

Maaïke Lauwaert &
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Facing Value

Radical
perspectives
from the arts

Valiz

1. Be unproductive
2. Hesitate and question
3. Share
4. Improvise
5. Invite and participate
6. Embrace the void
7. Play!
8. Support
9. Unite

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Clara van Gool, *Voices of Finance*, 2016



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Clara van Gool, *Voices of Finance*, 2016

ON VALUE

WHAT IS LIVING AND WHAT IS DEAD IN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?

Tony Judt

There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.

—George Orwell,
Homage to Catalonia

In October 2009 I delivered a lecture in New York in which I discussed some of the themes raised in this book. The first question came from a twelve year old schoolboy; I think it worth recording here, as it speaks to a concern with which I want to conclude. The questioner came directly to the point:

Ok, so on a daily basis if you're having a conversation or even a debate about some of these issues and the word socialism is mentioned, sometimes it is as though a brick has fallen on the conversation and there's no way to return it to its form. What would you recommend as a way to restore the conversation?

As I noted in my response, the 'brick' falls somewhat differently in Sweden. Allusions to socialism, even today, do not produce an embarrassed silence in European discussions any more than they do in Latin America or many other parts of

the world. This is a distinctively American response—and the questioner, as an American child, had a very good point. One of the challenges of shifting the direction of public policy debate in the US is to overcome the ingrained suspicion of anything that smacks of 'socialism' or can be tarred with that brush.

There are two ways to meet this challenge. The first is simply to set aside 'socialism'. We could acknowledge the extent to which the word and the idea have been polluted by their association with 20th century dictatorships and exclude it from our discussion. This has the merit of simplicity, but it invites the charge of hypocrisy. If an idea or a policy talks like socialism and walks like socialism, should we not acknowledge that this is what it is? Can we not hope to retrieve the word from the dustbin of history?

I don't think so. 'Socialism' is a 19th century idea with a 20th century history. That is not an insuperable impediment: the same might be said of liberalism. But the baggage of history is real—the Soviet Union and most of its dependencies described themselves as 'socialist' and no amount of special pleading ('it wasn't real socialism') can get around that. For the same reasons, Marxism is irretrievably sullied by its heritage, whatever the bene-



gerlach en koop, *No two things can be the same*, 2012

fits we can still reap from reading Marx. To preface every radical proposal with the adjective 'socialist' is simply to invite a sterile debate.

But there is a significant distinction between 'socialism' and 'social democracy'. Socialism was about transformative change: the displacement of capitalism with a successor regime based on an entirely different system of production and ownership. Social democracy, in contrast, was a compromise: it implied the acceptance of capitalism—and parliamentary democracy—as the framework within which the hitherto neglected interests of large sections of the population would now be addressed.

These differences matter. Socialism—under all its many guises and hyphenated incarnations—has failed. Social democracy has not only come to power in many countries, it has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its founders. What was idealistic in the mid-19th century and a radical challenge fifty years later has become everyday politics in many liberal states.

Thus, when 'social democracy' rather than 'socialism' is introduced into a conversation in western Europe, or Canada or New Zealand, bricks do not fall. Instead, the discussion is likely to take an intensely practical and technical turn: can we still afford universal pension schemes, unemployment compensation, subsidized arts, inexpensive higher education, etc., or are these benefits and services now too costly to sustain? If so, how should they be rendered affordable? Which of them—if any—is indispensable?

The broader question, implicitly raised by their more ideologically-motivated critics, is whether such social service states *ought* to continue in their present form or whether they have outlived their usefulness. Is a system of 'cradle-to-grave' protec-

tions and guarantees more 'useful' than a market-driven society in which the role of the state is kept to the minimum?

The answer depends on what we think 'useful' means: what sort of a society do we want and what sort of arrangements are we willing to tolerate or seek in order to bring it about? As I hope I have shown in this book, the question of 'usefulness' needs to be recast. If we confine ourselves to issues of economic efficiency and productivity, ignoring ethical considerations and all reference to broader social goals, we cannot hope to engage it.

Does social democracy have a future? In the last decades of the 20th century, it became commonplace to suggest that the reason the social democratic consensus of the previous generation had begun to crumble was that it could not develop a vision—much less practical institutions—that transcended the national state. If the world was becoming smaller and states more marginal to the daily operations of the international economy, what could social democracy hope to offer?

This concern took acute form in 1981, when the last Socialist president of France was elected on the promise that he would ignore European-level regulations and agreements and inaugurate an autonomous (socialist) future for his country. Within two years, François Mitterrand had reversed course—much as the British Labour Party would a few years later—and accepted what now appeared inevitable: there could be no distinctively social democratic national policies (on taxation, redistribution or public ownership) if these fell foul of international agreements.

Even in Scandinavia, where social democratic institutions were far more culturally ingrained, membership of the EU—or even just participation in the

World Trade Organization and other international agencies—appeared to constrain locally-initiated legislation. In short, social democracy seemed doomed by that same internationalization which its early theorists had so enthusiastically adumbrated as the future of capitalism.

From this perspective, social democracy—like liberalism—was a byproduct of the rise of the European nation-state: a political idea keyed to the social challenges of industrialization in developed societies. Not only was there no 'socialism' in America, but social democracy as a working compromise between radical goals and liberal traditions lacked widespread support in any other continent. There was no shortage of enthusiasm for *revolutionary* socialism in much of the non-Western world, but the distinctively European compromise did not export well.

In addition to being confined to one privileged continent, social democracy appeared to be the product of unique historical circumstances. Why should we suppose that these circumstances would repeat themselves? And if they do not, why would future generations necessarily follow their grandparents into the prophylactic and prudent compromises of earlier decades?

