Conservatism in Europe – the political thought of Christian Democracy

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'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 mora~ 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 (1948-63) 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 (in the latter, 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 characterised 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 epitomises a more general approach to social and political questions. Erhard was a devotee of

the free market, rather than an economy subjected to excessive state intervention. At the same time, he emphasised that prosperity could also be endangered by monopolies created by private companies. The proper role of the state, therefore, should be 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]

Indeed, what Erhard and his advisors dubbed the 'social market' (*soziale marktwirtschaft*) approach was designed to transcend the idea of endemic conflict in economic activity. It was characteristic of Erhard to dismiss the symptoms of such divisions 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 Adenauer as West German Chancellor).[5] Christian Democracy promoted the idea of harmony in the workplace, not least by encouraging 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 are not in a 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 recognised as a key conservative aim, lending itself to stability. However, the policy framework indicated by the 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. He had 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 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. His association with Ludwig Erhard – a Lutheran – illustrated his ecumenical approach. As befitted their contrasting backgrounds, the two men were very different characters who personified the 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 the underlying tensions 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 symbolise 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, of course, had sided either tacitly or openly with Hitler. For them, the CDU offered an excellent chance of 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.

While the CDU's appeal within West Germany is best understood as distinctively 'conservative', 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 above, Christian Democrats in West Germany and elsewhere could claim to have passed this test. West Germany itself was recognised as the beneficiary of an 'economic miracle' (*Wirtshaftswunder*) under Erhard's stewardship.

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 establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) under the Treaty of Rome (1957).

While other politicians (notably Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher) might have regarded the EEC as at best a necessary nuisance, for the CDU close co-operation (hopefully leading to outright political union) tended to be regarded as something akin to an ideological principle. For Erhard and Adenauer it was a means of extending the idea of partnership from domestic affairs to the international sphere. Even if West Germany continued to play a dominant role in the Community's affairs, it would use its influence to advance the interests of the continent as a whole. There would be no attempt to repress nationalistic emotions, whose crude expressions in the first half of the twentieth century had lured German conservatives into support for actions which betrayed their true interests. Rather, these would 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. Having accepted a Federal constitution for their own country, CDU politicians had no fear of what Eurosceptics in other European states referred to as 'the F-word'.

The extent to which the CDU succeeded in 'civilising' 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 realised, 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?

Looking back on the history of the CDU from the perspective of 1992, it was difficult for an unprejudiced observer to draw any negative conclusions. The party's absorption of liberal economics within a framework of ideas which featured distinctive conservative elements seemed to have taken Germany from division to reconciliation at a variety of levels. It was now a single state once more, led by a party which, having worked tirelessly to address sources of tension within West Germany, was ideally placed to extend the same approach to the East. Under different leadership, the reunification of Germany might have caused considerable alarm within the international community. As it was, to well-informed observers of European politics Helmut Kohl was a reassuring figure – a fitting exemplar

of the Christian Democratic tradition which stood, above all, for stability. The significant exception to the general welcome of reunification – the UK'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 (see Chapter ?).

However, the CDU now faced the problem of persuading German voters of its continued relevance. To disinterested (or hostile) observers, it might seem that it had fulfilled its historic purpose, helping to create a domestic and international context in which the reunited country could begin to explore more sharply defined ideological alternatives. 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]

If the CDU 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, in the expectation that they could hope to win lucrative positions so long as they avoided expressions of strong ideological commitment. 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 publicise 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 above, 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 its 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, like Germany, which still provide considerable electoral support to parties which claim 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 is a symbol of success and stability which voters feel inclined to retain.

Nevertheless, under Merkel the CDU has been forced to confront various developments which threaten to cause a fatal disruption within its coalition of moderate conservatives and economic liberals. On the one hand, the complex process designated by the short-hand term 'globalisation' has prompted a more 'liberal' approach to economic matters; meanwhile, demographic change within Germany has helped to convince Merkel and her colleagues to minimize restrictions on immigration,

particularly in respect of refugees seeking asylum from political oppression in the Middle East. Simultaneously, Merkel was forced to deal with moral questions (notably same-sex marriage) which threatened to polarise even moderate liberals and conservatives who were still willing to shelter under the Christian Democratic umbrella.

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 recognised 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) until the late 1980s. 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 any conservative, offering a genuine semblance of social and political harmony rather than an enforced stability. However, even in Germany, where Christian Demoocrats can point to so many significant historic achievements, this conservative-liberal approach to politics now seem to hinge 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 left and a newly-invigorated right which advocated something like the re-Nazifaction of Germany.[9] Although her steadfast championship of the EU made her less than universally popular among self-styled 'conservatives' in Britain, her narrow victory in the German elections of 2017 should have reminded 'Brexiteers' that they can only take a continuation of European peace for granted thanks to the pragmatic outlook of Angela Merkel and her Christian Democrat predecessors.

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[1] Ludwig Erhard, *Prosperity through Competition*, New York: Frederick A Prager, 1958, 2-3.
[2] Paolo Pombeni, 'The ideology of Christian Democracy', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 5 No.3, (2000), 289-300, focuses on the influence of Catholic thinkers. For general surveys see Geoffrey

Pridham, *Christian Democracy in Western Europe*, London: Routledge, 1979; and David Hanley (ed), *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparitive Perspective*, London: Continuum, 1994. Christian democracy has also been influential in South America (especially Chile and Brazil), but this article focuses on European where the tradition has been most prominent.

[3] Wolfram Kaiser, 'Christian Democracy in Twentieth-century Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No.1, Jan 2004, 127-35.

[4] Erhard, *Prosperity,* 102-3.

[5] Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *Ludwig Erhard: A Biography*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 184.

[6] See Arthur Olsen, "'Gauliist" Adenaeur Challenges Erhard', *New York Times,* 26 July 1964, http://www.nytimes.com/1964/07/26/gaullist-adenauer-challenges-erhard.html.

[7] Quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F Kennedy in the White House*, Houghton Mifflin, 1965, 291.

[8] For 'catch-all' parties, see especially Kirchheimer, O. (1966) 'The transformation of Western European party systems', in J. LaPolambara and M. Weiner (eds.) *Political Parties and Political Development* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press)

[9] Muller, J. W. (2014) 'The End of Christian Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 July.

Further reading

Hanley, D (ed), *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, London, Continuum, 1994.

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