Dialectics of the Swing (Voter): Notes on The Formation of the Radical Centre

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Abstract: This paper aspires to offer a brief genealogy of a new figure of political discourse that I call the "radical centre." In opposition to earlier centrisms, discourses which emphasized moderation, harmony, and balance, this new configuration imbues the centre with a kind of revolutionary or radical potential linked to its capacity to avoid being "trapped" by the traditional political poles. Though this thought envisions itself as beyond ideology and in some sense beyond repetition of any kind, the tropology of the centre is filled with repeating motifs and figures. The claim of this paper is that the radical centre has become the dominant political rhetoric of our time and that its hegemony works to preempt the possibility of genuinely new (and inventive) forms of political imagination.

I am ever for the Medium in every thing. Between foolish rashnesse and extreme length, there is a middle way

King James I (164, 1994)

I am not a centrist because I can’t make my mind up about Right and Left, rather it is because each of those has proved itself to be so non-optimal that rationality and experience move me toward the dynamic moving center.

Paul Samuelson

…we need political innovation that takes America’s disempowered radical center and enables it to act in proportion to its true size, unconstrained by the two parties, interest groups and orthodoxies that have tied our politics in knots. The radical center is “radical” in its desire for a radical departure from politics as usual….

Thomas Friedman,

From the widespread contemporary tendency to locate truth “somewhere in the middle” to the quickness with which we dismiss uncommon political alternatives as “extreme” or “marginal”, the centre as a cultural trope has become the dominant way of structuring, legitimating and disqualifying forms of knowledge and politics in postmodern societies. The
centre, of course, is not a new political figure: it is, in fact, among our oldest. Invocations of the middle as an ideal space of political (and metaphysical) balance, truth or efficacy are at least as old as Aristotle and have functioned as an anthropological constant across a range of cultures and times. The most famous example here is, of course, China, the Mandarin name of which (zhongguo) foregrounds spatial and metaphysical centrality as basic to the very self-conception of the country. The centre, however, comes to take on its modern Western connotations in the aftermath of 1789 and the irruption of the modern political spectrum: though this process began earlier in Britain, it is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the canonical content of the Left/Right opposition is consolidated within political theory and practice.

For much of the modern period, however, especially the case in the early to mid-twentieth century, the middle came to be seen by many as a site of opportunism, fence-sitting, and intellectual cowardice, a political position that was accidental or manipulated rather than auto-telic and rational. To be “caught in the middle” was, from this angle, an experience of extreme and humiliating immobility; nothing so disgusted the radical republican and socialist revolutionaries of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than a centrist. It is in this context that we can understand Robespierre invoking the image of the middle as a kind of swamp (“Le Marais”), a morass that swallows every genuine virtue and intensity (150). The middle, so it would seem, was where possibility went to drown and die.

The centre functioned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a synonym for the good “common-sense” of liberalism just as its valence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was still regularly articulated to the body of the sovereign and the propriety and naturalness of absolutism. Here the centre is that which stands between order and catastrophe, a principle of architecture that prevents the social universe from spiralling into anarchy. Though this older image of the political centre as the site of metaphysical and social order can be traced through the whole of the Western philosophical tradition in the twentieth century, this figure was linked to politicians like Harold Macmillan and Dwight Eisenhower who promised ostensibly sensible, practical alternatives to the twin extremities of fascism and communism. What I call civil centrism designates this mid-century configuration in which legitimate political speech was thought to inhabit a middle ground mediated by the thick liberal democratic norms of the West, a culture of consensus that continuously counter-posed its own emphasis on dialogue and parliamentary reason with the ideological violence and mindlessness of authoritarianism. Crucial
to this discourse were the notions of moderation and balance; the civil centrist, continuously invoking the horrors of extremity, stood, or so it seemed, as a last, teetering bulwark against the chaos induced by a modernity without axes or limits. The predicate “civil” here implies not simply a commitment to liberal democracy as a form of government—a form thought to protect the autonomous rights and values of “civil society”—but also to a set of hexical and behavioral codes, a political “style” characterized by a certain middle class (or even aristocratic) politeness. “Macmillan’s achievement”, wrote one commentator, “was partly one of style, a public posture of unflappability [that] served to reassure the electorate that Britain remained strong and secure” (Bogdanor, 1986).

