

# Editorial

## The problem of social democracy

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The disconnection of our political life from most people's everyday interactions and concerns, much worried over today, is not a new problem. It can be traced back to the very emergence of the modern state. Social democracy originated as an attempt to bridge the gap.

Marrying, in more or less coherent ways, traditions of republican radicalism with the new collective agencies being thrown up by the industrial revolution, the first social democratic parties emerged in the later nineteenth century in response to the traumatic social dislocations and unprecedented economic polarisation then underway. Early social democracy was clearly distinguished from progressive liberalism by its anchorage in trade union and cooperative movements; but stood out against other socialist or working class tendencies by its strategic focus on conquering political power for the purpose of bringing the economy under some kind of democratic social control. Only against such a background, it was understood, could we secure for every human being their rightful freedom and capacity to flourish.

But this attempt to articulate social movements with electoral and governmental projects was always unstable, and the history of social democracy since the nineteenth century has been a problematic one, riven by fissures and splits, tainted by ambivalence and compromise. Combining vision with incremental progress has never been easy. Social democracy's pragmatic alliances with the nation state and the capitalist economy have provoked compelling challenges from anti-imperialists, feminists, anti-racists, and environmentalists, and others who have exposed the ways in which social democracy can reproduce the pathologies of the society it sought to transform. For many it came to be identified with its absorption into shallow parliamentarism and deadening bureaucracy, and some of the most vibrant and creative political movements of the Cold War period defined themselves in opposition to it. And yet insofar as these currents sought to assert themselves as the democratic basis for a radically different kind of state, whose leverage over private power they still sought to harness, they could be seen as reproducing, or deepening, social democracy's original problematic.

Today actually existing social democracy stands accused of complicity with neoliberalism and neoconservatism, while the gains of its postwar 'Golden Age' seem at best to be eroding, at worst irrecoverably lost. And yet, as the contributors to this issue point out

in various ways, the need to redistribute power and regain some kind of democratic collective control over our shared fate could not be more immediate. New economic inequalities are opening up, both within individual countries and internationally; spaces for community and care, and opportunities for shared experience, are becoming scarce; public institutions are weakening, or falling prey to private manipulation; risks of violent conflict, ecological crisis, even economic breakdown, are increasing. And, short of catastrophist imaginings, it is hard to see what headway can be made against this prospect without some kind of engagement with popular electoral politics and the possibilities of progressive governance and public policy. To that extent, social democracy, in its broadest and most open sense, still defines the political horizon for radical egalitarians, communitarians, and democrats today.

### **Combining for equality**

But as the diverse and divergent viewpoints collected in this issue here are intended to indicate, it is in this broad, open and necessarily contested sense that this journal will interpret its new remit to explore and develop the politics of social democracy. Social democracy not as a set of policies or institutions, nor even necessarily a tradition of ideas and practices, but as a problem that confronts us today, whatever we think of that history, and whatever use we make of it.

Central to social democracy, it can be argued, is the problem of mobilising collective agencies in the interests of a more thoroughgoing equality – empowering people by bringing them together. It is by acting in concert that the disenfranchised in any age have been able to shift the balance of power in their own favour. In the modern period this has meant countering and displacing the corruption of political process that social and economic inequalities will lead to, and turning the legislative power of the state against concentrations of private power in the name of a more inclusive collective interest.

Different approaches to this task can be traced throughout the nineteenth century pre-history of social democracy, in the programme of the Chartists, in the early documents of the First International Working Men's Association, in the Erfurt Programme of the German SPD, in the republican roots of French socialism. In the twentieth century in Europe the achievement of the franchise and the growth of trade unionism combined to enable a range of models for bringing the economy within frameworks of social regulation and redistributing its proceeds to the benefit of the majority. In other areas of the globe, much of which had been brought under the political and economic subjugation of European elites through the nineteenth century, processes of democratisation and varying degrees of economic socialisation were typically driven by complex nationalist coalitions of indigenous property owners, industrialised workers, and large agrarian populations. But no such project has ever been finally stable or secure, and can only exist as part of a dynamic balance of contending social forces. Many have struggled to accommodate the rightful claims of new collective agencies arising from outside the pale of the original settlements – be they militant shop stewards, movements for women's liberation, or

marginalised racial groups – at the same time as facing reassertions of power from resurgent, or reinvented, economic and political elites.

Our 'neoliberal' era can be seen to have resulted from this pincer movement. From the 1970s power and legitimacy drained from many social democratic institutions as they failed to realign themselves with new social forces. And yet, lacking the means of effective coordination and coalescence that social democracy had relied upon, these new currents in our society have been too dispersed, insufficiently encompassing, to shift us decisively onto a new progressive path.

