

## **SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

Social democracy is generally considered to be a practical middle-ground position between socialism and capitalism. It does not advocate or promise revolutionary change like communism or fascism, but it endeavours to slowly but systematically wear down circumstances which engender all forms of human suffering. The source of the suffering according to social democrats is located in the unregulated market whose power overwhelms community cohesion, produces inequities, and entrenches economic injustices. Aware of the power of markets to convert and reduce everything to commodities, social democracy strives to restrain and establish democratic control of those markets. If liberalism attempts to subordinate state institutions to the will of individuals, social democracy is an attempt to subordinate unregulated markets to democratic will.

In the 1950s, Anthony Crosland enumerated what he considered to be the quintessential social democratic objectives to aspire to which more or less are still pertinent today. The aspirations are as follows: (1) a love for liberty and democratic fervour; (2) an opposition to the material immiseration caused by capitalism; (3) a responsibility for safeguarding the concerns of those who are subjugated or just unfortunate; (4) trust in equality and a society devoid of class; (5) a repudiation of competitiveness and a belief in collaboration; (6) a challenge against the inefficient fall-out caused by capitalism such as unemployment.

### **Emergence**

What we now call 'social democracy' initially came out of labour movements in north-western Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century. It is mainly thought of as a reaction to rapid industrialisation and early industrial capitalism. Members of the working class who were sufficiently politicised would form political parties and trade unions in order to safeguard and present their interests. Such collective democratic formations would endeavour to abolish the extreme immiseration and social subjugation that many saw as the inevitable result of industrialisation.

Early in the twentieth century, the Russian Revolution and its ideological underpinnings revealed two distinct strands of socialism: reformist and revolutionary. Socialist parties have since chosen to err on the side of reformism in a practical sense if not theoretically. Before the Second World War, such parties throughout Europe had mixed results as many found themselves battling capitalist calamities with socialist oratory. Sweden, however, emerged as a positive case for social democracy as the SAP (the Social Democratic Party) there built political alliances across classes, introduced stabilising economic policies, and established welfare schemes.

When World War II broke out, the specifications of social democracy as an ideology seemed set. The first parameter was the social democrats' commitment to parliamentary democracy rather than destructive revolution or direct democracy. Secondly, their electoral requests were

addressed towards the 'people' as a totality rather than to a single social class. Thirdly, they believed that the ideal of egalitarianism would be accomplished predominantly through legislation and government policy.

### **The Golden Age**

The thirty years following World War II are considered to be social democracy's heyday. The unfettered capitalism of the 1930s had bred political fanaticism and led to general calamity, engendering in people a will to reconstruct a more just and secure social footing on which to stand. When states took control of the war effort, they had revealed their potential to exert more authority over the market. Furthermore, new economic theories gave governments a larger toolkit with which to steer state power. In industrialised democracies, the welfare state, some features of which are universal health care, education, housing, and social insurance, had now become an intrinsic part of a citizen's suite of rights. Citizens, regardless of their performance in the labour market had the rights to avail themselves of material resources. This decommodification is a feature of social democratic ideology.

### **Crisis**

In the 1970s, social democracy entered an ideological struggle from which it is thought it has yet to emerge. Once the economies of industrialised countries reached a point in which manufacturing jobs decreased and the service sector enlarged and women were a larger part of the workforce, and people were in general more educated and more affluent, social democracy began to show its weakness as an ideology based on manufacturing, a traditional family life, the opposition to unbridled consumerism, and an allegiance to institutions of welfare and trade unions. This was social democracy's crisis from a sociological vantage point.

On the economic front, neoliberalism gained steam and its political agenda was to retrench, deregulate and privatise. Neoliberal thinkers such as Hayek and Friedman critiqued social democracy stating that the market and not electoral politics should determine human destiny. They were against what they claimed was the coercive and homogenising nature of democratic collective action.

A new revisionism in social democracy resulted from the crisis in order to placate the neoliberal turn. Social democrats began to believe that being credible economically to the electorate and the market made increasing taxes untenable and that complete employment will have to be subordinated in favour of anti-inflation policy. These shifts have been seen by many as a total renunciation of the tenets of social democracy and contribute to the ongoing crisis within the ideology.

Adapted from Ben Jackson, 'Social Democracy' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)