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Social Policy and Contending Theories of Political Economy

By Christina Syriani

The adversarial positioning of capitalism and socialism in American gained unprecedented notoriety with its post-World War II influence on the narrative of twentieth century world history. Today, it has found new energy in the United States' 2020 presidential campaign. Beginning in 2019, as Democratic primaries brought forth proposals for social policy reforms, such as universal healthcare and free education, President Donald Trump launched into a broad attack on socialism. Though his reinforcement of a capitalism vs. socialism argument has found widespread support, his talking points have been consistently vague, lacking pragmatic didacticism. His evasive discourse mimics America's wartime propaganda, aiming only to perpetuate widespread mistrust in an overarching ideology rather than addressing the specific real-world problems that have brought the social policies to the forefront of political discussion. Manipulating Democratic primary talking points into a cautionary tale of the failed Venezuelan economy while celebrating the economic boom that surged during his initial term as United States president (a strategical oration employed in both the 2019 and 2020 State of the Unions), is a diversionary tactic that ignores many of the social problems so pervasive in American society. It is an outdated reverberation of a capitalism vs. socialism debate that superficially ties "object poverty and despair" to "socialist policy" without demonstrating a firm and consistent causal relationship to validate such claims.¹

Leaning on antiquated capitalism vs. socialism rhetoric to comb over social policy proposals aimed is a dangerous oversimplification of policy formation altogether. It is a reductionist tendency that does a disservice to democracy as it removes the necessity for political discourse and deepens the division of a two-party system. Bipartisan policy objectives have taken a back seat as the Republican party lays claim to capitalism, raising their spears in staunch opposition to a Democratic party that has been typified as socialist radicals. Not only is this stereotyping deeply polarizing, but it also leaves no room for compromise and effective policy implementation. If a more honest and transparent discussion cannot be employed, the vehemence of a capitalism vs. socialism debate will continue to belittle the democratic process as fair consideration, proper deliberation, and thorough analyses are too quickly removed from the involved process of politics.

Rather than positioning capitalism and socialism in rigid oppositional camps, Scandinavian nations have adopted a strikingly different approach to public policy. In a political-historical examination of twentieth century Norway and Sweden, Francis Sejersted explains the how the Scandinavian post-World War II perspective differs from that of the Americans: while the Americans were busy waging a war against communism and defending their ideal of capitalism, Norway and Sweden were defending democracy in a battle against dictatorship.² Consequently, these contrasting perspectives have had translated into drastically different socioeconomic policies for the United States and Scandinavian countries.

Finnish journalist Anu Partanen identifies this divergence of thought and writes extensively on the differences of Scandinavian and American political developments. In her

¹ Pramuk, Jacob. "Expect Trump to make more 'socialism' jobs as he faces tough 2020 re-election fight." CNBC News. February 6, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/06/trump-warns-of-socialism-in-state-of-the-union-as-2020-election-starts.html> (last accessed March 1, 2020).

² Sejersted, Francis. *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. 2011. P 186.

December 2019 New York Times article, she uses the American perception of Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to illustrate her point. While the American conservative right frames these leaders “as dangerous radicals,” Scandinavians find these politician’s policy proposals “normal – and not particularly socialist.”³ Partanen’s article is a persuasive extension of her book, The Nordic Theory of Everything,⁴ written for an American audience in an attempt to reverse the socialist label that has been thrust upon Scandinavian political economy. Her work captures her admiration of the United States but also highlights the glaring contradictions of American ideology which were abundantly apparent to her as a twenty-first century immigrant. Though themes of independence, freedom and opportunity are often synonymized with American capitalist culture, Partanen finds these characteristics far more inherent to Scandinavian society.

