

The Slow Erosion of Scandinavian Social Democracy

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There are three central narratives about Scandinavia today. First, there's the story about Nordic penal exceptionalism, which is familiar to sociologists of punishment: prisons in countries like Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are small and humane, crime rates are low – and the incarceration rate even lower. Academics have discussed the exceptionalism thesis for about a decade now, with some pointing to high rates of pre-trial detention, a thriving politics of law and order, and a growing tendency to punish and eject foreign citizens, including foreign offenders and (failed) asylum seekers alike. But it is probably fair to say that the exceptionalism thesis has withstood ten-odd years of criticism – certainly when societies like Denmark and Sweden are contrasted with relatively high-punishment polities like the United States, England & Wales, the former Soviet republics, and China.

Second, there's the story about the Scandinavian welfare states, also known as “the Nordic model.” Everyone from Bernie Sanders to Hilary Clinton, from Emmanuel Macron to Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has waxed lyrical about the virtues of Nordic social democracy. Many have pointed to these countries as proof that market economies can be both efficient and equitable. The Nordic countries suggest that neoliberalism is not the only viable political-economic regime currently on offer. In Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order* (2011), the much-coveted prize for all developing countries is said to be “getting to Denmark.” During an electoral debate in October 2016, Bernie Sanders said that

“we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway and learn what they have accomplished for their working people.” With free public healthcare and education, relatively low rates of income inequality, high levels of human satisfaction and happiness, low rates of unemployment, Nordic social democracy seems to promise the best of socialist egalitarianism and competitive markets, resulting in a “capitalism with a human face.”

But there’s a third story about Scandinavia: that something has gone terribly wrong in these previously well-functioning, homogeneous, and (allegedly) monocultural societies. Immigration policies have run amok, so the story goes, resulting in the influx of millions of foreigners, as with Sweden’s decision to (temporarily) settle around 160,000 refugees in 2016, most of them fleeing the Syrian War, or Norway’s acceptance of Somali refugees in the early 1990s and its reliance on “guest workers” from Pakistan since the 1970s and Poland beginning in the early 2000s.

These immigrants, various right-wing politicians and pundits claim, have caused (or will cause at some not-too-distant point in the future) social trust to wither away. Immigrants work less, destabilize the tax base, and bring about various social pathologies, such as urban unrest and criminal disorder, they claim. A welfare state, with its generous social policies, necessarily relies on high rates of labor force participation by relatively skilled workers, and, more broadly, a moral willingness to pay taxes and participate in reciprocal relations of mutual solidarity with a wider citizenry. All of these structural elements, critics claim, are strained by the arrival of unskilled, unemployed, unemployable, and “culturally unassimilable” immigrants, mainly from Africa and the Middle East.

This narrative has a lot of momentum, fueled by both domestic and global forces on the far-right of the political spectrum. At a rally in Florida in February 2017, President Donald Trump proclaimed to his followers, “Look at what happened in Sweden last night,” a comment for which he was widely ridiculed, as there was nothing particularly newsworthy going on in Sweden the night before. But, almost prophetically, his words were retroactively borne out by later events: in

April that same year, a terrorist attack in Stockholm, killing five people and injuring 14 others, seemed to confirm the Trumpian trope of broken Sweden, a failed multiculturalist state or trusting liberal democracy exploited by insidious Islamists. (As the Swedish government notes, however, no clear motive for the attack has ever been discovered, and no such groups have claimed responsibility for it.)

Similarly, the Norwegian right-wing Progress Party politician Sylvi Listhaug—a member of the Conservative-Progress Party governing coalition—was widely criticized for traveling to Stockholm during the Norwegian parliamentary elections in 2017 to warn against the spread of “Swedish conditions” to Norway – coded language for lax immigration policies that, so Listhaug claimed, had caused irreparable damage to Sweden’s suburban periphery and social fabric. The Norwegian politician was scorned by Swedish elites, and the mayor of Stockholm refused to meet with Listhaug on her tour of the city. Once again, however, the anxieties of the right were confirmed by later events: in early 2018, a spate of gang killings in Sweden’s various suburbs led the Swedish Social Democrat and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, partly under pressure from the right-wing Swedish Democrats, to consider deploying the nation’s armed forces on the streets of Stockholm – a US-style militarization of the policing of urban gangs largely unprecedented in Scandinavia.

