

## Book Reviews

Henry Milner: *Sweden. Social Democracy in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 260 pp.

Henry Milner's purpose is to examine social democracy. He seeks to find out whether it can work in practice. In order to find the answer, he has undertaken a profound study of a country which is well known for its social democratic society, Sweden.

In Sweden, the term Social Democracy is so closely connected to the Social Democratic Party that the book title is a little deceptive to Swedes. To Milner, social democracy is something more than a party. His definition (pp. 4 f.), comprises six basic principles: economic well-being, work, social solidarity, democracy, participation and access to information. A social democratic society is a friendly kind of capitalism and market economy; a solidaristic market economy.

Milner examines left- as well as right-wing criticism against social democracy. He concludes that, theoretically at least, these arguments are not convincing. There is no inherent contradiction in social safety and economic efficiency. And in order to achieve these goals you need not, or rather should not, squash the capitalists.

Having come thus far, Milner continues with an empirical analysis of Sweden. He examines the Swedish political system, which is found to have deep participatory qualities. The labour market has a smooth and peaceful history, with a constructive climate between unions and employers. The economy has been stable, with little unemployment and prosperous enterprises. This, in turn has been helped on by imaginative industrial leaders who have shown no lack of incentive. Education is extremely widespread, which results in a population with unique access to information. The result is a very competent work-force.

The reforms made by Social Democratic governments have resulted in a welfare state which leaves no one without proper protection against the ugly surprises life might have in store. At the same time, it is argued, these reforms have not resulted in a lack of incentive, proven by the industrial achievements by companies like Volvo.

The Swedish people are given a key role in the success of their country. Deep in Swedish tradition lies a high regard for work as a right and something to be proud of, which means that one of the most important basic principles was already present before the beginning of the social democratic era. The same can be said about the educational tradition. The fact that Sweden is a small and culturally homogeneous society, characterized by a "small country mentality" (p. 18) is a key factor.

The main argument of the book is that social democracy can and does work (pp. 3 f.). The conclusion is that Sweden proves this to be true. A counter-example to the Thatcherism/Reaganomics that dominated the 1980s, which should and, above all, can be followed.

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It is extremely difficult to remain objective about this study. Milner starts off on page 1 by acknowledging his own warm feelings towards social democracy, and

assumes that the reader shares these feelings. There is no reason to clamp down on this self-admitted normativity. On the contrary, it is refreshing to see it so openly admitted. There are only too many other writers to mention that ought to learn from Milner's example.

There are two major claims which would refute Milner's conclusion. One is that Sweden is a unique occurrence, lucky to be presented with a lot of extremely favourable conditions (vast natural resources shared by a small population, no war since 1814, etc.). The other is that the description of Sweden is false, and that in reality the 'Swedish model' is a failure.

As for the first refutation attempt, it could easily be agreed that Milner's analysis would have been more convincing if he had used a systematic comparative perspective, trying to match the Swedish example with other, non-social democratic societies with similar conditions or other social democratic societies with different conditions. Before such comparisons are made, the thought that Milner's account says more about Sweden than about social democracy lingers on.

Milner defends his position by stating that he seeks to 'come to terms with the overall workings of an existing society in which social-democratic values are dominant' (p. 8). His method is very much one of participating observation (the book is essentially based on experiences and data collected in a year – 1985/86 – during which he lived in Sweden). It would clearly be unfair to demand the same procedure to be repeated. Indeed, the insights gained from an intensive case study are, in this as in many other cases, highly valuable.

Moving on to the second point, brought forward by a lot of critics in Sweden, the non-socialist opposition parties claim that equality has indeed been at the expense of incentive and efficiency, while left-wingers, outside and inside the Social Democratic Party argue that there are several big flaws in the alleged equitable society. They would all agree that the dominance of the Social Democrats has resulted in a society so infiltrated by the 'Party' that totalitarianism is a threat.

In my view, it is impossible objectively to judge this second refutation attempt. It has been a major subject of most Swedish election campaigns for over 50 years. My own subjective judgement is that Milner proves his points quite convincingly.

However, there exist some errors in the book which deserve a mention. When describing the Swedish party system (p. 70), Milner uses the huge membership (one-quarter of adult citizens) to prove its participatory nature. In fact, the bulk of this membership is accounted for by the collective affiliation to the Social Democratic Party which, until its abandonment in 1990, constituted almost 80 percent of the party's members and over 60 percent of the members of all parties. Milner mentions the collective affiliation and its abandonment on p. 100, but does not include it in the discussion of the Swedish party system.

Another point worth mentioning is his way of describing the Social Democratic Party congress. The statement that the party leadership is likely to follow congress decisions contrary to the positions taken by the leadership itself is too optimistic (p. 72). In fact, a study by Jon Pierre ('Partikongresser och regeringspolitik', Kommunfakta 1986) shows that the Social Democratic Party leadership has been very skilful at preventing the congress from imposing undesirable policy ties. On the rare occasions when the congress has persisted, the leadership has acted after its own will, and got away with it.

There are other examples. For instance, all Volvo workers are not referred to as 'carbuilders' (p. 148). My friends who work there would not agree about the almost idyllic description of the Volvo Göteborg plant.

On occasion, the account does tend to be a bit uncritical. But on the whole,

Milner's description of Sweden is reasonable well-founded and accurate. And the Volvo workers would probably not prefer to work in Detroit.

