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Introduction

Luke Martell

In the British Labour Party in the 1980s a frequent discussion I participated in was about the possibilities for socialism if only social democratic parties were in power across Europe and even elsewhere. Capital would have nowhere to flee, as the only countries with workforces and consumer markets worth going to would be ones where other social democratic parties were in government. This would enable common regulations on capitalism, common social programmes and a shift away from the dominance of private capital and free markets. Businesses would be forced to make compromises with supranationally collaborating social democracy. At the start of the twenty-first century part of that dream (or nightmare, depending on your political views) seems to have come true. Across Europe the large majority of members of the European Union (EU) have social democratic governments. The Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament is coherent and well organized. There has even been a Democrat in the White House for much of the period of social democratic dominance, just to add the finishing touch to a perfect-looking picture.

Yet the fact of social democratic domination does not seem to be translating into the sort of progress for social democratic ambitions that were hoped for in those 1980s discussions. The EU is primarily a set of institutions with liberal economic goals. Of course, there are moderate social democratic EU policies and these are important, but they are subordinate to the primacy of open markets and the sort of macroeconomic policies determined by convergence criteria. In fact, some of the social democratic parties themselves seem more interested in pursuing the market goals of the EU than its social goals. They do not seem to need convergence criteria to persuade them to do so. Tony Blair fits into this category most obviously. But his prominent reluctance to

support an EU committed to social regulation only conceals the record of many other European social democrats in pursuing liberal economic objectives. Blair is not only a reluctant regulator; he is also a reluctant integrator, blocking common policies such as tax harmonization in the name of governments retaining national autonomy to pursue their own competitive interest. So here is an instance of a social democratic party showing hesitance about some traditional social democratic-type goals, and also about common agreements and further solidarity and integration. Even in circumstances never really expected in the 1980s, of social democrats in power across the continent, there is little sign of the common socialist Europe dreamed of then.

But how fair is this picture? Is this where social democracy has got to, and if so what led it there? And where might it, or should it, go in the future? This book originates from a conference held at the University of Sussex in October 1998,¹ entitled 'Social Democracy: Current Ideological directions'. Over a year after Tony Blair and Lionel Jospin's electoral victories and soon after Gerhard Schröder's, all seizing power from the Right and apparently in the process of rethinking what social democracy meant, the aim of the conference was to look at the changing ideologies and policies of social democracy. We wanted to pin down the contemporary development and meanings of social democracy against the background of debates such as those about globalization and the future of Europe. Since then we have been charting ongoing events, ideological discussions and policy developments. The chapters in this book emerge from that conference and from subsequent analyses made by the authors.

There are three main themes in the book. The first is concerned with what the changing context has been for social democracy. Those aspects of the changing environment most discussed in the book are globalization and a lower level of supranationalism, European integration. For Martin Shaw, globalization is primarily a political process, already well developed in the form of a military-political 'western state'. Social democracy is involved in that state, but only as part of it and it needs to break free from its historical ties to the nation if it is to express another of its traditional links – with the movement for democratization – in new global regimes. Neil Stammers is more sceptical about what he sees as the capitalist and statist accommodations of globalist social democracy of the sort supported by Shaw and others. Yet he shares much of Shaw's analysis of the historical inability of social democracy to think beyond the confines of nation-state organization. Stammers outlines six characteristics of social democracy – commitments to liberal

democracy, capitalism and mitigation of some of the worst effects of capitalism, and to elitism, statism and methodological nationalism – and argues that social democracy needs to go beyond the confines of these characteristics in order to become a true force for global democracy.

