
Book Review: The Primacy of Politics—Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century by Sheri Berman

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Introduction

How is it possible that non-democratic nationalist and fascist ideas are gaining traction in social democratic systems? Are these two ideological positions not polar opposites? It turns out we should not be surprised by ideological shifts in once-perceived social democratic strongholds toward less democratic perspectives. After all, the historical development of social democracy and fascism are similar. Through a detailed narrative of the interrelated development of democracy and fascism, Professor Sheri Berman's *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* offers a useful context to better understand the reemergence of nationalist and fascist ideologies in contemporary European politics.

The Primacy of Politics is a comparative historical analysis of social democratic, national socialist, and fascist ideologies in 20th century Europe. By examining the political development of five countries, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and Sweden, Berman traces the intellectual development of all three ideologies back to Marxist theory. She concludes that social democracy, national socialism, and fascism are closely related ideologies despite their perceived differences. All three ideologies grew to prominence by furthering the same doctrine: the primacy of politics and communitarianism. Berman identifies these as the two primary ideological wants of the populous. However, Berman's study is regrettably limited in scope and societal dimension, and it fails to offer causal evidence for the success of one ideology over another in each country. Despite these limitations, Berman's core finding, that social democratic, national socialist, and fascist ideologies are linked in theory and practice, has meaningful implications for studies on institutions and democratization, as well as for our collective understanding of the alarmingly close relationship between "successful" social democracy and extreme authoritarianism.

Berman makes two principal arguments: first, she identifies a coherent and compelling ideological connection between Marxism, social democracy, national socialism, and fascism. Second, in making this connection, she challenges the dominant liberalist and triumphalist narrative in European politics. Upon these foundational arguments, Berman warns of the potential for regimes to slip between these ideologies- a warning that feels almost prescient in context of today's political climate. Despite valid critiques of her analytical approach and use of the Scandinavian model, Berman crafts a compelling argument on the ideological connection between social democracy, national socialism, and fascism, cementing Berman as an authority on the development of European political ideology.

Social Democracy's Ideological Genealogy

Berman traces the development of socialist ideology in countries that played key roles in early 20th century European political development: Germany, Italy, France, Austria, and Sweden. She demonstrates an intellectual family tree beginning with Marxism in the late 1800s and ending with social democracy in Sweden and national socialism and fascism in Germany and Italy during World War II. Her narrative weaves through the beginnings of democratic revisionism (approximately 1883-1900), early experimentations in social democracy (approximately 1900 to 1914), the rise of fascism and national socialism (approximately 1914 to 1945), and social democracy in the postwar era after 1945. Berman establishes their shared ideological roots and forces readers to confront an uncomfortable and often unconsidered reality, that the line between democracy and fascism may be much finer than previously thought.

Around the turn of the 20th century, in the wake of the first industrial revolution, Europeans began to question socio-political theories based on what Berman identifies as the “primacy of economics,” paving the way for theories that favor the “primacy of politics,” or the idea that political forces can and should have authority over economic forces. In this context, the era’s dominant theories were thought to have fundamental weaknesses: liberalism failed to account for the negative consequences of early capitalism,¹ and orthodox Marxism “did little to meet the psychopolitical needs of mass populations,” especially in light of capitalism’s increasingly unlikely decline.² The “primacy of economics,” or the notion that economic forces dictate the course of history, as espoused by liberalism and Marxism, failed to appeal to a public who desperately sought protection against economic forces. According to Berman, addressing this public desire for primacy of politics and communalism in the face of strong economic forces has been the purpose of political parties to this day.

Marxists responded to this psychopolitical need by introducing an element of human agency—the primacy of politics—into their understanding of socialist political development. These revisions took two forms:

...Two distinct strands of thinking emerged. The first was revolutionary and epitomized by the work of Georges Sorel. For Sorel, a radical and perhaps violent overthrow of the existing order seemed the surest path to a better future ... The second strand of revisionism was democratic and epitomized by the work of Eduard Bernstein. Like Sorel, Bernstein believed that socialism would emerge from an active struggle for a better world, but unlike Sorel he thought this struggle could and should take a democratic and evolutionary form. Where Sorel’s work would help lay the groundwork for fascism, Bernstein’s would help lay the groundwork for social democracy.³

¹ James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 1986), 199.

² Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Berman traces social democracy back to Eduard Bernstein, a late 19th century philosopher and a member of the German socialist party who vocally questioned the International Socialist Movement's faith in Marx's revolutionary logic. Rather than accept Marx's claim that an inevitable proletarian revolution will lead to socialism, Bernstein was interested in whether capitalism and democracy could be jointly harnessed to promote socialist programs. This radical idea was rejected by the orthodox international party, but Bernstein continued to argue for engagement with "bourgeois" politics which created the foundation for social democracy, which while related, is wholly separate from traditional socialism. Through Bernstein's dissidence, the new ideology of social democracy was born out of Marxism.⁴ The social democratic school of thought inspired socialist parties across all five of Berman's examples to engage with their state's democratic electoral system in the years leading up to World War I, an attempt at "democratic revisionism."

Berman argues that the roots of national socialism and fascism are quite similar, identifying Georges Sorel, another socialist party member and philosopher, as the progenitor of both socialist nationalism and fascism. Sorel agreed with Bernstein that the ultimate goal of socialism needed direct means through mass mobilization and revolution. Sorel pioneered a socialist justification for revolutionary violence as a means for proletariat liberation. During the interwar years, Sorel's intellectual framework rose as the dominant ideology in Europe, while democratic revisionism was thought to have failed the socialist cause. An impoverished and war-torn post-WWI Europe was eager for communitarian and political protections, and leftist leaders adopted interpretations of Sorel's framework to answer this call. Two of these leaders were Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler in German. Sorel's revolutionary revisionism paved the way for the fascism and national socialism in World War II.⁵

In this narrative, Berman asserts that the ideological differences between social democracy and fascism are not a result of differences in society, but rather a result of different answers to the same public desires for the primacy of politics and communitarianism. By showing that social democracy, national socialism, and fascism belong to the same ideological family tree, Berman demonstrates they have the same commitments and thus public appeal:

For social democrats, the primacy of politics meant using a democratic state to institutionalize policies that would protect society from capitalism's harshest effect [...] For fascists and national socialists, the primacy of politics meant using a tyrannical state to control markets, ostensibly for the good of society [...] However critical these differences turned out to be, it is important to recognize that shared commitments to the primacy of politics and community fundamentally differentiated social democrats, fascists, and national socialist from contemporary liberals and orthodox Marxists.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ Ibid., 206.

As Berman explains, the policy agenda, public appeal and path to success of all three ideologies are functionally similar, establishing their deep association and furthering social democracy from its perceived roots in liberalism.

Described as “iconoclast,” Berman’s *Primacy of Politics* goes against liberalist triumphalism which traditionally dominated the narrative.⁷ Berman inserts a counter-narrative that relegates liberalism to the peripheral and draws ideological parallels that may better explain the political trends of today. Berman’s narrative represents a larger global conversation between the primacy of economics and the primacy of politics.⁸ In an increasingly globalized capitalist economy, this debate is not receding any time soon. For this reason, Berman’s findings as expressed in *The Primacy of Politics* and many of her succeeding writings remain relevant, as she interrogates the role of ideology in response to present and past calls for the primacy of politics.

Critique

Berman’s *Primacy of Politics* has been critiqued from three primary perspectives: that of electoral and political party scholars, European historians, and democratic preconditionists who hold that democracy is best achieved in a specific sequence of events. While scholars point out the limitations in scope and breadth, none attempt to diminish Berman’s conclusion on the link between social democratic ideology and national socialism or fascism. This suggests that this work, while narrow, is also remarkably robust.

The most compelling critique of *The Primacy of Politics* is its inability to make causal inferences about political party success. Susan E. Scarrow argues the book takes a thin approach and omits electoral topics such as expanded suffrage, party tactics, vote and legislative seat counts, or waves of enfranchisement: “for a book about political parties, elections and institutions have a rather secondary place throughout.”⁹ Scarrow applauds Berman’s historical narrative, but demonstrates that the work’s emphasis on ideology limits its contemporary application. This is evident in Berman’s concluding suggestion that the declining European social democratic movement should regain its legitimacy through a “return to its ideological roots.” To Scarrow this presents an unsupported logical leap:

Whether or not her optimism about the power of the ideas is justified, it is less clear that a return to its roots offers the social democratic left a recipe for electoral success. After all, this is a book about the dominance of ideas over electoral history—even if social democrats get the ideas right, they won’t necessarily win elections.¹⁰

⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, “Recovering the Age of Social Democracy: Sheri Berman’s *The Primacy of Politics* Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century” in *Dissent* (Denville, NJ: Dissent 2007), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹ Susan Scarrow, “Reviewed Work: *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* by Sheri Berman” in *German Politics & Society* (Washington, DC: Berghahn Books, 2007), 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

In practical terms, Berman's work is lacking, largely because of its unbalanced emphasis on ideology.

