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Suet puddings and red pillarboxes: A review of Marc Stears' *Out of the Ordinary*

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Marc Stears, *Out of the Ordinary: How Everyday Life Inspired a Nation and How it Can Again* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2021), 236 pp. £30 (Hardcover). ISBN: 97806743878

Abstract

Marc Stears' *Out of the Ordinary: How Everyday Life Inspired a Nation and How It Can Again* is an engaging and sincere work of political theory. In it, Stears explores how the work of a number of British writers and artists in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – Bill Brandt, Barbara Jones, Laurie Lee, George Orwell, JB Priestley and Dylan Thomas – can help us to overcome some of the lazy ideological conventions of our time which suggest it is impossible to simultaneously value tradition and progress, patriotism and diversity, individual rights and social duties, nationalism and internationalism, conservatism and radicalism. In this review, I highlight the timely and engaging elements of Stears' book while also raising doubts about his treatment of the 'everyday' and his Blue Labour solutions to our political ills.

Keywords

Britain, Marc Stears, nationalism, the everyday, the ordinary

Prior to his current stint as the Director of the Policy Lab at the University of Sydney, Marc Stears was Chief Executive of the New Economics Foundation, a well-respected left-leaning British think-tank, and before that senior advisor and

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Chief Speechwriter to Ed Miliband – the leader of the British Labour Party from 2010–2015. Miliband convinced Stears to leave his Professorship at the University of Oxford, the place they met when studying PPE as undergraduates. Stears is thus something of a rarity: a well-regarded academic political theorist who has also has direct knowledge of the upper echelons of national politics. Other political theorists with similar political experience, whether behind the scenes or as elected politicians, often end up writing memoirs about their time in politics. Stears resists this temptation. The result is a very different kind of book, one that attempts to shift opinion about what really matters politically and to explain why we overlook it, instead of venting resentments and frustrations before learnedly lecturing the rest of us about the ways that politics is not a philosophy seminar.

Out of the Ordinary focuses on an ‘almost entirely discarded’ (p. 4) tradition of British writing, art and cultural criticism that Stears exhumes from works produced by Bill Brandt, Barbara Jones, Laurie Lee, George Orwell, JB Priestley and Dylan Thomas in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. This grouping, and the ‘humble vision’ Stears extracts from it, are his own creation. These artists and writers did not see themselves as pushing a common position: ‘They wrote independently from one another, rarely met, and when they did, they disliked each other’ (p. 60). But Stears insists that common commitments, attitudes and aversions mark their work which have important implications for contemporary politics. In particular, he claims that his chosen writers and artists show us that we can think about politics unshackled by ‘the lazy ideological conventions of our time’ which suggest it is impossible to simultaneously value tradition *and* progress, patriotism *and* diversity, individual rights *and* social duties, nationalism *and* internationalism, conservatism *and* radicalism (p. 6). His central contention is that his group of writers and artists can show us how to get beyond these crude dichotomies because their work resists the siren-songs of abstraction and empty idealization by celebrating the magic and power of ‘everyday life’. This is a bold and intriguing proposal.

Out of the Ordinary is thus not intended to be read as an academic piece of intellectual history (p.8). It is a lyrical and gentle polemic written for a Britain bedevilled by political polarization, xenophobia, distrust, suspicion and a marked lack of confidence in its future. The lens Stears employs ensures that his discussion of the political difficulties Britain is trying (and clearly failing) to grapple with is completely unique. This differentiates *Out of the Ordinary* from other books written by academics that promise to make sense of the political challenges of the moment which are also aimed at that mysterious group of intelligent, non-academic readers who are prepared to buy (and sometimes even read) such works.

Stears declares that there are lessons for all societies living through the political crises affecting Western liberal democracies in what he writes, and at a very general level there may be. But *Out of the Ordinary* is first and foremost a book about a neglected facet of Britain’s cultural past written for those who care about Britain’s future.

The Argument of the Book

Stears begins by focusing on Orwell's response to the dominant intellectual traditions of the interwar period, showing why he rejected the nostalgic lamentations of conservative cultural critics like TS Eliot and FR Leavis and the Manichean socialism favoured by luminaries of the left, like WH Auden and Spender. Both approaches were smug, self-satisfied and condescending, revealing a lack of 'a sense of community, of solidarity, of deep human feeling' (p. 28). Stears skilfully explains why Orwell found this kind of hostility to ordinary people politically dangerous.

