

Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*

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Ashley Lavelle, *The Death of Social Democracy: Political Consequences in the 21st Century*

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## BERNSTEIN'S HEIRS

Two opposing predictions about the fate of social democracy developed in the nineties. The first argued that, freed of the Stalinist (sometimes also extended to 'Marxist') incubus, social democracy would now flourish, at least in its European homeland. The second held the project of reforming capitalism was likely to enter a period of steep decline with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the long boom. This debate is now mostly over as the crisis of the welfare state becomes increasingly obvious. The question now is how to explain this outcome, and to assess its likely consequences. Two books that have appeared in recent years provide stimulating if sharply different accounts: *The Primacy of Politics* by Sheri Berman, a rising star in the American academy and frequent contributor to *Dissent*, and *The Death of Social Democracy* by Ashley Lavelle, a tough-minded Australian Trotskyist. Berman's crisply written and engaging book suggests that social democracy—not liberalism or Marxism—was the real victor of the 'age of extremes'; but the left's amnesia about this historical triumph has led to a debilitating loss of will. Lavelle's forceful and intelligent book holds, in contrast, that social democracy's achievements even in the favourable environment of the long boom were extremely modest. With the beginning of the long downturn the economic conditions that made the project of reforming capitalism possible are gone, never to return.

These books are products of very different political cultures. Berman writes from a stance generally favourable to social democracy. But two features distinguish her particular position: its insistence that the problems of the left have derived largely from its anti-capitalism, and its attachment to communitarian thought of the Michael Walzer variety. From this last feature comes her belief that people have a 'deep-seated and ineradicable psychological need to feel part of a broader community', a view that leads her to an often surprisingly positive analysis of fascism. Lavelle's text, in contrast, is written from the perspective of the Tony Cliff wing of the Socialist Workers' Party. This is a highly specific form of Trotskyism which holds, against Trotsky himself, that the Soviet Union and the Western European welfare states were different forms of state capitalism. What sort of interpretation of social democracy do these stances produce?

Sheri Berman's book argues that social democracy 'was the most successful ideology and movement of the twentieth century: Its principles and policies undergirded the most prosperous and harmonious period in European history by reconciling things that had hitherto seemed incompatible—a well-functioning capitalist system, democracy, and social stability.' *The Primacy of Politics* develops its argument in seven substantive chapters, an introduction and conclusion. The first three trace the development of pre-1914 'revisionism' in its democratic, revolutionary and nationalist forms. Chapters five and six analyse both the development of a distinctively social-democratic position in the interwar period, and the rise of fascism. Chapter seven, 'The Swedish Exception', traces the story of the Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (SAP). Having abandoned its Marxist baggage early, this organization was well placed to block the road to a Swedish fascism. The final chapter briefly treats the post-Second World War period while the conclusions reflect on the reasons for contemporary social-democratic malaise.

The master narrative of *Primacy of Politics* is of social democracy's triumph over liberalism and—especially—Marxism, which Berman summarizes as the view that 'history was propelled forward by economic development and the class conflict it generated'. In her account, Marxism created three major problems for late nineteenth-century socialists. First, it provided a wildly misleading analysis of the dynamics of modern society, by wrongly predicting that the social order was breaking up into two hostile camps. Second, it offered little in the way of political strategy, instead providing a 'counsel of passivity' in face of the inevitable 'crisis of capitalism' to come. Third, Marxism was culturally weak: it could not answer the 'psychopolitical needs of mass populations under economic and social stress'. In response to these inadequacies, Berman argues, two revisionist movements developed: democratic revisionism leading to full-fledged social democracy, and revolutionary revisionism leading to fascism and Bolshevism. The key

figure in the democratic revisionist camp is Eduard Bernstein. In Berman's account, he rejected the historical materialist claim that socialism was an inevitable outcome of capitalist development and argued instead 'for an activist political path to socialism' embodying the 'primacy of politics'. Further, Bernstein abandoned the doctrine of class struggle, holding instead that socialism should be implemented through 'cross-class cooperation' among 'individuals . . . motivated by their ideals and by a vision of a better world'. Thus he also replaced class conflict with 'communitarianism'. This double reversal, so Berman argues, laid the foundations for a distinctively social-democratic ideology.

