**Elements of the Ideology of­ Social Democracy**

**1. Concept of society**

a) The relationship of the individual to society

As with liberals, social democrats generally view society as equal to the sum of its parts. In other words, society is what people make of it. People are social beings, and society is where people achieve their fullest potential. Thus, the parts of society are people who *naturally* come together in social settings. However, social democrats strongly reject an individualistic view of society such as might be seen in both liberal and conservative ideologies.

b) Nature of society

Social Democrats are strongly critical of society when it is divided, they would argue **artificially divided**, into classes or groups based on socio-economic position, access to education, gender, etc. Society is a place where all people are equal, and any society that does not promote that is neither a good nor a just society.

c) Concept of social change

Social change is not only possible, but necessary in the social democratic view. Greater equality, stronger bonds of community, etc., are all things which social democrats see as important changes. However, change is gradual and incremental.

**2. Nature and role of the state**

a) The nature of the state

For social democrats the state has a central role to play in promoting a good, just, and healthy society. Because of their firm belief in democracy, social democrats see the state as representative of the will of all, and as such it must take the lead in upholding society’s values. In this way, the state is an instrument of social change. They differ sharply with Marxists who see the state as an instrument of oppression.

b) The role of the state in social welfare

Social democrats, like liberals, have generally supported the **institutional model** of social welfare. Social welfare is a fundamental part of society, and as the democratic expression of society, it is the responsibility of the state to guarantee access to resources to meet basic needs. Whereas liberals see the institutional model as something needed to deal with the distributive failings of capitalism, social democrats have traditionally seen the institutional model as part of the gradual movement toward a more just society. Liberals might see the institutional model as an unfortunate necessity; social democrats see it as integral to the proper development of society and therefore one in which a democratic state plays a pivotal role.

**3. Concept of human nature**

Social democrats share a similar view of human nature with the Marxists. For social democrats, human beings are social beings, and it is through social interaction that they achieve their fullest potential.

Recent commentators on political ideologies explain the socialist concept of human nature as follows:

Human beings are social or communal creatures, socialists say, so we should think of an agent as someone who is connected to and dependent upon other people in various ways. In particular, we should think of agents as individuals engaged in relations of production, distribution and exchange with others. (Ball and Dagger 1995, 123)

This could lead to an identification of human nature based on Marx’s concept of social class, which will be discussed in the next section. However, social democrats refrained from going that far in their discussion of human nature and instead have tended to identify the role of citizen, which implies political, civil, and social rights, as the place where one’s human nature is fully expressed.

**4. Fundamental economic institutions**

Social democrats have always had an ambivalent but generally benign view of the role of the market in society. Social democracy, particularly in its Fabian form, assumed that the expansion of democracy would lead to the gradual elimination of capitalism. However, they went to great lengths to distance themselves from any perspective that saw the overthrow of capitalism as the primary goal. As Eduard Bernstein is quoted as saying:

I frankly admit that I have extraordinarily little feeling for, or interest in, what is usually termed the final goal of socialism. This goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything. (quoted in Eatwell and Wight 1999, 86)

The welfare state was to be an instrument to reform capitalism. However, the changes wrought by globalization discussed above have necessitated a major reconsideration by social democrats of the role of capitalism and indeed of the welfare state. The result has been an acceptance that capitalism is not gradually disappearing, and the realization that there needs to be some other way to control capitalism. Lionel Jospin, currently (2001) the socialist prime minister of France, spells out his view of capitalism this way:

Rather than a system, social democracy is a way of regulating society and of putting the market economy at the service of the people we accept the market economy, because it is the most effective means provided it is regulated and managed of allocating resources, stimulating initiative and rewarding effort and work. But we reject the market society. For although the market produces wealth in itself, it generates neither solidarity nor values, neither objectives nor meaning. So we are not left-wing liberals’ we are socialists. And to be a socialist is to affirm that the political should take precedence over the economic. (Jospin 1999, 1)

**5. Basic operative values**

a) Co-operation

This value is sometimes referred to as fraternity, fellowship, or solidarity. It is part of the rejection of a competitive market system that was a major component of traditional social democracy and socialism in all its various forms. This value also includes the notion of altruism, in which people offer help to others without a sense of getting something back in return.

