

# The Long, Lingering Death of Social Democracy

Dennis Pilon

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Volume 70, Fall 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt70re02>

[See table of contents](#)

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**Publisher(s)**

Canadian Committee on Labour History

**ISSN**

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this review**

Pilon, D. (2012). Review of [The Long, Lingering Death of Social Democracy]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 70, 245–260.

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# The Long, Lingering Death of Social Democracy

**Dennis Pilon**

Cronin, James, George Ross, and James Shoch, eds., *What's Left of the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011)

Evans, Bryan, and Ingo Schmidt, eds., *Social Democracy After the Cold War* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press 2012)

Redvaldsen, David, *The Labour Party in Britain and Norway* (London: I.B. Taurus 2011)

Pawley, Howard, *Keep True: A Life in Politics* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press 2011)

SOMETIMES IT FEELS like we've reached the end of history. The headlines seem ominously familiar: the economy remains in the tank, inequality continues to widen, and social democracy – the last significant electoral embodiment of the left still standing – appears unwilling or unable to do much about it. Much pulling of hair and gnashing of teeth accompanies every lacklustre social democratic turn at governing but there never appears to be much headway in breaking the impasse. Meanwhile, the suggested critical alternatives – Occupy, local food movements, local economies, direct actions, etc. – tend to ignore both the state and any meaningful engagement with the general public. For those who understand capitalism as fundamentally shaped by the state, and the state in turn affected by the great mass political organizing of the 20th-century left, neither social democratic inactivity nor the turn to civil society is very satisfying. But what can be done, if anything? Social democracy's decline often seems inevitable, like a long, lingering death where little can block the eventual terminal stage.

To begin we need some perspective on the problem, starting with some

solid analysis about how the present state of social democracy has come to pass. Here we do not lack for commentary. The past two decades have produced an enormous literature claiming to diagnose what ails the left. Perhaps with such insights, the left might regain its confidence to make history again. But be forewarned: different analysts tell very different stories of the left and its challenges, offering wildly different recommendations about “what is to be done.” The battle to interpret the left’s history may prove crucial in influencing its future. The most recent contributions claim to add something new: a systematic assessment of the governing practice of the latest innovation on the left, the Third Way. But despite the new subject matter, the books divide along very traditional lines of critique that are arguably more than a century old. The various contributors differ over how to define what social democracy is, what its challenges are, and what its future trajectory should be.

The debate turns on which of social democracy’s component parts is more flawed: the “social” or the “democracy.” On the one side, a considerable body work in the past two decades has condemned the social vision of traditional social democracy, claiming that the experience of 20th-century left governing allegedly shows the impracticality of messing with the economy, redistributing wealth, changing society and social norms, etc. For this group, tracing its lineage back to the first high-profile left revisionist Eduard Bernstein, what social democracy is or should be has always been in flux and the subject of contention. Under the pressure of historical and social change, the left must modernize, adapt to new circumstances, and abandon old theories and practices. But for another group the real problem with social democracy is, and always has been, its democracy. From early critics like Roberto Michels to the more recent Occupy movements, the problem with the electoral left has been its relationship to its supporters and to the larger society. After all, the dramatic economic inequality and exploitation that gave rise to the historic social democratic parties is, sadly, still with us. And there is much evidence that voters still seem interested in the traditional social themes of the left and party members often resist attempts to water them down. All this raises questions about just where the pressure is coming from to abandon the “social” in social democracy.

Two recent books take up these different sides of the social democracy debate. In *What’s Left of the Left*, editors Cronin, Ross, and Shoch make the case for modernizing the left, abandoning much of its traditional social vision, and adapting to the more recently dominant market orthodoxy and its attendant inequalities. By contrast, in *Social Democracy After the Cold War*, editors Evans and Schmidt argue that the electoral left’s real problems are largely democratic in that social democratic governments regularly introduce policies that are not wanted by their electorates and do not work in practice. Contrasting these two books illustrates how the debate tends to be structured differently by both sides and why they cannot agree. It also highlights what is missing altogether from the discussion.

