

AN ORDER OF FREEDOM, THE POLITICAL CENTER AND SYMBOLIC SPACE

**THE GENESIS OF THE DIVISION OF THE POLITICAL
SPACE BETWEEN THE RIGHT, THE CENTER AND THE
LEFT, AND ITS USES IN MODERN POLITICS**

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At the present time, differences between the political right, center and left are becoming blurred, in spite of the nostalgia for maintaining this tradition, articulated by some well-known intellectuals (Bobbio, 1997). In the last British elections, the differences were either of minor importance, or both the protagonists and the political analysts tended to play them down (Crowe *et alia*, 1997). A prestigious newspaper has recently suggested in one of its editorials that the United Kingdom is becoming decidedly orientated towards a new version of a relatively remote past: “*Back to a Whiggish Future*” (The Wall Street Journal Europe, 1999). In this resurgent past, differences of opinion and political temperament would be settled on the basis of a broad and deep consensus. It could be said that the British, by doing so, would merely be following in the footsteps of United States politicians (Morris, 1997). However, this is not just an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon: parallel movements can be observed in continental Europe, in Germany and France, for example (Benoist, 1995). So it seems as though the great ideological labels of the nineteenth and greater part of the twentieth centuries, so often emptied of content and refilled with a different one, have finally reached a point of maximum indifferentiation.

However, this situation is not new. The modern political history of Western societies is, it could almost be said, *littered* with “third ways” and the overcoming of traditional politico-symbolic dyads or triads, which has not prevented the return to common usage of these expressions. They have perhaps never been related in a reasonable and satisfactory way to the political problems of a particular country at a particular time (as Theodore Zeldin suggests in his discussion of the French experience over nearly a century, from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s: Zeldin, 1973: 383ff.); but it would also be true to say that, in spite of their drastic simplification of the changing complexities of modern politics, or possibly because of it, these labels have been considered “useful” and, consequently, used over and over again.

But used for what? In the light of experience, perhaps it is most advisable to distinguish between the possible uses of this division by means of a criterion that is both simple and compatible with its original uses: that of its ‘civil’ use in support of the development of an order of freedom (or a “civil society” in the classic sense of the term: Pérez-Díaz, 1997), or its “uncivil” use in opposing such

a development. From this perspective, our task consists of trying to understand the logic implicit in the contrast and evolution of these uses in modern Western politics and of selecting certain milestones or reference points for this purpose. The labels may lack a “semantic anchor”, as Giovanni Sartori (1976: 335) claims, but the *uses* that have been made of them, without being firmly ‘anchored’ either, have certainly left their mark on history. That mark has not yet disappeared from the living memory of many people, and their memory, if activated, can be used in a civil or uncivil way in the politics of the day.

Consequently, this paper offers both analysis and historical interpretation. A general reflection on political symbolic space, and on the genesis and present meaning of the horizontal division of the space between the right, the center and the left, is combined with a reading of the evolution of this division over the last two centuries. The latter, organized around the question of the avatars of an order of freedom, centers on two historical moments: on the initial shift towards an order of freedom, and on the present. And I interpret the present as containing the possibility of a (relative) return to its origins.

1. Political symbolisms of a spatial nature

Although at each historical moment the political historical space corresponding to every ruled society is transformed, there is, from the outset, a continuity that underlies all the changes. The construction of a symbolic space is always an attempt to prevent the reduction of politics to the sphere of the merely profane, or to a simple balance of power. It tries, at least partially, to situate politics within the framework of a sacred universe in which a principle of legitimacy is operating. It does so in order to try and stir up the power of the gods (or their preternatural substitutes, heroes or peoples) or of religion (including the variants of a civic, traditional, nationalist or revolutionary religion), in order either to enhance or to limit the power of the authority. Political symbolic spaces reflect the structure of the political relationship between the public authority and members of society, and of the latter among themselves, in a more or less faithful, more or less distorted fashion. Their purpose is to regulate and facilitate the debates and strategic encounters between the authority and its subjects (or possibly its citizens) in a way that may be more or less balanced, or

more or less biased by the values, passions and interests of one side or the other.