b) Community

Social democrats have always had a strong sense of community, although it has frequently been expressed through the larger notion of society and also in the value discussed above, co-operation. Anthony Giddens, a major proponent of the third way as an alternative to neoconservatism, spells out a direction for community development:

Community building emphases support networks, self-help and the cultivation of social capital as means to generate economic renewal in low-income neighbourhoods. Fighting poverty requires an injection of economic resources, but applied to support local initiative-Community building initiatives concentrate upon the multiple problems individuals and families face, including job quality, health and child care, education and transport. (Giddens 1998, 110-111)

c) Equality/inequality

The social democratic case for equality represents both the desire for equality of outcome (which is favoured by the Marxists) and equality of opportunity, which has some support also from liberals. The argument for equality has generally been based in a rejection of the consequences of inequality: economic inefficiency, social disruption, poverty (or social exclusion as it is now sometimes called), and natural justice. The welfare state was often seen as a way of reducing inequality and moving toward a more equitable society. As support for the welfare state has waned, social democrats place a greater emphasis on equality of educational opportunity.

d) Freedom/liberty

Social democrats have a conception of freedom that accepts liberal and even some conservative notions, but also includes the notion that people are not free if they do not have the resources *to do* certain things. Where a conservative might see freedom as the absence of constraint, social democrats would think that this is insufficient. First, they would argue that freedom requires a concern for equality. The greater the inequality of economic resources, the less free some people (the less well-off) will be. Secondly, political freedom must also mean economic freedom. Fear of being without work, of having no power in one’s workplace, of having no workplace protection means people are not free. Lastly, they argue that freedom is the result of government action. If government is not prepared to provide some measure of support for the freedom found in law, then people really are not free.

**6. Theory of social need**

For social democrats the issue of need has largely been one of determining which needs are universal or basic and which are of a secondary order, based perhaps on some normative process. We can find some social democrats who have tried to develop some general criteria that can be applied to a discussion of basic needs. Food, shelter, and health care are often mentioned. Also included is the notion of autonomy.

Without autonomy, or the freedom to be able to decide and choose, human beings are arguably deprived of a need as basic as physical health. It is no use being healthy without the ability to realize the aspirations or objectives which make us human: secondary needs such as being able to develop oneself in various ways, to communicate and to become engaged with other human beings. (Blakemore 1998, 29)

a. Concept of poverty: Social inclusion and exclusion

To understand the social democratic view of poverty, one has only to look at one way of describing it: social exclusion. Poverty for social democrats is not simply the lack of money, it is the whole range of issues that arise when people are not actively engaged in society. Because work is seen as a major defining way in which people become engaged, to be out of work is to be not engaged. People are excluded on the basis of ethnic and racial characteristics, because of a physical impairment, or age. If we accept the social democratic view of human nature (active creators through participation in society) and the human need for autonomy, then we can easily see the problems caused by poverty in this context. Poverty prevents people from being able to participate.

Social democrats define need as normative, in the sense that they believe that the development of a poverty line as a measure of how well society is meeting the needs of its members is important.

**7. Principle of social justice**

Social justice is a significant component of the social democratic ideology. It is by appealing to principles of fairness and justice that social democrats provide justifications for the collective actions they see as necessary to control the excesses of capitalism. Social democrats argue strongly that the problems created by a market society (that some people will lose and lose badly in the competitive system the aged, those without educational opportunities, the disabled, etc.) can in fact be averted through collective action.

**8. Implied ameliorative action**

Traditional social democratic imperatives for action called for methods, of which the welfare state was one, for reforming capitalism. The difference between social democratic reforms and liberal reforms was that social democrats wanted their reforms to be part of a process that led to the transformation of capitalism into something else. Liberal reforms were designed to protect the fundamentals of capitalism itself.

Current social democratic thinking has moved away from the notion of transformation by gradual reform and, as we have seen, has tried to come to some accommodation with capitalism.

There is an explicit attempt to reformulate social democracy in such a way that it becomes the new common sense defined in terms of the ambition to combine a dynamic market economy with the requirements of a decent and cohesive society, it involves a rejection of both new right and old left, of market individualism and state collectivism. (Wright 1999, 101)

The question for social democrats is how this reformulation will take place as an implied ameliorative action. This is a problem still to be worked out.