



“Summary of article by Tim Tilton: What is Distinctive About Swedish Social Democratic Ideology?” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 324-329

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by Tim Tilton: What is Distinctive About Swedish Social Democratic Ideology?”**

This article identifies five themes that embody the enduring values of Swedish Social Democratic ideology. Together they create a distinctive whole that has shaped both the unique Swedish model of economic and social policy, and the evolution of the movement's critique of liberal capitalist society under changing economic and political conditions. While it may be difficult for other countries to adopt the particular institutions and policies of the Swedish system, the core values of equality, democracy, freedom, solidarity, efficiency, work, and security that shape the system may be more readily transferable.

### **DOMINANT INTERPRETATIONS OF SWEDISH DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY**

To date, three alternative interpretations have dominated the understanding of Swedish Social Democratic ideology. All have weaknesses, but the new analysis presented here arises from a synthesis of these views. The first comes from the work of Herbert Tingsten, who emphasized the change in the party's ideology from its origins in Marxist socialism to its support of welfare statism. Tingsten argues that there were inherent tensions between the essentially Marxist doctrine first adopted by the Swedes and the current realities of parliamentary politics and tardy capitalist development. This inevitably led to the steady decline of unrealistic and unachievable Marxist elements, leaving a watered-down ideology that promoted gradual reforms for the public interest rather than increasing class conflict. However, while this account of the development of Social Democracy has been very influential and has useful elements, it contains some serious analytical flaws. In particular, Tingsten fails to show that Swedish Social Democracy ever adhered as closely as he claims to broad Marxist perspectives. Alternative analyses must therefore be considered.

A second approach was developed by Leif Lewin who focuses his analysis of Swedish ideology on the "socialist conception of freedom", which is distinctly different from that of the liberals. Rather than regarding the state as a threat to freedom as liberals do, Social Democrats view it as an instrument that can potentially free people from the domination of capital and poverty. Moreover, while liberals believe that equality is incompatible with freedom and economic growth, Social Democrats argue that these are complementary values. Lewin's thesis is powerful and well-documented. However, it is important to note that freedom is not the central Social democratic value; rather, Swedish Social Democrats place at least equal importance on several other mutually reinforcing values such as equality, solidarity, and democracy.

The third important interpretation of Social Democracy denies any ideological motivations, characterizing it instead as a fundamentally pragmatic system. The key problem with this interpretation is that it assumes that "ideological" is equivalent to "unrealistic", and thus the opposite of "pragmatic". This need not be the case if ideology avoids irrational interpretations and takes practical concerns into account. Moreover, it is not reasonable to expect ideology to offer a specific policy blueprint as some pragmatists demand; instead, it provides a core set of values that shapes the policy-making process and serves as a basis for a decent society. "Politics regularly requires improvisation and muddling through, but far from obviating the importance of ideology, such episodes allow one to see which values and predispositions shape the new policy." [257]

## **AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: FIVE CENTRAL THEMES**

Five central themes or values characterize the core of Swedish Social Democratic ideology. Together they form an integrated, coherent whole that shapes and drives national social policy. The first is the idea of integrative democracy as the standard of legitimacy. This entails a belief in democracy and full participation not only in the political arena, but also in the economic and social realms. The starting point of the social democratic ideal is the deproletarianization of the working classes which is achieved by overcoming the political, economic, and material disadvantages that rendered them passive. The goal is integration into the economic life of society as an equal partner, not domination over other classes. The system thus aims for "the rule of all", preferably on the basis of consensus. [259]

The second key theme is the concept of society and state as the "people's home" -- the folkhemmet -- a home characterized by solidarity, cooperation, and equality where no one is privileged or unappreciated. This concept replaces the patriarchal and class-stratified social welfare system that first arose in the early days of Sweden's industrial development with an ideal based on equal rights and universal access to services controlled not by aristocratic beneficence, but by democratic decision-making.

The third theme argues for the compatibility, even complementarity, of socio-economic equality and economic efficiency. While social science has not resolved the debate about whether or not there are tradeoffs between the two, Swedish Social Democrats have consistently sought to maximize the development of society's human resources, arguing that generating the economic growth needed to support higher standards of living depends on a political compact with labor that creates an atmosphere of cooperation rather than antagonism. In addition to offering full employment and a larger worker role in management, egalitarian wage structures are promoted on the basis of equity and efficiency. In a system of equal pay for equal work, profits should actually reflect a firm's efficiency, rather than its bargaining power with respect to workers. Some Social Democrats go still further, arguing that efficiency should be restructured to emphasize employee welfare rather than profits as the key indicator.

