14.1: Social Democracy

In the aftermath of the war, the most important and noticeable political change in the west was the nearly universal triumph of democratic forms of government. Whereas the democratic experiments of the interwar period had all too often ended in the disaster of fascism, stable democratic governments emerged in the postwar era that are still present today, albeit in modified forms in some cases like that of France. All of the governments of Western Europe except Spain and Portugal granted the right to vote to all adult citizens after the war. And, for the first time, this included women almost everywhere. (Although one bizarre holdout was Switzerland, where women did not get the vote until 1971!)

There was a concomitant embrace of a specific form of democratic politics and market economics: “social democracy,” the commitment on the part of government to ensure not just the legal rights of its citizens, but a base minimum standard of living and access to employment opportunities as well. Social democracy was born of the experience of the war. The people of Europe had simply fought too hard in World War II to return to the conditions of the Great Depression or the bitter class struggles of the prewar period. Thus, one of the plans anticipated by wartime governments in the west was recompense for the people who had endured and suffered through the war - this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “postwar compromise” between governments and elites on the one hand and working people on the other.

It was within the commitment to social democracy that the modern welfare state came into being. The principle behind the welfare state is that it is impossible to be happy and productive without certain basic needs being met. Among the most important of those needs are adequate healthcare and education, both priorities that the governments of postwar Western Europe embraced. By the end of the 1950s, 37% of the income of Western European families was indirect, subsidies “paid” to them by their governments in the form of housing subsidies, food subsidies, health care, and education. European governments devoted four times more income to social services in 1957 than they had in 1930.

The results of state investment in citizen welfare were striking. By the end of the 1960s, most Western European states
provided free high-quality medical care, free education from primary school through university, and various subsidies and pensions. In part because of the strength of postwar leftist (both communist and socialist) parties, trade unions won considerable rights as well, with workers entitled to pensions, time off, and regulated working conditions. Thus, as the economies of the Western European states expanded after the end of the war, their citizens enjoyed standards of living higher than any generation before them, in large part because wealth was distributed much more evenly than it had ever been.

The welfare state was paid for by progressive taxation schemes and a very large reduction in military spending; one of the benefits of western Europe’s alliance with the US, and European commitment to the UN, was that it was politically feasible to greatly reduce the size of each country’s military, with the understanding that it was the US that would lead the way in keeping the threat of a Soviet invasion in check. For instance, even as military spending skyrocketed for the US and the Soviet Union, it dropped to less than 10% of the GDP of the UK by the early 1960s and steadily declined from there in the following years. Likewise, with the long-term trend of decolonization, there was no longer a need for large imperial armies to control colonies. Instead, “control” shifted to a model of economic relationships between the former colonial masters and their former colonial possessions.

Also in stark contrast to the political situation of the interwar years was the power of the political center. Simply put, the far right had been completely compromised by the disastrous triumph of fascism. Just about all major far-right parties had either been fascistic themselves or allied with fascism before the war, and in the war’s aftermath far-right politicians were forced into political silence by the shameful debacle that had resulted in their prewar success. In turn, the far left, namely communists, were inextricably tied to the Soviet Union. This was a blessing for communist parties in the immediate aftermath of the war, but became a burden when the injustices of Soviet society became increasingly well known in the west.

The problem for western communists was that communist parties were forced to publicly support the policies of the Soviet Union. In the immediate postwar period that was not a problem, since the USSR was widely admired for having defeated the Nazis on the eastern front at tremendous cost to its people. In the postwar period, however, the USSR quickly came to represent nothing more than the threat of tyranny to most people in the west, especially as it came to dominate the countries of the eastern bloc. The existence of Soviet gulags became increasingly well known, although the details were often unclear, and thus western communist parties struggled to appeal to anyone beyond their base in the working class. Around 30% of the electorate in France and Italy voted communist in the immediate aftermath of the war, but that percentage shrank steadily in the following decades.

Thus, with the right compromised by fascism and the left by communism, the parties in power were variations on the center-left and center-right, usually parties that fell under the categories of “Socialists” (or, in Britain, Labour) and “Christian Democrats.” In turn, at least for the thirty years following the war, neither side deviated significantly from support for social democracy and the welfare state. The ideological divisions between these two major party categories had to do with social and cultural issues, of support or opposition to women’s issues and feminism, of the stance toward decolonization, of the proper content of the state-run universities, and so on, rather than the desirability of the welfare state.

The “socialists” in this case were only socialistic in their firm commitment to fair treatment of workers. In some cases, socialist parties held onto the traditional Marxist rhetoric of revolution as late as the early 1970s, but it was increasingly obvious to observers that revolution was not in fact a practical goal that the parties were pursuing. Instead, socialists...
tended to champion a more diffuse, and prosaic, set of goals: workers’ rights and protections, support for the
independence of former colonies, and eventually, sympathy and support for cultural issues surrounding feminism and
sexuality.

In turn, Christian Democracy was an amalgam of social conservatism with a now-anachronistic willingness to provide
welfare state provisions. Christian Democrats (or, in the case of Britain, the Conservative “Tory” Party) tended to oppose
the dissolution of empire, at least until decolonization was in full swing by the 1960s. While willing to support the welfare
state in general, Christian Democrats were staunchly opposed to the more far-reaching demands of labor unions.
Against the cultural tumult of the 1960s, Christian Democrats also emphasized what they identified as traditional cultural
and social values. Arguably, the most important political innovation associated with Christian Democracy was that the
European right accepted liberal democracy as a legitimate political system for the first time. There were no further
mainstream political parties or movements that attempted to create authoritarian forms of government; fascism and the
war had simply been too traumatic.