

**‘Ted’ Wheelwright Memorial Lecture**

**REINVENTING SOCIAL DEMOCRACY  
FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**Fred Block**

It is a great honour to deliver the third annual Wheelwright lecture, and I am deeply grateful to the faculty, students, and alumnae of the Political Economy Department at the University of Sydney who have made this event possible. The extended political economy struggle at the University of Sydney is truly an inspiration for all of us who recognize how important it is to challenge the global hegemony of neo-classical economics. But I need to say at the outset that my talk puts me in the uneasy and humbling position of delivering ‘coals to Newcastle’. I am visiting from the United States where the social democratic tradition has been very weak and I am delivering a message about that tradition in a place, Australia, with a rich social democratic history. But such paradoxes can be productive; visitors from abroad can sometimes remind people of things that they already know.

**Why Social Democracy?**

Antonio Gramsci’s famous slogan was ‘Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.’ But the context in which he offered this advice could not have been more different than our own. In the years after World War I, revolutionary and utopian visions had a deep hold on the popular imagination in many countries—empowering radical movements of the left and of the right, including the Italian fascists who sought to silence Gramsci by imprisoning him. But in our time, the utopian imagination has shrivelled and almost disappeared; our era is dominated by dystopian visions of environmental collapse or descent into

barbarism. Despite intensifying economic austerity in many places, revolutionary alternatives are few and far between.

For that reason, I think it is appropriate and necessary to reverse Gramsci's injunction. Today, what we need is: 'Optimism of the intellect, pragmatism of the will.' It is urgent that we have much more systematic thinking about how we can transform our societies by considering what Erik Wright (2010) calls 'real utopias'—schemes for improvement that are actually feasible. And by 'pragmatism of the will,' I mean that both activists and intellectuals must be alert to the consequences—both intended and unintended – of our actions. This means cultivating a critical perspective on our own practices and a willingness to adapt new strategies and new approaches as circumstances change.

In this spirit, I want to make an argument today for reviving and renovating the tradition of social democracy. But let me hasten to say that I am very critical of what many take to be key parts of that tradition—particularly its technocratic and centralizing tendencies. I am arguing for a decentralized and bottom up version of social democracy that actively embraces environmentalism, feminism, and the empowerment of minority communities.

Let me start by making some of my premises explicit. I believe that Marx and many of his followers got one thing terribly wrong—this is the idea that changing ownership of the means of production is the indispensable key to radical social change. We have seen from the Soviet experience that eliminating capitalist property failed to usher in a broader process of emancipation. Instead of 'the primacy of property relations' that Marxism emphasizes, I would propose 'the primacy of politics'—the belief that the key to radical social change is to use democratic politics and the power of the state to challenge and reduce the inequalities of income, wealth, and power that result from the unequal ownership of property.

There are two distinct problems with the Marxist formulation. The first is that it imagines that transforming property relations would produce irreversible gains in demolishing class hierarchies. It basically ignores the possibility that new axes of inequality and hierarchy could emerge as new groups sought to entrench their positions of privilege and power.

The alternative focus on the primacy of politics assumes that such new inequalities will inevitably emerge, but it also identifies a mechanism—a strong set of democratic institutions and values—that could be mobilized to blunt those challenges.

The second problem is that Marxism tends to conceptualize property or ownership as a unitary or unified thing; bourgeois property either exists or it does not exist. The primacy of politics position conceptualizes property instead as a bundle of different rights and different forms of political leverage, so that legal and political reforms can progressively narrow those rights and reduce those sources of leverage. As Sheri Berman (2006) shows in her book, *The Primacy of Politics*, some of the key theorists of Swedish social democracy were quite explicit in arguing in the 1920's that private property is actually a bundle of different rights, and that government has the ability to reshape that bundle in ways that diminish capital's advantage in political struggles. Labour laws, for example, routinely give union officials access to the workplace and the ability to do certain things there, eroding the employer's claims to absolute sovereignty over his or her property.

This leads directly to an understanding that social democracy is not some watered down and hopelessly compromised version of socialism; it is—or it has the potential to be—its own distinct type of social order. Its critical feature is the potential for steady expansion over time of democratic control over the economy.

