SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by Nik. Brandal, Øivind Bratberg and Dag Einar Thorsen

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

VOLUME 35

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CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

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FOREWORD

The present volume offers a multifaceted analysis of social democracy in our time, with Europe as its core. Across eleven distinct contributions, the net is cast far and wide. Yet, they all seek to take stock of social democracy today – as a movement and a set of ideas. The ambition has been to cover not only what can be learnt from the decades passed but also what the near future may hold for the centre-left.

Academic work on social democratic politics easily turns towards an idealised version of the past and a dystopic view of the here and now. From this perspective, social democracy enjoyed its heyday in the post-war decades and is something of a sunset ideology today. We have encouraged the contributors to steer clear of the 'doom and gloom' narrative in favour of open-mindedness in relation to our topic. Questions to pursue have included where and in what sense Social Democrats have succeeded or failed, and what ideas and dilemmas that accompany social democracy today.

Socialdemokratiet, the social democratic party of Denmark, has been both acclaimed and subject to criticism in recent years, as a profound (and at times painful) policy review has been followed by a return to government. The renewal was characterised by a distinct emphasis on working people, alongside a tight immigration policy and a strong commitment to countering climate change. We are grateful to Frederik Vad Nielsen, the current leader of Danmarks Socialdemokratiske Ungdom, the autonomous youth section of Socialdemokratiet, who has contributed his own political perspective on priorities for twenty-first century social democracy.

During our work with this volume, we would have confounded in our efforts, if it were not for the research assistant Torbjørn Svanevik. He has made a decisive contribution to this volume, especially when it comes to everything usually unseen in a finished book of this kind. We are also in a debt of gratitude to the editorial board of *Comparative Social Research*, series editor Fredrik Engelstad especially, for giving us answers to all our questions and heeding to our cries for help whenever we needed moral support and solutions to practical challenges.

The contributors to this volume, and the reviewers of each contribution, have of course also been very helpful throughout the process, and we owe them all our heartfelt appreciations. They have given us much to think about, and we hope that this volume will become an inspiration for them to continue their work in various fields of social and political science. The editors have undoubtedly been given much to think about, by everyone we have worked with on this volume, which we also aim to revisit in future projects of our own.

During our work on this volume, we have benefited from the working environment and financial support provided to us by our main employers at Bjørknes University College, the University of Oslo and the School of Business at the University of South-Eastern Norway. We have also indirectly been advanced in our efforts by the donations from the Leif Höegh Foundation, who have contributed to a different project directed by one of the editors to this volume, and thereby given us some much-needed financial flexibility. We owe them all our gratitude.

Oslo, June 2020
Nik. Brandal, Øivind Bratberg and Dag Einar Thorsen

PREFACE

Frederik Vad Nielsen

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY MUST REDISCOVER ITS SOCIAL COMPASS

Social democratic thought has contributed to creating some of the best societies in the world, notably in Scandinavia. Countries in this region benefit from a high level of education. An extensive welfare state ensures security for all; the labour market is civilised, and most women and men are in employment.

All these elements are grounded in politics guided by social democracy, with one keyword above all: balance – that is a balance between a competitive market economy and public interest, a balance between personal liberties and state intervention, a balance between economic freedom and equality and so on. Balance has been the mantra of Social Democrats in Denmark and helped our movement evolve from being an international class-based party at the beginning of the 1900s to being a national people's party half a century later. The key realisation in the course of this journey was that social harmony and order were preconditions if we wanted to unite the population as a whole behind the goal of social justice for the working class. A balance was required in all tactical and strategic choices we made. As a result, we succeeded – in Denmark as in Norway and Sweden – in creating what counts among the most open, free, equal and community-spirited societies of the world.

The Balanced Welfare Society Is Evaporating

In recent years, it has been evident that this hard-fought balance threatens to evaporate. Part of the reason is that Social Democrats have turned away from the original rationale for pursuing it: the ability for people in the working class to govern their own lives.

In Denmark, skilled and unskilled workers constitute half of all people in employment. Blacksmiths, technicians, service workers, haircutters, electricians, butchers and metal engineers struggle day in and day out for the community but to little gain. At the same time, thousands of people fall by the wayside in what ought to be a productive welfare society.

Social Democrats are in danger of forgetting these people. Instead, they have tacitly accepted that financial, educational and cultural elites are granted more and more privileges.

