



Secular or Biblical, community or individual?

The role of values in Scandinavian Social Democracies

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In World Values Survey's cultural map of the world, the Scandinavian nations have since the turn of the millennium placed themselves in the most secular-individualistic corner, with Sweden being the prime example of these values. The most powerful political force in post-war Scandinavia is undoubtedly Social Democracy. Therefore, it is vital to understand the central values in this political movement, and how these may have affected the Scandinavian nations. In my doctoral thesis *Moving reality closer to the ideal*, I have analysed the role of autonomy, individualism, and secularism in Swedish politics.¹ In my trial lecture in November 2022, I was asked to present an overview on political values in Scandinavian Social Democracies at large. Here is a revised version of this lecture.

In the late 1950s, three Scandinavian Prime Ministers met in Malmö to discuss the future of Social Democracy in northern Europe. From Norway came Einar Gerhardsen; from Denmark, HC Hansen and from Sweden, Tage Erlander. The question on the agenda was how Social Democracy should find its way into the 1960s, in an age with a booming post-war economy and expanding social welfare, which appeared to have solved the

material needs that the Social Democratic movement strived for. What new goals could lie ahead, and what values should form the basis for a Social Democracy in powerful hegemony?

It was no coincidence that this meeting took place in Sweden. This nation was home of the most successful party in the democratic West, at this point more than a quarter-century into a seemingly endless period of government. Erlander, accompanied by his young secretary Olof Palme, took a natural leading position in the meeting. Accordingly, it was also the Swedish party that kept the leading role in pushing the political discourse further into a new value system, where traditional Marxist ideals gave way for a new, radically individualistic version of Social Democracy.

Historical background and political impact

Sweden was, however, not the first in the political organization of the working-class movement in Scandinavia. In Denmark, the party Socialdemokratiet was founded in 1876, Arbeiderpartiet in Norway began in 1887, and Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti (SAP) two years later, in 1889. "The Golden

Age of Social Democracy” occurred between around 1930 and 1970, when the movement held government power in several European nations, often with election results exceeding 40 per cent of the votes.² Only in Sweden, however, did the Social Democratic party hold government power for a consecutive period of 44 years, from 1932 to 1976.

Regarding influencing actual government policy, the Danish party was once again earliest in Scandinavia. Socialdemokratiet became a supporting party for a radical government already in 1909. Thorvald Stauning was party leader between 1910 and 1939, and he managed to exercise influence by adopting pragmatic reformism. The party managed to gain and remain in power for most of the time between 1924 and 1982, although interrupted by other governments during five periods of between two to three years. They managed to distance themselves from revolutionary communism, but nonetheless, the Social Democratic government still chose a pragmatic government cooperation with the Third Reich occupation regime. This led to popular dislike after war, but the party still managed to win government power back between 1953-1968, although never again with the same popular support as in Sweden or Norway.

The Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet chose during its first decades a more radical left-wing position, entering the Komintern when it was founded, and did not commit to abandoning the idea of world revolution until 1927. The same year, though, the party’s first Prime Minister Christopher Hornsrud was removed from office after just three weeks, after explicitly declaring that the new government’s goal was to introduce a socialist society. Reformism was not adopted as the overall

strategy until after the 1930 election.

Johan Nygaardsvold received a new chance to be Social Democratic Prime Minister during the economic crisis in 1935, and he handled the situation better and remained as exile government during the war. After the war, Einar Gerhardsen became Prime Minister for a socialist majority up till 1965, when a right-wing majority took over with a coalition government. Arbeiderpartiet then came back to power during most of the 1970s.

The Swedish SAP was exceptional, not just by its political impact, but also by its longevity. The party experienced just three party leaders between 1932 and 1986 – i.e., Per Albin Hansson, Tage Erlander and Olof Palme – while also holding the office of Prime Minister for 44 consecutive years. Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet also had just three Prime Ministers between from 1923 to 1975: Oscar Torp, Einar Gerhardsen and Trygve Bratteli, but did not have the opportunity of holding the Prime Ministership to the same extent as in Sweden. Denmark, on the other hand, went through no less than nine party leaders during the same period, which reflects the party’s relative weakness, compared to their Scandinavian counterparts.

