

Book Reviews

Alain Bergounioux & Bernard Manin: *Le régime social-démocrate*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989, 189 pp.

Ever since the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, it has been commonplace to speak of 'the crisis of social democracy'. On this view, the 'third way' between laissez-faire capitalism and authoritarian communist rule has lost its ability to deal with the economic problems of an interdependent world. Moreover, the structural transformation of Western societies has blurred those social cleavages on which the political distinctiveness of social democracy rested. An ideological identity crisis has ensued, leading to an inexorable 'Americanization' of social democracy: social democrats will have to accept the role of a catch-all party, no different from their competitors in the mainstream of Western politics.

While not denying the basic *facts* on which the above view is based, Bergounioux and Manin argue that this interpretation is wrong in viewing social democracy as a political or ideological line. To them, social democracy is not *une politique* but *une forme de gouvernement*, a mechanism through which important political decisions can be reached. And since social democracy is a regime rather than a policy, it possesses the capacity to make decisions which stand in a rather clear contrast to previously established policy lines. It is only with reference to this character of social democracy that the major transformations and reorientations in its history can be explained.

The specificity of the social-democratic regime rests on two major pillars. First, social-democratic involvement in the struggle for suffrage expansion gave it a profound democratic heritage, a belief not only in parliamentarism and gradualism but also in the necessity to take the political adversary's interests into consideration. Second, social democracy is supported by a *de facto* union with a centralized and well-disciplined labor union movement. This liaison explains the basic character of the 'historical compromises' made by social-democratic parties. They are not so much ideological about-faces as deals involving a *quid pro quo*, a trade-off stemming from fundamental wage-earner interests.

To Bergounioux and Manin, social democracy continues to represent a viable form of government even after the crisis of the 1970s. It has not lost its specificity as compared to its rivals: its capacity to produce comprehensive political outputs is still unparalleled in Western politics. Rather than the 'regime' itself as a mechanism, its social and electoral base is today a cause of serious concern. Still, the authors argue that the cleavage separating 'wages and profits' will continue to be the major dividing line in politics. Moreover, while representing a serious challenge to social democrats as well as to the rest of the political field, the proliferation of post-materialist values is more likely to benefit social democracy than the right wing. In fact, the authors see a *rapprochement* between social democracy and the environmental parties as more or less unavoidable. This may be a road to a strengthened

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electoral base in the future; as the authors point out, however, it also entails the risk that the vital ties with the labor union movement may be weakened.

Stated in this shorthand manner, the main conclusions of the book may indeed appear as *gefundenes Fressen* from the point of view of the social-democratic parties. Certainly, this study paints the future prospects of social democracy with brighter colors than most other scholarly works on the topic. For this very reason it is important to stress that the authors base their conclusions on a fairly extensive comparative account comprising four countries of major importance: Sweden, the UK, Austria, and West Germany.

In the empirical part of the book, the authors rather convincingly argue that the social-democratic regime has to do with form rather than content; what the political substance of the outputs is has to do with the concrete historical situation rather than with a consistent ideological line. At all times, the ability to induce wage moderation on the part of the unions has been a crucial bargaining chip for the social-democratic regime. It has been utilized to produce compromises with the employers and with other political parties. In Sweden in the 1930s and in all four countries after the Second World War, this instrument helped the social democrats to accomplish the basic elements of the welfare state. In the crisis of the 1970s, wage restraint was rewarded through strong measures against unemployment. Here, however, the British Labour Party was no longer able to control the labor union movement, which is more decentralized than in the other three countries. Labour's difficulties since the late 1970s largely reflect this problem. In fact, Bergonioux and Manin argue that Labour really can not be regarded as a social-democratic party of the same kind as the SAP, the SPÖ, and the SPD, since it does not have the same kind of a centralized labor union ally as the other three parties.

The authors ascribe several misconceptions in the previous literature to the view of social democracy as a substantive political line. One of these notions concerns the role of Keynesian economics. Social democracy was never ideologically tied to Keynesianism; similarly, Keynesian economics was always practiced by governments of varying political orientations. The West German case in the 1970s shows that social democracy could accept a variant of monetarism as long as there was a *quid pro quo* acceptable to the unions.

Le régime social-démocrate is certainly a worthwhile contribution to the literature on European social democracy. Its strength lies in the novel perspective from which the phenomenon at large is viewed; moreover, the authors make several keen observations concerning the four cases studied. The empirical part of the book, based as it is on secondary sources, will probably offer few new facts to the expert; on the other hand, these concise accounts can be recommended to anyone who wishes to learn the essentials of the four cases.

Lauri Karvonen, Åbo Academy, Department of Political Science