

Book Review

Wahl, Asbjørn (2011) *The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State*. London: Pluto Press. ISBN: 978-0-745-33140-9.

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In *The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State* Asbjørn Wahl does not seek to bring technical analysis to bear on welfare systems and their evolution. Instead the book commits itself to national and international debates designed not to describe the specificities of welfare states and services but to explain their role in society. As laid out in the first part of the book, for Wahl the origins of welfare systems lie in ‘historical and social processes shaped by a lengthy struggle between conflicting interests’ (p. 16). They are not just functional constructions having to be reformed because of empirical failures. These systems are not abstract social objects but battlefields between social forces, acting on each other through power struggles. They were built on a balance of power, in the Nordic countries and elsewhere, and reflect a long term process, allowed by the strength and will of trade unions, and which can’t be understood by ‘non historical approaches’ (p. 14).

Analyses and social actors which do not place the social classes at the center of the analysis are denounced by Wahl with great vigor. Marked by international and national features, according to Wahl the different social models rest on ‘three main pillars: the early social-liberal ideas of the social state, the struggle of the trade union and labour movements, and the need of Western capitalism for popular support in the cold war...A fourth pillar [is] the need of modern capitalism for a number of public services, an efficient public infrastructure and qualified labour’ (p. 39).

Wahl does not offer an idyllic image of Norway and other Nordic countries – often seen as traditional social democratic countries wherein parties and trade unions play a decisive role in the building and the conservation of the social state. Instead for him globalization and the neoliberal offensive has generated a massive shift of power. De-ideologized and suffering under its social partnership ideology, the trade union movement is badly prepared to meet the renewal of the class struggle implemented by ‘the economic and political elites...in the process of reconquering privileges’ (p. 64). From the seventies onward, employers and neoliberal forces have abandoned the class compromise. The markets restrict the scope for democratic decisions and supranational agreements and institutions follow in the same direction. Yet despite common assumptions, for Wahl the state is not powerless, ‘rather it has changed character’ (p. 90).

‘The attacks on the welfare state did not begin with the financial crisis’, according to Wahl (p. 93-125). Financial cutbacks are combined with increased individual responsibility to undermine the previous social roles played by ‘the welfare services’ (p. 95). Labour becomes a commodity. ‘The brutalization of work and workfare’ (p. 126-158) meets various forms of social exclusion, with poverty and inequality increasing. And ‘Even the trade unions have supported workfare’ (p. 154). In

Europe the welfare ideology is 'cutting across the traditional Right-Left axis' (p. 162), and Social Democrats 'inherit from Reagan' (p. 162).

Wahl points to the 'Misery of Symbol Politics' in chapter seven (p. 159-177; referring perhaps to Marx's 'Misery of Philosophy?'), with the contention that symbol politics (corporate social responsibility, social clauses, formal legal right) have taken the place of actual politics and thus obscured any analysis of power. This 'ideological smokescreen' hides the formidable shift of power taking place in 'the real world' (p.173). For Wahl the result is clear: 'Because of the lack of fundamental analyses of causes and driving forces in the development of society...the political responses have a tendency to degenerate into symptom and symbol politics', he writes (p. 176).

In the final chapter of the book, the author presents challenges and alternatives: 'Changes must be forced upwards from below, now as it has always been', he writes (p. 182). He argues that some struggles already signal a renewal of the social movement, which must foil the European Union as an extra barrier to economic and social development. The weakened unions, 'ridden by bureaucracy', 'influenced by the social partnership ideology' (p. 186) are, however, pushed towards radicalization by the crises. They must gain independence from their old allied parties to organize comprehensive campaigns and actions across national borders (p. 201), reshaping their freedom tradition.

This book doesn't offer comment on the academic debates on welfare states, and many will find the thinking too unilateral. But that is perhaps the strength of this book. It presents a well-informed reflection coming from the (very) left wing in the labor movement. And, from an academic point of view, it is a rough reminder that social actors and their relations are at the center of the very complex evolutions welfare states are experiencing.

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