In electoral strength, the Swedish Social Democrats were over time the most successful, with 54 % in 1940, 51 % in 1968, then falling to 36 % in 1998 and 40 % in 2002. In 2022, the party received 30 %, but lost government power, even though they had won over the Centre party to their side during the preceding election cycle. The Norwegian party experienced slightly lower election results than in Sweden, but still strong, although declining from 48 % in 1957 down to 24 % in 2001. In 2021, Arbeiderpartiet received 26 % of the votes, but still mana-

ged to win back government power, due to good coalition building. The Danish party never reached above 43 % after the war and fell to 29 % in 2001. The party still leads the government in 2023 with 27 % of the votes, also as a result of its skills in forming a government coalition.

Political values and path choices in Scandinavia

A political party, especially one with government power, constantly needs to balance between values, which may also sometimes stand in opposition to one another. For a Social Democratic party, one central decision was from the beginning to decide the path to the final goal: Should the movement be revolutionary or reformist? When the latter path was chosen, several other deliberations became necessary. Should one strive for utopianism or pragmatism? Close to this lies the questions of whether to promote idealism or materialism, collectivism or individualism, or whether to build your socialist ideals on an exclusively secular basis, or if it possible to include suitable parts of a Christian worldview?

When Social Democracy finally found itself in a position of power, a new question arose: Should the party now aim for large, rapid reforms, or move slower, in order to build trust and establish a long-term power? From an economic and ideological point of view, a Social Democratic party also has to position itself along the scale between planned economy and market economy, and of course also along the general political scale between left and right.

Regarding the latter, the Manifesto Research Group establishes that the Danish Social Democrats have traditionally not been remarkably left leaning in international comparison. The Norwe-

gian party, however, positioned themselves furthest left on the scale among Social Democratic parties in the West between 1945 and 1959, closely followed by the Swedish party. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Swedish SAP moved even further left along the scale, now only superseded by France, where Social Democracy during this period went through a period of fragmentation into smaller radically socialistic parties.³

The left-right scale is not the only aspect in which the Swedish SAP stands out as internationally particular. This is also evident in political decisions and choices of paths. Sheri Berman concludes in her book about Social Democracies in Europe:

It was only on Scandinavia, and particularly in Sweden, that a unified party embraced the new approach [reformist socialism] wholeheartedly. This is why one must turn to Sweden to observe the full dimensions, and potential, of the new and truly social democratic alternative.⁴

In relation to this, she also points out the unique hegemony built around the SAP, which resulted in not just their own party, but also the rest of society over time accepting the ideological vision shaped by Social Democracy:

Perhaps the SAP's greatest success, however, has been to preserve a sense of social democratic distinctiveness in Sweden. (...) Rather than questioning whether such social democratic concepts are worthwhile, political debate in Sweden has tended to be about whether the socialists or the bourgeois parties are best able to implement them.⁵

The remarkable success of Swedish Social Democracy is also shown in several aspects by political scientist Hans Keman.

He has conducted a comparative study of Social Democratic parties across the world, and he points out that the Swedish party stands out as particular in several areas, especially regarding time in power, governmental power in relation to parliament, and left-wing radicalism and policy-making in relation to their electoral strength.⁶ Keman describes the Swedish Social Democrats' ability to exercise such strong influence in their nation as a natural consequence of how they solidified their grip on power several years before the Second World War and could then continue to ride the popular wave after the war.⁷

Another remarkable facet of the SAP's success in Sweden is how effective the party has been in turning electoral results and political offices into political performance. As comparison, Hans Keman has shown quantitatively how the Danish party was not as successful in election results, but still managed to receive political results almost as strong as Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet. This insight portrays Socialdemokratiet as relatively more successful. In Sweden, though, the SAP gained the highest expected political results, due to electoral strength and gaining political office, but on top of that they also managed to outperform themselves and receive an impact in actual policy that was even larger than expected.⁸

Early visions in party programmes

The central ideological positions of a political party are typically found in its party programmes.⁹ Regarding these, the Danish party adopted their first programme, Gimleprogrammet, already in 1876. This was basically a translation of the German Gotha programme and would form the basis of all the programmes from the Socialdemokratiet until the

1960s. The first programme from the Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet was in its turn a direct translation of the Danish programme. Some similarities to these two remain in the first programme from the Swedish SAP in 1897.