We simply do not know the outer limits of what a social democratic society can achieve in terms of equality, social justice, and human freedom within the constraints of continuing private ownership. But we do know that the Scandinavian social democracies—despite the last thirty years of triumphant market fundamentalism in the global economy—have been remarkably successful in establishing societies with high levels of equality, social inclusion, and union density (Huber & Stephens 2001; Pontusson 2011). They are certainly far from perfect, particularly around the issues raised by immigration and cultural differences, but they are infinitely preferable to the more extreme patterns of social exclusion and inequality that fester in the U.S. or Australia (Hacker 2006; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Stilwell and Jordan 2007).

**Table 1: Measures of Inequality, circa 2000**

	(1) Household Income Inequality	(2) Poverty Rate	(3) 95-5 Ratio on Literacy Tests	(4) Information- Age Literacy
<b>LME Average</b>	.332	14.4	2.53	52
USA	.370	17.7	2.79	53
Australia	.317	13.0	2.48	56
<b>Continental Average</b>	.267	7.3	2.00	58
<b>Nordic Average</b>	.244	5.9	1.76	68
Denmark	.225	5.4	1.65	65
Finland	.247	5.4	1.86	63
Norway	.251	6.4	1.75	69
Sweden	.252	6.5	1.79	74

*Source:* Table is largely taken from Pontusson (2011)

*Notes:* LME average is unweighted average for Australia , Canada , Ireland , the U.K, and the U.S.

(1) is Gini coefficient for disposable household income from <http://www.lisproject.org>.

(2) is percentage of the population living in households with less than 50% of the median disposable income, from same source as (1).

(3) is the ratio of 95<sup>th</sup> percentile test scores to 5<sup>th</sup> percentile test scores on literacy tests for population aged 15-65 in 1994-98 from OECD 2000, p. 135.

(4) is the percentage of the population scoring level 3 or better on literacy tests from OECD 2000, p. 136.

## Untangling the History

We need to reassess the last half century of social democratic history because there are multiple layers of mythology and misunderstanding that obscure the subject. I want to start by looking at social democracy's often unheralded successes in withstanding the head winds of the market fundamentalist globalization of the last thirty years. And then I want to turn to what I think are the major weaknesses of post-World War II social democracy; first that it succumbed to the technocratic temptation and second that its leaders were quite slow to recognize that the reform strategies of the 1930's and 1940's had been exhausted by the 1960's.

## Globalization

It has been widely argued that participation in the contemporary global economy means that social democratic policies are inherently obsolete. This view is clearly wrong. Yes, the Scandinavian social democracies have all been forced to trim the generosity of their social insurance policies—the number of sick days and the duration of unemployment insurance have been cut. But the differences in poverty rates, measures of inequality, and union density between these countries and the rest of Continental Europe are very large, and the differences with the so-called liberal market economies are huge (See Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, in the decade before the economic downturn of 2007-2009, most of these social democratic countries had been experiencing stronger economic growth than other OECD countries.

**Table 2: Unionization Rates, 1980 and 2000**

	1980	2000	Change
<b>LME Average</b>	43.8	25.1	-18.7
USA	22.3	11.5	-10.8
Australia	48.7	20.3	-28.4
<b>Continental Average</b>	35.2	20.2	-15.0
<b>Nordic Average</b>	71.1	67.6	-3.5
Denmark	78.6	69.4	-9.2
Finland	69.4	71.2	+1.8
Norway	58.3	54.9	-3.4
Sweden	78.0	75.0	-3.0

*Source:* Table is largely taken from Pontusson (2011).

*Notes:* ‘LME average’ is unweighted average for Australia, Canada, Ireland, the UK and the USA. Continental average relates to the whole of Europe. The figures show the percentage of the workforce who are members of trade unions.

Data are from Jelle Visser, “Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts in 34 Countries between 1960 and 2007,” <http://www.uva-aias.net/208>.

To be sure, the Swedish Social Democrats have been out of office for a number of years, and an anti-immigrant party gained seats in the most recent elections. Nevertheless, the centre-right coalition in government

does not dare dismantle the basic infrastructure established by the Social Democrats.

