

# ELECTORAL CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

## The fate of social democracy: Interview with Adam Przeworski

David Klemperer

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Adam Przeworski is a Polish-American political scientist whose work has provided important insights into the dynamics of social democratic politics over the course of the twentieth century and beyond. In his books *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1985), and *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (1990) (co-written with John Sprague), Przeworski explored the prospects of social democracy by examining the strategic dilemmas faced by social democratic parties throughout their history. Adopting a rational choice approach, Przeworski argued that the choices social democratic parties made were the product of external constraints. Specifically, he identified the electoral constraints imposed by the need to appeal to voters outside of the working class, and the economic constraints imposed by the necessity of maintaining growth. From his analysis of the trade-offs these constraints produced, Przeworski pessimistically concluded that ‘Social democrats will not lead European societies into socialism’.

In his subsequent wide-ranging research, Przeworski has looked beyond social democratic parties to explore the nature of democracy and elections, the relationships between democracy, capitalism, and inequality, and the conditions under which different political systems collapse or endure. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Politics at New York University, and a Fellow of the British Academy.

The following interview was conducted by David Klemperer on the 27 March, 2023, and has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**How did you first come to work on social democracy?**

I think it was mainly a reflection of having lived in Chile during the first year of the presidency of Salvador Allende, where all of these issues – namely, whether socialism can be reached only through revolutionary means, or if there is a democratic way – were lived intensely every day. I was basically trying to figure out an answer to that question.

**What was it that you wanted to argue?**

If I was arguing anything, it was probably that many accusations against social democracy from certain groups on the left were unfounded, or at least had to be examined. There was a line that social democrats were traitors to the cause, that they were ideologically duped, that they were either fools or traitors.

But I wasn't so much wanting to argue: my motivation was to see, what were the constraints that people who opted for socialism under democratic conditions faced, and what were the choices available to them? I didn't start that work with a preconceived argument, I started with a question!

I had two conclusions, which were related. One was that social democrats faced electoral constraints, and the second one was that they faced economic constraints.

**Could you say something about the reception of your conclusions?**

People argued more against the former conclusion than the latter. Namely, they saw the electoral future of social democracy more positively than I did. And they didn't see the trade-off between appealing to a class base and maximising votes as inexorable in the way I saw it. But there were no hostile reactions. It was an argument, and there were good arguments.

**Did your work generate a reaction within social democratic parties themselves?**

Yes, but strangely, probably, much later. It was only ten years after the publication of *Capitalism and Social Democracy* that the book was really picked up. Perhaps to some extent it was because of my friendship with Felipe González, the prime

minister of Spain, who invited me to meetings of the Socialist International. And I was invited by the French Socialist Party to talk. But it was only in the late 1990s that this book had echoes in Europe.

However, the book did have important echoes in Chile at the end of the 1980s, when transition back to democracy was on the table, because of the arguments that generated within the Chilean Left forces. There's an article about the opponents of the Chilean dictatorship, showing that they were arguing about reformist versus revolutionary strategies very much in my terms.

**How did the French and Spanish socialists respond to your work when you spoke to them?**

The French did not engage at all. When I went there, the French Socialist Party was in an ideologically catatonic state. I was at this meeting of the top French Socialist cadres, with about three hundred people from all around France. François Hollande – who was then the First Secretary of the party, and who eventually became President of France – gave a speech. I was struck by the fact that normally, when a party leader gives a speech, there are some phrases with which people automatically express their agreement because they are standard slogans. But at that meeting, nobody did, people were half asleep.

With the Spanish Socialist Party, I had a more continuous interaction. I had discussions with González about what choices he faced, and I must admit I was a little bit of a leftist critic of González. But I had several conversations with him, and I think maybe even made a little bit of an impact.

**The 1980s was a difficult period for social democratic parties. Were your own opinions and your own analyses impacted throughout the 1980s by the rise of neoliberalism?**

Very much so! I was particularly affected by an exchange of letters between Bruno Kreisky, Olof Palme, and Willy Brandt, who were at that time prime ministers of their respective countries (Austria, Sweden and Germany). What was earth shaking for me when reading them, was their shared understanding that the redistributive policies of social democracy were now facing a real constraint, and their desperate search for a social democratic response to the crisis of the 1970s.

And then came neoliberalism, which, didn't seem to affect the socialist parties very much for the first few years, because the early years of the Thatcher and Reagan experiences were not very economically successful. Even a French right-wing minister, Alan Peyrefitte, wrote, I think two years into the Thatcher experience, that it was just a fleeting phenomenon which would not succeed. So, I was surprised, and I continue to be surprised, by its success.

What really fascinates me is that social democrats basically adopted the neo-liberal language, when they started talking about trade-offs between equality and efficiency, equality and growth. I was really surprised by that. I remember having several conversations with Felipe González, who I thought embraced that language without thinking very much. What fascinates me today is to what extent that was inevitable, and to what extent social democrats were ideologically duped by neoliberals.

**You wrote in 1985 that ‘social democrats have done about as well as they could have done, under historical circumstances not of their choosing.’ Would you say the same thing about social democrats since 1985?**

I go back and forth on this because I’m deeply impressed by the historical role of social democrats. And I think that social democracy has transformed Western Europe and has had many unquestionable achievements. But whether they really had to yield their positions under the neo-liberal offensive, or whether there were alternatives, I don’t know. I go back and forth all the time. Social democrats have done pretty well. Whether they’ve done as well as they could have under the circumstances I don’t know.

**How would you see the situation of social democracy today?**

There’s a Polish saying that a pessimist is just an informed optimist. So I am an informed optimist.

