

ON THE VERY IDEA OF A LEFT

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1. Bobbio's case for the right-left opposition

Norberto Bobbio published in 1994 a short book that became a best seller, gone through two enlarged editions, and one of the few cases of Italian non-fiction translated into several languages. Bobbio's claim is that, the need for redefinition of a number of descriptive details notwithstanding, the couple right-left still is a fruitful way of organizing our understanding of the political life and its basis is the issue of more or less equality in our societies. The appeal of the topic for the Italian readership was obvious enough after the fall of Berlin wall and after the *Mani Pulite affaire*.

The most interesting objections to Bobbio have been (a) that the issued is not equality but inclusion (Pizzorno, 2001). A possible answer is that inclusion is not something opposite to equality, but instead one kind of equality, namely equality of opportunities, and (b) that the crisis of the idea of a left is more than the fall of the Berlin wall, the demise of social democracy and the coming closer of the 'new' left with neoliberalism (Anderson) and that a purely 'axiological' defence of the idea of a left, while leaving the market as the preferred regulatory mechanism of both right and left is not enough to keep any meaning to the distinction; Bobbio's answer has been that equality is axiological, and that the value of equality is what was shared by the Communist and the social democratic kinds of lefts, and that, even if the planned economy has been abandoned by the left, the limits to the market still are one of the main battlefields.

The discussion has been taken up also in the Anglo-Saxon word where the right left couple always had less entrenched roots.

Anthony Giddens in a book that became the manifesto of Blair's 'New' Left argued that:

virtually no conservatives now defend inequality and hierarchy in the manner of Old Conservatism. The neo-liberals accept the importance of inequality and up to a point view it as a motivating principle of economic efficiency. But this position is based primarily on a theory of the necessary flexibility of labour markets, not on a justification of poverty... the neoliberal have actively attacked traditional forms of privilege more than latter-day socialists have done; and these... have frequently included modes of entrenched power. Conservatives critical of the neo-liberals are often so because they see free market models as producing too much of a divided society; they want less inequality rather than more" (Giddens 1994: 251-2).

According to Giddens equality was never at the core of the socialist ideal, less than the intelligent control of social life. His own proposal is the generative model of equality, that is,

Equalizations as:

a) mutual collaboration to overcome collective evils;

b) generalized movement away from productivism;

(less on a rigorous sharing of material things than an indifference to them, coupled to a 'defensive' understanding of the limits of unending economic growth).

The goods relevant to the pursuit of happiness are, security, self-respect, self-actualization. The possession of wealth is relevant only partly. Welfare programs directed at the affluent as well as at the poor would reduce, not increase inequality.

There are serious counter-objections to Giddens. Dworkin objected that equality is as important as ever and the 'new' left attempt at watering it down by reducing it to equal consideration while dropping the old left alleged ideal of crude equality (together with the right-left distinction) is no more than a short-sighted tactical move, since the serious question is: what is required as a precondition for equal consideration, either a minimal level of basic needs satisfaction (like Rawls) or something more demanding? In either case equal consideration is no alternative to 'crude' equality of some kind (Dworkin, 2000).

I intend to ask here three questions concerning issues not of empirical relevance, but instead of conceptual analysis, trying to understand what kind of intellectual move are we doing while describing our political systems in terms of right and left, and what this intellectual move may afford, and what may go lost. The questions are:

a) A redescription of society in terms of hierarchy, of higher and lower positions, is a mapping of society on a Cartesian space. What is highlighted and what is obscured by such a mapping?

b) Does equal means (i) homogeneous or just (ii) equal in rank? In the first case there may be room for defences of 'difference' or of 'true individualism'. In the latter case, the true criticism to equality may turn around the limits of a redescription of society in terms of rank or space.

c) recent discussion of equality has highlighted how sensible questions are not how much inequality is recommended to leave but instead how far society is better described in terms of a multiple mapping on several Cartesian spaces.

2. The origins of the idea of a political "Right" and "Left".

The right-left bipolarity is one of the root-metaphors by which human beings make sense of their lived experience starting with the body as their basic access to the world and using metaphor (and in a subordinate position, metonymy) as a basic tool for extending basic lived experiences to less immediate areas of experience. The bodily dimension and anthropomorphism are at the root of such spiritual intellectual achievements as religious, artistic, philosophical, scientific systems of ideas.

