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CHAPTER TWELVE

Conservatism in Europe – the political thought of Christian Democracy

Martin Steven

The reshaping of our economic order had to work towards two things: to bring to an end this division, which hampered progressive development, and to end with it ill-feeling between rich and poor. I do not wish to hide either the material or the moral foundations of my struggle. They determine my actions now as then ... The danger of limitation of competition threatens constantly from many sides. One of the most important tasks in a country based on a free social order is, therefore, to secure free competition. It is no exaggeration when I declare that a law against monopoly is essential as an indispensable 'economic principle'. Should the State fail here, there would be an early end to the 'social market economy'. This principle means that no individual citizen must be powerful enough to suppress individual freedom, or, in the name of false freedom, to be able to limit it. 'Prosperity for all' and 'Prosperity through Competition' are inseparable. The former marks the aim, the latter the path leading to it. These few remarks already show the fundamental difference

between the social market economy and the liberal economy of the old days. Businessmen who believe that because of modern economic developments they can demand cartels are like those Social Democrats who conclude that automation inevitably leads to State control. This reflection should shed light on my theory that it is infinitely more useful to increase prosperity by expansion than to try for a different distribution of the national income by pointless quarrelling.¹

Ludwig Erhard (1897–1977) is a key figure in the post-war history of European Christian Democracy. As the West German minister for economic affairs (1949–63) he is credited with a central role in the divided country's revival after the devastating conflict of 1939–45. He was not given to explicit declarations of principle, but this was typical of Christian Democratic politicians who achieved notable electoral success after the Second World War in Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy as well as West Germany (where the Christian Democratic Union [CDU] continued to hold office after reunification in 1990). Surprisingly, in view of its importance to an understanding of post-war European history, the academic literature on Christian Democracy in English is thin, especially in relation to its ideological identity.² However, European Christian Democratic parties are invariably characterized as movements on the 'centre right', and they are usually designated as 'conservative' in nature. Their preference for practical activity over theoretical speculation can itself be regarded as a characteristic feature of conservative politics. Indeed, this unexciting profile – 'pragmatic, centrist but distinctively conservative' – might help to explain the relative lack of academic interest.³

The title of Erhard's book *Prosperity through Competition* (1959) from which the above extract is taken provides a clear indication of the Christian Democratic approach to economic matters, which in turn epitomizes a more general approach to social and political questions. After suffering serious wounds as an officer in the First World War, Erhard had studied economics at the University of Frankfurt, later working in the Nuremberg Business School. He was associated with a group of economists (mainly based at the University of Freiburg), who championed the free market, rather than an economy subjected to excessive state intervention. This viewpoint (later dubbed 'ordoliberalism') envisaged an important role for the state, in particular to prevent the creation of private monopolies. The state, therefore, should be strong enough to ensure free competition through regulation; it should act as a 'referee' rather than one of the players on the pitch, taking impartial decisions in the national interest.⁴ This was far removed from the Nazi vision of the state, and it was surprising that Erhard was allowed to

retain his academic post until 1942. His record and his beliefs made him an ideal consultant for the allied armies of occupation after the war, and Erhard remained a powerful figure in West German politics for the next two decades.

What Erhard and his advisors dubbed the ‘social market’ (*soziale marktwirtschaft*) approach was well suited to the task of post-war reconstruction because it was designed to foster harmony within economic enterprises. It was characteristic of Erhard to dismiss the symptoms of industrial conflict as ‘pointless quarrelling’ – Erhard, indeed, regarded partisan politics in much the same light, and did not formally join the CDU until 1963 when he was about to succeed Konrad Adenauer as West German chancellor.⁵ Among other measures to promote cooperation in industry, Christian Democracy encouraged the participation of workers’ representatives on the boards of private companies. The approach also had important ramifications for social policy. The prosperity generated by private industry would be used by the state to provide for those who were in no position to support themselves.