Cronin *et al.* move quickly to answer the question their book title implies. What's left of the left? Apparently, not much. For the editors, as outlined in their introductory overview chapter, the point of the book is to make the case that the historic left has moved decisively to the centre of the political spectrum. The left is now the centre-left, spanning traditional European social democratic parties, Anglo-derived labour parties, and even the American Democratic Party. This shift to the centre was a response to a series of key changes in the late 20th century: the discrediting of Keynesianism in the 1970s, the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, and increasing economic globalization from the 1990s on. Additionally, long-term structural and political changes forced a re-evaluation of traditional left strategies. As the old manufacturing-based working class gave way to a new service sector-oriented middle class, and mass parties lost members and the ability to reach the public directly, the left needed new appeals and new methods of communicating. This led to new policy mixes and the adoption of modernized campaigning and voter outreach. As a result, today's various centre-lefts accept markets, favour low deficits and restrained spending, tolerate higher levels of inequality and reduced wages/benefits for workers, and emphasize libertarian issues to attract middle-class voters. Most importantly, for the editors, the "idea of transcending capitalism and creating 'socialism' has completely disappeared." (Cronin *et al.*, 3)

The jettisoning of much of the left's traditional social vision is not, for the editors, "the dead end of the left's long march." (4) Instead, they believe that these "new conditions also open up new political space for center-left parties and political entrepreneurs." Indeed, they argue, "with older certainties gone, there is much greater room for more persuasive and creative center-left politicking than earlier." (13) They see Obama's 2008 presidential victory in the United States as emblematic of what this new disciplined, market-oriented centre-left can do. (13, 19) With such a programmatic introduction, one might expect that the rest of the book's chapters would develop this centre-left thesis in more detail. This is true for some but not all of the contributions, which include two overviews of social democracy, three country-based case studies, three chapters on the United States, and four more touching on issues that transcend borders within Europe.

Following the introduction, Sheri Berman's overview of the history of social democracy certainly marshals support for the editors' overarching thesis. In her characterization, the left has always faced a choice between accepting the passive determinism of class-based theories or embracing the active political agenda of the "democratic revisionists," as she calls them. In the former, she claims, the influence of orthodox Marxism left socialists passively awaiting capitalism's contradictions and the increasing immiseration of the working class to usher in socialism. (30–1) In the latter, by contrast, her democratic revisionists like Bernstein called for immediate reforms within capitalism and cross-class cooperation to achieve it. While Bernstein did not shift the

German Social Democrats in his day, the post-World War I economic crises did move some on the left to seek more immediate reforms. Eventually this would contribute to what Berman calls “the core elements of social democratic ideology” (43), a cross-class political strategy within broad “people’s parties” and an acceptance of capitalist markets to fuel growth with government regulation to assure stability. (47) For Berman, this formula has been best carried out in northern Europe where the Scandinavian countries “show conclusively that social welfare and economic dynamism are not enemies but natural allies.” (47)

Not that everyone agreed, or agrees now. Berman complains that even with the arrival of a broadly social democratic era after World War II, there were still those on the left that characterized capitalism as a zero-sum rather than positive-sum game. In her view, “helping people adjust to capitalism, rather than engaging in a hopeless and ultimately counterproductive effort to hold it back” has been the historic role of the social democratic left. (47) She cites the German Social Democratic Party until 1957 and much of the French and Italian left throughout the postwar period as unable to “make their peace with reality.” (40) Indeed, she argues that the French Socialist Party was dogged by those holding to a Marxist line and that, “unsurprisingly,” its membership and support declined. (41–2) Her historic lessons for the present volume seem obvious. She claims that the centre-left must manage change rather than fight it, embrace the future rather than try to escape it. As a result, those on the centre-left should encourage trade and focus on making a bigger economic pie. (47)

Berman’s narrative of social democracy makes for a great story, one that certainly supports the volume’s overarching thesis, but it amounts to little more than Whig history. In her version, the development of the left is one long and inevitable battle to make peace with different classes and capitalism, to face “reality,” and to give people a “sense of the possible.” Space limitations prevent a full engagement with the litany of historical disputes one could take up here, but suffice to say that Berman’s representations of the past are both selective and self-serving. To cite just one case, it is hard to argue that French socialists were dogmatic Marxists when from the late 1940s to the late 1950s they repeatedly joined governing coalitions dominated by the political centre. Their decline arguably had more to do with their crass opportunism than any alleged class dogmatism.

The second historical overview of social democracy is both more systematic and more compelling. Gerassimos Moschonas provides a quantitative snapshot of the electoral left by decades, starting in the 1950s. The only problem is that his findings undermine the basic thesis of the book. He charts three phases of electoral social democracy, with the high point in the 1950s and 1960s, some decline in the 1970s, then a levelling off in the 1980s, before a return to decline in the 1990s. (52) Apparently the more the left has become a “centre-left” the less successful it has been. For Moschonas, this is because

the early period was more egalitarian, more genuinely cross-class in its economic results, whereas the more recent neo-liberal era has led to a defection of working-class support precisely because it offers them so little. (74–5) The present crisis for social democracy, he sums, is “that it does not project a genuine ‘reformist imaginary,’” one that can take the “ideological lead” over their opponents. (72)

From broad-ranging overviews of social democracy, the book shifts to more finely grained country-level case studies to make its case. But curiously only two of the three studies (UK, France) seem to endorse the book’s centre-left argument, while the third (Sweden) only does so by dramatically narrowing its scope.

