

Democracy and Social Democracy

‘From the very beginning one of the key aims of Social Democracy has been its unconditional belief in democracy.’¹ Thus writes one of the leading party intellectuals of the German Social Democratic Party, Thomas Meyer, in his most recent book on the future of Social Democratic Parties in Europe. It should not be difficult to find similar statements among all the theoreticians of contemporary Social Democratic Parties in Europe. But what kind of democracy did Social Democrats believe in? In 1919 Sidney Webb could still argue that ‘socialists have contributed so far very little to the theory or practice of democracy’. Instead, they had ‘accepted uncritically the ordinary Radical idea of democracy’.² Opponents of Social Democracy were likely to argue not only that Social Democracy did not contribute very much to the theory and practice of democracy; they, as did Friedrich Hayek, found that any form of socialism and democracy were ultimately incompatible:

It is now often said that democracy will not tolerate ‘capitalism’. If ‘capitalism’ means here a competitive system based on free disposal over private property, it is far more important to realize that only within this system is democracy possible. When it becomes dominated by a collectivist creed, democracy will inevitably destroy itself.³

Had not Alexis de Tocqueville, that shrewd observer of American democracy, already noted in 1848 that

Democracy enlarges the realm of individual freedom, socialism diminishes it. Democracy assigns the highest value to the individual; socialism reduces each and everyone to being a mere instrument, a mere number. Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word: equality. But mind the difference: while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in control and bondage.⁴

Was the relationship between the two one of mutual exclusion

rather than close interrelatedness? In the middle of the Second World War, Joseph Schumpeter argued that neither was the case:

... between socialism . . . and democracy . . . there is no necessary relation: the one can exist without the other. At the same time there is no incompatibility: in appropriate states of the social environment the socialist engine can be run on democratic principles.⁵

A few years earlier, in 1935, at a time when both democracy and Social Democracy seemed to lose out to Soviet Communism and various forms of fascism across Europe, the lapsed Communist Arthur Rosenberg wrote on the subject of 150 years of European history under the analytical framework of 'socialism and democracy'. He maintained that the relationship between the two had been the crucial problem for all social movements from below since 1789. Rosenberg distinguished between socialist democracy and various forms of bourgeois democracies. Only a socialist democracy aimed for the abolition of capitalism and the self-government of the masses. Social Democracy, by contrast, was one of four types of 'bourgeois democracy'. While it strove for the political emancipation of the working classes, it did not question the existence of private ownership of the means of production. Hence it was closer to the other three types of bourgeois democracy: imperialist (England), liberal (Switzerland, Norway) and colonial (Canada) democracies.⁶

Already these few statements demonstrate the simple fact that the relationship between democracy and social democracy has been the subject of a considerable amount of debate among historians and social scientists. In this brief article I shall try to problematize some of the major junctures in the history of that relationship and concentrate in particular on the existence of different concepts of democracy within West European Social Democracy at different times in the twentieth century. After discussing the links between Social Democracy and radical democrats in the nineteenth century, I shall consider the impact of Marxist thinking on democracy. Above all, I shall argue, it left an anti-pluralist legacy which resulted in a fundamental ambiguity of Social Democrats towards democracy. Only in the postwar period, under the conditions of the Cold War and a long economic boom, did Social Democrats fully endorse the politics of pluralist democracy. And when the emerging 'Social Democratic consensus' came under intense criticism in the 1970s and 1980s,

the commitment of Social Democracy to democracy was one of the few uncontentious areas. Arguably this is also the reason why much of the recent renaissance of Social Democratic movements across Europe has focused on democracy as a central tenet of 'new' Social Democracy.

The Origins of Social Democracy in the Democratic Movements of the Nineteenth Century

When Social Democratic parties were founded in the last third of the nineteenth century, they perceived themselves as heirs to a variety of democratic movements of the first half of the century. In Britain the Social Democratic Federation (founded in 1884) and the Independent Labour Party (founded in 1893) built traditions and constructed histories linking them to the radical working-class Chartist organizations of the 1830s and 1840s. Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock have demonstrated comprehensively

. . . the extent to which the 'socialist revival' of the 1880s was influenced by concerns — reminiscent of Chartism — with constitutional and electoral reform. Thus, aspirations for democracy remained no less central to socialism than the apparently more novel aims of social and economic transformation.⁷

Before 1914 the British labour movement was characterized by an ideological struggle between those forces in favour of more radical and direct democracy and those which pleaded for the basic acceptance of representative democracy as it existed in Britain. In many Continental labour movements, similar debates were taking place about which particular ideal of democracy should be endorsed by Social Democrats. Yet almost everywhere the commitment to some form of democratic theory formed a key element of Social Democratic thought. The two Social Democratic Parties founded in Germany in the 1860s self-consciously saw themselves as continuing the work of radical democrats such as Johann Jacoby and Guido Weiss. They felt committed to democratic ideas of the 1848 revolution and in particular to the first national labour movement of that time — Stephan Born's Brotherhood of Workers. Conceptually, the idea of democracy preceded the ideal of socialism. Hence the construction of socialism in Germany was tightly related to democratic theory.⁸ Notwithstanding Giuseppe Mazzini's anti-Communism, many

Italian Social Democrats, who founded the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) in 1892, perceived themselves as carrying on the legacy of Mazzini's Democratic Party founded after the failed 1831 rising in Italy. The French Socialist Party portrayed itself time and again as the natural successor of working-class Jacobinism in the French revolution of 1789. By 1900 European labour movements broadly saw themselves as upholding the values embodied in the declaration of human rights in the American War of Independence in 1776 and in the French Revolution of 1789.

