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PASOKIFICATION: SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS



THIS ARTICLE discusses the electoral prospects of social democratic parties in Europe since the crisis of 2008. It identifies the concept of *pasokification* as a diagnosis for declining vote share and party collapse. It argues that the crisis has created a demographic which does not respond positively to neoliberal solutions. Lastly, it highlights the left alternatives emergent in a renewed social democracy.

Origins

The concept of *pasokification* was first coined by Labour activist James Doran, in the aftermath of the 2012 general elections in Greece.¹ Doran highlighted the electoral collapse of PASOK (the Panhellenic Socialist Movement) as a cause of concern for the British Labour Party. He also offered some remedies so as to help Labour avoid repeating PASOK's experience. The concept worked on two levels: firstly, it explained a general trend occurring across Europe, and secondly, it acted as a plea for Labour to not make the same errors as its Greek sister party.

Doran's earliest reference to *pasokification* identifies a situation where "a Labour government is elected on a wave of hope which the leadership of its parliamentary party is unwilling to meet."² Following Doran's example this would trigger the collapse of the party and open up the way for an alternative left force in the form of a "British Syriza".

From the very beginning, the concept is grounded in the relationship of the Labour Party to the workers' movement. This can be clearly seen in the conditions Labour was in, prior to the resurgence of the left within the party. The political landscape before the 2015 general election was dotted with hopeful left-wing alternatives to Labour; among them the Green Party, Left Unity, and TUSC. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy was also floating the possibility of setting up a separate 'trade union party' which would be affiliated to Labour.³ However, the 'trade union party' proposal was never followed through and none of the national left-wing alternatives made any significant electoral intrusions.

George Galloway's victory in the 2012 Bradford West by-election took Labour by surprise, and suggested that its electoral base could not be taken for granted. Aside from the loss of one seat in Parliament, the importance of the 'Bradford Spring' was that some voters idealised Galloway as a more authentic expression of 'true' Labour values, set against the Labour Party itself.⁴ This theme reoccurred in Tower Hamlets, where Labour lost ground to a new independent group called Tower Hamlets First. Again, several of the Tower Hamlets First candidates were former Labour councillors, including the mayor – Luftur Rahman. Also in East London, a series of

disputes between community activists and the Labour council in Barking & Dagenham caused three sitting Labour councillors to join the Socialist Labour Party. These outbreaks of dissent were small and isolated, but they all emerged from contradictions within Labour.

The programme of intensified class dominance pushed by the 2010-15 coalition government was met by a broad anti-austerity movement. This had the political support of major trade unions, yet it was not fully reflected in the Labour Party, which pointedly refused to support union mobilisation around pay and pensions.⁵ Labour's position on austerity was vague then, and at best the party sought only to dampen the ferocity of the class offensive, not to repel it.

In the run-up to the 2015 general election, discussion of Labour's impending collapse continued. Michael Meacher,⁶ Aditya Chakraborty,⁷ and Doran himself⁸ all returned to the theme, animated by Labour's difficulties in Scotland. Richard Seymour also predicted Labour's collapse on the same lines as the French Socialist Party:

"If it wins, Labour will be forced to implement an austerity agenda which, while not enough to satisfy Conservative voters, will turn its own remaining voters off in droves. That would be a defeat of a different order. For a vision of that future, one need only look across the Channel, at François Hollande sinking and sinking in the polls, and the Front National on the rise."⁹

Labour did not win in 2015; it lost a further 26 seats and left the Conservatives with a slim majority in Parliament. The Scottish National Party took 56 of Scotland's 59 seats, most of which had belonged to Labour. In one of Labour's safe constituencies in Glasgow, the vote share dropped by almost 35 percentage points.¹⁰ The Green Party and UKIP only won one seat each, but they both managed to quadruple their votes.

These results were enough to shock Labour out of complacency. Seymour's post-election analysis identified it as the collapse of Labour,¹¹ and Steve Topple warned that the party was "completely disenfranchised from its voting base."¹² Seymour and Mark Perryman¹³ in particular referred to a narrative that Labour had been "saved by First-Past-the-Post" – *ie* that the Labour result was propped up by tactical voting behaviour, rather than a sense of genuine *parteinost* or party loyalty from Labour supporters.