James Cronin argues strongly that recent politics in the United Kingdom demonstrates the power of the book’s centre-left analysis. In his view, the British economy of the 1970s was broken and neither Labour nor their union supporters would do anything about it. Indeed, he blames irresponsible unions for failing to make wage concessions and the Labour Party for being too radical. (124) This created an opening for Thatcher’s Conservatives to come to power and do what was needed. But instead of learning from this defeat, he claims, Labour went even further left. Cronin’s characterization of the British Labour Party is unique, and at odds with most scholarship on the party. For instance, he claims that Labour only really become social democratic in 1989 “when it finally reconciled itself to working within the ‘mixed economy’ and gave up its aspiration, never realistic but never relinquished, for socialist transformation.” (121) Though the shift to the centre began in the late 1980s under Neil Kinnock and then continued under John Smith, it was only under Tony Blair’s leadership, Cronin argues, that voters came to believe that Labour had changed. (123) For him, Labour’s victories in 1997, 2001, and 2005 are evidence that the shift to New Labour and their consistently moderate policies in government were the right moves.

Turning to France, Arthur Goldhammer and George Ross do not bother to justify the need for political centrism – they simply assume it – but instead spend their chapter focusing on why the French left has not modernized effectively. Of course, unlike Cronin’s argument for the UK, it would be hard to argue that the public wanted the left to move to the centre as the French left was actually elected in 1981 on a program much more radical than anything British Labour had proposed. Since then, despite many moves to the centre from the French Socialists, the authors claim that France has failed to adapt to the new economic environment of globalization due to chronic divisions on the left, a focus on maintaining the French “social model” of stakeholder social programs, and the institutional impact of presidentialism. (141–2) Decoded, this seems to mean that French voters and party activists on the left simply don’t want what the authors think is necessary, and the political workings of French presidentialism means that it cannot be rammed through anyway as is the case in Anglo-American countries. What remains, they suggest, is a

hopelessly factionalized left, divided between those prepared to govern and those that just want to protest (156), between those defending the old social model and those prepared to reform it. (157) Ultimately, they claim, this means that the French left cannot put forward credible and coherent policies, and only some kind of external shock will help them break out of opposition. (160–1) Of course, the recent presidential and legislative victories of the French left in 2012, despite these divisions, would appear to weaken this analysis.

The final case study offers a much more detailed engagement with the political and economic foundations of modern social democracy, one that makes plausible links between political choices and economic results. But there's a catch – it only applies in Scandinavia. Jonas Pontusson argues that Scandinavian social democracy is fundamentally different in its purpose and institutional design than both the social market economies of Europe and the liberal market economies of the United Kingdom and the United States. He claims they have ultimately modernized their economies more effectively than elsewhere because they protect an individual's access to a good job rather than a *specific* job. (92) But this success relies on the existence of a “social democratic policy regime”: universalism and direct provision of social services, solidaristic wage bargaining, active labour market policies, a focus on gender equality in work, and high levels of investment in public education and training to equalize opportunity, which in turn aid labour mobility, productivity, income redistribution, and equal opportunity. (90) Nordic countries have introduced some neo-liberal reform, he argues, but these have been pragmatic rather than ideological and often reversed when economic conditions improve. (106–7) The backbone of all this is a strong labour movement, with both centralized political influence and strong local associations. And this is the challenge in converting Scandinavian results into a more general model of a new centre-left: the weakness of unions elsewhere, particularly in liberal market economies. (113)

The book then devotes three chapters to the US, no doubt in recognition that the attempt to cast the Democratic Party in amongst a broader European centre-left may be received as both unusual and controversial. Surprisingly then, the chapters do little to make the case for the Democrats' inclusion as a genuinely centre-left party. The closest one contributor can come is to suggest that as European parties are increasingly adopting what appear to be American-style welfare reforms, US experience might be “a useful roadmap – or a cautionary tale.” (189) The chapters have many useful insights, particularly data demonstrating the modern weakness of the Democrats amongst the white working class, but most document how the Democrats' more recent neo-liberal economic policies have weakened them politically. (174–5, 177–8, 206, 216) Hardly a ringing endorsement of the book's centre-left thesis.