Prior to the First World War, democratic revisionism took many forms. In France it was exemplified by Jean Jaurès, who sought to link socialism to the tradition of the French Revolution. In Germany it remained a largely theoretical current around Bernstein himself. In Italy the key figure for Berman is Filippo Turati, praised for trying to forge an alliance with Giovanni Giolitti (described, somewhat surprisingly, as a 'charismatic liberal'). Berman also praises the Austro-Marxists for their analyses of nationalism. All of these currents, argues Berman, show that the democratic revisionists were already pushing for a basically social-democratic strategy in the workers' movements of France, Italy, Germany and Austria in the run-up to the First World War, yet they were thwarted at every turn by more orthodox Marxists. In France this led to Millerand's expulsion from the SFIO. In Italy the anti-revisionists undermined Turati's attempted alliance with Giolitti. In Germany Kautsky's orthodoxy checked Bernstein's proposals for a coalition with the progressive bourgeoisie and participation in the government.

More surprisingly, Berman reads Lenin's revolutionary revisionism as equally based on a rejection of historical materialism and class struggle. Instead of replacing classes with broad popular coalitions, however, Bolshevism identified the agent of social transformation in the revolutionary party. Berman identifies a further type of revisionism in the writings of Georges Sorel, which embraced a form of revolutionary nationalism based on a 'fusion of the anti-democratic forces of the left with those of the right'.

During the interwar period, Berman argues, the balance of forces changed as democratic revisionism 'blossomed into a movement of its own' by openly rejecting 'the twin pillars of orthodox Marxism—class struggle and historical materialism' and embracing 'cross-class cooperation and the primacy of politics'. Two key experiences increased the appeal of these slogans: the Great War had 'revealed the immense mobilizing power of nationalism and bred a generation that valued community, solidarity, and struggle', giving the *coup de grâce* to the doctrine of class struggle. Second, after 1929 the onset of the Depression 'made preaching submission to economic forces tantamount to political suicide', thus undermining what Berman sees as

historical materialism's main claim. This was the context for the emergence of mature social-democratic theory, with Hendrik De Man's *Plan du Travail*. De Man argued that the key issue in socialist transformation was the seizure of control over production, not ownership; 'nationalization and expropriations' were unnecessary, since 'the state could direct economic development through less obtrusive means'.

Unfortunately, in Berman's view, the baleful effect of Marxist orthodoxy again prevented this considerable ideological heritage from bearing fruit. In France Leon Blum's residual commitment to Marxist precepts prevented him from embracing *planisme*. In Italy the Maximalists refused to exploit the democratic opportunities opened up by the post-war period. In Germany Rudolf Hilferding attacked Wladimir Woytinsky's work-creation plans. In sum, because of its implacable orthodoxy, the left ceded ground to the radical right. Fascism, according to Berman, was able to step into this gap, for it offered the most adequate policy response to the chaos of the interwar period. By contrast, the orthodox socialist parties combined a rhetorical commitment to socialism with an inability to propose effective strategies. Italian Fascism, interpreted by Berman as an outgrowth of Sorel's revisionism, was able to step into this vacuum by linking 'a fundamental critique of the reigning liberal order and of capitalism's "excesses" with a commitment to private property and a claim to represent all of Italy's people'. Similarly, National Socialist policy was based on the separation of capitalist ownership from managerial control, just as De Man had proposed: private businesses were allowed to retain their profits, but their investment decisions and wage policies were heavily constrained by the state. Berman contrasts the interwar failures of the left in Italy and Germany to the outcome in Sweden, where the SAP had abandoned both historical materialism and class struggle by the 1890s, and presented itself as a reformist 'people's party'. This allowed the SAP to respond to the Great Depression by promoting work-creation schemes, championed elsewhere by the extreme right. In short Sweden could avoid the fascist interlude because the SAP embraced democratic revisionism without reservation and had jettisoned orthodox Marxism.

