

MALCOLM B. HAMILTON

DEMOCRATIC  
SOCIALISM  
in BRITAIN  
& SWEDEN

FOREWORD BY A. H. HALSEY



# DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM IN BRITAIN AND SWEDEN

Malcolm B. Hamilton

*Lecturer in Sociology, University of Reading*

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A. H. Halsey

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# Foreword

Two hundred years have passed since industrialisation and democracy set the European political agenda. It was Marx's achievement in the nineteenth century to understand the outcome as a social transformation by revolution. The theory lives on despite the fact that, at least in the Western world, both industrialisation and democracy have experienced transformations different from and indeed contradictory to its Marxist predictions. Accordingly, political scientists at the end of the twentieth century seek new understandings of political movements in industrial society. Dr Hamilton's study of Britain and Sweden is a scholarly contribution to that search.

He has chosen two countries in which it might be said that the Marxist theory of the future history of capitalism had been tested, found wanting and rejected before the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike Germany where the Social Democratic Party was avowedly Marxist or like France where the Communist Party had widespread popular support, the British and Swedish labour parties have been evolutionist, reformist and committed to democratic transition to socialism through parliament throughout the twentieth century. The argument of their proponents has not, of course, been that their intentions to transform capitalist society were any less radical. The dream of a society of free individuals bound to each other by equality of citizenship was never essentially different from Marx's kingdom of freedom. But the means were different because democracy was held to be also a desirable end in itself; and both ends and means were different because the class analysis of Marxism in effect postulated the impossibility of socialism by parliamentary legislation in a state controlled by capitalist interests.

Dr Hamilton is not concerned, however, to argue the truth or falsity of competing theories of class in history. He takes the British and Swedish social democratic parties for the twentieth century facts that they are and asks a narrower but vital question: Why have these parties oscillated in the degree or intensity of their radicalism? What factors have determined whether they have been more or less 'socialist' in their programmes? Such an approach avoids, or its left-wing critics will say evades, controversy about whether these parties and their leaders have betrayed the socialist cause. He regards it as pointless to ask why neither the British nor the Swedish socialists

have not pursued revolutionary policies which they never intended to pursue. He does not question their belief in parliamentary democracy and he accepts the constraints thereby placed upon them by their commitment. Instead he seeks explanation for their ebb and flow of social democratic militancy.

The two countries are well chosen for the project Dr Hamilton pursues. The Swedish case is an uncomfortable one in three respects: for Marxists; for contemporary economic liberals who claim the necessity of *laissez-faire* policies for modern freedom and prosperity; and for the British Labour Party with its chronic and possibly fatal propensity to internal faction and fraction.

Marxist theoreticians must be discomforted by a country where private enterprise remains central to the economy and yet opportunity and access to welfare have been significantly reduced. Neo-conservatives must be similarly baffled by the Swedish achievement of high productivity, market competitiveness, an unemployment rate of below three per cent and a vigorous, individualistic independence among a people shamelessly willing to join trades unions, to support high rates of taxation and to maintain public services, pensions, social security and all the apparatus of an enervating welfare state. The British Labour Party must not only look enviously at the successes of their Swedish counterparts, but also reflect sadly on their own record of discord within the party and seriously declining electoral appeal.

However, these triumphs and disappointments are not Dr Hamilton's direct concern. The political lessons are there but are second order. The purpose of the book is to construct a theoretical basis on which such political lessons may be staged. His central purpose therefore is to produce an explanatory model. The dependent variable is radicalism in party policy. The independent variables, taking the existence of parliamentary democracy and of social democratic party formation as given, turn centrally on the choice of policies. Twelve are included and the model is, consequently, a complex one as may be seen from Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2. Three, however, turn out to be virtually constants – the character of the labour movement, the political constitution and the party structure. Four others are shown to have a direct influence on the policies pursued – the party's electoral position, its ideology, politics within the party and the perceived ratio of costs to benefits of the policy in question. Other factors work indirectly through the four factors specified and include party strength as measured by membership and

resources, the effectiveness of the party's 'education' of its potential supporters by propaganda and persuasion, the economic circumstances, the 'relative deprivation' felt by the electorate and the degree of radicalism in popular sentiment.

Dr Hamilton finds that fluctuations of policy are influenced most by party strength, as measured by the percentage of the vote secured in general elections and the number of parliamentary seats won, as well as by the degree of unity or disunity within the party and between the party and the unions. Second in importance he places the economic climate and its effects on the satisfaction of the electorate – their relative deprivation and radical attitudes. Sustained prosperity erodes radicalism; economic recession at first excites it but, if sustained, dampens it into private apathy and party defensiveness. The third most influential set of factors are those which make up intra-party politics – the forces which strike the balance between groups on the left and right within the party. All these factors interact.

