

Marc Stears, *Out of the Ordinary: How everyday life inspired a nation and how it can again*

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Marc Stears' argument in this book is that there has been, and again could be, an effective 'politics of the everyday': a cultural, political, policy, governmental and administrative focus on the infrastructure necessary for meaningful, enjoyable, daily life for all participants in a polity. The theme of the specific ethical quality of everyday life, as opposed to heroic deeds, idealized morality, statesmanship, or mobility and movement, recurs in philosophy - it features in pragmatist traditions and in phenomenology. In political theory it is prominent in communitarianism. Modernist writers in the first half of the twentieth century in Britain came close to an explicit articulation of it. Representations of daily life by T.S. Eliot (pp17-8), D.H. Lawrence (35-9) and Virginia Woolf (62-6) however, tend to emphasize its fragility. It is susceptible to overt or covert violence, to corruption, manipulation and destruction, in short to tragedy. Real life sees fragmentation and division between individuals and groups; real life is misrepresented in abstract theories, and is easily laid waste by governmental power and technological innovation. At the center of Stears' book, coming after the high modernists, is a generation of writers and artists including Bill Brandt, Barbara Jones, Laurie Lee, George Orwell, J.B. Priestley, and Dylan Thomas. These and others did not form any named school of thought: they weren't like Bloomsbury, or the Euston Road School of painters, although Euston Road School representations of streets and interiors are congenial to their ethical mood. (pp144-5) Nevertheless, they are linked by proximity in the literary and artistic world of 1930s and 40s Britain, and by the developing theme of the ethical and political value of everyday, commonplace, life.

In Stears' judgement they offer the right kind of representation, and celebration, of the quality of daily activity and sociability, ordinary culture and pastimes, and enjoyment of built and natural environments, by people in their public relationships with one another as strangers, as co-denizens, in streets, shops, cafes, parks, gardens, and other open spaces and places. Politically significant, this web of encounters and these skeins of parallel actions together are the robust and the only foundation for freedom, for action, for resistance to the outrageous pretensions and swaggering power of militarists and fascists, or to the inexorable, colourless force of bureaucracy. This ordinary life is not consistent with imperialism or jingoism - it laughs at them; it is not particularly royalist, except insofar as the royal family represents ordinary families. It is not commercial or commodified, but to value it is not to hate what is popular nor to denigrate the suburbs or estates where most ordinary people live. It is not managed, or directed, or under the aegis of any superior authority. Valuing it does not mean romanticism or nostalgia for any mythical folk world - quite the contrary.

Stears argues that the theme of the value and the possible politics and ethics of everyday life was impactful enough on British public culture that the designers of the Festival of Britain 1951 (some of the artists discussed in the book, notably Laurie Lee, worked on the festival exhibitions) proclaimed in the official guide the difference of that event from previous great exhibitions and global fairs which 'have shown a country's art, its industries, and its institutions but none has tried like this to recreate a people's personality.' [p. 4] The festival itself, at least on its South Bank site, which was freer than other sites of commerce and advertising, reflected this

decidedly ordinary and everyday aesthetic and ethic. Elements of this moment of public apprehension of this particular kind of ‘people power’ live on in the enduring institutions of public, universal and free-at-the-point-of-delivery health care in the UK, of public spaces where crowds of people can safely enjoy themselves alone or in small groups, and in all efforts to care for the fabric of the public built and natural environments. In these settings, the collective and public nature of the ‘people’ who do the work and enjoy the products of that labour is not denied. It is acknowledged that the boon of a public transport system for one is conditional on it being a boon for many if not all; our enjoyment of a walk, or sitting on a bench or at a café table, is conditional on numbers. This might look too obvious to be worth stating, but among the many enemies of these institutions and spaces are those who fear public settings, dislike other people, and insist on ‘going private’. However, the point of this collective foundation, for Stears, is that individuals can each value their own daily round, the flow of time and their own movement from and through secluded and open spaces. These individual flows and movements are punctuated by moments of awareness, encounters with strangers and neighbours, being arrested by beauty or by ugliness, and occasional vivid experiences of enjoyment. In these encounters the connection between people is occasioned by a common orientation to the material social world – the queues, the checkout machines, the park gates, the final tough bit of a steep flight of steps or hill. The connections are also constrained by norms: we should be friendly (friend-like, not intimate or intrusive), cooperative with the right level of curiosity (not nosiness) and of engagement (not too close nor too distant).

I personally find this a very attractive vision. As individuals, in this account, we are called upon to be present in the social world, as it is, without contempt or cynicism or fear, and that seems right. I recognize the enjoyment, the occasional peak experience, the magic of everyday life, and am sympathetic to the demand for public policy – legislation and provision – which respects the public cultures that are the setting for such enjoyment, and that fully gets to grips with the maintenance of the physical, civil, and social infrastructure necessary for these evanescent but satisfying exchanges. Obviously though, it’s tough to promote the magic of everyday life as such in a world of toxic public cultures, everyday sexism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, sectarianism, outright thuggery, and the everyday pollution that is killing the whole gorgeous magical planet. Stears’ book cites and quotes exhilarating, vivid, poetic descriptions and invocations of shared ordinary life by Orwell, Priestley, and Thomas, in particular, showing how the freedom and equality of individuals and small groups (families, friends) commuting to and from work, dropping down and picking up from school and nursery, having days at the seaside and walks in the park, presupposes the common world of parks, seashores, schools, workplaces. This shared world, and the web of relationships that are socially rooted and generated – in this sense anarchic - is the basis for the truth that underlies “myths” of national action, national character, popular resistance, and mundane heroism in times of disaster or war.

But, for many readers these descriptions of ordinary shared and individual life will be decidedly problematic. First, this particular echelon of British 1930s and 40s lower middle and working class (a.k.a ‘ordinary’) life is singular, and will be only marginally comprehensible to people much younger than me or from a different social class, or from Lagos or Beijing. Thomas’s ‘smell of fish and chips on Saturday nights’ and ‘bushy red-Indian hiding park’ (p. 78), Orwell’s people in the ‘streets, in the factories and the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back garden’ (102-3), Priestley’s British seaside ‘pierrots and piers .. ham-and-egg teas, palmists ...’(73-4) ... er... what? Pierrots? I was brought up in the seaside town of Brighton in the 1950s; we did

go to the beach and I have never seen a pierrot outside a picture book; and what's a 'four-ale bar'? Does this matter? – No, and yes. No, because the exact content of anyone's ordinary, individual, collective, cultural life is not the point. If this political theory – that daily collective, individual life is the foundation and the proper objective for government – is valid it must be valid for sushi and cherry blossom as much for singing crowds with leeks in their pockets (p. 78). But, yes, it does matter, because throughout his presentation of these thinkers' work Stears has to lament their thoughtlessness about empire and slavery. Bound up with Orwell's invocation of cabbage reeking hallways (the equivalent of which, in Rome, of course might be the familiar smell of simmering sugo; nowadays in the UK it is just as likely to be curry spices) is his emphasis on xenophobia as a national trait of the real people who are the only ones who could win World War 2. Soldiers got to know Europe first hand in World War 1, and it confirmed their dislike of foreign ways (p.147)

¹ As much as anything else this will be the impetus to the destruction of Hitler, Orwell thought in 1940. For Orwell himself, Hitler must be defeated because 'the thought of a world in which black men would be as good as white men, and Jews treated as human beings, brings him [Hitler] to the same horror and despair as endless slavery brings to us' (ibid, p.183). But we rely on the ordinary British people, with their mundane xenophobia, their deep investment in racism both conscious and unconscious, to beat him. They wouldn't want to be made perpetually slave themselves, but as we know British national consciousness lives with only half suppressed knowledge of the endless slavery of generations of African people. It is no more upsetting than the understanding that has to be brought to watching a gladiator film. You don't need a Ph.D in critical theory to see a deep irony, a contradiction, in this acceptance of the democratic value of actually existing British xenophobia, the reliance on it to defeat fascism, and the celebration of this particular daily life and popular culture. Orwell himself believed that England is not true to herself when refugees are interned in concentration camps, any more than when rich people are dodging their taxes. He thought that the freedom and equality we see at the British seaside, or in a pub, is part of the democratic heritage, to be augmented, salvaged, and built on. It means that 'totalitarianism is in deadly danger' (ibid, p.185).

All around the world in the decades since the 1950s forced migrations, expulsions, and genocides have lost individuals their cultures and home environments, and robbed them of any security in their everyday. The enormity of all this means that for many political actors and thinkers – as for those watching the rise of authoritarianism in Europe in the 1920s (or the 2020s) – the urgent task is to defeat fascism, to try to build democracy and to entrench rights and social and environmental sustainability. D.H. Lawrence argued that talking about what to do about fascism catapults us into an alienating realm of abstraction, and forces our attention from embodied life where it should be. The abstractions of political analysis are like the superficial, coarse, posturing of the self-conscious actor in contrast to sensuous actual living and feeling. Without, necessarily, Lawrence's ideas of 'life force' and the like, thinkers and actors have argued that where there's an 'ism' there's an analysis and a way of life gone wrong.

Against such either-or dualism, late twentieth and early twenty first century social philosophy has emphasized that we must bring our theories of fascism, democracy, or sustainability, into relationship with our daily lives: we must entrench anti-fascism in our attitudes and practices, we must live our democracy, we must alter our daily ways to live sustainably. In

¹ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius' (fp 1940) in *Essays*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 2014) pp. 138-188.

more contemporary parlance, we should think global and act local. Doesn't that sufficiently value the everyday? In any case – aren't elected politicians and appointed officers and servants constantly advertizing to the needs and aspirations of ordinary families? Stears' view is that neither the glocalism of current activists, nor the appeals to 'ordinary hard working voters', nor determinations to defend 'our way of life' (whichever way of life that is), really answer the case. The activists want to change the everyday, to transform it; and in his experience that too often resolves itself into denigrating the lives of others.(p. 171). The rhetoric of political appeal to the 'ordinary family' is often empty and insincere; at best it's not implemented; most often it is contradicted by action and practice; and very frequently it is divisive (the appeal is to one section of the 'ordinary people' to the exclusion of the poor, or migrants and newcomers) and tends to the populist in the sense of calling up intolerance and aggression.