In short, even under the highly restrictive rules of the global economy, the social democratic path remains viable. Greater equality means a labour force with higher levels of education and skill and this makes it possible to compete successfully in the global market for high value added manufacturing and services. The key here is that, especially with the move to environmentally sustainable patterns of growth, imported goods including raw materials represent a shrinking percentage of total consumption. Think of it this way—during its years of success, one Finnish firm—Nokia—made it possible for the whole country to afford the imports needed to sustain a high quality of life. The old put down of a service economy was that ‘a nation could not survive by people taking in each other’s washing’. But especially if a country embraces conservation and renewable energy, most of the population can be employed doing each other’s laundry and providing medical, educational, and other services, as long as some firms are able to succeed in the global market.

Moreover, we also have recent research showing that this social democratic path is not just for rich countries. Richard Sandbrook, *et.al.* (2006), *Social Democracy in the Global Periphery*, uses case studies of Chile, Costa Rica, Mauritius, and Kerala in India to make a persuasive case that social democratic strategies have been successfully used in developing countries to simultaneously improve standards of living and increase equality and inclusion. If certain key changes are made in the rules governing the global economy, the social democratic path could open up for a much larger number of developing nations.<sup>1</sup>

But it also has to be acknowledged that, ever since the dismantling of the Bretton Woods regime of fixed exchange rates in 1973, the established social democracies have experienced greater stress on their institutions (Scharpf 1991). The Bretton Woods regime placed limits on international capital mobility and assured greater national autonomy on trade policy. Both of these were supportive of social democracy, but they were swept

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1 To be sure, there are quite a number of developing nations with active civil wars or failed states that lack the stability or public institutions needed to pursue any project of political reconstruction. Positive change in these nations depends on major shifts in orientation in the extent and priorities of global aid programs.

away as the world economy moved in the 1980's to free capital movements and to embrace a more liberal trade regime. Sweden in the 1990's, for example, saw that it was no longer practical to remain outside of the European Community and it also went through a highly disruptive experiment with financial liberalization. Since the 1980's, all of the Scandinavian social democracies have struggled through periods where unemployment was very much higher than would have been tolerated in earlier decades.

Think of this as swimming against the current; social democracies have done it but it has been difficult, requiring significant fortitude and forcing them to rethink—perhaps not as quickly as I would have preferred—some of their earlier strategic choices. The key point—to which I will return—is that a number of feasible reforms of the global economy could do two things. Reforms could significantly expand the number of countries for whom the social democratic path became viable, and it would increase the opportunities for greater democratic control of the market within that broader tier of countries. But let us turn to the reasons that many on the left became disillusioned with the social democratic model.

### **The Technocratic Temptation**

The historic breakthroughs of Swedish social democracy in the 1930's and 1940's depended both on the existence of a highly effective social movement, based in the trade unions, and the skilful use of governmental power. It is easy to forget about the social movement side of Scandinavian social democracy, but it was integral to the movement's successes (Berman 2006; Korpi 1978). Even today—75 years after the initial victories—much of the social democratic regulation of the workplace in Sweden is not the product of bureaucratic edicts, but rather it is flexibly negotiated between employers and unions whose bargaining position has been immeasurably strengthened by state actions (Pontusson 2011).

But as the Swedish Social Democratic Party became entrenched as the party of government, its leaders succumbed to the technocratic temptation. They came to believe that their own expertise and skill were the central elements of social democratic success, and that their task was simply to assure the stable reproduction of the existing system. Within

this worldview, demands and complaints from below came to be seen as annoyances rather than signals of the need for change. In a word, social democracy morphed from the 'primacy of politics' to the primacy of 'expert knowledge', and with this shift it lost touch with its historical roots and its transformative project.

This technocratic version of social democracy fused with similar tendencies in liberalism to create the disastrous 'third way' politics of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Gerhard Schröder that further darkened the name of social democracy in the 1990's. But the point is that succumbing to this temptation is the negation of social democracy—not its realization. Social democratic politics simply **cannot** win significant reforms without high levels of organization and mobilization from below. Since these recent advocates of a 'third way' were hostile to mobilization from below, they could offer only slightly modified variants of the *status quo*.

