

# The radical centre

*A politics without  
adversary*

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*There is no 'third way'. The antagonisms of left/right  
politics are more relevant than ever.*

Tales of the end of the right/left distinction have been with us for some time. Since the late 1980s this was accelerated by the collapse of communism - we have witnessed a clear move towards the centre in most socialist parties. But with New Labour in power a new twist has been added to this tale. We are told that a third way is now available: the 'radical centre'. After promoting the label of 'centre-left', Blair and his advisers now seem to prefer avoiding altogether any reference to the left. Since its victory, New Labour has begun to market itself as a radical movement, albeit of a new type. The novelty of this third way of 'radical centrism' supposedly consists in occupying a position which, by being located above left and right, manages to overcome the old antagonisms. Unlike the traditional centre, which lies in the middle of the spectrum between right and left, this is a centre that transcends the traditional left/right division by articulating themes and values from both sides in a new synthesis.

This radical centre, presented as the new model for progressive politics and

This article is dedicated to the memory of Ralph Miliband, who, on this issue, I hope would have agreed.

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as the most promising alternative to old fashioned social democracy, draws on ideas developed by Anthony Giddens in his book *Beyond Left and Right*. Socialism, argues Giddens, was based on a 'cybernetic model' of social life which worked reasonably well in a world of 'simple modernisation', but which cannot work any more in a globalised, post-traditional social order characterised by the expansion of social reflexivity. In this brave new world of 'reflexive modernisation' we need a new type of radical politics, a 'generative' politics that allows people to make things happen and provides a framework for the life-political decisions of the individuals. Democracy should become 'dialogic' and, far from being limited to the political sphere, it should reach the various areas of personal life, aiming at a 'democracy of the emotions'. This new 'life'-politics overcomes, in his view, the traditional left/right divide since it draws from philosophical conservatism while preserving some of the core values usually associated with socialism.<sup>1</sup>

Alas, when examined more closely, stripped of its theoretical jargon and New Age rhetorical flourish, this radical centrism is oddly reminiscent of the strategy of 'triangulation' designed by Dick Morris for Bill Clinton's second-term campaign. In the case of Clinton there is no doubt that as an instrument of electoral propaganda it worked. By drawing on Republican ideas that resonated with voters - taxes, crime, welfare and the federal budget - and articulating them with leftist policies on abortion, education and the environment, Clinton managed to neutralise his adversaries and adroitly turn the tables in his favour. But who would want to call this radical politics?

Let me make clear at the outset that the problem I see in this notion of the radical centre is not its rejection of traditional left solutions. The critique of statism and productivism is far from new and many people who still identify with the left have long been aware of the shortcomings of traditional social democracy. The problem is not in the radical centre's embracing some conservative themes either. The postmodern critique of Enlightenment epistemology has for some time stressed the possibility of, and the need to, dissociate the left project from its rationalistic premises. Several attempts to reformulate the aims of the left in terms of 'radical and plural democracy' have pointed out how, by helping us to problematise the idea of

1. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, Polity, Cambridge, 1994.

progress inherited from the Enlightenment, traditional conservative philosophers could contribute to the elaboration of a radical politics.

What is really the problem with the advocates of the 'radical centre' is, I believe, their claim that the left/right divide, an inheritance of 'simple modernisation', is no longer relevant in our era of 'reflexive modernisation'. By asserting that a radical politics today should transcend this divide and conceive democratic life as a dialogue, they imply that we live in a society which is no longer structured by social division. Relations of power and their constitutive role in society are disregarded; the conflicts that they entail are reduced to a simple competition between interests which can be harmonised through dialogue. This is the typical liberal perspective that envisages democracy as a struggle among elites, taking place in a neutral terrain, thereby making adversary forces invisible and reducing politics to an exchange of arguments and the negotiation of compromises. I want to argue that to present such a view of politics as 'radical' is disingenuous and that instead of being conducive to a greater democracy the radical centrism advocated by New Labour is in fact a renunciation of the basic tenet of radical politics: the definition of the adversary.

