

Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics

EDITORIAL: On Mixed vs Pure Politics

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The whole modern world has divided itself into secular technocrats and religious fundamentalists. The business of secular technocrats is to go on making mistakes; the business of religious fundamentalists is to prevent mistakes from being corrected. Another insight from Chesterton (one of many the reader will have to endure): towards the end of the 19th century, the modern world divided itself into the figures of the *pure* Progressive and the *pure* Conservative.¹ The left and the right are in many ways still enamoured with the ‘purity’ of their positions, a quality routinely but wrongly interpreted as indicative

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York, NY: John Lane Company, 1910), 60.

of consistency. Rowan Williams recently addressed the consternation felt by both left- and right-wing camps vis-à-vis the ideological stance of Pope Francis as signalling a need to move beyond precisely such 'package deal' ethics.² But a 'package deal' implies the involvement of intention and deliberation in the packaging of the political position in question. (We may refer to this, more pompously but also more precisely, as 'ideological totalisation'.) Chesterton's point on the other hand (with which Williams is ultimately in agreement), is that the 'consistency' of the left and right derives ultimately from the purity of merely progressing or merely conserving.³ When Rowenna Davis rightly points out that 'the left has always been better at knowing what it wants to reform rather than what it wants to protect',⁴ she is making an observation that, as anticipatory of political advice, is likely to fall on deaf ears. This is not merely because 'conservative' is the word of the opposition and because it is conducive to partisan discomfort to suggest, as Davis does, that for the Labour party to win another election it must learn what it wants to preserve as well as what it wants to transform and therefore to rediscover its conservative tradition.⁵ It is also because for a rigorous politics of 'pure progression', praxis is confined merely to the reforming or transforming *act*. This is what stultified the Labour Party's response to the post-referendum need to prioritise the preservation of EU workers' rights and other similar 'progressive' issues which Brexit brought to the fore of left-wing politics in the latter half of 2016. Perhaps it may be said that whilst the conjunction of the pure Progressives and Conservatives naturally leads to a stalemate, the former has no appropriate response to the increasing

² Rowan Williams, 'Pope of the Masses: Is Francis really the people's champion?' *New Statesman* [Online] September 2015
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2015/09/pope-masses-francis-really-people-s-champion> (accessed: 21 March 2017).

³ Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw*, 60-61.

⁴ Rowenna Davis, 'Labour's "Conservative" Tradition' in *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, ed. Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 195, 196.

preponderance of the atavistic desire to return to the *status quo ante*. This is no doubt to be connected with the erroneous perception of our present predicament as a novelty. Of course, most post-liberal political visions (some of which are explored in this issue) are crucially informed by a disposition to recover one's sources, and in a time when atavistic sensibilities are increasingly normalised, thinkers within and around the Radical Orthodoxy movement would care greatly to discern the presentness of the past from its pastness—to borrow T.S. Eliot's formulation.

Indeed, what is certainly increasingly felt today is the pastness of liberalism. The impulse to move beyond it involves at least in part, according to the thinkers represented in this special issue, the recognition of its historical emergence as a corollary of the failure of the political vision of the Middle Ages and of the collapse of Christendom. At the theological and philosophical level, we are attempting to trace what Jacques Maritain, has called 'integral humanism' and to articulate a political position which the genealogy of the collapse of this humanism entails. However the political vision that may be entailed in the final analysis requires us to diversify the typology of progressives and conservatives, the left and the right, and it is also clear that other emerging political visions (which are both increasingly successful and potent in the socio-economic modifications which their implementation engenders) are similarly not reducible to such dichotomisation. At the same time, we should mark the significance of the increasing interest in 'secular' forms of association amongst the 'liberal' segments of the populace in the form of musical concerts and other artistic forums in contradistinction to declining numbers in churchgoing.⁶ Thus part of what post-liberal politics is crucially engaged in today is the mobilisation of the unexpressed consensus in Britain (and probably, if not certainly, elsewhere in the

⁶ Which is no doubt connected with growing perceptions about the inadequacies of current liturgical practices.

West) which rejects both technocratic liberalism and atavistic and sometimes fundamentalist neo-fascism.⁷

Most of these reflections lead us in the necessary direction of recognising the inadequacy of the left versus right distinction in contemporary politics. As Rowan Williams writes apropos the Pope:

Conservative or liberal? The Pope's record might prompt us to ask whether these categories are as obvious or as useful as we assume. As various commentators have astutely noticed, the Pope is a Catholic. That is, he thinks and argues from a foundational set of principles that are not dictated by the shape of political conflict in other areas. It is difficult for some to recognise that his reasons for taking the moral positions he does on abortion or euthanasia are intimately connected with the reasons for his stance on capitalism or climate change.