Stears next sketches how the idea that Britain's interwar demise might be found in the 'everyday experiences of ordinary people' (p. 36) began to find expression in the work of his chosen writers and artists in the 1930s. His most compelling discussions revolve around Priestley's *English Journey* and Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn*. He engagingly explains how Priestley's generalizations about the character of the people he met on his travels, which focused on the resilience, hard work, kindness and courtesy of working people in parochial towns and cities, led him to insist that ordinary 'people were the strongest part of England, whatever orthodox intellectual opinion might say' (p. 44). Stears also joyfully sets out Orwell's view that there was something 'distinctive and recognisable in English civilization' that bound English people together, finding this *something* in their experience of the ordinary and the everyday. For Orwell, English civilization had a flavour entirely of its own which he memorably claimed was, somehow, bound up in our 'solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillarboxes' (p. 69). It was this national character, more than anything else, which Orwell believed gave Britain a chance to prevail in the Second World War.

Subsequent to this, Stears explores Brandt's, Orwell's, Priestley's and Thomas's war work. They each tried to make sense of the ties that brought British people together without overlooking ordinary people's individuality and eccentricities. Stears argues that they gave birth to the idea of a 'people's war' by suggesting that Britain was a country:

where people had learnt to struggle collectively not because of any grand ideals or any faith in the established order but because they had realized they share a deep and abiding love of elements of life that many had previously dismissed as utterly mundane. (p. 95)

For him, the resulting image of the nation they sketched was an immense achievement because it showed how one could build an image of Britain on the experiences of normal people, instead of focusing on past wartime victories and the heroic lives of supposedly great Britons – the kind of thing Orwell brilliantly dismissed as 'all that Rule Britannia stuff' (p. 88).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Orwell's and Thomas' misgivings about the elitism and modernising, central planning of the post-war Labour Atlee government, and

the 1951 Festival of Britain, which Stears elegiacally paints as both the culmination and dying breath of the humble celebration of the ordinary and everyday his writers and artists accomplished. Finally, in Chapter 7, Stears directly explores what lessons his historical account has for contemporary politics.

Unlike other contributions to the genre, which can read like broadsheet newspaper opinion pieces with empirical data sprinkled on the top, and which usually aim to shore up their readers' existing partisan commitments, Stears wants to outline and defend a particular kind of political sensibility. The ambition is welcome and timely. Stears also brings his writers and artists to life with consummate skill. Readers unfamiliar with his cast will find much of interest in his evocative and deeply sympathetic account of their works, learning something important about an overlooked tradition of British art and cultural criticism.

The envisaged audience also allows Stears to depart from the standard conventions of academic political theory. Each chapter begins with him reflecting on aspects of his own life (bedtime stories with his parents, family holidays, his father's funeral, working for Ed Miliband) before linking these episodes to the discussion that follows. This cleverly roots the discussion in the kind of everyday experiences he champions and ensures that *Out of the Ordinary* is never a slog. One is also left in no doubt that Stears is an extremely well-motivated commentator on British public life. Cynical readers may be sneer at his earnestness, and his past as a speechwriter does sometimes gets the better of him in ways that would be easy to mock, but this is a sincere attempt to get to grips with some of the most important political issues of our age, rather than a tirade which seeks to score political points in Britain's on-going culture war. Stears wants a politics based on his vision of what we have in common.

Most significantly, perhaps, *Out of the Ordinary* makes an important and timely point about the relationship between nationhood and progressive, democratic politics. In the introduction, Stears suggests that the point that a vibrant and viable progressive politics has to celebrate national identity and national history in some way is especially important for academics to hear. Given the 'dominant discourse of left-leaning academia' (p. 6), those who make this kind of claim are either denounced as apologists, who are supposedly wilfully blind to the ways that our shared political history is irredeemably stained by past injustices, or ridiculed as 'centrist dads' (p. 7). Either way, they are derided. Stears is surely right that the kind of self-flagellation demanded by condescending academics that manifests whenever someone dares to focus on British nationhood is politically disastrous. In this regard, the ballot box doesn't lie, and the recent evidence of the British left's failure to convince the electorate on this score is irrefutable.