Taxes are reduced for the highest wages and the most expensive properties. Students in higher education reap the benefits of a publicly funded educational system. The labour market for the lower-salaried jobs grows ever more insecure as a consequence of 'social dumping'. Even in a small country such as Denmark, the gulf widens between the city and the countryside in services offered by the state, public investment and political attention. Overall, we are losing balance.

That balance must be regained! To that purpose, Social Democrats must develop policies to improve conditions for the common man and woman. If so, we should lead by the following imperatives.

First, the struggle over education is also a class struggle. Massive investment must be directed towards primary education. Over the last few decades, an increasing share of state funding for education has been directed to upper secondary education and colleges. We must be adamant that investment in early schooling is the quintessential educational policy for Social Democrats. All pupils who are dyslexic or cannot comprehend arithmetic must be screened early on, and two teachers should be the norm in every class in primary schools.

At the same time, the early years of schooling should be made less academic. Today, girls benefit much more from primary school than boys who are less honed to academic work. The gap is increasing between grades obtained by girls and boys. That gap must be eliminated. We want more practical skills integrated into schools, internships in secondary school and, generally, much more diverse offerings at school. This way, we can ensure that children and young adults learn about different spheres of life and succeed in not only reading, writing and math but also beyond.

In Denmark, the proportion of young people pursuing a vocational education has fallen from 30 percent in 2006 to less than 20 percent in recent years. We will lack tens of thousands of labourers within the next decade or so. It is to little avail that Social Democrats are afraid of making enemies among the creative class and young academics. The message from Social Democrats ought to be clear: we cannot push all our young people onto university education. The belief that globalisation eliminates the need for manual labour should be thrown on the garbage heap. We are in need of hands in care, construction work, industry, service and trade here and now and will be in the decades ahead. From this lesson proceeds a strategy for massive investment in vocational education and limits to admission into academia. It might seem odd that Social Democrats should be the ones to set a limit for people being enrolled in higher education; for such a long time, we were first in line in the campaign for the opposite. But, we inhabit a world that requires more young people who have learnt a trade. We need to adapt our educational system accordingly.

Moreover, educational policy should not seek to gain first and foremost those who pursue the lengthiest degrees and gain the highest salaries thereafter. Social democracy should take a stand and correct what has been misguided in our policies.

Second, climate change and automatisation must be tackled in a way that is socially just. My generation will be faced with two all-encompassing challenges for many years to come: climate change and a wave of automatisation in the

labour market. Both challenges entail great opportunities but, evidently, enormous downsides as well, and they will need to be addressed through policies agreed upon and delivered in the next decade. Social Democrats have neither presented the solutions needed to provide for a green transition that is socially just nor prepared the coming generations for a labour market that will change fundamentally.

Tackling climate change requires a break from the neoliberal economic policy that governments, including social democratic ones, have been guided by over the last 30 years. If we are to succeed with a green transformation without crashing the working class, we will have to borrow to invest. To acquire that, we must eliminate our aversion to state debt. Funds should be directed towards the purchase of arable land, the electrification of transport, temporary tax relief for more effective heating in the housing sector, reduced taxes for energy from wind and waves and for green development aid to the poorest countries in the world.

A policy that is green and sustainable cannot be forged on the back of welfare cuts or tax increases for ordinary working people. Public investment is the only way forward, and it is one that Social Democrats must take.

An increase in public borrowing should not only be spent on policies countering climate change. In the course of the next decade, we must enable the greatest upskilling of our workers in recent history if we are to prepare for the automatisation of our labour market. As machines, robots and artificial intelligence take on ever new tasks, the workforce must gain new skills to adapt. This requires that we elevate the unskilled to skilled and make sure that a fast track to further education is provided for workers with lower wages and fewer years at school. Together, we will kick-start the greatest programme in generations for investment in skills.

Social Democracy Must Rediscover Its Social Compass

Social democracy must prepare the working class for the future. It is time we take their interests as a point of departure in our quest to regain a better social balance. For too long, we have let the elite from the financial, cultural and educational domains define our political priorities. Our belief that globalisation will extinguish the need for manual labour, sending everyone to well-paid jobs in the creative sector, must be dropped once and for all. Only thus can we ensure that support is sustained for the social harmony, safety net and support for liberal democracy in which our country takes such pride. We have demonstrated through our history how social balance is created by standing by all those who contribute to the collective wealth of society. That formula must remain ours. That way, social democracy can rediscover its social compass!

