

James T. Kloppenberg

# UNCERTAIN VICTORY

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Social Democracy  
and Progressivism in European  
and American Thought,  
1870 - 1920

# Introduction

Between 1870 and 1920, two generations of American and European thinkers created a transatlantic community of discourse in philosophy and political theory. Discarding accepted distinctions between idealism and empiricism in epistemology, between intuitionism and utilitarianism in ethics, and between revolutionary socialism and laissez-faire liberalism in politics, they converged toward a *via media* in philosophy and toward the political theories of social democracy and progressivism. This is a history of their ideas.

While the chains linking Marxism to idealism and liberalism to empiricism have been carefully reconstructed, the philosophical origins of social democratic and progressive theory remain obscure; as a result these ideas, which diverged from the socialist and liberal traditions toward the end of the nineteenth century, appear to be simply unstable accommodations to the new realities of organized capitalism in an urban-industrial environment. Like most simple explanations, however, that is misleading. Not merely ideological expressions pressed into service to rationalize politically attractive positions, the theories of social democracy and progressivism instead elaborated, extended, and applied ideas about knowledge and responsibility articulated by a generation of renegade philosophers. In this study I focus on those two successive processes of convergence in ideas about how we know and what we are to do, explore the connections between them, and suggest that the best of these ideas continue to be both philosophically and politically vital.

The search for alternatives to the idealist and naturalist philosophies dominant in the mid-nineteenth century began in the 1870s and reached fruition during the next three decades. The thinkers who made the most important contributions to this quest for a *via media* were Wilhelm Dilthey,

Thomas Hill Green, Henry Sidgwick, Alfred Fouillée, William James, and John Dewey, who despite their differences shared several fundamental ideas that distinguished them from their predecessors and from most of their contemporaries. They denied both mind-body and subject-object dualisms inherited from Descartes, and they considered both passive sensation and active decision essential and inseparable aspects of experience. Knowledge, from their perspective, can neither be abstracted from nor entirely reduced to the historical circumstances of individual lives. Truth must be cut free from notions of eternity and necessity and grounded instead in human experience, never definite and subject always to revision. These mavericks insisted that ideas emerge from, and must be validated in, neither language nor logic but life. Theirs was a profoundly historical sensibility, imbued with the belief that meaning is woven into the fiber of experience, that becoming rather than being is the mode of human life, and that people make rather than find their values. I will call this cluster of ideas the radical theory of knowledge, radical because it cut to the core of attempts to find an Archimedean point for epistemology and substituted an acceptance of contingency for the standard quest for certainty.

From this unconventional perspective, these thinkers envisioned an ethics that modified both Kantian and utilitarian models by recognizing rules and results as complementary in moral reasoning. They faced the unsettling possibility that an irreconcilable conflict separates prudence from justice in ethical decisions, and their interpretations of the consequences of that dilemma struck chords ranging from heroic to tragic that reverberated through their own political writings to the theories of social democracy and progressivism. Following Sidgwick, whose *Methods of Ethics* provided the most penetrating and influential elaboration of these ideas, I will label these philosophers' moral theory the ethics of rational benevolence. Sidgwick coined that term to fuse Kant's notion of rationally intuited duty with the utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness, and it conveys his synthetic intent while suggesting the uneasy and paradoxical relation between self-interest and social obligation. If our ethical ideas, like the rest of our knowledge as these philosophers understood it, cannot conform to prescribed standards but derive instead from reason reflecting imperfectly on experience, then right and good, like truth, must be unhitched from certainty and made historical.

The political writings of these genial eclectics lacked the acuity of their other work. Pioneers in epistemology and ethics, they were left behind intellectually when Germany, France, England, and the United States reconstituted themselves as urbanized and mechanized nation states. This generation matured prior to the second industrial revolution, and a certain poignancy pervades their reflections on the sociopolitical world that dawned near the end of the nineteenth century. Aware that new circumstances made nonsense of prevailing political ideas, the philosophers of the *via media* groped toward unorthodox positions on reform strategy and toward altered ideals of liberty, equality, and justice consistent with their theories of

