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The title of Sheri Berman’s thought-provoking new book brings to mind one of my favorite genres of popular nonfiction: the history of the world reinterpreted and told anew through the lens of the transatlantic cod fishery, salt, or even the color mauve. Indeed, Berman does shed new light on the politics of 20th-century Europe by telling it from the point of view of one of its least well-understood political ideologies, social democracy. The tight focus on one branch of the political family tree leads inevitably to some distortions—but also to some new insights.

Berman is at her best when weaving primary source materials into an argumentative narrative, as when recounting the internal debates of German, French, Italian, and Swedish socialism through the 1920s. The first five chapters of the book, beautifully written, trenchant, and persuasive, chart the reformist critique of Marxist materialism and its eventual crystallization around a coherent set of political and ideological principles: subjugation of the market mechanism to political control, democracy, and the national community as the basis of solidarity. This combination is both distinct from socialist materialism and, during the interwar period, unique in combining support for democracy with control of the market to protect human society.

Social democracy had much in common, though, with another, more malevolent, ideological strain developing in Europe during the first decades of the 20th century. Like social democracy, fascism, national socialism, and other forms of right-wing nationalism were responses to economic and social crises. Like social democracy, these creeds interpreted the turbulence of the interwar years as evidence of the failure of liberal regimes unable or unwilling to protect society from the ravages of market exposure. Both instantiations of Polanyi’s (1944) countermovement, social democracy and the new right-wing creeds sought to reinscribe the economy in a set of social relations, this time defined not by local communities but by the nation. Both sought to bring markets under political control; both used what Berman terms “communitarian” appeals to national identity and solidarity. Berman highlights a single important distinction: Social democrats valued democracy as an end in itself.

Social democratic ideas assume center stage in Berman’s explanation of interwar regime outcomes. Where the socialist Left clung to Marxist orthodoxy until too late in the game, or was too divided or wavering in its support of the social democratic creed, it was unable to appeal to the masses—who gave their support instead to the nationalists, fascists, or national socialists who offered roughly the same policy solutions for the economic crisis, minus the democratic politics. In contrast, where a social democratic Left moved early to protect democracy and lay claim to the economic reforms that everywhere helped bring the crisis to an end, they triumphed electorally and set the terms for postwar development.
Berman’s tracing of the political lineages of interwar Europe is striking not so much for its novelty but for its clarity and for its close attention to the distinctiveness of social democracy vis-à-vis socialism. Striking, too, though, is the absence of Christian democracy from Berman’s account. Here was an alternative, grounded in the same revolt against the atomizing, socially disruptive forces of liberal markets that gave rise to social democracy and fascism. Perhaps Berman views Christian democracy as purely a conservative movement and hence not of the same ilk as the quintessentially modern movements she discusses. But well before World War II, Christian democracy bore marked similarities to both social democracy and right-wing versions of corporatism. Neither of its key texts, papal encyclicals De rerum novarum and Quadragesimo anno, can be read as purely conservative appeals to restore a prelapsarian social order. The latter, particularly, spells out an eminently modern attempt to reconstruct a moral economy in the context of a modernizing society.

Yet Berman does not even mention Christian democracy as a third force at play in the competition for hearts and minds in continental Europe—either before or after World War II. This omission is forgivable, given the book’s tight focus on social democracy. But it has repercussions for Berman’s second major argument, that the postwar period is essentially social democratic in nature.

Asserting that the post–World War II order in Europe has been widely misunderstood as a triumph of liberalism (albeit modified and “embedded”), Berman argues that in fact the state’s extensive involvement in economic life in the postwar welfare states is evidence of the victory of social democratic ideas, if not always and everywhere social democratic parties. Indeed, Berman argues that the rise of the postwar economic “model”—roughly the Keynesian welfare state, plus or minus national variations like French planning, Italian parastatals, German codetermination, or Swedish wage controls under Rehn-Meidner—was a result of the victory of social democratic ideas: the synthesis of democratic politics with control of the economy in the service of national solidarity.