The nineteenth-century identification of Social Democracy with various ideas of democracy makes sense only against the background of a firm distinction between nineteenth-century democrats and liberals. The latter were not in favour of a genuinely democratic politics. Instead they attempted to tie democracy to the acquisition of education and property. By contrast, Social Democratic parties concentrated on widening the existing franchise and incorporating as many people as possible in the democratic process. Electoral reform became the watchword for Social Democrats across Europe. The granting of full male suffrage in France as early as 1848 was the exception rather than the rule. In most other European states, Social Democratic parties had to struggle hard to achieve progress on electoral reform. Despite his fiery revolutionary rhetoric, Louis Blanc also claimed that only a democratically elected parliament would eventually be inclined to finance the setting-up of independent producers' co-operatives which would end all forms of exploitation in industry.⁹ Hence it was not that surprising that the Blanquists in the 1880s made energetic efforts to win support at the ballot box and participate in the political process.¹⁰ For very similar reasons, Ferdinand Lasalle's General German Workers' Association campaigned heavily for electoral reform in the 1860s.¹¹ Electoral reform also was the key issue in Sweden before the reform of the franchise system between 1907 and 1909.¹² The Belgian Workers' Party called three general strikes in its ferocious battle to win the vote for all workers.¹³ For Plekhanov, the Social Democratic movement in Russia had to fight for democratic freedoms first and foremost. Only after a democratic framework had been established could the battle for economic and social equality in Russia begin. Arguably this was also the reason why this hard-line opponent of revisionism argued in favour of an alliance with the liberals in the 1905 Russian revolution.¹⁴ And

even in Britain, in one of the allegedly most democratic political systems in Europe, Keir Hardie realized full well that electoral reform was going to be a key issue of the future. In his presidential address at the 1910 Labour Party conference he stated, 'The election has again forced upon our attention the need for a great scheme of electoral reform whereby the nation, and not merely a fraction of it, would be able to express its opinions at the ballot box.'¹⁵ The same year the party endorsed proposals for comprehensive electoral reform. The concern of the Labour Party with improving the workings of the British constitutional system continued in the interwar years, when Labour stalwarts such as G.D.H. Cole, Harold Laski and Ivor Jennings made a variety of suggestions and proposals.¹⁶

Universal suffrage was of such importance to Social Democrats because they assumed that the class-conscious proletariat would eventually form a majority of the population. Hence enfranchisement was the precondition for the victory of socialism.¹⁷ Social Democrats were even willing to consider using physical force to achieve electoral reform. The Swedish SAP, for example, united behind the idea of the general strike in 1894. In Germany many revisionists, including Eduard Bernstein, supported the idea of the mass strike to achieve a more democratic franchise system in Prussia, and they could count on the fervent support of the Social Democratic ranks in the SPD's campaigns to abolish the Prussian three-tier franchise.¹⁸ A certain ambiguity towards the enfranchisement of women and ethnic minorities was not absent from mainstream Social Democracy, even if no other major political force championed women's rights and the rights of ethnic minorities more prominently than Social Democracy.¹⁹

The idea of franchise reform and democracy more generally was firmly linked to the idea of greater social equality. As the Eisenach programme of the German SDAP put it in 1869,

. . . political freedom is the most indispensable precondition for the economic emancipation of the working classes. Hence the social question is indivisible from the political question. The solution to the former is conditional on the solution of the latter, and possible only in the democratic state.²⁰

Yet it was precisely this relationship between social equality and political democracy which proved to be the most difficult nettle to grasp for Social Democrats as it had been for numerous political theorists since Aristotle. Was democracy just the means

to achieve equality? And once equality had been achieved, would the interests of those who were governed and those who governed be identical? In which case, would democracy be superfluous in the socialist state of the future, because there could be, by definition, no differences of interest?

The Influence of Marxism on the Relationship between Democracy and Social Democracy

In contrast to some of the early socialists such as Robert Owen, Karl Marx defended democracy as the key means by which exploitation of the majority by a minority could be ended.²¹ Marx therefore was wholly in favour of Communists joining forces with democrats when it came to pushing through democratic reforms. Yet he also carefully distinguished between bourgeois and proletarian democracy.²² In the French revolution of 1848, Marx argued, the two concepts of democracy had parted company for the very first time. Bourgeois democracy rested on the twin pillars of the individual rights and freedoms and the rule of law. Democracy here was a formal mechanism of interest representation. Proletarian democracy started from the assumption that the formal democratic mechanisms had to be filled with social content. Furthermore, political democracy was in need of being supplemented by the democratization of power relationships in the economy and in society as a whole. Representative democracy restricted to the political sphere would eventually give way to participatory democracy in as many fields of society as possible. In later years, the council democracy of the Paris Commune was to provide a model for Marx's understanding of a genuine proletarian democracy.²³ For Marx such a participatory democracy would make the state the servant of genuine human needs. In this respect, Marxism proved the mirror opposite of Hegelian state philosophy.