### **Conflict and modern democracy**

One of the main problems nowadays is that the left's coming to terms with the importance of pluralism, and of liberal democratic institutions, has been accompanied by the mistaken belief that this means abandoning any attempt to offer an alternative to the present hegemonic order. Hence the sacralisation of consensus, the blurring of the left/right distinction and the present urge of many left parties to locate themselves at the centre. But this is to miss a crucial point, not only about the primary reality of strife in social life, but also about the integrative role which conflict plays in modern democracy. The specificity of modern democracy lies in the recognition and the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it through the imposition of an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body - which is characteristic of the holist mode of social organisation - a democratic society asserts pluralism and makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values. A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions. If this is missing there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral

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values or essentialist forms of identifications as is the case with identity politics. Too much emphasis on consensus, together with aversion towards confrontations, leads to apathy and to disaffection with political participation. Worse still, it may backfire with the result being an explosion of antagonisms unmanageable by the democratic process. This is why a vibrant democratic life requires real debate about possible alternatives. In other words while consensus is indeed necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent. There is

**The blurring of the left/right divide creates a democratic deficit and leads to the trivialisation of politics'**

no contradiction in saying that, as some would pretend. Consensus is needed on the institutions which are constitutive of democracy, but there will always be disagreement concerning the way social justice should be implemented in and through these institutions. In a pluralist democracy such disagreement should be considered legitimate and

indeed welcome. We can agree on the importance of 'liberty and equality for all', while disagreeing sharply about their meaning and the way they should be implemented.

It is precisely this kind of disagreement which provides the stuff of democratic politics and it is what the struggle between left and right should be about. This is why, instead of giving up 'left' and 'right' as outdated terms, we should redefine them. When political frontiers become blurred, the dynamics of politics are obstructed and the constitution of distinctive political identities are hindered. Disaffection towards political parties sets in and in turn discourages participation in the political process. Alas, as we have begun to witness in many countries, the result is not a more mature, reconciled society, but the growth of other types of collective identities around religious, nationalist or ethnic forms of identifications. Antagonisms can take many forms and it is illusory to believe that they could ever be eliminated. This is why it is preferable to give them a political outlet within a pluralistic democratic system. The deplorable spectacle of the United States with the trivialisation of political stakes, reduced to the unmasking of sex scandals, provides a good example of the degeneration of the democratic public sphere. The focus on Clinton's sexual history is a direct consequence of this new kind of bland, homogenised political world resulting from the effects of triangulation. The development of a moralistic discourse and the obsessive unveiling of scandals, as well as the growth of various types

of religious integrisms, are too often the consequence of the void created in political life by the absence of democratic forms of identifications informed by competing political values.

However the problem is not specific to the US. A look at other countries where, because of different traditions, the sexual card cannot be played in the same way as in the Anglo-American world shows that the crusade against corruption and shabby deals can play a similar role in replacing the missing political line of demarcation between adversaries. In other circumstances yet, the political frontier might be drawn around religious identities or around non-negotiable moral values, as in the case of abortion. But in all cases what this reveals is a democratic deficit created by the blurring of the left/right divide and the trivialisation of political discourse.

**A**nother, perhaps more worrying, consequence of the same phenomenon is the increasing role played by extreme right-wing parties in many European countries. Indeed I submit that the rise of the far-right in France and Austria, for instance, should be understood in the context of the 'consensus at the centre' type of politics that has resulted in these particular countries from the growing ideological convergence between the main governing parties. This has allowed the National Front in France and the Freedom Party in Austria - the only parties to challenge the dominant consensus - to appear as anti-Establishment forces representing the will of the people. Thanks to a skilful populist rhetoric, they have been able to articulate many demands of the ordinary people, scorned as retrograde by the modernising elites, and they are trying to present themselves as the only guarantors of the sovereignty of the people. Such a situation, I believe, would not have been possible had more real political choices been available within the traditional democratic spectrum.

### **Politics and the political**

Unfortunately, political theory, dominated as it is by a rationalistic and individualistic perspective, is completely unable to help us understand what is happening. Hence the urgency to develop an alternative approach. Against the views that envisage democracy as a 'dialogue', it is important to grasp the role of power relations in society and the ever present possibility of antagonism. In order to begin delineating a different conception of politics, one which acknowledges the centrality of antagonism, it may be useful to make a distinction

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between 'the political' and 'politics'. By 'the political', I mean the potential antagonism inherent in social relations, antagonism which can manifest itself in many different forms. 'Politics' refers to the ensemble of discourses, institutions and practices whose objective is to establish an order, to organise human co-existence in a context that is always conflictual because of the presence of 'the political'. Politics is concerned with the formation of an 'us' as opposed to a 'them'. It aims at the creation of unity in a context which is always one of conflict and diversity.

Envisaged from that angle, the novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition, but the different way in which it is established. A pluralist democratic order supposes that the opponent is not considered as an enemy to be destroyed but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against her ideas but we will not put into question her right to defend them. This category of the adversary does not eliminate antagonism, though, and it should be distinguished from the liberal notion of the competitor with which it is sometimes identified. An adversary, we could say, is an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy while disagreeing about their interpretation and implementation. However this disagreement is not one that could be resolved through rational argument because it involves power relations. Hence the antagonistic element in the relation.

