

What is Left?

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In the past year, the TLS has published two articles, by David Selbourne and John Keane, about the present state of the Left. For Selbourne, the Left is "making little sense of the great issues of the day": it must "move on", make a "genuine break with the reactionary socialist tradition", acknowledge that "socialism's defeat in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union represents not merely an emancipation from error but is itself historically progressive" and ungrudgingly accept "Capital's victory over the politics of Labour". Keane also proposed moving on – to the "democratization of socialism and the Left", which should henceforth mean "the democratic fight for greater democracy"; he also disliked Selbourne's politics which he dubbed "anti-democratic Rightism". I want here to carry this discussion further by asking some questions contained in my title. What are the distinguishing features of the tradition of the Left? What survives of that tradition today? Is socialism what survives, and, if so, which socialism?

These questions press on us for two related reasons. First, the Left-Right distinction has increasingly been called into question, in both West and East. The political landscape has been changing, ever more rapidly, the old landmarks and beacons are fast fading from view, and some doubt that the old Left-Right maps are still of use. One reason for this is complexity: contemporary politics is said to be too complicated for this simple dualistic schema. Another is irrelevance: it is held to be inapplicable to the most urgent contemporary issues. Hence the German Greens' slogan "Neither Left nor Right but forward" and its rejection among parts of the feminist movement. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union it has for some time been commonplace to doubt its applicability. Thus Adam Michnik wrote: "To the vast majority of Poles, 'Left' and 'Right' are abstract divisions from another epoch." Observing the scene in 1988, Timothy Garton Ash was less inclined to throw his own map away, commenting that "a leftist oppositional intellectual in East Central Europe today" was "the one who says that the categories Left and right no longer have any significance in East Central Europe. The right does not say this." Since then, the situation has become even more confusing. One moment Ligachev was on the left, then on the right. And the putschists against Gorbachev were dubbed rightists and market-favouring "democrats" leftists.

The second reason is that the armies of the Left trading through the landscape no longer seem to know where they are going. They have for a long time suspected that the long march to another country has been abandoned, but now the confusion in the ranks is deeper. Those identifying with the Left think it important so to identify with the formerly Communist regiments now call themselves democratic regiments of the Left, yet they are uncertain about what it is they are identifying with.

The idea that politics is a conflict between Left and Right was born in Versailles in August 1789 in the noisy, unruly Constituent Assembly, when those of like mind gathered and voted together, to the right and left of the President's desk: those on the right called their opponents "factious" to discredit them, adopting for themselves the name of *le coin du Palais Royal*. The terminology of "right" and "left" was used from time to time during the Revolutionary period, the former signifying attachment to one's privileges and the hierarchical order, the latter the desire to bring that order down. But it was not until the early nineteenth century that the distinction became current as a means of representing divisions within the National Assembly, and thence in the nation at large; and in the process the dichotomy

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## Essential Socialism and the urge to rectify

STEVEN LUKES

became a continuum. Then it spread to Piedmont and Italy and thence throughout Europe and the entire world.

What significance can be attributed to this new way of dividing up political space? What new vision of politics did it encourage? Conceiving politics as a symbolic space allows, it seems, for just three possibilities: verticality, centre-and-periphery, and laterality. The first two modes were, of course, much in evidence in the *Ancien Régime*: the hierarchy of Royalty, Orders and Estates and the imagery of the Sun King exhibit familiar and universal iconographic patterns. But the lateral symbolism of left and right, whether conceived as a dichotomy or a continuum, could be interpreted as symbolizing a new way of conceiving political divisions.

The matter is of course speculative, but this suggestion seems at least plausible: that laterality signifies a certain kind of equality, or better perhaps, parity between alternative political positions. Left, right and points between co-exist on the same level. My hypothesis, in short, is that the invention of left and right in 1789, as a way of classifying political divisions, introduced the *Principle of Parity* into modern political life: the idea that political alternatives are legitimately equal competitors for the allegiance of citizens.