Marx also introduced the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' which subsequently gave rise to much misunderstanding. Marx did not use the term to suggest the abolition of democratic republicanism. Rather he used it to describe the proletarian democracy of the future. According to Marx, all democracies were based on class rule. The democratic republic was the most advanced political organization of bourgeois society. It provided the

ground on which the class struggle of the proletariat could best succeed. Yet proletarian democracy would not do away with a democratic republic. Only the context and content of that republic would change. However, Marx's championing of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' lent itself to misconstruction, especially as he never actually bothered to think through systematically the question of the social organization of democracy.²⁴

Social Democratic Parties often adopted Marxist programmes under conditions of persecution and repression. They seemed to prove beyond reasonable doubt the reality of the class war. The state was apparently dominated by class interest and the revolution appeared to many as a way out of the current misery. The German Social Democrats, for example, adopted Marxism as their official ideology in 1891 — just after the Anti-Socialist Laws had lapsed.²⁵ In Italy the socialist organizations were forcibly dissolved in 1898, and Filippo Turati, one of the founding fathers of the Italian Socialist Party, was sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment in 1899. Under the impact of persecution, the Italian socialists' commitment to Marxism strengthened, and, conversely, when the repression gave way to a much more accommodationist policy after 1900, their Marxism became more gradualist and reformist.²⁶ The Spanish Socialists adopted Marxism in 1879. The intellectual influence of Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, clearly mattered, but, again, the repressive political conditions produced by the Cánovas Restoration (1875–1923) seemed to prove that the state was in the hands of the landowning social elites who were closely allied to the military.²⁷ It is surely not coincidental that the reception of Marx in France only really started in socialist circles after the brutal repression of the Commune and the subsequent destruction of the labour movement. Its revival after 1873 also brought the rise of political Marxism in France.²⁸ Where discrimination was less overt and obvious, such as in Britain, Marxism always remained somewhat of a distinguished minority tradition. Yet even among the British Left Marxism generated a good deal of debate. As G.D.H. Cole argued in 1933, 'To look around on the world of to-day with seeing eyes is to be a Marxist, for Marxism alone explains what is going on.'²⁹ Twenty-five years earlier, the Labour Party had already sought membership of a self-confessed Marxist body, the Second International. In 1908 no lesser Marxist than Karl

Kautsky had endorsed that application against strong opposition from the British SDF and Henry Hyndman. While Hyndman argued that the Labour Party was not Marxist, Kautsky insisted that it was an independent working-class party which, consciously or not, furthered the class struggle in Britain.³⁰

Kautsky had taken from Marx the belief that the existing class society made any true democracy impossible. Yet democratic institutions in the class state facilitated class conflict and thus heightened class consciousness. They paved the way to the proletarian revolution which, in democratic states such as Britain or Germany post-1918, would eventually come about by peaceful means, i.e. through the ballot box. Hence it is not surprising that Kautsky's 'democratic Marxism'³¹ was opposed to transferring the Bolshevik experiment to Western Europe. Given that Kautsky nowhere specifically analysed the exact nature of the democratic transition from capitalism to socialism, his idea of democracy remained largely focused on parliamentary representation and the championing of the rights of the individual. It is generally noticeable that late nineteenth-century Marxist Social Democracies paid little attention to the minutiae of democracy and democratization. After all, practically all of them (to varying degrees) struggled rather with the absence of democratic structures. Hence they sought to bring democratic institutions into being rather than marvel about the intricate problems of democratic systems.³²

Nevertheless, one could argue that Kautsky, the main adversary of Eduard Bernstein in the revisionism debate around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, rather ironically was as committed to liberal-democratic thought as his ideological enemy. Both adhered to the belief that political democracy was the normative precondition for the development of a socialist society. Bernstein and Kautsky both championed the concept of representative democracy over that of direct democracy.³³ In that respect they were following Kant and Mill rather than Rousseau, and both were influenced by the rights-based political language of British constitutional theory. Yet Bernstein undoubtedly paid greater attention to the intricate problems of democratization and linked democracy more firmly to socialism than most other contemporary Marxists did, including Kautsky.

