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'Honouring David Marquand'

Hans Schattle and Jeremy Nuttall (eds.), *Making Social Democrats. Citizens, mindsets, realities: Essays for David Marquand*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018

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Over the last few years social democratic parties' ongoing political and electoral crisis seems to have accelerated, forcing many into long periods of opposition, unstable minority governments or unsuccessful government coalitions. Social democrats' troubles began with the faltering of the Keynesian model and their struggle to find alternative policies through which they could continue to deliver social equality, their trademark, whilst keeping the economy going. As critics would argue, their ideological surrender and acceptance of their opponents' policies (and morality) has not just alienated low-income voters but also weakened those very values that, for years, made their electoral victories possible. With the fervour typical of the newly converted, centre-left parties have long vociferously condemned the public sector's inefficiencies, the ills of state intervention and welfare scroungers. When trying to mitigate social exclusion, they have carefully camouflaged their efforts, avoiding the use of terms such as redistribution and social equality. All this has contributed to a state where inequalities and poverty are today widely regarded as an unavoidable and somehow acceptable fact of life; to a political climate where tax rises and regulation have become electorally anathema, perilous policies that no centre-left party should venture using. Those who do (e.g. Jeremy Corbyn) are ridiculed as naïve. People's appetite for egalitarianism, we are told, is gone.

Social democratic parties' loss of their past cultural hegemony, the decline of a sense of common purpose and of egalitarian-minded citizenship are the central focus of Hans Schattle and Jeremy Nuttall's insightful and thought-provoking edited volume. The book aims at honouring the work and intellectual contribution of David Marquand, a vehement and vocal critic of the 'decline of the public' – as the title of one of his books reads – and the dramatic effects that the rise of moral individualism, marketization of daily life and a steady erosion of a communal ethos have had on Western societies.

We know that the post-1945 'public spirit' has been exaggerated. The volume's contributors who, mirroring Marquand's multifarious career, comprise academics (e.g. Gideon Calder, Michael Freedon, Andrew Gamble, Clare Griffiths and Ben Jackson), academics turned politicians (e.g. Kenneth O. Morgan, Tony Wright), political commentators (e.g. Will Hutton, Neal Lawson) and former politicians (e.g. David Owen), acknowledge this. However, as several of them note in their essays, one can't deny the dominance that progressive values exerted in post-WWII societies, with parties of the centre-right being forced for almost four decades to celebrate the 'public good' and use social-democrats' language of social justice to win elections. Those years seem a very distant past now. Since the 1980s the values underpinning the post-war Keynesian consensus and social democracy's 'golden years' have got a bad dent; and this has had dire consequences for progressive parties. To use Neal Lawson's words

(p. 213), there is no prospect of recovery for social democratic parties unless they resume their 'battle of ideas'. In line with Marquand's long time advocacy for a realignment of the left that unifies the labour and the social liberal tradition, the book's contributors use the term social democracy as a byword of a quite ambitious and broad progressive agenda that, stretching well beyond the social democratic tradition, encompasses republicanism, devolution, libertarianism and human rights, communitarianism and environmentalism. For such an agenda to win majority support, they maintain, the public need to re-learn the values and practices of 'engaged citizenship' and 'moral politics'. As Jeremy Nuttall puts it, 'social democracy is about economic and institutional change, but it is as much, more even, about the pursuit of change in hearts and minds'. Institutional change would get nowhere 'without a change of mentality and feeling'.

It is hard not to feel sympathy for an argument that urges progressive parties to regain a more distinctive and 'principled' language and embrace a more courageous defence of the public domain and its value. However, the question is how is this to be done? The book mostly focuses on the harmful impact that the crisis of progressive values has had on our societies' social and political fabric and pays less attention to the context and factors that have contributed to their demise and social democratic parties' abandonment of their 'educational' ethos. The truth is that decline in party membership, changes in electioneering and the media, the growth of spin politics have all made it exceptionally difficult for parties to lead the political conversation. De-industrialisation, growing social fragmentation and migration have also made talk of the common good a much harder job compared to the past: in an increasingly socially diversified and multicultural landscape, creating a sense of common purpose, albeit not impossible (as David Goodhart would argue), is indeed more challenging.

Schattle and Nuttall write (p. 310) that the new political culture needed to sustain 'a carefully crafted pluralist and republican social democracy' requires, among other things, forms of democratic activism that are 'sufficiently informed by and mindful of history, at times even to the point of erudition, as opposed to "unschooled wisdom"'. Such a scenario would be any academic's dream but it underestimates the prominence of internet and social media in today politics and their key role in undermining experts' authority and fomenting misinformation. On top of providing an ideal platform for fake news, social media have also made reaching out to unsympathetic audiences almost impossible. As Schattle points out, social media (p. 126) pushes far too many of us into "echo-chambers" with individuals gravitating to like-minded sources of information and conversation, weakening if not wiping out the capacities of citizens to comprehend (or even notice the existence of) perspectives divergent from their own'. For this reason, he concludes, 'any quest to re-make social democratic citizenship simply must include a new media dimension'.

Closer public scrutiny is indeed needed to monitor new media empires, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and hold them more accountable. It is difficult to say whether this will stop Social democrats' decline, but it will certainly help liberal-democracies to survive. Nick Clegg is on the job. I am sure readers of *Political Quarterly* will vary in their opinions on whether this can be a reason of hope or despair.

Ilaria Favretto
Kingston University