It cannot, of course, be claimed that such a model yields precise and powerful multivariate analysis. The method of measurement of the variables is primitive and, as Dr Hamilton points out, its predictions are not wholly reliable. Nevertheless the method is in principle the right one. It demands and permits the precise formulation of hypotheses, and it makes testing and modification of theory possible. In that sense Dr Hamilton belongs to the best kind of political empiricism – a tradition of which his two countries, Britain and Sweden, have been exemplars.

A. H. HALSEY

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MALCOLM B. HAMILTON

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# **Part I**

## **The Socialist Party in Capitalist Democracy**



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

What determines changes in the policies of socialist parties? Why have such parties deviated from their original socialist objectives, as far as concrete policies are concerned, during the course of their histories? Why did a number of them undergo a marked re-radicalisation in recent years? These are the questions with which this study is primarily concerned. More specifically it is a study of the processes which have shaped the policies of the British Labour Party and the Swedish Social Democratic Party during the period in which the democratic and parliamentary route to socialism has been available to them, namely from 1918 to the present time.

Such questions, while in themselves important, interesting and highly relevant for understanding contemporary circumstances and events, have much wider theoretical significance. Answering them is crucially relevant for a number of wider debates – for example, the sources of change and stability in capitalist democracies; the past failures and successes and the future of socialism and the socialist parties in such societies; the nature and focus of power and the character of the power structures prevailing in them. In its turn the changing ideological and policy stances of the socialist parties in the capitalist democracies have to be understood in terms of the broader question of the changing character of capitalist society. On the one hand, the socialist parties have been characterised by some Marxists, and particularly Marxist-Leninists, as merely instruments for ensuring the stability of liberal capitalism and a device for the deflection of working class aspirations. On the other hand, those less critical of capitalist democracy tend to explain the behaviour of such parties in terms of a gradual de-radicalisation in response to what they see as the progressive incorporation and integration of the working class and steadily increasing affluence, prosperity and equality of opportunity. There are, of course, a variety of positions between these two extremes.

It is necessary, therefore, to review briefly the main outline of such debates in order to demonstrate this relevance and to set the main concerns of this study in their wider theoretical context.

## 1.2 SOCIALISM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF CAPITALISM: THE OPPOSING THEORIES

After a century of democratic socialist endeavour to transform capitalist society, the great hopes with which this movement began are still far from being realised. The reasons for this failure have been the subject of considerable debate. In early days it seemed to those involved in the movement that its success was inevitable. It saw itself as representing the interests of the majority of the populations of the states of Europe and, consequently, once these states had become fully democratic, destined to win power with a mandate to carry out a programme for the transformation of capitalism.

Most attempts to explain the failure of democratic socialism have come from the left, and mostly from the Marxist left. For them, the movement was destined for failure from the start. Yet its failure presents them with an awkward dilemma. Their own analysis tells them that the working classes ought to have been more class-conscious than they have. It tells them that democratic socialism's inevitable failure ought to have led to more radical and revolutionary forms of class struggle. But it has not. The failure of democratic socialism, then, does not support the traditional interpretation of the way capitalist society would develop. It presents it with a new problem. How can the quiescence of the working class in these societies and their stability be accounted for? How is it that a class-divided society, or at least, one which exhibits a considerable degree of inequality, and one which is also democratic, nevertheless remains remarkably stable?

An explanation in terms of growing affluence, better working conditions and greater opportunities, in short, embourgeoisement, is, of course, unacceptable to Marxists. Its implications are that further material progress will push the hoped-for millennium still further away, or, in other words, that progress is possible within the framework of capitalism. The preferred interpretation of Marxists and, indeed, many others on the left, is that these societies are not really democratic. The ruling élite or ruling class theorists have contended that a dominant class or élite, usually said to have its power base in the economic order, is able to determine the course of

events, to shape political decisions and, generally, to exercise predominant power in such a way as to ensure the continuation of the status quo and of its own dominant and advantaged position. The most fashionable current interpretation of this position is that the long delayed transformation of capitalism can be explained in terms of ideological hegemony. Derived from Gramsci's concept of *egemonia*, this approach claims that it is through its control of the media, the educational system and the whole cultural apparatus of society that the capitalist 'ruling' class, or its agents, ensures the maintenance of that rule and the failure of left-wing movements and parties.<sup>1</sup>

### **The theory of ideological hegemony**

Ideological hegemony is frequently said to be most effective when it successfully defines the limits within which political questions are discussed; when it determines the framework within which people think and argue; and when it prevents any going beyond certain fundamental assumptions conducive to acceptance of capitalism as a system, such that alternative beliefs, values and ideas become almost literally unthinkable. In this way ideological hegemony determines the limits of what can be said to be legitimate, reasonable, sensible, practical and so on.