knowledge and responsibility. Victorian anxieties about the rise of science and the fate of religion afflicted them despite the unsettling implications of their own ideas; they were uncertain whether science could exert sufficient power to serve as culture's compass. Moreover, as emphasis on individual moral responsibility seemed to shrink as the state expanded, political action tended to replace personal conscience as the locus of reform, and the relation of state to society became increasingly problematical. The technical knowledge prized by the urban-industrial world and wielded with increasing confidence by the state challenged traditional cultural values, and this generation of philosophers worried about the future of a world whose religious meaning was dissolving under the corrosive influence of the secular society's mania for consumption. They feared that political, social, and economic progress might bring prosperity only by transforming life into a meaningless scramble for the shallowest of satisfactions. James expressed this discontent when he lamented the "irremediable flatness" threatening to smother "the higher heroisms and the rare old flavors of life," and he was not alone in wondering whether the promise of modernity was worth its cultural price.<sup>1</sup>

James's generation considered existing liberal and socialist ideas unsuited to the landscape of the late nineteenth century, but they failed to articulate a satisfactory alternative. That task fell to the generation that followed them by roughly twenty years, a generation of social democrats and progressives who helped provide blueprints for the welfare state during the 1890–1920 period. Modified repeatedly by committees and constructed of shoddy materials by unskilled hands over more than a century, the welfare state in its various national forms has become so ramshackle that it requires major renovation. It is maligned by the left as paternalist, by the right as inept, and by everyone as less than completely successful. Unfortunately, this avalanche of criticism threatens to bury its original purpose and distort the intentions of those who contributed to its creation. I want to examine the theorists of social democracy and progressivism in part to disconnect their ideas from certain developments they could neither anticipate nor prevent. The German, French, English, and American welfare states have been shaped by conflicting political, economic, and social forces, and by countless individuals who used or misused, willfully or inadvertently, the ideas discussed in this study. Much of the criticism leveled against social democratic and progressive theorists, born of a coupling between the slick condescension accompanying hindsight and the easy imputation of unstated motives, reveals a failure of historical imagination masquerading as tough-minded savvy.

The theory of social democracy emerged in the 1890s when new ideas about knowledge and responsibility combined with new political circumstances to transform socialist doctrine. A number of thinkers met at that junction of abstraction and reality, including those to be considered in this study: English Fabians Beatrice and Sidney Webb, German revisionist Eduard Bernstein, French socialist Jean Jaurès, and the two most prominent radicals of the American social gospel movement, Richard Ely and Walter Rauschenbusch. Ideas filtered into the theory of social democracy primarily from

Marxist and utopian socialism and from the tradition of Christian social criticism, but also from German and English economic theory, classical liberalism, positivism, and Darwinian evolutionary theory. While theorists blended these elements in varying proportions according to personal preferences, national political traditions, and socioeconomic conditions, they created an identifiable body of ideas with certain distinguishing characteristics. First, like the philosophers of the *via media*, they located the foundation of knowledge in experience and maintained that history provides a source of judgment more reliable, despite its uncertainties, than metaphysical or ideological doctrine. Second, they shared a commitment to extend the democratic principle of equality from the civil and political spheres to the entire society and the economy. Third, they championed gradual, constitutional reform instead of revolution. Finally, although they embraced socialism as an ideal, they emphasized the connection between their goal and the means necessary for its realization, and for that reason they concentrated more on proximate reforms than on ultimate ends.

The political meaning of social democracy has been problematical since the term first appeared in Germany during the mid-nineteenth century. From the time Marx scorned collaborators with states that masked co-optation beneath democratic disguises until the recent embourgeoisement of European social democratic parties, commentators have questioned whether social democracy could be as reactionary as its critics have charged or as radical as its partisans have claimed. The fact that social democrats have played different roles in different nations at different times has not prevented the storm of controversy surrounding their historical significance from descending into a fog of polemics. I will not presume to settle so vexing a question in this study, but I do hope to recover the ideas that animated the discourse of social democracy as it rose to prominence with the transformation of European and American politics from 1890 to 1920. Its chameleonic quality reflected not only changing conditions but a genetic proclivity to adaptation. Lacking certainty about what we know and what we are to do, these wayward socialists claimed that such limited knowledge makes politics less a science than a perpetual search for ideals of justice constituted historically rather than intuited a priori, a goal to be approached neither by individuals seeking private visions of the good, nor by classes fulfilling their revolutionary potential, but by communities struggling to order themselves democratically. A persistent tension regarding the implications of scientific knowledge further complicated assessments of the social democratic prospect. While science as the method of an enlarged empiricism offered an alternative to traditional authoritarian solutions of political problems, the relation between expertise and democracy was murky. For the anodyne to subservience promised by the scientific temper might prove simply a newer version of the snake oil that despots peddled to cure religious oppression, and experts dispensing knowledge in the name of science could become an equally formidable source of social control.

