

To the pressing return of Palme's figure in the debate on the future of Swedish Social Democracy an intense book by Göran Greider – poet and journalist, one of the ten most authoritative intellectuals in Sweden – has remarkably contributed: *Nobody escapes Olof Palme*^[1]; an evocative title for a work which is not meant as a biography but rather as a “walk”, taken during and just after the 2010 electoral campaign, across Palme's life as well as through the changes occurring in the Swedish Social Democratic party – and in Sweden in the whole – under the last decades (subsequently to Palme's death).

Greider's path – made up of meetings with old and new activists, in Stockholm as well as in more peripheral areas – starts from four places in Stockholm with a symbolic value in Palme's life: Östermalm, the upper class neighbourhood where he grew up; Vällingby, the ultra-rationalistic suburb where the Palmes moved to in the 1950s; the street (Västerlånggatan) in the Old Town, where he lived in the last years of his life; and the road (Sveavägen) in the modern city centre where he worked (the Social Democratic party has its head office there) and where he was murdered.

In the first chapter (*Östermalmsgatan*) Greider points out that the Swedish Conservative Party (*Moderaterna*), although claiming the legacy of Tage Erlander (Palme's predecessor, prime minister from 1946 to 1969, the age of the making of the impressive Swedish public sector), still looks at Palme as a taboo. Unless... he is not purified by any Socialist corruption. Greider is persuaded that exactly this embarrassing contamination explains why the centre-right parties as well as the Social Democrats try in any way to escape Palme.

The second chapter (*Tornedalsgatan*) focuses indeed on the biographies (by Henrik Berggren, by Kjell Östberg and by Klas Eklund^[2]) offering an embalmed portrait of Palme as statesman (and in the case of Berggren's work, also trying to turn Palme into a liberal). After all, why should the upper class give up claiming the most talented politician grown up from its own ranks (although unfortunately gone over to the enemy)?

Greider makes clear that his own aim is on the contrary to discuss the most controversial elements in Palme's political career. The author's thesis is that the Social Democratic leader can be understood only in the light of the social movement, aiming at a social transformation, which he led from 1969 (when Palme was appointed party leader and subsequently prime minister) to 1986, both in power and in opposition: the working class and its allies. According to the author, “the movement is the message”, as he makes clear already in the short *Introduction*, coming back to this idea in the second chapter, where moreover he points out that nowadays in Sweden the only political organization aiming at, and succeeding in, building a political movement is the xenophobic party, the Sweden

Democrats.

In the light of these worrying processes, Greider questions one of the commonplaces about the crisis of the Left all over Europe: what is needed – in Sweden and not only – is not so much to work out again the transformation thinking (it is not ideas and analysis which are missing), but instead to find new forms of organisation for social movements.

The author is critical with the influential historiographic trend explaining the ideological development of Swedish Social Democracy as a gradual but at the same time unavoidable removal, from the 1930s onwards, of all Socialist core ideas; starting of course from Socialization, being replaced by the more reassuring – and thus more suitable to ensure Capitalists' support – social democracy.

Greider recalls the great visions the Swedish Social Democrats built upon the cross-class consent they enjoyed, stressing that these were not inescapable paths, but instead the outcomes of choices made by the labour movement: first the “people's home”, launched in 1928 by Per Albin Hansson and since then revised several times as slogan; then, between the 1950s and the 1960s, the “strong society”^[3], to refer to the need of an active role of the State aiming at safeguarding citizens' welfare. In both cases, socialization played no role. Nevertheless, Greider asks himself: what does it mean that in the last years of Palme's life, after more than four decades of Social Democratic rule (yet interrupted by the centre-right government 1976-1982), almost four workers out of ten had a public employer?

By doing so Greider raises *the* question as far as the identity of Swedish Social Democracy is concerned, i.e. the role of the State in re-shaping the power relations between classes. His answer is that such an achievement reflected an unmatched degree of socialization of the economy. According to Greider's analysis indeed the SAP did not restrained its intervention to a socialization of incomes, but rather built an imposing public production system. This is exactly the history which has been removed: the making of a “embryonal Socialism” in Sweden. The centre-right can not take possession of it, because of the incompatibility with its own social-liberal vision; furthermore, this history makes many Social Democrats feel uneasy as well.

After making amends for the sins of Soviet Socialism, it is time, Greider writes in the third chapter (*Västerlånggatan*), to look forward: if not nowadays, in ten, twenty years the good “utopia” contained in Communism will become topical again.

The great chance missed by the Swedish Social Democracy, the third crossroad it had to face, is indicated by Greider in the debate on wage earner funds, started in the early 1970s (but with earlier roots) from the awareness that capital formation should be increased

without helping at the same time wealth concentration. Put forward in 1975 by the trade union economist Rudolf Meidner, the proposal provided the establishment of funds – stocks being strategic property – to be administered by workers and constituted through the transfer of a share of annual corporate profits; they were supposed to shift gradually the ownership in medium to large companies from employers to workers. The SAP strove to turn the funds into an instrument of capital accumulation; when they were finally introduced by a law, in 1983, had no longer anything to do with the original proposal, being rather an element within a general anti-crisis policy. That, too, as well as the People's Home and the Strong Society, was a choice, Greider stresses, without playing down at all Palme's contribution in neutralizing the subversive component of the funds, in the face of the hysterical reactions from business circles.

The divide between Palme and his successors is identified by Greider not in the capacity to take unpopular decisions – which Palme, too, took, and which the author accepts as hard lesson of politics – but rather on one hand in Palme's attachment to Democratic Socialism and on the other hand in his successors being unable to make it clear that, notwithstanding unfavourable circumstances, the aim is still the same: to ensure equality and safety. It is not by chance that what is considered worthy being celebrated in Palme is his internationalism, not his democratic socialism, i.e. not the politician who recalled the Socialist legacy always present (even though in an underground way) in the party history.

In the final chapter (*Sveavägen*) Greider points out to the two conditions which can allow a revival of Democratic Socialism in the XXI Century. The first is that as long as we live in a capitalist society, Marxism, yet not self-sufficient (but rather to be supplemented by the Green thinking and by social movements other than the labour one), remains the best conceptual tradition we have at our disposal in understanding – and in changing – reality. The second condition is to give raise to new social movements and at the same time to revitalize the existing ones, too often unable to communicate with each other.

The goal is, once again, with more urgency than ever, labour liberation.

Endnotes

[1] G. Greider, *Ingen kommer undan Olof Palme*, Ordfront, Stockholm 2011.

[2] See M. Quirico, *Olof Palme: One Life, Many Readings*, "Nordicum Mediterraneum", 2011, VI, 1.

[3] At that time the distinction between State and civil society was weak, in the Swedish political lexicon, thus the translation into another language has to take into account this ambiguity, due to the close relation between the two spheres. See L. Trägårdh, *The Paradox of Swedish Political Culture: State and Civil Society in Sweden*, Introduction to *State and Civil Society in Northern Europe. The Swedish Model Reconsidered*, ed. by Id., New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007, pp. 1-3.