Yet a moment's reflection suggests that parity does not naturally obtain between left and right.

Consider, first, the evidence of Indo-European languages, such as the connotations of *sinister, gauche, linksch and maldroit* and by contrast those of *right and rectitude, droit and droite, dirito and Recht*. (Arabic, apparently, displays a similar bias.) The words for right connote dexterity, uprightness, what is customarily, morally and juridically correct, and the words for left their opposites. Or consider the so-called "fall of parity" in modern physics, documented in Martin Gardner's *The Ambidextrous Universe: Left, right and the fall of parity*.

Or consider the history of religions and the results of comparative ethnography. Virtually everywhere, the right symbolically prevails. God made Eve out of Adam's left side and the forces of evil are on the left in medieval Judaism. According to the New Testament, the Son of Man "shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left": to the former He shall say, "Come ye, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world"; but to the latter, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" and the Son of Man shall sit "on the right hand of power". Koranic theology displays the same bias. Tribal cultures show the same pattern. And in all these societies the right also prevails in ceremonial customs and social etiquette – in taking oaths, saluting, concluding marriage and other contracts, in greetings and the expression of respect and friendship.

In the light of all this, we can see that the political symbolism of left and right combines laterality and hierarchy, equal standing and unequal capacity, formal equality and real inequality. In appropriating the metaphor, the political Left transformed its meaning, refusing to acknowledge its hierarchical content as a natural given. Existing hierarchies and sacred principles of social order were to be put in question, inequalities of economic and social condition, of status and political power were unjust and therefore to be reduced and eventually eliminated as a systematic project of political action.

"The Left", in short, denotes a tradition and a project born of the Enlightenment and expressed in the Principles of 1789: to fulfil the promises implicit in these by progressively reinterpreting what they consisted in, and moving from the civil to the political to the economic, social and

cultural spheres, through political means, by mobilizing support and winning power. Often, too often, it has been abandoned or betrayed by those claiming to pursue it. What I here seek to identify is an ideal-typical Left, the essential elements by virtue of which abandonment and betrayal can be identified as such.

It is a project that has been expressed in various ways – in the language of rights, as a story of expanding citizenship or justice or democracy, or as a continuing struggle against exploitation and oppression, as it was by Karl Kautsky when he wrote that the goal of socialism was "the abolition of every kind of exploitation and oppression, be it directed against a class, a party, a sex or a race". The Left, we may say, is committed to the progressive rectification of inequalities that those on the Right see as sacred, inviolable, natural or inevitable. It seeks to put things right: to remedy all disadvantages that are naturally or socially caused, as far as is possible and reasonable, so that all may have equal life chances. It sees the battle against different inequalities as part of a single war. Those who believe only in movement politics – the struggle against racism, say, or the feminist cause – and deny the very idea of an overall project "beyond the fragments", thereby deny an idea essential to the Left.

The Left sees this *Principle of Rectification* as underpinning some theory of Progress, an overall narrative structure of cumulative conquests, whatever the setbacks. It embodies the practice of social criticism, since it is committed to putting institutions and practices, and the beliefs that sustain them, to the test of justificatory discussion. It is thus universalistic, in several ways. Its commitment to social criticism requires it to advance reasons that anyone on due reflection can accept, reasons they can publicly offer one another and acknowledge as compelling, independently of their particular interests. Second, the standpoint from which the criticism is made is external: a critique of what some of us do in terms of a wider "we". Third, the dynamic of the Rectification Principle is essentially boundary-crossing: it moves naturally from, say, class to racial to gender inequalities, but also from inequalities within the nation state to those on a global scale. If rectification is to take place within the nation state, what possible justification can there be for the maldistribution of the world's resources?

Rectification requires parity. Our century's heroic social experiment of "real socialism" has at least proved this: that when the Left comes to occupy the whole of political space, its rectifying project is subverted and in the process generates just another oppressive and unequal social order that in turn demands rectification, and thus an anti-socialist Left is born in the East whose relationship with the various movements and parties of the old socialist Left in the West is often difficult and ambiguous. What, then, is the relation between socialism and the Left? Does socialism today still embody the tradition and pursue the project of the Left? To answer this, we must ask with what socialism is to be contrasted.