Bernstein perceived political democracy as the normative precondition for any socialist society. Under the influence of British

'New Liberalism', the extension of democracy became the central focus of Bernstein's political thought. He firmly believed in the ultimate victory of democratic evolution even in Wilhelmine Germany. Bernstein arguably was the first Social Democrat for whom democracy was not a means to an end. Democracy was the end: 'In the last instance, for me, socialism means democracy, self-administration.'³⁴ The debate on revisionism which reverberated around European Social Democracy in the early 1900s revealed the strong commitment of Social Democratic leaders in other Marxist parties to representative forms of democracy. MacDonald saw in Bernstein, who also was a close personal friend, an intellectual mentor.³⁵ Jean Jaurès, for example, like Bernstein, was convinced that republicanism and democracy were eternally progressing to all fields of society. And he called on his fellow Social Democrats to engage constructively in the political process, to build alliances with other parties and other classes so as to further the aims of Social Democracy in specific policy areas.³⁶ The Swedish SAP had, of course, its own version of Bernstein in the figure of Hjalmar Branting, who, unlike Bernstein, was almost undisputed leader of his party from its inception to 1925. Antonio Labriola, the 'father of Italian Marxism', argued in favour of a step-by-step introduction of social reform which would extend the democratic idea and build on existing democratic institutions.³⁷

The parliamentarization of Social Democracy across Western Europe undoubtedly contributed to the positive reception of liberal democratic theory among leading Social Democrats. While German Social Democrats indicted the Imperial German constitution for not providing proper parliamentary government, SPD reformism was nevertheless significantly strengthened by the strong parliamentary orientation of the SPD well before 1914.³⁸ Even a radical critic of the existing parliamentary system in Imperial Germany such as Franz Mehring, left the readers of his influential lead articles in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* in no doubt about his own high opinion of parliamentary government.³⁹ In the Weimar Republic the young German democracy had no firmer champion than Social Democracy. The 1921 Görlitz programme pledged allegiance to the 'democratic republic'. Rudolf Hilferding's theory of 'organized capitalism' perceived democracy as the specific state form of the working class. Like his mentor Kautsky, Hilferding upheld the notion that democracy

was the basic precondition for the socialist transformation of society.⁴⁰ Social Democratic constitutional theorists such as Gustav Radbruch and Hermann Heller contributed significantly to the theory of democracy in the 1920s.⁴¹ They insisted on the centrality of the rule of law in protecting all citizens from the encroachment of the state onto the territory of their individual rights. In the interwar years both the Soviet Union and a variety of fascist regimes served as powerful reminders of the importance of the constitutional democratic state for the Social Democratic project. In his autobiography, looking back on his experience as justice minister in the Weimar Republic, Radbruch expressed disappointment that he and his like were unable to commit Social Democrats more firmly to the democratic state: 'The masses had to be told firmly that democracy realizes one half of the Social Democratic programme and that it had to be the primary consideration to stabilize what had been won.'⁴²

Elsewhere, it had been easier to commit Social Democracy to championing the liberal democratic state. The British Labour Party after 1918 followed the teachings of MacDonald and the Webbs, and its MPs were totally committed to the parliamentary road to socialism.⁴³ The Swedish SAP moved from a self-declared working-class party to a people's party in the 1920s — using Per Albin Hanson's notion of the people's home (*folkhemmet*) as the crucial ideological tool.⁴⁴ The Dutch Social Democratic Party dropped its commitment to Marxism in 1937. Instead of endorsing the class struggle, the SDAP cited social reform and the preservation of democracy as the Party's most important aims.⁴⁵ But in countries well-known for their more illiberal traditions too, Social Democrats often held up the values of liberal democracy. In July 1933 Otto Bauer called on fellow Austrian socialists not to lose sight of the fact that the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat was out of the question amidst rising fascist dictatorships. Instead, he argued, 'the decision will be made today not between democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but between democracy and the dictatorship of fascism'.⁴⁶ Already during the Giolittian period before the First World War, the parliamentary party of the PSI was firmly committed to the parliamentary road to socialism.⁴⁷ In Spain the PSOE put all its energy into achieving a liberal democratic state after forging an alliance with the Republicans in 1910, and subsequently important leaders of the party, such as Indalecio Prieto, rallied to the

modernization and regeneration of Spain under liberal democratic (but capitalist) conditions.⁴⁸

The widespread belief among West European Social Democrats that the capture of state power through the ballot box would inevitably lead to socialism contributed to the endorsement of an uncritical statism among the stalwarts of Second International socialism. Socialism would begin as soon as the Social Democratic representatives of the working class had captured the state apparatus. Kautskyism, Bernsteinian revisionism, Fabianism, and most variants of Continental Marxist thought were united in this belief in statism. Luxemburgism and guild socialism were among the exceptions to the rule. Both stressed the more voluntaristic aspects of working-class emancipation and they favoured forms of direct democracy which otherwise had found a more permanent home in European anarchism. Rosa Luxemburg was highly critical of Bernstein's claim that democratization was the basic law of all historical development. Instead democracy, according to Luxemburg, was the self-determination of the proletariat, be it through the exploitation of democratic institutions, be it through the championing of extra-parliamentary activities such as the mass strike. She shared Marx's preference for a council democracy which would subordinate the state to the fulfilment of real human needs. With Rousseau she argued that a truly socialist society would not know any clashes of interest. The well-being of the individual would fall into one with the well-being of all. Nevertheless, in firm opposition to Leninism, she insisted on the democratic organization of society. While the freedom of the individual also had to be maintained after the revolution, that freedom would not be allowed to restrict the freedom of others. Democracy was more than the mere maintenance of individual rights. It also had to secure collective social rights.⁴⁹

In Britain, the opposition to state socialism was focused in particular on guild socialism, one of whose key proponents was G.D.H. Cole. For him 'guild socialism was essentially a theory of democracy'.⁵⁰ Statism, he argued, neglected the problem of social power, and only the extension of democracy to all fields of society could further the initiative and extend the freedom of the working class. Cole's deep dislike of parliamentary representation had its origins in this belief that people had to practice real democracy in their everyday life functions rather than delegate responsibility for decision-making to elected representatives

every four or five years. People had to take control over their social world where it mattered to them: at the workplace, in the neighbourhoods, in schools and universities.

