

Social Democratic Values and Freedom

05/07/2012 BY LUKE MARTELL 5 COMMENTS



Many discussions about the values of social democracy are about its traditional beliefs – equality, social justice and collectivism. It's debated whether these are still desirable, if they need revising to fit in with new times or to accommodate to the electorate, and what the best means are for achieving them. But freedom is also important and connected to social democratic values.

Libertarian and Marxist socialists emphasise self-determination, and some social democrats like equality and collectivism as the basis for achieving liberty. But freedom is a liberal value. It's not in itself what makes social democracy distinctive. And against equality and fraternity, it has had less of a central position for social democrats.

The equality and collectivism of social democracy require an intervening, regulating and redistributive state. This will impinge on some liberal freedoms – sometimes described as 'negative' liberty, from constraints imposed by the state. Many on the left favour liberties to do with sexuality, gender, or ethnicity but sadly not all and they aren't the essence of what it is to be left-wing. Some social democrats are amongst those who have resisted gender equality or gay marriage, for instance. Some of them see immigrants as a threat to their domestic working class base and not entitled to the same rights because they are 'outsiders'. They appeal to anti-immigrant sentiments to win votes; recently in the cases of Francois Hollande[i] and Ed Miliband[iii].

But social democrats have something distinctive to say about freedom, that people lack liberty because they don't have the bases for it like income, wealth or education. This is often a consequence of inequality or because too much is left to the market. Through redistribution and collective provision the left can be better at delivering 'positive' liberty. This is freedom 'to' do things, which needs underpinnings like resources and security.

There are other kinds of liberties. Time to do things out of free choice – whether something creative, being with your family or just watching rubbish TV – is constrained by the compulsion of paid work. Social democrats see work as a way of improving the income and well-being of the working class. Fairness, ownership and control in the workplace have, rightly, been preoccupations of the left. But social democrats need to think whether paid work should be so central to their aims and identity. This may also mean reassessing the priority placed on growth[iiii]. Redistribution of working time would mean that the employed can work less and have more free time and the unemployed can have work[iv]. Freedom from work for the employed can also reduce unemployment, a central concern of social democrats.

Great store is put on the free movement of capital and information. But the liberty of humans to move and improve their life chances is frequently frowned upon; often on dubious empirical grounds about the allegedly negative effects it has on receiving countries[v]. Yet it should be easy for social democrats to make arguments for this kind of freedom. It turns unproductive workers into productive ones in their new countries. They contribute to economic growth, boosting wealth and income, which create jobs, and provide tax revenue to support public services, the poor and elderly. There can't be anything more social democratic than a policy that supports jobs, redistribution and public services.

Marxist socialists are internationalists and see workers as the same wherever they come from. Social democrats should break out of their nation-state or European focus that means they view the working class of their area as who they serve and workers from other places as not part of their remit, or even a threat, despite their often acute needs.

In assessing their basic values social democrats can include liberty alongside traditional left beliefs like equality and collectivism. They should support liberal negative freedoms to the extent these do not threaten positive liberty. There are freedom reasons for sticking by redistribution and collective provision against economic liberalism. These are distinctively of the left and underpin positive freedom. Pursuing them will sometimes clash with liberal freedoms from state interference but can increase freedom overall. And there are liberties that neither liberals nor the left take seriously

enough, in fact they sometimes act against them – freedom to move and from the compulsion of work. Social democracy should value liberty in its own way, and when it does it should include these.

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