

Social Catholicism: Successes of the Past – Goals for the Future

Arnd Küppers

Strictly in accordance with the dialects of historical conflicts, Social Catholicism arises as a progressive social movement just at the time as anti-modernism spreads in the Church, i.e. the belligerent denial of all that which modern times have put forth as liberal achievements. This anti-modernism originates in the French Revolution and the conflicts between State and Church arising from it and continuing in the 19th century. Within a few years, the Church had to yield to the growing loss of political, economic and cultural power it had amassed throughout the centuries. In Germany, the Empire's Deputations Main Resolution (1803) executed the secularisation of the Imperial clerical classes and expropriation of most ecclesiastical estates, and with the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation (1806) the Catholic Church lost its political protecting power. The resolutions of the Vienna Congress (1815) resulted in millions of Catholics, e.g. in the Rhineland and Westphalia, being put under the rule of Protestant princes. For many Catholics, clergymen and laymen, this historical experience meant to be a trauma which cast a shadow on the European history of the Church of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Were there still attempts at a Catholic reception of the philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment at the beginning, did these wane after the Revolution to give way to a fundamental criticism of the thought of autonomy in the Age of Enlightenment and liberalism.

That marked the beginning of "ultramontanism", a movement sharply directed against the zeitgeist and the patronage of the Church by the state. From the 1840's ultramontanism spread all over Germany, and Episcopal sees were manned by men of this movement. But this was not only a church political but rather a cultural movement in its kind giving rise to modern Catholicism. Anti-modernism, clericalism and uniformity of the Church were just one face of the coin. The other side saw a popularization of forms of the faith and Church life. And areas of life beyond the Church were shaped in a Catholic way by integrating the faithful in Catholic associations covering almost all areas of life and social concerns. Thus arose "Catholicism as a social form"¹, the Catholic milieu, to form German history decisively for more than a hundred years. The historian Thomas Nipperday talks of an outright "Catholic sub-culture of an unheard of density and intensity"²

Despite increasing clericalism and hierarchy in ecclesiastical life, in this case the trick of history lies in the mobilisation of the Catholic masses exerting a strong effect on egalitarianism in social terms. Even if they did not have a say in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, laymen and the lower clergy gained considerable influence in political and social life. And because in milieu Catholicism denomination meant to be the essential binding element, other differences, above all the affiliation to a special social class,

lost their relevance. This is one of the reasons why from the very beginning rising political Catholicism openly addressed the social question. This is the reason why the Catholic Party of the Centre, since 1870, turned into the first German people's party which was voted for by the majority of Catholics irrespective of social class. Centre's politicians such as Georg von Hertling (1843-1919) and Franz Hitze (1851-1921) ranked as the most outstanding social politicians of the Emperor's Empire. Hitze was also one of the initiators of the *People's Association for Catholic Germany* founded in 1890, above all dedicated to the social political education of Christian unionists and the propagation of Social Catholicism's ideas. Before World War I, membership of the people's association stood at about 800,000 members and more than 15,000 volunteers.

After social democracy, organised Social Catholicism thus became the most successful social mass movement in Germany. Social democracy and Social Catholicism shared the same "issue of birth": the *worker's question*. Starting point of this thus named epochal conflict was the endeavour to push through the right of the individual to autonomy also in business and work life as propagated by the philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment. This exactly was the goal of the introduction of freedom of occupation and trade at the beginning of the 19th century. However, reality did not match this idealistic concept. It soon became evident that the formally free labour contract was perverted into a document of real non-freedom for the individual worker thus becoming the shocking and forming experience of a whole epoch. With sarcasm typical of him, Karl Marx expressed this context by ridiculing the labour market as "the true Eden of unalienable human rights"³

Marx, however, stands for the idea of a revolutionary answer to the social question. For many decades his revolutionary programme poses as a heavy burden for the young social democracy. Marx fulminates against the young movement of unionists fighting for higher wages and better work conditions, namely "that they fight against effects rather than causes of these effects; that it retards the downward movement, but does not change its direction; that it uses palliative medication instead of curing evil. (...) Instead of the conservative motto 'a just daily wage for a just day's work!' they should write on their banners the revolutionary watchword 'down with the wage system!'"⁴

The inseparable link between wage for work and the alienating character of work forming the basis of Marx's analysis of the social question and dominating his politico-economic programme in its very approach forms a decisive difference to Social Catholicism. Granted there were conservative forces dreaming of a class reorganisation of industrial society but the mainstream of German Social Catholicism pursued the path of social reform since the establishment of the Empire. The Mainz "worker's bishop" Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler already describes it in a talk in 1869 before the Fulda bishops' conference as follows: "As the system as a whole cannot be got rid of, it is important to alleviate it, to look for respective cures for its

single bad consequences and to have the workers, as far as possible, participate in the good things of the system and its blessings.”⁵

Ketteler’s criticism of the real existing capitalism and of the prevailing work conditions was hardly any less acerbic than that of Karl Marx. But the decisive difference was: contrary to Marx, Ketteler and Social Catholicism basically did not reject the conditions of wage labour.

