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August 17, 2018: This Social Democratic Moment

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Title: This Social Democratic Moment

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8/17/2018—It is said that the Democratic Party is in conflict between its more progressive wing and its more moderate wing. But there is no real conflict. Today's Democratic Party is basically an inheritor of the European tradition of social democracy. It basically seeks the protections and security of the welfare state within a primarily capitalist economy. The Democratic Party does not reject public undertakings in principle, and seeks human solidarity against an overly individualistic market viewpoint. But we are not socialists, democratic or otherwise.

The tradition of social democracy has fallen into disarray and disuse but it brought about and maintained security and prosperity in Europe for 70 years.

There is no reason to reinvent the wheel and deny that all this has been done before and thought before. The point is to cure what ails social democracy; there is no need to invent anything really new.

We have a model in this effort: Tony Judt, the great thinker and historian of the Left, who died in 2010 from the ravages of Lou Gehrig's Disease. It was Judt who started us thinking about what is living and what is dead in social democracy, the title of his famous lecture in 2009.

Just what is living and what is dead in social democracy I will leave for another day. What Judt himself represented, however, is the first step. Judt was humble in his thinking. He was not vicious toward those he disagreed with—they might think he was, but just compare his tone with today's exchanges.

Judt was educated in the history of ideas. He believed with Keynes that when public men proclaim that they are uninfluenced by thought, they are likely just repeating in garbled fashion an idea from the very tradition they think they reject.

Judt was universal. He believed in a common good for all. This did not mean for him the end of cultural differences. But universal values were real to him.

Judt was open to religion. He was a product of the Jewish tradition, however much he became a critic of the policies of the State of Israel. The worst aspect of the thinking of the Left today is its belittlement of religion. In doing that, the Left sacrifices that which is tender and the longing for the permanent and ultimate. Even for what is fair.

Judt was clear that the social democratic critique of unrestricted capitalism is a moral critique. And you can't have a moral critique if religion is wrongheaded in principle—not in its particulars but in its generals.

This is the social democratic moment. The moment to celebrate what social democracy in the postwar period accomplished and how little the Reagan-Thatcher reaction to it brought to us. Ironically, Reagan's great accomplishment was in his unflinching dedication to freedom from Soviet domination. For this he deserves to be lauded. But in this he was mostly within the post-war liberal consensus.

There is much more to be said. But only after recognition of who we are, where we are and what time it is.