# Has the future a left?


## Zygmunt Bauman



*Zygmunt Bauman proposes two defining principles for the left, and argues that these principles will always need to be battled for.*


There are currently two dominant ways of arriving at the idea of 'the left', both of which lead to a definition that is as unsettled and transitory as the reference points from which it is drawn. (Indeed such approaches can be seen as typical of the 'nowist' vision - the tyranny of the moment - that is a feature of our times: ideas can be assigned a history, but rarely ascribed a steady, stable substance.)

The first approach is to review and overhaul what has been remembered as the left (how much easier it would be if it could be forgotten) - with the intention of 'updating' it - that is, catching up with the most recent meanders of 'the right'. Examples include Blair's concept of New Labour as Labour adjusted to Thatcherist patterns of political wisdom, or warnings to Gordon Brown not to veer to the left given the apparent drift of disenchanted Labour voters to the Tories. In this approach, any substance the left may possess is secondary to the current position of the right. The agenda of the left becomes a derivative, a mirror image of the agenda scripted by the right. The left is whatever is not quite as right as the right currently manages to be. Ultimately it all boils down to a question of what the left could do better and more efficiently than the right, in relation to the things that the right has declared to be good and proper. In the last two decades this has been the British, and to a lesser extent German, way.

The second approach is to assemble a notion of the left out of the scattered and variegated political leftovers, rejects and refuse of the right. The substance underpinning this approach is purely negative, and lacks any inner core or cohesion. Being rejected - or not-fully-accepted - by the scriptwriters and directors of the right is the sole glue deemed necessary for holding the left together. This has recently been the approach of the Italians, for instance, and to a lesser extent the French.

There is, however, another way of grasping and comprehending the phenomenon of the left (not to be confused with the 'third way', or warmed-over policies represented as 'beyond left and right'). This other way starts from two assumptions essential for a specifically left perception of the human condition and its prospects and untapped possibilities. These assumptions are the basis for a self-assertive left, which, instead of apologising for its opposition to the mainstream, strives to create, protect, and be tested against values which it regards as non-negotiable. This way of grasping the defining features of the left is one that realises the left's ubiquitous and steadfast presence in modern forms of life, and understands that its frequently alleged demise always turns out to be no more than a relatively brief period of hibernation and/or recuperation.

The first assumption is that it is the duty of the community to insure its individual members against individual misfortune. And the second is that, just as the carrying capacity of a bridge is measured by the strength of its weakest support, so the quality of a society should be measured by the quality of life of its weakest members. These two constant and non-negotiable assumptions set the left on a perpetual collision course with the realities of the human condition under the rule of capitalism; they necessarily lead to charges against the capitalist order, with its twin sins of wastefulness and immorality, manifested in social injustice.

These assumptions will continue to set the left on such a course in the future - for at least three vital reasons. First, the charges they raise against capitalism remain completely topical: if anything, they have acquired even greater force in the globalisation of the capitalist order. Second, it is utterly unlikely that collective insurance against individual mishaps will ever be completed and made truly safe, or that vigilant scrutiny will ever be no longer be required. And third, it is equally unlikely that a society will ever be achieved in which some groups or categories of people do not fall behind the rest, or below the average standards.

The left is best described as a stance of permanent criticism of the realities of social life, which always fall short of the values a society professes and promises to serve. The left is not committed to any specific model of human togetherness: the sole model it refuses to tolerate is a regime that deems itself perfect - or at least the best of all possible worlds - and therefore immune to questioning. The left wants a humane society, one that strives for justice for all its members. The left defines a just society as one that is aware that it is not-yet-sufficiently-just, that is haunted by this awareness and thereby spurred into action.

The left cannot be anything other than democratic. It is a natural adversary and a sworn and staunch enemy of all ‘pensée unique’, whether in its current or any other variety - and of the TINA ('There Is No Alternative') posture. If an optimist is someone who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist is someone who suspects that the optimist may be right, the left places itself instead in the third camp: that of hope. Refusing to pre-empt the shape of the good society, it can't but question, listen and seek. As Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the founders of the 'socialism or barbarism' movement, has pointed out, in Ancient Athens each law accepted in the agora was preceded by a preamble stating that it was 'the view of the Council and the people': this alerted people to the law's possible fallibility, and the need to subject it to continual critical scrutiny. The left's hope is that such perpetual questioning, listening and seeking will call into being and keep alive a community of citizens - of people armed with tongues as much as with ears, and adept at using both. A community is democratic only insofar as its members know that the society that makes them citizens and gives shape to their citizenship is of their own making; and insofar as its citizens are prepared to bear responsibility for its assets and liabilities, virtues and vices.

The left stands for the awareness that the job of making the world more hospitable to human dignity - the dignity of all humans - remains unfinished. It stands for the

principled action that derives from such awareness. In these circumstances nothing is likely to make the left redundant: the completion of this task seems unlikely in any future that its principles enable/allow it to foresee, bring forth and shape. The sole thing one can be sure of when pondering the shape of such a future is that it is unlikely to be beyond criticism, and so is bound to have its left. Making the left indispensable, and ever and anew calling it into being, is the one permanent, unchanged and perhaps unchangeable feature of an otherwise eminently unstable and restless modern world.