The phenomenon is extremely ancient and coincides with the appearance of the first states (Hocart, 1976). When, almost two and a half thousand years ago, the Greeks and Romans began to experiment with the kind of states in which political decisions required debate and consent, we entered a new phase of that phenomenon. It is the one within which our Western tradition is located today.

It is possible to trace the evolution that led, in the Greek world, from agrarian and monarchical rites (and the gods of the earth, or subterranean gods, and the Olympian gods, respectively) to the theater and from there to the agora, where expressly political questions were debated (Rodríguez Adrados, 1983). Politics came into being in conjunction with the construction of a new kind of physical and symbolic space where orders were issued but explanations were given, advice was heeded, and the capacity for resistance of subjects was put to the test.

In this place of encounter between the authority and the people, they start out by asking questions together and end up by settling the destiny of the community together. Its destiny will be defined by the double possibility of what is wanted and what is feared, what they try to make happen and what they try to prevent from happening. What is desired is the prosperity and cohesion of the community; what is feared is its ruin, internal unrest, and perhaps a civil war. The key to the symbolic dramatization of the earliest empires was their belief that the destiny of the community was bound up with the power of the monarch and the dynasty, and with its capacity for regulating the cycle of life and nature. In the case of the Greeks, the scene was enlarged to embrace the entire situation in which the monarch acted in dialogue with the chorus, or the *komos*, or the community. The next step was to diminish the position of royalty in order to make way for the emergence and development of what we might call 'constitutional politics', one of whose paradigmatic forms was the triangular system of mixed government to be found in the Rome of the Punic wars, described by Polybius (1986). This occurred at around the same time as the appearance of the kind of city in which the importance of the original tribes was reduced and that of what today we would call an order of freedom, or an "abstract" (Hayek, 1988) or

"open" (Popper, 1966) society was increased. But the transition from royalty to constitutional politics on the part of the Greeks did not lead them to abandon religion and the theater. To some extent, the opposite occurred: politics (in Hegelian terms) "was to preserve the momentum" of religion and the theater within itself, in the shape of the symbolic space and the symbolisms incorporated into rhetoric and public ceremonies. The Romans were to feel a marked ambivalence towards dramatic representations, but their "triumphs" are theater, and their best political rhetoric was to combine the *logos* of critical discussion with the *pathos* of tragedy: rational discourse (the kind of discourse so dear to Thucydides) with an appeal to the emotions.

Neither the sense and efficacy of politics in the ancient city, nor the final impetus for the emergence of political life in classical Greece can be understood without examining its symbolisms. But the essence of these symbolisms lies in their expression of a desire and a belief: the desire to achieve control of the destiny of the community in order to ensure its prosperity and social cohesion, and the belief that it is possible to achieve this by means of the exchange of rational-instrumental actions and words, and of symbols, between the authority and its subjects.

The horizontal division of the symbolic space

The purpose of the symbolic space has always been to contribute to the realization of this fundamental impulse, made up of desire and belief, in the cities of antiquity, in medieval political associations, in the states of the *ancien régime*, in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, and in liberal democracies. However, it has taken on very different forms from one political regime to another, according to whether the exchanges between the authority and the members of the society have been defined as taking place (fundamentally) between equals or unequals, and it has thus accentuated its own horizontal or vertical dimension. So that, while the symbolic space of the states of the *ancien régime* accentuated its vertical dimension, that of liberal democracies has stressed its horizontal dimension.

Of course, a symbolic space can be adapted for use in many different ways. It will depend on what conception is held of the content of the destiny one is trying to control, how the prosperity and cohesion of the community in question is defined, and how the type of community that is considered

desirable is defined. The objective may be to achieve a “closed”, “collectivist” community bound by “mechanical solidarity” forming an “association-as-an-enterprise” or, on the contrary, an “open”, “abstract” society bound by “organic solidarity” and forming a “civil association” (in the terms employed by Karl Popper [1966], Friedrich Hayek [1988], Emile Durkheim [1967/1902] and Michael Oakeshott [1990], respectively). The contrast could also be formulated as that existing between a “primordial community” and an “order of freedom”.