One answer is *capitalism*. In that case, "socialism" means a feasible and viable socio-economic system that is an alternative to capitalism and will replace it. But no such system exists or can any longer be believed in. "Real socialism" at the end of the twentieth century could at best deliver an early twentieth-century economy and a grimly unjust and coercive social order. No "reformed" market-oriented version could have worked, since the change from bureaucratic to market co-ordination cannot be based on the unchallenged dominance of the state sector. Nor is there a plausible "Third Way" between the two systems, for two reasons. First, there is no second way. And second, there is no one first way, but rather

indefinitely many, from Brazil to Japan, from egalitarian Taiwan to social-democratic Sweden. Nor is there any reason to think that capitalism's versatility has reached its limit. From all of which we may conclude that socialism, on this interpretation, is the enemy of rectification, since it proposes an illusory world which will supposedly deliver it.

Is socialism, then, the opposite of liberalism? Militant Marxists used to say this, condemning "bourgeois" rights and freedoms as shams. But liberalism's central principles – of equality of respect and of opportunity, of personal liberty and tolerance in face of religious and moral diversity – do not contrast with a superior set of socialist principles. Rather, they demand to be taken more seriously than liberals have often taken them – though we should notice that this century's most impressive systematic defence of them, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, is a strongly egalitarian work of liberal political philosophy. But if liberals have, as socialists used to claim, turned the defence of these principles into an ideology that bolsters existing class relations, it does not follow that socialism needs other principles. The socialist project should rather be to interpret them, and live and act by them in a militantly rectifying spirit.

Or does socialism, finally, contrast with *individualism*? By "individualism" I here mean the free-market morality proclaimed by Austrian economists, such as von Mises and von Hayek, and practised by Thatcherism, the ethos of R. H. Tawney's "acquisitive society", in which the richness of human motivation is drowned, as Marx and Engels put it, "in the icy waters of egotistical calculation" and social bonds are reduced to the "cash nexus". On this interpretation, socialism does have distinct values and principles of its own: a commitment to reciprocal and solidaristic ways of living, and in particular to the principle that the energies, talents and skills of the favoured be turned to the advantage of those whom Rawls calls the "least favoured" – the poor, the defenceless, the unskilled and the unorganized, but also the disabled and the excluded. For market individualists, "society" does not exist, as Mrs Thatcher once said. Or rather, it is at most the background against which sovereign individuals are enabled and encouraged to reap rewards and exercise rights. For socialists, it is the field within which public policy intervenes to rectify injustices.

The socialism we have lost is not only a theory of institutional design for an entire socio-economic system but the very idea of such a theory. What is left is a strongly egalitarian, liberal and anti-individualist political morality that can inspire particular institutional innovations, programmes and policies and by which they can be judged. As the British General Election approaches, it gives a decisive verdict on a wide range of telling issues: on the invasion of market principles into the provision of public goods, forcing the needy to pay for private health-care and sharpening the social divisions in our education system; on the increasing unavailability of housing, legal aid and public libraries; on the prospects of the underclass – the homeless, the dispossessed, the under-skilled, the unaged and the unemployed; and on whether it is fairer that public borrowing should finance present private consumption or public investment for the future. Confronting such issues, two things are clear: our Left-Right maps still make sense of our politics, and the Left is right.

*In Choosing Our Future: A practical politics of the environment* (235pp. Routledge. £30; paperback, £8.99. 0 415 07946 2) Ann Taylor MP, the Labour Party's Spokesperson for Environmental Protection, asks whether human and environmental needs can ever be balanced, as well as how the Labour Party might best address the issue of environmental protection, within a system of socialist values, including a readiness to intervene and a commitment to equity in resource distribution. Included are chapters on the "greening of industry" and on "economics for the future", a bibliography and an index.

### Authors

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