This basic division in prewar European Social Democracy between a socialist collectivism (or statism) and a socialist voluntarism had direct repercussions on the attitude of Social Democrats towards democracy and towards parliamentarism and the whole idea of representation. For Social Democratic voluntarists democracy was not a mere formal mechanism for an institutionalized form of interest representation. Quite the opposite: democracy was the self-realization of workers in all spheres of life. Systems of national interest representation including parliamentarism as well as bureaucratized parties and trade unions in effect often had a deadening effect on the involvement of people in the political process. Hence forms of localized direct democracy were preferred, wherever possible.

Yet, when, after 1917, the Bolsheviks forced a split in Social Democracy, this split did not neatly follow the division between voluntarists and statists. Whereas Lenin was a statist, Luxemburg and, to a lesser extent, Gramsci were voluntarists. Yet they all were Communists united in their belief that a revolution would have to take place before a socialist democracy could be built. On the other side, the statists Kautsky and Hilferding as well as the Webbs found themselves paired with Cole on the Social Democratic wing of the divide, as they all argued in favour of non-revolutionary roads to socialism. After 1917 the basic dividing line ran between the advocates of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the champions of 'democratic socialism'.

Social Democratic Attitudes towards Pluralism

In interwar European Social Democracy, Austro-Marxists continued to adhere to Marxian notions of a harmonization of interests in the future socialist state. Max Adler celebrated notions of a solidaristic community in which a harmony of interests would prevail and in which reason would rule over a general will which knew no antagonistic social interests.⁵¹ Austro-Marxists such as Adler and Otto Bauer continued to differentiate between bourgeois and proletarian democracy. Bourgeois democracy was class rule. Proletarian democracy had

to be brought about by winning political power in the state. Violent means to achieve this were explicitly ruled out. Instead the proletariat had to assimilate a number of social classes that were close to the working class. Only such a homogenization of related classes would lead to an eventual majority for Social Democracy at the ballot box. In the 1920s Austro-Marxists argued that an existing 'equilibrium of classes' had led to a stagnation of the class struggle. This made the sharing of power at least a temporary necessity. But, not unlike Luxemburg, the Austro-Marxists stressed the fact that the democratic freedoms would have to be maintained even in the socialist state of the future. The French socialists' adherence to working-class Jacobin republicanism produced its own difficulties for an acceptance of a pluralistic democracy in which different interests would come together on the political stage to find compromise. After all, the nation was 'une et indivisible'; the state represented the will of the whole nation.

Social Democratic pluralists, such as Radbruch and Heller in Germany, abandoned the idea that a truly socialist society would not know any interest fragmentation. Precisely because the existence of diverse interests was a characteristic of every society, the maintenance of individual rights by the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) became of prime importance. The democratic state became the ideal state form for Social Democracy as it alone was capable of solving the existing class conflicts by extending the idea of the rule of law to other areas of society, notably to the economy.

In the interwar period 'economic democracy' became a popular slogan for many Social Democracies in Western Europe. In Germany, the idea was developed by Fritz Naphtali, the head of the ADGB's Research Institute for Economic Affairs between 1925 and 1928. The democratization of the economic sphere was to be achieved through extending the powers of works councils and establishing institutions for economic self-administration in which unions would be represented on equal terms with the employers. While the first steps towards 'economic democracy' could already be achieved under capitalism (essentially through state intervention in central processes of economic decision-making), full 'economic democracy', Naphtali insisted, would only be possible in a socialist economy. Hence the transformation of capitalism and the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production remained the long-term aim of the

ADGB.⁵² The Dutch SDAP also, at the end of the First World War, demanded a significant improvement in worker participation in management.⁵³ Whitley councils in Britain after 1918 as well as the Mond–Turner talks in the late 1920s signalled an interest in economic democracy among sections of the British labour movement as did the more theoretical contributions of Webb, Cole and Harold Laski.⁵⁴ In France, Jaurès had already argued that the political democracy of the republic had to be extended to the whole of the country's economic life.⁵⁵