Partanen’s research, and that of many others, reveal the inconsistencies of a capitalism vs. socialism rhetoric. Though Partanen tries to convince her readers that “Finland is a Capitalist Paradise,” the arguments she presents in support of this claim suggest that Finland is neither socialist nor capitalist, but rather a hyper-modern amalgam that has traded the rigidity of ideological constructs for something far more rational. In actuality, Partanen’s claim to capitalism is only an attempt to counter the accusations of the American conservative right who prefer to ridicule all of Scandinavia as a “wrecked” socialist system.⁵ She is only trying to reason within an existing conversation of capitalism and socialism. Instead, this perpetuates an altogether irrelevant categorization of political economy. Still, if it is to be discredited, it is pertinent to consider the capitalist’s accusation launched at twentieth century Scandinavia, where, to the ideological zealots, the rise of Social Democracy reflected widespread social policies promoting the type of socioeconomic equity so indicative of socialism.

The “Nordic model,” although a term synonymous with Scandinavia’s present-day political economy, was attached to the Social Democratic party’s engineering of the welfare state which incrementally grew out of mid-twentieth century. Sejersted identifies 1945 to 1970 as the hegemonic era of Social Democracy, described as a push towards “social formation based on planning and neither Communist nor capitalist” in its ambitions.⁶ Swedish Historian Lars Trägårdh and his co-author Henrik Berggren concur in their observation that post-world war socioeconomic aspirations were committed to reconstructing society “in the form of new, inclusive, and democratically responsive welfare states.”⁷ In order to understand this presumably “socialist”⁸ period of Scandinavian history and how this era contributed to a present-day “Capitalist Paradise,”⁹ we shall examine the principled values and the themes that informed and shaped the Nordic model.

During the hegemonic phase of Social Democracy, policies were driven by solidarity and collaboration. Partanen points out that capitalist proponents have accused the Nordic model of having “little to teach the rest of the world, because their success is specific to an isolated group

³ Partanen, Ana and Corson, Trever. “Finland is a Capitalist Paradise.” New York Times. December 7, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/07/opinion/sunday/finland-socialism-capitalism.html> (last accessed March 28, 2020)

⁴ Partanen, Ana. The Nordic Theory of Everything. HarperCollins Publishers. New York, NY. 2016

⁵ DiLorenzo, Thomas. The Problem with Socialism. Washington, DC. Regnery Publishing, 2016. P 77-83.

⁶ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 213.

⁷ Berggren and Trägårdh. “Pippi Longstocking.” P 11.

⁸ Referring to the label DiLorenzo places on the Nordic model, as referenced earlier.

⁹ From the title of Partanen and Corson’s article “Finland is a Capitalist Paradise.” New York Times. December 7, 2019.

of small, culturally uniform ethnically homogenous countries.”¹⁰ This is consistent with a rhetoric that prioritizes ideological stereotypes over socially responsive policy formation, and it “misses the larger point.”¹¹ The Nordic model is largely attributable to a bipartisan success, formed out of a singular vision that “dovetail(s) perfectly with the universal challenges that all nations are facing as modernity inevitably advances.”¹² Trägårdh and Berggren describe this as an effort of “amazing single-mindedness,”¹³ reflecting the solidarity in public thought. There is an overwhelming amount of research that points to the cohesion of Nordic politics during Social Democracy’s hegemonic phase. “This applied first of all to technological and economic projects, and then to popular projects that material prosperity made realizable... such as the refinement of the population through the expanded unitary school system and especially the welfare system.”¹⁴

Bridging party lines also meant reaching “beyond old class contradictions.”¹⁵ The bourgeoisie and the radical left all participated in creating a welfare system that could equally serve everyone across society. As Sejersted emphasizes in his work, the successes of the Social Democratic system were attributable to a principled collaboration among even the most oppositional political theories:

The radicals, from Gustav Moller and the communists on one side and the liberals and conservatives on the other, had all established equal payments as the basic principle. Consequently the final solution cannot be regarded as a compromise between the Socialists and the bourgeoisie. The ultimate solution was something beyond compromise – a Nordic Social Democratic system in its own right.¹⁶

Social democracy had become the sounding board for a consensus of ideas as it drove Scandinavian societies forward in shared aspirations of maintaining social order through the achievement of socioeconomic equity and well-being. Though the working class had been the basis for the development of the labor movement, a shared vision of the welfare state naturally ushered the working class into a Social Democratic “people’s party” that would share a vision of society with even members of the bourgeoisie.

