

Lakey, George (2016) *Viking Economics: How the Scandinavians Got It Right – and How We Can, Too*, Melville House Publishing, Brooklyn, Ny.

Review by Betsy Leondar-Wright

‘Another world is possible,’ asserts the slogan of the World Social Forum – but how many Americans believe that? Hope is a hard sell in this country of debased politics and a widening wealth gap.

But George Lakey cleverly dodges American discouragement by telling the stories of actually existing fairer societies and how they came to be. The Nordic countries could be models for the United States, he claims. By waging decades of struggle as Scandinavian people did, we too could have their cradle-to-grave benefits: free vocational and higher education, universal health care, paid parental leave, robust labor rights and so on. For half a century Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland have held the world’s records in health and life expectancy, clean democracy, educational achievement and combining high wages with economic growth, innovation and productivity.

The Nordic countries are often presumed to be special cases, impossible to replicate elsewhere, due to their small size, homogeneity and some imagined cultural emphasis on social welfare. But in fact, a century ago they had as much concentrated wealth, widespread poverty and weak safety nets as most of Europe, and as much political polarization. It took a struggle to make Scandinavia into what it is today.

The working class is the hero in these inspiring tales, particularly the Norwegian labor movement. *Viking Economics* makes an important contribution to the field of Working-Class Studies by emphasizing the agency and efficacy of its organized working-class protagonists. They organized unions, labor parties and federations of worker cooperatives. They collaborated with intellectuals and other middle-class allies. They fiercely resisted elite repression, Nazi sympathizers and German Nazi occupation. They sometimes made strategic mistakes, but also made some brilliant moves.

For example, in Sweden, military repression of striking workers in 1931 led to an uprising that took down the government and put the leftist Social Democratic Party into power for over 40 years.

In Norway, waves of strikes from 1919 finally brought the employer federation to the bargaining table in 1937. The labor movement and the employers hammered out a consensus, and the Labor Party came to power.

Most recently, Iceland, when its economy collapsed during the 2008 Wall Street crash, fended off International Monetary Fund demands for austerity – the first country to get IMF loans despite refusing to cut public spending. Instead, thanks to Occupy-like street demonstrations by over 3% of the entire population, they actually increased social spending and successfully revived the economy.

Could a similar transformation happen in the United States? Overcoming the public's aversion to higher taxes and the remnants of Cold War anti-socialism would be a necessary prerequisite to organize a multiracial, cross-class mass movement powerful enough to take on corporate power. The millennials' greater acceptance of socialism is a hopeful sign that we may yet take Occupy Wall Street to scale.

But the movement would need highly developed strategic skills to prevail through the backlash of the entrenched powers that be. Lakey is an unparalleled resource on strategy. He is the creator of the Global Nonviolent Action Database (<http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>), retired Swarthmore peace studies professor, author of other movement strategy books, and a long-time activist who has trained tens of thousands of activists, including me, through Movement for a New Society and Training for Change. This half-century of experience grounds his analysis of the strategic moves and mistakes made by the Scandinavian movements and his advice on building the global movement we need today.

The book necessarily loses some of its focus in the more critical chapters. Lakey interrupts his crystal-clear case for a positive alternative to portray these countries as cautionary tales as well. Though this disrupts the otherwise smooth flow of the book, it had to be done. If he hadn't covered the rise of right wing anti-immigrant parties or the overreliance on fossil fuels in oil-rich Norway, the book might have idealized societies that are in fact messy works in progress. And to omit a chapter on xenophobia would have undermined race-class intersectionality; you can't analyze one without understanding the other. The Nordic countries fulfill their promise to the extent that they extend their universal benefits to everyone within their borders, regardless of birthplace.

Viking Economics is written for a general audience in an enjoyable story-telling style, with first-person narratives from Lakey's time in Norway with his former in-laws, as well as from interviews he did with key players in all four countries. The book embodies the Working-Class Studies ideal of class analysis accessible outside the ivory tower. No reader should be scared off by the 'economics' in the title. This is a story of people organizing to make their societies work better for everyone. If you're a person with a society to improve, it's for you.

Reviewer Bio

Betsy Leondar-Wright, PhD, is the board president of WCSA affiliate Class Action (www.classism.org). She teaches the sociology of race and class inequality and social

movement strategy at Lasell College. She is the author of *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures* (Cornell University Press 2014), as well as *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* (New Society Publishers 2005) and co-author of *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the US Racial Wealth Divide* (New Press 2006).