### Strategies of Reform

What I am calling the technocratic temptation intersected with and reinforced an unfortunate strategic conservatism that characterized social democracy in the 1960's and 1970's. In its heroic period of the 1930's and 1940's, standardization, centralization, and the pursuit of quantitative economic growth were the necessary strategies for achieving significant social change. But as social democrats stuck with these strategies through much of the 1960's, 1970's and into the 1980's, it both weakened the movement and created a perception of social democracy as old fashioned, male-oriented, and rigid. Let me explain these in turn.

Swedish social democracy started with standardized 'one size fits all' social policies. Programs were not just universal; they also provided fairly uniform benefits as part of an explicit effort to equalize outcomes. The consequence were policies that reinforced the 'male bread winner' model and rested on a belief that everyone would move through the life course in virtual lockstep—getting married, having children, and retiring at pretty much the same ages. But subsequent developments—feminism and women's increasing labour force participation, higher levels of immigration and multiculturalism, and greater variability in the life course and in family forms—posed a series of challenges that were



difficult to meet through these standardized social policies (Esping-Andersen 1990; Esping-Andersen 2009).

In recent decades, social democracies finally moved to destandardized models of social benefits—cafeteria style benefits that can be adapted to fit different needs. This was a necessary response to the pluralisation of patterns of social and family life. Moreover, abandoning the old goal of trying to equalize everyone's income does not constitute a compromise with social democratic principles. On the contrary, it is consistent with the concept of 'complex equality' that Michael Walzer (1983) has elaborated. In contemporary societies where there are a multitude of different lifestyles and preferences, money has different value to different people. So the goal of social policy should not be to equalize the amount of money that everybody has; it is to facilitate a rich diversity of life choices, excluding those that make other people's lives considerably more difficult.

This said, the Scandinavian social democracies have continued to lag in their commitments around multiculturalism, as indicated by growing tensions in these countries around immigration issues. Some of the rhetoric of Swedish nationalism, particularly the idea of creating the 'people's home' that gave the social democrats legitimacy in the 1930's, now makes it difficult to include non-Swedes in that home.

A second shift in social democratic practice has to do with centralization. The initial thrust of social democratic policy was to place more authority in the hands of the central government and to reinforce the dominant economic role of a relatively small number of very large employers (Swenson 2002). All this fitted with the goal of stabilization and gaining greater political control over the labour market. But here again, subsequent developments—that occurred in Sweden as well as in other countries—made this centralizing bias increasingly problematic. Citizens demanded more responsiveness from local levels of government; and small firms, rather than large firms, became more important in providing new jobs.

Here, as well, social democracies have changed course over the last two and a half decades and have embraced decentralization both at the political level and in economic activity. In fact, several of the Scandinavian social democracies are now recognized for creating an

environment that is highly supportive of small high technology firms.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, creating this kind of flexibility has been done without giving employers *carte blanche* to squeeze work out of their employees.

Finally, quantitative growth refers to increasing the flow of goods and services that are easily measured and reflected in GDP data. Qualitative growth is what happens when a society spends more to improve the health of the planet with policies for environmental sustainability, when it prioritizes amenities such as parks and improved transit systems, and when it invests in improving the quality of life for the elderly (Block 1990: chapter 7). Again, the initial social democratic model stressed quantitative growth and was strongly challenged starting in the 1960's by citizens and movements demanding more emphasis on qualitative growth. Here again, social democracy has adapted and it has moved in the direction of qualitative growth. In sum, a revived social democratic tradition would have a strategic focus on destandardization, decentralization, and the pursuit of qualitative growth.

## **Global Reforms that Would Support the Social Democratic Pathway**

As we know all too well, the rules that govern the global economy were not handed down with the tablets on Mount Sinai; they were largely written in Washington D.C. at a time when the U.S. had persuaded the rest of the world that market fundamentalism was the wave of the future. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, that illusion has been shattered and it is obvious to everyone that major changes are needed in the global financial architecture.