The account of the British nation rooted in the everyday that he favours is distinctive and provoking. Given their aversion to grand abstractions, Stears' writers and artists disliked traditional accounts of the British nation which celebrated the form of 'Englishness espoused by the aristocracy and fake aristocracy of the upper-middle classes' (p. 89). He shows how Brandt, Lee, Orwell, Priestley and Thomas sought to provide accounts of the British nation which focused on the

everyday and the parochial, telling inspiring stories about working-class communities and the lives of ordinary people at war. In this sense, their work was deeply democratic and benignly nostalgic; they drew on memories of the past in order to try to forge a sense of togetherness among the people of Britain. By thinking about Britain in this way, they avoided tired nationalist clichés and shunned unrealistic images of communitarian unity and moral steadfastness. They also never ‘took the easy route and endorsed traditional accounts of the nation, with all their consequent legitimization of class hierarchies and undeserved privileges’ (p. 97). In place of self-important nationalism, Stears’ writers and artists stressed that the novel strengths of the British nation were to be found in ‘its resistance to grandiosity and pomposity, its celebration of individuality and eccentricity, [and] the rootedness that came from the persistence of its everyday rhythms of life’ (p. 104).

Seen in this way, Stears’ account repays attention precisely because it suggests that we can be patriotic without having to engage in a brazen and deceitful re-evaluation of the most shameful aspects of Britain’s past. Stears is not the kind of a flag-waving, woke-slaying, Professor-warrior for freedom of expression – except, that is, when it comes to taking the knee or protesting about the climate emergency – who, with a complete lack of self-awareness, bemoans cancel culture from the pages of the least scrupulous of Britain’s national newspapers. Like them, he insists that any viable political vision of Britain’s future needs to offer an ideal of British life that is rooted in Britain’s past. But unlike these oh-so-brave souls, Stears is not a bore-reactionary. Even if one does not agree with him, insofar as one cares about the prospects of progressive politics in Britain, Stears’ suggestions in this regard are worth taking seriously.

Whose Everyday?

The point of the book is to engender a particular kind of sensibility in its readers, to help them (re)discover the importance and significance of the values and goods which Stears’ account of the British everyday celebrates. These are supposed to be regarded as ‘*fundamentals* that sit behind policy making’, rather than concrete legislative proposals or political reforms (p. 5).

Stears’ account of Thomas’ masterpiece, *Under Milk Wood* – which focuses on a day in the life of Llareguub, a fictional Welsh seaside town – is perhaps the most important part of the book. Stears claims that this celebrated radio play distilled the essential elements of the public philosophy that his cast of writers and artists had been forging. It urged its listeners:

to preserve the best of the past even if they were striving for a better future; it gave them hope in the spirit of community; it reinforced the suspicion of bureaucracy, or of organized power of any sort; and it told us again to treasure the peculiarities, eccentricities, and diversities of ordinary people and not to worry that they would cause the whole social order to come tumbling down. (p. 131)

This is a lyrical retelling and Stears' sheer enjoyment of Thomas's works is a highlight. It also nicely illustrates that any vision of the 'everyday' or the 'ordinary' is inevitably idiosyncratic. Stears is not engaged in an exercise of value-free description. He picks out particular features of British life which he judges to be politically salient, pushing others into the background, in just the same way that his cast of writers and artists did. His 'everyday' is typified by rather a wholesome image of parochial working-class life in the period under consideration. He focuses on different forms of class and social solidarity and British eccentricity, drawing attention to the commonalities in ordinary people's everyday lives, and showing how they are rooted in traditions and shared understandings that are meaningful for them.

Of course, for every Dylan Thomas-style vision of the profundity of everyday life which celebrates the joy and magic of apple picking, pubs and people listening to music in their kitchens (p. 95), one can point to powerful counter visions. Consider the brilliant opening scene of Danny Boyle's adaption of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, where the main protagonist, Mark Renton, muses about whether or not he ought to 'choose life' over heroin:

Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourselves. (Hodge et al., 1997)

To be sure, nothing resembling an attractive politics is likely to be forged from Renton's bleak and nihilistic assessment of modern British life. But it undeniably captures *something* about modern Britain. This *something* is likely to ring truer to certain people, given their own experiences and temperament, than the message Stears extracts from *Under Milk Wood*.

The important point here is that no vision of the everyday can cash its own cheques – it can only make sense to its audience given their specific experiences of life. And precisely because the everyday is not supposed to function as a straightforwardly descriptive concept, there are a plurality of visions of the British everyday one could adopt. Readers need to be convinced to commit to Stears' one.