The election was a sign that the party had to change. This desire for a new approach was channelled into the subsequent leadership contest, which set in motion the reorientation of the party to the left.

Crisis of capitalism

Having explained how the concept of pasokification originated in Britain, and was applied to the British Labour Party, we now have to ask *why* it occurred.

Seymour identified pasokification in three steps, as related to Doran:

- the absorption of social democracy into neoliberalism, with the resulting form known as ‘social liberalism’;
- the resulting secular breakdown of the party-base relationship, the loss of party identity and the fragmentation of the class base;
- incorporation of ‘social liberalism’ into an austerity consensus, with the dramatic acceleration of these trends, culminating in a decisive breakdown of the party-base relationship and the effective end of the party as a party of government.¹⁴

The general corrosion of social-democratic values by capitalist realism has been a feature of the left going back to the very first social-democratic governments. So, of the above steps, the emphasis on austerity is the most important for defining pasokification as a *contemporary* phenomenon. Austerity is a response to the economic crisis which social democracy is unable to resolve. Doran clearly identified this contradiction:

“PASOK’s parliamentary leadership had no alternative to the austerity policies required to revive capitalist accumulation. So PASOK followed the line of march set by the previous conservative administration, and by the structures of the capitalist state in Greece”¹¹

Social democracy embodies a contradiction, sitting as it does between labour and capital. During the moment of crisis, this contradiction is brought to the surface and, according to Stuart Hall, social-democratic governments are “committed to finding solutions [to crisis] which are capable of winning support from key sections of capital.”¹⁵

In order to understand this, it is useful to reflect on the period from the mid-1990s to 2008, when social-democratic parties were widely popular across Europe.¹⁶ Their popularity coincided with a drift to the right, as these parties abandoned any pretence to a wider transformative project. For the most part they reoriented their efforts towards poverty-reduction and a social terrain defined by equality of opportunity,¹⁷ absent of any genuine engagement with the labour movement. However, in the conditions of a stable and growing global economy, they were capable of providing meaningful reforms and concessions to the working class.¹⁸

Under New Labour in Britain, this meant a new minimum wage, increased spending on the NHS,¹⁹ smaller class sizes in schools,²⁰ and the renovation of social housing. When the old proponents of the Third Way are brought out to justify their project, they rightly point to these social advances.²¹ The gains of New Labour were often obtained through a process of advance and retreat. For example, the public benefited from new hospitals, and these were built under private finance schemes, which ultimately ran against the public interest. Therefore we see that the contradiction within social democracy remained intact yet obscured. The result is that for the most part it did not cause large social ruptures. The day-to-day administrative agenda under New Labour revolved around technical or moral problems: knife crime, bird flu, childhood obesity, wind farms, fox hunting.

The role of crisis and austerity is the key to understanding pasokification. Symeon Andronidis explicitly made this

connection in Greece, writing that:

“The social, political and electoral fall of PASOK must be connected with the management and stewardship of the deep economic crisis befalling Greece and Europe.”²²

Crisis is what exposes the contradiction of social democracy and renders the negotiation of class compromise impossible. When social-democratic politics can no longer enact redistributive measures through the welfare state, it has nothing to offer the working class. In an extraordinary bid to prop up capital accumulation, social democracy uses its association with the labour movement to “discipline the working class”.^{15,23} This could be seen in the way the Miliband-led Labour Party pleaded with its supporters to accept the austerity consensus.

