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Sharing Our World. A bee and beetle feed on a common flower. Photo courtesy of the author

Nature, Gender, and Social Democracy- A Dialogue with Political Scientist Sheri Berman

Geoffrey Holland

This the first, in what will be an ongoing Q&A blog series, focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship.

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Geoffrey Holland - What nation states on earth today employ the social democratic model for governance?

Professor Sheri Berman - So the countries that are most classically associated with social democracy are the Scandinavian countries, although elements of the social democratic model exist in many West European countries. The reason this model is most associated with Scandinavia is first because in these countries over the post war period, social democratic parties have been quite strong, but more important is that across the political spectrum there's a general acceptance of the need for the government to temper markets to protect citizens from the their most damaging effects. In practice, this means using the powers of the

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state to help citizens adjust to economic change, protect citizens from unfortunate life events, and ensure that social cohesion remains strong.

GH - What is the principal difference between traditional market driven democracies and the organizing focus of social democracies?

SB - That's a great question. Because I think in the minds of many Americans, social democracy and socialism are hard to differentiate. One of the interesting things about social democratic economies, like the ones that exist in Scandinavia, is that they are still very capitalist. And in fact, if you look at agencies, like the OECD, or the World Economic Forum, that rate things like competitiveness, or ease of opening businesses, these countries often rank much higher than the United States. So, it's not a question of them being anti-capitalist, it's a question of the relationship between government or the state and the economic system. In social democratic economies, the belief is that the market will work better, societies will work better, capitalism will be more effective if the government ensures that citizens have the resources to adjust to economic change, when, for example, there is shift in the labor market, or technology, or the types of businesses that dominate the economy and things like re-training or moving to a new geographic area become necessary. It's not a question of the government controlling the economy or telling businesses what you do. What distinguishes social democracy is not government control of the economy or businesses; it is how government deals with citizens. In social democracies the belief is that citizens often require help to adjust to economic change and that it is both economically inefficient and socially unwise to leave citizens alone to deal with economic, technological, etc. change.

GH - What can citizens expect from government in a social democracy?

SB - Government in a social democracy is committed to protecting citizens from change and risk. What this means is the welfare state is designed to keep people in the labor market, not out of it. Practically, this means public provision of a whole bunch of things that in the United States, for example, are provided privately: health care; free education up through university, re-training for people who lose their jobs, support if they need to move to a new area, and more. For Americans the big difference between our model and the social democratic one is the larger welfare state or social security net. But the idea is that public provision is supposed to make it easier for citizens to integrate into the labor market; easier for businesses to adapt, easier for change to occur more generally.

GH – Would ‘Dignity for all’ fit as a defining principle for the social democratic model?

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SB - Yes, absolutely, again, because one of social democracy's fundamental ideas is that everybody deserves a certain level of social security; that extreme poverty and extreme inequality are bad, not only because they're morally unjust, but because they are economically and socially inefficient. So, in a social democracy, government ensures that all citizens have the resources, the tools, and the opportunity to take advantage of whatever life has to offer them. And again, that means things like not having to worry about what happens if you or a spouse member of your family gets sick, or whether or not you will be able to send your children to good schools, or whether or not you will have help adjusting if the labor market in your area changes. It means more equality of opportunity: your ability to succeed depends less on the resources your parents provide than in the United States. So, the idea is that government provides basic social security for all citizens. There will be more equality of opportunity, more dignity for all individuals, and society will accordingly be healthier overall.

GH - How do social democracies perform on being responsible planetary stewards?

SB - Very, very well. Just look at the international ratings of societal happiness, or best places to live, or the most environmental conscious countries; the Scandinavians and Western Europe more generally do quite well on all these measures. The reasons for this are probably two-fold. First, these governments accept the role of steward or protector of society, and so may therefore have a greater tendency to see "the big picture" or think for the long-term, more than American governments do. Second, perhaps, because people in social democratic countries don't have to worry about their basic economic security, they have the ability, the luxury, so to speak, to put environmental needs higher on their set of concerns.

GH - Is there a unique role for women in shaping effective social democratic governance?

SB- Well, yes, in the sense that social democratic/ Scandinavian countries have explicitly committed to getting more women in politics. These countries score quite high on female political participation, on numbers of female parliamentarians, party leaders and so on. Gender equality has generally gone further in the Nordic countries than probably anywhere else on the globe, it is no longer a goal whose desirability is really debated anymore.

GH - There's a lot more talk now about assuring a universal basic income. What is your take on that?

SB - I would say that universal basic income (BI) and Scandinavian welfare states are two different means to a similar end. Advocacy of BI for a lot of people stems from their fear that labor markets and technology are changing in such a way as to make jobs for everyone an

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impossibility. In that scenario political and social stability would require giving everyone a basic level of support, if there weren't jobs any longer to provide that for them. But in Scandinavia, work is not only an economic activity, it is part of being a productive citizen. For sure, Scandinavian welfare states require a high degree of taxation and for that to be feasible, there has to be very high labor force participation rates—otherwise where are tax revenues going to come from? But social democracy views work as more than that. The fear is if some people are in and others out of the labor market you will create social divisions that will damage social cohesion and a healthy democracy. In Scandinavia the belief is that political, economic and social equality are strongly linked. You can't have some people working and others not; similarly, you can't have immense economic or social inequality. So, the problem with universal basic income for a lot of Social Democrats is that it could divide citizens into productive and unproductive "camps." This could damage social cohesion, equality, and ultimately democracy itself.

GH - Conservatives claim that social democracy is all about high taxes, and the cramping of personal freedoms. How would you respond to that?

SB - There's a distinction made between positive and negative freedom that's very important in answering this question. Conservatives tend to believe in a negative idea of freedom, this is freedom defined as freedom from interference—by government, other citizens, and so on—in making choices. A positive view, in contrast, is based on the view that actual "freedom to choose" or real equality of opportunity is meaningless without a certain level of basic social security. How can you be free to choose if you have to worry about your health? Or if you can attend a decent school or go to college? Or if the infrastructure of the community you live in is determined by who your parents are?

Social democrats believe in equality of opportunity. They want to give everyone the ability to achieve their goals, to make whatever choices they want, and to become fully productive citizens. But they don't believe those things can happen unless there is a somewhat level playing field that all people start off on. In short, I think the difference between conservatives and social democrats is not the former values freedom while the latter does not; it is rather that they have different views of what "true" freedom entails or requires.

GH - Do you see a day when humans will embrace their common humanity and the idea of planetary citizenship?

SB – As long as public policy impacting people is made at the nation level, people's identities will remain primarily with their nations. It's also true, however, that the more people have

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their basic needs taken care of, the more they have the ability to think of non-material issues, whether it's the environment or the planet or the needs of other human beings. One of the things that social democracy generates indirectly is an ability for people to think about the longer term or the bigger picture, which again probably helps explain why Scandinavian countries tend to do so well environmentally and as far as things like foreign aid are concerned.

GH - If a life affirming, sustainable future is the endgame for humanity on Earth, is the social democratic model the best for shaping a system of thoughtful, planetary scale governance?

SB - I think so, because social democracies have beneficial effects, both on domestic and international levels. On the domestic level social democracies produce less divided, more productive and happier societies. The less domestic conflict that exists, the more people can think about their fellow citizens and the planet. On an international level, social democracies have a tendency to think of themselves as part of a larger community.

[Sheri Berman, PhD.](#) is Professor of Political Science at Barnard College/Columbia University. From 2014-2017, she was Chair of the Council on European Studies. Her book, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Regime to the Present Day* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

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