

might have declared that violating the fundamental rights of any of its inhabitants would be taken ipso facto as a harm against itself. Even for the world as it is, we need no more than a minimum code of universal rights, the infraction of any of which is always a crime against humanity. The scale of the infraction may be part of an operational threshold. But that scale does not inscribe itself as any sort of metaphysical presence in the individual assaults against persons of which mass human crimes are always made up.

In the conclusion to *Crimes Against Humanity*, May points to the need for good philosophical work in the area of international criminal law. His own book contributes to this by its ef-

fort to adumbrate a philosophical conception apt to the present law on crimes against humanity. In its general structure, I have argued, the conception he puts forward is indeed apt. But the “fit” it achieves with contemporary legal realities comes at the cost of arguments and distinctions that are open to question. ●

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Recovering the Age of Social Democracy

Jan-Werner Müller

THE PRIMACY OF POLITICS

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE MAKING OF EUROPE'S TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Sheri Berman

Cambridge, 2006 238 pp \$23.99

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago the German historian Karl Dietrich Bracher wrote an influential book on twentieth-century European political history called *The Age of Ideologies*. It was a classic text of liberal antitotalitarianism and is still in use as a text for undergraduates—an indication, perhaps, that our views of the twentieth century haven't changed all that much: Europeans were seized by an ideological fever in or about 1917, and were only really cured in or about 1991; what triumphed, in the end, was liberalism—though less in the American than in the European sense. And whenever we're confronted with new antiliberal challenges, the ideological-fever story of the

twentieth century is readily at hand: as “Islamofascism” or a “third totalitarianism.” So we haven't really left the twentieth century behind, as is sometimes asserted. The question is rather who will get to tell its story and what lessons will be drawn from that story.

Sheri Berman is offering a bold and well-written account of the European twentieth century that challenges liberal triumphalism. She follows Ralf Dahrendorf in seeing the twentieth century as the “Social Democratic century.” Berman provides a history of four main antagonists that interacted in what she calls the inner ideological dynamics of the twentieth century. Her iconoclastic claim is that fascism and social democracy actually shared an important characteristic, namely a belief in the “primacy of politics” and what she sometimes calls “the primacy of communitarianism.” This means that both were willing to confront the crises of capitalism and modernization that had become virulent after the First World War. They were prepared to intervene in society and comprehensively reshape it in the name of a distinct set of values. Not so

with those who, conversely, believed in “the primacy of the economic”: Marxism and classical liberalism. Adherents of the former were content to wait for capitalism to collapse on account of its contradictions; while liberals continued to hope that markets would work out their problems themselves.

This is a provocative thesis, and Berman is at pains to stress that fascists and social democrats pursued radically divergent ideologies. Nevertheless, she insists that there were dangerous ideological liaisons between the two. She spends considerable time reconstructing the intellectual development of Benito Mussolini, who, after all, started his political career as a man of the left. The essential switch from left to right occurred with the substitution of nation for class, but also with the jettisoning of any social determinism in favor of a glorification of the will to power. Here, Berman more or less adopts wholesale the controversial interpretation of fascism associated with the Israeli scholar Zeev Sternhell: fascism was a kind of socialism restricted to co-nationals or “co-ethnics.” It was what Sternhell famously called an “anti-materialist revision of Marxism.”

Berman skillfully analyzes the debates within social democracy at the end of the nineteenth century. She shows how the world’s largest and on paper most powerful social democratic party, the German SPD, became paralyzed during the later years of the Weimar Republic and failed to adopt the activist, essentially Keynesian policies that some of its leading experts were desperately advocating. The beneficiaries were the Nazis, whom Berman interprets as being heavily invested in welfare provision. In that she agrees with the maverick German historian Götz Aly, who has been trying to recast the history of National Socialism by viewing Hitler as a “feel-good dictator” who ravaged Europe not least because he needed to keep the German masses happy with plundered goods, fat pensions, and generous subsidies. It really was a merging of nationalism and socialism that responded to what the Nazi leader Gregor Strasser had called “the great anti-capitalist longing.”