The contention of this essay—and of a wider program of research focussed on my book-in-progress, *Critique of Centrist Reason*—is that we are living in the age of a new figure of the centre, one that functions in profound and often unnoticed ways to limit contemporary political imagination and practice. This new, “radical centre” imagines itself, in direct opposition to the civil centre mentioned above, as intrinsically revolutionary—radical, precisely by virtue of the rigour with which it occupies and cultivates discriminate “middle ground”. The middle is no longer a slough or bog, nor a zone of civil consensus, but the site of extreme (even dangerous) invention. The statement quoted above by Nobel Laureate Paul Samuelson perfectly captures the spirit of this new logic. The old image of the civil centre as a pragmatic, steady, middle course, as the upstanding back-bone of social order, has here been clearly replaced by a centre envisioned as a risky space of epistemological invention and possibility, a dynamic zone in which thought transcends old borders and limits. Though Musk or Zuckerberg haven’t yet announced bids for the presidency, when they do they’ll no doubt arrive, too, as “outside-the-box” partisans of the radical centre (the linkages between this rhetoric and postmodern economies will be explored below).

Traces of this new radical centrist consensus can be found everywhere. Its most obvious symptom is the now ritual tendency to signpost the content of one’s political position as intrinsically “beyond” the canonical Left/Right opposition: Thomas Friedman’s call in the *New York Times* for a new “tea Party of the Radical Center” (2010); Emmanuel Macron’s insistence that he is neither “Left nor Right”, but “for France” (qtd. in Collier, 2017); Tony Blair and Bill Clinton’s mid-nineties invocation of a Third Way (as well as *Neue Mitte* rhetoric in Germany around the same time); Barack Obama’s injunctions to a “post-partisan” politics that ‘reaches
across the aisles’ (qtd. in Weisman, 2008). So much of the common sense of contemporary political discourse takes as its key point of reference a middle or centre space imagined to be free from the stultifying repetition, “ideology” and dogma of the traditional political poles. In an address to the crowd given shortly after his 2017 election victory, Macron’s radical centrist stance was unmistakeable: “I will do everything I can” he said “to make sure you never have reason again to vote for extremes” (qtd. in Chrisafis, 2017).

A full demonstration of the pervasiveness of this logic within the context of contemporary culture is beyond the purview of this paper. Instead, I am going to simply lay out some of the basic coordinates of this imaginary by broadly examining its expression in one specific text, The Economist magazine, roughly between the years 1990 and 2013. The Economist is here particularly useful because it explicitly identifies as a partisan of the “extreme centre” and today exemplifies in perhaps the purest possible form many of the conceptual tics and habits now being distributed more broadly throughout contemporary global political culture. It is no coincidence, and this will be explored more fully below, that the expansion of the hegemony of the radical centre is precisely coeval with that of full-blown neoliberalism. If, as Dardot and Laval have argued, neoliberalism is a fully-formed “global rationality”, a way of being that comes to function on the level of behaviour as a new “existential norm”, there is a real sense in which the radical centre has come to function as the imaginary political space proper to this norm (8). Wendy Brown has argued that “neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense”—though it was from the Right that neoliberalism was first introduced and the consolidation of the era of its hegemony coincides with that of a political logic grounded in the seeming naturalness of centres and middles. What has gone largely unnoticed by theorists and critics of neoliberalism is how dependent its persuasiveness is on the figure of the radical centre: the latter is not merely an adjacent sign attached loosely to neoliberal practice, a fake flag flown to distract or confuse, but is instead the very *topos* in which neoliberalism unfolds, a map of the political that is at the same instant a working picture of Being itself. To lay out the remarkably subtle political ontology at work on the inside of any gesture to the centre is among the most important tasks for thought today, more so because even the most radical critics of contemporary capitalism—Hardt and Negri, for example1—find themselves reproducing many of its least visible gestures and habits.

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1 The conjunction between post-68 French theory—what we today sometimes call “post-structuralism”—and the
Radicalizing the Centre: From Thatcherite Exigency to Radical Management

[Margaret Thatcher] regards parliament as a legislative machine and its managers as often lumbering technicians…she is ruthless against all forms of bureaucracy…when most prime ministers would have happily sunk into the upholstery…she is still wrestling with the steering wheel and cursing the instruments.


[Schroeder] is a business-friendly, barely left-leaning Protestant from Hanover…whose instincts draw him not just to Paris and Rome, but also to London, even to Washington. He has a beautiful fourth wife, once a columnist at a tabloid newspaper, and he seems unabashed about his three divorces…He has attractive, lively-looking candidates for some posts—a computer entrepreneur, Jost Stollmann, to take charge of the economy, Walter Riester, a forward-looking trade unionist, to deal with labour, Michael Naumann, a civilised publisher, for the arts.


During its neoliberalisation in the 1980s, the avowed (civil) centristm of _The Economist_ passed through a period in which it was forced to attempt the extremely difficult task of retaining a hold on its claim to “pragmatist” circumspection even as it championed a new, emphatically “theoretical” position located on the margin of existing consensus. This is clearly demonstrated in _The Economist_’s complex negotiation of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher is a figure whose paradoxical combination of traditional social conservatism and “extreme” and inflexible monetarism placed her in a strange position vis a vis the journal’s traditional liberal suspicion of didactic government, but also with its tendency to frame dramatic theoretical or political change as at odds with centrist nuance and caution. Its conversion to Thatcherism and to a highly codified ideological position was framed by the magazine as the necessary (but temporary) corrective to the bloated impasse of “post-war consensus” (2013). Over-spending politicians, selfish unions, and lazy nationalized industries—all organized under an idea of coddled complacency, the original sin of the “nanny state”—had led to a Keynesian order that mechanically “inflated” from within, metastasizing in such a way as to necessitate authoritative, decisive action (Thatcher’s famous “[this] lady’s not for turning”). The crisis of the welfare state was so total that it required a complete suspension of business as usual, a kind of affective, political logic of the radical centre is an important part of _Critique of Centrist Reason_, but cannot be fully explored in this essay.
conceptual or political “state of emergency”. This shift to emphatic decisiveness (and even intensified executive authority) always existed uncomfortably with the magazine’s critique of “extremism”, a position it associates with “alarmist”, fashionable overreactions to problems better solved by more nuanced, intellectually subtle means. In short, its proximity to Thatcher compromised its claims to both skepticism and empiricism by aligning it with a way of thinking—“mad monetarism”—that was broadly intuited at the time by agents across the political spectrum as an extreme form of dogma.

It is in the shift from Thatcherite exigency—her “legendary” impatience with “wooly indecision”—to what we might call the managerial neoliberalism of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama that *The Economist* would perfect a centrism capable of combining the semiotics of balance with the feel and spirit of radicalism (1981, 21). As the phase of militant neoliberalism waned, a distinct style of governance coalesced around the project of intelligently managing the new conjuncture. All of the qualities necessary for the production of a revolutionary break were re-calibrated: idealist vision, which is to say the power to project a consolidated imagination of things to come; the thematics of authoritative action, with its emphasis on execution, decisiveness, and an integrated, realizable Plan; the whole rhetoric of intransigent fidelity; the truculence and indefatiguability of something like “character”; the figuration of consensus as an *ancien régime* characterized by sclerosis and rot. All of these to varying degrees were either jettisoned or transvalued under the conditions of full-blown neoliberal hegemony. Keep in mind that all of these coordinates spilled over into impressions intolerable to *The Economist’s* residual (civil) centrism: vision always risked becoming the purity and irreality of ideology (“mad monetarism”); authoritative action risked devolving into authoritarian blindness; fidelity stood to be lost to irrational attachment; “character” risked becoming boorishness; and the image of the present as sclerosis proposed a real threat to the Burkean sensibility and slowness (really a Conservatism) still always operative on the inside of any gesture to the political centre.

As neoliberalism trickled into the common-sense of transnational networks, think-tanks and governments, the neo-conservative aspects of “reform” uncongenial to the civil centre’s pragmatism, were replaced with a new thematics emphasizing bi-partisanship, co-operation, balance and flexibility. The Thatcherite break was increasingly conceptualized as itself a moment of excess, a disproportion at odds with the measured syntheses of the new centre.
Revolutionary intransigence, however, far from being dispensed with was instead inscribed into the very ethos of radical centrist management. Bi-partisanship was no longer the tepid consolidation of a consensus, but a radical fidelity to the singularity and intensification of differences (a position incidentally that would come to characterize the logic of post-structuralist ethics as well). Balance ceases to be static or normative, but a continuously refreshed dynamism of temporary alliances and connections, the “exhausting grind of consensus” (2003). To think this problem from the perspective of Carl Schmitt: bi-partisanship became the mantra of a hegemony at precisely the instant political antagonism as such had vanished.