By the post-war period, Berman suggests, socialist parties across Europe had learned the lesson of social democracy. Some version of Keynesianism and the welfare state consolidated in Italy, France and Germany, representing 'a clear triumph for social-democratic principles'—although paradoxically it was 'less of a victory for social democrats themselves—both because many on the left continued to cling to less promising ideological approaches and because many non-leftists moved quickly to appropriate central planks of the social-democratic programme.' The victory of social democracy as a broad set of principles, combined with the relative defeat of social democrats themselves, created a serious weakness. For its practical success 'has led

us to forget what a historical accomplishment it was'. The most successful political ideology of the twentieth century has therefore gone largely unrecognized, leading to a contemporary loss of political will. The recovery of this intellectual tradition is therefore also from Berman's perspective an act of political recuperation.

While Berman focuses on the period from 1890 to the 1970s, Ashley Lavelle's book concentrates on the development of social-democratic parties from the 1970s to the present—a period that constitutes a somewhat embarrassing coda for *The Primacy of Politics*. The argument that Lavelle develops in *The Death of Social Democracy* is almost diametrically opposed to Berman's. Far from embracing the primacy of politics, suggests Lavelle, social democrats have been utterly dependent on the rhythms of international capitalism. Thus, he claims, the 'buoyant economic conditions' from 1945 to 1973 'enabled social democrats some measure of success'. As growth rates declined across the capitalist world after 1974, all the parties that Lavelle studies—the Labour parties of Britain and Australia, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), Sweden's SAP—curtailed 'plans for reform' and instead implemented measures 'injurious to their natural constituencies'. When forced to choose 'between being responsible managers of capitalism or advocates of policies to raise workers' living standards' they chose the former. However, the economic conditions that sustained the post-war boom and made social-democratic policies possible will not return. Capitalist dynamism in the quarter century after the Second World War was the result of contingent factors: massive destruction of plant and equipment during the war, the stimulus of the Cold War arms race and the Marshall plan. These were 'unique circumstances', which are 'not likely to be repeated again'. As a consequence, Lavelle rejects any attempt to renew the social-democratic project. Indeed he goes further, arguing that social-democratic parties have become 'impediments to the building of a better world'. As he writes: 'The position taken in this book is a radical one precisely because it rules out a revival of social democracy. There can be no turning back because the economic base from which social democracy could provide an alternative to neo-liberalism cannot be restored.'

In Lavelle's *Death of Social Democracy*, a summary of the theoretical argument is followed by case studies of Australia, Britain, Germany and Sweden, each split into two chapters: one narrating the collapse of social democracy, and a second tracing its political consequences for the country in question. Although Lavelle is not explicit about the comparative design of his study, its logic suggests a version of John Stuart Mill's Method of Agreement, investigating the ways in which a set of highly divergent cases produce a similar outcome: in this instance the 'death' of social democracy. For Lavelle, it is the conditions these parties share—namely

their common dependence on the dynamics of world capitalism—that explain the collapse.

The Australian Labor Party had been elected in 1972 on a reformist programme under Gough Whitlam; the party was dismissed by the Governor-General in 1975. When it returned to power in 1983 under Bob Hawke it undertook a series of neo-liberal policies: privatization of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank, deregulation and austerity. According to Lavelle, the neo-liberalization of the ALP resulted in a punishing electoral defeat in 1996, in which the right-wing coalition won a substantially larger percentage of votes from the manual working class than its rival. Party membership has declined from 300,000 members at the time of the Second World War to a paltry 38,000 in 2003, while alternatives on both the left (the Green Party) and the right (Pauline Hanson's One Nation party) have grown substantially.

In Britain, Labour was elected in 1974 'on a radical programme to nationalize the top 25 British companies and bring about a "fundamental and irreversible shift in wealth and power in favour of working people"'. In fact, of course, it rapidly staged a U-turn, implemented IMF austerity measures and engaged in a bitter struggle with public-sector unions. After losing power to Thatcher in 1979, the party initially shifted to the left. But under Neil Kinnock's leadership from 1983, Labour moved decisively to the right. The creation of New Labour under Blair and Brown radicalized this turn; the new government elected in 1997 embraced every central element of Thatcherism. Lavelle points out, however, that Labour won only 43.2 per cent of the vote in 1997, considerably lower than the victories of Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson, and indeed fewer votes than in Kinnock's lost election to John Major in 1992. Labour party membership has also collapsed from a million people in the fifties to under 200,000 by 2006. Despite the obstacles posed by the UK's first-past-the-post system, Lavelle suggests that both the anti-war Respect Party on the left and the British National Party (BNP) on the right have gained some support.