**Global challenges for the left**

Two tendencies in the on-going history of the modern world stand out from all the numerous recent developments that are in opposition to the two constitutive assumptions of the left. These tendencies are the foremost challenge the left must confront in the foreseeable future - confronting them will indeed shape its own future, and that of the human condition. One tendency has come to be known as globalisation. Its most conspicuous distinguishing mark is the growing separation, nay divorce, between power and politics. This has led to the absence of any agency adequate to the enormity and gravity of the tasks that crave to be confronted and tackled. The other tendency is referred to under many and seemingly different names: crisis of citizenship, commercialisation of human bonds and interaction, the advance of consumerist culture, the dissipation of human solidarity. It has many names, but a closer scrutiny reveals that they all relate to a shared referent: a deepening feeling of existential insecurity, and an inability to locate, much less stem, its sources.

The charges Karl Marx raised against the capitalist market have lost nothing of their force. Unless closely watched and checked, markets tend to produce a lot of waste and lead to the deepening polarisation of human conditions and life prospects. They also generate insecurity, promoting and reinforcing feelings of abandonment, alienation and loneliness. For many decades the capitalist market was held in check - in no small measure under the direct or indirect influence of Marx's analysis. Its potentially devastating impacts were mitigated within the framework of the modern nation-state - through a lengthy, almost two-century long effort that culminated in the institution of the 'welfare state'. But the 'negative' globalisation of finance, capital and trade (though not of the political and legal institutions capable of controlling and regulating them) has rendered virtually useless the means at the disposal of territorial nation states for regulating the newly extraterritorial economic powers. The nation state has become incapable of counteracting their socially damaging propensities. At the same time, there are no new political agencies on the horizon capable of contemplating, let alone assuming, that job. The process of recapturing 'no man's land', conducted throughout the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth centuries under the auspices of the emergent nation-states, needs to be repeated in the twenty-first century. This time it must be done on a radically wider - humanity-wide - planetary scale, by agencies yet to be invented and built.

The left is bound to play a role in this repeated process of counter-acting the damage wreaked by capitalism, no less than it did in the original struggles; and it faces a truly formidable task. It is moving into unknown and as yet unmapped territory, with no easily conceivable vision of a destination, or the vehicles that will take us there. The ever closer and more intimate interdependence of all inhabitants of the planet is surely an accomplished and irreversible fact; but to speak of a planetary 'community', able to insure all against bad fortune and life hazards, is - to say the least - grossly premature. Nor are we as yet truly prepared to think of the human species as a whole – one continuous bridge, whose carrying capacity is measured by the strength of its weakest pillar. Even less are we ready to act concertedly on that thought. The problem is indeed mind-boggling. This does not mean, however, that we may leave it unattended - that would be at our shared peril.

There is now no longer any truly sovereign territory. Human rights, dignity of life, freedom and security can no longer be assured (not in a long run, at any rate) in any one country - unless on a planet where all these widely coveted values are universal human possessions. Care for the living standards and integrity of people around us will not be fully effective, and in the longer term could be shown to be fraudulent, if it does not rest on a steady concern with the planet as a whole, and on actions dictated by such concern. In a globalised planet, the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' has lost much of its former meaning and clarity. Any duality of strategies derived from that distinction has also lost its meaning. Whatever vision of the future the present-day left entertains and pursues must derive from the current interdependence, and prospective unity, of humanity.

This requirement does not invalidate the home-focused preoccupation of the left. Domestic, nationstate-focused concerns require vigilant attention. Keen and earnest engagement in the cause of the welfare of humanity as a whole can only start at home. It does matter, and crucially so, who the actors of global transformations are. What prospects are they determined to promote, which global settlements are they inclined to support and which oppose? To what use will they put the admittedly local resources they command? It is the ethical codes and value preferences gestated, incubated and entrenched within the framework of national policies that will eventually decide the principles that unified humanity will adopt and pursue. These will decide the quality of the global society that is brought into existence.

The exact form which 'unified humanity' will take cannot be designed, and even less can it be prescribed before the process of unification runs its course. However it can be said that this process is highly unlikely to lead towards a world-wide uniformity of culture, faith, or style of life - as it did not when conducted inside the realm of the nation state. Variety of life forms is here to stay. The unity of humankind will stand or fall on progress made in the arts and skills of living with difference, and eventually on a mutual acceptance of otherness, which does not require as its condition the annihilation or abandonment of difference. As Georg Gadamer states it: the art and skills of living with the Other, and living as the Other's Other.

