

Book review:

M. Fulla, M. Lazar (eds), *European Socialists and the State in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,* Palgrave MacMillan 2020, 400 pages

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The history is built of crunch moments. During them a set of existential questions is asked, prompting a reflection about the situation, the alternatives, and the preferable way forward. These deliberations happen especially when the circumstances are dire and when there is a cascade of predicaments, which both coincide with and supersede one another. They amalgamate subsequently into a *polycrisis*. It is a phenomenon so profound that in consequence there isn't anything certain, as also nothing should be expected to happen by default. Understanding that speaks for the fact that at the crisis moment, the power to pave the way forward doesn't vanish. But grasping it depends on the stakeholders' ability to push the boundaries of imagination and think about the world completely anew. A fair question to ask after a decade and a half of struggle (if counting from the groundbreaking financial crisis of 2008–2009), is whether traditional political actors and institutions are indeed able to seize the moment and follow another popular wisdom of *never wasting a good crisis*.

Consequently, one of the pertinent queries is whether *a state* could be such a stakeholder. The above-mentioned crash, the pandemics, and the costs of living crisis on one hand, and on the other – global warming the climate emergency, digitalisation, outbreaks of wars, and intensified migration waves – all seem to have brought citizens to think about a sense of collective actions. Many analysts believed that especially in the context of COVID-19, there were circumstances that would favour the expanded power

of the *state* with strong public services and effective policies to safeguard economies. Like in 2007–2008, it was anticipated that these sentiments would fuel support for the centre-left and lead to the return of especially social democrats to power. But looking at the electoral results of the last years, there is no such trend. If anything, the contemporary polls suggest that the crisis of the traditional political parties persists, and while the moderate forces shrink, the radical and extreme ones get to grow. Exemplary to that are the results from Belgium and Germany. Thus, what prevented the pendulum swing? Was it a problem of an ideological nature? Those seeking answers should dive into the edited book *European Socialists and the State in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. This excellent volume provides a handful of important articles, which may help in understanding these particular dynamics.

The book is published within the *Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements* series, and it is the result of the international colloquium that was held at the *Science Po* in Paris in 2016. The papers initially presented at the event were then thoroughly reworked and updated. They amount to 21 papers, with 4 among them being comparative articles and the remaining 17 – case studies focused on the individual countries. They were then divided into three parts, respectively: *Using the State to Democratise Society, Socialists and Civil Servants*, and *Socialism and Changes in Capitalism and State*. Among the authors we can find 18 senior scholars from across the EU and UK, whilst the editorial work was completed by a tandem consisting of Marc Lazar (Professor of Political History and Sociology, Director of the Centre for History at *Science Po*) and Mathieu Fulla (who is a PhD and the same Faculty Member).

The book is started from a reflection on the relationship between socialism (social democracy) and the state. It is described as *multi-layered, contradictory, and ambiguous* (p. viii), which is an interesting observation. Against the contemporary perception that social democratic parties' doctrine involves the strong belief in a state as an embodiment of a social contract (welfare state) and as a tool for emancipation (democratic state), initially the founding fathers of the movement considered the state to be the opposite, serving only narrowed elites and, in their hands, turning to be a tool of oppression. In that sense the industrialisation and the lessons learned from World War I prompted a change of thinking among many within the socialists' movement, seeing followers of Jean Jaurès, Emile Vandervelde, Eduard Bernstein and others forming a social democratic wing. From that point of view, the split within the Socialist International was at its core about the role of the state as well – whereby the dividing lines would remain between taking over the apparatus on one hand and democratising the country via the reformist agenda on the other. The collection demonstrates that socialism and statism have never been synonymous (as often is mistakenly assumed). And although in the 1920s and 1930s social democrats chose to be the reformist movement in favour of the state and its institutions, and consequently they came to govern and co-create constitutions in many places in Europe, still what "a state" meant for them was very different from country to country. This is how this movement, which to this day is composed of proud internationalists cultivating organisations such as Socialist

International or Party of European Socialists, sees such a variety of member parties' models and programmes.

There was, of course, the famous *French exceptionalism* (p. 57–75); there was a conciliation strategy and nationalisation plan in Belgium (p. 77–96), and there were Scandinavian experiences with the state being made about democratisation and shared ownership, with social democrats exercising the very patriotically flavoured rhetoric (p. 97–118). With time passing, the respective visions would alter. The main turning points were: the period after World War II (when the majority of the social democratic parties would re-emerge and propagate a welfare state as a solution to both a need for reconstruction, democratisation and progress); the 1960s and 1970s (with the rise of new social movement and the oil crisis there was a new set of issues and a different type of pressures, leading to i.e. Swedish social democrats abandoning Keynesianism for good); and the 1990s (when globalisation was in full swing and a search for a new synthesis led to embracing of the Giddens' concept of the Third Way by several of key parties). And one must admit, despite the vehemently expressed criticism about The Third Way in the book, that the conflict over the *active state* and the extent to which it was not only a *corrector*, but *more of an enabler* for the economy (p. 276–277, 294–295, 352–353, 357) has been the last of the sort of grand intellectual attempts to coherently define a *modern* state. The ambition then was to comprehensively analyse the challenges and prospects, redefining policies and mechanisms of governance (also financial and economic ones).

