

Opposing Forces

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I am very glad to be here with you today. But I hope that no one is going to break into tears at what I am about to say.

Try to remember, if you are old enough, the years between 1977-1988. It was during that time that I had the opportunity to visit Sweden five or six times as a sort of guide for groups of about 25 German students of social work. I took them around and tried to show them what a German might learn in Sweden.

While preparing for this seminar, the question was posed to me: What was it that got you interested, involved, and sort of taken in by the Swedish model? The answer has many parts, and here are some of them. Let us assume the date is 1988.

24 reasons to study Sweden:

1. Nearly 200 years of peace.
2. Full employment as a primary political goal, while in Germany the corresponding goal was price stability. As I recall, the unemployment rate in 1988 was 1.8 percent.
3. Control over the economy by a democratic, parliamentary form of government--*political control of the economy*.
4. The strong influence of organized labour on the Social Democratic government. Don't you feel your tears coming?
5. Great advances in the equality of women, enforced by law.
6. An extremely high rate of female employment-- 83 percent female participation in the labour market in 1988.
7. An extremely even distribution of income.
8. A well-developed system of rights to further one's education, including training and retraining to help "deskilled" people become employable again.
9. Model projects to humanize work organizations and working procedures.
10. Model efforts to buffer and/or solve the employment and deskilling problems after the shutdown of shipyards in Göteborg.
11. Advances in preventive safety and health policies in working life.

In Germany, we had none of this, or much less, or much later.

12. The pioneer role of Swedish stress research, personified by Lennart Levi, Bertil Gardell, Marianne Frankenheuser, Gun Johansson, Töres Theorell and their disciples.
13. The official recognition of heart attack as an occupational disease, through the reversal of the burden of proof. Unheard of, the world over!
14. The classification of rape in marriage as an unlawful act.
15. Prohibiting corporal punishment of children.
16. A public health system financed by taxes, with a priority on preventive measures.
17. A positive list of 600-800 publicly subsidized medical drugs. If you told that to German doctors, they would be ready to get out their guns and take to the streets-- not to speak of the pharmaceutical industry.
18. Separate, individual taxation of marital partners. In Germany, they are taxed jointly-- the effects, you wouldn't believe.
19. Much better-developed child care to support working mothers.
20. The expansion of the public sector in order to transform the unpaid work of women to paid work.
21. Measures to ease integration and inclusion of immigrants and their children in Swedish society, for example: intensive language training for adults, support for the maintenance of cultural identity, play and leisure activities for children in their language of origin. Just travel throughout Europe and try to find that sort of thing.
22. To the extent that these options and activities are now available in Germany now, they have been introduced much later and with less public financial support.
23. A solidaristic wage policy, in order to prevent the lowest-paid workers from falling behind.
24. The world's lowest functional illiteracy.

Unlovable interests

Now, isn't that is a lovable project? Sure it is. But each of you in your own field can assess how much of it has been eroded, scrapped, squandered, stolen. These are words that suggest something I have not heard here all day: That is, that here may be people with very odd motives going around and scrapping this model-- not because they are evil. They are simply representatives of contrary *interests*, another word that I have hardly heard today.

There *are* interests. They may be opposing interests, and they may even involve minorities against majorities-- extremely *small* minorities against very *large* majorities.

Earlier today, Gösta Esping-Andersen had much to say about the importance of investing in the cognitive development of children. I would not contradict that. But based on my experience in education, I would say that, in most cases where people have been "blocked" in learning, it is due to emotional reasons. No act of learning is

performed without the involvement of feelings. These may be feelings of revulsion-- if one has a stupid teacher, teaching useless things, for example. If, however, there is joy in learning, it will stick, it will stimulate curiosity and make learning a continuous, self-propelling process.

So, the idea of increasing or improving cognitive skills in a knowledge-based society must definitely be augmented with consideration of the emotional needs of people as they prepare for the demands of a new society. Some people might use the term, "social competence", which might involve the ability to co-operate and communicate with ease. But it might also involve the ability to take a stance in a conflict that is justified and legitimate.

Any group of people with a tendency to uniformity, conformity, etc., may one day find themselves in a situation where it is no longer possible to solve problems by methods that are generally acceptable in a group like this. They may confront adversaries that are so strong that it is necessary to *fight*.

Bygone consensus

The impression I got from the discussion earlier today was this: Here are people of good will, with a tremendous amount of information and analytical skill. But, they all basically agree that they want the same general good, and the consensus seems to be that there would not be any argument, or any power or any interests that might counteract the common interest of this group.