Right and Left are ways of symbolical representation to be located within the wider framework of forms of symbolic spatial organization of experience, such as the bipolarities close-far, high-low, forward-back along with the basic processes of substantializing and anthropomorphism. Such forms of symbolical representation always carry attribution of meaning and of value. For ex. the high-low bipolarity is related with the experience of gravity, and with the experience of the effort required by the keeping of a standing position or by carrying anything upward, and accordingly what is higher has always been perceived in every culture as better in terms of quality (I refer to George Lakoff's experiential theory of metaphor).

The right-left bipolarity is well-known to anthropologists as an item of systems of representation of the world, of ritual action, of patterns of behaviour where the right or left position is given several symbolic meanings. When compared with other bipolarities, the right left couple has a weaker symbolic meaning. In the western tradition, as a consequences of the fact that the right hand is for most human beings the hand used for the most important task, the position on the right became the most honoured one: it was so in the religious symbolic code, since according to the New

Testament in the day of the last judgment the just will seat at the right side of the Father, and in the code of manners, since the positions at the right side of the king or of the lord were the most honoured ones. There is one example of symbolic code where the left position is the most honoured, that of Chinese culture. The reasons for that have been explained by anthropologists on several grounds (let me recall that the Chinese writing is done from below upwards, and this may lead to a different symbolic organization of space).

Thus, in the eighteenth century the right-left scheme as a code for a symbolic organization of social life was already available, but it played a quite marginal role when compared with another bipolarity: the high-low couple. The self-image of medieval society was a hierarchical image, based on a one-to-one correspondence between society and the universe, and a view of the latter in terms of pyramid, whose top is the idea of the Neo-Platonic One or Good, and a number of intermediate level are set between the top and ordinary, imperfect beings. Society was conceived in terms of hierarchy, mirroring cosmological hierarchy, and the need for stability of such hierarchical order was strengthened by belief in imperfection of human beings and earthly entities, due to the original fall.

In the seventeenth century, after the scientific revolution, the Reformation, and the struggles for toleration and peace, the opposition to the establishment had to find ways of framing an alternative world-picture. The Greek idea of isonomy, equality, itself the result of a mathematical-political analogy, did play a role in the Greek view of the political space, but a limited one, since it was equality before the law, not political equality, of a limited number of individual, namely the masters. Now it became the keyword for an alternative non-hierarchical view of society, that paralleled a non-hierarchical mechanistic view of the physical universe. This may account for the central role played in the modern view of society by the ideas of equality and of the individual. Both were items of a mechanistic atomistic picture of society carried by a physical-political analogy, and both played both a descriptive and a normative role. The ideal of 'real' equality, in terms of social and economic conditions, as depicted in Rousseau's political works, looks incredibly naïve when looked at from the viewpoint of present-day social theories, but was a powerful argumentative tool within the context of a hierarchical society and of a hierarchical self-image of that society. Besides the choice of such a keyword made available the assets provided by traditional elements of the mainstream culture (namely the stoic

idea of universal equality of all the members of the cosmos, and the Biblical idea of universal brotherhood carried by God's fatherhood.

The historical circumstances of the French Revolution carried occasional use of the right-left bipolarity that was bound to be kept for the following two centuries.

In the *Etats généraux* of 1789 the location of members was established on the basis of a complex symbolic code resulting from combination of three bipolarities: high-low, close-far, right-left.

On August 28 1789 the members of the former General States, now National Assembly, agreed to displace themselves in the meeting hall, for practical reasons in order to make counting of votes easier, with supporters of a right of veto by the king on the right side and supporters of a constitutional regime on the left side. The phrases *la gauche* and *la droite* arose after this event, with a number of symbolic implications carried by language: those on the left were perceived as those on the less honoured side and by implication those from below; those on the left, by one familiar rhetorical move, vindicated as a honourable qualification what was meant by those on the right as an insult. The fact notwithstanding that at other times during the French revolution the location of deputies in assemblies changed (*la Montagne*, *le Marecage*) the right left bipolarity met with incredible success.

3. Left as "progressivism"

During the nineteenth century in Continental Europe the memory of that founding event, the General States, was taken metonymically as the description of the political scenario in European States.