Of course, this is a theory of power and how it is exercised in liberal capitalist democracies. It claims that power is exercised and maintained through ideological rather than coercive means, and even then not by crude indoctrination, but by a subtle and insidious process which is difficult to observe and of which those subject to such power are unaware.

Perhaps the popularity of the ideological hegemony thesis is to be explained in terms of its convenience. It allows the retention of the approach to the study of political behaviour which interprets such behaviour broadly in terms of class – always the most promising of ideas for a sociological approach – while at the same time explaining the stable, peaceful and orderly character of most of the liberal democracies of Western Europe and their apparent immunity from attempts to produce fundamental change.

### **The pluralist theory**

For others the stability of the capitalist democracies is no longer a problem. Their answer is that stability is the consequence of the

achievement of this very democracy itself, of a general commitment to its preservation, and acceptance of an obligation to operate within the framework of its procedures. For them the problem of industrial society has been solved without the necessity of the fundamental structural change envisaged by the socialists. The pluralists<sup>2</sup>, as they have been called, deny the existence of any single homogeneous élite and emphasise competition among a plurality of élite groups, each active only in spheres in which their own interests are at stake, and none acting or dominant across the whole field. This competition ensures that all interests are represented through a variety of organisations, including those of the working classes. Competition also has the implication that an élite group or an organisation representing some particular interest may win or lose on any particular issue. No one wins consistently all of the time. There is thus a balance of interests and of power which ensures that no single group or class is dominant. Wealth and property no longer guarantee political power. The economic and political spheres have been separated, and the former has been subjected to institutionalised regulation.

The consequence has been, it is argued, the defusion of political and economic antagonisms and an increasing moderation on the part of members and representatives of the working class. A steady improvement in its material position with the growth of prosperity and affluence during this century, plus widening opportunities for upward mobility, has diminished radicalism and led to a general acceptance of the mixed economy and of moderate reformist politics – in short embourgeoisement. The working class has become less distinct and less class conscious and is declining as a proportion of the working population.

### **Pluralists, élitists and the nature of power**

The disagreement between ideological hegemonists and pluralists is not simply a matter of empirical evidence but, more significantly, it is a question of the interpretation of that evidence and of the underlying assumptions and conceptualisations upon which these interpretations rest. The most significant source of disagreement is to be found in their differing views of the nature of power.

Pluralist conceptions of power are based on what is generally referred to as the decision-making approach. Power is seen as the capacity to determine the outcome of important decisions.<sup>3</sup>



Pluralist conceptions of power have been criticised by élitists<sup>4</sup> for placing too great an emphasis on actual decision-making in which, in a situation of conflict of views or interests relating to some issue, one or other party prevails. This neglects, the élitists argue, those situations in which power may be exercised without the powerful having to make any decision because they are able, by one means or another, to prevent the issue from arising at all. The limitation of this conception of power partly derives, also, from a methodology which concentrates on an examination of issues that arise for public debate and formal decision which, consequently, blinds it to those processes by which some demands and some issues become suppressed.<sup>5</sup>

Other élitists go even further than this in claiming that the powerful may not even have to prevent potential issues from arising, because those who have an interest in the matter do not perceive that they do, or if they do perceive it, cannot, or simply do not, do anything about it.<sup>6</sup>

While the original pluralist conception of power did indeed neglect many possible situations in which power is not readily or easily visible, élitist correctives of this weakness have often gone too far in dissolving the substance of power, and in seeing it as so diffused throughout the structure of capitalist society that it becomes simply a property of the structure itself. Power becomes a vague and insidious force of inertia and resistance to change embedded in the capitalist system. This is well illustrated by a passage from a well-known work on class in Britain:

What we have in mind is a passive enjoyment of advantage and privilege, obtained merely because of the way things work and because those ways are not exposed to serious challenge. In any society, the pattern of peoples' lives and their living conditions take the form which they do, not so much because somebody somewhere makes a series of decisions to that effect, but in large part because certain social mechanisms, principles, assumptions – call them what you will – are taken for granted. Typically of course, those mechanisms and assumptions favour the interests of this or that group vis-a-vis the rest of the population. The favoured group *enjoys effective power*, even when its members take no active steps to exercise power. They do not need to do so – for much of the time at least – simply because things work their way in any case.<sup>7</sup>

The authors go on to say: