

Marc Stears. *Out of the Ordinary: How Everyday Life Inspired a Nation and How It Can Again*. Cambridge, MS. & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-6747-4387-8. Pp. 248. Hardback: £30.00.

Out of the Ordinary is the attempt by a former frontline British political operator and now director of the Sydney Policy Lab, Marc Stears, to provide a manifesto, antidote, and alternative to the divisive political culture that he feels afflicts British society today. Stears, once an advisor to former Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, diagnoses a political health crisis in contemporary Britain that prevents the formation of a workable and inclusive national identity. This impasse, in his view, is caused by competing and exclusionary right- and left-wing interpretations of British history, which are respectively overly romantic and overly condemnatory about Britain's past.

Seeking an alternative to these binary visions, Stears revisits literary and cultural figures from a forgotten Britain who, during the 1930s and 1940s, placed faith in a compromise between the past, tradition, and justice as the most realistic prospect of finding a viable national identity. They were, among others, J. B. Priestley, George Orwell, Barbara Jones, Dylan Thomas, Laurie Lee, and Bill Brandt. Stears argues that these names make up a neglected school of thought in British political history. This school constructed a vision of Britishness that at once confronted the social alienation caused by industrial life whilst not resorting to the extremes of either Fascism or Communism. In their search for a workable national identity, they argued that 'tradition can be combined with progress, patriotism with diversity, individual rights with social duties, nationalism with internationalism, conservatism with radicalism' (p. 6). Most of all, they insisted that the ingredients for a better political culture were to be found in the *ordinary*. Orwell and company argued that the people of Britain could be trusted to provide answers as to how to live together and solve problems, and that these solutions were to be found in the pubs, hobbies, and suburban homes of the British people.

Stears begins by outlining the intellectual conditions which presaged this turn to the ordinary following the Great War. The trauma of mechanised conflict in the mud of Flanders' fields had left the leading intellectual lights of the age in despair. D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot laid the blame at the feet of the Victorian cult of progress. They argued that industry and capitalism had merely led to greed and alienated people from one another and their own sense of humanity. For them, Britain needed an orderliness which could only be acquired by reconnecting with traditional values and re-establishing community as a central feature of society. They admired and romanticised the idylls of the countryside and its hierarchical social order which had persisted across centuries.

Yet it was not hierarchy and romanticism which the likes of Orwell felt offered an ideal alternative. Ultimately, such a vision was undemocratic and ended up negating the agency of ordinary people. However, just as the

Ordinary school rejected romanticism, so too did they reject the radicalism of the varying Communist visions which emerged in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression. Orwell and Thomas criticised both the ideological justification for violence that Communism included and the hypocrisy of the many intellectuals who aligned themselves with radical politics without ever engaging with the causes of the ordinary people they were supposed to advance.

Instead, Orwell, Thomas, and company suggested starting from the ordinary. Rather than look at society from the perspective of the intellectual who thinks they can remake the world anew, they believed it possible 'look at the world as it is, mentally and emotionally to withstand its horrors, and to find joy in the real beauty that remained there, nonetheless.' (p. 32). As Stears says:

Most fundamentally of all, it was a philosophy that turned its back once and for all on the notion that attaining social improvement involved decrying the qualities of ordinary life itself (p. 32).

By reconnecting with community, nature, and everyday pursuits, Britain could find a calmer way of life and a unifying public philosophy. Britain could also find solutions to its social problems by observing them from the perspective of those whom they affected most. Writers, rather than analysing from afar the complexities of the 'system,' ought to get to grips with ordinary life and people (p. 36). This was the spirit in which Priestly's *English Journey* and Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* were both written. Orwell, Priestly, and co. challenged the common assertion that the ordinary people ought to be ignored and insisted that they offered a public philosophy that avoided the impractical abstractions of political theorising while still providing a basis for community and progress.

The war years, which saw people from all walks of life drawn together in a monumental common struggle, reinforced the Ordinary school's belief in the capacity of the ordinary to propel Britain forward. The crowning moment came with the 1951 Festival of Britain, which put on display a vision of a homely but modern democratic country led by ordinary people and ordinary values. Alas, this vision was quickly forgotten as the post-war settlement became the dominant narrative, with the Attlee government being hostile to the ordinary. Instead, Attlee pursued a modernist, futuristic, and technocratic program that meant Orwell and co.'s vision would go ignored till now, as Stears hopes to resurrect Britain's faith in the ordinary.

The only possible flaw in Stears's attempt to do so is that he could be accused of romanticising the past in a similar way to those whom he critiques. Stears risks placing too much faith in now quite old ideas which are not necessarily well-equipped to relate to the complexity of contemporary issues of British identity, especially present discourses on

ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. However, Stears corrects his course, critiquing the Ordinary school's weaknesses and because his overall emphasis is on rejecting convenient and utopian visions, his book avoids falling into the romanticising trap and manages to offer something truly fresh, inclusive, and convincing.

As a former Labour political advisor, it is natural that Stears should respect and seek to highlight the practical visions espoused by Orwell and company. Yet what makes *Out of the Ordinary* really worth reading is the way in which Stears uses the Ordinary school's arguments to offer a treatment plan in addition to his diagnosis of a British political health crisis; so many other authors are content to simply critique British politics without providing a solution. Stears has given British politics interesting food for thought, made more significant by the pandemic's disruption of normal life, and politicians and writers might want to consider taking a leaf or two from his book as they seek to re-orient Britain once the virus passes and Brexit concludes.

James Brown