In my view, however, that is history. You had better get prepared for the new times. With the knowledge-based economy and society, we have something like the World Trade Organization which, for example, is prepared to support Canada in its efforts to compel Sweden to resume the import of a deadly poison, asbestos. There are no democratic controls on decisions by the World Trade Organization. But Sweden is a party to the WTO, just like Germany.

I cannot remember anyone in Germany-- not my union, not my party, the Social Democratic Party-- actively raising their members' awareness of the restrictions on the use of public funds for the public good that have been written into the European Union's Maastrich Agreement.

Or consider all the idiocies associated with plans for the wholesale privatization of public services. In Germany, the railroads, the postal service, every large German industry that used to be operated by public service corporations is in danger of being privatized. This has been studied backwards and forwards, and to believe that this will produce better results. . . . Just travel to the south of England and try to drink the water that comes from the tap.

I am not sitting here primarily as a scientist, although I have been trained in the social sciences. I am involved in politics with very, very strong feelings, and some events in my life have sharpened my sensitivity to power, the use of power, and the readiness of certain groups to devise strategies against the good of the majority. . . .

People against people

I have visited the United States some six or seven times during the past ten years. I have studied there. I was the beneficiary of a U.S. scholarship to study for a full year during 1950-51 at the University of Wisconsin. Over the years, I have come to know a lot of people in the U.S. who have a lot of problems that have long since been solved in Sweden.

With regards to the issues of social policy that we have been discussing here today, I have met a lot of people in the U.S. who fight a fight which is very hard to fathom, to believe. Disadvantage has attained such an extent in the United States of America that, in 1995, for the first time a chairman of the AFL-CIO was removed from office in a sort of palace revolt. This was done by young people who said, "No more dilly-dallying, no more business unionism. If we retreat further, it will be the end of the labour movement in the U.S."

In Germany, we now have a union density of about 35 percent. It was about the same figure in the U.S. during World War II, and it is the maximum level that has been reached anywhere outside the Nordic region. Today, union density in the U.S. is about 13 percent, and it is only at that level because some 20 percent of public service workers are organized. In the private sector, the figure is *seven percent*.

Now, German Social Democrats learn early on that one must always avoid being considered anti-American. We all recall images of immense beauty from the United States: the Manhattan skyline, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, the giant cactuses of New Mexico, the snow-capped peak of Mt. Hood, Crater Lake, the sound and the islands of Seattle, the romance of New Orleans and the Mississippi steamboats. Add to that the images projected by television and films-- immense wealth, happy people, hard-working, caring and socially responsible, devout, generous, solid, a motor car always at hand.

You see, I really love the United States. For the most part, a European visitor would be likely to meet affable, helpful, truly likeable people, some of them lovable. The many I have personally met are great people. But most of them who know other countries are critical of their own social-political-economic system. That system is increasingly felt to be excessively competitive, setting people against people, with negative effects on their lives, their identities, their modes of thinking, their self-respect, their dignity. The laws of the market permeate every aspect of life, and most mass media present life as an unending ruthless game, a "knockout system" which produces a small select group of victorious players-- the "winning team"-- and ignores the masses of losers.

Race to the bottom

You know what shareholder value means. It means prioritizing the interests of those who control the capital of corporations, and whose most powerful-- there's that word again-- power-full representatives, the heads of big investment funds, go around to major corporations and tell the CEO: "If you do not produce a gain of 20 percent on invested capital within three years, we will see to it that you are removed." Twenty percent on capital investment is the standard benchmark of those who have the power to realize such threats. Of course, any chief executive

officer will have to perform accordingly, or be thrown out. How does a CEO raise the price of his company's stock when business has not been going well? You throw out 10-, 15-, 20- or 30,000 people.

Why am I telling all this to Swedes? Because I believe that everything we have been discussing here today may be history in something like 20-25 years. This syndrome has not yet reached Sweden, but there is no guarantee that it never will.

I have been able to touch upon only a small portion of what I would like to tell you. But if anyone is interested to know why a German comes here to say these things, take a look at Germany and know better. Go to Britain and look at what Mrs. Thatcher did to that country. Something similar happened in the U.S. under the reign of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, the elder. It is what U.S. unions call "the race to the bottom".

Werner Wilkening is the now-retired director of the Federal Institute for Health Education in Cologne, whose occupational history includes extensive experience of the German advertising industry. A long-time student and admirer of Swedish society, his primary research interests have been: the interplay of work and health; systems of social equality/inequality; and the effects of unemployment on health, identity and human dignity. He is currently a lecturer with the Dept. of Social Work at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences