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David Schelhaas
Dordt College

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What Does Social Democrat Mean?

Abstract

"Social democrats see the state as playing a major role in creating a good and just society, often using taxes to pay for the public services and other social changes they desire."

Posting about the merits of a social democracy from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-does-social-democrat-mean/>

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What Does Social Democrat Mean?

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Dave Schelhaas

The emergence of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party as a major candidate for president has required many Americans to ask themselves, “What is a socialist?” Or, perhaps more appropriately, “What is a social democrat?”

At the very least most of us remember that the socialist credo is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” We recognize that at its most basic this means that people with more than they need help the people who cannot meet their needs. And we probably know that socialist governments bring this about by taxation and other means. We probably realize that socialist governments in the past century were radically different from U.S. and Canadian democracies. They did not have democratically elected leaders but successor regimes like that of the old U.S.S.R. Most significantly, they replaced capitalism with an entirely different system of production and ownership.

Obviously, Sanders is not that kind of socialist, but he *is* a social democrat. A social democracy implies that capitalism operating within a democracy will be the economic framework by which the interests of large needy segments of the population will be met. Social democrats see the state as playing a major role in creating a good and just society, often using taxes to pay for the public services and other social changes they desire. Embedded within this methodology we still see the old credo “from each (often via taxes) according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Finally, social democrats are committed to cultural and religious tolerance.

To summarize, social democrats want more government rather than the limited government that most Republicans and even moderate Democrats want. In the remaining part of this essay I want to look very briefly at two questions: First, do social democracies create successful societies in our world today, and secondly, can (or should) Christians support social democracies.

At its core “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” is about income or wealth equality. In his fine little book *Ill Fares the Land*, writer and scholar Tony Judt shows that virtually all social problems that plague a society, things like infant mortality, life expectancy, criminality, mental illness, etc., are problems that have inequality—especially wealth inequality—as their underlying cause. Using research that measure these social ills in various countries, Judt shows that

the wider the spread between the wealthy few and the impoverished many, the worse the social problems: a statement that seems to be true for rich and poor countries alike. What matters is not how affluent a country is but how unequal it is. Thus Sweden and Finland, two of the world’s richest countries by per capita income or GDP, have a very narrow gap separating their richest from their poorest citizens—and they consistently lead the world in indices of measurable wellbeing. Conversely, the United States, with its huge aggregate wealth, always comes low on such measures. We spend vast sums on healthcare, but life expectancy in the US remains below Bosnia and just above Albania.¹

If we look at the social democracies in Europe, countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, France, Austria, Netherlands and Belgium, as well as countries like Australia and Canada, we see countries with relatively narrow variances in income equality and high rankings in the indices of wellbeing. It is clear that in many countries, social democracies promote conditions that allow their citizens to flourish.

Nevertheless, many here in the U. S. fear that they will lose individual liberties if the U. S. moves in the direction of the European social democracies—even though the people in these social democracies that I have just listed have suffered no loss of liberty in their lives. But older Americans especially have vivid memories of the horrors of the

Soviet state and they cannot easily be erased.

My response to those who fear the very word *socialism* is to say that I am not talking about socialism here, but social democracy—with the word *democracy* being as important a part of the idea as the word *social*. And then I would remind them that many of the best current features of our American culture are manifestations of social democracy—things like public schools and colleges, social security, and Medicare. These are the kinds of things that characterize those European social democracies.

Some folks might object to a social democracy because they fear it promotes or encourages sloth: “I work hard for my money and I don’t believe it should go to people who lie around and do nothing all day.” I understand that concern and do not have a rebuttal except to say that most people, given meaningful work and the ability to do it, will choose working over doing nothing.

Finally, let me be so bold as to suggest that Christians should seriously consider the merits of social democracies. The church is a body as St. Paul so eloquently tells us in Romans 12, and the body is made up of many parts; the only way it works is if all parts have equal merit. None can claim to be more important than any other. Paul writes in II Corinthians 8: 13-14, “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality.”

John Calvin said of this passage: “God wills that that there be proportion and equality among us, that is, each is to provide for the needy according to the extent of his means so that no [one] has too much and no [one] has too little.”² Now that has a familiar echo, doesn’t it?

And Calvin was not content to keep this doctrine confined within the walls of the church but made it the practice of the entire city of Geneva. In other words, he acted politically to see to it that economic justice prevailed in Geneva. In fact, in the words of Calvin scholar H. H. Meeter, “so much social legislation was enacted by the Genevan government at the time and through the influence of Calvin that his government has been termed Christian socialism.”³

Calvin’s Geneva was more of a theocracy than a democracy, so perhaps we would call it a social theocracy. And that would fit with what C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity* about a fully Christian society. First of all he asserts that in such a society, everyone would work. But then Lewis says that “If there were such a [Christian] society in existence and you or I visited it, I think we should come away with a curious impression. We should feel that its economic life was very socialistic. . .”⁴

Footnotes

1. Judt, Tony. *Ill Fares the Land*. (New York: Penquin, 2010.)18-20. [↩](#)
2. as quoted in Cooper, Dale. “John Calvin’s Big Dream.” *The Banner* Oct. 2009: 38. [↩](#)
3. as quoted in De Koster, Lester. “Calvinists and Democrats.” *The Best of the Reformed Journal*. Ed. James Brat and Ronald Wells. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 49. [↩](#)
4. Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Macmillan, 1955.) 66. [↩](#)