In a primordial community, the common good is defined by the state or public authority, presumedly with the support of a large part of public opinion. In an order of freedom, the common good consists of a framework comprising the game rules (guaranteed by the public authority) that allows each one of the members of the community to define their own personal well-being as well as the public good, and to pursue them with the minimum possible amount of interference on the part of the public authority or anyone else. In the primordial community, the common good is achieved as the result of collective action by the members of the society, orientated to that end, and coordinated by a central agency. In an order of freedom, it is achieved as the indirect result of the efforts of the different members of the society acting in an autonomous way.

In general terms, the political symbolic space in which the vertical dimension predominates reinforces the importance of the authority and tends to further the aim of achieving a primordial community. In contrast, every order of freedom requires some form of political symbolic space in which the horizontal dimension predominates. In an order of freedom, the authority is prohibited from imposing decisions on the private affairs of members: such affairs are subject to the individual will of the latter, and their arrangements or agreements among themselves. The authority is dealing with free subjects: its relationships with them are contractual, and it can only extract resources in exchange for something, and supposedly only as a contribution to the preservation of the order of freedom (for example, in defence of the order against any external or internal enemies). Moreover, it has to account for its actions: it is subject to the law in the same way as they are. In other words, an order of freedom means fundamental political equality between the authority and the members of the society, and it requires some kind of horizontal

symbolic space. However, it is not to be expected that all horizontal symbolic spaces will necessarily further an order of freedom: some do and some do not, as the case may be.

The double possibility of the ‘center’

If we examine the configuration of the symbolic space of modern politics, with its horizontal (and lateral) division between right, center and left, we see that this division is susceptible to a variety of uses. If we take the normative perspective of a theory of civil society, we can say that this spatial division is put to a ‘civil’ use or an ‘uncivil’ use according to the extent that the realization of an order of freedom is promoted or obstructed. If we omit the genesis of this order, we can say that once the institutional framework of an order of freedom has been established, efforts to maintain it involve a vision of politics that is normally limited to the sensible management of public affairs; in other words, to what is considered feasible or viable in such an apparently unbounded expression as the “control of the destiny of a community”. This is so because the logic by which an order of freedom functions is the logic of an indeterminate, open-ended world that is, by definition, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Whatever is feasible or viable in attempts to control its destiny is reduced to the permanent job of improving the institutional framework, and to formulating fragmentary and tentative forecasts and a range of plausible scenarios.

Having said this, I believe we may put forward, as an orientating proposition for this discussion (Homans, 1967), the idea that the probability that the horizontal spatial schema of modern politics is given a civil use will increase in relation to the importance of the center within the schema (under certain conditions), and that the probability of an uncivil use of this schema will increase in relation to the importance acquired by the extremes.

The more or less civil nature of the symbolic space is related to the perception of what consists of control of one’s destiny, and the importance of the role that is attributed to the state. In effect, it is common to observe a typical tendency in both the right and the left of appealing to the desire and belief of the masses that control of their destiny is possible and desirable in the literal sense, normally associated with ‘statism’, that is, with the attribution to the state of a major role in the task of ensuring that control. However, realization of the statist tendency leads to the reinforcement of certain character traits in subjects to the detriment

of the development of an order of freedom. A reciprocal causal relationship has been visible between this tendency and dominant dispositions over the historical period covering the last two centuries, in which it has seemed natural to many to declare that “God is dead” as the correlate of affirmations that man could be “master of his destiny” (and thus transcend his mortal condition), and that the state could be omniscient and omnipotent in defining and solving the social, economic and cultural problems of society as well as its problems of identity. The historical slide of the right and left towards statist positions would have been inconceivable without the support of a public opinion that felt insecure and disconcerted by the open and uncontrollable nature of an order of freedom. And it has been the fact of sharing these feelings of insecurity, and to compensate by means of resorting to a powerful public authority, that has given a large part of the right and the left a certain family air. This fact has also reinforced the common inclination of the right and the left to parcel out society between them and, as a corollary, to define the center as merely a place of encounter and compromise between them.