The final section of the book takes up issues that cross national borders in Europe: welfare state policy, immigration, European integration, etc. As with the chapters on the US, there are some keen insights here, particularly

Sofia Perez's sensitive treatment of the unequal burden of risks associated with immigration policy, but they do not, as a whole, advance the book's argument. Indeed, in some cases they undermine what other authors proffer. For instance, in Jane Jenson's treatment of policy responses to "new social risks" she casts Britain's Labour governments as creating a "liberal welfare regime" (252), which is the conventional view, but hardly the result one would expect if Cronin's view of Labour as radicals bent on "socialist transformation" were correct.

The editors conclude their book in much the same way they began – defending their programmatic revision of the left as a centre-left – and in doing so blithely ignore their volume's mixed messages and evidence. The new centre-left, we are told, must embrace markets and create new coalitions of interest, forgetting class and its traditional social imaginary. Even if "deep sociological causes" (i.e. changes in structure of work and classes, rise of the middle class, post-materialism, etc.) were not at work, the editors argue that the left would still require a makeover because "the basic programmatic and utopian projects that lefts developed over more than a century are now largely exhausted," and specifically the "goal of 'democratizing capitalism' has largely been achieved." (351–2) Needless to say, the book itself provides much evidence to counter such glib dismissals of the left's traditional utopian projects. Indeed, the last declaration about achieving democratized capitalism seems particularly complacent, as previous chapters recounted just how classed democratic participation and influence under capitalism is. In the end, *What's Left of the Left* is incoherent and unconvincing in defending its over-arching centre-left project, despite some excellent individual contributions from the non-editors.

One finds a very different take on both the history and recent accomplishments of the left in *Social Democracy After the Cold War*. Editors Evans and Schmidt have assembled seven case studies that examine the recent "Third Way" remaking of social democracy in terms of why it has emerged and what it has (and has not) accomplished. They too seek to contribute to a programmatic reorientation of the left, though in a rather different manner than the editors of *What's Left of the Left*. Their book seeks "to lay the basis for the reformulation of progressive class politics" by exposing how contemporary social democracy has "neither a class politics that could potentially develop the power to realize alternatives to neoliberalism" nor a "strategic vision to build such alternatives and class politics." (Evans and Schmidt 4–5) The book is strong precisely where the previous volume was weak: supporting its analytical approach with empirical evidence. Indeed, *Social Democracy After the Cold War* could be read as a point-for-point refutation of *What's Left of the Left*, challenging both its explanatory framework (for example, changing class structures, the impact of globalization) and the case studies it uses to support them (particularly the UK and Sweden). But this book gives less direction about where its proposed "reformulation of progressive class politics" might go.



The book is divided into a fairly brief and straightforward introduction from Evans, a critical overview of the theoretical underpinnings of Third Way social democracy from Schmidt, and seven case studies covering North America (Canada, US, Quebec), Europe (UK, Sweden, Germany) and Australia. Schmidt's chapter is clearly the centrepiece of the book, as it vigorously contests both the justifications for the Third Way and its purported accomplishments. In the process, Schmidt develops a compelling counter-explanation about where the left has gone wrong and why.

Schmidt begins his overview of social democracy by pointing out the "unacknowledged economism" embedded in most of its thinking, despite claims about the "primacy of politics" driving historic modernizations of the electoral left. Here the left has become captured by the same narrow economic thinking they once contested in that they see the economy much like a machine that needs constant technical upgrades. The role of politics then is "to adjust the institutional superstructure to a shifting economic base in order to allow a continuation of technical, and therefore economic, progress." (19–20) The so-called "choices" are anything but, as the structural economic changes seem to determine what must follow. *What's Left of the Left* is littered with just such deterministic phraseology. Political actors who contest such economic logic are "intransigent" (Cronin *et al.*, 38), "fundamentally and historically naïve" (Cronin *et al.*, 119), and refuse to "make their peace with reality." (Cronin *et al.*, 40) Indeed, at one point, the editors simply assert that "markets are here for the duration and everyone knows it" (Cronin *et al.*, 352), effectively narrowing the space for political deliberation on the left by fiat.

Such economism undergirds two key arguments in favour of the Third Way: socio-demographic change and globalization. One line of argument says that the traditional working class is in decline and the left must broaden its base of support to include middle-class professionals and post-material issues if it is to maintain some of its post-war gains. This assumes, economically, that the welfare state as politics is linked to the size, and by extension power, of the working class. But Schmidt argues that the substance of working-class politics is worked out historically, not as some automatic result of demography. (Evans and Schmidt, 23) Thus the decline of a particular kind of blue-collar industrial work should not equal any necessary change in politics. The answers for change need to be sought elsewhere, in the actual practice of political agents and in assessing the impact of historical events.