My doctoral dissertation shows how the non-socialist parties gradually move into a secular-individualistic direction during the 20th century. For the Social Democrats, however, it is notable how the ideological positions are established early on in their joint history. They typically become more pragmatic and less revolutionary over time, but several of their central value-related positions remain.

The first Danish programme displays a distinctly socialist policy. Its central idea is not equality between classes, but explicitly focused on the working class, stating: "All other classes are for them just a reactionary mass."¹⁰ This programme also expresses a distinct criticism of organized religion, and demands the privatization of faith, described in words that will echo all the way up till today, where the new party demands: "Religion declared as a private matter."¹¹

The first Norwegian programme from 1885, being a translation of the Danish, naturally keeps the same class-based, Marxist opposition to capitalism. It shares the same individualized understanding of religion, calling for abolishment of the State Church and abandoning the school teaching of Christianity.

Even though the Swedish party was founded in 1889, its first programme was not adopted until 1897. The text does show some inspiration from the Danish and Norwegian predecessors, but the SAP has more developed general principles, a matter which will remain also during the 1900s. The Swedish programme shares

the same socialist value base, an individualistic view on religion, the abolishment of the State Church, and demands for a reform of school system and education, where the connections to religion and Church are removed – all summarized under the secular-individualistic axiom: "Religion declared as a private matter".¹²

Two values that stand out as central in Social Democratic policy are equality and solidarity. These are typically group-oriented values. Over time, though, an autonomous understanding of these concepts takes over, especially in Sweden. In both these values, the trends for or against secularism play a role in the public debate. As will be seen, a call for Bible-based values occasionally also plays a part in the debate about which values are best suited to form a basis for a well-functioning society.

Equality – a value with several meanings

Equality is a value strongly rooted in Social Democratic ideology. This concept may, however, take several different understandings. In Norway, it was initially understood in a strictly Marxist fashion. In 1900, Arbeiderpartiet "works for equal rights and equal plights for all, with no regard to gender, and for the removal of all differences between classes".¹³

Arbeiderpartiet's radical left-leaning period is illustrated in the 1930 programme with its strong focus on capitalism and the need for workers to unite, not primarily for equality, but "through class struggle to defend their daily interests, and pursue this struggle to the point where the working people are lords over the land and means of production and free from the capitalist system".¹⁴ The same view and goal is repeated in the 1939 programme, although expressed

through more pragmatic means.

In the party's next programme in 1969, the aim for a socialist equality is preserved, although with a touch of autonomous ideal:

The goal for the Norwegian Arbeiderparti is a socialist society. This is a society where democracy rules in all areas, where there is equality between all humans and groups, and with the largest possible freedom for individuals, as long as it does not harm others.¹⁵

In Sweden, the SAP gradually moved towards an individualistic understanding of equality. For a long time, though, the strictly Marxist interpretation remained. The party programme of 1944 describes the guidelines for Social Democracy's strivings to be: "Societal influence over production forces, participation in ownership for the workers, a planned production and equality for the citizens".¹⁶

The radical individualistic turn in Swedish Social Democracy occurs in relation to the 1960 programme revision. Here, it is stated: "The demand for equality (...) must above all signify the individual's right and opportunity to develop oneself according to one's personal disposition".¹⁷

In the late 1960s, radical opinion-maker Alva Myrdal receives the task to lead the party's vision for equality into the 1970s. The aim of her report is formulated with a clear focus on autonomous values, namely to give each citizen "equal freedom of choice to shape his own future", plus freedom from "the pressure of external circumstances".¹⁸

