

Sektion 8

A Social Democratic NGO



Introduction

The following paper is the result of discussions held in Autumn 2010. About thirty people, many not affiliated with *Sektion 8*, took part in four meetings. The paper starts by analysing the fundamental problems facing the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), and its flawed and failed reform strategies. It then draws conclusions from this analysis and introduces the reader to *Sektion 8*'s approach to contributing to and improving Austrian Social Democracy, as part of a hegemonic project for a more holistic society.

1. The failure of party reform is due more to its form than content

The theory of the ‘march through the institutions’ suggests that it is possible to reach central positions of power in politics and society through targeted and coordinated strategies and, once in these positions, to control discourse in society. This tactic focuses on **individuals** reaching positions of power. We seriously doubt that this classic linear model of gaining power is effective.

The Cap-Gusenbauer generation applied this concept to the SPÖ. They did not try to change the SPÖ but, following this individualistic model, sought to swiftly reach important posts within the party, its parliamentary club, and the government. By doing this, the stakeholders internalised the logic of the bureaucratic apparatus. But form is content. As in the sciences, where it is impossible to dissociate a method from certain paradigms, it is impossible in politics to detach content from its form. Form retroacts on content, and from bureaucratic methods results bureaucratic content. Social Democratic stakeholders who follow this method would gradually turn into social bureaucrats. The ‘march through the institutions’ of the party is foredoomed by the power-logic of bureaucracy. Experience demonstrates, not only through this example, that ‘lone fighters’ who are motivated by opposition to party policies and developments, after many years of gradual upward career progression, do *not* change the rules.

The following argument can be drawn from this analysis and is appealing to many: if an individualistic approach does not work, why not opt for a **structural approach**? According to this line of thinking, a radical change of politics is only possible if the struggle is not for official posts (mandates and ministerial seats), but for the party – through the persistent renewal of basic structures. Several groups must begin the ‘march through the institutions’ from the base. They need to occupy one structure after another in order to eventually form a majority at the next level. These majorities will then, after bureaucratic power struggles, be divided into groups. However, this strategy also has major weaknesses. For instance, if over the next twenty years we see our primary task as to divide the Party in this way, all other questions will become secondary to this priority. This method is, in fact, bureaucratic power through the backdoor. The struggle for power will be justified ideologically and we will thus have no time to discuss ideological standpoints. Instead of focusing on hegemony of opinion in society, we will waste our resources and energies on particular people. Consequently, the structural approach may be the best method to work within the status quo, but it will not break with it. It is not possible to reach positions of power through *Logic A* and, once at the top, act according to *Logic B*. Our goal has to be to act according to *Logic B* from the very beginning and to increase its reach as far as possible. Whether or not we reach top positions should not be our main concern. To act according to *Logic B* is politically preferable, even if influence is thereby limited, to a complete change of leading personnel brought about through *Logic A*.

2. Space beyond the predominant logic

The only way to attain sustainable change within Social Democracy is to create a space which is not governed by the dominant logic, and to gradually expand this space. The precondition for the creation of such a space is to believe, against Adorno, that there is right (life) in the wrong. In fact, it is not necessary to utilise bureaucratic power to effect political change. Practically speaking, this means that we need to define a permeable space which communicates with the Party but functions according to a different set of rules. The cornerstones of these rules are the following.

The end does not justify the means!

If any means are permissible to reach a defined objective, the means will eventually alter and define the objective. It is not only the ‘Terreur’ of the French Revolution and the crimes of the Stalinist era that illustrate the fact that the end does not justify the means. A look at Social Democratic institutions in

Austria shows that a degenerated culture of political discussion has reduced the differences between political opponents to mere labels. Mockery, ridicule, defamation, mobbing, public humiliation and political tribunals are the rule and pose no moral dilemma to, and are even justified by, those involved. It is laudable, but does not suffice, to hold left-wing views if one does not act accordingly. It is possible to be on the 'right' side and still be wrong.