Regardless of the almost universal appeal of notions of 'economic democracy', Social Democratic thinking on democracy remained characterized by a fundamental ambiguity between the perception of democracy as a means to an end (i.e. socialism; essentially the Austro-Marxist perspective) or an end in itself (which would inevitably lead to socialism; the argument put forward by Social Democratic pluralists). Both positions could be satisfied with the explicit commitment of the Socialist Workers' International (passed at its 1920 conference) to democracy, as the term itself remained vague and certainly was not clearly defined in Social Democratic discourse. At the end of the First World War a tidal wave of democratization swept the European continent. Yet, during the next two decades, many of these new democracies collapsed. The economically and socially unstable class states of the interwar period left important sections of Social Democracy with strong and lingering doubts about the parliamentary road to socialism. It was difficult to imagine that bourgeois democracy would deliver socialism in the end. The class struggle seemed to threaten even the most stable democratic systems such as the British parliamentary system. Harold Laski, for example, feared the worst for British parliamentary democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, and began to question the possibility of bringing about socialism by employing constitutional means.⁵⁶ Both the ILP in Britain and the SAP in Germany parted company with mainstream Social Democracy in the early 1930s, not the least because their leading representatives seemed to despair about the Labour Party's and the SPD's legalistic attachment to forms of 'bourgeois democracy' and their endorsement of pluralism as the main safeguard against threats to democracy from the political Right. Under the impact of European fascism, other sections of European Social Democracy moved to the Left. In France the *Bataille Socialiste* wanted to commit the SFIO to

a more radical united front strategy. In Belgium the Action Socialiste sought to return the Belgian party to its revolutionary origins and away from the strong reformist orientation of the interwar period. Under the impact of events in 1934, Otto Bauer moved from his acceptance and defence of political democracy in Austria to more revolutionary demands for a dictatorship of the proletariat. And in Spain, the trend away from a commitment to liberal democratic forms and reformist strategies was perhaps most marked in the early 1930s, with both PSOE and UGT emphasizing the need for revolutionary change in Spanish society which could not be brought about solely through parliament and the democratic reform process.⁵⁷

Towards a Pluralist Consensus: Social Democracy under the *Pax americana*

Yet after 1945 things looked very different again for Social Democrats who were emerging from years of oppression and persecution under a swastika-dominated Europe. The ideological development of the first Social Democratic chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Willy Brandt, was in many respects representative of the further move of West European Social Democracy towards the acceptance of pluralist democracy after 1945.⁵⁸ In 1932 Brandt had decided to join the breakaway SAP. He was disappointed with the SPD's purely legalistic defence of the political democracy of Weimar. Socialized in the Social Democratic youth movement (SAJ) of the 1920s, he grew up with the SAJ's slogan 'The republic, that is not much — socialism is the aim'. His position changed during his enforced years of exile in Norway, when, under the influence of Scandinavian Social Democracy, he increasingly came to perceive political democracy as the basis on which socialism could be built. Conversely, he came to see socialism as the 'perfect democracy'.

The Swedish Socialist Workers' Party (SAP) was arguably the first and the most successful Social Democratic Party in accepting and practising pluralist democratic power politics in the early 1930s. They had forged an important alliance with the Agrarian Party (representing largely agricultural interests) and, while in government, began to experiment with Keynesian anti-cyclical economic policies. Within the framework of the liberal constitu-

tional order and the democratic state, Swedish Social Democrats set out to manage capitalism more effectively and produce a 'capitalism with a human face'. The SAP was convinced that democracy and cross-class alliances were the key to a socialist society of the future. Its leading theoreticians, such as Hjalmar Branting, Ernst Wigforss and Per Edvin Sköld, were also its leading politicians, and they shared a fundamental belief in the liberal democratic state's ability to deliver socialism. The Swedish/Scandinavian model soon evoked intense interest in other Social Democratic parties. In Britain, the New Fabian Research Bureau sent a high-ranking delegation to Sweden in the summer of 1937.⁵⁹ And the Labour Party's international secretary, William Gillies, was in touch with Swedish Social Democrats over their policies on public-works programmes, housing, a national health service, and trade union-party relationships.⁶⁰

In 1950s Western Europe, the achievements of Scandinavian Social Democracy were celebrated in other Social Democratic parties, and many of Europe's leading socialists, like Anthony Crosland in Britain, championed the Swedish road to socialism.⁶¹ Nationalization, economic planning (which involved some kind of corporatism), the welfare state and a pluralist democracy were the key pillars of the Social Democratic identity as it was remodelled in the context of the Cold War. Pluralist Social Democrats such as Ernst Fraenkel in Germany argued that democracy was the key mechanism for achieving a proper balancing out of conflicting interests even in a socialist society. As Dietrich Orlow has written in a detailed comparison of the postwar trajectories of the Dutch, French and German Social Democratic Parties,

... virtually all Socialists insisted political democracy was an end in itself. The concept included both respect for individual civil rights and adherence to a system of political decision making founded on free, universal suffrage. Most Social Democrats favored parliamentary democracy as a constitutional system.⁶²

In 1951 the revived Socialist International sanctioned democratic pluralism as the official stance of Social Democratic parties across the globe: 'Socialism can only be realized through democracy; democracy can only be perfected through socialism.'⁶³ And in 1989, the Socialist International reiterated its belief that democratic socialism consisted of the 'worldwide democratization of economic, social and political power structures'.⁶⁴