As a result the left was identified with:

- a. change vs established order
- b. equality vs hierarchy
- c. progress vs tradition
- d. universalism vs particularism
- e. reason/science vs religion

and

- f. the individual vs the community

g. freedom vs authority

h. free market / property rights vs regulation / the state's arbitrary power

or, on the opposite

f1. collectivism vs individualism

g1. general will vs anarchical unrestrained freedom

h1. centralized control of the economy (abolition of private property) vs economic liberalism

While the first two couples were inherently associated with the very definition of the left-right bipolarity, the others were gradually less directly associated with it, and were so more by historical circumstances than by any logical implication, and in the Anglo-Saxon world a number of these implications (religion, free market, tradition) were less evident because of a different history that had carried radical evangelical trends, revolutions justified by vindication of ancient traditional rights, guilds as traditional, medieval institutions which had been nonetheless effective in defending weaker interests against stronger interests.

3. Left as an item of a symbolic system

From the story that has been told, it turns out that "Left" is something less than a concept: it is a symbol or a metaphor, or better one item of a system of symbolic representation of political life and society which is itself metaphorical, but with an important metonymic element (the identification of political life with the primary scene of the French Revolution).

A few remarks are in order:

a) One conjectural explanation for the fact that the right-left bipolarity was chosen instead of the high-low and the near-far is that it is based on a horizontal distribution, that could be easily overturned, while the other two could be less easily overturned.

b) One more reason for the success met by the bipolarity is quite flexible, since the picture it gives rise to makes room for both a dichotomic opposition and a gamut of positions from extreme to more moderate ones, including the invention of the idea of a Centre. This idea is an incredibly powerful asset the scheme enjoys with, since it is

useful as a location for everything that cannot be located either on the left and on the right, and thus prima facie would seem to be a counter-instance to the scheme.

c) Yet, the high-low bipolarity is what dictates the hidden agenda of the right-left opposition. The latter seems to be preferred as far as it carries a horizontal image of society. That Left is connected in its very roots with the idea of equality.

d)The right is at odds with the right-left scheme. Those on the left are those that want to exclude the vertical dimension, while those on the right are precisely those who believe the right-left scheme to be unjustified and the vertical scheme to be the right one. Thus, those on the right are bound for ever to identify themselves in terms other than their being on the right, and what gives its meaning to the bipolarity is one of the terms: the idea of a left.

This explains two phenomena: recurrent attempts to define itself by the right as centre, and mimesis of the left, particularly dramatic in the history of South America where conservatives are named social democrats and social democrats are named revolutionary left.

e) The main consequence is that the option for the horizontal picture was made for reasons such that nobody could ever forget that the vertical dimension in society was the main issue. Equality, of one kind or of another, was accordingly the main object of any possible left. Thus, equality is what gives the left its own meaning, and the left is what gives its own meaning to the right-left opposition.

4. Revolutionary right wings, third positions

The last two centuries have seldom seen any explicit defence of inequality as such, for a number of reasons that will be discussed in what follows. A consequence was that the political space has mainly been defined in terms of distances from the left, not of distances in two opposite directions from the centre. The right has most of the times described itself as a centre, and described the centre as a left which is more prudent, more gradual, more careful than the real left, that the real left cannot carry out its own task in a proper way, and a “centre” is needed to carry it out.

An anomalous case that shows up only in the twentieth century, in Post-war Italy and then in the Weimar Republic, is that of non-conservative right-wing political movements: such movement share most individual contents with conservatives, while not defending order but instead subversion of order; new kinds of oxymora show up like “reactionary modernism”; let me recall that the Italian futurist poet

Marinetti became a militant Fascist. Such kinds of new right and also less extreme kinds of right, such as French Gaullism or Argentinian Peronism, adopted also the idea of a Third Position, a curious idea, denoting the same as the older idea of a Centre, while connoting it in an opposite way (See Ferraresi and Galeotti, 1987).

Different phenomena such as “transversal politics” have appeared in European countries with the green movements

In national contexts where the crisis of a political system was on the agenda more complex phenomena appeared such as in Italy after *Mani Pulite*: there the phenomenon of *nuovismo* emerged making room for a political quadrilateral: light and left combined with innovation – conservation.