One of the basic conceits of today’s radical centre is its claim to have exited the dialectics of big and small for a non-conforming third option premised on intelligent solutions. Clinton, Obama and now Macron regularly intone that we must move beyond the stultifying rigidity of the government/market dyad to a regulatory framework that escapes the limits of each. This is perhaps one of the clearest markers of the difference between Thatcher’s neoliberal logic of the partisan and the dialogical (yet “radical”) centrism practiced by today’s political elite. The radical centrist marks the end to Thatcherite market fundamentalism as a moment in the process of its own secularization. Yet this shift to the middle is not in any way a return to the social democratic ideals of the seventies (now wholly discredited as “appeasement” and “ideology”), but a dynamic sublation of opposites powered only by the differential potentiality of middleness itself. It is still unequivocally market oriented; it is simply that the semiotics of middleness—ideas about exchange, in-betweeness, a space of circulation—merge with a renewed conception of the market—as innovative, “creative”, social—to produce the impression of a position that is somehow at the same instant within and beyond the market/state dyad. It is this within and beyond that can be attached to the radical centre as a mark of its flexible refusal of ideological thinking. At the same time, the shift to the middle can be framed as a shift to a position beyond labels, a discriminate gesture that picks and chooses the good from the bad among all of the existing systems: “As prime minister, [Tony Blair] has been neither socialist, nor liberal, nor conservative, but has mixed all three together and somehow made the mixture stable” (May 10th, 2007).

The 1990s provided the centre's sense of its own hereticism with a tantalizing array of paradigmatic subjects. Fernando Cardoso, once a Marxist sociologist of uneven development, later Brazil's finance minister and architect of the anti-inflationary Plan Real; Adam Michnuk,
tireless debunker of ideological thinking, formerly a critic from the left of communist Poland; Michelle Bachelet, a consummate Chilean moderate once tortured by Pinochet; and Tony Blair himself, among countless others, repeat a remarkably linear formula. At one pole exists belief, ideology, and youth while at the other, experience, pragmatism and the terrain of the (revolutionized) actual. Won is the right to knowingly dismiss one's former political exuberance as of a piece with an error in the choice of pants. Disparity between remembered political hope and its subsequent failure, between a grand imagination of change and the reality of sameness, becomes the means by which to frame every attempt at systematic transformation as inherently risible, a cycle which can only end in knowing bitterness or humiliation.

Though this will sometimes express itself as an abjural both of the form and content of these ideals, many radical centrists claim to have smuggled objectives effectively identical to those practiced in their youth into the body of their new moderation. The radical centre never chooses to frame itself as the comfort of an apolitical or resigned status quo. Instead, what has changed are not the (revolutionary) ends, but only the means. The drift to the technocratic (really neoliberal) centre is hereby styled not simply as tepidity or attrition, but a prudent modification of tactics scaled to the immensity of the existent. The benefit of such a position—unlike that of Thatcher's for example—is its ability to remain believably flexible and convicted. Those who dispense with both (revolutionary) means and ends gain the skeptic's trust but with the risk of veering into a certain de-personalized technocratic directionlessness (accusations of merely managing the status quo). Those who retain the ends while jettisoning the (revolutionary) means instead demarcate precisely the methodological orientation of the radical centrist. Its motto: the only thing better than being despised by a church one has left is being hated by two one never joined to begin with. The radical centrist imagines itself as an outsider, a rebel whose radicalism is as prone to keep them out of the status quo as it is whatever revolutionary “church” emerges to contest it (this is, of course, the fantasy too of today’s “disruptive” entrepreneurs).