Along with public austerity, the responses to crisis employed the standard neoliberal technologies of privatisation, deregulation, and enclosure of the public commons.²⁴ These are all features of “accumulation by dispossession”²⁵ and would be familiar to the subjects of IMF structural adjustment programmes in the Third World.²⁶ The important point is that the state was unable or unwilling to chart a route out of crisis which depended on stimulating economic activity through expanded reproduction. There was no option for social democracy to protect public services or welfare systems, because capital sought a route out of crisis which relied on expropriating these public goods. This solution was necessary due to the special nature of the crisis itself; the maelstrom which revealed itself in 2007/08 was not just a temporary blip in the market. By the time Syriza finally replaced PASOK in 2015, it was clear that Europe had settled into a ‘long crisis.’²⁷

Crisis of legitimisation

The crisis in Europe, which up to this point was limited to being only an *economic* problem, now presents itself as a *political* problem. It is normal for the advanced capitalist economies to experience cyclical crashes, and usually they are able to absorb the social fallout. However, the new conditions show that the neutralising capacity of social democracy is broken. Neoliberal, market-oriented solutions were possible and popular in the past; they are no longer applicable in the present. Richard Seymour refers to the contradiction in the Labour Party according to the following logic:

“In so far as the Labour Party adopts neoliberalism, it must seek to win support for these ideas by communicating them in a language acceptable to the working class.”²⁸

The problem is that social-democratic parties can no longer sell the notion of ‘capitalism with a human face’ to a suspicious electorate. They are unable to contain the rift between the hard constraints of intensified neoliberalism, and electoral marketing which promises a better future for working people. In response to market liberalisation in Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker famously remarked that “we all know what to do, we just don’t know how to get re-elected after we’ve done it.”²⁹ This was also observed by Perry Anderson, who described the French Socialist Party as walking a “frayed tightrope between electoral promise and political performance.”³⁰ In Germany, the SPD encountered a similar problem with its *Agenda 2010*³¹ welfare reforms, according to Gerard Braunthal:

“The SPD’s search for fine-tuning the welfare system without losing too many of its voters is a major challenge to its leaders, who have no easy answers as to how to do it.”³² René Cuperus commented that in Greece, PASOK “lacked

the necessary legitimacy to force austerity on its own population.”³³

There is a sense that the neoliberal project has been delegitimised,³⁴ and across Europe the ruling class has had to resort to a series of special and exceptional measures to protect their interests from democratic interventions. This could be seen in 2011 with the brief emergence of technocratic governments in Italy and Greece, both led by unelected functionaries whose support base lay in the institutions of global finance. More recently we've seen the creation of new centrist electoral vehicles which eschew the potentially volatile democratic constraints of an empowered party membership. These liberal praetorians emerged as Ciudadanos in Spain, The Opportunities Party in New Zealand, En Marche in France, or 'Change UK/TIG' in Britain.

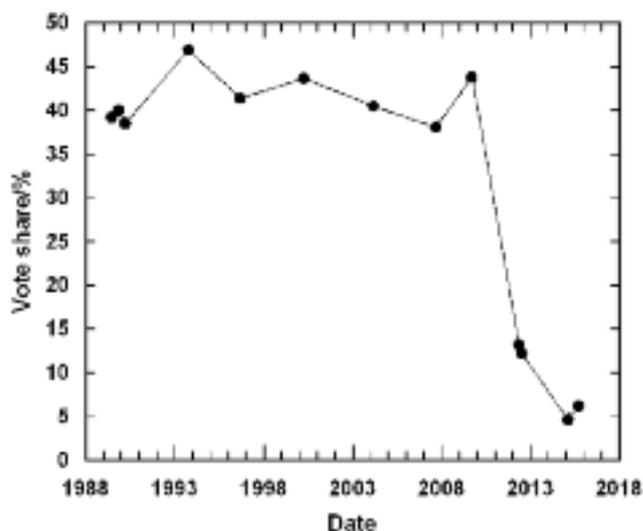
Examples

Having seen how the concept of pasokification originated in Britain, and was applied to the British Labour Party, we should now look at other individual cases of pasokification in Europe.

Greece

PASOK first entered government in Greece in 1981, and for the next three decades its vote share in elections stayed between 38 and 48%. By any measure it was a large, established party which enjoyed consistent popular support. However, after its electoral victory in 2009, the party entered government and began carrying out an austerity programme. This was deeply unpopular, shattering the party's support base and driving it to catastrophe (see Fig 1).

Fig 1. Greek PASOK legislative election results 1989-2015. Date markers refer to 1 January each year.