Merely the contemporary laissez-faire-liberal concept of total freedom in formulating a work contract met disapproval. It was Ketteler who first stood up for state legislature for the protection of workers, for the organisation of a workers’ union and even the right to go on strike. The point last mentioned is very remarkable as strike as a means in industrial action was commonly regarded as controversial for a long time – not by Catholics active in the socio-political and unionist arenas, but in official dogmatic statements on Social Teaching. Industrial action – looking back on the reality of these confrontations in the 19th and early 20th centuries not quite unjustified – as an element of class struggle, is the central issue of Marxist theory. This idea of class struggle is diametrically opposed to Catholicism’s traditional ideals of society which originally are based on an organic thought of communal living and whose focus, even to this day, has been common well-being.

The idea of a collective bargaining agreement, however, i.e. the collectively agreed regulation of the work and wage conditions in consensus of employer and employee found great acclaim from the very beginning, especially so against the backdrop of the orientation towards the community and its well-being, the hallmark of Social Catholicism. Already in 1898 did the social-political spokesman of the Centre faction, Franz Hitze, plead for “the individual regulation of the work and wage contract (...) to be replaced by the ‘collective’ of the occupational association.”⁶ To the government that tended to be sceptical and industry that overwhelmingly refuted the idea of collective bargaining agreement he countered that by “strengthening work associations one could most appropriately counter-act class struggle.”⁷

Thereby Hitze proved an enormous farsightedness. In 1981, nobody less than Jürgen Habermas stated: “the legal institutionalisation of the wage conflict has become the basis of a reformist policy which has led to social pacification of the class conflict by the state.”⁸ Only this social cushioning and framing have largely helped capitalism win victory over communism in the 20th century dominated by the struggle of the systems, because: “Under these conditions the designated bearer of a future revolution, the proletariat, has dissolved itself *as* proletariat.”⁹

From the beginning it was the objective of Social Catholicism to further develop the collective bargaining agreement issue into a genuine partnership on wage bargaining and an even more encompassing social partnership. With the ideal of society manifesting itself here, Social Catholicism has made an essential contribution to the development of Germany’s consensus-orientated social culture which, looked upon as a whole, perhaps was and today still is more important than institutional progress

reached in 150 years. In this context, Social Catholicism is not shy to demonstrate a considerable balance, not the least by looking at the history of the young Federal Republic and the development of its social free market economy.

Here Social Catholicism was so successful that, in 2004, Ralf Dahrendorf could state: “The one who talks of social free market economy in Germany (...) has in mind Ludwig Erhard plus Catholic Social Teaching, that programme of irreconcilabilities marking the early CDU and CSU and, to a certain extent, still does today, the SPD adopting it after Bad Godesberg 1960 and even more so after Karl Schiller.”¹⁰

As the term “irreconcilabilities” already indicates, Dahrendorf did not mean that uncritically in 2004. It was the time of Agenda 2010, and the liberal Dahrendorf then thought that less Catholic Social Teaching – for Dahrendorf a synonym for social policy -was needed to prepare the social free market economy for the future and more of Ludwig Erhard – to him a synonym of free market. At least in this broad generalisation this demand has become obsolete meanwhile. In the financial market crisis of the years 2007 to 2009, it became evident that primitive neo-liberalism with its grossly generalised demand for less state and more market has failed. Here, too, it has become plain that certain social-legal measures – e.g. short- time worker’s pay – can be of great help to move a national economy through a crisis without too many social predicaments. After this decisive episode, the economic-political discussion has become much more differentiated in the meantime. In the face of an ideology of neo-liberalism in its vulgar form, an orderly political mindset has regained importance.

A policy of order is one of the key ideas of neo-liberalism in its original demanding form with Walter Eucken and others; it additionally indicates a glaring proximity to the ethics of order as conceived by Catholic Social Teaching. Social Catholicism should take the opportunity of the hour and join in the work of breaking up the long-standing ideological – and rather senseless – opposition of economic policy versus social policy. Today a modern social policy should also be thought through in terms of political order. That means that social policy should seek to achieve social purposes through such instruments, if possible, that do not interfere with the functionality of the market, especially fair competition and free price formation. In turn, economic policy should always heed the goal of social justice. Acts of social injustice – as became apparent in the years of crisis – are not at all a moral problem but cause high opportunity costs for the national economy. It holds true that every national economy structurally must adapt to the challenges of a globalised market. At the same time, care must be taken that all citizens receive a just share of the national economic gains achieved by this. Bishop Ketteler’s demand of 1869 even today, in times of globalisation, can be valued as a programmatic statement of Social Catholicism: “As the system as a whole cannot be got rid of, there is need to alleviate it, to seek for respective cures for all its bad implications and to have the workers (today one might say: all people, especially the weak; AK) partake in what is good about the system and blessings.”