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INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dag Einar Thorsen

ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, Social Democrats around the world have been the victims of drastically changing fortunes. After 2015, these mixed fortunes took in several instances, in Greece, France and the Netherlands most prominently, the form of an outright collapse in terms of electoral support. At the same time, the world economy is increasingly dominated by an unfettered brand of international financial capitalism, leading to a progressively more ruthless exploitation of workers around the world. Both these trends entail that Social Democrats need to come up with new answers to the most pressing political issues of our time. In this introductory chapter, the first order of business is to provide the reader with an idea of what Social Democracy might signify in the twenty-first century, focussing on the basic ideas of human rights, democracy and personal freedom. The chapter then moves on to describe and discuss some of the problems facing the world today. Global warming and resource depletion, poverty and economic inequality, as well as sudden shocks to the political system such as the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 will likely continue to set a large part of the political agenda for the remainder of this century. If Social Democrats continue to be part of a truly world-transforming labour movement, they must address and engage with these issues, and with the yet unknown political problems of tomorrow.

Keywords: Social democracy; democracy; labour movement; political parties; elections; human rights; development

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What has become of social democracy? Or, directly relating the question to the present collection of articles on the topic, where is it heading? Social Democrats in the Western world can look back on a century where growth and expansion of centre-left values seemed, during certain periods, to be a law of nature. During its so-called golden era (from the 1940s to the 1970s), the fortunes of the centre-left spiralled, with its legacy everywhere to be seen. Fifty years on from the end of that era, that period in time maintains, for understandable reasons, a particular status within the social democratic movement. It holds an equally elevated position in much of the academic work on social democracy in Europe and beyond. In this volume, an analysis of this brighter history, alongside analyses of challenges of the centre-left today, is presented.

There is ample reason to romanticise previous times. As of 2020, the French *Parti Socialiste* risks irrelevance in the squeeze between liberal, conservative and national-populist rivals. In Germany, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* has fallen in electoral support to a level not experienced since the years of the Weimar Republic. The picture across Europe is not altogether bleak, but it is clear from present evidence that social democratic parties are no more a 'natural' party of government than other party families. Since the turn of the century, the electoral base of social democratic parties has been transformed as well as reduced in most countries. In policy terms, social democratic parties have strived to adapt to an era that is separated by class yet diversified in terms of minorities, individualised and transitional yet characterised by collective yearning; and typified by postmaterialistic values yet oriented towards bread and butter policies when push comes to shove.

Paradoxes abound for social democratic parties, whose chief characteristic may be that they are workers' parties no more. As new identities must be forged, different agendas developed and issues resolved, Social Democrats must take stock of not only where they are coming from but also where they are heading. The academic contributions in this volume shed light on some of the choices to be made for Social Democrats in the Western world two decades into the twenty-first century. This chapter begins with a brief historical backdrop, before taking on a conceptual clarification of social democracy. Finally, the chapter addresses a set of challenges the social democratic movement must grapple with and relates these to individual chapters in the volume.

THE MIXED FORTUNES OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY SINCE 1989

After the end of the Cold War, social democratic parties in Western Europe especially, but also elsewhere around the world, started experiencing increasing volatility in terms of both electoral support and membership numbers. Initially, the future seemed bright for a 'modernised' or centrist type of social democracy. This was especially the case after Tony Blair in 1997 and Gerhard Schröder in 1998 became heads of government in the United Kingdom and Germany, respectively.

At the same time, the mood in conservative and other centre-right parties across the region grew ever more dismal and desperate.

Since the turn of the century, however, the political fortunes have shifted, at least in Western Europe but also to varying degrees in other parts of the world (Keating & McCrone, 2013; Manwaring & Kennedy, 2018). The electoral support for social democratic parties has dropped significantly in both Germany and Scandinavia or collapsed altogether in other countries – such as Greece, France and the Netherlands. In these countries, a number of recent and interrelated developments seem to challenge the ideational and electoral basis for social democratic parties and policies such as economic globalisation, European integration, demographic change, international migration, the automatisation of the economy and climate change.

This decline of social democratic parties has also coincided with other political trends, perhaps most notably the rise of right-wing populist politicians and political parties (which, since 1990, have managed to become political forces to be reckoned with in several countries, both inside and outside of Western Europe) (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). Another broad trend is the rise of new and nontraditional parties on the left-hand side of the political spectrum – parties that might be broadly construed as left-wing populists, green parties, New Left parties (along with regionalist catch-all parties) and centrist parties without an easily identifiable ideology or economic policy at their core.