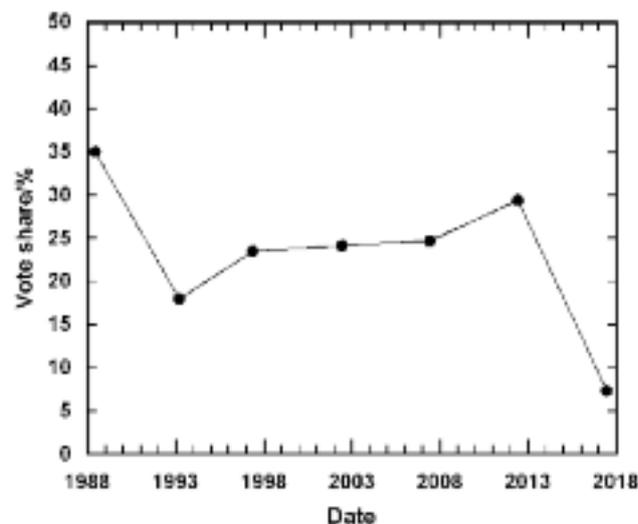


At the following two elections in May and June 2012, PASOK received 13.2% and 12.3% respectively. It emerged from the deadlock as a junior partner in a coalition government led by New Democracy – the main right-wing party. Despite its apparent survival, PASOK was a party whose time was finished, the pact with New Democracy cutting away its remaining popularity. At the 9th Congress in 2013, the party leadership faced public criticism over the coalition deal from its left faction,³⁵ which later split to join Syriza.³⁶ Party staff complained that their salaries had not been paid in a whole year,³⁷ and one former PASOK voter described it as “a corpse”.³⁸ In the next general election two years later, PASOK received only 4.7% of the votes and hit rock-bottom.

France

The second most severe case of pasokification hit the French Socialist Party (see Fig 2). In 2012 the socialist candidate François Hollande won the presidency and the subsequent general elections returned a left majority in the National Assembly along with a socialist-led coalition government. Like PASOK in 2009, Hollande was elected on the back of a promise to find an alternative route out of the economic crisis, one which brought economic growth while also preserving the French social model. Also like PASOK, the French Socialist Party swiftly abandoned this course and in practice opted to continue the neoliberal restructuring of society.

Fig 2. French Socialist Party legislative election results 1988-2017. Date markers refer to 1 January each year.



In 2014 the Socialist Party was damaged in the municipal elections, the socialists and their allies losing 151 towns to the right.³⁹ The only consolation was that Paris remained in the hands of the left. That same year, the deputy responsible for membership, Laurent Grandguillaume, noted that party membership was “on a downwards trend.”⁴⁰ The total membership dropped from around 173,000 at the Toulouse congress in 2012, to around 120,000 at the Poitiers congress in 2015.⁴¹ In April 2016 the number had dropped again to around 100,000;⁴² and in January 2018, ahead of the Aubervilliers congress, the party released a figure of 102,000. This is the official count of people eligible to participate in the congress; the number of active members might be significantly lower.⁴³

The collapse of the French Socialist Party was realised in 2017 through the presidential and subsequent legislative elections. Sensing the mood in the air, the members of the Socialist Party and its allies overwhelmingly voted to present a figure of the left, Benoît Hamon, as their presidential candidate. However, despite his radical credentials and his attempts to repudiate the policies of his predecessors, his campaign was critically damaged by its association with the outgoing austerity government. Hamon was outflanked in both rhetoric and in campaign organisation by Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the ‘France Insoumise’ movement. In the first round of the presidential election, Mélenchon received 19.6% of the vote, meanwhile Hamon received only 6.4%. Shortly after the election, senior right-wing figures in the Socialist Party swiftly defected to take up positions in Emmanuel Macron’s government. Meanwhile, Hamon himself broke away from the Socialist Party to form a new grassroots movement called Génération.s.

