

Haggling in the dreamland

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The so-called European elections are approaching. What will they be about? Country by country, the old center parties, right and left, and the various shades of green are setting out to test their remaining electoral appeal, by displaying optimism and good feelings, all symbolized by “Europe”, whatever this may be. The aim is not to lose too many votes to those they call “anti-Europeans”, the new arch enemies, right and left, of all decent people, i.e., of the “pro-Europeans”. If ever there was an identitarian politics, here it is, and it is to be feared that in this respect the European elections are also a test run for the next round of national elections.

Political discussions, especially if they might reveal disagreements within the “pro-European” camp, are strictly avoided. “Europe is the answer” – to everything; never say where it might not be; never inquire what that wonderland would have to be like to do all the good it is supposed to start doing the day after the election. Those who nevertheless ask questions can only be outsiders who spread pessimism, sow discord, and generally spoil the atmosphere; who doesn’t properly despise them excludes himself from the community of the good. Europeans of all countries unite! – in a celebration of positive sentiments, *en marche* into a new dreamland called “Europe”, where all problems dissolve in thin air. This, at least, is what is suggested, but hardly believed, by the parties of the European center – and given the glaring moral and intellectual shortcomings of the New Right, and the almost complete absence of strategic agreement and even debate among the Left, it may well do the job. Strange how vulnerable European voters, the best educated generation ever, seem to have become, under the impact of the crisis, to the shameless identity marketing that is being tried on them by the very parties that have caused the neoliberal mess in the first place.

As always in European politics under German hegemony, there is also a domestic German angle here. Remember five years ago, when Junker and Schulz, center-right and center-left, and politically indistinguishable, pretended to be running against one another for the job of president of the European Commission – no matter that the post is filled, not by the Parliament, but by the Council. Merkel was not amused, but in the end she had to agree to Junker, self-declared winner with no more than 30 percent of the vote, being appointed by a Council intent on avoiding conflict with its declining number of supporters in the Parliament.

This time, the two centrist blocs, widely expected again to lose votes to the “Eurosceptics”, have put up new candidates, the center-right “party family”, the European People’s Party (EPP), featuring a German, one Manfred Weber. Weber has for some time been leader of the EPP in the Parliament but has no executive experience whatsoever. In Germany he is a member of the CSU, the Bavarian sister party of Merkel’s CDU. With Weber eyeing the presidency of the Commission, the CSU has flexibly changed its rhetoric to the content-free “pro-Europeanism” of the CDU (“against populism and nationalism”) and all other German parties except the AfD and parts of the Linkspartei. In return, as this made her life easier, Merkel agreed to support Weber’s candidacy.

The way European elections go, Weber’s bloc will again be the biggest, although even farther from a majority than last time. His party, the CSU, will expect Merkel, still Chancellor, to do her utmost to get the Council to appoint Weber, in the name and for the sake of democracy. Her strongest opponent there would be her friend Macron, who insists on the prerogatives of member state governments and is generally wary of too many Germans in leading EU positions. To get him on board, a high prize would have to be paid that almost certainly would cost Merkel at home, not least with the CSU. Moreover, to get Weber appointed, she would have to withdraw the sitting German commission member, a CDU stalwart dear to her party. If on the other hand she fails, this will be mercilessly interpreted as evidence that she has lost her clout – an argument for having her step down early. Not least, by putting another

German into a leading European position she would rule out a German successor to Draghi at the European Central Bank, as well as herself following Tusk as president of the Council. Life in a German Europe, or a European Germany, is far from easy, even for Germans.