Underlying Scarrow's critique is a greater comment on the work's one-dimensionality. This sentiment is echoed by Lynch who comments, "The tight focus on one branch of the political family tree leads inevitably to some distortions—but also to some new insights."¹¹ While Berman's one-dimensional argument has significant theoretical implications, it lacks in two areas: 1) to provide a deep historical political analysis of factors outside of ideological genealogy, and 2) to account for possible confounding variables. This is the Achilles heel of *The Primacy of Politics* and the reason why Berman's insights on the so-called "success" of the social democratic party in Sweden and "failure" of its equivalent party in Germany feel inapplicable to contemporary case studies. Her analysis does not provide enough evidence to support her conclusion that superior strategy and execution by the Swedish social democratic party was the primary reason for its victory over national socialism or fascism. This critique reminds the reader that Berman's book should be understood as narrow in scope and restricted in application. However, as both Scarrow and Lynch clarify, one-dimensionality is certainly not reason enough to discount this work.

My own critique of Berman's *The Primacy of Politics* builds on Scarrow's concern over unidimensionality to challenge her chosen success case, Swedish social democracy, as well as her suggestion that Swedish social democratic program presents a replicable model for success. I find that Berman's claim regarding the Scandinavian Model – that social democracy survived the interwar wave of authoritarianism due to political maneuvering of Scandinavian democratic socialist parties – plausible but not probable. She fails to consider the possible impact of homogeneity in the successful development of social democracy in Sweden, which could drastically undermine her argument that political party prowess was the key to success. Recent studies on the relationship between state welfare and heterogeneity, particularly with regard to immigration, have shown a negative relationship between the two.¹² Berman's justification for Sweden's success would be more persuasive if it included a model that controls for the percentage of ethnic minorities or foreign-born persons within each country at the time of development of social democracy. In the context of new information on the relationship between heterogeneity and social benefits, the success in Scandinavia, a relatively homogeneous country, could be considered a product of environmental rather than institutional factors. Further, in Sweden the recent rise in foreign-born residents¹³ coincides with a rollback in social benefits,

¹¹ Julia Lynch, "Book Review: Berman, S. (2006). *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press," in *Comparative Political Studies* (UK: Sage Journals, 2008), 250.

¹² Udaya R. Wagle, *Heterogeneity Link of the Welfare State and Redistribution* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2013), 103.

¹³ "World Population Prospects - Population Division," United Nations, September 27, 2019. <https://population.un.org/wpp>.

suggesting that homogeneity is an important factor within welfare systems that function on the primacy of politics. This would diminish the validity of Berman's advice for today's social democratic movement to return to its ideological roots. While well-executed ideology may be impactful, it may not be as impactful in different societal conditions, such as increased heterogeneity.

Berman's Continuum of Work

The Primacy of Politics is part of a robust continuum of work by Sheri Berman which taken together presents a comprehensive thesis on political development in Europe, directly and indirectly questioning what does and does not make democracy work. Considering topics in comparative political development, political history, democratization, globalization, and the history of the Left, Berman's works tell the story of European political development through a unique lens that emphasizes social and ideological factors and their relationship with political institutions. Her prominent works feature an obvious commitment to historical accuracy of intellectual transmissions, thoughtful considerations of public sentiment, and deep analysis of the influence of political institutions on the behavior of governing regimes. While her works lack causal findings that can be applied to contemporary global politics, they offer focused and attentive accounts of the political development that serve as a model for scholars analyzing ideological political development.

Soon after completing her doctorate in 1994, Berman established herself as a burgeoning voice in the field of democratization studies by analyzing the relationship between civil society, institutions, and democracy. This is exemplified by her articles "Civil Society and Political Institutionalization"¹⁴ and "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic."¹⁵ In the former, she argues against an idea shared by both Mass Society and Neo-Toquevillian theoreticians, that civil society fuels democracy. This challenges the work of prominent scholars such as Robert Putnam,¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama,¹⁷ and Benjamin Barber.¹⁸ In the latter, Berman illustrates her conclusions by analyzing the collapse of "the twentieth century's most critical democratic experiment, Weimar Germany" through the development of civil society.¹⁹ In both, she challenges the formerly assumed causal relationship between civil society and democracy, illustrating how an active civil society without robust institutions are more likely to result in the collapse of democracy and the cooptation of democratic institutions for non-democratic ends.