## **Movements and governance**

As a result, for some time the left's politics have been seriously strained, often almost totally bifurcated, between careful minimalist amelioration and passionately principled opposition. So, over the past few years, we have seen moves to 'humanise' the neoliberal order by New Democrats in the White House, 'third way' social democrats in Europe, and promoters of a 'post-Washington consensus' to the developing world; at the same time as new protest movements against capitalism, against environmental degradation, and against war, that gain much of their energy from a radical refusal of any such accommodation. Sometimes the tension between these two poles is productive, and it can and should never be wholly eradicated. But we should never forget that, in the middle, lie the unpoliticised majority, unconvinced by the utopians and the visionaries, but in many ways deeply unhappy with the present state of things. It is this arena in which right-wing populism can and does often find its audience.

The problem this sets the left, then, is the problem faced by its organisers, activists, thinkers and leaders more than a century ago: how to deploy the power of social movements to expand the possibilities of democratic politics. Our goals may indeed be utopian, but our strategies cannot be. So this journal will set itself a demanding but necessary task. We should not temper our ideals – of equality, of human flourishing, of free association, of genuine democracy. Nor should we shy from an honest confrontation with how far short of these standards our world falls today. But we must always force ourselves back to the question of what is to be done, and what is indeed already being done, to change it. And here our analysis has to be complex and concrete, not shrill or rhetorical.

Three key areas of investigation emerge from this predicament, that will be recurrent concerns in these pages. First, an exploration of and engagement with any and all movements for progressive change in our times, to share and disseminate their ideas, to see what might be learned from their methods, but ultimately to assess them not only on their aims but by the real differences they can effect. Secondly, an inquiry into the dilemmas and trade offs of practical policy and politics, one that takes seriously its difficulties and complexities, but without thereby abandoning all critical perspective or radical ambition.

But thirdly, most importantly, we will seek a better understanding of the interplay between the two – the ways in which social change can redefine the limits of the politi-

cally possible, and the ways in which political processes and interventions can enable and empower new forms of social action and interaction. The New Right made very effective use of state power at national and international levels to disable the institutions of solidarity and collective agency that had previously supported a more egalitarian politics: attacking organised labour, weakening local government, commercialising the public sphere, individualising economic risk. Has the left an answer?

## **A new opening**

For this journal, at the present moment, such questions seem close to home. A decade of Labour government has delivered some measurable improvements to the lives and the life chances of the majority. A skilful exercise in the art of the possible has delivered higher employment rates, a significant expansion of our public services, and some redistribution from 'middle' to lower incomes. And now the architect of this strategy is at the helm, beneficiary of a slow motion rebellion of the Labour movement against a leader whose excesses eventually provoked a hesitant reawakening of social democratic conscience.

But ten years after a new contract between government and people was proposed, the relationship between citizen and state is in even worse repair. Inching progress towards the 'New Britain' promised by New Labour is hard for many to detect amid their continuing frustration with their working lives, with the availability of services, with their sense of economic precarity, with the strains on community life. The Conservative Party is making what it can of this, though the more likely response of many voters may simply be to join the growing ranks of the disaffected. Either way, the time for stealthy, technocratic gradualism may be running out.

The vigour with which Gordon Brown has sought to refound Labour's governing project indicates that this has been recognised. A new narrative has been launched that places central importance on informed deliberation over matters of shared concern, 'engaging and involving' all in the development of collective solutions to pressing challenges such as climate change, economic restructuring, and legitimately rising aspirations. To facilitate this, new forums and structures are being put in place, with more radical changes to our constitution hinted at. There is a declared enthusiasm for the role that voluntary initiatives and NGOs can play in building support for progressive causes, from the eradication of child poverty at home to the redressing of economic injustice internationally.

It is too early to say whether this story might also include a positive role for trade unionism, greater autonomy for local government, even moves to redress the corporate domination of our media. In these areas we see more clearly how empowering people by bringing them together may run up against existing concentrations of power that have previously gone unquestioned. It may be, of course, that citizens' juries are simply there to reconcile a petulant citizenry to 'hard realities' and teach them not to demand the impossible. But encouraging and supporting wider participation in political discussion and

debate could serve to bring forth new movements of public opinion in favour of bolder government action to challenge inequality and assert the public interest.

Ultimately this will depend not upon Gordon Brown or his government, but on actors in civil society moving into those spaces that do exist for deliberation and collective organisation, and effectively challenging their limits, redrawing the boundaries between social and political power to create further possibilities for progressive social change. It was in this way that trade unions grew, that the franchise was won, that capitalism was regulated and public welfare secured, and that challenges to patriarchy, racism, and other forms of oppression gained ground. It remains our best hope for bringing global economic forces into line with the requirements of environmental sustainability, conflict reduction, and global justice. The problem of social democracy is that this synergy of social mobilisation and active government can never be scripted or guaranteed. It can always fall into a form of co-optation that needs to be revitalised by radical challenges from the outside.

And so, in the coming period, this journal will seek out and support those synergies, and aim to maximise their potential, while remaining critically alert to the risks of cooptation, and alive to the development of new radical challenges. The only certainty is that we cannot now know how this will turn out. But possibilities are there, and they should be seized.