Moreover, although the everyday should not be regarded as a straightforwardly descriptive concept, it clearly fuses questions of fact and value – it is both normative while also being guided by an interpretation of ordinary British life. This means we can evaluate Stears' vision of the everyday from at least two directions – in terms of: a) its political attractiveness, and b) whether or not the image of British life that it is guided by rings true.

Though Stears admits it is not easy to work out what one can do to realize a world which cherishes the aspects of the everyday and ordinary that he values, he insists that by considering *Under Milk Wood* an outline becomes clear:

Any alternative could not be a politics driven by the central state. It had to be a politics of ordinary people. Nor could it be a politics driven by economics, even the kind of politics that pursues a greater equality. It had to be a politics centred in real relationships between people and their memories of the past. A politics, in other words, grounded in the humane aspects of everyday life, comfortable with emotion and sentiment and attachments to place, not embarrassed by them. (p. 132)

That sounds quite politically appealing, but does this implicit political vision of British life ring true?

Bernard Williams once remarked that if invocations of British working-class tradition are to guide our political imaginations they need to avoid overly sentimental views of what made people act (Williams, 1997: 55). It is hard to see how Stears' reading of Thomas is not problematic in this respect. Stears himself recognizes that Llareguub achieves the kind of parochial, community connectedness he so values *because* it is a place marked by a complete absence of 'competition for social status' and 'asserted power' (p. 130). As a piece of fiction, perhaps this doesn't matter (too much). But if we treat *Under Milk Wood* as some kind of political guide it surely must.

There are several dangers here. The first is that by highlighting the wholesome aspects of British everyday life in the period Stears is concerned with and down-playing other aspects of it which we rightly abhor – the racism, xenophobia, sexism – we simply ignore the fact that the good and bad were likely inextricably bound up with each other. This point was well made by a number of British post-war moral and political philosophers – Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams chief among them – who, like Stears' cast, were very resistant to grand and overly abstract philosophical styles of thinking about our social lives. Indeed, Hampshire explicitly argued that there is something ethically suspect about artificially isolating the attractive features of a distinct way of life from its less salubrious features, drolly referring to his opposition to trying to extract the good while discarding the bad in this way as the 'no-shopping principle' (Hampshire, 1983: 148).

Put in terms of a current political issue, the worry is that Stears is doing something analogous to what leading Brexiteers do when they paint Brexit as a project fundamentally concerned with protecting agreeable British traditions, or achieving proper democratic self-determination, while ignoring all the ways that the project is also inextricably tied up with xenophobia and forms of jingoistic patriotism which have overdosed on the idea of British exceptionalism. In reality, all of the above are present and intertwined in complicated ways. Most importantly, perhaps, it is simply false to claim that the xenophobia and jingoism are somehow best understood as top-down driven deformations of the true spirit of everyday Britain – that they are, in other words, generated by political elites and imparted on

ordinary people. In this respect, the politics of Britain, like everywhere else, is complex because ordinary British people are complicated.

The second danger is that even if one could extract the wholesome aspects of British life in the period Stears is concerned with from the less wholesome it would not follow that they can form the basis of an attractive politics today. Stears is astute enough to anticipate this concern. He recognizes that some commentators will mock his vision as overly nostalgic or, less kindly, suggest it is hankering for a social life in which heterosexual, cisgender white men dominate with impunity (pp. 186–187). His response is that:

the advantage of drawing on the everyday as the basis of our shared identity rather than on some purer, grander notion of race or nation or history or language is precisely that it can bind people together in shared experiences independent of background. (p. 187)

But he provides no argument in support of this claim, simply declaring that the kinds of experiences he has in mind are still widely shared. The reality is probably that the sorts of things he values are still widely shared in some parts of Britain, at least among some kinds of people, but not among different kinds of people. Indeed, some people, most obviously those who choose to leave the kind of places where Stears grew up in order to move to a major city like London, can be deeply attached to their new ‘place’ because it enables them to get away from the kind of (in their view) stifling everyday community and commonality that Stears celebrates.