Everyone wanted to be a Social Democrat in the 'golden age'

of Social Democracy in Western Europe between 1945 and 1975. Even the intellectually most agile of the Euro-Communist parties, the Italian PCI, already championed what its chairman, Palmiro Togliatti, called 'progressive democracy'. According to Togliatti, no transition to socialism would not involve a break with parliamentary democracy. Quite the contrary, the road to socialism would lead via the achievement of cultural hegemony (Gramsci) which in turn would produce electoral majorities. Certainly, most centre-right parties in Western Europe came to accept key components of the Social Democratic world view. A 'Social Democratic consensus' emerged which promised economic stability, social peace and an improvement in the life chances of an ever increasing number of people. The discourse of Fordism had superseded the class theme which still had such a strong presence in the interwar period. The productivist ethos was replaced by a consumerist self-understanding of large sections of the working class, and the 'affluent worker' was soon raising the spectre of a 'levelled middle-class society' in which a maximum degree of social equality was allegedly becoming a social reality.⁶⁵ Earlier notions of 'economic democracy' were now superseded by the ideas of 'co-determination' and 'critical partnership' with capital within differing conceptualizations of corporatism in Western Europe.⁶⁶ Yet this particular Social Democratic utopia could only flourish against the background of the long postwar economic boom in Western Europe. When economic recession began to bite in the 1970s, the certainties of Social Democratic wisdom began to tumble and fall.

The new neo-liberal ideologies challenged the Social Democratic consensus and infiltrated a wide variety of centre-right parties across Europe. Neo-liberalism attacked in particular nationalization, economic planning, and the welfare state as the key evils which had caused the economic crisis. Thus three key pillars of the old Social Democratic self-understanding came under sustained attack. The only pillar which remained virtually unchallenged was that of democracy. It is therefore hardly surprising that attempts to revive the fortunes of Social Democracy in the 1990s rested heavily on the central commitment of Social Democracy to democratic values and norms. Democracy seemed indeed 'socialism's best reply to the right'.⁶⁷ So, for example, the new Social Democrats in Britain and Germany have placed much emphasis on intra-party democracy,⁶⁸ and they are seeking to

involve a greater number of people in decision-making processes within their wider national societies.⁶⁹ New Social Democrats everywhere stress the need for a more active participation of greater numbers of peoples in political decision-making processes, and they champion the expansion of the idea of citizenship.

Some on the left have argued that democratic decision-making at the national level of policy-making has already been fatally undermined by the processes of globalization. The crisis of Fordism has brought new marginalizations and displacements and has produced a more diffuse 'pluralistic class society'. Only international networks of autonomously organized and nationally constituted democratic social movements can hope to meet the challenge posed by a globalized and increasingly aggressive capitalism.⁷⁰ Others have painted less apocalyptic scenarios, but have also placed notions of 'democracy' centre-stage. Thus, the strengthening of civil society is often regarded as the key to the involvement of more people in democratic decision-making processes.⁷¹ The democratization of all areas of society would lead to the mobilization of the people against over-powerful and highly bureaucratized apparatuses of parties and state. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their analysis of the crisis of left-wing political thought in the 1980s, summarized the neo-liberal challenge as 'anti-democratic offensive' and described their alternative for a New Left as 'radical democracy'.⁷² Oskar Negt, political adviser to Gerhard Schröder, has recently argued that 'a public debate about democracy and socialism . . . would be a first important step towards solving the identity crisis of the left'.⁷³ Economic democracy and the democratization of industrial decision-making processes are seen by Norberto Bobbio — perhaps the most well-known socialist intellectual in contemporary Italy — as a vital ingredient of political pluralism, as otherwise the power of corporate capitalism will subvert pluralist democratic decision-making.⁷⁴ For Bobbio, the old distinction between left and right in politics is still a valid one, as the left remains ideally concerned with reducing inequality, seeking social justice and the protection of the vulnerable in society. However, the concept of democracy and democratization is the vital means for achieving a left-wing political agenda.⁷⁵

Anthony Giddens has argued that precisely this distinction between left and right is far less important in contemporary

Western societies than it was in the past. Yet, democratization is also a central ingredient of his 'third way'. In his historical analysis of the left, Giddens comes to the conclusion that the relationship between socialism and democracy has often been ambiguous and paradoxical, but ultimately

socialism is closely tied up with ideals of democracy . . . Reformist socialism . . . has accepted the importance of democracy for socialist goals . . . Democracy essentially offers a framework within which socialist parties can peacefully rise to power and implement their programme of change.