As social democrats tugged socialist theory away from its preoccupation

with revolution, they found themselves backing into a group of intellectuals pulling the theory of liberal individualism in the opposite direction. Accustomed to seeing one another from a distance, the heirs to socialist and liberal orthodoxy recognized only slowly that they were standing on common ground. While this realization delighted some of them, others quickly built fences to protect their turf from intellectual interlopers. The convergence of political thinkers from the traditions of socialism and liberalism paralleled the convergence in philosophy between idealism and empiricism, and in both cases the differences in background and rhetoric have obscured important similarities. Without minimizing the very real and revealing differences separating social democrats from progressives, I will examine the convergence between those who sought to extend the democratic principle of equality and those who renounced possessive individualism and embraced an ideal of solidarity to supplement the customary liberal commitment to personal freedom. Building upon a more radical empiricism and a revised utilitarianism, progressives scrapped the rickety notions of a hedonistic psychology and a self-guiding market and replaced their liberal ancestors' model of an atomistic society with an ideal incorporating positive as well as negative liberty, duties as well as rights. Those who translated liberal theory into an idiom appropriate to the twentieth century often called themselves progressives, in Europe as well as in the United States, and that is the term I will adopt in this study. Of the many thinkers who contributed to this re-orientation, I will concentrate on English sociologist Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse, French radical politician Léon Bourgeois, American publicists Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann and philosopher John Dewey, and German sociologist Max Weber.

Loaded with mental equipment obtained from diverse sources and suited to widely different purposes, those who searched for new ways of thinking about philosophy and politics from 1870 to 1920 were less an organized expedition than a number of independent-minded explorers who ended up neighbors in a territory of new ideas. They got along with each other in different ways, sometimes borrowing freely and acknowledging mutual debts, sometimes feuding, sometimes picking up stakes and moving on. The more generous among them, notably William James and Jean Jaurès, welcomed almost anyone and expected that tolerance would breed understanding and eventual cooperation. Others such as Max Weber found the new intellectual vistas no more inspiring, and perhaps less comforting, than those left behind. Some, including Richard Ely and Léon Bourgeois, for example, finally judged themselves unsuited to pioneering and returned to more comfortable surroundings. I realize that my conception of such an intellectual community is unconventional, and some readers may rub their eyes after seeing Fouillée placed next to Sidgwick or Rauschenbusch beside Bernstein. There is admittedly something jarring about labeling Ely an American social democrat and Weber a German progressive, since the absence of socialism is a distinctive fact of American history just as surely as the absence of liberalism is the tragic fact of German history. Yet I want to emphasize

precisely such apparent incongruities, because the tendency to pigeonhole thinkers according to national or assumed ideological categories blurs our vision of the inchoate world of ideas in which creative minds operate.

Some of my groupings will occasion little surprise, because they conform so clearly to Marc Bloch's familiar adage that comparative study should seek to unearth significant differences obscured by surface similarities.<sup>2</sup> Yet comparison can yield equally valuable insights if phenomena assumed to be dissimilar can be shown to exhibit similar features when viewed from a new perspective. For example my comparison of Weber and Dewey, arguably the most important European and American thinkers of the twentieth century, will seem particularly heretical, for I contend that their images as antidemocratic *Machtpolitiker* and hardheaded scientific naturalist need revision in light of their contributions to the progressives' community of discourse. Both were drawn to positions between liberalism and socialism. Weber lamented the polarization of German politics and longed for a viable alternative to revolution and reaction; Dewey regretted the hegemonic consensus preventing American radicals from shifting political debate off dead center. From their opposite vantage points they posed the questions of leadership and community participation, bureaucracy and democracy, science and value, more clearly than did any other social democrats or progressives, and their conflicting answers set the terms for continuing political debate.

