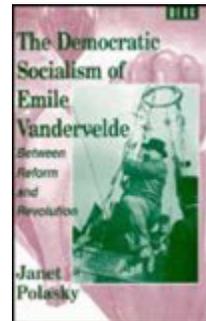


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Janet L. Polasky. *The Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde: Between Reform and Revolution*. Oxford England: Berg Publishers, 1995. xi + 303 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85496-394-2; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-033-1.

Reviewed by Gerd-Rainer Horn (Western Oregon State College)
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This book constitutes an important recent addition to the slow but steady trickle of historical studies focussing at least in part on the oldest industrial country on the European continent, Belgium. Janet Polasky presents an interesting array of materials regarding a variety of issues that have greatly affected Belgian and European history for the classic decades of European Marxism, ranging from the 1880s to the 1930s. Her chapters draw attention to such issues as the extraordinary, but little-known, contribution of the Belgian labor movement to the extension of the electoral franchise; the particularly autocratic form of Belgian imperialism in the Congo; and the vagaries of Belgian social democracy's pioneering experiments in the exercise of governmental power with more conservative coalition partners starting in 1914.

Polasky also manages to integrate her insights on the relations between Belgian social democracy and the Belgian state into a description of the overall evolution of European social democracy from Marxist orthodoxy to advocacy of reforms and governmental participation as ends in themselves. The author is enabled to do so by the peculiar position of Belgian social democracy as a representative of the labor movement in a relatively small and ethnically and linguistically fractured state which, however, was one of the early strongholds of European social democracy outside German-speaking Central Europe and which thus served as a bridgehead to the franco-phone portion of Western Europe and Latin Europe as a whole. Belgian representatives played a disproportionate role in the debates within European social democracy, and Emile Vandervelde, together with Louis de Brouckere, played the most prominent role of all Belgian socialists in those years.

Polasky's study therefore fills a number of gaping holes in the scholarship of European socialism. Yet, in a curious manner, her book, for all its strengths, serves neither as an introduction to the vagaries of Belgian socialism in these important decades, nor is it a convincing "history of democratic socialism as it evolved at the center of European socialism between 1889 and 1938," (2) to use her own words.

To explain. When I first began reading this volume, I hoped to have finally found an accessibly written study that could serve as a text for an audience interested in, but largely unfamiliar with, the vagaries of Belgian history and the political itinerary of European social democracy. Yet Polasky, for all the wealth of detail, rarely introduces the background information necessary for the non-specialist reader to understand the broader context of most of the debates in which Vandervelde was embroiled for most of his life. For example, neither the peculiarities of the party-political system of pre-World War I Belgium nor the issues behind Belgian socialists' debates on the pros and cons of joining coalition cabinets during and after World War I are ever satisfactorily introduced. The same lack of attention goes for the international controversies in which Vandervelde played a major role. The author never fully discusses the real issues undergirding the mortal rifts which separated the various pro- and antiwar currents during the course of World War I or the nature of the corresponding postwar rifts. Polasky utilizes concepts such as the Zimmerwald movement or the Second-And-A-Half-International, but she never explains the meaning of these terms.

In general, the attentive reader is always very well informed of Vandervelde's opinions but rarely gains

deep insights into opposing views, thus rendering Vandervelde's political evolution somewhat murky. When Polasky addresses the views of Vandervelde's opponents, it is sometimes carried out in a partial manner. Thus Polasky, after describing Vandervelde's pro-Allied positions in World War I, does indeed describe the viewpoint of less belligerent representatives of European social democracy, but leaves essentially unaddressed the opinions of the most vocal opposition to 'Allied socialism' – the organizers of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences, significant portions of which eventually mutated into the hard core of Third International communism. Similarly, Polasky's portrayal of the Plan de Man in 1933 and 1934 as a "strategy of class collaboration" (226) conforms to certain preconceptions and prejudices concerning Hendrik de Man which owe much to his earlier critique of Marxism and his subsequent shift to the right, but has little in common with de Man's opinions at this particular conjuncture of Belgian and continental European socialist politics.

Perhaps Polasky's real concern is not to provide a general introduction to Belgian politics and European socialism, but to provide for specialists a building block towards the comprehension of international socialism's evolution. Yet for such a task Polasky's book is far too undertheorized. If there is a theory-driven 'red thread' to her argumentation, it concerns Vandervelde's contributions towards the emergence of 'democratic socialism'. But Polasky is remarkably imprecise concerning the contours of this 'democratic socialism'. At one point she equates "his democratic socialist strategy" with "his revolutionary reformism" (55), which, however, merely begs the question. Quite frequently throughout her text, she

appears to equate 'democratic socialism' with the activity of social democrats in national parliaments, as in her comment on the Belgian King's support for universal suffrage in November 1918: "When the king finally handed the Socialists the key to the path of democratic socialism...." (162). In her introduction, Polasky goes as far as to refer to the former CEO of the European Union, Jacques Delors, as the late-20th century incarnation of "democratic socialism." But to lump Jacques Delors and Emile Vandervelde into one category is no more meaningful than Vandervelde's belief, in the words of his biographer, that "Socialism was by definition a revolutionary doctrine, no matter how reformist the strategy advocated by its leaders" (259). To Polasky's credit, she does occasionally refer to "the ultimate contradictions in a democratic socialism that sought to realize its lofty ideal through a strategy of compromise," (264) but she never fully addresses these contradictions nor does she always seem to be fully aware of them.

In the end, this volume will be most useful to specialists who are not in search of conceptual clarity or an analytic assessment of European social democracy in the classic years of the European Left. Instead it may serve as a useful compilation of empirical evidence, focussing on an important but long-neglected European state and statesman. Polasky's study may thus serve as an important building block towards an overall picture of European socialism.

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