Define a goal and draw 'red' lines

On the other hand, it is important to hold firm convictions: 'Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm.' (Abraham Lincoln) It is therefore imperative to first agree upon the specific content of a progressive programme which it will be worth fighting for. Second, it is important to draw red lines beyond which there is no return. Practically, and for the individual, this means intellectual disagreement with, and material distance to, the SPÖ must be allowed. A core task of the group is to provide protection for those swimming against the stream. Consequently, and for the group, this means that individuals' decisions must be respected, even if they are in opposition to the group's majority view. Those who disagree must not be accused of treason.

Structure follows strategy

The programmatic direction of the SPÖ is dictated by the bureaucratic culture dominating it. The question is not 'what is right?' but 'what is in it for us?'. This short-sighted view is shared by the shareholder value ideology of financial capitalism. It is thus not content that defines the organisation of the Party, but the organisational culture that dictates programmatic goals. In architecture, 'form follows function', and in business economics, 'structure follows strategy'. The SPÖ does the opposite: function follows form and strategy follows structure. We, on the other hand, want to organise our structure to fit our strategy. This paper is an attempt to deduce our organisational structures from our strategic goals.

Culture precedes structure

The structure of an organisation is only a framework, which at its best can provide incentives. It does not stand-alone. It is much more important how stakeholders operate within the structure. Cooperation in organisations for example can be supported by the structure but, in the end, organisational culture as defined and lived by human beings is decisive for its success. The sum of shared and lived ideals and moral concepts shapes the character of an organisation.

Creating not scheming

We want to avoid intra-SPÖ trench warfare, and focus instead on the creation of new grounds for Social Democracy. In our view, it is not an achievement to go for a coffee and scheme. But it is an achievement to anchor Social Democratic positions in society. It is a great achievement to explore, expand and create new spheres of action for Social Democracy. It is a moderate achievement to accept old structures. The design of new political organisational forms and structures does not, however, exclude their gradual absorption into existing ones.

3. A Social Democratic NGO

We want a platform which focuses on content and defines its own political standpoint. Instead of navel-gazing, we want to fight for Social Democratic positions in society. Instead of accepting dead structures, we want to create new ones. We want to find our own style of communicating with those outside our group. In short, we want a flexible, dynamic, direct and creative platform: a Social Democratic NGO.

We aim to influence Social Democracy. We will only be listened to and deemed credible if we are part of the SPÖ. Thus we will always be a hybrid of current and new structures. The most immediate way to create space away from the dominant logic of bureaucratic power is to breathe new life into already

existing structures. In addition to reviving existing structures, another option is to create new Social Democratic structures in ways not established or conceived to date.

a. Working on the inside

How can *Sektion 8* create its own space within the existing structures of the SPÖ? It is both a **concentrated** and **concerted** act.

- **The concentrated act: *Sektion 8* as home-base**

Concentration

It is best when critically thinking forces ally and meet in one space, instead of despairing somewhere in the Party on their own. Unless they find allies and have a realistic chance of influencing reform or change, it is to everyone's advantage that those critical of the direction the Party has taken concentrate in one group. But membership of *Sektion 8* does not exclude political engagement elsewhere in the Party. On the contrary, it is welcomed.

Free radicals and lost souls

We call those youth activists, trade unionists and non-actives who affiliate themselves with the SPÖ but cannot engage with it 'lost souls' and 'free radicals'. We want to be a Social Democratic NGO within Austrian Social Democracy. We do not aim to keep those already engaged in other institutions of the Party from trying to work from within those institutions. We rather target those for whom this option is unattractive.

Critical mass

The SPÖ Alsergrund (9th district of Vienna) has about 1,500 members and 50 activists. It is not as large as the SPÖ groups of other districts. Consequently, it is relatively easier to reach critical mass, which guarantees our positions are heard. With every additional person supporting us, our voice gets louder. We can currently count on 150 members for support.

Don't vote blank!

Take a stance by choosing *Sektion 8* as your home. To be a Party member in your home district without getting active there is like voting blank on Election Day. It implies that you support the way things are and comply with the majority. All those who want to see change and put down a marker are invited to join the SPÖ and *Sektion 8* or, if already a Party member, to switch to us.

Focus on people's abilities not their rank

We are a group of people open to rational arguments and discussion. We share the opinion of the SPÖ leadership when it is objectively justified. Whenever we do not share its views, we will determine our own position and are keen to participate in internal party or public debates.