With the success of equalizing conditions, Scandinavian political consciousness was empowered to adopt a new impassioned goal: freedom. To understand how the Nordic model disrupts American ideological stereotyping, we must first understand the American narrative that has claimed freedom as a tenet of liberal capitalism and associated socialism with a surrender of freedom. The categorical sorting of freedom is based on the assumption that a socialist system dictates an equal distribution of life’s necessities (such as housing, healthcare and education) at the expense of individual choice. As individuals surrender their income in the form of taxes, the state is entrusted with, what capitalists would deem, very personal life choices, which are then systemically provided for by the state. Indeed, increased taxes are an integral part of many social policies, and capitalists fear that surrendering their hard-earned dollars to the state to manage their social welfare gives the state too much authority over personal freedoms. Under this logic, the state is seen as a collective existence that erodes individualism. Further, if the state is poorly managed, capitalists associate such preconditions with an inevitable rise in authoritarianism and

¹⁰ Partanen. The Nordic Theory of Everything. P 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Berggren and Trägårdh. “Pippi Longstocking.” P 11.

¹⁴ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 240.

¹⁵ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 257.

¹⁶ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 254 (citing Amark 1999)

a complete confiscation of individual rights. It is by this oversimplified logic that the capitalism vs. socialism argument makes adversaries of individualism and collectivism, respectively.

In demonstration of the misguided tenets of this ideological framework, the Nordic model created policies that promote values of *both* individualism and collectivism. Lars Trägårdh and Henrik Berggren are Sweden's experts on understanding and explaining how the Nordic model reconciles these seemingly conflicting ideals. To illustrate their point, they turn to the fictional Swedish children's series that follows the story of a young girl named Pippi Longstocking. "The originality of the Pippi stories are that they simultaneously take two radically conflicting ideas to their most extreme points of tension without compromise or easy resolution: on the one hand, total individual sovereignty, on the other, the absolute necessity of a stable social order."¹⁷ By their expert evaluation, the cultural value of "self-sufficiency and independence in respect to other members of the community" is balanced with "an appreciation of the necessity of stability and social responsibility in a good society."¹⁸ First published in 1945, the Pippi Longstocking stories exemplify a Nordic model that beckons society to embrace and encourage individual sovereignty while acknowledging a simultaneous dependence on a stable collective social order.

Though Trägårdh and Berggren's illustration of the symbiotic relationship between individualism and collectivism alludes to an understanding of Nordic society dating back to 1945 (the first year's publication of the Pippi Longstocking books), Francis Sejersted believes that the social emphasis on individualism only began to emerge at the pinnacle of Social Democracy's prime. A "consciousness of rights forcefully entered the debate around 1970"¹⁹ that advocated for new personal freedoms; the social priority had shifted from "a principle of the greatest possible equality to a principle of the greatest possible freedom – freedom of choice."²⁰ The catalyst for this aspirational change was, ironically, Social Democracy's greatest accomplishment: the waning of class consciousness:

This successful policy for equalizing conditions, however, tended to undermine the subjective class consciousness of the new generations and weaken the Social Democratic order. As so often happens in history, the effect destroyed the cause. This weakening of class consciousness was followed by what seems like a paradox: when class as a cultural construction weakened, the differences again rose.²¹

The strivings of egalitarianism had dominated the hegemonic phase of Social Democracy from 1945 through 1970, but once the goal neared full realization, it became a matter of less value by virtue of its success. Equality found itself caught in a self-defeating feedback loop:

The move from equality and unity to freedom and diversity implies a dramatic change of mentality, and it broke with the traditional Social Democratic mode of thinking... Today... There is a demand from the left that the term "freedom" be recaptured from the liberals, while simultaneously arguing that the freedom revolution involves many positive elements from a Socialist perspective as well... The Social Democratic order with its welfare state was built on solidarity thinking, but its realization, paradoxically, undermined solidarity... The great successes of the Social Democratic regimes – in short, the whole welfare state – are indeed a precondition for the great liberating project of late modernity, insofar as they provided the material basis for individual freedom, that is, freedom from need.²²

¹⁷ Berggren and Trägårdh. "Pippi Longstocking." P 12

¹⁸ Berggren and Trägårdh. "Pippi Longstocking." P 12.