In Germany, Lavelle traces the SPD's turn to the right back to the mid-seventies, a trajectory that intensified after 1982, during the party's sixteen years in opposition. When the SPD returned to power under Gerhard Schroeder in 1998 its social-democratic core had weakened. The *Neue Mitte* strategy called for 'support for smaller government, the fostering of closer relations with business leaders, and an acceptance of the constraints of globalization'. Here too the party suffered heavily for its neo-liberal turn, especially at the regional and local levels. In 1998 the SPD beat the Christian Democrats by 18 percentage points among manual workers, but by 2005 this advantage had dwindled to only 5 per cent. The reason of course, was Schroeder's implementation of the bitterly contested Hartz laws. The SPD

also faced a long-term decline in membership. In 1990 the party still had over 900,000 members, but by 2005 this had dwindled to 600,000—still fairly substantial in comparison to New Labour or the Australian Labor Party. Lavelle's argument that social-democratic decline produces political polarization can point to the creation of Die Linke in 2005, and a slight rise in support for the neo-Nazi Nationaldemokratisches Parte Deutschlands.

The arc of Swedish Social Democracy follows a similar trajectory. After defeat in the 1976 elections, the SAP shifted to the right in its years in opposition. When it returned to power the party liberalized capital controls, enforced wage restraint and cut deficits. By the nineties its leadership had openly rejected Keynesianism. Meanwhile, the SAP's electoral support had dropped from a peak of 45 per cent of the vote in the 1930s to 37.5 per cent in the 1990s, accompanied by a dramatic loss of membership: from over a million in 1990 to 152,000 by 2003. The result in Sweden, as elsewhere, has been the Greens and parties to the left and right of the SAP picking up some support.

How to explain these trajectories? Lavelle considers four possible factors: the rise of neo-liberal ideology, globalization, electoral determinants and the end of the post-war boom. Only the last, he argues, constitutes an 'ultimate explanation', while the others are 'proximate'. Although Lavelle is not sufficiently explicit about his underlying model, it seems to be roughly this. From the 1980s, the onset of the long downturn created an environment favourable to neo-liberalism, seen as offering a 'solution to the structural crisis'. Globalization, lifting barriers to foreign investment, was in turn a neo-liberal strategy for restarting economic growth. But as social-democratic parties adopted these policies they undermined their relations with the working class. This de-alignment forced the parties to shift to the right, in search of votes outside their core constituency—a move that has largely failed in electoral terms, leading to further erosion of the parties and a 'polarization' of the political spectrum. Lavelle's aim, then, is not so much to dismiss the alternative explanations as to relate them to the underlying economic conditions. His political conclusion could not be clearer: social democracy cannot be saved and is not worth saving. It is, he warns, 'utopian to hold out any hopes that social democrats will make society fairer and more just'. It is hard to imagine an argument more sharply at odds with Berman's.

Taken together, these books raise three basic issues. The first is a question of meaning: what is social democracy? The second is a problem of analysis: how should the rise and decline of this particular political movement be understood? The third concerns outcomes: what have been the consequences of social democracy's collapse for contemporary politics? I will take these issues in turn. To begin, then, with the term itself: Berman defines it as 'a full fledged alternative to both Marxism and liberalism that had at its

core a distinctive belief in the primacy of politics and communitarianism'. At times, she adds two other features to her definition: a commitment to democracy, and recognition that 'capitalism is the only economic game in town'. An immediate problem with this framing is that it scants the intimate historical connection between social democracy as a political movement and Marxism as a social theory. All major nineteenth-century political Marxists from Lenin to Turati to Kautsky to Luxemburg saw themselves as members of a wider political movement called social democracy; the largest broadly Marxist party in the world before the First World War was the German Social Democratic Party. One would not know this from *The Primacy of Politics*, where Berman never translates the acronym SPD and whose index mysteriously refers to this organization as the 'German Socialist Party'. Lenin was a leader of the 'Russian Social Democratic Labour Party' and *What is to Be Done?* enlists the Marxist Social Democrat, Karl Kautsky, against Bernsteinian revisionism. Even after the historical split in the movement over the First World War and the Russian Revolution, self-proclaimed Marxists led social-democratic governments in Germany and Austria. In effect what Berman has done is to project a division that developed only after 1914, and which was still in flux in the early interwar period, back to the late nineteenth century. The consequences of this arbitrary and ahistorical opposition between Marxism and social democracy are exacerbated by Berman's highly reductive and idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxism. For her,

The most distinctive features of this doctrine were historical materialism and class struggle, which combined argued that history was propelled forward not by changes in human consciousness or behaviour but rather by economic development and the resulting shifts in social relationships.