There was criticism of the aging free market economy around the start of the new millennium but not only from the side of a liberal market system but also from the left. Of special prominence is the one aired by the Danish sociologist Gosta Esping-Andersen who, in his book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* published in 1990, criticised the welfare states inspired by the Catholic Social Teaching as they exist in Germany and Austria as “conservative” and “corporate”. To him this model is better than the “Anglo-Saxon” type which is archetypically realised in the USA, but markedly worse than the “Scandinavian” model which is characterised by a strong welfare state which integrates all citizens irrespective of their occupation and social status into the same system of social security and is to guarantee social equality on a high level.

In the meantime, this criticism has become more or less obsolete. The Scandinavian welfare state has met its limits because of the threat of too much demand on the state thus having to cut its benefits. Meanwhile, Denmark, but also Finland, have largely and strongly said goodbye to the “Scandinavian model” idealised by Esping-Andersen. The old principle of subsidiarity (“corporate” and “conservative”) originating from Catholic Social Teaching, so belittled by Esping-Andersen, again enjoys great popularity as a guiding principle for structural reforms of the social state because it shows a path between the Skylla of etatism and the Charybdis of the pure market society.

But Esping-Anderson is right in saying that the pressure of adaptation in the welfare state does not only arise from conditional changes in the national economic framework caused by globalisation but also from additional socio-economic changes. For example, today the normal employment relationship cannot be taken for granted the same thing as with the family living a life-long marriage with at least two children in which the father works full-time and the mother, if at all, part-time. It is the erosion of traditional families that hurts many in the Catholic Church. But it is just the clerical Social Teaching that cannot simply carry on and build on conditions as if things formerly taken for granted were still the same. It holds true what the Jesuit and social ethicist Hermann Josef Wallraff once said: the Catholic Social Teaching is an aggregate of open sentences which have to be filled with contents according to social challenges of the concrete time and society.¹¹

Today the social question does not pose as a workers’ question which formed the background of origin of Social Catholicism in the 19th century. The social line of conflict today runs differently than then, not between capital and labour, between “us” and “them”. Today the social line of conflict rather separates those who are “in” from those who must remain “outside”, who are excluded from the central economic, social and cultural resources of our society. Different from the proletariat of the 19th century, the group of those, who are affected by this problem, today is very heterogeneous; to them belong the long-term unemployed, the precariously employed, handicapped people, single mother families, children from under-privileged families or migrants. And it is no coincidence that these new challenges were recognized earlier by Social

Catholicism than anywhere else, today as before still strongly orientated towards the well-being of the community. Already in 1986 did US-American Catholic bishops in their widely discussed economic pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All” broaden the traditional notion of social justice with the goal of social inclusion and talk of “justice of participation.”¹² Meanwhile, these terms have gained currency, but even after 30 years, there is to be found the large social challenge, in times of the influx of millions of refugees and migrants perhaps more than ever. But it is just the refugee crisis that has shown that, as ever, there are many resources of solidarity in our society, especially in the churches. Social Catholicism is not dead, but rather very lively, though it shows itself today in completely different forms of appearance than in former times.

Translated from the German by York R. Buttler, 6/16

¹ Karl Gabriel, *Christentum zwischen Tradition und Postmoderne*, Freiburg i.Br. 1992, 80.

² Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918, Erster Band. Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist, Sonderausg.*, München 1998, 439.

³ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (Marx-Engels-Werke 23-25)*, Berlin 1962-64, Bd. 1, 189.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Lohn, Preis und Profit*, in: *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Bd. 16, Berlin 1962, 101-152, hier: 152.

⁵ Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, *Ansprache vor der Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz vom 05.09.1869*, in: *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, hrsg. v. E. Iserloh, Bd. I.2, Mainz 1977, 429-451, hier: 438.

⁶ Franz Hitze, *Die Arbeiterfrage und die Bestrebungen zu ihrer Lösung*, 4. Aufl., Mönchengladbach 1905, 14.

⁷ Franz Hitze, *Reichstagsrede zur Bedeutung der Gewerkvereine (1898)*, in: Gabriel, Karl/Große Kracht, Hermann-Josef (Hrsg.), *Franz Hitze (1851-1921). Sozialpolitik und Sozialreform*, Paderborn u. a. 2006, 225-232, hier: 231.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981, Bd. 2, 510.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien*, 4. Aufl., Frankfurt a. M. 1971, 229.

¹⁰ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Wie sozial kann die Soziale Marktwirtschaft noch sein? 3. Ludwig-Erhard-Lecture*, Berlin 2004, 13.

¹¹ Vgl. Hermann Josef Wallraff, *Katholische Soziallehre – Leitideen der Entwicklung? Eigenart, Wege, Grenzen*, Köln 1975, 26 ff.