A preference for a socially controlled market economy is the fourth theme, implying public control, but not necessarily public ownership, of productive enterprises; nationalization is one possible means for doing this, but not generally the preferred one. There are four strategies of social control. Rather than advocating heavy market regulation, the first focuses on restructuring

and equalizing the background conditions that determine what resources individuals bring to the market and how markets operate. Framework legislation, the second strategy, targets markets directly with the intention of making them more nearly perfect in the liberal sense, for example by improving the supply and exchange of employment information, subsidizing labor mobility, establishing production standards, and providing special incentives to some industries. The third strategy reflects a particularly Swedish approach that advocates neither a fully market nor fully planned economy, but rather a planned market, i.e., a system that recognizes producers and consumers as independent economic agents and regulates the framework within which they interact. The fourth strategy comes from the view that property is a bundle of divisible rights that can be placed in a number of different hands, rather than a block that must always be transferred as a whole. Thus, instead of outright nationalization of industries, private enterprises are gradually surrounded and infiltrated by measures that increasingly direct their efforts toward public objectives.

The fifth theme makes explicit a perception that is implicit in many of the others, that is, the conception that rather than necessarily threatening individual liberties, proper expansion of the public sector can extend freedom of choice. Health insurance, pensions, and full employment policies can provide increased security, freedom from anxiety and poverty, and greater choice and opportunity. This principle in turn rests on two others, first that government is democratic and effectively represents society's wishes, and second that taxes are not an abuse of citizen's freedoms or a form of coercion, but rather a means of allowing people to pay for desired public services.

## **THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY**

While the core values of Sweden's Social Democracy have remained relatively constant, its critique of liberal capitalist society has evolved with changing political and economic circumstances. The movement has generally avoided utopianism and has instead focused on identifying and remedying the abuses of liberal capitalism. Thus, rather than seeking to replace capitalism with socialism, the goal has been to reshape the market system in such a way as to ensure that all individuals possess the capacities and the resources to function effectively within it. In so doing, the movement has succeeded in broadening its basis of support from blue-collar workers to members of the poorer rural strata, the new middle class, and employees at large.

The Social Democratic critique began with a focus on the proletarianization and exploitation of workers who were prevented from achieving material wellbeing, security, and power. It sometimes advocated the socialization of ownership, among other measures, to remedy the situation. However, even then socialization and planning were seen only as the means (and only one of several possible means), not the ends of Social Democracy. At the same time, there was growing recognition that poverty was less tolerable to people than exploitation, and that socialization would not be accepted if it threatened economic growth. This led to a decreasing emphasis on formal ownership of the means of production and advocacy of socialization, and an increasing acceptance of the attitude that the government's role was to adjust markets and their impacts, but not substitute for them, i.e., that Swedes should "[l]et private industry under society's control take care of what it can. Society should not intervene unless it is necessary."<sup>1</sup> This attitude is the foundation of the "historic compromise" between labor and ownership,

whereby cooperation in industrial restructuring was exchanged for better wages, guarantees of full employment, and other social benefits.

The position of Swedish workers has steadily improved, and the economy has in fact been gradually, but increasingly socialized and subjected to greater control by labor and government. Yet Swedish Social Democracy is still characterized by two general tendencies - the dominant one sees private enterprise as a key way of increasing productivity that should be accepted within the framework of the welfare state, while the second is wary of increasing the concentration of capitalist wealth and power. Both the Swedish set of institutions and Social Democratic ideology should therefore be regarded as evolving, rather than as finished products, each of which is subject to the influence of pragmatic judgments about how best to achieve Social Democratic goals. "Social Democrats make their own ideology, but not just as they please; they make it within a tradition of the values of equality, freedom, democracy, solidarity, security, work, and economic efficiency." [276]

## **HOW IDEOLOGY SHAPES POLICY**

It is frequently argued that ideology is of minor importance in shaping policy, which instead is said to be driven by necessary functional adaptations to modern industrial society, the power of the labor movement, or state capacity. However, these factors alone cannot adequately explain the significant variations in national policies with respect to the structure, coverage, financing, and benefits of social programs. In fact, the influence of Social Democratic ideology is apparent in the formation of a number of distinctive elements of Swedish social and economic policy such as the promotion of full employment, the universalism of social policy, and the adoption of an unusually comprehensive form of industrial democracy that includes solidaristic wage policy, active labor market policy, collective capital formation, policies that support women and families, and a host of others. This ideology's greatest achievement, however, has been its ability to persuade opponents and create a general consensus in support of these policies.

## **Notes**

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1. Tage Erlander, *Valfrichetens Samhalle* (Stockholm: Tidenforlag, 1973), 281