Here we can clearly distinguish the difference between a Clinton, Schroeder or Sarkozy and a Thatcher or Reagan. Where The Economist finds in the latter a decisiveness venerable despite its conservative moralism, a radicalism still hobbled by folkwisdom, the former manage to act without the encumbrance of a conviction: “Mr. Blair exudes a sense of purpose” wrote the newspaper in 2007, “but one that does not seem to be anchored to anything in particular” (10th May). Whereas Thatcher represented an “unbending determination” that was as intellectually
limited as it was politically powerful, this new cohort channel “charm, pragmatism, [and] tactical nous” (2003). Paradoxically, it is precisely the sleaze of these figures that reveals their freedom from the “lie” of politics (a trope common to laissez faire centrists); jazz, yachts, and sex signpost an unconscious unburdened of Robespierre, all of the archaic moralisms, excessive attachments and dualisms congenital to the political. Against such figures Thatcher appears slow-wittedly conservative—“prim” in the words of The Economist (2013)

How did The Economist manage to think itself across the divide separating Thatcher from Blair and into the tropological space of the new (radical) centre? Between 1990-2008—the discourse begins to alter after the financial crisis—the centrisms of The Economist finds in the ontology of a newly technologized capitalism a strange incitement to a novel way of synthesizing its own practice. The notion of the flexible factory, its infrastructure multi-modal and fluid, available to instant adaptive re-arrangement, functions as the form through which the radical centre construes a point without premise, a substance emptied of atoms, that neither stays the same nor changes nothingly in the winds. Postmodern production, in other words, functions as the machinery through which the radical centre can think its own non-situated positionality. Itself modularly integrated into a labyrinth of untotalizable relations, this factory retains its hold on the “virility” of output while at the same time registering environmental vibrations with a sensitivity that borders on etherealization. It is, in this sense, resolve and openness at the very same instant. Such is its command of its own body, its supreme portability, that it can dismantle itself effortlessly only to emerge re-materialized on the other side of the planet. In a state of continual surveillance, always researching space for fresh interstices, its orientation equal parts spontaneity and strategy, the flexible enterprise represents a mode of ideation which not only instantly discerns the desire posed to it by the real, but also immediately collapses the time between the registration of this demand and its satiating supply. This is the age of the three-dimensional printer in which between the Platonism of the form and the Nietzscheanism of the deed there is no longer the merest shadow of a gap. Circumspection and decisiveness are here magisterially (to say nothing of falsely!) united.

Powered endogenously by a shopfloor that doesn't merely transmit orders, but itself informs the practice of management, forever breeding from below sharp short-cuts and tweaks, egalitarian flexibility does away with the rigid hierarchies of the Plan replacing a clumsily embodied, even impotent Mind with the intuitional intelligence and hexical savvy of the
networked body. Or rather, mind and body, intention and action coalesce in a pragmatism wholly extracted from an association with miserliness or common sense, but also weirdly compatible with an inventiveness and idealism of the real which is worlds away from any prior metaphysics of the actual. The seemingly miraculous transformation of social space by new technologies, the ascription of play to the kind of work we now deem affective (the ingenuity of Google or Apple), but also the interpenetration of whim and expertise, casual open-mindedness and highly specialized knowledge encodes a figure of centrist thinking which is popular without being populist, connected but also distinct, refined but not elitist, creative but also practical, and dynamic as well as disciplined. These, again, are precisely the (self-imagined) coordinates of the radical centre.

Its inputs maximized by the rigors of efficiency, the postmodern enterprise fantasizes an industrialism that is always drawing more from less. Nature is conserved within the manufacturing process by technological innovation that increases productivity, but also left unspoiled by a biodegradable output which dissolves back into the earth from which it came:

“[what we need are] new industrial processes that squeeze more output from each unit of input...[we have to begin] thinking about a product’s death from the moment of its conception...the world will need products that, during their lifetimes, do minimal damage to the planet and that, at the end of their lives, can either be safely thrown away or put to new uses. What a fortune awaits the company that devises—say—a way of transporting individuals rapidly, safely, and quietly, without emitting nasty fumes, in a container that melts back undetectably into the earth as soon as it reaches the end of its long life!” (The Economist 8 August 1990, 3).

Unskilled labourers are taken on or shed as needed and teams of creative professionals are assembled in clusters that are dissolved when a task is finished. Everything hangs together like a fragile dance: supply chains snaking onto a murky global intrication prone to new risks and competitiveness feed production lines themselves responding to market data received in real time. In direct opposition to the massed coporeality of communism, materials never pile up in warehouses. All of this, to the letter, is absorbed into the imaginary of a radical centre which sees its bi-partisan coalitions as a precarious, “just-in time” waltz, its efficacy as direct and productive without the weight and friction of unnecessary ideological baggage, its political interventions as temporary, task-oriented, and solution-based, and its action as always informed by a real-time empiricism rather than the industrial Prometheanism of old-fashioned political utopias.
On The Swing Voter

The climate changes constantly, and once man thinks he has seized the controls to avert some disastrous man-made alteration, he will be forever jiggling them to steer his world through natural changes that will follow” (“How Climate Changes”).


