



Book Review

Journal of Sociology

1-3

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1440783317740422

journals.sagepub.com/home/jos



Reinventing Social Democratic Development: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Comparisons
Olle Törnquist and John Harriss (eds)
NIAS Press, 2016

With societies and social scientists around the world actively debating the future of the welfare state, this comparative history and analysis of the social democratic model is timely. Törnquist and Harriss (in collaboration with Neera Chandhoke and Fredrik Engelstad) chart the rise, heyday and the troubled present of social democracy in Sweden and across Scandinavia, as well as in one of its less well-known outposts in the developing world: India. They effectively pull together a broadly international cast of experts to make this an exceptionally well-integrated edited volume.

Sociologists have extensively researched the mechanics of the welfare state, but many may have only a vague sense of its origins. This book details the historical emergence of the welfare state in the context of social democratic politics. Chapter 1 lays out a theoretical approach to social democracy, while chapters 2 and 3 apply this approach to the development of social democracy in Scandinavia and India (with a focus on Kerala and West Bengal) to complete an extreme case comparison of the operation of social democracy in some of the richest and poorest parts of the world respectively. Ten empirical chapters then focus on aspects of each of the individual cases, followed by lessons learned in the concluding chapter 13.

Early on, Törnquist and Harriss define social democracy as ‘democratic politics towards the combination of social equity and economic growth’ (p. 3), but this definition fails to communicate the core of the concept. The core of the concept is collaboration, among individual people, interest groups, social classes and even ideologically disparate political parties. However, Törnquist and Harriss go on to argue that social democracy is driven forward by four fundamental processes (p. 10): the formation of political collectives that represent broad popular interests, efforts to link state and society, collective popular struggle for universal policies and the development growth coalitions between capital and labour. The enumeration of these fundamental processes makes clear that the common thread running through these processes is collaboration, among individual people, interest groups, social classes and even ideologically disparate political parties.

Social democracy is often conflated with the welfare state, but as Törnquist and Harriss explain, social democracy is an inclusive, egalitarian form of politics that has

proven especially effective at promoting welfare, not a guaranteed route to the welfare state. As they point out, Sweden's early social democrats were cautious about assigning welfare functions to an all-powerful central state, with some preferring local responsibility for welfare and others preferring a cooperative self-help approach (pp. 16–17). It was only in the 1930s, when confronted by the failure of social democracy in central Europe, that Swedish social democracy coalesced around the centralised welfare state.

Countries that achieve such a high level of state–society collaboration do very well under social democracy, but the unavoidable suspicion is that such countries would flourish under any form of governance. The authors argue in various places throughout the book that high literacy, a strong civil society and generalised trust are necessary for (or at least ease the path towards) social democracy, but this suggests that many of the accomplishments of social democracy are its own prerequisites. This raises one of the perennial chicken-and-egg questions of development studies: do robust societies implement better social policies or do better social policies build robust societies?

In attempting to answer this question, the comparative dimension of the book is especially useful. The Scandinavian countries are now very wealthy, while India is a low-income but nonetheless democratic country with an ambitious written constitution that guarantees the kinds of individual and social rights to human well-being that are associated with social democracy. Those rights are generally inoperative in India as a whole, but the Indian state of Kerala has long been held up as a social democratic success story. In the decades following India's independence in 1947, social democratic Kerala dramatically outperformed the rest of India on a host of social indicators. However, Kerala started with much better social indicators at independence, and today's neoliberal Kerala continues to post some of India's best social statistics – just without the inclusive social democratic politics. Though the authors and editors of this volume suggest that Kerala's social policy successes can be attributed to its social democracy, their own data suggest that Kerala's social policy exceptionalism (relative to the other states of India) both predates and has survived its three decades of social democratic governance (1957–87).

The authors conclude with an argument that financial pressures emanating from globalisation have made Scandinavian social democracy more difficult to maintain, pointing to oil-rich Norway as the one country where the model continues to flourish. They argue that the survival of social democracy in the Global North may depend on the negotiation of transnational pacts to support more inclusive growth in the Global South. But the authors also point out that the bulk of Sweden's socially excluded workers are, ironically, in the state sector (p. 293). Their exclusion cannot be attributed to the impersonal forces of economic globalisation, and their working conditions will not be improved by growth pacts that include the Global South. Globalisation is a real force in contemporary society, and social democracy is under strain in both Sweden and India, but Törnquist and Harriss present little evidence of a connection between these two contemporaneous processes.

Reinventing Social Democratic Development reads more like a focused monograph than an edited volume, bringing together the work of nine contributors. It is distinctive for taking India seriously in a political sociology of social democracy (a field that overwhelmingly focuses on European examples) while at the same time being

distinctive for approaching Scandinavian experiences through the lenses of development studies. Its integration of such disparate case studies under a single theoretical rubric make this a truly exceptional and valuable book, and one need not agree with the book's conclusions to benefit from its data and insights. The editors and authors may allow their enthusiasm for social democracy to influence their analyses, but if they do they are nonetheless careful to provide sufficient evidence to allow readers to reach their own conclusions.