

Democratic socialism & social democracy: an attempt at conceptual clarification

In response to debates in South Africa on socialism, democratic socialism or social democracy, WINFRIED VEIT* argues that democratic socialism and social democracy are one and the same thing. Social democracy is "neither a corrective social tool for capital nor a scapegoat for Stalinists unwilling to undergo change."

The current debate about the future of socialism after the collapse of the Leninist-Stalinist model has moved the question of a 'social democratic path of development' in South Africa into the focus of attention. In the course of this, some arbitrary adoptions or rejections of social democratic concepts are evident, reflecting the particular political and social perspectives on which the arguments are based (eg Alan Fine in *SA Labour Bulletin Vol 16 No 3*, Jan/Feb 1992, and Enoch Godongwana in *SA Labour Bulletin Vol 16 No 4*, Mar/Apr 1992).

There seem to be three central terms subject to confusion which need to be discussed in some depth: *democratic socialism*, *social democracy* and the *social market economy*. Such conceptual clarification seems particularly necessary because the differing interpretations lead to sweeping statements claiming social democratic values to be the sole property of one side, or simply discrediting it as a reformist ideology of capitalism.

Social democracy: to the right and the left

On the one hand, a picture of social democracy is drawn which depicts it merely as a corrective

social tool to soften otherwise unrestrained market forces. At the same time, it serves to shield the system from the influences of social conflict by binding the trade unions and the working class into a social consensus.

The 'enlightened' group in South African capital has actively adopted this one-sided interpretation of social democratic politics from Europe. The more this distorted image of social democracy is promoted by these forces, the more their approval contributes to the discrediting of social democracy amongst the left.

On the other hand, the orthodox left uses the same picture to portray social democracy as a cover up for capitalism in order to pre-empt genuine socialism. In this way, the terms 'socialism' and 'social democracy' are shown in an artificial opposition to each other which actually does not exist. Even if the orthodox left admits the Leninist-Stalinist model has failed, socialism is still seen as an independent path of development to the social democratic one. This is historically incorrect, as an explanation of these concepts will show.

Democratic socialism and social democracy in a European context have the same meaning. At least, this is true for German and Scandinavian social democracy. And the 'social market

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economy' in its more radical version is nothing but an instrument or tool to achieve the goals of democratic socialism. It is a tool, however, which can only be understood against the background of the developed European industrial societies. It is sometimes propagated in a crude way in Third World societies, leading to misunderstandings.

Historical roots of a great divide

Historically, democratic socialism of the social democratic kind, and bureaucratic socialism of the Stalinist kind have common roots. Both grew out of Marxist theory, but their ways parted at the beginning of the 20th century with the debate on revisionism initiated by Eduard Bernstein.

Bernstein mainly tried to overcome the gap between the revolutionary theory in the programmes of the social democratic parties and their obviously reformist praxis: trying to improve the conditions of the working class within the framework of the existing system. This reconciliation of theory and practice within the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was only concluded in 1959 with its Godesberg Programme.

The other main feature of Bernstein's thinking was that democracy and socialism were considered inseparable parts of the same way of thinking, distinguishing democratic socialism markedly from the Leninist-Stalinist orientation.

The latter only gained impetus in most of the communist parties after Rosa Luxemburg had been assassinated by right wingers in 1920. Despite her much more radical position in comparison with Bernstein, she was heavily criticising the already visible trend towards democratic centralism and was emphasising democratic mass action as a main tool to overcome the capitalist system.

After her death, the centralist authoritarian tendency took over and eventually led to the monstrous distortions of bureaucratic Moscow-style 'socialism' whose inhuman nature and general incapability brought about its downfall in the past few years.

Reformulating socialist concepts

The breakdown of the Soviet model has given socialists of all different orientations an

important chance to re-think and re-formulate socialist concepts and ideas. Two dangers must not be overlooked in this respect, however:

- Many, especially former communists, seem to equate the collapse of eastern Europe with the failure of the idea of socialism. European conservatives and liberals are triumphantly talking about the "end of the social democratic century" and the American liberal ideologist Francis Fukuyama even detects the "end of history".
- A counter-reaction to this shortsighted view is to shrug off the perversion of the Leninist-Stalinist model as a 'wrong application' of a basically correct theory, and to excuse it by citing 'human error'.