On Berman's reading, the central political defect of Marxism is its 'passivity': a 'passive economism' offering a 'counsel of passivity'. In support of this view she cites a decontextualized passage from Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and Kautsky's pamphlet *The Class Struggle*, but offers no serious exposition of Marx's own work.

Neither Marx, nor any major Marxist thinkers, Engels included, would have recognized themselves in this caricature. Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach', usually understood as a founding document of historical materialism, is a hymn to active interventionism: 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism' is that reality 'is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice'—the point is not only to interpret the world, but 'to change it'. Still more bizarre is Berman's assertion that 'Orthodox Marxism in general had little to say about the role of political organizations, since it considered economic forces rather than political activism to be the prime mover of history'. This is to ignore



the immense amount of time that Marx and Engels devoted to building the Communist League and then the International; not to mention the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The problems of political organization were central to Kautsky's *Road to Power* and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

It is on the basis of this caricature of Marxism that Berman constructs her portmanteau idea of 'revisionism', which gains its coherence exclusively from its contrast to her invented orthodoxy: any important socialist thinker who rejects absolute economic determinism and recognizes the 'possibilities of informed and determined political action' becomes by definition a revisionist. Naturally this creates a very strange category including such wildly divergent figures as Bernstein, De Man, Gramsci, Lenin and Sorel. To bring some order to this strained construction Berman then introduces a further set of distinctions within the revisionist camp between its communist, democratic and nationalist forms. This has little to do with what revisionism meant in historical reality. The original referent was the right wing of the SPD, positions first articulated by Eduard Bernstein at the Party's 1898 Congress. The revisionist faction demanded that the SPD abandon talk of revolution and commit itself to parliamentary reformism. Obviously Lenin, Gramsci and Sorel stood at the very opposite end of the ideological spectrum from revisionism in this sense, because they were all revolutionaries of different sorts.

Why does Berman not simply emphasize a more direct lineage from Bernstein to post-war social democracy? To unravel this question requires a return to her very specific intellectual formation. For what she really wants to do is establish that what set social democracy apart from liberalism and Marxism was not just parliamentarism, but communitarianism and the 'primacy of politics'. The problem is that the historical tradition of reformist social democracy has not been notably marked by either of these features. Indeed the political currents closest to Berman's version of orthodox Marxism (particularly Kautsky), were among the most influential precursors of post-war social democracy. Far from seeing any contradiction between their Marxist economism and their reformist practice (even where it involved cross-class alliances or the use of the state for achieving social reforms), they often linked the latter to the former. Famously, Kautsky rejected Lenin's revolutionary tactics because the Russian proletariat constituted a minority of the population. Power was to be won only when manual workers organized in a mass socialist party could gain it through universal suffrage. In any historically accurate account of the doctrinal origins of social-democratic reformism Kautsky would have to hold a central place; but this makes nonsense of the idea of social democracy as a non-Marxist alternative.

Berman's elevation of Hendrik De Man to the position of crucial doctrinal forerunner of post-war social democracy can be understood as a compensation for the enormous hole left by the removal of Kautskyism; but the notion that De Man was a major influence on social democracy is hard to credit. *Planisme* was of course a vogue in the thirties, but it had as much connection with fascism as social democracy. Indeed Berman herself acknowledges this, suggesting that 'an appreciation of the nature and significance of fascism's and national socialism's programme is necessary not only for understanding their success during the interwar years: These programmes also helped to shape the trajectory of their nations in later decades'. Suddenly it seems that it was not the 'principles and purposes' of social democracy but rather those of fascism that 'undergirded the most prosperous and harmonious period in European history'.