By Schmidt's reckoning, the post-war welfare state was the product of a concatenation of various historical processes and events, including the historic rise of a distinct working-class identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the impact of catastrophic and unstable events like the Depression and two world wars. The rise of the Cold War specifically was important in structuring post-World War II capital/labour accords that backed Western welfare states, which appeared to be the price capitalists had to pay for workers' "abandonment of fundamental social change." (24–5) An

important element of these post-war political settlements was the cross-class coalitions between the working class and the middle class in various countries to secure state social programs that would benefit both, highlighting that broadening the left was hardly a unique suggestion from the Third Way.

The unravelling of the political status quo supporting the welfare state in the 1970s and 1980s leads to the other economic argument from the Third Way: globalization. In this view, increasingly global patterns of trade at the end of the 20th century meant that governments could no longer effectively tax the wealthy or regulate economic activity, forcing them to adopt neo-liberal policies of spending restraint, tax reduction, and deregulation. But according to Schmidt, this mistakes description for explanation and reverses the proper direction of the causal arrows. Globalization is not reason for change, but the response to it. Specifically, globalization was set in train by capitalists reneging on nation-based capital/labour accords when their profits began to be squeezed in the 1960s and 1970s. (25)

But Schmidt underlines that globalization as a political project was not simply authored by the wealthy. Certainly, well-financed think tanks, corporate funders, and right-wing parties promoted globalization and neo-liberalism, but their rise was also facilitated by the alienation of working people from the state services they had helped to create and the unmaking of the working-class consciousness that had fuelled working-class politics in the immediate post-war period. As Schmidt notes, few workers coming of age from the 1970s on had any experience with unions, job actions, or the old working-class electoral politics. Instead, they increasingly saw themselves as atomized “individuals struggling for survival rather than part of a potentially collective movement.” (26) Not surprisingly for some workers, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, bashing unresponsive state bureaucracies and reducing taxes had a decisive populist appeal, at least for a time. When the Third Way came to power in the 1990s touting its own brand of neo-liberalism, it promised to restore economic growth – but it did not, despite a careful adherence to market orthodoxy. The result, as Schmidt notes, was that “increasing numbers of working class people, with no effective political representation in sight, moved toward abstention and passivity.” (31) Far from broadening left politics, the Third Way narrowed it, succeeding only by effectively abandoning the working class and its specific interests.

Social democrats had claimed that they “could tame the self-destructive tendencies of unregulated market economies” but, as Schmidt documents, the facts suggest this only holds true when capitalist economies are growing and expanding:

In times of crisis, social democratic governments have regularly surrendered to the primacy of economics, meaning they took measures to restore profits and investments even if this hurt their own constituencies. Thus, the limits of capital accumulation also represent limits to social democratic attempts to moderate conflicting class interests. Under present conditions, where working classes lack political representation and the capacity for independent

class mobilization, this, of course, implies that capital's quest for profit dictates the political agenda. (41)

For Schmidt, the only way to counter these trends would be for social democrats to reconnect with their former working-class constituencies and, with unions and other groups, contribute to the revival of a distinct working-class culture. This would mean abandoning their technocratic approach to politics, with its opinion polls, focus groups, and, at best, short-term electoral gains, as well as their commitment to destructive neo-liberal policies which lead to "fragmented markets, beggar-thy-neighbour policies and ... severe economic instability." (27) But he doubts social democrats will take this up, suggesting that developing alternatives to neo-liberalism and remaking the working class will occur in spaces outside the electoral left. (43)

With Schmidt's incisive critique of Third Way social democracy, both its rationale and performance, the rest of *Social Democracy After the Cold War* effectively applies its interpretation to various case studies. In country after country, the facts reveal a project that has not delivered on its promises, despite repeated opportunities. Detailed studies of Canada, Germany and Australia document the constant capitulations of social democratic parties to various so-called economic exigencies, only to see said parties fail to benefit from their "moderate" policies or succeed by alienating their core constituencies. Herman Rosenfeld's contribution on the United States is particularly insightful, doing in one chapter what *What's Left of the Left* failed to do in three, namely explain the relationship of various stripes of leftism to the Democratic Party. Rosenfeld rightly underlines the unique power of the American state, the strength of the US capitalist class, and the impact of running an empire on various attempts to launch an independent left in that country. (104) Yes, progressives have often ended up in the Democratic Party, he notes, but that doesn't mean the party is reliably or even regularly progressive. Where case studies overlap between this book and *What's Left of the Left*, the evidence here is much stronger. For instance, Ostberg reports how most of the factors highlighted by Pontasson as crucial to social democratic success in Sweden – particularly strong unions – have actually declined over the past decade. Indeed, since breaking the historic links between the central union federation, the Lo, and the Social Democratic Party in the early 1990s, both have witnessed a precipitous decline in membership. (210)