Political scientists sometimes refer to the process by which individuals disengage from strict party affiliation as "partisan de-alignment". The primary symptom pointed to here is the waning of the political party as a basic organizing principle of everyday life in the West: though parties have not, of course, disappeared, commentators point to declining membership across the political spectrum but also a shift away from the kind of explicit affective links between political parties and quotidian citizenship that characterized earlier moments (clubs, dinner parties, marches, etc). Especially important, however, is the contemporary tendency for voters to toggle between options from election to election rather than voting consistently along established party lines. Individuals in the “advanced economies” are often more likely to identify with issues than they are parties. They are also frequently more likely to identify as “independent” than they are a partisan of a particular ideological system.

For The Economist, the floating center produced by the waning of the Left/Right binary is either 1) all of the plurality indigestible to di-archy, a fractional multitude of skeptics and independents put off by the failure of a broken political system, 2) a mushy, indecisive middle mass of voters incapable of deciding what they want, or 3) “ordinary” people of the middle marked by a strong independence of mind, family values, and pragmatic commitments to balance, a kind of contemporary variation on the good Jeffersonian yeoman-citizen. To capture the middle is in this sense to appeal to a majoritarian sensibility often uncongenial to the skeptical, “non-conformist” attachments of the radical centre: it is the purview of a triangulation susceptible to allegations of opportunism or emptiness.

When viewed, however, as a smaller cohort, the swing voting centrist is framed as the decisive fraction, a *kingmaking margin*. As the mass of the center contracts, its value expands to approximate its rarity, self-consciousness and enlightened distance from the poles. Their patience is the mark of a refined circumspection. Too sophisticated for the programmed to and fro of the talk shows, the undecided are, from this angle, the breeze of reason that tips the scale at the last
instant. Some variation on this motif is encountered in the European systems of proportional representation where small liberal corpuscles aligned with the entrenched parties often hold deciding ballasts. In diarchies, however, this fractional center is thought to queerly outweigh the corpulent poles, its small but disproportionate power a secular encryption of theist providence. This holy spirit of rationalism is what prevents the pie-throwing of the parties from total burlesque and provides for centrist elites a sense that they are still in control of things (rather than the beneficiaries of cultural randomness, inertia or indifference).

If the poles no longer match the multiplicity of the social, if even their hold on the consciousness of the subject has been loosened by variety in motion, what remains is an image of a drifting centrist multitude whose will is no longer captured by corporatist fidelity and instead retained only on the basis of results:

Independent voters have been marginalised over the past decades. Armies of partisans have marched over the political battlefield. Elections have been much more about energising the faithful than reaching out to wavering voters ... [However, the new independents] are younger and better educated than the average American. They are pragmatic, anti-ideological and results-oriented, hostile to both Big Labour and Big Government but quite prepared to see the government take an active role in dealing with problems like global warming. (2008, 42).

The swing voter floats between parties, a discriminate atom that attaches to a mass only after having closely vetted its options. Its truth-claim is here secured by its belatedness (a hesitancy which indicates cautious intelligence), but also by the ease with which it switches teams (its lack of “tribal” attachment). Envisioned as a majority it is neither the stable middle mass described above nor the kingmaking margin, but a combination of the two: it is at once stable and dynamic, circumspect and normative, effective and utterly utopian. There at the root of the radical centrist swing voter is an idea that better educated populations are no longer so easily taken in by the predictable solicitations of the parties, but also that they have outgrown ideology itself, their smart technologies and blogs intrinsically allergic to the bad universalism, monotony and blindness of traditional political “truth” (old dreams of socialist freedom, plans for a radically more equal life-world, etc.).

The shift away from a binary logic of the political to that of the floating centrist multitude is always undertaken in the name of a highly valorized conception of complexity. One place we can begin to trace out the resonances of this concept is in The Economist’s extremely
interesting relationship to nature. It would be easy to imagine a political center oriented 
ecologically around a stable and quite readily available package of centrist meanings. Balance, 
wholeness, moderation: the metaphysical center’s traditional historical and conceptual adjacency 
to these values would be simply switched on within an environmental crisis formulated as kink, 
excess and disproportion. Following a division as old as Plato, disorder reveals itself as an 
aberrant exception to the homeostasis and continuity of system; greed tips balance into a 
disorienting withdrawal of pattern, an unpredictability wholly at odds with the boundedness to 
law of things as they are and should be. Nature and change are rendered opposites, the latter’s 
infection of the former an effect of human deviation from common sense. With these premises 
intact, it becomes possible to refract the center as deep essence or core, a re/centering of the 
world on the basis of natural values we have learned to forget.