Yet in his contemporary analysis, Giddens emphasizes the need for a further 'democratization of democracy'. He calls on the left to go beyond orthodox liberal democracy and experiment with extending democracy to more social spheres. Ultimately, Giddens argues, democratization may well be the key means to enhance social cohesion in Western societies.⁷⁶ Calls for 'democratizing democracy' and 'second-wave democratization' abound in Giddens's 'third way' publications. Decentralization of political decision making, constitutional reform, administrative efficiency, local direct democracy and more active citizens' involvement describe 'a form of government which it should be the aim of social democrats to promote: the new democratic state.'⁷⁷ Giddens was, of course, not the first political philosopher on the left to put democracy centre stage. Margaret Thatcher was just celebrating her third successive election victory when John Keane suggested that the crisis-ridden socialist tradition could be revitalized by reference to democratic theory. His self-declared aim was to show 'how the meaning of socialism can and must be altered radically — into a synonym for the democratization of civil society and the state'.⁷⁸ Equally, albeit with different emphases, Jürgen Habermas has argued at length that socialism needs to be rethought in liberal-democratic terms. This involves stressing the importance of liberal freedoms and bourgeois rights. After all, Habermas maintains, the question of how power is organized is not solved by decisions on who holds power. Therefore the law becomes the central element in upholding a precarious balance of interests in democratically constituted societies.⁷⁹

It is not by chance that Wim Kok, the leader of the Dutch PvdA and one of the earliest Social Democrats to search for new Social Democratic policies in the 1980s and implement them as prime minister after 1994, argued that 'The success of West

European Social Democracy . . . was primarily the success of choosing democracy.⁸⁰ If continental Social Democrats such as Kok were critical of the much-heralded British ‘third way’, it was mainly on account of the fact that they had long argued for and, in fact, practised what was now being sold by Blair as a new paradigm for Social Democracy. Of course, there were other criticisms as well: in particular leading French and German socialists, including Lionel Jospin and Oskar Lafontaine, argued for a more active state which would not just accept global free-market capitalism but seek to control it.⁸¹ Scandinavian Social Democrats were critical of Blairite calls to reform the welfare state, as in Scandinavia the welfare state had in general worked well. Radical readjustments seemed unnecessary in the very different national contexts of Scandinavian democracies. Yet, despite such grumblings, European socialist leaders who followed Bill Clinton’s invitation to the White House in 1999 to discuss third-way politics found much to agree on. At home, Blair faced a more critical reception among many British Marxists and Social Democrats alike who criticized the lack of any radical reform measures in practically all policy areas. Instead they saw in Blairism a desperate and vacuous search for the middle ground. Ultimately, critics as diverse as Stuart Hall and David Marquand seemed to agree that, for all its radical rhetoric, ‘New Labour’ was decidedly short on radical practice. It was, in Hall’s memorable phrase, a ‘great moving nowhere show’.⁸² Marquand, reminiscent of Continental socialists such as Lafontaine, called on Social Democrats to use democracy as a means to harness the capitalist Leviathan once again:

Either democracy has to be tamed for the sake of capitalism, or capitalism has to be tamed for the sake of democracy. The capitalist market economy is a marvellous servant, but for democrats it is an oppressive, even vicious master. The task is to return it to the servitude which the builders of the postwar mixed economy imposed on it, and from which it has now escaped.⁸³

Regardless of how one assesses ‘New Labour’, ‘Neue Mitte’ or the ‘third way’ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in a variety of forms and disguises, democracy increasingly becomes the central ingredient of Social Democratic political theory. The new ‘liberal socialism’ challenging the neo-liberalism of the 1980s is based in particular on the endorsement of democratic practices both within the Social Democratic parties and in wider

society.⁸⁴ However, the term ‘liberal socialism’, was already used by G.D.H. Cole to describe a socialism which could combine social equality with the Western liberal tradition.⁸⁵ And going even further back to the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘liberal socialism’ was also the term that Eduard Bernstein chose to describe his own ideas. Individual morality and moral engagement mixed with the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment produced the conceptualization of a Social Democratic universe which in some respects owed more to the world of late Victorian radical liberalism than it did to Marxism.⁸⁶ Bernstein, however, always insisted that he remained a Marxist. Unlike modern Social Democrats, he wanted to transform capitalism. Yet despite this crucial difference, contemporary European Social Democrats are in many ways returning to Bernstein’s revisionism which was the central debating point for Social Democrats at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Notes

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11. Shlomo Na'aman, *Lasalle* (Hannover 1970), 377–408, for Lassalle's theory of democracy.

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27. Angel Smith, 'Spain', in Berger and Broughton, eds, op. cit., 174.

28. For details of the reception of Marxism in France, see Gary P. Steenson,

After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914 (Pittsburgh 1991), 115ff.

29. In *Plebs*, March 1933, cited in A.W. Wright, *G.D.H. Cole and Socialist Democracy* (Oxford 1979), 209.

30. On the debates surrounding entry of the Labour Party into the International see Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats 1900–1931. A Comparative Study* (Oxford 1994), 236.

31. Dick Geary, *Karl Kautsky* (Manchester 1987), 78.

32. Anton Pelinka, *Social Democratic Parties in Europe* (New York 1983), 14.

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36. On Jaurès, see Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth and Dissolution* (Oxford 1978), vol. 2, 129ff.

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63. 'Ziele und Aufgaben des demokratischen Sozialismus', in Julius Braunthal, *Geschichte der Internationale* (Hannover 1971), vol. 3, 613f.

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66. Further details on this are provided in comparative perspective by Stefan Berger and Hugh Compston, eds, *Social Partnership for the 21st Century: Western Europe in Historical Perspective* (Oxford, 2001).

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