To come to accept the position of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity and it implies a shift in power relations. Certainly, compromises are possible and they are part of the process of politics, but these are only temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation in which it is impossible to satisfy everybody. There is a distinction which I take to be crucial for grasping the specificity of modern democratic politics: the distinction between antagonism and agonism. A relation of antagonism is one that takes place between enemies, while a relation of agonism takes place between adversaries. Against the two dominant models of democratic politics (the 'aggregative' one that reduces politics to the negotiation of interests and the 'deliberative' or 'dialogic' one which believes that decisions on matters of common concern should result from the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all) I envisage democratic politics as a form of 'agonistic pluralism'. This is a way to envisage democracy which, starting with the recognition of power relations and the conflicts that

they entail, stresses that in modern democratic politics the crucial problem is how to transform antagonism into agonism. In other words, the aim of democratic institutions from this perspective is not to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere; it is to provide democratic channels of expression for the forms of conflicts considered as legitimate.

Envisaging modern democracy as a form of agonistic pluralism has very important consequences for politics. Once it is acknowledged that this type of agonistic confrontation is what is specific to a pluralist democracy, we can understand why such a democracy requires the creation of collective identities around clearly differentiated positions, as well as the possibility to choose between real alternatives. This is precisely the function of the left/right distinction. The left/right opposition is the mean through which legitimate conflict is given form and institutionalised. If this framework does not exist or is weakened, the process of transformation of antagonism into agonism is hindered and this can have dire consequences for democracy. This is why discourses about the 'end of politics' and the irrelevance of the left/right distinction should not be cause for celebration, but for concern. The traditional framework of left and right is in serious need of overhauling and it is not a question of merely reasserting the old slogans and the dogmatic certainties. However it would be a mistake to believe that such a distinction could be transcended and that a radical politics could exist without defining an adversary.

### **Which globalisation?**

Those who argue for the need to go beyond right and left affirm that in the type of globalised, reflexive society in which we live, neither conservatism nor socialism can provide adequate solutions. No doubt this is the case. Moreover it is true that in political practice the categories of left and right have become increasingly blurred. But to infer from that empirical fact a thesis concerning the necessary irrelevance of such a distinction, or to make a value judgement about the desirability of its disappearance, is another matter. This might make sense from the perspective of a liberal approach unable to recognise the constitutive role of relations of power and the ineradicability of antagonism; but for those who aim at formulating a progressive politics it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of what I have called 'the political' and the impossibility of a reconciled society. Our task should be to redefine the left in

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order to re-activate the democratic struggle, not to proclaim its obsolescence. There is in advanced democratic societies an urgent need to re-establish the centrality of politics and this requires drawing new political frontiers capable of giving a real impulse to democracy. One of the crucial stakes for left democratic politics is to begin providing an alternative to neo-liberalism. It is the current unchallenged hegemony of the neo-liberal discourse which explains why the left is without any credible project. Paradoxically, while increasingly victorious politically - since it is in power in many European countries - the left is still thoroughly out-manouvered ideologically. This is why it is unable to take the intellectual initiative. Instead of trying to build a new hegemony, it has capitulated to the neo-liberal one. Witness the desperate strategy of 'triangulation' whose outcome is the 'Thatcherism with a human face' trademark of New Labour.

**G**lobalisation is the usual justification given for the 'there is no alternative' dogma. Indeed, the argument most often rehearsed against redistributive-type social-democratic policies is that the tight fiscal restraints faced by the government are the only realistic possibility in a world where voters refuse to pay more taxes and where global markets would not allow any deviation from neo-liberal orthodoxy. This kind of argument takes for granted the ideological terrain which has been established as a result of years of neo-liberal hegemony and transforms what is a conjunctural state of affairs into an historical necessity. Here, as in many other cases, the mantra of globalisation is invoked to justify the status-quo and reinforce the power of big transnational corporations.<sup>2</sup>

When it is presented as driven exclusively by the information revolution, globalisation becomes detached from its political dimension and appears as a fate to which we all have to submit. This is precisely where our critique should begin. Scrutinising this conception, Andre Gorz has recently argued that, instead of being seen as the necessary consequence of a technological revolution, the process of globalisation must be understood as a move by capital to provide what was a fundamentally political answer to the 'crisis of governability' of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> In his view, the crisis of the fordist model of development led to a divorce

2. For a similar argument see the editorial of *Soundings* No 7, *States of Africa* by Doreen Massey.

3. Andre Gorz, *Miseres du present, Richesse du ible*, Galilee, Paris 1997.



between the interests of capital and those of the nation states. The space of politics became dissociated from the space of the economy. This phenomenon of globalisation was made possible by new forms of technology. But this technological revolution required for its implementation a profound transformation in the relations of power among social groups and between capitalist corporations and the state. The political move was the crucial one. The result is that today corporations have gained a sort of extra-territoriality. They have managed to emancipate themselves from political power and to appear the real locus of sovereignty. No wonder the resources needed to finance the welfare state are diminishing since the states are unable to tax the transnational corporations.