Both these trends have led to the bloodletting of older parties, perhaps especially among the social democratic parties of Western Europe. This bloodletting has taken place directly in the form of voters migrating from older centre-left parties to new and more exciting alternatives – left, right and centre. There is, however, a more subtle and indirect way of grinding down in play whenever new parties have succeeded in setting the political agenda, exposing a perceived shortage of new ideas or relevant solutions to new problems among the older parties. Such developments have, in many instances, led to demobilisation among supporters of the older parties. Both voters changing their allegiances to new parties and voters becoming disenchanted with their old party and simply refusing to continue voting as before will contribute to a decline in relative support at the polls for a traditional party. For many social democratic parties in Western Europe, both defections and disenchantment may have happened at the same time, and to varying degrees, after the turn of the century.

There are, however, some counterexamples of parties resisting this trend. In Portugal and Spain, social democratic minority governments were formed in 2015 and 2018, respectively. Here, it seems the Social Democrats have adapted quite well to a changing political environment or at least adapted much better than their traditional antagonists on the centre-right. The same goes for Denmark, where the Social Democrats formed a minority government after the parliamentary elections of 2019. Interestingly, this did not happen after a landslide in their favour but rather happened because *other* centre-left and left-wing parties made significant gains, as the right-wing populists quite resoundingly lost much of their support at the polls.

The Labour Party in Britain was also an example of a social democratic party doing fairly well or, at any rate, not as bad as the most pessimistic forecasters would have it, at least for a long time. After 2010, it experienced not only a considerable growth in membership numbers but also quite divisive and unfriendly debates about where the party should go next. In the general election of December 2019, the British Labour Party, under the flagging leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, was completely unable to give Boris Johnson and his Conservative Party any type of serious competition. Instead, the party ended up with its worst result at a general election since 1935, without a shred of hope of returning to a position in government any time soon.

Throughout Western Europe, it appears, however, that there is at least room for social democratic parties to come back from being the opposition if they manage to attract enough support from their traditional electorate and, at the same time, gather enough support from other parties on the left-hand side of the political spectrum. And yet it seems many social democratic parties in Europe suffer from lingering self-doubt and hesitation and fail to be sufficiently attractive to both once lost voters and potentially new voters or win working majorities together with allied parties. A collective depression has simultaneously affected many of these parties, making it harder for them to regain their former position as a leading force on the political scene in their respective countries.

In the context of the European Union as well, Social Democrats seem unable to build a common idea sufficiently different from the ideas coming from European conservatives and liberals of what the future of Europe should be. In other words, the centre-left of Europe is effectively unable to become a forceful alternative to the centre-right parties presently dominating European politics. Instead, many social democratic parties seem, for the most part, satisfied with being a mere partial corrective measure to the political agenda of conservative or liberal parties and leaders. Increasingly often, we even find Social Democrats in close cooperation with ever so slightly more intrepid parties of the centre-right, forming the so-called grand coalitions of older parties in government as a way of making sure that new movements and political currents – left, right and centre – are kept at bay.

Outside Europe, there is quite a considerable variation as well, far too much variation to describe thoroughly in the space of a single book and certainly not in a single introductory chapter. In many mature democracies around the world, but far from all, social democratic parties have for a long time been, and in most cases still are, forces to be reckoned with in national politics. In other countries, perhaps especially countries that have only recently undergone a process of democratisation, it may be harder to identify political parties that, with some degree of justice, could be described as belonging to a social democratic tradition of thought or'family' of political parties. This is perhaps especially the case in countries more characterised by conflicts between different ethnic or religious groups instead of economic cleavages and class-based voting patterns.

In the twenty-first century, however, it has gradually become clear that many of the political problems or challenges we are all faced with are truly global in scope and consequence. There is simply less room for local or national politics, and policy-making set completely apart from the global issues of the day.

Hitherto unexpected existential threats or armed conflicts caused by environmental degradation and relative deprivation, as well as a practically unfettered type of international financial capitalism leading to a more brutal brand of exploitation of workers and their families around the world are all inescapable parts of the political agenda of this century. But so are also global solutions to many of the problems facing mankind. Technological development in, for instance, energy, robotics, medicine and genetic engineering may radically alter what problems we have and will have—and which solutions to these problems are available to us.

This also means that it will be exceedingly difficult for all political parties and movements, not only those that claim to be Social Democrats, to restrict themselves to facilitating political improvements behind the increasingly imaginary borders between states and peoples. While the last century created a setting in which individual states could form their own destiny and national politics could be the principal factor shaping the lives of individual citizens in a country, that may no longer be the case, at least not everywhere and not all of the time. For Social Democrats, this may mean that they must return to being the kind of *vaterlandslose Gesellen* ('unpatriotic journeymen'), which conservatives and nationalists once claimed they were. Social Democrats, if they are to remain a relevant political force in *our* century, need to find their own solutions to the problems of an increasingly global age. It would be a death trap for them to become increasingly nationalistic or conservative in an age marked by globalisation and rapid social and technological changes.