Democratic socialism (that is, social democracy) rejects both interpretations and regards itself today as the only credible alternative to the liberal capitalist model of society which is unable to solve the basic problems of social inequality and economic underdevelopment. Democratic socialism, to the contrary, can look back at the impressive history of its struggle. The working class in Europe is predominantly freed from hunger and poverty. Progress towards more democracy, social security and freedom cannot be denied.

This does not necessarily mean that this is socialism, but it isn't merely reform capitalism either. Socialism from the view point of democratic socialists is an ongoing struggle which has to cope with changing structures and problems. For example, the ecological question has nowadays to be weighed against employment considerations in polluting industries.

It is an ongoing struggle because it wants, according to the Basic Programme of the Social Democratic Party, 1989, "democracy throughout society, including in trade and industry, in factories and at the workplace," and because it wants "a society liberated from class barriers."

But just as the achievements of the past were gained from harsh struggles with the bourgeoisie, and were not just granted from above, the same is true for ongoing struggles. Democratic socialism, therefore, has never viewed itself as merely a corrective tool of capitalism.

The social market economy

This is not changed by the fact that today the market has been accepted as a central - if not the only - regulatory tool for economic processes. For democratic socialists the social market economy implies a balance between economic and social factors, and not - as the conservative view would have it - the definite pre-eminence of the market with a few social state components to counter the worst social defects.

The social market economy is only an instrumental aspect of a comprehensive vision of a democratised society which unites all democratic socialists of the world. In the words of Willy Brandt, former SPD-chair and current chair of the Socialist International, this means: "Self-determination of the people in the working field, co-determination of the society and economic development, and effective control of political and economic power. This must exclude both the comprehensive power and centralist control of the state over the means of production, as well as the arbitrary rule of a socially unrestricted private ownership. The social control of economic power does not exclude market relations, it makes sure to include them."

These views only became the consensus in German social democracy after decades of sometimes harsh discussions about the relationship of market and state, nationalisation and social control. The particular debates in the SPD - specifically in the decade after the end of the Second World War until the Godesberg Programme - could prove to be very interesting for the current debate in South Africa.

Applicable to all countries?

However, democratic socialism cannot and does not try to advance a social and developmental model which is applicable to all countries. To cite Willy Brandt once more: "The democratic socialist parties determine the instruments of social control differently according to their specific traditions and the developmental state of their countries. They place different emphasis on the role of private enterprise, co-operatives, nationalisation, forms of co-determination and indicative planning. Yet they all agree on the basic principle of a mixed and democratised

economic order."

Another aspect has to be taken into account in the current debates in South Africa about socialism and social democracy. The challenges which the democratic socialists have to face in the North are naturally different to the ones faced by the South because the historical prerequisites, the social structures and the economic state of development are very different.

While Europe has essentially solved the problems of democracy and freedom, social justice and the rule of law, South Africa finds itself only at the beginning of similar developments. European social democracy, on the other hand, sees itself confronted with ecological and technological challenges and the problems of a far-reaching 'systematisation' of working and living conditions. These are leading to limitations on the personal possibilities of development for individuals.

The liberal model of market economy cannot offer any convincing solutions to these problems - not in the North, and definitely not in the South. Unchallenged capitalism has not been able to rid the Third World of underdevelopment, poverty, hunger and illiteracy.

And the effects of Thatcherist and Reaganite economic policies in the North make it clear exactly how important a strong and unified labour movement and powerful socialist and social democratic parties are in order to counteract reckless individualism and the unscrupulous dismantling of the social net.

On the other hand, bureaucratic 'socialism' of the Moscow kind has failed to bring about any social and economic development - not to mention the lack of democracy and the fact that there was no rule of law.

Whether a form of democratic socialism adapted to the conditions of South Africa is viable as a path of development for this country must remain up to the democratic will of the majority of the people.

In debating the subject, however, it must be taken on board that democratic socialism and social democracy are neither a corrective social tool for capital nor a scapegoat for Stalinists unwilling to undergo change. ☆