As a proper foundation and object for developed and programmatic public policy, politics of the everyday would be distinct and distant from *raison d'état*, from state managed polity-wide social democracy and conservatism, and from (state implicated) *laissez-faire* or finance led capitalism. It is thankfully to be distant from the incoherence and contradiction of policy U-turns, implementation failures, or the policy deadlock and gridlock that frustrates 50:50 divided polities. Stears is also doubtful, it would seem, whether his vision is consistent with the world in which people, when they have moments of heightened clarity or attention, or enjoy remembering an exchange with a stranger in a shop or in a park, hasten to communicate the moment on social media platforms (p. 189). He doesn't deny that this might be a problem – the reliance on photo, video and audio recording, the communication with a dispersed and distant network, could be a practice that destroys the very thing that it is trying to communicate, because the moment of heightened attention becomes a moment of planning, hastening out of the here and now into a recorded future. Nor does he dwell particularly on the way that austerity policies have had the effect of destroying the built, natural, and social infrastructure whose good order and sustainability is a precondition of this kind of enjoyment at all. Its possibility can be crowded out by fear, for instance, or by sheer misery. The point is that if this were an effectively pursued political project, austerity as we have known it in the twenty first century would have to be decisively rejected.

Stears' answer to these criticisms is four-fold. First, the endorsement of daily life, and the exhortation to direct public policy to the preservation of the common space and infrastructure that supports social life, does not involve the endorsement of all daily cultures. We don't celebrate the movements and encounters of vandals and gangs. We should support the daily ways that allow individuals collectively to face down gangs, to withdraw any permissions for vandals to destroy the world. The collective public life that Stears recommends is the kind you find in a launderette in a multi-cultural neighbourhood (pp. 187-8). That is, the everyday life of the British (or the French, whatever), people should be endorsed, but not any racism or xenophobia that might be at its heart. Indeed, we might infer, in a world in which forced migration and resettlement via internment camps is the experience of many millions, endorsable daily lives must be ones that make space for displaced people to find and instate their own culturally inflected daily ways alongside groups with very different histories and geographies. Second, then, rather than any particular content (ham and egg teas, coastal steamer trips) the point is to recognize the value of the daily life of ordinary people, with the constraint that such daily life should be based in a shared, and cared for, built or natural environment, with encounters between strangers, between neighbours, between individuals with diverse backgrounds and life histories, brought together in the small enjoyments of cafes, shops, streets, parks, and so forth. . Third, Stears insists, we can be determined to beat

authoritarianism and fascism, or to struggle for global sustainability, without undermining or denigrating the crucial features of the everyday but instead protecting and enhancing them(p.170) Further than this, fourth, we should begin to think about politics as such as beginning in, rooted in, this world of encounters with strangers in a shared built environment. This would, he hopes, begin to bridge the gulf between ‘politics’ and ‘everyday life’, perhaps correcting the distortions of a more or less wholly, and certainly overly, professionalized political class, which by its very nature is deracinated, and cut off from the very place and space that supports the kind of human ethical encounters that, in Stears’ analysis, lend so much meaning to the flow of our daily round.

There is much to enjoy in this readable book. The novels, poems and essays analysed are very well worth revisiting, or meeting for the first time, individually and in relation to one another. The irony and mischief perhaps is under emphasized: Stears points out how Brandt’s photographs of London in World War 2 problematise the myth of heroic stoical Londoners, reveal the ambiguity and discomfiting undercurrents of a relatively settled way of life upended by bombs, and hinting at the other kinds of violence that bombardment prompted or allowed to emerge. But he doesn’t point out the joke in Thomas’s Llareggub (read it backwards). This doesn’t necessarily undermine the reading of *Under Milk Wood* as a utopia (126). Thomas, after all, follows Thomas More in whose *Utopia* the names are jokes that escape a reader without Latin (or a reader who doesn’t have Paul Turner’s translation.²) But Stears’ proposal for a politics of the everyday, without irony, is a serious proposal, aimed at ‘ordinary citizens’ who might find here the substance for demands to candidates for election, and to executive officers alike, that there is value, and mileage, in a popular politics without any hint of populism.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Frazer is Emeritus Fellow in Politics, New College, University of Oxford and among her more recent publications are *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified* (2019), and *Violence and Political Theory* (2020) which she wrote with Kimberly Hutchings, and *Shakespeare and the Political Way* (2020).

Email: elizabeth.frazer@politics.ox.ac.uk

² Thomas More *Utopia* (1516) Trans and Intro Paul Turner, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1965.