I understand that ideas are no more identical than snowflakes unless they are melted, and I do not intend to run these ideas through an analytical furnace to make them equivalent but vapid. I want to examine with equal care their differences and their similarities. Although the parallels will never be exact because of individual idiosyncrasies, distinctive cultural traditions, and the inevitable complications arising from problems of translation, comparative analysis can kindle new insights from ideas grown stale in conventional classifications.

As historians join philosophers, literary critics, and social scientists in awakening from idealist and positivist slumbers in which ideas were imagined to exist somehow apart from social reality, they see that thought and behavior are two sides of the coin of human experience, whose value derives from the meanings culture stamps on it. But this realization, integral to the radical theory of knowledge a century ago, itself threatens to become a simplification purchased at the cost of accuracy. The restraints imposed on creativity by prevailing ways of thinking can be exaggerated, for while ideas change slowly, they do change. William James explained the process with characteristic insight: "The individual has a stock of old opinions already," James wrote, "but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain." Instead of collapsing from the "inward trouble to which the mind till then has been a stranger," he "seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions." At last he latches on to a new idea "that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously," and he stretches the older beliefs just enough to "make them admit the novelty."<sup>3</sup> What James understood, perhaps more clearly than recent students of the

coercive power of mental structures, is the individual's creative role in cultural change. Existing patterns of thought limit possibilities without eliminating new ideas. The restless challengers discussed in this study jolted philosophical and political discourse from standard categories and made possible new ways of thinking that were neither idealist nor empiricist, socialist nor liberal.

My approach to this process of intellectual change, which might briefly be called hermeneutical and contextualist, owes more to the thinkers I analyze here than to any other source. I would rather exercise this method to examine its origins in the writings of Dilthey, Fouillée, James, Dewey, and Weber than provide a rationale for it by way of introduction. Perched between documentary and presentist purposes, my perspective is hermeneutical in the restricted Diltheyan sense of an ongoing interpretation of meanings rather than in the more expansive ontological sense used by Heidegger and Gadamer. Resistant to Marxist and Freudian techniques even more problematical than its objects of analysis, this approach takes into account the various contexts provided by socioeconomic and political conditions and by other thinkers, both contemporaries and predecessors, without overlooking the contributions of dynamic minds in altering patterns of discourse.

Part One deals with the imaginative construction of a *via media* in epistemology and ethics and its creators' tentative gropings toward new political ideas. Part Two concerns the second generation's completion of this project by extending ideas about knowledge and obligation and elaborating theories of social democracy and progressivism. My procedure in examining each group is similar: after explaining why prevailing alternatives failed to satisfy them, I discuss their efforts to escape, as James put it, the inward trouble occasioned by new experiences straining old ideas. Much of the analysis, particularly in Chapters Two through Four, has an intramural quality that reflects the mutual engagement of thinkers trying to resolve shared difficulties. Ideas composed of tightly wrapped bundles of arguments sometimes change shape or even unravel as they bounce back and forth between lively minds, and it is impossible to chart their course accurately and understand their final form without attending closely to what happened along the way. As my organization implies, the convergences in philosophy and politics were to a certain degree distinct from one another. Two different generations with rather different preoccupations were involved, and the strength of the connection between the philosophical and political ideas varies among the individual thinkers. Certain members of the first generation, notably Green and Fouillée, fashioned fairly sturdy political ideas, while others such as James and Dilthey sketched their political positions in tones more suggestive than definitive. Likewise some social democrats and progressives, such as Jaurès and Hobhouse, contributed substantially to philosophical as well as political debates, while others such as Bernstein and Bourgeois skimmed terminology from bubbling philosophical controversies without dipping fully into them. Only Dewey played an equally decisive part in both stages of the progression from philosophy to politics. For that reason he alone figures

prominently in both parts of this study; he illustrates most clearly the continuities among the radical theory of knowledge, the ethics of rational benevolence, and the politics of progressivism.