That such a reading is possible points to a fundamental analytic problem: the two pillars of Berman's notion of social democracy (the primacy of politics and communitarianism) have no obvious connection to one another; nor do they link clearly to 'capitalism' and 'democracy'. As she herself admits, a commitment to the primacy of politics was one of the defining features of Leninism, but it was coupled with a stiff rejection, not acceptance, of capitalism. De Man combined three of Berman's social-democratic principles: primacy of politics, communitarianism and acceptance of capitalism, but rejected the fourth, democracy, in favour of fascism. Carlo Roselli, who Berman sees as an important social-democratic precursor, rejected Marxism, but retained a commitment to socialism. In short, the various dimensions of Berman's concept of social democracy are loosely connected and do not serve to identify a real intellectual tradition.

Lavelle has a more nuanced view of the historically specific relationship between Marxism and social democracy. Yet his discussion of the latter yokes together two quite different meanings. First, following Ian Birchall, he defines social democracy as a working-class, but parliamentary and reformist, movement committed to socialism; from this perspective, it can be best understood as a political strategy. Competing with this definition is a rather different one that Lavelle identifies with a set of public policies: redistribution of wealth, state intervention 'to deal with market failure', and 'the provision of better health care, education and welfare'. These two definitions, it should be noted, do not imply one another. Parliamentary socialism need not lead to a policy of using the state to implement social reforms, especially if these are seen as strengthening capitalism. Conversely, a commitment to policies of redistribution need have no connection at all to socialism as an ideal. Indeed according to Lavelle's second definition the Democratic party in the US could be identified as a social-democratic force.

This creates further ambiguity about what exactly the death of social democracy refers to. Lavelle's analysis singles out electoral setbacks and declining party membership. Yet as far as winning elections is concerned, it is not clear that there has been any long-term slide for the parties of the Socialist International. As Lavelle himself writes, 'Blair delivered three consecutive general-election victories (1997, 2001 and 2005) for the first time ever'. The Australian Labor Party won elections throughout the eighties and nineties and returned to power in 2007. The French Socialist Party currently dominates every level of the political administration, from the municipalities to the regions, the National Assembly, Senate and Elysée. In 1998 Schroeder became the first SPD chancellor in more than a decade and a half; the SPD is in government in 12 out of 16 Länder. Sweden's SAP also continues to be the dominant electoral force in the country. The notion that these *parties* have suffered massively in electoral terms for their neo-liberal policies seems to be belied by the facts.

What of the erosion of party membership? Here Lavelle's evidence is striking. But declining party membership has been a general feature of all political parties in Western Europe since 1980. Lavelle systematically discounts this fact, by arguing that alternative political forces have grown during the same period. But parties such as the Greens or the various lefts that have emerged throughout Europe are in no sense replacements for the mass organizations of the post-war period. Indeed it is hard to escape the conclusion that the etiolation of social democracy is part of larger decline in the mass party as a political form. Lavelle is aware of these problems, reasonably seeking to distinguish the death of the 'social-democratic content of these parties' from that of the organizations themselves. This is convincing only in terms of the first definition of social democracy, as a strategy for achieving socialism. It works less well for his second specification, that social democracy is a political movement committed to the reform of capitalism. The use of government to redress market failures and a general defense of some welfare state is rather standard fare among today's centre-lefts. Even more importantly, perhaps, many of the political forces that Lavelle sees as alternatives to social democracy (such as the Greens) espouse virtually the same policy package.

Lavelle's and Berman's usages of the term 'social democracy' both strain between historical and theoretical meanings. Whereas Berman interprets nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social democracy using the categories of the mid twentieth-century centre-left, Lavelle interprets the mid twentieth-century centre-left using the criteria of pre-war socialism. There is therefore a curious and symmetrical inversion of interpretive categories and empirical focus in the two books. Neither approach can adequately deal with what must surely be one of the key elements in the history of social

democracy: its changing meaning, over the course of some 120 years, from a strategy for achieving socialism to a policy package for managing capitalism. A more complex, indeed dialectical, account is needed. Such an analysis, instead of offering an ahistorical 'definition', would seek systematically to link concrete political struggles to achieve social-democratic goals, with intellectual battles about what the nature of those goals should be.