¹⁹ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 390.

²⁰ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 429.

²¹ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 488.

²² Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 493.

Though Sejersted acknowledges that the move towards freedom and diversity may appear to contradict the accomplishments of equality and unity, there is a parallel observation that concludes the welfare state has served as a material precursor, not a mere historical preceding, for this new shift in mentality. Unequivocally, the welfare state has remained a priority: “Despite the problems of the many growing demands, and despite the adjustments that were made along the way out of necessity, nobody wants to dismantle the welfare state.”²³

Under the lens of capitalism vs. socialism, this may seem categorically implausible, but the welfare state remains an essential component of the Nordic system precisely because *it is* the foundation for Scandinavian freedom. Quite to the contrary, the push and pull between equalization and individual liberty is not hostile, but complementary. This is the theme that Anu Partanen captures in her work. Scandinavians are willing to pay high taxes and invest in social policies aimed at equalizing access to education, healthcare, childcare and so much more because these social policies ensure personal autonomy:

What really motivates Swedes and other Nordic citizens to support their system isn’t altruism – no one is that selfless – but self-interest. Nordic societies provide their citizens – all their citizens, and especially the middle class – with the maximum autonomy from old-fashioned, traditional ties of dependency, which among other things ends up saving people a lot of money and heartache along with securing personal freedom.²⁴

Rather than citizens leaning on the charity of family members throughout life’s pivotal (and otherwise expensive) milestones, the Nordic model allows Scandinavians to separate obligatory financial burdens from the sanctity of human love and connection:

As Swedes prioritize policies that enable individual autonomy through state managed resources, this does not mean that loving and caring relationships are not valuable to them. It means that they don’t want those relationships to be “reduced to a state of dependency” and they find it easier to trust the sincerity of love when the relationship is not encumbered by material needs.²⁵

Partanen’s articulation of this relationship between state-managed egalitarian policies and individual liberty echoes Trägårdh and Berggren’s work:

We are always and unavoidably enmeshed in social relations that circumscribe and limit our sovereignty... as a fundamental social virtue, love is all about unmediated and absolute duty towards one’s fellow man. In Sweden – perhaps Scandinavia at large – on the other hand, the premise is the reverse. Rejecting the idea of love as constitutive of unequal and hierarchical social relations, and basing instead the ethos of love on the principle of egalitarianism, the Swedish theory of love posits that all forms of dependency corrupt true love. Only mutual autonomy can guarantee authenticity and honesty in human relationships.²⁶

This reasoning justifies a co-dependency between the individual and the state: the Scandinavian woman protects the egalitarian tenets of the welfare state because the welfare state protects her independence and allows her to freely chose her ties in society. In this sense, equality begets freedom.

In contrast to this alliance Scandinavians have formed between the individual and the state, Trägårdh and Berggren point out that the American system hinges on a partnership between *family* and state. For all its capitalist claims of individuality and freedom, individual autonomy seems to lose itself amidst the inevitable hardships of American life, forcing

²³ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 493.

²⁴ Partanen. The Nordic Theory of Everything. P 57.

²⁵ Partanen. The Nordic Theory of Everything. P 59.

²⁶ Berggren and Trägårdh. “Pippi Longstocking.” P 12.

individuals into a relationship of dependency that confuses responsibilities and burdens familial and communal relationships.