This is not, however, the only possible definition of the center within a symbolic space divided horizontally (and laterally). This is a question of great importance, and it is the key to determining whether or not civil uses of the political symbolic space will prevail over uncivil ones. To some extent, the center can be a variety of things; and those who occupy it have to choose between it being a mere hybrid, composed of its two extremes, or ‘something else’. Although, in principle, the center is an element that is essential to the whole, the choice of its *content* can make it wholly, or partially, irrelevant.

In principle, the center is an essential element because there is no symmetry between the left and right of a body, or a plane, except through reference to a central axis (Weyl, 1952). In this case, the center can be expressed as the projection of an initially external focus onto a plane.

In a focus external to the political symbolic space we could place God, or the king, or the chorus, or a sovereign people, as if all of them had their potential advisors and candidates for public office (what, nowadays, we would call the ‘political class’) around them, to their left and right. Let us imagine that the focus listens to them, judges them and decides. The “political” left, right and

center can be defined by reference to it: they revolve around it, they envelop it, they try to attract it, convince it or subjugate it. To the extent that they achieve this, they appropriate the focus and incorporate it as the virtual center of a homogeneous space.

This center may prove to be passive and indecisive, and inclined to follow the lead of the extremes, or it may be active, at least sufficiently so as to ensure a margin of freedom for itself. If the center is passive but able to impose its *vis inertiae* in the long term, it may find that the left and right, left to themselves, indulge in a game of alternation, of revolutions and reactions, that will finally become a game of illusions, an eternal return, a circular movement, a revolution around the center. They would both actually become, in this case, revolutionary, and would therefore recover the original use of the term ‘revolution’ that simply denotes the movement of going around, revolving or turning round (as in the revolution of the spheres or the planets). On the other hand, a passive and indecisive center may be mobilized by the right and the left and dragged ‘backwards’ (towards the recuperation of a primordial or collectivist community of one kind or another) and ‘downwards’ (towards the abyss of a totalitarian state, based on a moral of resentment, that generates the degradation of co-existence). Naturally, the influence of the right and the left might prove to be more civil; but it appears necessary for the center itself to be active in an autonomous way in order for that to happen.

The remaining alternative among these possibilities is the mobilization of the center resulting from its identification as the basis of an active source of social action, and linked to a project for the realization of an order of freedom. As such, it can try and exercise the function of promoting and coordinating the right and the left. We can see this more clearly if we think of this active center by analogy with the central axis of a moving body.

The central axis of the human body plays a decisive role in maintaining an upright position, in controlling the movement of the limbs, upper and lower, left and right, and in exercising a sense of direction. These are the sum of the conditions necessary in order for human beings to walk. We advance by putting one foot forward, and compensating for it with the movement of the opposite arm, then we put the other foot forward with the corresponding compensation, and so on and so

forth. We walk by orientating ourselves within a space onto which we project a spatial schema in which the horizontal or lateral division of the center, right and left is very important. Walking is an exercise of controlled imbalance and continuous re-balance, and an exercise in looking and orientating ourselves, which is carried out from a perceptive and motor focus situated ideally on a central axis.

In the same way that human beings are balanced when they are walking on firm ground yet, in order to advance, they have to continuously "un-balance" themselves, inclining first to one side and then to the other as they walk, and in the same way that they can only set a course (which is the center of their horizon) at sea by continuously correcting the helm first to the right and then to the left, depending on the condition of the sea, the wind and their vessel, they play with analogous spatial references as regards the way in which the political body manoeuvres, or the vessel of state sails the high seas. But the very image suggests the limitations to the importance of this categorization of the public space, and the absurdity of making any of its elements absolute. It is logical that human beings should operate in this space by employing the elements of the right the left and the center, but they would be falling into an essentialist delusion if they tried to *be* (of) or identify themselves with any one of them and behaved in consequence. If they always walked towards the right or sailed towards the left, they would go round in circles; and if they only attended to the central axis of their body, without any concessions to either one side or the other, they would never move at all.

