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Sheri Berman does not quote Lord Dahrendorf, but she certainly agrees with his judgment some years ago that the twentieth century in Europe saw the rise of social democracy as the continent’s dominant political and economic ideology. [1] In this lucid, very readable book, the author traces the convoluted and often contradictory path of the ideas that eventually led to the triumph of social democracy first in western Europe and, after the collapse of communism, in eastern Europe. The primary merit of the book is not originality. Recently others, like Stefan Vogt, have written on the relationship of social democracy and right-wing nationalists, and the overall intellectual history of the evolution from Marxism to social democracy has been well covered in the literature. [2] As a result, many of the figures discussed in these pages will be familiar to specialists in the field. However, Berman’s book is unique in one very important sense. It is a synthesized work that traces not only the evolution of left-wing thinkers, but also describes social democracy as the culmination and amalgamation of ideological strands from both the left and right side of the political spectrum.

Berman begins with the observation that by the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant political and economic ideologies in Europe had found no satisfactory answers for the social problems that arose with the triumph of the industrial revolution. The dominant bourgeois ideology was liberalism. Its economic ideas had produced a dynamic capitalist economy but its commitment to genuine political democracy was lukewarm at best. On the left side of the political spectrum, the economic determinism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was not only increasingly at variance with the reality of economic developments, but also unable to integrate such powerful concepts as nationalism into its ideological framework.

A variety of intellectuals from Georges Sorel to Vladimir Lenin attempted to solve the conflict of economics, politics, and nationalism. Eventually their efforts would be codified into three ideological systems: Marxism-Leninism, fascism, and social democracy. Berman focuses her attention on the Social Democrats, but it is a major merit of this book that it takes fascism seriously as an attempt to answer Europe’s social dilemmas. As a result, in the course of her discussions, she is able to explain why some left-wing intellectuals ended up in the fascist camp. Like Ze’ev Sternhell, she analyzes the ideas of originally left-wing thinkers who later became fascist sympathizers or activists, such as Hendrik de Man, Benito Mussolini, and Marcel Deat, as serious contributors to the debate, rather than dismissing them as mere populist agitators or opportunists. [3]

Berman argues that social democracy combined faith in political democracy, responsible economic freedom, and moderate nationalism into a coherent set of ideas that provided effective guidelines for social life in twentieth-century Europe. Marxism-Leninism failed because it denied both economic freedom and political democracy, while fascism was doomed because it insisted that political democracy was incompatible with national greatness. Political democracy, the fascists argued, had to take a back seat to dictatorships that deified race or nation. Berman is particularly effective in describing social democracy’s faith in political democracy as laying the foundation of modern social life on the continent. While Marxism-Leninism might have accomplished some notable feats of industrial engineering under the leadership of a single-party dictatorship, and fascism could
point to the mobilization of national energies, only social democracy managed to combine economic dynamics, national integration, and political democracy into a coherent, long-lasting and practical set of ideas.

Berman’s particular intellectual hero is Eduard Bernstein. She correctly credits Bernstein’s ideas with laying the groundwork for social democracy’s evolution from a belief in economic determinism and political revolution to the acceptance of the primacy of parliamentary democracy and economic freedom. As for the actual application of Bernstein’s ideas, Berman focuses on social democracy in Sweden as the most successful practitioner of social democracy in the twentieth century. Sweden, in her words, was the “Social Democratic standard bearer,” especially after World War II.

In general, this book offers an excellent short introduction to the ideas—both successful and failing—that molded much of political life in twentieth-century Europe. Still, the book is not entirely free of errors and distortions. While Berman is certainly justified in focusing on the successes of Swedish social democracy, at times, she veers into historicism. It is also unfortunate that she says very little about the Dutch Partij van de Arbeid, whose evolution in many ways paralleled that of its Swedish counterpart.

I also disagree somewhat with her very negative judgment of the German SPD. She describes the SPD in the Weimar Republic as an “abject failure” (p. 203), and while this judgment may be true in view of the eventual coming to power of the Nazis, it ignores the heroic efforts that the SPD made to maintain parliamentary democracy by parliamentary means. Moreover, it should be noted that the SPD’s 1921 Görlitz Program was the first document that gave Bernsteinianism the force of an official party program. The author could also have addressed the continuing influence of fascist concepts—albeit without their racial and political totalitarian connotations—after 1945. Stripped of its racial determinism, a concept like the Volksgemeinschaft enjoyed a social democratic life after 1945. Similarly, corporatism, now embedded in the framework of political democracy, was the foundation of the laws on industrial Mitbestimmung that the Social Democrats sponsored.

While Berman justifiably celebrates the ideological and political triumphs of social democracy in the twentieth century, she is very pessimistic about social democracy’s future in our present century. She blames these gloomy prospects on a combination of a lack of vision and new ideas among the Social Democrats, and on what she calls the “almost Gramscian hegemony” (p. 209) of neo-liberalism in the present public discourse of the western world. One might add that perhaps part of the reason for the recent lackluster performance of the social democratic parties is the neo-liberal bacillus that has infected some of their leaders. Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair come to mind.

Unfortunately, the layout of the book follows the growing trend in Anglophone academic publishing of failing to provide the reader with a bibliography. To be sure, the work is equipped with footnotes rather than endnotes, but while they are helpful, they do not replace a bibliography. At the very least publishers should follow the example of journals like the Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, which supply the location of the original full citation in all subsequent short references. Overall, however, this book is an excellent overview of the several strands of political thinking that began with the criticism of Marxist economic determinism and ended with the dominant role of social democracy, especially in the last half of the twentieth century in Europe.

Notes


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