Look, I just don’t see social democracy today as a distinct ideology or even as a distinct programme. What social democrats were, and what they lost – I think irretrievably – is that they talked in terms of transforming societies. Transformation was their whole language. As of the 1980s, they are only coping. They are only coping with new problems. New problems, new challenges – the economy has changed, technology has changed, societies have changed culturally. New problems pop up every day, and social democrats cope with them. Their claim these days is the typical electoral claim, namely, we can cope with it better than our opponents. But they are not transforming anything. And to my dismay, they are not only not transforming, but they’re not really addressing the greatest challenge we face as humanity, which is climate change. So I mean, I’m not optimistic.

It doesn’t mean that I don’t think that they’re going to win elections here and there. Their electoral share is in decline on average, but they are still in office in several countries – Germany, Spain, etc. They will win some elections, they will lose some elections. But I have almost lost interest in their electoral success because, programmatically, they are like all other parties.

**Do you think that if social democratic parties commit to bold action on climate change, they will face the same kind of constraints you’ve previously written about them facing with regards to socialist policies?**

Yes, but unfortunately talking about climate change is not a successful electoral strategy. People are not willing to pay short term costs, even when facing the spectre of disaster.

Although all my life I've tried to stay away from voluntaristic factors, I'm struck by the lack of leadership. We no longer have leaders like Kreisky, Brandt, and Palme. We don't have leaders who are willing to take the risk of trying to persuade. You just don't have them anymore! And climate change – it needs explaining, and it needs persuading. But leaders aren't willing to do it, because it doesn't play electorally.

**Are there other issues beyond climate change that social democrats should be addressing?**

I think that they have to address the question of the impact of money on politics. Political inequality, if you wish. We have extensive evidence that money infiltrates into politics in all kinds of ways, and that governments of all persuasions are much more sensitive to the preferences of the rich – and perhaps these days the educated – than those of people with lower incomes and lower education. Somehow, these social differences infiltrate themselves into policymaking, which means that political inequality results in economic inequality, which results in more political inequality, and thus feeds back into a vicious circle. I think that should very much be on the agenda.

In addition, there is the question of market regulation. Since the 1980s, social democrats have adopted a posture in which on the one hand, they sought to strengthen markets, and took all kinds of measures to decrease regulation and privatise, but markets generated inequality, so then they had to redistribute. So, they adopted this posture of strengthening the motor that generates inequality, and then trying to correct for the results produced by the motor.

What we know from the Scandinavian experience – particularly Swedish and Norwegian experiments – is that the key to relative income equality in those countries was market equality. In other words, markets produce less inequality in those countries than in other Western European countries. To achieve that, we have to start thinking against markets (and perhaps, to some extent, the property structure) in order to reduce the inequality produced by them. So, these are questions of regulation, regulation of the economy, the role of the state, and the role of organisations such as trade unions.

**Thinking back to what you've written previously about the structural economic constraints social democrats face, has it been interesting to you recently to see right-wing governments run up against exactly those constraints? I'm thinking of course, of Liz Truss here in the UK.**

I was absolutely amused, and truly surprised by what happened! I have this notion of the structural dependence of the state on capital. I basically argued that governments of all persuasions have to take into account reactions of markets to their policies. But I always thought that these reactions would go against redistribution! So when markets reacted against Truss, I found that amazing! I even tweeted asking if it was the only time such a thing had ever happened!

**Is the market response to Truss a warning to future left-wing governments? Or should we take it as a hopeful sign?**

I would have hope for a leftwing government taking new policies. I don't know much about the UK, but it seems that the whole social service delivery system in the UK is really in an extraordinarily deep crisis. I think measures to reinvigorate it and to make it more efficient will probably be supported by voters, and perhaps not resisted by the bourgeoisie. Because right now, it's just not working.

Back in the 1980s I had this notion of 'class compromise'. I thought what had happened in Europe after the war was that unions, and working class organisations in general, had decided that abolishing capitalism was not feasible and attractive, that they should exercise some degree of wage restraint, and that socialist governments should exercise tax restraint. I thought that the bourgeoisie had learned that they could live with democracy, and with unions even, as long as they exercised this restraint, and that the state came in by managing the system by providing social services and promoting investment. That all broke under the neo-liberal offensive.

But the question of the role of the state in transforming fiscal revenue into social services. There are all kinds of issues in there – namely, underinvestment and bad organisation. My Danish friend Gøsta Esping-Andersen emphasises that the whole welfare state system was developed during a period with a very different demographic structure, and very different household structure. All of that now needs to be rethought and redone. So there perhaps there could be broader support.

**You've written that social democrats need to rediscover the language of transformation. What do you think the language of transformation would look like in the twenty-first century?**

I know the piece you mean. You've read the version, the published version, in which they stuck in a sentence which was not in the original.

Look, I certainly think that social democrats have to find some language that goes beyond the electoral program for the next election. But, as my daughter and granddaughter remind me all the time, we are under the shadow of a climate catastrophe. That is now the most urgent issue. Perhaps transforming society today just means defending ourselves from a disaster. For that we do need to think

beyond the next election. We have to tell people what their lives will be in ten years and twenty years and thirty years and maybe what the lives of their children will be like. We have to start thinking in a longer term. But unfortunately, it's not transforming in the optimistic sense in which was which social democracy was born.

**Finally, you've previously written that as a young man your favourite political party was the Swedish Social Democratic Party, and that your favourite football team was Arsenal. Is that still the case?**

Yes! The Swedish Social Democrats less so these days. But Arsenal yes, I am a complete fanatic – and for absolutely idiosyncratic reasons. My paternal uncle who served with the Polish Army in Britain during the war, stayed in England for some years afterwards, and developed a loyalty to Arsenal that he conveyed to me at the age of ten, and which I have been suffering from ever since!

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