

## Book Review

Olle Törnquist and John Harriss (eds.) (2016)  
*Reinventing Social Democratic Development. Insights from  
Indian and Scandinavian Comparisons.* Copenhagen: NIAS Press.  
ISBN 978-8776942007. 366 pp. Softcover £25

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The book presents a series of contributions, publishing results of a comparative research project on Swedish and Indian social democratic development. The two main editors Olle Törnquist and John Harriss (editing together with Neera Chandhoke and Frederik Engelstad) define social democracy as “a politics based on political equality that strives to realize social justice, by democratic means and in such a way that the realization and social justice and democratic deepening serve each other” (p. 53). Based on this definition, they analyse social democratic development along four dimensions: (1) democratic citizenship, that is “the formation and organisation of democratic political collectivities” (p. 10), including questions of political representation and mobilisation; (2) the construction of strong democratic linkages between the state and civil society, going beyond the liberal democratic institutions; (3) the focus on wider societal interests than those of the working class alone, that is “struggle against special privileges, racism and discrimination, and for equal civil, political, and social rights of all” (p. 16); (4) structural conditions for, and efforts towards, development of coalitions between capital, labour and agrarian producers. This definition then assists in the structuring of the book into seven parts, each containing one or two chapters.

After the introduction, the book’s second part deals with comparative analysis and utilises all four dimensions. The first chapter of Part Two gives a general historical overview of democratic development in India and Sweden, while the second chapter deals with two regional experiences of social democracy in West Bengal and Kerala, the two outstanding historical examples of Indian social democracy, according to the editors. Part Three follows the first dimension of democratic citizenship and outlines political collectivities, with a chapter on the historical political development of Swedish social democracy and a second chapter asking about the prospects of a social democratic alliance in today’s India. Part Four focuses on the second dimension of linkages between state and society in two chapters. N.C. Saxena writes about governance reforms in India, while Torsten Svensson compares current Indian and historical Swedish experiences with regard to administrative reforms and accountability. Part Five deals with the third dimension of considering wider societal interests by rights and welfare, again with a chapter on Indian development (in historical perspective) and a comparative chapter on social rights, decommodification and democracy in Sweden and India. Part Six features two chapters on growth and equity to analyse the fourth dimension of the development of coalitions between capital, labour and agrarian producers. Kalle Moene writes about social democracy as a development strategy, while Pranab Bardhan reflects on problems and prospects of democratic development in India. The concluding Part Seven consists of two chapters. Olle Törnquist’s

chapter on the implications for Scandinavian social democracy and international cooperation opens the floor to the final chapter by both main editors on the prospects for current social democratic development.

In general, the Swedish case is analysed historically, to unravel the “importance of historical preconditions for social democratic policy and class compromise in Europe” (p. 87), as Sandvik states in Chapter Four, referring to Heller’s reflections on how the Global South could benefit from the experience. In this regard, the authors of “reinventing social democracy” relate to the qualitative and historical background of Esping-Andersen’s (1985, 1990) seminal work on the social democratic welfare state regime. The consideration of the historical background – that is the economic, social, cultural and political conditions – of the social democratic project established in Scandinavia is worked out very well, as it avoids simplistic blueprints on how to reinvent social democracy. Furthermore, the general definition of social democracy by the editors is promising. By focusing on the dimensions of social justice and democracy, they avoid a direct equation with social democratic parties, but rather construct an ideal type of social democracy. The continuous focus on democratisation and the concrete societal circumstances and conditions sets the book apart from other works on the matter (Scharpf, 1991).

The cases for the analysis of social democratic development were selected according to the comparative method of “contrasted contexts” (p. 6), as introduced by the historians Skocpol and Somers (1980). This already indicates the editors’ and authors’ orientation towards an analysis of historical processes. Especially the contributions on Swedish development emphasise the historical peculiarities of one of the most important practical examples of social democratic development. While it is promising to contextualise the Swedish path of social democracy, it remains puzzling why India was chosen as the “contrasted context” of social democracy in the Global South. Thereby, a country with very little social democratic tradition is compared to a kind of social democratic “role model” in the Global North. While the editors acknowledge the “pink tide” of socialist and social democratic governments in Latin America (e.g. p. 23), they rather chose to compare the ideal typical Swedish social democracy to a largely non-social-democratic counterpart in the Global South. The method of contrasted contexts is stressed by comparing the (historical) national experience of Swedish social democracy with the regional governments in West Bengal and Kerala as the most important social democratic experiences in the Indian context (cf. Chapter Three by Harriss and Törnquist). While the latter are critically described as cases of failure due to clientelism and neo-liberalisation, the Swedish case is not scrutinised in the same way. In contrast to the analysis of the Indian case, recent transformations of the Swedish welfare state towards a more neo-liberal and managerial regime (Palme and Cronert, 2015) were less a matter of concern for the authors of the book. While Sweden serves as a kind of “shining example”, India is much more critically presented as the example to obtain lessons from the Global North.

The book is excellent reading for scholars and policy-makers interested in the historical experience of Swedish social democracy and on possibilities of how to learn from it for the Global South. Furthermore, it also provides an excellent overview of historical and recent political developments in India, and the Indian regions of Kerala and Bengal. In contrast, readers with an interest in mutual learning of both the Global South and the Global North might be disappointed by the approach taken in *Reinventing Social Democratic Development*. For the latter group, further reflections on recent centre-left governments in Latin America might contain more inspiration than the analysis of the deficiencies of the Indian case. *Reinventing Social Democratic Development* would be an interesting point of departure for such further analyses.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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