All in all, the detailed analyses included in the book depict the trajectory that transformed socialists, who had been originally a protest movement, into a party that became a pillar of a system, fulfilling the function of either governing or the main opposition party. With the examples from Germany, France, Austria, Scandinavia, the UK, Spain, and Greece, it shows what made social democrats rise, seize, and share power – until the point at which the latter was no longer possible. As it would seem from the book, due to both intellectual and organisational shortcomings. That period starts from the financial crash, following which social democrats have been muddling through, engaging in rather involuntary support for austerity and further decline under pressures of those, who (for valid or illegitimate reasons) feel more and more oppressed and disempowered by the status quo.

There are several hypotheses about the origin of the above-mentioned deficiency. On one hand, the authors writing about the French case, point to the ideas such as "voluntarism" that were introduced in socialists' narrative already in the 1970s consequently eroding the notion of "new citizenship" in the sense of mix of rights and responsibilities (see p. 68–70). That however was still not as decisive as the reform of Lionel Jospin in 1990s, which antagonised PS (fr. *Partie Socialiste*) and civil servants. The relevance of that is to be understood as cutting off from the roots inside of the public sector, since the majority of the PS leaders had been coming from the *Ecole Nationale d'administration* (p. 71, 275). The presidency of Hollande moved the concept further from Pierre Mauroy's *state that would boost industrial capacity and increase workers' powers* (p. 271) to more ambiguous François Hollande's *state that parents, regulates,*

and anticipates. On the other hand, those treating the question of Sweden, describe the SAP (*Swedish Social Democratic Party*) embracing the *marketisation* as a path to offering more choice and hence more emancipation and efficiency. The change of the party doctrine was driven by a wish to embrace the new reality and rebuild power structures for the benefit of many. Paradoxically, as a logic for how to deal with the recession in the 1990s, it became the reason for a growing divide between the social democrats, public sector workers, and trade unions (p. 338–349). Though the French and Swedish conditions differ, the conclusion that seems to be common is that the centre-left lost its legitimacy as a representative and organisation incorporating the everyday builders of their respective states, as also protectors and promoters of quality public goods and services. And without that, and with no other tools (as unlike liberals they couldn't pledge the allegiance to market), how could they possibly make a viable promise of progress and prosperity for all?

Another theory promoted by several authors in the book suggests that, in addition to the aforementioned antagonism with public servants and the inability to attract innovative thinkers (from creative sectors, intellectuals, and youth), the ideological compass of the social democrats became largely confused due to their flirtation with certain doctrinal aspects of neoliberalism. For some of the other authors, this relates to the flexibilization and liberalization of the market rules, as also with entrusting the logic of the European integration that has been laid out in the Maastricht Treaty. They claim that the EU limited the autonomy of the states, while in the meantime “losing the unifying energy” (p. 20), that social democrats, being in power in the 1990s and 2000s, missed the opportunity to coordinate amongst themselves and bring the Union onto another developmental track (p. 252–253), and that pro-Europeanism meant in several cases embracing “social-liberalism” (p. 275) and pushed parties, such as PASOK, towards even greater incoherence (p. 393–394). This is a bold and risky set of claims, which perhaps would deserve further exploration to determine their accuracy. That is especially true, because social democrats have significantly helped to change the EU over the last two or three decades. At the same time those in the governments openly depended on European cooperation amid the *polycrisis* of the last year. Many among them also believed in the EU's power to unite states, giving them the ability to face the triple transition (green, digital, and demographical). Hence, the question of how far the pro-Europeanism was indeed underpinning the reason for their shortcoming in conceptualising the modern state would be a great material for a separate monography.

All in all, *European Socialists and the State in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* is an scholarly excellent, gripping book with many relevant takeaways. Scholars of different disciplines (political theory, political party systems, public administration, European studies) will all find their own exciting threads to follow and complement their understanding with diligently examined country case studies. But above all, for both academics and practitioners, it is an elementary reading in a time when so many discussions are taking place about the future of the EU, alongside those regarding the paths towards its enlargement and deepening. The reviewed book demonstrates that it is essential that

such deliberations are taking place. Simultaneously, it is also necessary to pay attention to the role that every segment of the EU governance should play. Eventually that comes down to having a clear idea of the kind of a state and Union desired. And that is a political question, where not only social democrats – but also all the other political families would do well to come forward with convincing, coherent answers. Leaving that issue aside or remaining ambiguous will only further fuel the tensions and hence empower the centrifugal forces, which currently are on the rise.

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