**B**y unveiling the strategies of power which have informed the process of globalisation, Gorz's approach allows us to see the possibility for a counter-strategy. Of course it is vain to simply attempt to resist globalisation from the context of the nation state. It is only by opposing the power of transnational capital - another globalisation, informed by a different political project - that we could have a chance to resist successfully neo-liberalism and to install a new hegemony. However such a counter-hegemonic strategy is precisely what is precluded by the very idea of a radical centrism which denies the existence of antagonisms and the need for political frontiers. To believe that one can accommodate the aims of the big corporations with those of the weaker sectors of society is already to have capitulated to their power. It is to have accepted their globalisation as the only possible one and to act within the constraints that capital is imposing on national governments. The adherents of such a view see politics as a game where potentially the demands of all could be met without anybody having to lose. For New Labour there is of course neither enemy nor adversary. For them everybody or organisation are part of 'the people'. The interests of Murdoch, Formula One, or the rich transnational corporations, can be happily reconciled with those *of* the unemployed, single mothers and the disabled. Social cohesion is to be secured not through equality and solidarity but through strong families and shared moral values.

### **A new left-wing project**

Radical politics cannot be located at the centre because to be radical - as Margaret Thatcher, contrary to Tony Blair, very well knew - is to aim at a

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profound transformation of power relations. This cannot be done without drawing political frontiers and defining an adversary or even an enemy. Of course a radical project cannot be successful without winning over many of those who are located at the centre. All significant victories of the left have been the result of an alliance of important sectors of the middle classes, whose interests have been articulated, and those of the popular sectors. Today more than ever such an alliance is vital for the formulation of a radical project. But this does not mean that such an alliance requires taking the middle ground and trying to establish a compromise between neo-liberalism and the groups that it oppresses. There are many issues concerning the provision of decent public services and the creation of good conditions of life on which a broad alliance could be established. However this cannot take place without the elaboration of new hegemonic project that would put again on the agenda the struggle for equality which has been discarded by the advocates of neo-liberalism.

Perhaps the clearest sign of New Labour's renunciation of its left identity is that it has abandoned such a struggle for equality. Under the pretence of formulating a modern, post-social democratic conception of equality, Blairites have eschewed the language of redistribution in order to speak exclusively in terms of inclusion and exclusion. As if the very condition for inclusion of the excluded were not a drastic redistribution and a correction of the profound inequalities which the neo-liberal long decade has brought about.

The current avoidance by New Labour of the theme of equality, and its increasing acceptance of inequalities, is very symptomatic indeed. As Norberto Bobbio recently reminded us, it is the idea of equality which provides the backbone of the left vision while the right has always defended diverse forms of inequality.<sup>4</sup> The fact that a certain type of egalitarian ideology has been used to justify totalitarian forms of politics in no way forces us to relinquish the struggle for equality. What a left-wing project today requires is to envisage this struggle for equality in a way that takes account of the multiplicity of social relations in which inequality needs to be challenged. This will of course require a critique of the shortcomings of traditional social democracy. If Thatcherism was successful it is in part because it was able to re-articulate in its favour the popular resentment against those shortcomings. I have no problem therefore with the

4- Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right*, Polity, Cambridge, 1996.

idea of a 'post-social democratic polities', on condition that this does not mean regressing behind social democracy to some pre-social democratic liberal view. Yet this type of regression appears to be precisely the kind of move that is behind the logic of the welfare-to-work policies advocated by Blairites.

John Gray, another of Blair's advisers, celebrates New Labour for having abandoned a redistributive, social democratic idea of justice but worries that they have not put anything in its place. He urges them to re-invent liberal Britain by embracing the New Liberalism advocated in the early decades of this century by L.T. Hobhouse and T.H. Green. According to such a liberalism, says Gray, economic inequalities were not unfair and the important issue was to reconcile the demands of individual choice with the needs for social cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