The Danish party, in their turn, developed a distinctly socialistic, but at the same time more community-based understanding of equality, compared to Sweden. Their programme of 1961 states: "Demo-

cratic socialism has the goal of liberating the human, securing their safety, and provide opportunity of free expression with responsibility for the community.”¹⁹

The same programme goes on to establish equality together with human dignity and family community, stating:

The basis for democratic socialism is constituted by respect for the human being and the will to create equal opportunities for everyone during their whole life. (...) It is of crucial importance to both individual and society that good conditions are created for the life of the family.²⁰

The Swedish emphasis on autonomy

As noted above, Sweden stands out, in both Scandinavian and global comparison with very secular-individualistic values, centered around the core value of autonomy. A general shift from equality values to freedom values did indeed take place in Scandinavia during the 1960s. Explicitly autonomous values were, however, particularly prevalent in Sweden.

1960 party programme describes that Social Democracy strives to reshape society so that ”the citizens are liberated from dependence on any kind of power groups beyond their control”.²¹ This is a key wording, as it is repeated several times in other party texts from the following decades. The same goes for the programme’s formulation that Social Democracy wishes to shape a society “which provides space for each person’s individuality and needs of expression”, a societal environment ”intended to shape free, independent and creative human beings”.²²

This individualized view of the human person is over time adopted also in family policy, and gets its public blessing from Prime Minister Olof Palme at the Social

Democratic Women’s Association congress in 1972: ”The principle is plain. Each human shall be treated as an autonomous individual, not as an appendage to a provider.”²³

Family-political outcomes of political values

What stands out as telling in the long run are the practical outcomes of these different political values. When a government starts out from different understandings of the individual and our relations to for instance family, church, and civil society, this is also reflected in political decisions, and in the next stage also in the state of the nation. Such path choices are often also closely connected to the party and its core values. Some telling examples of this are related to family policy. One example from the last decades regards the father’s quota, i.e. a certain number of weeks of the paternal leave that can only be used by the father. The introduction of this is defended by values of both equality and autonomy, namely the wish to create equal circumstances for both genders in family and work life, but also the wish to make the mother autonomous from the family.

This suggestion was discussed in all Scandinavian nations during the 1990s, but Norway was first to introduce it, in 1993 under a Social Democratic government. At that time, Sweden had a short-lived non-socialist government, but as soon as the Social Democrats were back in power, they immediately introduced the same reform in 1995. Denmark followed suit three years later, also under a Social Democratic government. In 2002, however, this rule was removed by a non-socialist government and not introduced again until in 2022, again under a Social Democratic government.²⁴

This exemplifies how the autonomous and equality-based understandings go hand in hand in Social Democratic family policy, but do not have the same focus among other parties.

Regarding practical societal outcome of these values, the pattern is double. On one hand, one would expect that a nation with a family policy focused on equality and female autonomy would have a higher percentage of women in the workforce. This was also the case in late 20th century Scandinavia, where Sweden stood out with a distinctly higher part of women in the workforce.²⁵

On the other hand, one would also expect that a society strongly influenced by egalitarian values would have a more even distribution of genders within different occupations. This is, however, not the case. This fact is in the academic discussion labelled "the welfare state paradox", showing that Sweden has a lower percentage of women in male-dominated occupations and men in female-dominated occupations than other Nordic countries.²⁶ This may have several explanations, but underlines that materialistic factors are not the only ones relevant in people's personal choices. Deeper convictions and values may be equal, or even more decisive when people plan their lives. This may also count for society as a whole – something which leads us on to the final value analysed in this comparison of the Scandinavian nations, namely solidarity.

Solidarity – built on a secular or Biblical foundation?

When analysing the political value of solidarity, it becomes apparent that the understandings of this concept may not rest mainly on the left-right scale, but rather on what basic worldview a govern-

ment would follow. Solidarity is indeed a central concept in Social Democratic policy. It is, however, also a word that can take very differing meanings. This has been the case in the Scandinavian examples.