Seen from this perspective, the pace or progress of an order of freedom is bound up with a definition of the center as an active part of the whole in several ways: with the predominance of the ternary schema (in which the center occupies its own space) over the binary (where the center is reduced to a virtual line), with the relative primacy of the center over the right and the left, with civil uses of the symbolic space, and with the process of 'civilization' of the right and the left (precisely because of their submission to the influence of the center).

But I must point out that identification of the center as the key location within the symbolic space for fulfilling the function of promoting an order of freedom must never be confused with identification of a political party or coalition of parties carrying out that function at any particular

time or place. I am referring to the 'liberal function' of a hypothetical center that may be effectively realized in many and varied ways or not at all. It might be implemented by a liberal party (of the center), although in the present situation, it is unlikely that such a party would be able to exercise it unless it were in coalition with sectors of the right or left. It could also be implemented by a right or left of center party, with or without other parties in support. It may remain unfulfilled and await, so to speak, the exhaustion of the incumbent political class (because it loses a war, for example, or simply because it is overtaken by the following generation).

2. The initial shift towards an order of freedom

The division of the modern political symbolic space between the right, the center and the left is not a random product of a verbal debate between certain schools of thought or groups desirous of power that followed on from each other capriciously over time. There was a reason behind such a spatial distribution from the outset, and there are reasons that underlie its evolution up to the present day. Owing to this, it cannot be understood today if its past is neglected. An understanding of the present requires an understanding of how and why we have arrived at it, by looking back over the course of the last two centuries until we reach its origins.

The transition from the *ancien régime* to modernity, brought with it a profound change in the way politics was experienced. Although the full and effective realization of this change took place over a very long period, its orientation became obvious at an early stage. The shift was double: in favor of both an order of freedom and an egalitarian political order.

Firstly, this shift inspired the spread of an order of freedom in all spheres of life: in the economy, society and culture. This freedom was possible thanks to the law, whose observance was guaranteed by the public authority. Its authority, in turn, was based on its fulfilling its mission to enforce the law. The law was not (primarily) defined by its origin; neither was it interpreted as emanating from the will of a (personal or collective) sovereign and justified by this. Instead, it was (primarily) defined by its function of guaranteeing the order of freedom; consequently, it was interpreted as the expression of a natural, or traditional, order that had

slowly been refined with time. Secondly, the shift meant a radical levelling of all members of society. Those who occupied positions of authority were subject to the same law as the rest of the members of that society, and they were obliged to account for their actions to it. (Kings could be exempt from this submission and this duty provided they agreed to certain terms: their authority would no longer be effective but merely symbolic or decorative, they would respect a tacit pact with their fellow citizens whereby they would not exercise their residual authority except in extreme circumstances and in a tacitly or explicitly agreed way, and they would not abuse their privilege of exemption from responsibility, under penalty of suffering the corresponding sanction, including dethronement, a change of dynasty or the abolition of the monarchy).

Consequently, the transition to modernity brought with it a radical alteration of the traditional symbolic topography of the public space. What had previously been a public authority symbolically situated above its 'subjects' became, in principle, an authority situated on the same level as its 'citizens'.

During the *ancien régime*, the public space had tended to be structured (and perceived) as either a circle around a center or as a pyramid dominated by its upper vertex. With the focus of public authority placed at the center or the vertex, the kingdom or nation as a whole was located either in concentric circles around it or beneath it. This tendency did in fact only occur in a transient and very imperfect way in specific societies, such as France, because the sociopolitical order functioned with approximately these features for only a few generations. However, this 'court society' (Elias, 1983) has remained a paradigm of compulsory reference in the modern political imagination.

It must be remembered that, in reality, the pretensions of the continental European monarchies of the *ancien régime* to usurping a large number of the traditional functions of the Church, to marginalizing the constitutional tradition, and to creating what some writers have called the 'absolute state' around themselves, their courts and their central administrative apparatuses, met with only modest success. The preeminent position of the emperor or king in late medieval or early modern societies was countered by the spiritual power of the church, the nobility, the constitutional tradition, and the many autonomous powers of the medieval polyarchy (comprising cities, guilds,

universities, jurisdictional estates, peasant communities, etc.).