Among the dangers of intellectual history is the tendency to generalize beyond the limits of the evidence. Although I scan the larger contours of politics and ideas during this period, I am not trying to erect such overarching analytical constructs as the "Social Democratic Mind," the "Progressive Temper," or anything of the sort. As political theories and political movements, the American and European varieties of social democracy and progressivism were too multifaceted and dynamic to be contained neatly within generalizations drawn from twenty or even several hundred individuals. Nor do I claim that these thinkers were representative of the "American mind" or the "European mind," which I consider similarly seductive but misleading fantasies. I will try to suggest how these ideas emerged from and reflected different traditions, but to go beyond suggestions would be to ignore the contestational quality of ideas deliberately conceived to challenge inherited ways of thinking, ideas shaped within a transatlantic community of discourse rather than a parochial national frame of reference.

I have chosen to concentrate on the individuals who figured most prominently in two processes of intellectual convergence. It would be tendentious to deny that others participated as well, and a broader survey might include among philosophers Royce and Peirce in the United States, Rickert and Windelband in Germany, Renouvier and Boutroux in France, and Bradley and Schiller in England; among social democrats such figures as Walling, Vollmar, Millerand, and Wallas; and among progressives at least Brandeis, Naumann, Bouglé, and Hobson. While my focus may expose me to charges of myopia, the exchange of depth for breadth may not be a good bargain in examining difficult ideas. I have consciously resisted the temptation to provide thumbnail sketches of more individuals and ideas than I could portray with adequate respect to their complexities. This analysis is not an overview and has no pretensions to comprehensiveness. It promises not an intellectual grand tour but visits to a sufficiently limited number of thinkers to enable readers to understand how their minds worked. Merely to mention Veblen or Henry Adams, Nietzsche or Freud, Sorel or Bergson, McDougall or Shaw, of course suggests currents of cultural criticism running contrary to the tendencies examined here. Although I do not deny the shattering impact of these thinkers on the generation that came of age in Europe in 1914 and later became fatally attracted to varieties of fascism and communism, part of my purpose in writing this book is to call attention to those who acknowledged the importance of subjectivity and the limits of rationality without turning to philosophies of force or succumbing to despair.<sup>4</sup>

In a celebrated passage, John Dewey once suggested that "intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them."<sup>5</sup> Just as prewar generations "got over" idealism and

empiricism, socialism and liberalism, so those who came after them abandoned their alternatives and turned instead to phenomenology and logical empiricism, scientific naturalism and existentialism. The unsteady synthesis created by Dewey's generation proved too fragile to survive war and revolution, and new ideas prevailed in a world whose urgent interests were Lenin and Hitler. Now in turn, as thinkers from diverse backgrounds again suggest that we discard questions whose vitality has been drained during the years since World War I, the ideas examined in this study are attracting increasing attention. The philosophers of the *via media* suggested a genuinely new approach to the problems of knowledge and responsibility, an approach whose limited claims to certainty make it an attractive alternative to philosophical programs that seem unable to fulfill their grander ambitions. By contrast, the rhetoric, if not the ideas, of social democracy and progressivism has moved so successfully from the periphery to the center of the political stage that the significance of these programs has been consigned by familiarity to contempt. Yet this political progress has been marked by irony more than triumph, for the genuinely radical impulses of social democratic and progressive theory have filtered into the political process in a way that has enabled systems of welfare capitalism premised on very different principles to perpetuate themselves. That outcome may testify merely to the enduring pathos of politics, but it may be instead the particular problem of twentieth-century democracy. Although things have not turned out as these generations hoped, they accepted the unpredictability of the democratic project as an integral part of its value in a world where truth and justice are to be carved from culture rather than found already etched in reason. They understood that such indeterminacy leaves open the possibilities of liberation or control, community participation or domination by elites, and they did not take for granted the outcome of such struggles. If the failures of the welfare state have mocked their confidence and provided melancholy confirmation of their doubts, the last sixty years have also failed to provide better answers to many of their questions. In philosophy and in politics these thinkers proclaimed the fruitfulness of uncertainty; in both spheres their victory has itself proved uncertain. While I would not suggest that we ignore the gulf of time separating our world from theirs, it may be time to build bridges back to their ideas.