But when circumstances change, opinions should follow. We shall not soon hear again from the ideologues of free market dogma. The so-called G20 group of important countries is much resented by lesser states excluded from its deliberations, and its drive to become the decision-making center of the future carries significant risks; but the emergence of such a grouping surely confirms the return of the state to center stage. Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

If we are going to have states, and if

they are going to count for something in the affairs of men, then the social democratic heritage remains relevant. The past has something to teach us. Edmund Burke, in his dyspeptic contemporary critique of the French Revolution, warned against the juvenile propensity to dispense with the past in the name of the future. Society, he wrote, is '... a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.'

This observation is typically read as conservative. But Burke is right. *All* political arguments need to begin with an appreciation of our relationship not only to dreams of future betterment, but also to past achievements: our own and those of our predecessors. For too long, the Left has been insensitive to this requirement: we have been in thrall to the 19th century Romantics, in too much of a hurry to put the old world behind us and offer a radical critique of everything existing. Such a critique may be the necessary condition of serious change, but it can lead us dangerously astray.

For in reality, we only build on what we have. We are, as those same Romantics well knew, rooted in history. But in the 19th century, 'history' sat uncomfortably upon the shoulders of a generation impatient for change. The institutions of the past were an impediment. Today, we have good grounds for thinking differently. We owe our children a better world than we inherited; but we also owe something to those who came before.

However, social democracy cannot just be about preserving worthy institutions as a defense against worse options. Nor need it be. Much of what is amiss in our world can best be captured in the language of classical political thought: we are intu-

itively familiar with issues of injustice, unfairness, inequality and immorality—we have just forgotten how to talk about them. Social democracy once articulated such concerns, until it too lost its way.

In Germany, the Social Democratic Party is accused by its critics of abandoning ideals in pursuit of selfish and provincial objectives. Social democrats all across Europe are hard-pressed to say what they stand for. Protecting and defending local or sectional interests is not enough. The temptation to calculate thus, to conceive of German (or Dutch, or Swedish) social democracy as something for Germans (or Dutch or Swedes), was always present: today it seems to have triumphed.

The silence with which western European social democrats greeted the atrocities in the Balkans—a faraway region of which they preferred to remain ignorant—has not been forgotten by the victims. Social democrats need to learn once again how to think beyond their borders: there is something deeply incoherent about a radical politics grounded in aspirations to equality or social justice that is deaf to broader ethical challenges and humanitarian ideals.

George Orwell once observed that '[t]he thing that attracts ordinary men to Socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the "mystique" of Socialism, is the idea of equality.'³⁹ This is still the case. It is the growing *inequality* in and between societies that generates so many social pathologies. Grotesquely unequal societies are also unstable societies. They generate internal division and, sooner or later, internal strife—usually with undemocratic outcomes.

I found it particularly reassuring to learn, from my twelve year old interloc-

utor, that such matters are once again being discussed by schoolchildren—even if mention of 'socialism' does bring the conversation to a shuddering halt. When I began university teaching, in 1971, students spoke obsessively of socialism, revolution, class conflict and the like—usually with reference to what was then called 'the third world': nearer to home, these matters appeared largely resolved. Over the course of the next two decades, the conversation retreated to more self-referential concerns: feminism, gay rights and identity politics. Among the more politically sophisticated, there emerged an interest in human rights and the resurgent language of 'civil society'. For a brief moment around 1989, young people in western universities were drawn to liberation efforts not only in eastern Europe and China but also in Latin America and South Africa: liberty—from enslavement, coercion, repression and atrocity—was the great theme of the day.

And then came the '90s: the first of two lost decades, during which fantasies of prosperity and limitless personal advancement displaced all talk of political liberation, social justice or collective action. In the English-speaking world, the selfish amorality of Thatcher and Reagan—'Enrichissez-vous!', in the words of the 19th century French statesman Guizot—gave way to the vacant phrase-making of baby-boom politicians. Under Clinton and Blair, the Atlantic world stagnated smugly.

Until the late '80s, it was quite uncommon to encounter promising students who expressed any interest in attending business school. Indeed, business schools themselves were largely unknown outside of North America. Today, the aspiration—and the institution—are commonplace. And in the classroom, the

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enthusiasm of an earlier generation for radical politics has given way to blank mystification. In 1971 almost everyone was, or wanted to be thought, some sort of a 'Marxist'. By the year 2000, few undergraduates had any idea what that even meant, much less why it was once so appealing.

So it would be pleasing to conclude with the thought that we are on the brink of a new age, and that the selfish decades lie behind us. But were my students of the 1990s and after truly selfish? Assured from all quarters that radical change lay in the past, they saw around them no examples to follow, no arguments to engage and no goals to pursue. If the purpose of life as lived by everyone you see is to succeed

in business, then this will become the default goal of all but the most independent young person. As we know from Tolstoy, '[t]here are no conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him.'

In writing this book, I hope I have offered some guidance to those—the young especially—trying to articulate their objections to our way of life. However, this is not enough. As citizens of a free society, we have a duty to look critically at our world. But if we think we know what is wrong, we must act upon that knowledge. Philosophers, it was famously observed, have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

Ill Fares the Land. A Treatise On Our Present Discontents. New York: Penguin Books, 2010, pp. 227–237
We have kept the original note numbers of this text.

Tony Judt (1948–2010) was a British historian, essayist, and university professor specialized in European history. His last book to be published during his lifetime, *Ill Fares the Land*, projected lessons learned forward, challenging readers to debate 'what comes next?'. The book made the case for renewed social democracy and was as such Judt's most overtly political book.

³⁹ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Mariner Books, 1980, original publication 1938), p. 104.