But perhaps more important are the explanations that each offers for the course of this political movement. On the surface the two accounts could not be more different. For Lavelle, social democracy has repeatedly demonstrated a striking inability to achieve its own goals. For Berman, social democracy was successful when it was able to pursue an independent political programme, unsullied by Marxism; where this occurred, social democrats could fully embrace communitarianism and steal nationalism from the right. Her argument here rests on two sorts of evidence: the case of Sweden, where the SAP was able to constitute itself as a 'people's party', and form an alliance with the peasantry to push for broad social reforms; and the cases of Italy and Germany, where the split between Communist and social-democratic parties blocked such a formation and opened the way to fascism. There are several problems with this framing. First, the comparison itself is strained, since one reason why the SAP could form an alliance with agrarians is that Sweden lacked a class of large landowners, corresponding to the German *Jünkers* or Italian *latifondisti*, whose domination over impoverished rural populations could constitute these as reservoirs of support for reactionary projects in times of crisis. Regardless of any ideological differences, the Swedish countryside was objectively much easier for the left to organize than were its German and Italian counterparts.

Second, Berman's attempt to read fascism as a popular party tends to overestimate its level of political support. Neither the NSDAP nor the PNF ever won a majority of the popular vote in anything like a fair election. A key element for both parties, particularly the PNF, was the use of paramilitary violence. Berman sketches the PNF's expansion in the countryside as follows:

Focusing on particular agricultural and rural areas, which felt especially ignored by the government and threatened by the socialists, and under the banner of a 'war against Bolshevism,' Fascists often took control over entire towns as part of their campaign to restore calm to the countryside and offered jobs and other resources to gain supporters.

This is deeply distorted. The rural areas that the Fascists invaded in 1920 and 1921 were overwhelmingly organized by the Socialist Party. Fascism's expansion into them was not the result of a law-and-order campaign with broad support, but a military operation, carried out in alliance with specific

landowning interests, and backed up by a party organization able to lock the agrarian masses into its framework.

Berman also completely fails to register the heavy responsibility of the reformist forces in both Germany and Italy for the defeat of the left in those countries. The capitulation to chauvinism of the parties of the Second International in August of 1914 had deep roots in the 'democratic revisionist' tradition that Berman so admires. Bernstein was an enthusiastic supporter of German colonial expansion from the late nineteenth century, and fully subscribed to the civilizing-mission ideology of late nineteenth-century European colonialism. This imperialist background was one of the reasons for the capitulation of German Social Democracy to its national bourgeoisie; only the more radical Italian Socialist Party, along with the fractions represented at the Zimmerwald Conference, stood out against the slaughter. After the War, the Ebert–Scheidemann government's decision to pursue 'orderly demobilization' and unleash the Freikorps against the November Revolution played its part in paving the way to German fascism. Similarly the refusal of the Italian trade-union leadership in 1920 to convert the factory occupations into a full-scale uprising arguably opened the door to squadrist violence. In both cases, a strategy of class collaboration led to the disastrous conservation of basic elements of a deeply reactionary social order.

Berman offers a sharply truncated account of the post-war period, despite claiming it as the era of 'triumph for social-democratic principles and policies'. But who carried these out? After 1947, governments were dominated by Christian Democrats in Germany and Italy, and mainly by Gaullists in France. Berman herself argues that:

Fascists and National Socialists pioneered a range of policies including state control over investment, nationalized industries and corporatism . . . Since many of these principles and policies were incorporated into the post-war order, it is fair to say that fascists and national socialists as well as social democrats deserve to be included in the family tree.

When European social-democratic parties entered government as avowedly reformist forces, the yield was slight. Brandt and Schmidt squandered the SPD's electoral strength, capitulated to NATO on *Ostpolitik* and were without ideas as the oil crisis hit. Craxi's government ended in an orgy of corruption, his style of rule the template for *Berlusconismo* (Silvio B. was an intimate friend). Mitterrand jettisoned the Parti Socialiste's electoral programme and imposed deflation and budget cuts. As Berman herself admits, these were 'dreary version[s] of the same theme'.