The persistence of diversity, and the benefits to be derived by all participants from their multivocality, does not in any way justify indifference about the quality of life that each variety may offer. If the two principles that constitute the left are used as the yardstick by which the virtues and the shortcomings of each variety are measured, not all will pass the test with equal honours. Some are likely to emerge from the test with flying colours, others are not.

**The social state**

More than anything else, the 'welfare state' (I prefer to call it the social state, which shifts the emphasis from material gains to the principle of their provision) is such an arrangement of human togetherness. It resists the present-day 'neo-liberal' tendency to break down the networks of human bonds and undermine the social foundations of human solidarity. The drive to 'privatise' - that is to impose the essentially anti-communal patterns of the consumer market and individual consumption - pushes the task of resolving socially produced problems onto the shoulders of individual men and women, with their admittedly inadequate skills and insufficient resources. A social state protects its members from the morally devastating competitive 'war of all against all'.

A state is 'social' when it promotes the principle of communally endorsed, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences. It is that principle - declared, set into operation and trusted to be working - that lifts abstract 'society' to the level of felt-and-lived community. It replaces the mistrust and suspicion-generating 'order of egoism' (to deploy John Dunn's terms) with the confidence and solidarity-inspiring 'order of equality'. And it is this same principle that lifts members of society to the status of citizens. It makes them stakeholders as well as stock-holders. They become beneficiaries, but also actors, responsible for the creation and availability of benefits.

They become individuals with an acute interest in the common good, which is understood as the shared institutions that assure the solidity and reliability of any state-issued 'collective insurance policy'. The application of this principle may, and often does, protect men and women from the plague of poverty. Most importantly, however, it can develop into a fertile source of solidarity, able to recycle 'society' into a common, communal good. It provides defence against the twin horrors of misery and indignity, and against the terrors of falling, or being pushed, overboard from the fast accelerating vehicle of progress. A defence against condemnation to 'social redundancy' or consignment to 'human waste'.

The social state, in its original intention, was to be an arrangement to serve precisely such purposes. Lord Beveridge believed that his vision of a comprehensive, collectively endorsed insurance for everyone was the inevitable consequence and indispensable complement of the liberal idea of individual freedom, as well as the indispensable condition of liberal democracy. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's declaration of war on fear was based on the same assumption. After all, freedom of choice always brings with it uncounted and uncountable risks

of failure. Many people find such risks unbearable, fearing that they may be too much to cope with. Freedom of choice will remain an elusive phantom and idle dream for most people, unless fear of defeat can be mitigated by an insurance policy issued in the name of community - a policy people can trust and rely on in cases of personal defeat or blows of fate.

If freedom of choice is granted in theory but unattainable in practice, the humiliation of haplessness is likely to be heaped on top of the pain of hopelessness. The daily putting to the test of people's ability to cope with life challenges is after all the very workshop in which individuals' self-confidence, and thus their self-esteem, is cast or melted away. Furthermore, without collective insurance there is no stimulus for political engagement - and certainly none for participation in a democratic game of elections. No salvation is likely to arrive from a political state that refuses to be a social state.

Without social rights for all, a growing number of people would find their political rights useless and unworthy of their attention. If political rights are necessary to set social rights in place, social rights are indispensable to keep political rights in operation. The two rights need each other for their survival. Their survival can only be a joint achievement.

The social state is the ultimate modern embodiment of the idea of community. It is an institutional incarnation of an abstract, imagined totality, woven of reciprocal dependence, commitment and solidarity. Social rights tie that imagined totality to the daily realities of its members, and found that imagination in the solid ground of life experience. These rights certify the reality of mutual trust, and of trust in the shared institutional networks that endorse and validate collective solidarity. 'Belonging' translates as trusting in the benefits of human solidarity, and in the institutions that arise out of that solidarity. It is a promise to serve it and assure its reliability. In the words of the Swedish Social
Democratic Programme of 2004: "Everyone is fragile at some point in time. We need each other. We live our lives in the here and now, together with others, caught up in the midst of change. We will all be richer if all of us are allowed to participate and nobody is left out. We will all be stronger if there is security for everybody and not only for a few". (1)

Contrary to the assumption of 'third way' advocates, loyalty to the social state tradition and an ability to modernise swiftly - with little or no damage to social cohesion and solidarity - need not be at loggerheads. On the contrary, as the social democratic practice of our Nordic neighbours has demonstrated, the pursuit of a more socially cohesive society is the necessary precondition for modernisation by consent. The Scandinavian pattern is anything but a relic of the past. Just how topical and alive its underlying principles are, and how strong its possibilities for inspiring human imagination and action, is demonstrated by the recent triumphs of emergent or resurrected social states in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile. Gradually yet indefatigably they are changing the political likeness and popular mood of the Western Hemisphere. They bear the hallmarks of that 'left hook' with

which, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, all truly decisive blows in human history tend to be delivered. And though this is a truth that is hard to perceive in a Britain that is sunk in the murky dusk of the Blairist era, it is the truth nevertheless.

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Notes
1. See Sweden's new social democratic model, Compass 2005, p32.