**W**hile agreeing with Gray in his critique of 'egalitarianism', I believe that he establishes a false dichotomy between equality and individual freedom. To be sure there will always be a tension between those values and it is unrealistic to believe that they could be perfectly reconciled, but it does not mean that they are incompatible and that we have to discard one in pursuit of the other. For those who still identify with the left there are ways to envisage a social justice which is committed to both pluralism and equality. Several theorists have been concerned with developing such a perspective. For instance in *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer elaborates a conception which he calls 'complex equality'.<sup>6</sup> He argues that if one wants to make equality a central objective of a politics that also respects liberty it is necessary to abandon the idea of 'simple equality' which tends to render people as equal as possible in all areas. Equality in his view is a complex relationship between persons mediated by a series of social goods; it does not consist in an identity of possession. According to the complex view of equality that he advocates, social goods should be distributed, not in a uniform manner but in terms of a diversity of criteria which reflect the diversity of those social goods and the meaning attached to them. The important thing, he argues, is not to violate the principles of distribution proper to each sphere. One needs to preclude success in one sphere implying the possibility of exercising preponderance in others, as is now the case with wealth. It is essential that no social good be used as the means of

5. John Gray, 'Goodbye to Rawls', *Prospect*, November 1997.

6. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of justice*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

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domination and that concentration of political power, wealth, honour and offices in the same hands should be avoided. Thinking along those lines would allow us to envisage the struggle against inequality in a way that would respect and deepen pluralism instead of stifling individual freedom.

The main problem that a post-social democratic vision informed by a view of complex equality will have to tackle, a problem of which the welfare-to-work policies of New Labour seem to be unaware, is the crucial transformation with which our societies are confronted: the crisis of work and the exhaustion of the wage society. In this area, more than any other perhaps, it is evident that we have entered a quite different world in which neither laissez-faire liberalism nor Keynesianism will be able to provide a solution. The problem of unemployment calls for new radical thinking. Without a realisation that there will be no return to full employment (if that ever existed) and that a new model of economic development is urgently needed, no alternative to neo-liberalism will ever take off. The Americanisation of Europe will proceed under the liberal motto of 'flexibilisation'.

**A** truly radical project needs to start by acknowledging that, as a consequence of the information revolution, there is a growing dissociation between the production of wealth and the quantity of work needed to produce it. Without a drastic redistribution in the average effective duration of work, society will become increasingly polarised between those who work in stable, regular jobs and the rest who are either unemployed or have part-time, precarious and unprotected jobs. Jointly with such a redistribution, a plural economy should be developed where the associative sector would play an important role alongside the market and the state sector. Many activities, of crucial social utility but discarded by the logic of the market, could, through public financing, be carried out in this solidaristic economy. There is however a third element to take into account. Indeed the condition for the success of such initiatives is the implementation of some form of citizen's income that would guarantee a decent minimum for everybody. This is an idea that has recently been gaining an increasing number of supporters who argue that the reform of the welfare state would be better approached by envisaging the different modalities of such an income than by replacing it by workfare.

Implemented together these measures could create the basis for a post-social democratic answer to neo-liberalism. Of course such an answer could only be

carried out successfully in a European context and this is why a left-wing project today could only be a European one. In this time of globalisation the taming of capitalism cannot be realised at the level of the nation state. Only within the context of an integrated Europe, in which the different states would unite their forces, could the attempt to make finance capital more accountable succeed. If, instead of competing among themselves in order to establish the more attractive deals for transnational corporations, the different European states would agree on common policies, another type of globalisation could be possible. That the traditional conceptions of both the left and the right are inadequate for the problems that we are facing at the eve of the new millennium is something that I readily accept, but to believe that the antagonisms that those categories evoke have disappeared in our globalised world is to fall prey to the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse of the end of politics. Far from having lost their relevance, the stakes to which the left and the right allude are more pertinent than ever.

**A** last word on New Labour. Given its mistaken conception of the democratic process, we should not be surprised at the fact that it is unable to accept the expression of dissent in its midst. Its authoritarianism chimes with its conception of a consensual politics of dialogue from which strife has been eliminated. Such a conception cannot make room for the conflict inherent in social life. As I have tried to show, the radical centre is unable to acknowledge the importance of an agonistic confrontation. Every expression of dissent is therefore seen as the manifestation of an antagonism that will threaten Labour's existence. However this politics without an adversary is a flawed conception. By wanting to include everybody in 'the people', and have the powerful cohabit with the oppressed, New Labour perpetuates the continued subordination of the very people that it was meant to defend and represent. In the end it cannot do without adversaries, except that since it cannot see them in Murdoch and his likes, it must resort to the part of 'the people' that resists being 'dialogically' domesticated: 'Old Labour', which is depicted as the enemy. Alas politics always calls for decision. When the stakes are on the table, one needs to choose one's camp, there is no 'third way'. The centre - radical or not - has to take sides. We can only hope that New Labour will not learn that lesson too late.