I will just talk about two of the necessary reforms that would significantly increase the room for social democratic strategies. First, there is the Tobin Tax—the financial transaction tax— that social democratic thinkers and their allies have been advocating for decades (ul Haq, Kaul, and Grunberg 1996). As currently conceived, this would involve a transaction tax of something like a hundredth of one percent on both foreign and domestic purchases of financial assets. This would

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2 All four Scandinavian social democracies were ranked among the top fourteen most competitive nations in the world in the World Economic Forum's (2010) Global Competitiveness Index.

operate to dampen much of the computer-driven high volume trading in financial markets that has significantly increased both momentum and volatility in these markets. The consequence would be to reduce the kind of power currently exercised by financial traders. Think, for example, of the recent crisis over Greece's debt that forced the government to embrace extremely unpopular austerity measures. There is good reason to believe that even a very small transaction tax would have significantly reduced the total value of the negative bets being placed on Greek government bonds, significantly reducing the severity of the crisis.

A second necessary reform is the logical complement to the Tobin Tax. The amount of money flowing into these speculative trades is an indication that current mechanisms are not working to direct global savings into productive investment. Ben Bernanke (2005), Chair of the Federal Reserve Board, has argued that the root source of the financial crisis has been a global savings glut produced by high rates of savings in China, Japan, and other Asian nations that flowed to New York to buy up those collateralized mortgage bonds (Schwartz 2009).

Even if we take the Bernanke argument as an exercise in blame-shifting, the point remains that the largest global corporations are sitting on piles of cash that they are reluctant to invest and governments are now severely constrained in the size of the deficits that they are allowed to run. This means that global investors face a chronic shortage of high quality securities to purchase. But, of course, this happens at a time when there are still all kinds of worthwhile investments that are starved for capital. These include funding for promising start-up firms, the financing of alternative energy and conservation initiatives, paying for the rebuilding and expanding of needed infrastructure around the world, and raising the skill and knowledge level of the global labour force.

We need a vastly expanded network of global development, infrastructure, and green banks that would raise money by selling bonds and would relend the funds to worthy projects in countries around the world. The World Bank has been doing this for a long time, but the scale has to be dramatically expanded so that, by 2020, a trillion dollars worth of investment per year would flow through this mechanism. And some of the proceeds from the Tobin Tax could be used to subsidize the cost of a portion of these loans. So, for example, the bonds might be sold

for 5%, but loans for clean energy in less developed countries might charge an interest rate of only 2 or 3%.

The World Bank is a problematic model, however, because it has exemplified the absence of democratic accountability. These new institutions have to be structured in a way that strengthens democratic accountability and eliminates the World Bank's bias in favour of the corporate form. These global funds should be able to loan to government entities, nonprofits, employee-owned cooperatives and other types of alternative economic institutions as long as there is a reasonable prospect of repayment.

Such a global financing mechanism could obviously strengthen the prospects for a decentralized, bottom up version of social democracy. Historically, one of capital's major weapons in its battles against workers was the difficulty of finding financing for worker-owned enterprises. But, as we have learned from the model of the social economy pursued in the Province of Quebec in Canada in recent years, when unions and their allies are able to mobilize large financial funds, they gain the capacity to finance a significant expansion of employment opportunities while also increasing access to needed services such as child care and elder care that are not effectively produced by for-profit enterprises (Mendell and Neamtan 2010).

And finally, these are both winnable reforms at the global level. The Tobin Tax is harder because it must be agreed to by all of the major powers, but it is a proposal that has already been on the agenda of international discussions. The expansion of financing mechanisms at the global level is already happening, albeit not quickly enough. Both measures could be pushed to successful implementation by organized pressure from global social movements.

## Clarifying the Vision

Karl Polanyi (2001: 242) defined socialism as the 'tendency inherent in an industrial civilization to transcend the self-regulating market by consciously subordinating it to a democratic society.' Note how different this definition is from the Marxist definition. It flows from Polanyi's core belief that markets are not, in themselves, evil or undesirable; they are, in fact, ancient human institutions in which individuals are able to make choices and exercise agency. For Polanyi,

the problem lies with the idea of market self-regulation and particularly how that idea legitimates a series of significant limitations on democratic governance, such as 'independent central bankers', an expansive conception of property rights, and a complex separation of governmental powers that in my country includes requiring a super-majority to pass anything in the U.S. Senate.