This general approach envisaged the state as a promoter of partnership – a supporter of social and economic ‘consensus’. This is widely recognized as a key conservative aim, lending itself to stability. However, prior to 1945, German conservatism had been associated with a different approach to such questions, in which the state (preferably under a restored monarchy) would underpin a relatively rigid social hierarchy dominated by landed aristocrats. In sharp contrast, the policy framework indicated by the CDU’s social market was designed to facilitate freedom within civil society, guaranteed by democratic principles enshrined in the constitution (or ‘Basic Law’) promulgated in 1949. In the same year, the Christian Democrat Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967) became West Germany’s first post-war chancellor.

Adenauer’s previous career provides useful insights into the nature of German Christian Democracy. Unlike Erhard he was a ‘career politician’, having served as mayor of Cologne between 1917 and 1933 – crucial years for Germany, in which the country struggled to establish a liberal democracy after defeat in the First World War, then succumbed to the Nazi dictatorship. Adenauer had already shown a propensity for constructive cooperation with political opponents in the interests of stability. However, he was identified as a likely opponent of the Nazis and lost his political offices when Hitler came to power. Under Hitler’s tyranny he was in constant danger and was imprisoned more than once. Adenauer was a devout Roman Catholic, and had represented the faith-based Centre Party during his early career. However, he had never implemented sectarian policies, and after the war he worked for a realignment of the various Christian movements in the interests of political stability. His association with Ludwig Erhard – a Bavarian Lutheran – illustrated his ecumenical approach. As befitted their contrasting backgrounds, the two men were very different characters who personified underlying tensions between ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’

approaches to governance: while Adenauer had no principled objection to state intervention when he judged this to be necessary, Erhard (as the above extract shows) had an inbuilt bias in favour of economic freedom.⁶ But during the crucial post-war years, they kept their differences under wraps, in pursuit of their common understanding of the national interest.

Thus, the West German CDU could hardly have adopted a more informative name. It originated in long-established Christian political movements, and continued to draw strong support from the main German faith groups. But this 'Union' of Christians hoped that religion could both symbolize and cement a social consensus in a Germany which worked within democratic institutions carefully crafted to protect freedom of religious conscience, among other liberties. The party was therefore 'Christian' and 'Democratic'; but was it distinctively 'conservative'?

If the CDU were to be judged on the outlook of its founding leader, its conservative credentials would be unequivocal. Adenauer frequently gave voice to sentiments which betrayed a highly pessimistic (even cynical) view of human nature. ('In view of the fact that God limited the intelligence of man, it seems unfair that He did not also limit his stupidity.'⁷) More importantly, Adenauer's outlook – and that of the CDU in general – was informed by a respect for tradition which is highly characteristic of conservatives. The German experience since the fall of Bismarck in 1890 had been punctuated by spectacular upheavals. But the ill-starred Weimar Republic (1919–33) had been one of several attempts to establish liberal constitutions, from which valuable lessons could be absorbed by conservatives. Bismarck himself had presided over the establishment of a pioneering system of state welfare; and the idea of partnership between labour and capital in the workplace had been endorsed by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

Thus, in the early post-war years, the West German CDU could be seen as perfectly acceptable by moderate liberals, and highly congenial for those who regarded themselves as 'conservative'. Many of the latter had sided either tacitly or openly with Hitler. For them, the CDU offered an excellent chance for a fresh start – a way of 'de-Nazifying' themselves through identification with politicians who had never collaborated, and beginning the process of cleansing their country's reputation. In simplistic electoral terms, the CDU squared the democratic circle – its conservatism could draw support from rural areas, Erhard's free-market ideas were sure to appeal to ambitious entrepreneurs and the 'social market' approach could attract workers as well as the representatives of big business who were prepared to tolerate Erhard's animosity towards monopolistic practices in return for the prospect of harmonious labour relations.

If the CDU's appeal within West Germany owed much to its 'conservative' elements, for external observers its value derived crucially from its promise of stability in the context of ideological confrontation between the democratic West and the Soviet-dominated East. Although the party stood

for a compromise between free-market liberalism on the American model and bureaucratic dictation along Soviet lines, its stance was appropriate for a state which was oriented towards the West. It was, in short, resolutely anti-Communist, although it was careful not to increase the existing tensions between the Cold War antagonists. This external dimension was, of course, an important ingredient in the success of Christian Democrat parties in other European countries.