Berman’s argument about the triumph of social democracy after World War II is less convincing, I think, than her description of the emergence of social democracy in the prewar and interwar periods. To begin with, the assertion that the postwar order is “most common[ly]” (p. 135) understood as a liberal order seems overdrawn. While Ruggie’s (1982) “embedded liberalism” has indeed been a prominent interpretation of the period in international relations and international political economy circles, comparative political economists—including several cited by Berman—have tended to see markets in the postwar continental states as subject to high levels of political control and coordination. This is largely a matter of how one sets up the argument because of course Berman is well aware of the extensive state presence in the economy in postwar Europe, a presence that to her signals the triumph of social democracy.

But is the postwar model truly a social democratic one? Berman rightly points out that
If liberalism can be stretched to encompass an order that saw unchecked markets as dangerous, that had public interests trump private prerogatives, and that granted states the right to intervene in the economy to protect the common interest and nurture social solidarity, then the term is so elastic as to be nearly useless.

But to conclude that all political economic institutions that subject markets to political control in the defense of the national interest are social democratic risks similar conceptual stretching.

Many policies that Berman labels as evidence of a social democratic victory were put in place during the interwar period under fascist or national socialist auspices. Berman’s focus on ideas and parties as causal agents gives short shrift to the social partners, who often have independent interests in particular types of regulation, and ignores path dependence and policy feedback, which may lock particular types of political economic institutions into place without a corresponding ideological motivation for their retention.

The strongest challenge to Berman’s interpretation, though, comes once again from Christian democracy, which offered in many countries a similar set of economic policies to those prescribed by social democracy and which contributed in important ways during the reconstruction of the post–World War II European society. Christian democracy had the capacity to synthesize communitarian and conservative impulses with democratic politics and a variety of forms of market regulation after the war, precisely because it did not care all that much how capital was regulated. Social democrats, no matter how hard they worked at reaching across the class divide, were never quite as good as Christian democrats at reaching out to small farmers, shopkeepers, and other conservatives. This was particularly true in Catholic and Holy Roman Europe, where the conservative/liberal, Church/state conflict remained salient into the 20th century. But it held even in Denmark and Norway, where strong Christian democratic currents prevented the social democratic hegemony that Sweden experienced. And whereas Christian democratic parties did in some countries and at some points in time lean toward liberal economic ideas and policies, this was by no means universally the case. One could perhaps argue that Christian democrats were pushed to adopt more market regulation than they otherwise might have by the presence of strong social democratic competitors on the Left, but this would give short shrift to Christian democracy’s own ideological legacy, which prominently included subjugation of markets to the needs of an organic society.

Berman reserves a final, rhetorical chapter to defend social democracy’s continuing relevance in an era in which the defenders of the social fabric must do battle against proponents of unfettered global markets. This chapter trenchantly critiques what Berman sees as the pale approximations of social democracy offered up by the market-accepting “third way” and a New Left driven by fractionalizing identity politics. The blueprint for a safe and noncoercive form of Left communitarianism is
less comforting than one might have hoped (Berman’s main defense is that it would not be as scary as the Right’s version), and the social democratic future that Berman envisions seems utopian (a democratic International Monetary Fund?) But the historical narrative that precedes it makes clear that some utopian dreams, when cleverly articulated, strategically wielded, and above all pursued with conviction, can indeed become realities.

_The Primacy of Politics_ is an illuminating and highly accessible contribution to the intellectual historiography of the European Left. Berman’s lively, purposeful prose makes _The Primacy of Politics_ a gripping read. Its modest length makes it a perfect book for teaching, upstaging the much longer and more scholastic treatments of the European Left (e.g., Przeworski and Sprague’s [1986] _Paper Stones_, Bartolini’s [2000] _Political Mobilization of the European Left_) that have until now been syllabus standbys. And all criticisms aside, students and scholars alike will benefit from Berman’s carefully crafted examination of the development of one of the 20th century’s most important, underestimated, and ultimately inspiring political ideologies.

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**References**