Matthew Browne and Yusuf Akbar take a different angle on globalization altogether. Their emphasis is on the discourse of globalization, not just as a tool used by politicians to justify policies that are really chosen for ideological reasons, but as a discourse that constitutes their knowledge of the world, their politics and agenda. Other authors also turn to the theme of globalization. Christien van den Anker suggests social democracy needs to find a way of reconstituting itself at global levels to provide a globally regulative antidote to free market capitalism. Such an international outlook is something the Dutch, the subject of her chapter, have long had a leaning towards. Francis McGowan is more sceptical about the possibilities for international forms of social democracy. He looks at a supranational form which exists concretely here and now with a strong social democratic element in its history – the European Union (EU). Like Stammers, McGowan draws on some valuable conceptual distinctions – between positive and negative integration in the EU, between traditional and modernizing social democracy, and between policies that are either compensatory in relation to liberal economic integration or countervailing to it. For McGowan, liberal integration has come to dominate the EU, and social democracy is too nationally divided and too domestically oriented at present to make inroads into reconfiguring the EU in a more social democratic direction, despite its numerical strength there.

A second key theme of the book is about how social democratic ideology has developed in response to changes such as globalization, or the perception of it, as well as in response to the influence of neo-liberalism in some places, problems of Keynesianism and the welfare state and the changing social basis of social democracy. As already mentioned, McGowan distinguishes between traditional social democracy and the more economically liberal modernizing social democracy, exemplified by Blair, but evident elsewhere too. Stephanie Hoopes analyses the implications of changes in the media in the United States and United Kingdom for three forms of social democracy: traditional, modernizing and globalist. She argues that the new media increase the power of civil society in relation to the state, and also that of private enterprise, while having effects which go against equality and justice. These seem to threaten social democracy. Yet she also argues that the new media can

strengthen democratization in civil society, which can in turn act as a force against private enterprise and in favour of equality and social justice. Furthermore, modernizing and globalist social democracy are in touch with the information revolution and global telecommunications. So there may well be ways in which social democracy can benefit from the new media as well as be negatively affected by it. Stammers makes a similar traditional/modernizing distinction to McGowan's adding, with Shaw and Hoopes, another recent type – globalist social democracy. What makes these types different is initially evident from the terms themselves, and I will leave the details to the authors in their chapters. Some of the authors also discuss national differences in social democratic development, McGowan for one seeing them as an obstacle to social democrats pursuing positive integration in pursuit of social democratic ends in the EU. Domestic constraints and national differences prevent social democratic governments from the sort of collaborative positive agreements they would need to forge to secure social democratic successes at a regional level.

Charles Lees provides a clear analysis of some of the differences between German and British institutions and political systems illustrating the impact that national contexts can have. There may well be similar policy agendas across nations like Germany and the UK – in this case between *Die Neue Mitte* and the Third Way – yet institutional differences are likely to lead to related debates and similar policy agendas ending up with differing outcomes. Such institutional and cultural factors, which may affect the development of social democratic policies, are also discussed by Nick Cowell and Phil Larkin. Their chapter seeks to pin down what New Labour is all about, arguing that interpretations of it need to stress Labour's relationship with its own history more than some analyses have done. They argue that policy agendas across European social democracy are more similar than rhetorical differences or commentators sometimes make them appear. Yet this is not at odds with Lees' conclusions because, like him, they see nationally-specific factors that will make similar policy agendas turn out differently across national boundaries. Christien van den Anker provides a complement to these views, her chapter analysing the recent and current state of the ideologies and policies of social democracy in the Netherlands. 'Similar but different' is also the story here. There are very similar features to modernizing social democracy between the Netherlands and elsewhere. In fact Dutch social democracy may be seen as an early modernizer. Yet politics in the Netherlands also has distinctive features which go against some of the economically liberal inclinations of modernizing social

democracy – an emphasis on consensus, collaboration, consultation and continuity, for example, and a history of being involved in positive integration in international affairs. Van den Anker's own suggestions are for social democracy to take a more globalist and regulative role than some modernizers are currently apt to do.

This brings us to the third basic concern of the book – with critical and prescriptive arguments. How are we to assess modernizing social democracy's aims and goals? What alternatives are there to modernizing social democracy? And what sort of future might it or should it have? A number of the chapters touch on such issues. Browne and Akbar's argument, on the discourse of globalization, is clearly critical in the sense that they see its real function as not to give us a better handle on social reality, but more to constitute what political actors think and do. Van den Anker has her own prescriptions for a more global social democracy, which she sees as necessary if some more traditional social democratic goals are to be achieved. And she discusses criticisms of the direction modernizing social democracy has taken in the Netherlands. Stammers argues that social democracy needs to transcend its six defining characteristics if it has any hope of tackling the challenges of political globalization and establishing itself as a genuine force for global democracy.