Christian Democracy in practice

For a conservative, not even the most attractive statement of principles can rival the importance of practical success – in other words, the establishment of ‘governing competence’. In post-war liberal democracies the key measure of success has been economic prosperity. By 1959, when Ludwig Erhard published the book quoted earlier, Christian Democrats in West Germany and elsewhere could claim to have passed this test. West Germany itself was recognized as the beneficiary of an ‘economic miracle’ (*Wirtschaftswunder*) through the application of Erhard’s ideas.

Indeed, from the viewpoint of politicians who were acutely concerned with European stability it could easily appear that West Germany’s social market approach was proving too successful for comfort. Despite constitutional provisions designed to guard against a military resurgence, it was understandable that the state’s neighbours (and their American allies) should feel unsettled by the prospect of economic domination. The CDU’s answer to this problem was to sponsor proposals for European unity, leading to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) under the Treaty of Rome (1957). While other politicians (notably Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher: see Chapters 14 and 16) might have regarded the EEC as at best a necessary nuisance, for the CDU close cooperation (hopefully leading to outright political union) tended to be regarded as something akin to an ideological principle. Although Erhard and Adenauer had different visions for Europe – the latter prioritized West Germany’s relationship with France, while Erhard had stronger Atlanticist leanings – they both rejected crude inter-war German nationalism. Rather, these feelings should be diverted into a more constructive channel – a sense of national pride which was fully consistent with the pooling of West Germany’s resources with its European partners.

The extent to which the CDU succeeded in ‘civilizing’ nationalistic feeling in West Germany is reflected in attitudes towards the territorial division imposed after 1945. A succession of CDU-dominated governments focused on the fortunes of their own citizens in the West, while keeping the possibility of reunification alive by maintaining amicable relations with the Soviets and their satellite states (a pragmatic approach known as *Ostpolitik*). In 1990, the dream was finally realized, under a Christian Democrat-dominated

government led by Helmut Kohl (1930–2017), a Roman Catholic from the Rhineland. Kohl also worked closely with the socialist French president Francois Mitterand on a programme to deepen European integration, which culminated in the declaration of a European Union in the Maastricht Treaty signed in 1992.

Christian Democracy in decay?

From the vantage point of 1992, German Christian Democracy could easily seem like an unalloyed success story. The CDU's absorption of liberal economics within a framework of ideas which also featured distinctively conservative elements seemed to have taken the country from division to reconciliation at a variety of levels. The significant exception to the general welcome of reunification – the United Kingdom's Margaret Thatcher – actually reinforced that lesson, since her blend of strident nationalism and aggressive championship of the free market made her a natural antagonist of the conservatism of Christian Democracy.

However, the inherent ideological tensions incorporated within the CDU's 'liberal-conservative' approach had already been exposed, at least in part thanks to its practical success. In the terminology of political science, the CDU had been established as a 'catch-all' party, offering a tepid ideological brew which only satisfied politicians and voters who accepted that this was the best that could be expected in unpropitious post-war circumstances.⁸ When Erhard succeeded Adenauer as West German chancellor in 1963, he had been troubled by the emergence of a 'consumerist' ethos which threatened to undermine feelings of national solidarity. Erhard was particularly worried by the strength of West German interest groups, notably the trade unions. At the CDU's 1965 party conference he drew on the recent work of the conservative theorist Rüdiger Altmann, and referred to the idea of an 'aligned society' (*formierte Gesellschaft*). Radical critics, who already regarded Christian Democracy as an instrument of the West German middle class, accused Erhard of trying to use the power of the state to exclude dissident voices – in short, of trying to preserve a pretence of economic pluralism, while resorting to political authoritarianism.⁹ The idea of the 'aligned society' was quickly dropped, and Erhard himself was forced from office in 1966.