¹⁴ Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and Political Institutionalization" in *American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (1997): 562.

¹⁵ Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic" in *World Politics* 49 (1997): 401-29.

¹⁶ Robert Putnam et. al, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Robert Putnam, "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital" in *Journal of Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995), 6; Robert Putnam, "The strange disappearance of civic America" in *The American Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: 1996), 24.

¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1995).

¹⁸ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How the planet is both falling apart and coming together—and what this means for democracy* (New York: New York Times Books 1995).

¹⁹ Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," 401.

The multi-functional understanding of political institutions, most notably political parties, as both supporting and undermining democratization is a foundational pillar of Berman's work.

In contrast to earlier works, Berman's *The Primacy of Politics*, received less attention despite being more thorough in her analysis of ideology, institutions, and democratization. The work's underestimation was possibly due to the timing of its publication, over 15 years removed from the collapse of the Soviet Union and during a period of democracy-building efforts by Western powers. Possibly in response to the field's inattention, Berman spends significant energy in the following years contextualizing *The Primacy of Politics* and warning the West of its potential to repeat the errs of the 20th century. Her article "The Primacy of Economics versus the Primacy of Politics" asserts the relevance of her findings in light of the 2008-9 economic crisis:

The current economic crisis has once again brought debates about capitalism and globalization to the forefront of the political agenda. [...] the issue at the heart of globalization debates - whether political forces can dominate economic ones or must bow before them - is not new at all. I show that many of the great ideological and political battles of the last century were fought over precisely this ground, and argue that because we have forgotten or misunderstood these earlier debates our current discourse is thin and impoverished.²⁰

In the wake of the economic crisis, Berman uses this article to insist that the primacy of politics and communitarianism is a primary concern for the global population and astute theorists and parties must address these calls. She makes a compelling case for a timely reconsideration of her findings and warns social democrats not to "peddle 'fascism lite' nor accept nativism or prejudice" at risk of resembling dangerous steps toward authoritarian ideologies taken by social democratic thinkers in the beginning of the 20th century.

As 21st century democracies espouse growing nationalist sentiments through limiting international border flows, voting against participation in regional organizations, and waging trade wars, Berman's warnings are increasingly poignant. In this context that Berman published her latest work, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day*.²¹ This book is an extensive consideration of European political development that unites and refines her investigations of transitions from monarchy, intellectual transmissions, and the impact of institutions. Berman touches on a broad array of historical cases and addresses (some but not all) critiques of one-dimensionality through the incorporation of graphs on electoral results, elites participation, gross domestic product, distribution of labor force, emigration, and more. Berman posits that this work contributes to the study of democracy in three ways by: 1) deepening our understanding of the challenges that new democracies face by exploring those of the past, 2) providing more realistic criteria by which to judge new democracies, 3) providing a

²⁰ Sheri Berman, "The Primacy of Economics versus the Primacy of Politics: Understanding the Ideological Dynamics of the Twentieth Century" in *Perspectives on Politics*, 7, no. 3 (2009): 561.

²¹ Sheri Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019).

better understanding of what it took to make democracy work in Europe.²² In today's political climate, liberal democracy is again under pressure to adapt. Unfortunately, as Berman notes, it has "often taken tragedies like democratic collapse, violent dictatorship, and war to force elites and publics to recognize the value of liberal democracy and what it takes to make it work."²³ On this ground, Berman implores us to stay vigilant and thoughtful and face threats to liberal democracy head on.

Conclusion

The Primacy of Politics is a powerful book that offers insights on the development of social democratic, national socialist, and fascist ideologies in 20th century Europe. It lays the groundwork for future analyses on the role of ideology and institutions in democracy, identifies a coherent and compelling ideological connection between Marxism, social democracy, national socialism, and fascism, and disproves the dominant liberalist triumphalist narrative in European politics. In its fearlessly "iconoclast" consideration of the history of social democracy, the work presents an important counter-narrative that may better explain contemporary political movements. Bracing the field for future studies on nationalist democratic movements, Berman's *The Primacy of Politics* does the important work of reframing our collective understanding of the dangerously close relationship between "successful" social democracy and violent authoritarianism.

²² Ibid., 405-407.

²³ Ibid., 407.