At no point does The Economist seriously flirt with this vision of nature as a violently 
desecrated whole. It sees the transformation of our environmental history into a story of punished 
transgression as a typical instance of mythopoetic thinking (a critique which allows it to link 
such thought to both religion and “religious” politics): overly curious, a creature of pure avarice, 
the human must be chased from the garden for having flouted nature’s clear limits. At work in 
such a narrative is the standard religious contempt for self-interest, invention and profit. As we 
saw above the radical centre’s refusal to decry greed is at the very heart of its claim to have 
exited ideology. Moderation is to be praised within the jurisdiction of the political; it speaks to a 
certain vocational prudence, an awareness of the line separating politics from life. But nothing is 
more suspicious to the newspaper than the politician whose moderation extends into the domain 
of privacy; to change concretely the way one lives—forgoing plans for travel and good quality 
steak—is to immediately succumb to the dogmatic asceticism and otherworldliness it associates 
with political theology (Robespierre as much as Calvin).

For The Economist, nature is not a balance ruined by the disproportion of greed, but a 
dynamic system always in the process of learning new ways of differing from itself:

Only two things are certain about the world’s climate, and one of them is that it will 
always be unpredictable. The forces that govern it are preposterously intertwined, linking 
the chemistry of the deep oceans to the physics of the stratosphere, the ice-fields of the 
Arctic to the forest canopies of the tropics. It is difficult to find a single cause for a climate 
change as it is to pinpoint the sneeze on which to blame an epidemic of influenza. Such 
complexity leads to the other certainty about climate: it is in perpetual flux (13, 1990).
This quote accomplishes a number of disparate tasks at the same time. First, the insistence on climate as a structure of continual change undermines the capacity of critics to oppose growth and culture like purity to sin. If nature is always already different from itself, the enormous industrial signature of the human can be integrated as merely the latest in a succession of planetary ecological events. Second, though *The Economist* clearly intuits the immense interconnectedness of nature, *this knowledge terminates in a declaration of complexity, rather than totality or wholeness*. Meshed causality gives rise not to an intuition of soberly shared risk, a precarious continuum or oneness, but to a consciousness of epistemological finitude and limit. The bewildering inter-relatedness of things proscribes etiological certitude, even as it functions as a brake on political exigency: who is to say that what we do to fix the problem will not create problems of its own? The inscrutable complexity of the system defuses not only the factual anger needed to generate a political will but also the lucid comprehension of concrete tactical alternatives.

To demand a green future on the basis of a repression of infinite human desire is to immediately betray a naturalized phenomenological fullness—one linked really to Being itself—for a collectivist delirium founded on pure speculation. Here the mentioned tendency of the radical centre to posit the technological marvels and comforts of the present as in some strange sense inviolable plays a role. The notion of a world-girdling layer of environmental regulation—“planetary management” — coupled to the almost certain drag on growth such a system would imply, strikes at the very heart of the radical centre’s agoraphilic nervous system (13).

What does it mean to speak in the name of complexity? Such a discourse needn’t comprehensively map the imbroglio; indeed, it more often begins precisely where an idea about the probability of full disclosure ends. All that is required is the appearance of a technical relation to the unchartable whole: it is enough to have discriminately revealed a small segment of its confounding mass. The unknowable is not used by *The Economist* to validate a frontier inaccessible to scientific investigation; on the contrary, a full sense for the scale of our powerlessness and ignorance can be gained only through the applied specificity of disciplined knowledge (game theory, models, the mathematics of chaos). Such a rhetoric draws on the conservative radicalism of people like Oakeshott and Gray, both of whom insist on the imperfectibility of the human without grounding it in an innate essence or nature, and at the same time it adds to this sceptical realism a technocratic or scientistic dimension which protects it
from charges of anti-intellectualism or fuddyness. The radical centre today does not deny that climate change is a problem—a claim that would put it at odds with the main body of scientific opinion—but rather that we cannot know for sure its scale or the full evolution of its risks; such caution is necessary if we are to avoid the “alarmism” mentioned above, another form of thinking it links to religion and politics (a kind of thoughtless messianism). More often than not, today’s radical centrist—think Macron, for example—is fully committed to the struggle against climate change. For such figures, complexity comes to be envisioned as its own political solution: market-driven technological innovation will avoid the very worst while at the same instant, by-passing the restraints on growth promised by new regimes of regulation. “Decisive action” is withdrawn from its association with totalitarian control and allowed to percolate through the entirety of the capitalist knowledge economy. Radical centrist skepticism of the state here dovetails with the methodological “skepticism” of the natural scientist to produce an impression of knowledge boldly unleashed.