More than a century of Catholic social teaching has failed to make less severe the disappointment and often surprise characteristic of the responses from the left when the Pope opposes euthanasia or from the right when the Pope repudiates capitalism. But the Pope is a good Platonist and shows us that knowledge, including knowledge of the good and the right—to invoke the Platonic distinction—requires understanding which in turn entails explanation. This is different from the epistemic position designating merely true belief where variously held truths are either isolated from one another or hold together for arbitrary reasons. The inadequacy of these dichotomies may be demonstrated in two ways. Firstly, in relation to the fact that 'left' and 'right' are irreducibly categories of modernity which map certain dispositions vis-à-vis history and tradition that are nonetheless dispositions informed by the sensibilities of modernity.⁸ In this sense, 'conservative' and 'liberal' are also categories which

⁷ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 381-382.

⁸ See John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 129-132, 261-261.

simply convey irreducibly 'liberal' dispositions. The contemporary technocratic metropolitan is in some important ways an inheritor of legacies of libertinism, perhaps especially in England, and Pinto has furthered this genealogical insight in a biography of John Wilmot by correctly linking his libertinism with Hobbesian materialism.⁹ But the same may be said of the contemporary fundamentalist, ultimately with recourse to the same genealogical endpoint. Secondly, and as Camille Paglia has also recently noted, the dichotomy is outmoded in relation to newly emerging implications of global politics and increased technologisation.¹⁰ Thus the division into left- and right-wing politics is doubly inadequate and doubly outmoded and outdated; it is inadequate in light of any return to pre-modern sources (since these sources are anterior to liberalism), as well as in light of future engagement with post-modern challenges (which to some extent always invoke presentness of the pre-modern).

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that out of modernity's dichotomisation of sensibilities internal to the liberal and modern, which perhaps first occurred with great significance in the cultural sphere, with the uniquely modern battle of the books between 'ancients' and 'moderns' (which was in fact the quarrel between two kinds of moderns), that *culture* has emerged in Western society, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, as our 'central life-world category'.¹¹ This is sufficiently the case to entertain the idea of the contemporary 'culture war' as a sustaining discourse of modernity's originary quarrel between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists', holding back any kind of post-modern excoriation of modernity. As Thomas Frank has shown with regard to the American context, ideological disagreements along philosophical and economic lines are transposed into

⁹ Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Enthusiast in Wit: A Portrait of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1962).

¹⁰ Camille Paglia, 'Women aren't free until speech is' *Time* [Online] March 2017 <http://time.com/4707294/camille-paglia-women-arent-free-until-speech-is/?xid=homepage> (accessed: 21 March 2017).

¹¹ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 30.

disagreements along 'moral' and cultural lines, to the effect of setting up a new opposition between the hard-working poor and the 'liberal elite' which really obscures the more basic division between the rich and the poor.¹² This does not, however, only obscure class division, but obscures authentic cultural processes whose political necessity the post-liberal vision highlights.

Instead of merely stipulating (as does Marxism) an overdetermining antagonism which enables the theoretical overcoming of other oppositions which are determined as 'single issue' politics, typically attached to a specific politicised identity, mixed or 'psychic' politics begins with the overdetermination of the human psyche as determined towards a peaceable and just ordering,¹³ though it achieves this, importantly, through two additions. Firstly, it recognises the socialist principle (which is nonetheless affirmed, following Maurice Glasman, in unison with Catholic Social Thought) that work, which discloses the personal origin of the human, does designate a kind of concrete universal.¹⁴ Secondly and crucially, it affirms—and this is indicative of its contemporaneity—a kind of primacy of culture (especially in the domain of international relations)¹⁵ which constitutes, in keeping with the Hegelian typology, the 'universal particular'. But the centrality of culture in contemporary socio-political discourse cannot be exhaustively explained by ideological criticism;¹⁶ it occasions the recognition of culture as a superadded reality to material politics. In other words, it is not that what matters most today—politics—is *really* about culture (as both the liberal technocrats and the atavists differently insist through their focus

¹² See Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

¹³ Recall Henri de Lubac's criticism of Marxist anthropology in Henri Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. E.M. Riley, et al. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), especially p. 444.

¹⁴ Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356-357.

¹⁶ Frank sometimes intimates this, and many more are likely to affirm it, but Žižek is right to be suspicious (pp. 31-32).

on social over fiscal issues), but that what matters most today simply is culture. For the thesis of ‘psychic’ politics is precisely that ‘the embodied soul evolves in the city and is, therefore, political, just as politics is about the governance of both the body and the soul and, therefore, the city is psychic’.¹⁷

This special issue on post-liberal and post-secular political visions reboots the *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* journal with a year’s perspective on the Brexit referendum. If the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 was a corollary of a rejection of liberalism from a more recognisably ‘right-wing’ position (as a number of authors contributing to this issue recognise), the 2017 UK snap election signalled a possible new direction for a move beyond the liberal establishment in major party politics. Some perspectives on both the challenges and opportunities that this presents are articulated below.

¹⁷ Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 275.