Paradoxically given our intuitive understanding of the United States as an individualistic nation and Sweden as a softly socialistic one, Sweden is far more consistent in its embrace of the idea of individualistic autonomy. In the United States the liberal individualism of the market coexists most uneasily with its opposite, a conservative communitarian ethos first centered around family, religion and nation... a cause for confusion, contradiction and deep division – between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ – America.²⁷

This presents a deep inconsistency in America’s capitalism vs. socialism debate and highlights the interest struggle perspective which defends a particular mode of thinking versus embracing a comprehensive analytical approach to social policy.

Though American political economy may struggle to find a solid landing place for the individual, the Nordic reconciliation of individualism and collectivism is not a foreign concept in political philosophy. Reaching far back to the earliest development of political thought, Aristotelian philosophy articulates the essential interdependencies of these supposedly conflicting ideals. As Aristotle deconstructs political organization in The Politics, the “uncompounded elements”²⁸ unveil an inherent partnership between the individual and the collective, bound by the very laws of nature. It is only through this partnership that the city is able to attain its self-sufficiency, but it is also through this partnership that the city “exists for the sake of living well.”²⁹ In Aristotle’s words, “the city is first by nature and prior to each individual” and any individual “incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god.”³⁰ There is no practical way for the individual to deny the great necessity of the collective, nor can the collective deny its compositional element of the individual. The two are inseparable by nature.

Though essential to one another, should the individual or the collective fall into an excessive dominance, the imbalance can have detrimental ramifications. Sejersted cautions against an unmitigated leaning towards deeply individualistic tendencies to live aesthetically. Public discourse becomes endangered at the widespread “insistence on one’s own subjective feelings and interpretations”³¹ which forget the individual’s tether to a greater collective existence:

Value is what one creates for oneself, and that interpretation can give a feeling of freedom and power. Individuals step into the public sphere in order to realize themselves by becoming visible. The public arena, where previously people could debate the great social questions, increasingly becomes a stage people use to attract attention.³²

This form of hyper-individualism frays democratic discourse as self-aggrandizement takes the place of results-oriented debate and deliberation. On the other hand, John Stuart Mill advocates for a healthy dose of independent thought and to protect the people from social tyranny.³³ He

²⁷ Berggren and Trägårdh. “Pippi Longstocking.” P 21.

²⁸ Aristotle. The Politics (Carnes Lord translation). Chicago. The University of Chicago Press, Ltd; London, 1984. Book 1, Ch 1. P 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Book 1, Ch 2. P 36-37.

³⁰ *Ibid.* P 37.

³¹ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 447.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty with Subjection of Women and Chapters on Socialism. New York, NY. Cambridge University Press, 1999. P 53.

advocated for “the collision of adverse opinions”³⁴ as an essential vehicle for democracy and a catalyst for the necessity of ongoing refinements in public policy. Productive discourse requires intelligent confrontational individuals to occasionally challenge societal norms if the collective is to grow and continually adapt to the needs of its members.

Robert Nisbet and Christopher Lasch echo John Stuart Mill’s call for public discourse and strong independent thought, but they also recognize that radical individualism must be tempered by a collective body. In The Quest for Community, Nisbet writes:

...the intensity of men’s motivations toward freedom and culture is unalterably connected with the relationships of a social organization that has structural coherence and functional significance. ... the discipline of values within a person has a close and continuing relationship with the discipline of values supported by human inter-relationships. “Only by anchoring his own conduct... in something as large, substantial, and superindividual as the culture of a group,” wrote the late Kurt Lewin, “can the individual stabilize his new beliefs sufficiently to keep them immune from the day to day fluctuations of moods and influences of which he, as an individual, is subject.”³⁵

In order for the individual to thrive, he must be anchored in something larger than himself. Building on this sentiment, Lasch romanticizes the delicate and almost spiritual necessity of the individual’s grounding in a larger communal purpose:

... a glimpse of the great world beyond family and friends... schools us in the virtues essential to civic life: loyalty, trust, accountability. It tempers romance with responsibility. It encourages us to make something of ourselves, to impose difficult demands on ourselves, and to appreciate the satisfactions conferred by devoted service to an ideal.³⁶

