

The dictatorship of no alternatives

The world suffers under a dictatorship of no alternatives. Although ideas all by themselves are powerless to overthrow this dictatorship we cannot overthrow it without ideas.

All over the world, people complain that their national politics fail to deliver real alternatives: especially alternatives that would give new meaning, new life, and new efficacy to the old progressive idea of a better chance for everyone – a chance to ensure the moral as well as the material necessities of life, a chance to work and to be cared for when one cannot work, a chance to engage in the affairs of one's community

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and one's society, a chance to do something with one's life that has value in one's own eyes.

Is it possible to suggest a way forward in a short space? And to do so in a manner revealing the similarities as well as the differences between the way forward for richer and for poorer countries? I believe that it is possible, and that it must be possible in brief if it is possible at all.

Many countries are now governed by people who would like to be Franklin Roosevelt, and who do not know how. Many others are ruled by people pandering to the interests of big business and to the desperate and inverted resentments of a working-class majority that feels abandoned and betrayed by the would-be Roosevelts. The self-described progressives appear on the stage of contemporary history as the humanizers of the inevitable: their program has become the program of their conservative adversaries with a falling discount. They disguise surrender as synthesis – for example, of social cohesion with economic flexibility. Their “third ways” are the first way with sugar: the sweetener of compensatory social policy and social insurance making up for a failure to achieve any fundamental broadening of opportunity.

The calamitous ideological adventures of the twentieth century are spent. No global ideology with the worldwide authority of classical liberalism or socialism has yet arisen to take their place and to contest the

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arrangements now associated with the rich North Atlantic democracies and with the ideas emanating from their universities. With this surprising silence of the intellect and with the consolidation of the American ascendancy, an unquiet order has descended upon the world. Wars are local: punitive expeditions by the remaining superpower against those who defy it, or products of extreme oppression and desperate resistance in disunited countries, under the yoke of despotic governments. No economic collapse seems likely – given the resources of economic management within countries and of economic coordination among them – that could rival in magnitude the economic disaster of the 1930s.

The great European social theorists – Karl Marx first among them – identified the internal dynamics of societies – the revelation of inescapable conflicts and missed opportunities – as the proximate cause of their transformation. These thinkers were mistaken. War and economic collapse have been the chief levers of change; catastrophe – unforeseen and uncontrolled – has served as the midwife of reform.

The task of the imagination is to do the work of crisis without crisis. However, the high academic culture of the rich countries, with its glittering world-wide prestige and influence, has fallen under the control of three tendencies of thought that help prevent this work from being done. Although the

votaries of these three tendencies often regard themselves as adversaries and rivals, they are in fact partners. In the social sciences – especially in the most powerful, economics – rationalization rules: the explanation of the workings of contemporary society becomes a vindication of the superiority or the necessity of the arrangements now established in the rich countries. In the normative discourses of political philosophy and legal theory, humanization is in command: the justification of practices, such as compensatory redistribution by the State or the idealization of the law as a repository of impersonal policies and principles, that would make life less harsh for the poorest or the weakest. The most admired theories of justice place a gloss of metaphysical apology on the practices of redistributive tax-and-transfer adopted by the conservative social democracies of today. In this way, the humanizers hope to soften what they no longer know how to change or remake. In the humanities escapism is the order of the day: consciousness takes a ride on a roller coaster of adventure, disconnected from the reshaping of practical life. We are taught to sing in our chains. The silent partnership of these rationalizing, humanizing, and escapist tendencies in university culture leaves the field open for forms of practical political thinking that are as deficient in insight as they are bereft of hope.

In the United States, the Democratic Party, ever the

instrument of American progressives, has failed to produce a practical and attractive sequel to Roosevelt's program, or to make up for the absence of economic ruin and world war as incitements to reform. Much of the white working-class majority of the country holds the policies favored by the Democrats – to the extent these policies differ at all from those advocated by the Republicans – to be products of a conspiracy between some of the rich and many of the poor to promote the moral interests of the former and the material interests of the latter at the cost of their own values and advantages. They see little in the shrunken governmental activism favored by the would-be progressives that addresses their interests and much – especially by way of apostasy from the religion of the family – that offends their ideals. Better to mitigate their losses by cutting the federal government down to size.

The result of the divorce in the preponderant world power between the white working-class majority – a group that thinks of itself as “middle class” – and their would-be champions is fateful for the entire world. Its consequence is to aggravate a circumstance without precedent in modern history. When, during the earlier, nineteenth-century episode of globalization Great Britain and the other European powers exercised a dominance less complete than the one the United States enjoys now, the ideological debates that

resounded throughout the world were reflected, indeed anchored, within the most advanced countries. Now the hegemonic power is not in imaginative communion with the rest of humanity. Its leaders, its thinkers, and its population look out and see a world that will continue to be dangerous, poor, and unfree, unless it converges to the same institutional formula by which they believe themselves blessed.

The rest of humanity, full of admiration for the material exuberance and personal space enjoyed by Americans, curses in response, ill concealing the thought that it must ultimately choose war if the requirement of peace is surrender. The commanding beliefs of the American people – that everything is possible, that vast problems can be solved if broken up into pieces and addressed one by one, and that ordinary men and women contain within themselves, individually and collectively, the constructive genius with which to craft such solutions – now find themselves without adequate practical expression.

