



German History in Documents and Images

From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Problematic Feelings about Parties: Excerpts from the *Staats-Lexikon*: "Parties" (1845-48)

The author of the following entry in *Staats-Lexikon* (1845-1848), a twelve-volume encyclopedia of political terms and concepts, argued that political parties should be differentiated according to the concrete interests they serve, and not merely positioned on a static left-to-right continuum.

[. . .]

Therefore, before I proceed to my account, I shall look more closely at Rohmer's* theory for a few moments. Rohmer deduces as follows:

At first he attacks the prevailing concepts about parties, which, operating under the well-known headings "radical," "liberal," "conservative" (also "aristocratic"), "absolutist" (or "reactionary"), and "*juste milieu*"**, originate in the view that we "live in a period of transition from an old to new era"; one party wants the new era – the party of "progress" (liberal), the other clings to the old, the "retrograde" (conservative) party. In between are those who want to mediate – the "*juste milieu*," loved by the one side as a tendency toward reconciliation, hated or despised by the other as a tendency toward weakness. These two major parties, however, contain gradations and varieties. What clings to the old can either stand still (conservative in the narrow sense) or move backwards (reactionary or absolutist). The friends of the new either want progress with the preservation of existing conditions (liberals in the narrow sense), or progress without regard for them – unsparing and from the ground up (radicals). Liberals and radicals are the same in terms of principle, but different in terms of execution. Radicalism is for some a mistaken extreme, for others the loftiest implication of the liberal principle. One is radical, according to the former, if one applies the principles of "progress" imprudently and without knowledge of conditions, and according to the latter if one knows how to implement them bluntly and energetically. These are the prevailing concepts, Rohmer says [. . .].

[. . .]

* Friedrich Rohmer was a contemporary journalist – ed.

** Literally: "proper center" or golden mean, i.e. moderate, associated with the compromise-oriented policy of France's Orleanist king Louis-Philippe – trans.

The only way for us to acquire a standard for the proper assessment of parties is to answer the question: What is the immediate aim of partisan struggles, and what, in the first place, does each party want to achieve? Certainly nothing more than the chance to organize the state according to its concepts and wishes. And when this chance has been won, what axiom, what principle, what guiding thought determines this organization? Simply, nothing other than interests. Every party wants to organize the state in its interest, every party, once it has seized power, gives society a form that corresponds most closely to its own interests — It is interests, the different interests around which parties revolve, that form the focal point for all impulses and movements in the realm of the state. The nature of these interests also determines the nature of the parties, gives them their content, their principle, stamps them into what they are, determines their characteristic features, distinguishes them from each other.

There are two kinds of interests, special interests and general human interests. The former are rights, privileges; the latter is the law. The fundamental characteristic of privileges is discrimination against the whole in favor of a few. The fundamental characteristic of justice or law is respect for the rights and needs of each individual.

There are, corresponding to these two kinds of interests, two kinds of parties: representatives of privileges and representatives of human interests.

By way of content, parties of the first kind are similar to each other, they have a common principle, the same aims and interests; by way of form, they are divided into three main classes, whose difference is determined by the methods which each individual one uses to realize its aims. Since privileges represent nothing more than favoring some at the cost of the whole, a subordination of general interests to special interests, a degradation of the whole into a means and tool for some, therefore the parties of privileges belong to one of these classes, depending on the method whereby the whole is exploited for their purposes, used as a means, made to work in their interests.

The first class stands for that party which uses the power of the state directly in order to force the whole to act in its interest, to work, to produce, to hand over a portion of its products to the holders of state power under some form and pretext. This party represents political absolutism. Political absolutism gives the representative of this party the right to organize the state in such a way, i.e. to formulate the manner in which state power is applied, that the private interest of the holder of this power, and of those whom he has drawn into his interest – whom he, in order to use them as tools, has turned into his accessories – are placed above the interests of the whole.

The second class stands for that party which uses people's religious feeling to keep them in a condition in which they are inclined to work, to produce, to relinquish a portion of the fruits of their labor in the interests of this kind of privilege holder. These are the priests, the representatives of the church, as they have developed in the course of time and especially as they were trained by Gregory VII and the Innocents.

The third class, finally, stands for that party which uses the institutions of production and commerce in order to have the entire community work in its service, to compel them to relinquish a portion of the fruits of their labor. These are the representatives of capital, the so-called bourgeois.

The common characteristic of these parties is therefore the representation of interests that are opposed to the interests of the community, the use of the community as a means for purposes alien to it. They are distinguished only by the methods they use to achieve their aims. The representatives of political absolutism coerce directly by using various higher-level methods of force. The representatives of the "church" achieve their aims by a peculiar cultivation of human emotion, and the representatives of capital use the general medium of commerce, money, in order to get the non-propertied to serve their interest. These parties are all conservative in nature, i.e. they seek with all the means [at their disposal] to maintain the status quo condition corresponding to their interests, which they either found or created. Therefore they seek at any price to prevent the whole, the people, from achieving a position in which it destroys privileges and gives society a form corresponding to the interest of the whole of the people. These parties are unconditionally conservative, i.e. they seek to maintain the status quo, even when it is absurd, corrupt, and unnatural, contradicting the interests of the community. For them it is not the reasonableness, usefulness, the essence, or the core that is decisive for the maintenance of the status quo, but alone the fact that something exists, that it has come into being, in other words the empty form, the superficiality, emptiness, i.e. they "reduce," as Rohmer says, "principles by way of history and law," they make a cult of form, of the formal, of positive law, into the highest purpose.