5. The ancients' and the moderns' equality

The Greek idea of equality was the idea of *isonomy* that is of equality before laws, or of laws granting equality, or symmetry, or harmony.

Such an idea may fit in the framework of a society that is unequalitarian as to admit of slavery. In Plato equality is reconciled with hierarchy in so far as extreme equality, implying common property of goods and abolition of family, holds only for those who are equal among themselves, being unequal from others

Plato talks of two kinds of equality: arithmetic equality, giving the same to everybody that carries disharmony since it leads to apeiron (infinite) of wants and desires; Geometric equality that carries finitude and thus harmony, since it gives different things to different individuals.

There are two dimensions of equality mentioned in the *Declaration des droits de l'homme* art.vi: a) juridical equality (equality before the law); b) political equality (equal right to contribute in determining the outcome of collective decision).

There are two kinds of paradox in modern equality:

A. The descriptive paradox of modern equality:

Descriptive inequality is natural, not artificial (see the case for women).

There are various kinds of equality (Sen, 1992; Walzer, 1983; Dworkin, 2000):

a) Equality of results (wealth or of revenue)

b) Equality of opportunities

c) Equality of need satisfaction (are needs more equal than other things; or does need satisfaction go beyond equality and inequality?).

d) Equality of consideration (being treated as equals)

There are a couple of serious problems that have been highlighted:

a) Dominance and monopoly among various kinds of goods make so that equality in the scale of distribution of one good strengthens the weight of differences in the scale of distribution of other goods (Walzer, 1983);

b) Transformation of goods into other kinds of goods makes any kind of equality unstable (Walzer, 1983);

c) transformation of resources into need satisfaction or “functionings” adds one dimension of instability of equality; inequality is required in order to produce equality (Sen, 1992)

B. The normative paradox of modern equality: it seems hard to find a foundation for it as a normative principle, and yet it is impossible to dispense with it; no defence of anti-equalitarianism (unless it be a non-political doctrine such as socio-biology) seems to be available; even neo-liberal doctrines argue that inequalities may be *useful*, not just.

6. The privileged position of left in the argumentative ‘space’ of democratic politics

It is virtually impossible to defend a consistent rhetoric of a political Right within the framework of a democratic society since the universally shared normative ideal of democracy and the (to a point) universally shared normative ideal of equality of consideration are carried as a matter of course by the very framework of democratic institutions.

Thus, only two critical strategies were left: a) the critique of ‘formal’ equality from the left, which led to the Marxian paradox: beyond equality to everyone according to his own needs.

Such a critique has afforded paradoxically the only plausible argument for modern despotism (see modern China etc.).

b) Tocquevillian liberal conservatism: equality is a powerful and dangerous fact of modern societies, a threat to liberty, generating the tension liberty-equality; politics becomes a means of defending liberty against the threat of equalization.

7. What is Left?

Is the concept-metaphor “Left” is still useful, whether it highlights relevant features of society more than obscuring them?

What is at stake in present-day societies? The main problem of radical politics today according to Giddens: a) combating poverty, absolute or relative; b) redressing the degradation of the environment; c) contesting arbitrary power; d) reducing the role of force and violence in social life.

What is left aside by the right-left root metaphor? The answer is that issues b) and partly issue d) cannot be understood entirely in terms of equality such as peace and ecology. This is quite a lot, and yet not enough to make the right-left bipolarity entirely misleading even if not entirely satisfactory.

In present-day societies the main feature of social life is neither growing equalization nor persisting inequality disguised by the language of equality. Juridical and political “forms” are far from being the opposite of a substance; they are indeed social facts – at one level of the social system and with one kind of social reality, different from that of inequality in wealth or revenue, but not ‘unreal’ – and what forms of effective collective social action do is creatively bringing those facts into interaction with well-known or recently discovered, or novel facts of inequality.

The standard of equality, being hard or impossible to justify, is a kind of intuition or basic principle or axiom of normative political discourse (Walzer, 1983; Rancière, 1994). And, as far as such a standard will not be eliminated, both a description of the political space in terms of the right-left polarization (and such an unbalanced characterization of such space as to leave to the right the burden of proof) will persist being the marks of politics as such as it has been constructed in the modern world.

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