

Another Country

A defense of the expanding American welfare state is long on optimism, but short on politics

BY KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AMERICA BY LANE KENWORTHY NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 248 PAGES. \$28.

Economic crises get the jeremiads they deserve. More than a hundred years ago, with the labor uprisings of the Lower East Side as a backdrop, Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives*; the 1930s saw an outpouring of writing chronicling the Depression as a betrayal of American promise; in the early 1960s, Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*, an impassioned exposé of poverty in the midst of abundance. Just a few years earlier, John Kenneth Galbraith had deplored the inane commercialism of 1950s America in *The Affluent Society*. And in the early aughts, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* told the story of the underside of the first Internet boom—the desperate straits of a service-sector working class.

All of these books were written with literary flair and moral outrage, and plumbed the contradiction between the American dream of democratic prosperity and the reality of our economic life. Political scientist Lane Kenworthy's *Social Democratic America* belongs to a very different genre—that of the social-science review—yet it resembles these classics in its desire to reckon with the central economic problems of the day. However, where most such books seek to engender a sense of passion in the reader, a feeling that conditions are intolerable and action must be taken, *Social Democratic America* takes a radically divergent approach. Kenworthy suggests that what might appear a dramatic turn in social policy—namely, the vast expansion of the welfare state and the establishment of Scandinavian-style social democracy in America—is in fact simply an outgrowth of the path we are already on.

Kenworthy sets the stage by making the case that, ever since the 1970s, economic life has become increasingly unequal and insecure. Companies are fighting to survive against lower-cost manufacturing overseas, while shareholders demand higher profits, and “large and highly efficient firms such as Walmart” exert competitive pressure throughout various sectors. Overall, our economy is “more competitive, flexible, and in flux.” The result of this intensified competition has been greater poverty and economic uncertainty—more lost jobs, lower wages, and less social mobility.

Since Kenworthy's main diagnosis of the ills facing the country hinges on “too little economic security,” it stands to reason that his suggestion for a cure emphasizes insurance—the expansion of government programs to help protect against the risks and dangers of the competitive economy. Here, too, his tone is one of stubborn calm; there is, he insists, nothing in the least radical about any of his prescriptions. “For the most part,” he says, “we aren't in need of new ideas.” Instead of limiting globalization, trying to organize unions, crafting industrial policies to revive manufacturing, or seeking to raise wages across the board, he argues that the United States should borrow heavily from the Scandinavian nations. This means, among other things, universal health insurance, yearlong paid parental leave, universal early-childhood education, wage and sickness

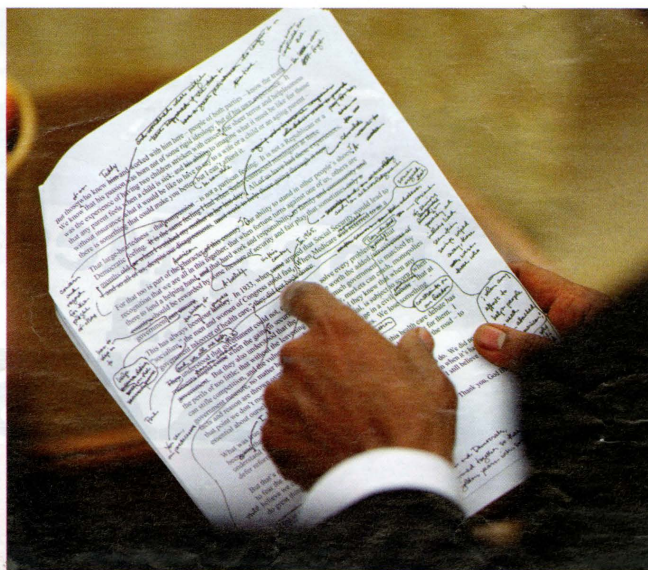
insurance, an expansion of public-works programs so that the government acts as an employer of last resort, and more paid holidays and vacation time.

Kenworthy believes these reforms will come to pass, and that after half a century the United States will likely employ almost all of its population in service-sector jobs—many of them in “helping-caring” industries, such as education, health care, and social work. Many of these will be low-wage jobs, and more will be short term—we'll shift between jobs even more often than we do now, so the economy will continue to be (cue the buzzwords) innovative and flexible. Even so, economic growth is unlikely to approach the peak ranges it reached in the middle of the twentieth century. The economy will be even more globalized than it is now. Unions will continue their march toward irrelevance. Families and communities will possibly become even weaker and more fragmented.