Failure in the presidential contest was followed up by a

similarly disappointing result from the legislative election in June 2017. The Socialist Party's 'New Left' group in the National Assembly only won 31 seats, down from that group's governing majority of 295 seats in 2012. To put this in context, FI, the PCF, and their allies collectively hold 33 seats. After the election, the Socialist Party was forced to put its headquarters in central Paris up for sale in order to pay off debts from the campaign.⁴⁴

To summarise: since 2012 the Socialist Party lost a large portion of its membership, lost control of municipal government across France, lost the presidency, lost its majority in the National Assembly, and ended up in financial difficulty. This presents the worst-case scenario for pasokification.

Holland

In the Netherlands, the pattern of pasokification repeated itself with the Dutch Party of Labour (PvdA). When the PvdA arrived at the 2012 general election it had a fresh new leader, and was challenging an incumbent government led by the conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). The VVD was seeking a mandate to subject the economy to more intense neoliberal measures, and the response of the PvdA was one of caution, that austerity was necessary, but only 'within reason'.⁴⁵ The PvdA had already undergone the turn towards the 'Third Way' in 1994⁴⁶ and by 2012 it had no pretence to a robust socialist alternative. Its election platform was complete with moderate centre-left policies, as described by Corinne Deloy:

"Cancellation of the increase in VAT, a 60% tax on revenues over €150,000, the restructuring of the banking sector, the restriction of bonuses, the creation of a national investment bank for SMEs."⁴⁷

Opinion polls for the PvdA in the run-up to the 2012 election were dismal, but on voting day the party bounced back: it received a respectable 24.8% of the votes and came second only to the VVD on 26.6%. With this result, the PvdA proceeded to join the VVD in government, and they agreed on a coalition deal which committed them to supporting the VVD's programme of austerity⁴⁸ – which is where the decline began. Gordon Darroch described the problem:

"Samsom [leader of the PvdA] had promised a 'social way' out of the recession; in practice the economy recovered, but society became more polarised and fragmented. And the voters who had rallied behind the party in the summer of 2012 simply drifted away."⁴⁹

In government the PvdA went along with reforms to meet the needs of the market, but as a consequence they lost their popular appeal. A profile of the PvdA finance minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem characterised his administration as "dreamless, managerial, suit-and-tie progressivism."⁵⁰ The party gave off an image which was technocratic and devoid of political vision, and failed to invigorate the public.

The PvdA began a downwards spiral in the opinion polls shortly after the election. From late 2012, public support for the party dipped from ~26% down to around 10% in late 2013.⁵¹ The party's fate was compounded across the provincial elections in 2015, when it won only 63 provincial seats, down from 107 in 2011. Next, in the 2017 general election the PvdA vote fell to 5.7%, and its parliamentary representation was cut from 38 seats to just 9. In both provincial and general elections, the PvdA was overtaken by the Socialist Party, an ex-Maoist party with more consistent left politics.

Year-by-year counts of party membership are publicly available for Dutch parties which receive government funding. PvdA membership was fluctuating at between 147,000 and 94,000 from 1947 (the year after it was founded) through to the late 1980s. In 1986 it began a gradual decline, from its last peak of 103,760 members in 1986 to 42,416 members in 2019.⁵² Becker and Cuperus place the shedding of members in line with a similar general trend in the Netherlands and Europe as a whole.⁵³ This means that the PvdA's steady loss of members is too slow to identify it as a specific symptom of pasokification, but that may have exacerbated problems in the party overall.

At the end of 2012, the Dutch Party of Labour was in government and was the second-largest party in parliament. At the end of 2017 the party had lost its government positions, lost a significant number of seats in provincial elections and was relegated to a minor player in the House of Representatives. The final, and most critical result, is the PvdA's loss of its credibility as "the only responsible, experienced, large left-wing party."⁵⁴ The effect of pasokification was to shatter the aura of electoral invincibility hanging over the large social-democratic parties.

