

# SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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# SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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# FOREWORD

The present volume offers a multifaceted analysis of social democracy in our time, with Europe as its core. Across eleven distinct contributions, the net is cast far and wide. Yet, they all seek to take stock of social democracy today – as a movement and a set of ideas. The ambition has been to cover not only what can be learnt from the decades passed but also what the near future may hold for the centre-left.

Academic work on social democratic politics easily turns towards an idealised version of the past and a dystopic view of the here and now. From this perspective, social democracy enjoyed its heyday in the post-war decades and is something of a sunset ideology today. We have encouraged the contributors to steer clear of the ‘doom and gloom’ narrative in favour of open-mindedness in relation to our topic. Questions to pursue have included where and in what sense Social Democrats have succeeded or failed, and what ideas and dilemmas that accompany social democracy today.

Socialdemokratiet, the social democratic party of Denmark, has been both acclaimed and subject to criticism in recent years, as a profound (and at times painful) policy review has been followed by a return to government. The renewal was characterised by a distinct emphasis on working people, alongside a tight immigration policy and a strong commitment to countering climate change. We are grateful to Frederik Vad Nielsen, the current leader of Danmarks Socialdemokratiske Ungdom, the autonomous youth section of Socialdemokratiet, who has contributed his own political perspective on priorities for twenty-first century social democracy.

During our work with this volume, we would have confounded in our efforts, if it were not for the research assistant Torbjørn Svanevik. He has made a decisive contribution to this volume, especially when it comes to everything usually unseen in a finished book of this kind. We are also in a debt of gratitude to the editorial board of *Comparative Social Research*, series editor Fredrik Engelstad especially, for giving us answers to all our questions and heeding to our cries for help whenever we needed moral support and solutions to practical challenges.

The contributors to this volume, and the reviewers of each contribution, have of course also been very helpful throughout the process, and we owe them all our heartfelt appreciations. They have given us much to think about, and we hope that this volume will become an inspiration for them to continue their work in various fields of social and political science. The editors have undoubtedly been given much to think about, by everyone we have worked with on this volume, which we also aim to revisit in future projects of our own.

During our work on this volume, we have benefited from the working environment and financial support provided to us by our main employers at Bjørknes University College, the University of Oslo and the School of Business at the University of South-Eastern Norway. We have also indirectly been advanced in our efforts by the donations from the Leif Høegh Foundation, who have contributed to a different project directed by one of the editors to this volume, and thereby given us some much-needed financial flexibility. We owe them all our gratitude.

Oslo, June 2020

Nik. Brandal, Øivind Bratberg and Dag Einar Thorsen

# PREFACE

Frederik Vad Nielsen

## **SOCIAL DEMOCRACY MUST REDISCOVER ITS SOCIAL COMPASS**

Social democratic thought has contributed to creating some of the best societies in the world, notably in Scandinavia. Countries in this region benefit from a high level of education. An extensive welfare state ensures security for all; the labour market is civilised, and most women and men are in employment.

All these elements are grounded in politics guided by social democracy, with one keyword above all: balance – that is a balance between a competitive market economy and public interest, a balance between personal liberties and state intervention, a balance between economic freedom and equality and so on. Balance has been the mantra of Social Democrats in Denmark and helped our movement evolve from being an international class-based party at the beginning of the 1900s to being a national people's party half a century later. The key realisation in the course of this journey was that social harmony and order were preconditions if we wanted to unite the population as a whole behind the goal of social justice for the working class. A balance was required in all tactical and strategic choices we made. As a result, we succeeded – in Denmark as in Norway and Sweden – in creating what counts among the most open, free, equal and community-spirited societies of the world.

### *The Balanced Welfare Society Is Evaporating*

In recent years, it has been evident that this hard-fought balance threatens to evaporate. Part of the reason is that Social Democrats have turned away from the original rationale for pursuing it: the ability for people in the working class to govern their own lives.

In Denmark, skilled and unskilled workers constitute half of all people in employment. Blacksmiths, technicians, service workers, haircutters, electricians, butchers and metal engineers struggle day in and day out for the community but to little gain. At the same time, thousands of people fall by the wayside in what ought to be a productive welfare society.

Social Democrats are in danger of forgetting these people. Instead, they have tacitly accepted that financial, educational and cultural elites are granted more and more privileges.

