

Can David Hume Save the Democratic Party?

It is turning into what the philosopher called a ‘party from principle.’ That wasn’t a term of praise.

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Few past philosophers have as much present influence as David Hume, the pre-eminent Scottish Enlightenment thinker, who died on Aug. 25, 1776. Not long before, his local newspaper published the Declaration of Independence, which he supported. “I am an American in my principles,” he had written to a friend in 1775, “and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper.”



Hume wouldn’t be surprised that we are misgoverning ourselves today. He shaped disciplines such as economics, sociology and empirical inquiry, and his insights about ideological extremism, which influenced America’s Founders, can help us understand today’s politics, especially what has happened to the Democratic Party.

In a popular book of essays that James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and other Founders admired, Hume criticizes “parties from principle,” those organized around ideology. “Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs.”

He contrasts them with parties “from interest,” which form around professional and geographical interests. The interests of farmers and sea merchants are different, which is reflected in their political allegiances. Parties of interest are alive and well on K Street in Washington.

Parties from principle produce fanatical behavior in a way that parties from interest don’t, Hume observed. Parties of interest compromise to get what they want, but ideological purists don’t. This was the root of religious wars and of present-day culture wars.

Hume explains that humans universally dislike ideas opposing their own, and when “superstition” (fear and ignorance) blends with “enthusiasm” (hope and ignorance), they do crazy things. Modern innovations—pamphleteering in Hume’s day, social media in ours—have made it easier to organize and motivate ideologues.

Viewed through Hume's lens, Democrats' intramural struggle with socialism is only the latest evidence that they are morphing from a party from interest into a party from principle. Coalitions consisting of organized labor, minority populations, immigrants, farmers and urban machines have given way to a party dominated by highly educated people driven by superstitions and enthusiasms about race, sex and class.

Unlike "The Communist Manifesto," which is all about class struggle, the [constitution](#) of the Democratic Socialists of America is a jumble of collectivism and culture-war topics. It opens by rejecting "an economic order based on private profit," then quickly moves to include feminism, "gender identity," sexual orientation and "brutality and violence in defense of the status quo" as mission-critical issues.

Progressive activists are much whiter, more urban, more educated, and much younger than the national average—which is to say, they are much more beholden to university orthodoxies than to workaday concerns. They become enraged about "oppression," but they have no firsthand experience with it.

This detachment from reality leads them to see oppression where most people see merely challenges. Inflation is stubborn, and Americans are legitimately upset about it, but that doesn't mean they support the "popular control of resources and production" the DSA constitution champions. Research shows that the middle class is hollowing out primarily because more Americans are moving up and out of it, and low-income people move up financially when they move into opportunity-rich places. Most people know this, but progressives, who are mostly from affluent backgrounds, are blind to their own experience.

The Democrats' socialism problem didn't appear in a vacuum. Its path was paved by elites who insisted on denying common sense and imposing esoteric ideas—"defund the police," "all white people are racist," "men can become pregnant" and so forth.

Candidates are backing away from some of them, but that is merely an electoral strategy. As Joe Biden's presidency demonstrated, Democrats who run as moderates don't end up relenting on culture wars.

The Democratic Party needs to reckon, in Hume's formulation, with the "superstition" about the market economy and "enthusiasm" about identity politics in its ranks if it is to find its way.

Democrats need present-day David Humes to help understand the root causes for their problems rather than the variety of bogeymen their leaders cite. Only then will enough among them decide to leave their party of principle and return to the more mundane, yet more sensible, party of interest their traditional voters want.

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