In Denmark, it has traditionally been understood as a class-based concept. The 1913 programme states:

Socialdemokratiet in Denmark regards itself as a part of, and declares itself in solidarity with, the class-conscious international working class, whose mission in world history is the complete liberation of all people, without regard to gender, race or nationality.²⁷

When fast-forwarding to 1969, solidarity has followed the ideological trend to get a more international and ideological interpretation. By then, the Danish Social Democratic programme demands "Working-class solidarity fund" to support the working-classes in other nations and liberation movements in non-independent states.²⁸

In Sweden, solidarity is a non-existent value in the SAP programmes until 1944. From then on, it typically has a class-based understanding. It does, however, become very central under Olof Palme. For him, though, solidarity is mainly connected to the Third World, and generally disassociated from family, religion and the local community.²⁹ In this way, it becomes possible to combine seemingly opposing values – proposing both solidarity far away and autonomy for the individual.

Norway stands out during this period with a different, more Christian understanding of the concept. Arbeiderpartiet takes 30 years to revise their 1939 programme, but when they do so, they finish their party programme with a very different concluding paragraph, compared to

their Danish and – especially – Swedish counterparts.³⁰

After explaining how neighbourly love stands at the centre of a Christian view on societal morality, the party puts itself in line with this thought: "Arbeiderpartiet sees a clear connection between the Christian message and a societal policy built on solidarity." The text goes on to establish what moral foundation a solidaric society should build on, and explains: "A society built on equality, equal value and security, responsible cooperation, and world peace is in accordance with the principle of neighbourly love."

After this, the party program goes on to establish how Christianity is a central part of Norway's cultural heritage, and coming generations must have access to this through school education. Arbeiderpartiet concludes by stating that they want to gather all people around this view, regardless of differing personal views and religiosity.

This is not the place to evaluate the reasons why the Norwegian Social Democrats took such a different direction. Some explanations may derive from the experiences of the Second World War, others from the debates on school education during the 1960s. The Norwegian example does under all circumstances illustrate that Social Democracy can carry different understandings of key values, and it is not self-evident that a Christian understanding can be disregarded *per se*.

A practical challenge for party politics is, however, that in the long run it appears challenging to maintain all these three values at once. There seems to appear a pivotal point in the political discourse where strivings for equality have to take either of two routes: autonomy or solidarity, but seldom focusing on both in the same culture at the same time.

What values to choose for the future?

For the Social Democratic movement, one central question ought to deal with one of the great paradoxes in my study: How does the movement evaluate the fact that this foundationally group-oriented movement turned into an increasingly more radical individualism? Has the autonomous project, which in Sweden during the 1970s rolled over into ultra-progressivism, given the desired consequences?

Towards the end of the last century, at the SAP party congress in 1997, party chairman and Prime Minister Göran Persson takes the speaker's booth and delivers an ideologically well-conceived speech about how several people look upon what may have been lost in the project of modernization. In this evaluation, Prime Minister Persson points back towards values more connected to solidarity than to individualism.

Moreover, he repeatedly makes this point by referring to Biblical values. He quotes the apostle Paul, refers to Genesis, and argues that people facing the turn of the millennium long for The Great Vision. Göran Persson continues: "I'm not sure that I know in detail how this should be formulated. But I know this: 2000 years ago, a man went up on a hill outside Jerusalem. He said that the light must shine upon everyone in the house. The message in the Sermon on the Mount was crystal clear: Everyone, not just a few."³¹

The leader of the world's most successful Social Democratic party, the Prime Minister of the nation which had by this day become the most secular-individualistic in the world, concludes his speech by quoting a fellow Social Democrat and also a Christian believer, who during most of his time in office held his faith

private. This person was Tony Blair, who explains his view of what socialism could be – a view that echoes Biblical values of solidarity and community, but that is clearly critical against autonomous values:

It is a moral purpose to life. A set of values. A belief in society. In co-operation. In achieving together what we are not able to achieve alone. It is how I try to live my life. The simple truths. I am worth no more than anyone else. I am my brother's keeper. I will not walk by on the other side.