Clearly, *What's Left of the Left* and *Social Democracy After the Cold War* are very different books. Not only do they disagree about economic facts, they often present categorically different characterizations of the political actors and movements under study. For instance, James Cronin would have us believe that the UK Labour Party was a radical party bent on socialist transformation, at least until Neil Kinnock took it over in the mid-1980s. But in Bryon Sheldrick's account Labour was never really socialist at any point in its century-long history. Cronin says Labour turned left after their defeat by Thatcher

in 1979, electing left-winger Michael Foot as their leader. But Sheldrick claims Foot led the campaign against the left in the party after 1979. Who's right? Well, considering it was a Labour government that agreed to loan terms with the IMF in 1976, with all its attendant austerity measures, it is hard to accept that the party was in the grip of radicals. (Evans and Schmidt, 161) But that doesn't mean Sheldrick's assessment is entirely spot on either.

One thing both books can agree on is that today's social democracy is not very socialist. Indeed, both seem to agree that today's left is really "reform liberal" at best. Of course, one book applauds this development while the other decries it. This disagreement underscores the real fault line between these two books, the reason they cannot agree notwithstanding any disputes over facts: their differing interpretations of how capitalism works. *What's Left of the Left* is guided by a liberal interpretation of capitalism, one where there is no necessary antagonism between worker and capitalist. Sheri Berman captures this nicely when she argues at one point in the collection that markets can produce wealth to the benefit of everyone. (Cronin *et al.*, 47) But *Social Democracy After the Cold War* is informed by a class theory of capitalism, one where better lives for workers must eventually – inevitably – come into conflict with the profit margins of capitalists. These two views have arguably clashed ever since socialism emerged in the early 19th century. In the era of post-war prosperity, the capitalist "golden age" from 1950 to 1970, the liberal view seemed plausible as economic growth coincided with rising living standards for workers. But after three decades of neo-liberal austerity, of falling real incomes and increasing inequality, liberals are looking more and more like ideologues. When a strategy fails to work for a long time, it's time to try something different.

Here the class analysts of *Social Democracy After the Cold War* have a better grip on contemporary economic reality but are not much more enlightening about what to do about it. To be fair, they suggested their book would only lay the basis for a new class politics by exposing the lack of class in contemporary social democracy. But after Schmidt's effective introduction, which balanced a critique of neo-liberalism with an appreciation of working-class identity as an important part of what was going on, one might have expected more attention to the working-class culture/politics links in each of the case studies. Instead, the case studies focus almost exclusively on the neo-liberalization of social democracy, with the sole exception of Rashi's brief chapter on some of the new movements and parties on the left in Quebec. Without attention to the concrete challenges of making a new left, the contradictions inherent in social change can be avoided and judgements about who or what is radical (or not) are rather too easily tossed around.

From another perspective, these two books suffer from a similar one-sidedness in a number of ways. Both tend to examine the left as agents apparently free to take action, limited only by contexts that appear as abstractions (like

“economic reality” for liberals) or a lack of conviction on the part of leaders (for class theorists). These accounts do not really reckon with the left’s concrete opponents: right-wing parties, the media, financial and industrial élites, etc. Nor do they dwell on the millions of individuals, many without much formal education, who nonetheless identified as socialists throughout the 20th century, which challenges both liberal and class dismissals of the electoral left’s radical credentials. And while both collections cast their stories of the left in historical settings, they do not really come to grips with the messy and unpredictable aspects of historical conflicts and events.

With some of these other insights filled in, the story of the left might not appear so neat and linear. It just might be possible that well-meaning and committed socialists tried to make significant change but fell short in terms of organizing or support, or came up against opponents they judged to be too powerful, and, in the end, accepted less than what they and their supporters had hoped for. More in-depth historical accounts are forced to deal with these many contending and contradictory forces. David Redvaldsen tries to grasp this complexity in his comparative historical study, *The Labour Party in Britain and Norway*, focusing on the 1930s. What he discovers are two parties of roughly similar strength coming out of the 1920s, both claiming to promote a democratic socialism, that end up in very different places by the late 1930s. In this period, Norway’s Labour Party ends up the dominant governing player in the country while UK Labour falters and splits in two. The results, Redvaldsen argues, had less to do with the kind of social democracy promoted by the different parties than the timing of when each party came to power and whether or not the left was united at election time. (129) He underlines the importance of the *order* of historical events. His basic thesis is that Norway’s Labour Party was more successful than UK Labour primarily because the former came to power after the Depression had started, whereas the latter was in power as the economic crisis unfolded. (130) Such historical investigations expand our appreciation of the complexity of events, of how and why actors thought their decisions made sense. On the other hand, they do not exhaust what was possible in any given moment. In other words, history can’t tell us what might have happened if different choices were made in either locale (e.g. if UK Labour had challenged the Depression instead of submitting to it).