Lavelle's argument that social-democratic reforms were dependent on the long post-war boom, and came to an end with the long downturn that set in from the 1970s, accords rather better with the actual history of these

movements; and it is backed up by a substantial amount of evidence. Yet his rigorously economic stance leads him to elide two quite distinct historical phenomena: the stalling of reformism, a phenomenon of the late 1970s, and the turn toward neo-liberalism, which took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The centre-left governments of the 1960s and early 1970s—Whitlam in Australia, Wilson in the United Kingdom, Brandt in Germany and Palme in Sweden—still operated within the framework of trade-union advance, state investment in nationalized industries and a universal welfare state. From the late 1980s, however, the leaderships of these parties had begun to embrace neo-liberalism (Hawke in Australia, Blair in Britain, Schroeder in Germany). The second phenomenon is clearly far more significant than the first; but can it be explained as simply a response to the long downturn? By the time Blair entered office, the capitalist slump was already over two decades old. It might be argued that the Thatcherite revolution of the 1980s had installed a new political-economic framework, to which New Labour simply adapted. But Lavelle insists on dating the death of social democracy to the mid 1970s.

More striking is the absence from Lavelle's analysis of any sustained discussion of the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global triumph of capital on Western social democracy. Lavelle's interpretation of the Soviet Union as 'a form of "state" capitalism in which the relationship between the state and worker was akin to that between the private business owner and worker in the West' leads him to downplay the significance of its fall for the Western European welfare states. The switch from the stalled reformism of the 1970s to the headlong embrace of neo-liberalism after the collapse of state socialism is neither registered nor explained. Instead Lavelle treats the whole period after 1974 as one of continuous decline.

These reflections point to a weakness common to both books: neither fully and consistently registers the impact of the decline of socialism both as a reality and ideal on social democracy. But this weakness derives from two quite different political stances. For Berman the problem is that any admission of the dependence of social democracy on a horizon beyond capitalism would seem to redeem in some way the Marxist tradition. For Lavelle, to admit that the collapse of the Soviet Union had a negative effect on social democracy would seem a retrospective justification of the Stalinist bureaucracy. When they turn to a discussion of contemporary politics, however, the two authors offer a strikingly similar picture. For both, the contemporary decline of social democracy favours political polarization. In Berman's view:

As the founders of the social-democratic movement understood, people have a deep-seated and ineradicable psychological need to feel part of a large community—a need that the expanding reach of markets only intensifies, as

all that is solid melts into air. That need will be met one way or another, and if the democratic left cannot figure out how to do so, less savoury forces will be more than glad to step into the breach.

Lavelle also detects increased polarization between left and right, evidenced by the rise of the alter-globalization movement and 'populist and xenophobic politicians'. The rise of the 'radical right' in Western Europe is of course a cottage industry in political sociology and political science. In a broader historical perspective, however, what is more striking is its relative weakness. Lavelle's own evidence shows that no extreme right parties in his four cases broke the threshold of 10 per cent of the vote in a national election, and most gained well below 5 per cent. What of the left? Here a case can be made for Germany that Die Linke has been able to take advantage of the 'death of social democracy', and to this hopeful development can now be added the Front de gauche in France and Syriza in Greece. However these are hardly radical left-wing forces; rather, what they represent is the partial re-emergence of a truly social-democratic left. With the exception of SYRIZA, few of these parties have won more than 12 per cent of the vote.

Why do both Berman and Lavelle fail to register these fairly obvious facts? One reason may be that they read contemporary politics through the distorting lens of the 1930s: the contemporary radical right is treated as the functional equivalent of fascism, and the anti-globalization movement and far-left parties play the role of the revolutionary Communist movement. For Berman, the contemporary task of the left is to bind radicals and reformists together into a social-democratic force that can responsibly reform capitalism and avoid revolutionary adventurism. Lavelle's project is to develop a seriously anti-capitalist politics, in part to combat the danger of a rising right-wing tide.

Yet the contemporary politics of the advanced-capitalist world bears scant resemblance to that of the interwar period. During the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, France and Germany super-politicized populations organized themselves into mass parties of the left and right. By contrast one of the distinctive characteristics of politics in the early twenty-first century is what Peter Mair has termed the 'void' of organization between civil society and the state. Any renewed politics of the left will have to begin with a careful assessment of this altered terrain defined, in part, by a crisis of politics as a form of human activity. It is unlikely that either Bernstein or Lenin can offer lessons directly applicable to this context.