Live the change you seek

It is counterproductive to advocate democratic participation, tolerance and integrity without living according to these values. We aim to find a participatory middle way between grassroots democracy and bureaucratic leadership. We intend to discuss and create counter models for internal party democracy. A precondition for tolerance, real freedom of opinion, and for the development of autonomous political characters is an environment for discussion which is free of fear. The accumulation of posts as the sole motivating factor for action should be counteracted by personal integrity. A person's honesty facilitates co-operation, and co-operative working principles should be self-evident for Social Democratic leaders.

Recognising positive achievement

Sektion 8 supports the principle of positive achievement and tries to apply it to its own group. Amenability, family bonds, sleaziness, scheming, unquestioning support and lack of political profile are dominant features for success in some parts of the SPÖ. These ‘criteria’ should not determine promotion in and support by the SPÖ. Instead a person’s professional and personal qualifications, her/his previous and current engagement within Social Democracy, as well as in civil society, are the factors we want to stress and reward.

The last bastion

Criticism of the SPÖ leadership from within the SP-family by trade unions, youth organisations or regional groups is not uncommon. But *Sektion 8* is the only structure within the SP-apparatus created explicitly as a critical force vis-à-vis the party leadership. By becoming a member of *Sektion 8* you signal that you do not applaud or accept every action of the party leadership, but that you support and empower the declared ‘last bastion’ of the SPÖ.

- **The concerted act: the SPÖ network**

Sektion 8 wants to work with those SPÖ members and activists who believe in the possibility of change. We want to invite those who share our hopes into a network. We aim to initiate an SPÖ network but do not claim its leadership. The network facilitates regular exchange and co-operation without hindering individual structures in their freedom of movement. It is a network of existing structures (including various sections, FSG – Socialist Trade Unionist groups, SJ – Socialist Youth, AKS – Socialist Pupils, VSStÖ – Socialist Students, JG – Young Generation etc.) and not a stand-alone organisation.

- b. Working on the outside**

It is important to acknowledge that *Sektion 8* is not a party project, but a hegemony project. We seek to network and co-operate closely with organisations which pursue similar goals via different means, and with political minds not beholden to political bureaucracies and their laws. We want to engage them in debates and perhaps motivate them to get involved in politics. This includes people from the trade unions, NGOs, charities, the media, religious communities, academia and businesses; examples being the ÖGB (Austrian Federation of Trade Unions), ATTAC, Amnesty International, Asylkoordination, Caritas and those socially liberal movements dominant in the daily *DerStandard* and the weekly *Profil* magazine. We aim to reconnect with those who used to be affiliated with Social Democracy but who turned to the private and public sectors, as well as to academic careers, when the SPÖ lost its attraction to them. We want to motivate them to re-engage with Social Democratic campaigns or to get active within the SPÖ itself.

We believe that anchoring and connecting our group to the academic world is essential for developing and improving our arguments and gaining the necessary depth and credibility to improve our chances of realising our projects. We don’t intend to ideologically manipulate the sciences, but to scientifically underpin our political programme. Social Democracy needs to return to the neuralgic points of social research in all disciplines – from gender studies to national economy. It is absolutely necessary to root Social Democracy in academia and to integrate the sciences into Social Democratic discourse. Our aim is to add to these goals with our own humble contributions. The foundation of a think-tank would allow interested parties from the worlds of academia and civil society to work on the content of a programme.

4. Conclusion

We don't believe in the 'march through the institutions' of Social Democracy in its original sense. It is impossible to use *Logic A* to reach the top and then adopt *Logic B*. The only way forward we see is the creation of a space away from the dominant logic. Our platform is content based. We define our own views. We fight for Social Democratic values and positions in society. We encourage active engagement and aim to find our own style of communicating with those outside. We want to create a Social Democratic NGO, as a hybrid of old and new structures. Hence we see two imperatives for our actions: expanding the existing Social Democratic space and, above all, creating new structures. In practice, we want to expand our sphere of influence by strengthening our core, i.e. *Sektion 8*, and initiate an internal party network. We want to create new structures through an external network that looks beyond Social Democracy.