In this way, public discourse becomes a healthy exchange that benefits both the individual and his broader society. Lasch encourages individual and fearless expressions in public discourse and trusts that the audience will regulate the excess in a balanced exchange meant to promote “intelligent awareness”³⁷ for both parties. The interaction benefits one’s personal self-realization while rooting him in a purpose larger than his purely selfish pursuits. Indeed, this meets the Social Democratic goal of building a society “strong, independent, and compassionate enough not to fall prey to strong leaders, group think and frenzied nationalism.”³⁸ This is the focus of a nation unfettered by capitalist or socialist associations, intent on building a strong and self-aware society. This is the true workings of democracy, measured in participation, collaboration, solidarity, equality, autonomy and freedom.

Tragically, these themes get lost in America’s obsessive discourse on capitalism and socialism. If the president of the United States can address the American public with the assertion that “Socialism destroys nations, but always remember, freedom unifies the soul,”³⁹ then surely the ambiguity of such a statement is reflective of a broken political system that takes for granted the passivity of its public. Sejersted would say that this style of American politics in

³⁴ Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty with Subjection of Women and Chapters on Socialism. New York, NY. Cambridge University Press, 1999. P 53.

³⁵ Nisbet, Robert. The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom. New York. Oxford University Press, 1953. P 230.

³⁶ Lasch, Christopher. The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy. New York, NY. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995. P 118.

³⁷ *Ibid.* P 131

³⁸ Berggren and Trägårdh. “Pippi Longstocking.” P 11.

³⁹ Wolffe, Richard. “‘Freedom unified the Soul:’ Trump’s State of the Union Speechwriters have thrown in the Towel.” *The Guardian*. February 4, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/04/freedom-unifies-the-soul-trumps-state-of-the-union-speechwriters-have-thrown-in-the-towel> (last accessed February 28, 2020)

2020 has lost the communication perspective and reduced public discourse to meaningless insults as partisan interests are put on stage in a struggle for power.⁴⁰

Conflicts of interest [are] the driving force in the development of politics... the political ideal can be regarded as the transcendence of political contradictions... accomplished through open and informed discussions which must be carried out before informed conclusions can be reached... In many instances it should be possible to go beyond the compromises and attain consensus on what ultimately is the best solution. From the perspective of the interest struggle, public discourse tends to be defined as noise that veils the power struggle, but, from the communication perspective, public discourse is the most important element in the political process.⁴¹

The interest struggle perspective manipulates the public arena into a podium for rallying emotions rather than engaging in an honest and transparent discussion regarding the great social questions of our time.

If we hope to cure these ailments in American society, we need a leader that elevates policy issues with intelligent discourse in the pursuit of common ground. Just as “Social Democracy was a historical compromise between capital and labor,”⁴² American politics must also find a collective path forward that serves the needs of the people. As Anu Partanen proposes:

Indeed, what if the entire purpose of the state in the twenty-first century, as agreed upon and expressly stated by its citizens, was not to take more power away from the people, but just the opposite to push the modern values of freedom and independence even further, to provide the people with the logistical foundation for the most comprehensive form of individual liberty possible? It is exactly this exceptional commitment to individualism that defines the Nordic social contract today.⁴³

Capitalism is no guarantee against dictatorship just as socialism is no guarantee against economic oppression. The answers to political economy will never be that straightforward. It is only through open and informed discussions that we can ever hope to achieve an understanding of what needs improvement in our society, and *how* it should be improved. In order to engage in productive public discourse, in order to assess how to correct demoralizing issues of inequality and preserve individual freedoms, political discussion must transcend the contradictions of the interest perspective and thrive in the space of open communication, information, and fair consideration that reaches across both sides of the aisle. We must abandon our biases, shed the scales from our eyes, and look at social policy from a results-oriented lens. Only then can we achieve what really needs to be done.

⁴⁰ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 432.

⁴¹ Sejersted. The Age of Social Democracy. P 432.

⁴² *Ibid*. P 431.

⁴³ Partanen. The Nordic Theory of Everything. P 56.