Confronting these parties, the representatives of privileges, is the party that represents general interests. This is the democratic party, since – because it wants to look after each individual's right – it seeks to put the whole [totality] of these individuals, the people, into a position to adjust the form of the state to its interests, i.e. the popular interests, the interests of the whole. Just as the parties of privileges are essentially conservative in nature, the democratic party may be characterized as reformist, creative. The former lack productivity, the capacity for education; their interests operate in complete, self-contained forms; their activity is thus restricted to the maintenance of these forms as their living conditions. The latter, the democratic party, represents the organic development from old to new, from what has become unusable to what is better, for its interests are those of humanity, but humanity finds itself in a permanent process of rejuvenation that involves shedding forms which have become obsolete. The parties of privileges are stable, their movement is only apparent, mechanical, ever restricted to the same circle that contains once existing forms. The democratic party is progressive, developing from within, forming itself organically, lively. The former defend evident infirmities in public life, even when they are disadvantageous to the general interest, if they promote privileges. The latter recognizes as its highest purpose only the welfare of all individuals, and destroys whatever is opposed to that, even if it has been sanctioned and affirmed by a thousand-year existence, by the thickest rust of centuries. By contrast, that which accords with the highest purpose is

respected by the democratic party. It is therefore likewise conservative, but not unconditionally, but rather critically, thoughtfully, scrutinizing. It conserves only the good, the true, that which serves the general purpose, but not the bad, the erroneous, the unusable; it conserves, in a word, not because something exists, but rather because it is reasonable and good, it views not merely the form, but the essence, the core, the content.

The democratic party constitutes the directing principle in political struggles, it is what assigns the other parties their positions toward each other and itself, and the other parties orient themselves toward it. —

So long as the democratic party slumbers, the other parties struggle for supremacy, i.e. each one seeks to turn the privileges it represents into the dominant ones. Thus, initially, political absolutism and the church fought with each other for domination, and the democratic party forced them to make peace and forget an alliance, for the parties of privileges never fight each other on principle because they represent a common principle, whereas the principle of the democratic party is fundamentally opposed to theirs. Thus, in France, the representatives of capital fought against political absolutism, and the democratic party, or rather its principle, led both opponents into each others' arms and brought about a joint rule, the domination of the bourgeoisie. Political developments in Switzerland since the overthrow of the patricians until recent times offers the most persuasive evidence of how the democratic party, little by little, brings about a reconciliation between representatives of privileges originally fighting each other and later merging into one party.

It is also the democratic party that, as the one principally opposing the others, brings its own principle into consciousness and pushes them toward its [logical] conclusions.

Thus, in the clerical field, it was the democratic party that more or less forced the principle of Catholicism out of the Catholic church the principle of Catholicism and compelled it to be embodied in Jesuitism. For Jesuitism was called forth by Protestantism and is nothing more than consistent Catholicism, the representative of the principle of the Catholic church, as it underlies its entire effectiveness and positive statutes. And in the broadest meaning of the word, indeed, Jesuitism represents the emergent consciousness of the principle of subordinating human interests to special interests, which instinctively underlies the parties of privileges, i.e. everyone is a Jesuit who deliberately, and conscious of the misanthropic nature of his interests, applies the proper means for his aims, i.e. the maintenance of his privileges. The diplomat who implements the system of bondage with Satanic refinement is just as much of a Jesuit as the representative of the Catholic church who deliberately pursues the stultification of the people, or the selfish bourgeois who turns the maintenance of his privileges into the guiding idea for his effectiveness as statesman and human being.

From the preceding it should thus have become clear that the true, correct yardstick for assessing parties according to their principle[s] and their characteristic features cannot be something that exists outside of any immediate causal relationship to them, but rather must

reside in the relationship in which they place themselves in their aspirations and tendencies toward the "generally human," toward the interests of humanity. This yardstick, precisely because it designates the highest, the general, is alone what can be reasonably applied to the subordinate, to the special; and compared to the whole, individual parties are of a subordinate degree. This yardstick, by the way it puts a stop to the indefiniteness of the prevailing concepts and traces the party labels radical, liberal, conservative, absolutist, *juste milieu* back to their true meaning, must also expose the nakedness of a theory that rests on playing around arbitrarily with phrases. The radical, when he turns special interests into the ultimate end of his aspirations, has just as little value as the liberal who has lapsed into the same error or the conservative or the absolutist who must also lapse into this error. That yardstick alone is the correct measure for the parties; of radicalism, liberalism, conservatism, absolutism, *juste milieu*, for it establishes the authenticity of every party, shows the extent to which they are alloyed with false components. That yardstick alone also contains the justification for rule by any individual party. It does not depend on whether it calls itself liberal or conservative, radical or mediating, whether it has a minority or majority on its side, but only on whether it fights for privileges or general human interests, whether for the advantages of individual classes or the welfare of the whole, whether for the right of individuals or the right of all individuals. Any party can rule factually, but only the democratic one can do so lawfully.

Source: Carl von Rotteck and Carl Welcker, eds., *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyclopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände* [*The National-Lexicon: Encyclopedia of the Political Sciences for People of all Stations*], 2nd ed., rev. and enl. Altona: Verlag von Johann Friedrich Hammerich, 1845-48, vol. 10, pp. 480, 493-96.

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