WHAT IS SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?

Different observers and analysts have defined the term 'social democracy', found in the title of this book, in different ways. This volume contains contributions with slightly different notions of what social democracy actually is and how it compares to related terms such as 'socialism', 'democratic socialism' and 'social liberalism' and usually more encompassing terms – for instance, 'the left' or 'the centre-left'. There is simply 'no single binding definition' (Gombert et al., 2009, p. 9). That being said, there seems to be no serious disagreement in the relevant research literature about what social democracy actually is, except perhaps at the very margins of the phenomenon.

In political science or political sociology, it is quite often taken for granted that social democracy is an umbrella term for the ideas and policies of political parties that in some way or another think of themselves as Social Democrats and as belonging to the social democratic 'family of political parties' (Escalona, Vieira, & De Waele, 2013). This understanding will, however, lead us quite easily to the rather vacuous notion that social democracy is whatever Social Democrats say or do, not entirely unlike what Herbert Morrison at one point allegedly said, 'Socialism is whatever a Labour government does'.

Another problem with this kind of conceptual descriptivism is that it is not necessarily all that easy to identify a set of political ideas shared by all or at least

most political parties and movements; individual politicians and thinkers at some point in time have found it useful to call themselves Social Democrats. Instead, people and organisations that either have been perceived of or perceived of themselves as belonging to a social democratic tradition of political thought might not share that many common characteristics at all. Therefore, one might perhaps profitably think of social democracy as 'a widely extended family' (Waldron, 1987, p. 127) under which, like for other ideologies or traditions of thought, the members share little more than a vague collective identity defined by social and political networks, slogans and empty generalities.

A more historical approach to the matter of what social democracy actually is or should be might, therefore, be in order. A quick survey of the actual use of the term reveals, however, that in the nineteenth century and up until the 1920s, terms such as 'communism', 'socialism' and 'social democracy' were habitually used as synonyms. Orthodox Marxists who wanted to install a 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat', under which a radicalised elite group was to assume absolute power, and then change practically everything all at once quite often called themselves 'Social Democrats'. Socialists believing in gradualism and working towards an incrementally more democratic and equitable society, on the other hand, frequently belonged to the same organisations, political parties and trade unions as the revolutionaries, occasionally even calling themselves 'communists'. In addition, a cluttered crowd of different political sects and groupings self-identified as 'Socialists', sometimes even acknowledging that even others belonging to other factions could be part of a wider socialist family as well.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, however, these three terms slowly became more distinct, so 'social democracy' became a term exclusively used for gradualist and reformist brands of socialism, while 'communism' developed into a term reserved for those revolutionary Socialists taking their cues from the Bolsheviks of revolutionary Russia and, to varying degrees, those who later followed the same path. The last concept, socialism, thus became a name for a very broad category of political thought, under which one would be hard-pressed to find an essential core belief which all Socialists share (Newman, 2005, pp. 1–5). All across the world, the often sharp divisions between gradualists and revolutionaries were also mirrored in an organisational split between communist and social democratic parties, often resulting in outright hostility between the two now increasingly different ideologies.

In our day, social democracy is the name for a set of political beliefs, or a political ideology, created from a socialist tradition for political thought. For this reason, many Social Democrats call themselves democratic Socialists or quite simply Socialists, while others insist there is a difference between 'social democracy' and 'democratic socialism'. Usage of these terms also varies between countries; the Social Democrats of Southern Europe, for instance, tend to call themselves and their political parties 'socialist'. In Northern Europe, however, it has steadily become less common for Social Democrats to describe themselves as Socialists – with or without the adjective 'democratic' in front, perhaps to avoid ambiguity and distance themselves from authoritarian ideologies and systems of government also called socialist. Thus, there is no clear-cut conceptual distinction

between socialism and social democracy beyond the rather trivial observation that 'socialism' is a wider category compared to 'social democracy' and the relationship between these two categories varies with time and space.

Perhaps the most characteristic idea that sets social democracy apart from other variants of socialist thought is the idea of a 'mixed economy'. Social Democrats have traditionally, even before the final separation between them and the revolutionaries during the 1920s, wanted to build a broad coalition that could take over the reins of government to create a more democratic, equitable and egalitarian society. In so doing, they helped to build a mixed economic system, or a regulated and planned market economy combined with a relatively prolific welfare state. An economic system which is not one thing alone but rather characterised by its pluralism and its heterogeneity or by its multiple ways of organising work for the benefit of the community as a whole.