When an identity forms between complexity and markets, critique of the latter becomes nothing more or less than a fear of the multiple as old as monotheism. Simplification, in other words, is the necessary form of appearance taken by any attempt to totalize a system isomorphic with plurality. Efforts to theoretically organize capitalist reality under a dominant set of traits or predicates immediately offend the phenomenological manysidedness of a lifeworld that is simply too diverse and big for a concept of itself. Any “solution” to capitalism can only play out like a laughably reductive displacement of actually existing complexity; no subtlety (or so the story goes) can remove from critique its bad complicity with bulldozed forests. Having divided and specialized competencies, de-centralizing production and knowledge, capitalism appears to democratize intelligence even as it practices a kind of epistemological humility vis a vis the power of an agent to comprehend, guide or direct the whole. Any anti-capitalist gesture is hereby reduced to hubris or stupidity, a position born precisely of the critic’s failure to see just how complicated and incalculable things are.

Conclusion

What they subjectively fancy radical, belongs objectively so entirely to…the pattern reserved for their like, that radicalism is debased to abstract prestige…[Their] outsiderishness…is an illusion…They are already just like the rest.
The Brock Review

The centrism of the mixed economy—that of the “civil centrism” I mentioned in the introduction—was a machinery of balance. Balance resulted from the unstable relation between labour and capital, public and private; liberal democracy—opposed to both communism and fascism—could itself be imagined as the fulcrum upon which an entire polarized globe relied for its orderliness. The centre was where contact between these organs could be staged through the intermediation of speech, a parliament as flexible (i.e., open to change) as it was sovereign and institutionalized. The centre was still an intentional node, a point of governance that radiated efficacy, but the One of its decisiveness could never be separated from the Many of the procedure by which it was made possible. Remember, that much of this was continually parodied from the left as a colossal banality, stuffy, male, homogenous, frightened, managerial, vertical, protestant, violent, moribund and empty.

The new radical centre envisions itself as at once the neutral locus where differences aggregate and the machine or device that processes them. Difference does not just fill the space of the centre, that zone relative to other zones, its variety collected and placed into relations of exchange. If this were the case, the centre, as we have seen, would be reduced to the neutrality of traversed space. Of course, this aspect of the concept is indispensable when foregrounding the centre's post-ideological properties. The notion of the centre as a place close to everything, however—useful as it may be—crucially leaves it susceptible to allegations of vapidity and opportunism. The centre, then, is not just volume, but an apparatus of mediation. Sometimes this is considered as the site of a synthesis that changes or re-distributes a configuration of parts and flows. The centre in this sense is much more closely linked to a systemic intelligence or a concatenation of nerves than it is the hollowness of space: it somehow adds value. The seductiveness of this model is that the centre can accommodate cultural and ideological multiplicity, allowing for the retention of the distinctness of its participants while at the same time refusing to merely transmit their contents unaltered. Agora and network, wild promiscuity of contact and wired inter-relatedness, trenchant individuality and digital collectivism: these are the supple dimensions of the centre as envisioned by its contemporary adherents. Finding our way out of its rhetoric, learning how its models and figures work, is the first step in leaving behind—once and for all—its ruinous political legacy. However urgent and dangerous the conjuncture opened by the election of Trump, the Right is in no way the sole or even primary
threat to our moment’s many de-potentiated possibilities. One of the key lessons for Left theory and practice moving forward will be to ceaselessly resist the trick by which an insurgent conservatism renders “sensible” a neoliberal centrist incapable of thinking (let alone addressing) our moment’s most pressing economic, racial, and environmental contradictions.

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