The historical achievements of social democratic societies are proof that these limits on democracy are not needed for the health of the economy. Social democratic societies have used governmental authority to reconstruct markets to produce more egalitarian outcomes, and to establish a durable regime in which business firms, including the largest corporations, accept significant constraints on their actions as a *quid pro quo* for continuing action by government to create the infrastructure and institutions required for profit-making. The lesson is that we can deepen democracy—both in terms of the extent of public participation and the range of decisions subject to public input—while also constructing an economy that meets human needs.

While I am limited by time, I want to mention a few of the other reform initiatives that are consistent with these achievements but that could push them further:

- A revived social democracy must be centrally concerned with the challenge of climate change and the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy. Increased investments in conservation and renewable energy—solar, wind, and those biofuels that do not compete with food production—can create millions of decent jobs, reduce current and future use of imported energy, and drive qualitative growth. And at the same time, we need to revise our housing patterns, our agriculture, and our industry to reduce both the carbon footprint and to assure the continuing reuse of other raw materials.
- The provision of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) to all citizens would provide a subsistence level of income, so that no person would be forced to take whatever job happens to be on offer (van Parijs, Cohen, and Rogers 2001). It would reduce the negative impact of economic inequality across class, gender, ethnic, and racial divisions. The UBI would also significantly expand individual freedom by giving people the ability to live

‘off the grid’ or to survive as grassroots activists. It would increase the bargaining power of employees while also facilitating the growth of a ‘social economy’ or ‘third sector’ of firms that were not in search of profits, some of which could also be organized non-hierarchically.

- Archon Fung and Erik Wright (2003) have written extensively on ‘Empowered Participatory Governance’—efforts to include more citizen voice in key decisions and key institutions. This encompasses the system of participatory budgeting developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil and a host of other efforts to increase public participation in local and regional governments. This is not seen as a substitute for existing democratic forms but rather as a complement that will ultimately increase the quality of debate within the arena of electoral politics.
- We also need to begin a long-term effort to democratize decision making within the corporate world. Placing so much power in the hands of a single corporate CEO makes about as much sense as turning over all important government decisions to a dictator. Ultimately, corporations should be run by stakeholder boards that give effective representation to all of the firm’s major constituencies—employees, shareholders, lenders, suppliers, consumers, and neighbours. One promising path to get there is to create a new category of corporation that has this more democratic governance structure as well as requirements to meet higher standards for disclosure, for labour policies, and for managing waste and resource use (Block 2006). We would then have public policies that favour these more benign firms for government contracts because they impose fewer costs on society, and then see if these new firms can out-compete the old dinosaur firms.

## Conclusion

So that is the vision—reformed global institutions that would make possible a much broadened path to social democracy, so that societies could pursue reduced racial, ethnic, gender and class inequalities, greater

democratic self-governance, a truly sustainable relationship to the natural environment, and enhanced personal freedom. Of course, this vision has no chance of being realized unless it is taken up by literally millions of activists around the world. But what I have been trying to suggest is that this vision is economically feasible and it represents an extension of the democratic and egalitarian political struggles of the last two centuries.

I want to end on a more sober note—raising a critical organizational question for which I don't have a good answer. In the classical era of social democracy, things were relatively simple. Mostly male workers organized in trade unions represented the extra-parliamentary base of the social democratic party. Even in the small number of countries where a majority of employees are represented by unions, it is no longer appropriate for the labour movement to be the key mass institution through which publics shape the party agenda. Other identities and non-work roles now play too central a role in our current politics. So we face a rather daunting organizational challenge—how do we construct mechanisms of participation in a mass social democratic party that simultaneously reflect the diverse constituencies and political styles that need to be represented and that fit with the overburdened and time-scarce lives that many of us now lead?

We are beginning to see some possible answers to this question in the development of various online communities that are sometimes extremely effective in handling the fact that some people have way too much time on their hands and others might only be able to check in occasionally. But we cannot rely on virtual solutions alone; there also have to be actual meeting places where people with quite diverse perspectives and experiences come together and hash out issues.

In a word, we still don't know what the actual institutions of a future participatory democracy might look like. The only consolation is that every step that we make in solving this difficult organizational problem brings us closer to the creation of a participatory society based on justice, equality, and democracy.

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