We also need a better sense of the individuals who make up the left and how they act on their socialist commitments. The class literature on social democracy is often dismissive of the socialism of electoral left parties. But this consigns the sincere beliefs of a considerable number of people to the trash without so much as a second look. We’re not just talking about the most obvious layers of party leadership but also the thousands of members of the various parties and their millions of voters. What they thought socialism was or could be should matter, if for no other reason than they confirm that radical ideas for social change can have a mass base and, as such, might again.

Here researchers might consider ethnographic techniques to help capture the mindset of the working-class supporters of socialism, in all their diversity.

We know much more about what social democratic élites thought through biographies, autobiographies, published diaries, and recorded public addresses. Obviously there can be a self-serving side to such documents as politicians and party insiders try to justify their actions. In Howard Pawley's *Keep True: A Life in Politics*, the former New Democratic Party Member of the Legislative Assembly and Premier of Manitoba clearly wants to give his take on what happened while he was an elected member of the legislature, as a cabinet minister in the Schreyer government, then opposition leader, and finally as premier. But Pawley's book is a much better account than most political memoirs for a number of reasons. First, for a politician, he is disarmingly modest. Pawley never fails to credit party members and the larger progressive movement for his accomplishments. Second, he manages to convey the viciousness of political battle, of how the left's opponents would stop at nothing to defeat them. Never mind socialism, Manitoba's economic élites went apoplectic at the thought of public automobile insurance, and pulled out all the stops in an attempt to derail it. Pawley's account of the intimidation and dirty politics practised by the insurance companies in an attempt to get their way should be required reading for left critics of all stripes (see Chapter 2, "Baptism by Fire").

It is a shame that Bryan Evan's otherwise exhaustive chapter on the NDP in *Social Democracy After the Cold War* did not dwell on Pawley's administration, as there is much in his actions that Evans could have supported. For instance, Pawley consistently campaigned on economic issues, underlining how left parties could gain and keep office by addressing the concrete economic fears of working people. While left spin-doctors were counselling the federal NDP to stay away from the economy, Pawley was demonstrating how it could be the party's strength. (Pawley, 111) Pawley's recounting of his own experiences as a politician also underline the impact of "events" no matter how committed to socialism one might be, particularly the unpredictable opposition that can emerge over certain issues. His account of the surprising public hostility to the restoration of French language rights in the province that emerged in the 1980s demonstrates how hard "issue control" can be, especially when the media and the political right are prepared to opportunistically use any opening to defeat the left (see Chapter 6, "Anatomy of a Political Nightmare"). Finally, Pawley's account of how his childhood socialization into a left culture stayed with him throughout his career and helped keep him focused on what the working class needs from politics certainly supports Schmidt's case that reviving the community side of the left must be a key priority.

Despite these many incisive criticisms and creative suggestions to help stave off what appears to be social democracy's imminent death, there is little doubt that the Third Way will likely remain the dominant approach of electoral left parties, reflecting the hegemony of liberal market fundamentalism at this

historical juncture. It seems that people, both élites and followers, literally cannot think in other terms about how economies function or how politics might alter our economic “reality.” Part of what allows this state of affairs to go on is that the people who promote such an understanding have very little contact with the many people who suffer from it. And the people who suffer from it have few outlets to express themselves. Art sometimes has a better grasp of these things than social scientists. John King’s novel *Human Punk* revolves around the lives of four fifteen-year-old boys who love the emerging punk scene in 1970s Britain. The book captures the desperation and claustrophobia of their lives, their lack of options both economic and social, and the inchoate rage that results from the indifference to their plight coming from the political system. And this is happening at the *height* of the British welfare state. OK, it’s fiction, but it is precisely because the injuries of class are often hidden, particularly from middle-class academics, that such artistic representations fill an important gap (academically, Bourdieu *et al.*’s *The Weight of the World* does successfully address some of these themes). The work of the left then would appear to be fairly straightforward: connect with those who are not making it in today’s economy – a considerable group of people by any number of economic measures – and help make their plight visible, at least as a first step. The second step would involve providing some insight into why things are as they are, and what might be done about it. And that unavoidably means talking about power.