Although the CDU recovered from this existential emergency, it could not afford to rest on its laurels in the aftermath of the Cold War, and faced the challenge of (at least) presenting its tried and trusted electoral offering in new packaging. The problem was more acute for other Christian Democratic parties which had succeeded at the ballot box, but whose practical achievements were less palpable. Too often, the senior ranks of these parties were dominated by colourless technocrats, drawn to political activism not by earnest convictions of any kind, but rather

by an interest in problem-solving – or by a desire for personal gain. The end of the Cold War exposed the extent to which individuals in the latter category had infiltrated European Christian Democratic parties. The most notorious example of this phenomenon was Italy, whose *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) party collapsed in 1994, after five decades of dominance, amid accusations of corruption which engulfed senior figures as well as lesser functionaries. Then again, the DC had always operated within a political culture in which corrupt practices of various kinds had been prevalent, and which offered far less scope for political stability than other European states; its eventual fate was only delayed until a time when it was safe to publicize its activities. It was more surprising that Kohl himself incurred considerable unpopularity during his last term in office (1994–8), and after his resignation his legacy was tainted by revelations concerning illegal donations to the CDU.

While Konrad Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard would have been disconcerted by these developments, they could in fact have been predicted on the basis of their approach to politics in the CDU's early years. Adenauer, with his pessimistic view of human nature, could have no illusions about the tendency of power of any kind to corrupt. Erhard, in the extract quoted earlier, expressed his vehement opposition to economic monopolies. Exactly the same warning could have been issued in relation to *political* monopolies. As soon as the citizens of any European state could safely conclude that a Christian Democrat party would dominate the next government, regardless of the forthcoming election result, something dangerously akin to the unhealthy results of an economic monopoly were bound to ensue: the consumer (or, in this case, the voter) would always be the loser in the final analysis. In this respect, when Adenauer and Erhard helped to found a party which was designed to appeal to the maximum proportion of West German voters, they were running the risk that they were sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

Thus, after the end of the Cold War, the future of Christian Democracy was in serious doubt unless politicians who identified with that tradition proved equal to the challenges of a new era. In this task they faced a handicap which had not affected Adenauer or Erhard in the late 1940s. Throughout Europe, attendance at Christian services of any denomination had fallen consistently since 1945; and the trend has not been markedly different in countries, such as Germany, which still provide considerable electoral support to parties claiming the 'Christian Democrat' label. Since 2005, Germany's chancellor has been Helmut Kohl's protégée, Angela Merkel. As the daughter of a Lutheran clergyman, whose early years were spent in East Germany before reunification, Merkel is in herself a tribute to the continuing appeal of Christian Democracy despite the disappearance of its original Cold War context. Yet it can be argued that her longevity in office is a testament to her considerable political abilities rather than a reflection of the popularity of the tradition of political thinking with which she identifies.

Even if Christian Democracy no longer excites many Germans, Merkel has continued to be a potent symbol of success and stability.

In summary, it is tempting to designate European Christian Democracy as a phenomenon which marked a specific moment in time. On this view, the Second World War created a context in which centre-right political parties recognized the importance of a platform that could rally conservative voters without alienating their more radical opponents, thereby winning democratic elections but, more importantly, coming as close as possible to generating a national 'consensus' wherever Christian Democrats were a potent force. This desire to rebuild stable polities on the basis of a ubiquitous Christian heritage, combined with hopes of a more prosperous future based on an acceptance of the liberal post-war economy backed by American fire-power, could look very persuasive on paper in the circumstances of 1945, and was capable of securing acquiescence (at least). Although the example of the CDU could easily be misleading given the unique circumstances of West Germany in the years between the war and the country's reunification, it would be reasonable to argue on the basis of that experience that politicians like Ludwig Erhard and Konrad Adenauer could use the principles of Christian Democracy in a way which would satisfy all but the most purist of conservatives, offering a genuine semblance of social and political harmony rather than an enforced stability. However, even in Germany, where Christian Democrats can point to so many significant historic achievements, the conservative-liberal approach to politics had begun to show signs of strain even in the 1960s, and now seems unduly dependent on the fortunes on a single individual. In the elections of 2017, it was all too easy to portray Merkel as the representative of a conservative variant whose time was running out, in the face of insurgents from both the left and a newly invigorated right which was uninhibited by attempts to associate it with the most inglorious episodes of Germany's part.¹⁰