In short, the book gives a fairly accurate picture of Sweden as of the mid-1980s. The problem is the ironical turn of events which took place just after the book was written.

In 1989, Finance Minister Feldt proposed a raise in the state sales tax in order to cool down the over-heated economy. This was fiercely opposed by the trades unions, and the government decided not to persist. Instead, an agreement about 'compulsory saving' (in effect a temporary income tax to be refunded at an unspecified time) was reached with the Centre Party, a move which proved meaningless. It was even more unpopular than a sales tax increase most likely would have been, and lacked the contractive qualities.

In the winter of 1990, the government proposed a severe austerity plan. Its most controversial content was a temporary ban on industrial action. The presidents of the blue-collar unions first agreed, but changed their minds when faced by the wrath of their members and shop stewards. A slightly adjusted proposal was presented to Parliament and defeated (with the help of the Left Party Communists). The government duly resigned, only to return immediately without a general election. The austerity plan was in shreds (the industrial action ban abandoned) and Feldt resigned.

The unique cooperation between the Social Democratic governments and the blue-collar unions, pointed out by Milner, suddenly lay in shambles. (A verbal lash-out at the policies of Feldt's successor by LO chairman Stig Malm in December 1990 underlined this point. Malm's immediate apology did not mend the damage, only damaged his own credibility.) Even worse, the previously undisputed governmental skills of Social Democratic governments seemed lost.

Later, in 1990, a major income tax reform was carried through parliament. This is the result of an agreement between the Social Democratic and Liberal parties. The tax cuts are vast for high incomes and very moderate for low incomes. The reform very much carries the profile of the tax policy advocated by the Liberals in the 1988 election campaign. At the time it was subjected to vicious criticism by the Social Democrats. It is now in operation, by courtesy of an agreement between the two enemies. It indicates a system shift in the Social Democratic Party taxation policy, in the same direction but on a much wider scale than discussed by Milner on p. 211.

In 1987 the government had committed itself to universal access to the preschools for small children by 1991 (Milner pp. 164 f.). Towards the end of 1990, it was clear that this could not be achieved. The cabinet minister for social welfare called the unfulfilled promise a 'promise of a target', words which have become immortal.

Perhaps most importantly, in the autumn of 1990 the Social Democratic government suddenly decided to apply for membership to the European Community. This after opposing such proposals from the Conservatives and Liberals for several years. A main argument for the application was that the Swedish economy could not survive on its own outside the common market. Wise or not, this change of mind has increased the bewilderment of the Swedish public.

These political problems have been accompanied by increasing unemployment, highlighted by alarming redundancies announced by, among others, Volvo.

The electorate has responded. Throughout 1989 and 1990 the Social Democratic Party continuously broke its own all-time low records in opinion polls. At the time of writing (February 1991), it looks as though the party is supported by something in the region of 30–32 percent of the electorate. So far, its worst national election result since the 1920s has been 42.2 percent (in 1966).

Of course, Milner cannot be criticized for failure to predict these events. Nobody would have been able to do so before 1988. But at the same time his analysis does not seem to allow for such turns of history. There is a tendency to take the situation in Sweden as that of the mid-1980s at face value.

Even then, there were distressing trends. Discontent with Feldt's policies was growing within the unions. There was an increasing rivalry between unions representing public and private sector employees, something Milner registers but plays down. Industrial unrest in the public sector, which is one of the main threats to the Swedish system, had increased alarmingly. Once again Milner has noticed this, but fails to draw any alarming conclusions.

If the development in Sweden continues, Milner's book could serve as an example to – Sweden.

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Andrew Dobson: *Green Political Thought. An Introduction*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, 224 pp.

The Green movement has been successful in many ways. One branch with particular success is the Green political parties. In every Western European country one or several Green parties have been formed and have had at least some success (i.e. representation in local councils). However, in a lot of countries the success has been even greater. Some Green parties have grown to become quite large parliamentary parties. Scholars have been tempted to talk about 'the success of green parties and alternative lists' (Müller-Rommel 1989). Die Grünen, of West Germany, have been the major symbol of this green party success.

However, 2 December 1990 was a gloomy day for the Green movement. That Sunday Die Grünen (from the western part of the country) did not pass the threshold to the new German parliament. The moderate success of their eastern counterparts was little consolation.

This failure of the German Greens sets the Green movement in a new perspective. Is the emergence of the Green movement to be explained by long-term factors (i.e. post-material value change) or short-term factors (i.e. the shifting political agenda)? If we focus on short-term factors, the failure of Die Grünen seems easy to explain. The environmental question was not a 'hot' issue in the 1990 German election and therefore voters turned away from the Greens.

But if we adopt a more long-term perspective the failure of Die Grünen is more confusing. Many scholars have interpreted the rise and success of the Green parties as a proof of the existence of a new Green cleavage in West European party systems (Müller-Rommel 1989; see also Inglehart 1990). New post-material values, it is argued, have become an influential factor when it come to explaining attitudes and voting behavior, and the post-material/material conflict is to be seen as a new cleavage within mass publics. The failure of Die Grünen makes one doubt the existence of a new cleavage.

How then should the emergence of the Green movement be interpreted? Is there or is there not a new cleavage in the party systems of Western Europe? Survey studies and electoral research do not provide the only possible answer to that question. This kind of research must be complemented with other studies. The problem survey researchers studying the Green phenomenon are facing is the vague