However, Berman’s story of social democracy in the first half of the twentieth century is by no means one of complete failure. There

were liberal socialists such as Carlo Rosselli and assorted “democratic revisionists” and, in particular, idiosyncratic thinkers of “planning” and “state intervention” such as Henri de Man and Marcel Déat, who, according to Berman, paved both the roads to social democracy and to fascism. For Berman, though, the one shining example of social democracy is Sweden. The success of the Swedes in uniting workers and peasants, and in presenting an attractive program to society enabled them to entrench an electoral—and cultural—hegemony that lasts until today. Even, as was seen recently, when conservatives win, they have to sell themselves as better Swedish Democrats than the Social Democrats themselves. To her credit, Berman does not neglect to describe the dark side of the Swedish dream, in particular Sweden’s extensive eugenics policies: not everyone was welcome in the *folkhemmet*, the “people’s home” that the Swedish Social Democrats were constructing.

PROBABLY NEITHER historians nor political scientists will be satisfied with this broad-brush picture. For historians, Berman’s account might be too schematic, while empirically minded social scientists are likely to complain that her story relies too much on the power of ideas. For this reviewer, though, these are the strengths of the book. Berman has started a much-needed debate on the intellectual-political history of the last hundred years and she has assembled a formidable range of evidence, from party declarations to detailed policy debates and, not least, the statements of such leaders as Mussolini.

The only real weakness of the book is in the later chapters that deal with the postwar period in Europe and then the present. What in retrospect came to be called the “thirty glorious years” of prosperity in Europe should be the triumphant moment for Berman’s ideal social democrats: an age of high productivity, social peace, corporatist negotiations, and the extension of democracy from parliamentary elections to the workplace. This is the period, according to Berman, when capitalism became compatible with democracy. But in a curious way, it’s here that her story turns flat: social democrats weren’t really in power in any of the

major countries for long (with the exception of the Labour Party in Britain, which undoubtedly did create the British welfare state); and Berman has to fall back on the claim that social democratic ideas had become common sense, even when the party itself lost at the polls. But isn't there a parallel story that could be told about Christian democracy, which, after a certain point, was as committed to a specific kind of political and economic activism inspired by Catholic social doctrines?

It's also not quite clear how the European social democrats then lost it so spectacularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Berman thinks they simply forgot the earlier lessons of the twentieth century and became complacent and ceased being "active, aggressive, and hungry." There's probably something to that, but, again, one feels that other explanations should have been addressed in more detail: the post-1973 changes in the world economy, the rise of the New Left, and the reshaping of left-wing cultures across the West.

Berman wants her history also to be a rallying cry for the present. Rather than passively accepting the seemingly ineluctable forces of globalization, the "primacy of politics" ought to be re-asserted. Far too many on the left are back to where the story started, minus any utopian hopes. Like the Marxists of the late nineteenth century, they have bought a story about supposedly unalterable economic forces. But, unlike them, they have no reason to believe that things will eventually get better. The field, Berman claims, is left to a ruthless liberalism, and, as in the past, such liberalism potentially provides an opportunity to right-wing populists or worse who claim to speak to and for the downtrodden.

There's certainly something to that interpretation of recent social democracy in Europe.

Tony Blair's New Labour and the German SPD have been perversely fascinated by the prowess of business and the buzz of the New Economy. It wasn't an accident that former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder came to be known as the *Genosse der Bosse* (the comrade of the bosses). Much more serious—but also deeply revealing—is the recent confession of Hungary's socialist prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, that his government had been lying and that it was time to face up to harsh realities, meaning the fiscal discipline associated with the common European currency, the Euro, and global investors in general.

The economy really does seem to be like fate; and to counter that common perception, one would have wished for at least a few more hints as to what the "primacy of politics" could mean today. It's not obvious that "perhaps the greatest failing of social democratic parties today . . . is their loss of . . . idealism"—as opposed to their being lost for ideas. Here, Berman only gestures vaguely at new forms of community-building to satisfy the "hunger to belong."

Overall, though, this is an important and highly stimulating book, one that is extremely well written and therefore accessible to a range of readers well beyond the often arcane debates in "comparative politics." Even if one quibbles with some of the historical interpretations, the great merit of Berman's analysis is in demonstrating that the ideological excesses in twentieth-century politics were *also* a response to very real political and economic challenges. It's a lesson that we ignore at our peril. ●

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