My own conclusion to this book argues that this gives up too much strategically, and that capitalism and the state are necessary ingredients of any attempt to move towards global structures which can limit and regulate capital and extend democracy. Shaw identifies a similar historical deficiency on the part of social democracy in coming to terms with globalization as Stammers. But he pins his hopes on what he sees as an already existing force for democratic political globalization – the Western state. However, he argues that social democracy is only part of that state at present and, like Stammers, feels it needs to do some serious reconstituting of itself along global lines to become a participant with real influence on it. Shaw, though, does not see social democracy providing the values for the Western state, but rather the institutional levers through which they can be pursued. Such values can be brought in from elsewhere, from global social movements for example. This is where Shaw, Stammers and I stand on similar ground, agreeing on the importance of social movements in any future for social democracy at a global level. As I have outlined, McGowan's conclusions on all this are more hard-headed: global social democracy is a dream that is a long way in the future. Even at a regional supranational level, where social democracy has more of a foothold and history, it does not seem that capable

of imposing itself coherently and effectively, at least in pursuit of its traditional goals. And he also shows how much social democracy, for good or ill, has lost of its traditional beliefs and how much it has failed to achieve them through the EU.

There are several distinctive features to the approach of this book. Like many other books in the area it has a European focus, although Stephanie Hoopes does provide a US angle on the discussions. This European focus is in part a result of the expertise of the authors involved. Yet social democracy and social democratic ideas are important elsewhere in the world, not just in more obvious places like Australia and New Zealand, but also in regions such as South America. Further analyses of social democracy will need to be more outward-looking to such regions, especially if they are to take globalization as a key theme as we have done in this book.

The book is not a country-by-country survey of different national social democracies. Hence we have not found it essential to include chapter-length studies of every relevant country with a social democratic history. But we have discussed themes that unite and differentiate national social democracies and which are relevant for and addressed in relation to countries far beyond those that get chapter-length attention here. Clearly, there are country-based chapters and a number of the contributions address comparative issues. But this is also a book which addresses common themes and concerns which go beyond individual nations or comparisons between them. It aims to provide an overall assessment of where social democracy is generally, of critical assessments of it, of supranational forms and global possibilities and at least some sense of possible alternatives to, or partners for, social democracy, in social movements and civil society, for example.

The book is also interdisciplinary. Charles Lees provides the sort of political science perspective often associated with books on this sort of topic, as does McGowan to some extent. But unlike many other books on social democracy the issue is also addressed from many other perspectives. The contributors to this book also represent approaches such as international relations, sociology, economics, European studies, social and political thought and discourse analysis. Cowell and Larkin, and Shaw, build in historical perspectives to their analyses. Many of the authors make good use of the concepts and perspectives of social and political theory, drawing important conceptual distinctions and definitions, and tackling some of the ideological and philosophical strands which are part of current social democracy. Shaw and others try to identify wider-scale social and political changes which are important

to the rethinking of social democracy, while others, such as Browne and Akbar, try to deconstruct some of the discourses around those alleged changes. Perspectives come from both macro-and more micro-directions, and are both theoretical and practical. The book, like the conference on which it is based, creates the means for the interaction of these approaches. Together, they make for a more complete picture of the current state of social democracy and of the challenges and potentials for its future.

Finally, coming from all these perspectives, we go beyond merely describing what is going on in contemporary social democracy in this book. The aim is also to conceptualize it, explain it and provide critical and normative perspectives. We aim to give some conceptual meanings to different forms of social democracy, analyse why they are taking the directions they are, in response to what forces and changes, evaluating whether this is desirable and discussing prescriptions and recommendations.

Note

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