In such an economic system, both public and private ownership is part of the mix. Neither form of ownership is thought of as an end in and of itself but as a means to the end of creating a society truly governed by the people rather than a small elite, no matter how 'elite' may be defined. This perspective is also found in one of the more general definitions of 'social democracy' by the political philosopher Roger Scruton: '[T]he theoretical and practical attempt to reconcile democracy with social justice through the use of state power' (Scruton, 2007, p. 642).

Indeed, in the social democratic conception of the mixed economy, ownership of resources, or what Marxists tend to call 'the means of production', is a less important issue. It does not really matter to a social democrat if a particular company or enterprise is owned by the state if it is cooperatively owned by the workers of the company or the participants in a collective enterprise, or if it is owned by rich people who have inherited their financial stakes in the company. What matters to a social democrat is that the economic system as a whole is organised to the benefit of the community. This sets Social Democrats apart from other Socialists on the left, as well as from liberals and conservatives on the right-hand side of the political spectrum – who both, for very different reasons, tend to think of a particular way of organising the economy as an end in and of itself.

Two recurring catchphrases among Social Democrats, especially in Scandinavia, are 'The market is an excellent servant but a poor master' and 'Results are what matter'. If a regulated market economy with a high degree of private ownership of capital is better than the alternatives at providing the community and all of its members with material comfort, then we should have such a mixed economy. If, on the other hand, experience shows us that a larger measure of public or cooperative ownership is preferable to create a more prosperous, equitable and egalitarian society, then we should have this kind of mixed economy instead. This is what the editors of this volume said about the matter some years ago in the book *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy:*

> In a mixed economy, the state can ensure that the consumption of resources is sustainable and that the distribution of welfare and opportunities is fair, while a large proportion of goods and services can be produced in the private sector, reflecting the economic laws of supply and demand. This pragmatic approach to the question of public or private ownership is coupled with a firm belief that democratically elected governments should intervene in the economy

> whenever necessary in order to defend the interests of the whole of society. And the reduction of inequality, in order to create a society in which opportunity and individual liberty is more evenly distributed, is perhaps the most basic and important of these interests. (Brandal, Bratberg, & Thorsen, 2013, p. 9, p. 9)

Another idea characteristic of social democracy is the still quite radical notion that the entirety of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) should matter and be the basis for political action and reform all over the world (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007, pp. 20–24). The articles of the UDHR, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, contributed significantly as the inspiration behind the more recent *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) affirmed by the same body in 2015 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). Both the UDHR and the SDGs set out a very ambitious political agenda on a global scale as well as within the confines of individual countries.

Of course, lots of people who do not consider themselves Social Democrats will claim to support the concept of human rights or sustainable development as described by the United Nations. But, they will often claim that some of the articles of the UDHR or some of the SDGs are more 'fundamental' than others and even some of the rights and SDGs 'may be right in theory, but they won't work in practice'.

From the left wing of the political spectrum, for instance, one occasionally hears the idea that economic rights are more important than civil and political rights. Freedom of speech and assembly is, according to this view, a luxury or a lofty goal that should become a primary concern only when a society has successfully combated poverty, hunger and environmental degradation. From the centre-right, on the other hand, one can often see arguments claiming property rights are more fundamental than the right to, for instance, earn a living wage in return for one's work or get access to basic education and healthcare or the right to live in a safe and healthy environment. Sometimes, more principled liberals and conservatives even claiming inequality, poverty and hunger may be the price we would have to pay for living in a so-called free society, in which people are free to own stuff and compete with each other for control over scarce resources.

The social democratic conception of human rights is more all-encompassing, claiming instead that both the civil rights and the political rights associated with being a citizen of a functioning democracy – as well as economic rights such as access to work, health and education – are all fundamental rights that matter, and equally so. There really is no way, according to this conception of human rights, to have democracy or personal freedom without the level of material comfort needed to enjoy these things. It is also not feasible or practical, at least not in the long run, to sacrifice democracy or personal freedom in order to achieve greater levels of material comfort or vice versa. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, disease and ignorance are evils, and sources of inhibition which experience has shown us are much harder to combat without democracy, civil rights and personal freedom. And democracy or freedom is hardly sustainable without sufficient access for all citizens to a decent standard of living. All human rights matter; they are codependent and they are all 'fundamental'.