In other words, all the same trends toward inequality and insecurity will continue. But their devastating impact will be blunted, because the state will correct for the hypercompetitive nature of the economy, and the expansion of insurance and welfare programs will protect people from the tumult of economic change. As a social vision, Kenworthy's prescription is not exactly “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” But by expanding the welfare state to make workers far more independent from their jobs, their lives can be measurably improved—and the problems of inequality, instability, and poverty greatly alleviated.

Much of the argument is conducted in a debater's style, as Kenworthy debunks imagined critics on the left and right. Think big government will tank the economy? Kenworthy reviews the literature and points out that there is no correlation between the size of government and economic growth. Concerned about the road to serfdom? Kenworthy notes that the Nordic social democracies score quite well on even the Heritage Foundation's surveys of “economic freedom”; social democracy doesn't involve heavy regulation. Do you fear that without inequality the economy will stagnate? Kenworthy reminds us that during those mid-twentieth-century glory years—when taxes were high and growth more equal—not only did the number of people with cars, indoor plumbing, electricity, and telephone and television service grow rapidly, but the American economy presided over the development of such vaguely titillating innovations as “photocopiers, disposable diapers, and the bikini,” all of which made life “easier or more pleasurable.”

What many readers may find most surprising about Kenworthy's book is his sheer certitude that the United States is in fact headed in the direction of social democracy. For him, it appears, this is a simple matter of weighing the evidence and dispassionate deliberation: Policy makers will have to recognize the success of government programs in addressing problems such as “deficiencies in economic security, opportunity, and



President Obama edits a health-care speech, 2009.

shared prosperity,” as he puts it. While many commentators observe that American social policy has moved rightward over the past thirty years, Kenworthy notes that politicians have expanded social programs many times over this same period—for example, Medicare prescription-drug coverage, or free vaccines for poor children, or the earned-income tax credit.

For all the putative victories of conservatism, the similarities between the United States and Sweden are stronger than the resemblances between the United States of a century ago and the America of today. “The United States is a much better country today than it was a century ago, and a key part of the reason is that government does more to ensure security, opportunity, and shared prosperity now than it did then,” Kenworthy writes. “In the future it will do more still, and we'll be the better for it.”

Kenworthy's confident pronouncements tacitly treat the fine-tuning of economic policy as something that transcends mere political conflict—and this is the great weakness of *Social Democratic America*. For him, there is nothing especially political about the growing inequality of the United States, or the attendant rise in economic insecurity. It is, as the social scientists say, an exogenous problem, the result of a rise in competitive conditions that is itself neutral. There is thus little apparent need to account for the mobilization of the wealthy, or their active efforts to reshape the economy or politics, even though they have mightily benefited from these initiatives. And so Kenworthy sees no reason why there might be powerful resistance to the policies that he promotes—why employers might have contempt for social programs that offer their workers greater independence, for example. He likewise glosses over the malign neglect within our mainstream politics that typically greets the elements of the social-democratic agenda with either indifference or contempt. There is no mention anywhere in the book of the

actual current priorities of the American government, the military foremost among them. His picture of the expansion of the American welfare state over the past century evades any mention of the turmoil that accompanied it—the protests, strikes, and demonstrations that helped press forward the programs that Kenworthy admires. The relentlessly anti-utopian frame of the book lends *Social Democratic America* a touch of crackpot realism—since there's little sense of what the opposition to the changes he outlines might be, there's also no real sense of how to achieve them.

But this slightly fantastic quality also makes *Social Democratic America* a surprisingly enjoyable read, despite its think-tank prose. After all—even if you find Kenworthy's evocation of a good society a bit desiccated—there is something reassuring about his air of calm certainty. Most of the time, politics seems so hard, frustrating, and painful, demanding of sacrifice and commitment, and for what? The arc of the moral universe may bend toward justice (Kenworthy's epigraph borrows the famous King quote), but it sure feels long, and there's no real assurance that we'll get there. In this context, it is cheering, if a little bizarre, to read that universal health care, family leave, and universal early-childhood education are on the way—if we just wait. Someone had better warn the president!

Kenworthy's breezy policy handbook may not be grounded in political reality as the rest of us know it, but as comfort reading, it's on the order of good dark chocolate. Next time you're feeling down about politics, order Kenworthy's book and call the doctor in the morning. And you can charge the whole thing up on the universal health-care plan we'll be sure to have by then. □

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