Clearly, a significant shift in the Nordic political landscape has taken place in recent years. The decade that has passed since John Pratt’s work on Nordic penal exceptionalism has seen the further erosion of social democracy (including privatization, marketized logics of service provision, and mounting socioeconomic inequalities) combined with continuously reverberating ethnonational anxieties. In the book *Nordic Nationalism and Penal Order* (2017), the sociologist Vanessa Barker points out that there has been a rebordering of the Swedish welfare state, exemplified by the decision to reintroduce passport checks on the Danish side of the famous bridge between Copenhagen and Malmö in southern Sweden. Scholars like Katja Aas have observed the rise to prominence of a “crimmigration” agenda in the Norwegian political field where crime, immigration, and punitivity are seamlessly conflated. My own work has documented a (moderate)

turn towards law and order policies in Norway, with a 35-percent increase in the average sentence length in the last 15 years and a 30-percent increase in the imprisonment rate in the same time period.

While right-wing ethnonational anxieties contain an element of truth at a purely factual, empirical level—terrorist attacks do occur, and urban unrest has grown in places—these are partial realities that are wholly disproportionate and disconnected from wider truths. There is something faintly hysterical about the fears of the Scandinavian popular right. If the wealthiest nations on Earth could be decimated or destroyed by the arrival of a few tens of thousands of immigrants per year, perhaps these societies weren't as stable and secure, or even worthy of preservation, as their upholders would claim. Moreover, their embeddedness in a global order (as evidenced by their huge reliance on imported consumer goods, for instance), means that they too must shoulder the predictable consequences of geopolitical conflicts – many of them caused by the West. Sweden's paltry thousands of Syrian refugees pales in comparison with the staggering burden carried by tiny, impoverished nations like Lebanon and Jordan, which have accepted millions. As commentators like Glenn Greenwald and Slavoj Žižek have pointed out, the would-be defenders of liberal democracy are so eager to preserve basic Western liberties that they would dismantle those very rights in the fight against various shadowy enemies. In Norway, the national parliament discussed one such proposal in March 2018: the governing Conservative Party and Progress Party supported a proposal allowing individuals with dual citizenship suspected of terrorist crimes to be stripped in absentia of their Norwegian citizenship in speedy trials (so-called *hurtigdomstoler*, or "rapid courts"). In the wake of an acrimonious national debate on this issue in March 2018, the right-wing politician Sylvi Listhaug lost her post as the Norwegian Minister of Justice, and the legislative proposal ultimately faltered, but such proposals are suggestive of where the political field is headed.

Nordic social democracy is withering away. In Norway, around 500,000 people now have private health insurance, a twelvefold increase between 2006 and 2016. Privatization has resulted in the nation's largest oil company Statoil—the source of so much of the country's

wealth and therefore a crucial precondition for its generous social spending—being listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The proportion of Norwegian schoolchildren attending private schools has doubled in ten years. Mounting wealth inequalities means that the richest one percent of Norway’s population now controls nearly half the country’s financial wealth (shares, bonds, and similar). The very richest individuals—the top 0.01 percent—earned 26 times the average income in the 1980s, but by the late 2000s they were making 178 times the average annual income. According to the OECD, wealth inequality in Norway is now greater than in the United Kingdom, France, and Australia. The once-widespread ideal of egalitarianism is faltering, and the welfare state is being hollowed out by members of the upper and middle classes eager to enjoy the benefits of private healthcare, schooling, and other services previously held to be the sole domain of the state. And similar features obtain for Sweden and Denmark. As the acclaimed Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn notes in a recent review, “The egalitarian, solidaristic ‘People’s Home’, which has attracted widespread progressive admiration internationally, is being eroded and dismantled.” Sweden now displays “extraordinary... inequality of wealth,” Therborn writes.

Social democracy is not faltering because of the arrival of immigrants from the postcolonial sphere. Instead, the welfare state is being dismantled by the very political establishment that has taken a tougher stance on criminal offenders and asylum seekers, including center-left social democratic parties like the Norwegian Labor Party. The real cause of social dislocation is not immigration but marketization. If social democracy was the leading cause of penal exceptionalism, its disappearance must, logically, cause exceptionalism to falter and fade away also. It seems improbable that Nordic penal exceptionalism can withstand the slow erosion of social democracy.

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