Criticisms

For a concept which has attracted significant attention, pasokification has also attracted significant criticism. Marina Prentoulis pointed out that people have been predicting the end of social democracy since the 1990s and to her, pasokification is ahistorical.⁵⁵ This fits with the idea that PASOK was a special case, apart from other parties. Greece was an extraordinary situation, with an extraordinarily corrupt party. For Prentoulis the concept falls apart once it fails to explain the unique national contexts which frame the collapse of each party. For example, in 2017 both the German and Austrian social-democratic parties faced legislative elections after a period in which they had both participated in broad governing coalitions with the conservative right. Yet, in Germany the centre-left vote dropped to a historic low, while in Austria the centre-left vote didn't budge. So, the fate of social-democratic parties is not preordained; rather they are subject to general conditions and pressures which can be negated by particular circumstances. This is not to say that social democrats should place their faith in the regular tick-tock rhythm of the electoral swingometer; as the experience of the last decade shows, a large and begrudgingly loyal voter base cannot be taken for granted.

The question remains, whether pasokification is statistically an observable trend, or just the case of a few spectacular outliers. The effect is clearest in Southern Europe, where the average centre-left vote share dropped from 36.3% in 2001-2008 to 21.4% in 2008-2017.⁵⁶ However, if you look at every national election in Europe from 1997 to 2017, the average social-democratic vote share only drops around 5 percentage points.⁵⁷ While it is trending downwards, the overall situation is not a complete wipe-out.

Another criticism of the concept of pasokification is that it is insufficiently attentive to social movements and industrial activity; that it is focused on partisan politics and tends to measure success through elections. Elections are still good indicators of popular support, but they are clumsy tools for describing the overall balance of class forces. A politics oriented around polling figures generally reflects the marketing-driven attitudes of right-wing social democracy. By contrast, the labour movement is often keen to emphasise the relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action, summed

up according to the principle “one foot in parliament and a thousand in the streets.”⁵⁸ Failure in national elections does not necessarily translate into a defeat in the workplace, or in the communities.

David Osland argued that the idea of pasokification is promoted in bad faith by a desire to see Labour fail, and a pessimistic outlook on what would happen if it did.⁵⁹ For Osland, a wounded Labour Party would drift rightwards, and the failure of a unified left alternative force would compound that drift across British politics. Doran responded to this criticism, firstly reiterating his position that pasokification of Labour would not be “a desirable outcome for our class.”² He also wrote that “talk of pasokification is not yearning for our party’s demise, it is a warning that implementing austerity will kill it.”¹⁴ This argument is becoming less relevant in hindsight. It is clear now, with the Labour Party committed to a socialist programme, that pasokification has been overcome in Britain for the time being.⁶⁰

The last comment on pasokification refers to how we think about differences within social democracy. To some on the socialist left, there is nothing new about social democrats acquiescing to austerity policies. What we now call social liberalism would be nothing more than a rebranding of old right-wing social democracy. This particular attitude is sometimes deployed against left-reformism: Bernie Sanders, Corbyn, Syriza, Podemos, all illusions destined to distract and disappoint the working class. There is some truth in that, as the historic role of social-democratic parties has been to back down at the moment they are forced to confront the power of capital. However, we cannot claim that Labour’s commitment to social democracy is a single homogeneous position. There is a very open battle taking place within the party between right-wing and left-wing tendencies, and the reality is that Labour today is radically different from the New Labour of the past. Corbyn is not Blair. This is not a superficial difference, and it requires us to engage positively with the project for a left-led Labour government.

Conclusion

The economic crisis in Europe has produced a political crisis of social democracy. Across the continent the vote share of social-democratic parties is ebbing away. In the most severe cases parties have collapsed dramatically, while others were only wounded. Capitalism in conditions of crisis cannot deliver welfare to the population. Since a neoliberal social democracy is unable to solve this problem, voting populations will abandon it in favour of alternatives.

Pasokification presents both a setback as well as a moment of potential for the left. What will come after the crisis? On what basis will social democracy return to the fore? And how could we stop this sorry situation from repeating itself?

Acronyms and Abbreviations

PASOK - Panhellenic Socialist Movement
 PvdA - Partij van de Arbeid
 TUSC - Trade Union & Socialist Coalition
 UKIP - United Kingdom Independence Party
 SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
 SME - Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
 VVD – Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie
 VAT - Value-Added Tax
 TIG - The Independent Group
 IMF - International Monetary Fund
 PCF – Parti Communiste Français
 FI - La France Insoumise

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