We aren't simply people set in isolation from each other, face to face with eternity, but members of the same family, community, the same human race.³²

Göran Persson goes on to say that Tony Blair's version of socialism is also his. In the actual development in 20th century Scandinavia, especially in Sweden, the political direction took a much more

secular turn. Arguably, values such as equality and solidarity existed in Social Democratic policy, but even though the Norwegian party had a period where they underlined the need for a Christian view of society and solidarity, the secular-individualistic movement that affected the whole West became especially strong in Scandinavia.

Here, Sweden became the strongest example of this movement. In opposition to Göran Persson's more Biblical vision above, Social Democracy and thus also the Swedish nation went another way, while gradually also bringing in radical versions of liberalism.

It is within this society we now stand, and it is from here we must proceed. Maybe Göran Persson was on the track of central values for the future, not only to Social Democracy, but to any government of any colour, when shaping the society in which we all live.³³

Notes

¹ Per Ewert, *Moving reality closer to the ideal: The process towards autonomy and secularism during the Social Democratic hegemony in 20th century Sweden*. Diss. series for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.) at VID Specialized University; 44, Doctoral thesis, 2022. <https://www.vid.no/site/assets/files/38790/phd-ewert-vid-2022.pdf>.

² This and following references to election results from Pascal Delwit "This is the final fall. An electoral history of European Social Democracy (1870-2019)", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351127354_This_is_the_final_fall_An_electoral_history_of_European_Social_Democracy_1870-2019

³ Hans Keman, *Social Democracy: A Comparative Account of the Left-Wing Party Family* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2017), 92.

⁴ Sheri Berman *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176.

⁵ Ibid. 198f.

⁶ Keman, *Social Democracy*, 45f, 92, 106, 108, 112, 127.

⁷ Ibid, 67f.

⁸ Ibid, 46.

⁹ Programmes from this period in Sweden are found in Klaus Misgeld, red., *Socialdemokratins program 1897 till 1990* (Stockholm: Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek, 2001), the Norwegian programmes are gathered on Arbeiderpartiet's website, <https://www.arbeiderpartiet.no/om/historien-om-arbeiderpartiet/historiske-partiprogrammer/>. The Danish programmes can be found at Det kongelige bibliotek.

¹⁰ Socialdemokratiet, Gimleprogrammet (1876), point 1.

¹¹ Ibid, point 2.5.

¹² Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (SAP), Party programme 1897, point 3.

¹³ Arbeiderpartiet, Party programme 1900, preamble.

¹⁴ Arbeiderpartiet, Party programme 1930, point 6.

¹⁵ Arbeiderpartiet, Party programme 1969, point 1.

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- 16 SAP, Party programme 1944, General principles.
- 17 SAP, Party programme 1960, General principles, paragraph II.
- 18 Alva Myrdal, ed., *Towards Equality: The Alva Myrdal Report to the Swedish Social Democratic Party* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1971), 15.
- 19 Socialdemokratiet, *Vejen frem*, Party programme 1961, 4.
- 20 Ibid, 5, 8
- 21 SAP, Party programme 1960, General principles, preamble.
- 22 Ibid. General principles, paragraph II.
- 23 Social Democratic Women's Association, Congress protocol (1972), 367, 370.
- 24 Mari Teigen and Hege Skjeie, "The Nordic Gender Equality Model" in *The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, But Still Viable?* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2017), 140;
- Marie Preisler, "Dads on equal footing with mums in Denmark's new parental leave" *Nordic Labour Journal*, 18 August 2022.law
- 25 Teigen & Skjeje, 133.
- 26 Ibid, 134.
- 27 Socialdemokratiet, *Program og love*, Party programme 1913, 4.
- 28 Socialdemokratiet, *Det nye samfund: 70'ernes politik*, Work programme 1969, 6.
- 29 See for instance Olof Palme, *Democratic socialism means solidarity: Inaugural address 1972 party congress*, passim.
- 30 The following from Arbeiderpartiet, Party programme 1969, Appendix.
- 31 SAP, Congress protocol, (1997), 93.
- 32 Ibid. 95f.
- 33 See also Per Ewert, *Landet som glömde Gud : hur Sverige under 1900-talet formades till världens mest sekulärindividualistiska land* (Skellefteå: Norma, 2022).