Taxes are reduced for the highest wages and the most expensive properties. Students in higher education reap the benefits of a publicly funded educational system. The labour market for the lower-salaried jobs grows ever more insecure as a consequence of 'social dumping'. Even in a small country such as Denmark, the gulf widens between the city and the countryside in services offered by the state, public investment and political attention. Overall, we are losing balance.

That balance must be regained! To that purpose, Social Democrats must develop policies to improve conditions for the common man and woman. If so, we should lead by the following imperatives.

*First, the struggle over education is also a class struggle.* Massive investment must be directed towards primary education. Over the last few decades, an increasing share of state funding for education has been directed to upper secondary education and colleges. We must be adamant that investment in early schooling is the quintessential educational policy for Social Democrats. All pupils who are dyslexic or cannot comprehend arithmetic must be screened early on, and two teachers should be the norm in every class in primary schools.

At the same time, the early years of schooling should be made less academic. Today, girls benefit much more from primary school than boys who are less honed to academic work. The gap is increasing between grades obtained by girls and boys. That gap must be eliminated. We want more practical skills integrated into schools, internships in secondary school and, generally, much more diverse offerings at school. This way, we can ensure that children and young adults learn about different spheres of life and succeed in not only reading, writing and math but also beyond.

In Denmark, the proportion of young people pursuing a vocational education has fallen from 30 percent in 2006 to less than 20 percent in recent years. We will lack tens of thousands of labourers within the next decade or so. It is to little avail that Social Democrats are afraid of making enemies among the creative class and young academics. The message from Social Democrats ought to be clear: we cannot push all our young people onto university education. The belief that globalisation eliminates the need for manual labour should be thrown on the garbage heap. We are in need of hands in care, construction work, industry, service and trade here and now and will be in the decades ahead. From this lesson proceeds a strategy for massive investment in vocational education and limits to admission into academia. It might seem odd that Social Democrats should be the ones to set a limit for people being enrolled in higher education; for such a long time, we were first in line in the campaign for the opposite. But, we inhabit a world that requires more young people who have learnt a trade. We need to adapt our educational system accordingly.

Moreover, educational policy should not seek to gain first and foremost those who pursue the lengthiest degrees and gain the highest salaries thereafter. Social democracy should take a stand and correct what has been misguided in our policies.

*Second, climate change and automatisisation must be tackled in a way that is socially just.* My generation will be faced with two all-encompassing challenges for many years to come: climate change and a wave of automatisisation in the

labour market. Both challenges entail great opportunities but, evidently, enormous downsides as well, and they will need to be addressed through policies agreed upon and delivered in the next decade. Social Democrats have neither presented the solutions needed to provide for a green transition that is socially just nor prepared the coming generations for a labour market that will change fundamentally.

Tackling climate change requires a break from the neoliberal economic policy that governments, including social democratic ones, have been guided by over the last 30 years. If we are to succeed with a green transformation without crashing the working class, we will have to borrow to invest. To acquire that, we must eliminate our aversion to state debt. Funds should be directed towards the purchase of arable land, the electrification of transport, temporary tax relief for more effective heating in the housing sector, reduced taxes for energy from wind and waves and for green development aid to the poorest countries in the world.

A policy that is green and sustainable cannot be forged on the back of welfare cuts or tax increases for ordinary working people. Public investment is the only way forward, and it is one that Social Democrats must take.

An increase in public borrowing should not only be spent on policies countering climate change. In the course of the next decade, we must enable the greatest upskilling of our workers in recent history if we are to prepare for the automatisisation of our labour market. As machines, robots and artificial intelligence take on ever new tasks, the workforce must gain new skills to adapt. This requires that we elevate the unskilled to skilled and make sure that a fast track to further education is provided for workers with lower wages and fewer years at school. Together, we will kick-start the greatest programme in generations for investment in skills.

### *Social Democracy Must Rediscover Its Social Compass*

Social democracy must prepare the working class for the future. It is time we take their interests as a point of departure in our quest to regain a better social balance. For too long, we have let the elite from the financial, cultural and educational domains define our political priorities. Our belief that globalisation will extinguish the need for manual labour, sending everyone to well-paid jobs in the creative sector, must be dropped once and for all. Only thus can we ensure that support is sustained for the social harmony, safety net and support for liberal democracy in which our country takes such pride. We have demonstrated through our history how social balance is created by standing by all those who contribute to the collective wealth of society. That formula must remain ours. That way, social democracy can rediscover its social compass!