He also recognises that the retrenchment of the power of central government, an increasing reliance on the market, austerity politics and digital technology have undercut the material conditions of his everyday (pp. 160–161, 189). All of this has led to the current moment where the dangers of right and left populisms loom large. Stears claims that his politics of the everyday can help us to navigate a course between them. He is scathing about the right-populism of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson due to its utter fraudulence. Its leaders are just as dissimilar in terms of personnel and interest from the working people of Britain as the ‘metropolitan elite’ who they claim to disdain are (p. 162). He is equally dismissive of Corbynist left-populism because it, in the name of class war, pursues a kind of ‘ideologically pure, systemic economic change’ that scorns conservative opinion wherever it is found (pp. 161–162). In place of both, he suggests that we need:

a politics that acknowledges the need for deep, structural change but that rejects Manichean division; a politics that is committed to treating people with respect, no matter where they come from or what cultural aspirations they share, but that recognises that there are important arguments to be had; a politics that realizes that wisdom does not reside in Whitehall, Westminster, or our leading universities alone, but also seeks to find expertise in every corner of the country. (p. 163)

Unfortunately, this passage is typical of many of the more constructive-seeming parts of the book. It is unhelpfully speechwritery. We are not told how we can

respect each other while having difficult political conversations or what kind of expertise we need to draw from the country beyond Westminster. The idea that bold changes can be pursued in a way that doesn't sow division is appealing, but beyond very briefly talking up the potential of community organizing and arguing that we need a thorough decentralization of power, frustratingly little detail is provided about how this might actually be achieved from where we are.

This matters. We are, in effect, being asked to have faith in Stears' vision of the everyday. But given that a plurality of visions of the British everyday could be adopted, we need to be given good reason to do so. That his vision of the everyday sounds nicer than alternative visions, such as those which drive the right- or left-populisms he rejects, is not sufficient: it is an invitation to wishful political thinking because any account of the everyday trades on some view of how ordinary people behave and what motivates them to act. Briefly outlining the Blue Labour belief in the potential of community organizing, and sketchily insisting that if we give local communities more power they will come up with the goods (and in the process will also somehow ensure that everyone is respected and included in decision-making in the right kind of way), does not cut the mustard. Most likely in this form of politics some communities will flourish and some won't, in much the same way that some people thrive when they are given responsibility and others don't. Stears does not do enough of the hard work he needs to in order to get readers to share the faith that – to riff on the subtitle – everyday life can inspire a nation again.

A similar problem plagues Stears' otherwise thoughtful account of British national identity. Despite celebrating the benign nationalism of his cast, he recognizes that they failed to reckon with the British empire and Britain's role in perpetrating major injustices across the globe (pp. 104–108). Nor does he shy away from the fact that some of the group expressed some despicably racist views (p. 107). Stears, rightly, regards this as 'profoundly depressing' given that the entire thrust of their work was about 'humanizing those whom others had rendered inhuman' (p. 108). But he says nothing concrete about how we might reckon with these aspects of British history while thinking about the British nation in terms of the everyday and parochial, simply noting that 'those of us who are otherwise sympathetic to their vision must ... think on how we should respond' (p. 108).

He is right. We must. But there is no discussion of *how* we might do that beyond a brief celebration of the inclusiveness of Danny Boyle's opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics. Boyle's ceremony was widely celebrated at the time but, as Stears notes, this inclusive vision of Britain quickly withered and died. We are living through that rejection of British identity today. Stears, sadly, offers no detailed suggestions about how we might resuscitate it.

Conclusion

Nietzsche (1997: 6) famously said that 'If we have our own "why" of life we shall get along with almost any "how"'. In his gently prophetic and well-meaning way, Stears suggests he's glimpsed the 'why' of political life. His reminders about the

significance of tradition, local attachments and everyday joys are thoughtful and engaging. But I am not persuaded that he has succeeded in offering a convincing sense, even in rough outline, of how thinking in terms of the everyday and the ordinary will actually help us to get to grips with our political malaises.

One might see the lack of more by the way of an account of how we might actually give political life to the kind of vision of British nationhood that Stears describes as an unfortunate sign of the inevitable incompleteness of the book. In much the same way, one might regard Stears' discussions of community organizing and decentralizing power as annoyingly brief rather than fatal. All good books – and this is a good book – are incomplete in various respects and raise more questions than they answer. But a golden rule of politics everywhere is that sincerity and good intentions are not enough. At the end of the book, I couldn't avoid the nagging thought that Stears gives the false impression that politics in the 21st century is immeasurably easier than it must surely be. Refocus our attention on the little things that matter, trust ordinary people, and voila.

What about the slow, strong drilling through hard boards?

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