The richest and freest part of the world has shown two faces to the rest of humanity. European social democracy has seemed to provide an alternative to the harshness of the American model; if the world could vote it might vote to become Sweden rather than the United States – a Sweden of the imagination. In the meantime, however, the heart has been going out of

historical social democracy. Under the disguise of an effort to reconcile European-style social protection with American-style economic flexibility, social democracy has given up, one by one, many of its traditional traits, and retreated to the last-ditch defense of a high-level of social entitlements.

This eviscerated version of social democracy can neither address the problems of contemporary European societies nor bear the weight of humanity's hopes. In Europe itself, the erstwhile progressives appear as chastened votaries of the ideas of their neoliberal opponents. In many countries, they find their proposals for reform repudiated by an electorate that is offered no real alternatives and that is told by the political and academic authorities that none exist.

When we now turn to the world outside the North Atlantic haven of relative freedom and prosperity, we see only fragments of feasible and attractive alternatives, unexpressed in any project – or family of projects – that could appeal to the rest of mankind. Among the most successful developing countries in recent decades have been the two most populous – China and India. Each has succeeded by maintaining a measure of resistance to the universal formulas dispensed by the North Atlantic elites, particularly Washington, Wall Street, and the universities of the United States. Each has wanted to join the global economy on terms that would allow it to organize its

national life and to orient its economic development in its own way.

However, in the great country that has been most fertile in institutional innovations – China – the scope and development of such innovations have remained subordinate to the defense of one-party rule. The role that might have been played by an alternative set of ideas has been occupied by genuflections to the dead, inherited orthodoxy of Marxism and by fascination with the new, imported orthodoxy of the market economy, as it is understood in the political, financial, and academic capitals of the North Atlantic. In India, with its flawed but vibrant democracy, resistance to this imported orthodoxy has mainly taken the indistinct form of slowness and compromise, as if the point were to take one's time in treading a path from which there is no escape. The region of the world that proved most pliant to the recommendations from the North – Latin America – has suffered a catastrophic decline in its relative position.

In history obedience rarely pays; what pays is defiance. To the question, however, about the directions defiance should take if it is to further the promises of democracy, there is not yet an answer. We see in the world a universal political-economic orthodoxy contested by a series of local heresies. Yet only a universalizing heresy would suffice to counteract a universal orthodoxy. If the heresy is merely local

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in character and content it is likely to be abandoned at the first sign of trouble and pressure. If the local heresy can resist, its resistance may depend on a religiously sanctioned way of life unsympathetic to the democratic and experimentalist ideals to which progressives adhere.

It is not only for practical reasons that a universalizing heresy seems to be the indispensable antidote to the universal orthodoxy about markets and governments that now provokes such resistance throughout the world – whether in France and Germany or in Russia, Brazil, and South Africa. It is because the causes of discontent – of which the first is failure to anchor economic growth in a great broadening of opportunity – are themselves universal. It is also because the established ways of responding to that discontent are so meager and ineffective. The repertory of institutional and policy alternatives on offer for the organization of economic, social, and political life is now very restricted. If we could progress anywhere in the world – rich or poor – in expanding this institutional repertory and anchoring practical progress in a broadening of opportunity, such an advance might have implications for every country.

The attempt to achieve economic growth with social inclusion fits readily with the search for proposals that are more than local solutions to local problems. It prepares the mind for a universalizing

heresy. However, the failure to anchor practical progress in a sustained widening of opportunity is not the sole source of the present unhappiness. There is another powerful source of discontent: the complaint that the orthodoxy prevents countries or regions of the world from developing their different forms of life and ideals of civilization by denying them an opportunity to house them in distinct ways of organizing society. Because it calls for a convergence of all countries to the institutions and practices now established in the North Atlantic, as well as for convergence within that world itself, the orthodoxy seems to be the enemy of deep differences of experience and vision. The demand for pluralism, unlike the search for growth with inclusion, seems incompatible with a political and economic alternative claiming to be general in relevance and reach.

It is not. The semblance of paradox dissolves once two premises are made explicit. The first premise is that an unqualified pluralism – an openness to any form of national life, no matter how despotic and unequal – can form no part of the objective. The aim should be a qualified pluralism: to build a world of democracies in which the individual is empowered both to participate and to dissent. There is no single, uncontroversial interpretation of what a democratic society is or can become. Democratic ideals must be allowed to develop in different, even clashing direc-

tions if they are to develop at all. Under democracy the differences that matter most are those that lie in the future rather than those we have inherited from the past. Under democracy prophecy speaks louder than memory.

The second premise is that the small repertory of institutional solutions now available to humanity – the existing forms of political democracy, of the market economy, and of free civil societies – fails to provide the tools we need to develop national difference in a form compatible with democratic ideals. A particular set of innovations in the organization of contemporary polities, economies, and societies can provide them. This set of innovations – a major part of the progressive program that now needs to be advanced throughout the world – defines a narrow gateway through which humanity must pass if it is to strengthen its capacity to produce difference on the basis of democracy. To describe this gateway as it might be approached by both richer and poorer countries is the concern of this hopeful manifesto.

We cannot, however, understand this way forward unless we first grasp the nature of the obstacles with which we must contend, and of the forces and the opportunities on which we can count, in treading it.