What is striking about Third Way advocates is their lack of analysis of power. Instead, they talk about politics itself as if it were a marketplace of ideas, where the task is simply to figure out “what is the demand out there for center-left reformism?” (Cronin *et al.*, 4) The assumption is that politics in Western democracies is the result of what voters want, a classic pluralist formulation. As we have seen, Cronin *et al.* believe that “the goal of ‘democratizing capitalism’ has largely been achieved.” (352) To get back to talking about power would involve discrediting such superficial analyses. The working class has about as much influence over politics via elections as they do the economy via consumerism – which is to say, not much. Their complicity with or consent to our current social structures is questionable, given their lack of power. Attempts to make them the author of our current politics are about as convincing as Locke’s claim that people in his day consented to their political system because they walked on its roads.

Nowhere is the lack of attention to power more obvious than in the study of elections. Liberals like Cronin *et al.* seem to assume that the public is in the driver’s seat when elections occur, but such views can only be sustained by ignoring the material reality of what is involved in modern campaigns. The individual voters cast one ballot each. Their ability to participate in what goes on in an election is limited by their finances, their sense of class entitlement (or the lack thereof), and competing demands on their time, like work and family. Arrayed against them are corporate-financed political candidates and parties,

corporate-owned media, and better-financed participants in civil society, all of whom can draw on resources unavailable to the individual citizen, such as advertising, research, polling, access to powerful individuals and organizations, etc. If ever there were a clear example of a class-biased process in contemporary society it would be elections.

Nor does it help things to suggest that the left mimic such techniques by adopting so-called “professional” campaigning. The irony of such “modernization” is that it makes the left a follower rather than a leader, and a craven one at that. The often desperate adoption of behavioural and marketing research techniques by left parties delivers, at best, superficial and short-term gains, while costing them their traditional working-class bases and sense of direction. These “modern” techniques were themselves the right’s initial response to successful mobilizing innovations by the mass left. Advertising and marketing sought to get between the public and its sense of itself, to broker the meanings rather than have people work it out for themselves, to replace “the people” of the democratic imaginary with “the individual” of the consumerist society. But the check on such strategies was the direct relationship that the working-class left supporters had with their parties. Face-to-face mobilization, often on the doorstep, brought politics directly to working people in a space where they could participate. Such links also protected left parties as their opponents attempted to marshal “public opinion” against them. And, importantly, it anchored them to those constituencies, preventing such parties from gaining power on one set of backs only to serve others. If such direct links are problematic today – and they are for a host of reasons – then the answer is not simply to adopt the tactics of your enemy, but to examine how to re-establish the links in a new way.

A considerable amount of ink has been wasted in trying to define social democracy in terms of policies and a pragmatic temperament. But what has really distinguished social democracy has been its links to the working class and its concrete problems, problems that could not be remedied with just a program here or there, but with the promise of a fundamental altering of social relations. Helping some people up the ladder, as liberals would have us do, would not alter the fact that many would be left behind. Targeted help, as conservatives recommend, would not alter the relational inequality that would quickly attach negative connotations to any benefits. What is required is change in the relationship of classes to one another as only that would alter how everyone in society perceives themselves and their worth. In a way, the US did this by making class less visible than in the UK, but it was a sleight of hand, as the “hidden injuries of class” still limited people’s lives, and worse denied them a public identity that might have helped them make common cause with others rather than experiencing their limits as personal shortcomings. Social democracy at one point was just such a rallying point for the working class.

Contemporary social democracy may be dying but the left can still be reborn. But the way forward can only be traversed with the active participation, indeed



leadership, of the working class, in all its diversity. Events like Occupy disrupted the usual flow of neo-liberal discourse, and that is important, but it did not attract a mass following amongst working people. Whether it is Occupy, or protests, or community meetings, or even elections, working people are largely absent. There are complex reasons for this but much can be traced back to the evisceration of working-class identity in popular culture (except as figures of ridicule) and the decline of working-class organizations run by the working class itself. Historically, the organized left played a key role in the development of both. As Geoff Eley pointed out in his magisterial *Forging Democracy: A History of the Left in Europe*, from the late 19th century into the 20th, the left helped organize the working class and name both the system oppressing them and how to oppose it. This created a counter-hegemonic set of ideas that anchored these parties in their working-class constituencies. Though the terrain of the 21st century may be different, Eley argues that the left throughout the last century survived by reinventing its application of class analysis and political organization, not by giving them up. After all, severe class divisions remain with us, and the political right and their wealthy supporters have ratcheted up a class war over the past three decades that shows no signs of abating. Thus a critical examination of the left at this juncture should not celebrate some clever acquiescence to inequality or exploitation (a la Cronin *et al.*), but help to name it, to break through the liberal obfuscation of the class issues and politics behind it.