro-Marxist leaders of the SPÖ were largely responsible for the defeats of the 1930s, which made possible the establishment of the fascist corporate state under Engelbert Dollfuss in 1933.

Leser notes the "half-heartedness" of Austro-Marxism, but still praises it as a "cultural movement, full of noble ambitions and which ... in the midst of poverty and adversity, where countless people were otherwise cut off from the joys of life, not only provided the illusion of a better future but made possible a little piece of happiness and fulfilment in the present."

Leser's reference to this "piece of happiness" is an allusion to the "Red Vienna" of the inter-war years, to which he dedicates a whole chapter of his book. This was when the social reformist theories of Austro-Marxism could be seen in practice. In the Austrian capital, the party leaders presented the development of the health service, the building of social housing and the provision of education in the capital as the "peaceful road to socialism." In reality these policies, gave the rightwing bourgeois forces that controlled the rest of the country, the time and opportunity to proceed against the working class and its organizations.

In 1929 Leon Trotsky had already warned against such a development. What Austro-Marxism carries out "in Vienna's city hall, is enough to distinguish it from the bourgeois parties in the eyes of the workers," he wrote. But while it exposed the bourgeoisie in articles and speeches, it prevents the workers "rising up against their class enemies."

Trotsky warned against the deception of democracy and the promise of a peaceful transition to socialism: "But in the age of imperialism, which in Europe is above all the age of decaying capitalism, democracy has reached a dead end. That is why we see in Austria, where the constitution was framed by the Social Democrats, where the Social Democracy holds a position of exceptionally great importance, controlling the capital city, and where, consequently, we ought to see democratic forms of transition from capitalism to socialism in their most finished expression, we find instead that politics is governed, on the one hand, by attacking bands of fascists, and, on the other, by retreating detachments of half-armed Social-Democratic workers, while the role of grand symphonic conductor of this democracy is taken by an old police official of the Habsburg school" (Leon Trotsky, "The Austrian crisis and communism," 1929).

In contrast to Trotsky, Leser does not make the cautious, conciliatory politics of the social democrats responsible for the seizure of power by the Austro-fascists under Dollfuss, who in 1934 then militarily destroyed the already illegal workers organizations. Instead, he makes the so-called "Marxist utopia" responsible, which he equates with the Russian revolution. "The ascent and victory of fascism in different countries of Europe," he writes, "is essentially due to two factors: the Russian revolution and its reception in the form of defence and imitation, and on the failure of social democracy due to a wrong ideology."

### **The SPÖ after the Second World War**

Such views predominated in the SPÖ leadership after the Second World War. The Austrian Social Democratic Party was founded just days before

the final liberation of Vienna by the Soviet army. The leadership was taken by right-wingers Karl Renner and Adolf Schärf. Renner became the first federal president of the Second Republic and Schärf was party chairman.

Under Renner, Schärf, Leopold Figl of the People's Party and Johann Koplenig of the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) headed the government—the Stalinists were included because the Soviet army controlled one quarter of the country until the four-power occupation ended in 1955. This government worked across party lines to stabilize bourgeois rule. Following the betrayal of the pre-war Social Democrats, the horrors of the war and occupation, socialist slogans were very popular.

But Schärf and his interior minister Oskar Helmer were clearly closer to the rightwing forces of the republic than they were to the workers. In 1938, the lawyer Schärf had "Aryanised" the courts by purging a Jewish lawyer. Subsequently, he rejected any compensation being awarded to the Jewish victims of fascism. He also opposed the repatriation to Austria, from exile, of Jewish party officials.

Although the KPÖ was a reliable political tool of the Kremlin bureaucracy and undertook no attempts to initiate a revolutionary mobilization, Schärf and Helmer led hysterical anti-communist campaigns. Internal party opponents, who advocated co-operation with the KPÖ, were banished from the party. At the same time, Schärf promoted the formation of the Federation of the Independent (VdU), a gathering together of former Nazis, from which the Austrian Liberal Party (FPÖ) of Jörg Haider later emerged.

Together with bourgeois and rightwing forces, the SPÖ defeated militant strikes in October 1950. The strikes had been directed against low wages and the continuing poor supply situation. The social democrats denounced the strikes as a "communist putsch" and organized strike-breakers.

In his chapter about Schärf and Helmer, Leser mentions no word of this at all. For him, both were "honourable men of the old school" and "quite special personalities."

Leser's political attitudes become even clearer in his evaluation of Franz Olah, one of the most rightwing and corrupt figures in Austrian politics.

From 1949 to 1957, Olah was chairman of the building and wood workers trade union. In this capacity, he was largely involved in the dissolution of the October 1950 strikes, by organizing strike-breakers. In Soviet-occupied Vienna, the SPÖ co-operated closely with the American CIA in order to undermine the influence of the Soviet authorities. Olah coordinated this collaboration. His reward came in 1959 when he was made president of the Austrian trade union federation (ÖGB). In this position, he formed a partnership with the employers under the conservative government of Julius Raab. This became the foundation for institutionalizing Austria's so-called social-partnership.

In 1959, Olah used union money to finance the launch of the rightwing populist daily *Kronen*. In 1964, he used millions of Austrian schilling from the coffers of the trade unions to help the rightwing FPÖ overcome its financial difficulties.

After these scandals had somewhat sullied the public image of the SPÖ, Olah was expelled from the party and later received a short prison sentence. After his expulsion from the SPÖ, Olah established the rightwing extremist Democratic Progressive Party (DFP) in 1965.

Leser's description of Olah is an outright affront. Over six pages he praises Olah as a "workers' leader", who "survived and outshone his opponents". Leser calls the proven cases of fraud and corruption a "pretext" by the "left" in order to criminalise him.

Finally, it should be noted that *The Decline of the Eagle* is by far Leser's weakest and least interesting book. He reduces the history of Austrian social democracy to subjective portraits and completely leaves out any reference to historical and world-political events. In the entire book, not a word is said about the social and economic changes of the last 120 years.

This can only be seen as a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader as to the true character of this party.

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