In consequence, the public space of eighteenth century Europe was complex. This complexity led to a debate on public affairs orientated in two directions. On the one hand, it was (vertically) orientated to persuading the king and his court, and thus influencing the course of public affairs; and on the other, it was (horizontally) directed to persuading a public made up of nobles, merchants, ecclesiastics, public officials and men of letters.

The horizontal dimension of the public debate during the *ancien régime* conditioned the richness of that debate: the more important the former, the greater the latter. In turn, the wealth of moral arguments, passions and interests overlapping in the public debate of the *ancien régime* bore a relation to the amplitude of the social circle of those involved in it, and to the quantity and quality of the resources at their disposition (their wealth, their status and their culture). It was also related to a sociocultural intangible of enormous importance, that of their entrepreneurial spirit in the broadest sense, that is to say, to their spirit of curiosity, of adventure and of commitment to their own convictions and feelings. In other words, to their freedom of spirit.

Two ways of making the initial shift

When the time came, there were two different ways of making the transition to a horizontal political symbolic space, and of understanding the relationships of rivalry and cooperation between its different segments. By drastic simplification, we could refer to them as 'the French way' and 'the British way'. The differences between the two have some bearing on the way in which each country began to leave court society behind and, accordingly, on the richness and complexity of their public debate.

At the crossroads of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some countries took one path and others took another, very different one. The evolution of the public space varied greatly from one to another. After the shockwaves produced by the spread of the printing press, and the turbulence of the wars of religion, throughout the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s, and parallel with the tendency towards a greater or lesser complexity in the economic, social and cultural life of the corresponding societies, the debate intensified in some countries (like England, but also France),

and diminished or became distorted in others (like Spain) (Pérez-Díaz, 1998). Where the debate intensified and its horizontal dimension was potentiated, tension developed between court society and public opinion that ended with the historical defeat of the court, and the development of an order of freedom and an order of political equality.

In France, the road to an order of freedom was, to say the least, eventful. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were replete with diverse politico-religious factions (Huguenots, Gallicans, Jesuits, Jansenists, libertines), diverse interpretations of reasons of state (the school of Henri IV and Richelieu, *les politiques*, the devout party), diverse ways of interpreting the relationship between royalty and the aristocracy or between the *noblesse de robe* and the *noblesse d'épée* (such as, for example, that of Louis XIV and that of the Duc de Saint-Simon) and different ways of considering the constitutional tradition. Throughout the 1800s, this gradually led up to an endemic conflict between the court and the Parliament of Paris, which prepared the way for the revolution at the end of the century.

The last stretch of that long road, during the second half of the century, was highly complex. It culminated in the revolutionary-Bonapartist episode comprising two years of a representative regime and over twenty years of terror followed by an authoritarian regime (not to mention twenty-three years of war and the million and a half Frenchmen who died in them: Schama, 1989: 184, 599). Altogether, the abrupt nature of the break between the earlier period and what was to follow was confusing. The last thirty years of the *ancien régime* in France had, in fact, been witness to the gradual, persistent progress of profound socio-economic and cultural changes. These were reflected in the progress of a political program aimed at liberating an over-regulated commerce (interrupted by the revolution), and affirming principles of fiscal equality and political representation (leaving aside the continuity of the process of administrative centralization).

This program had been set up and carried out mainly on the initiative of the Parliaments, but also of some Courts of Justice (like *la Cour des Aides*), the Assembly of Notables, and the ministries of Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot and Charles Alexandre de Calonne. It was broadly supported by public opinion, of which an eloquent echo is to be found in the *Cahiers de Doléances* presented to the

States General of 1789, even if this is mixed up with the protectionist, semi-collectivist voice aspiring to an increase in state regulations of another sector of opinion (Schama, 1989: 309, 316). The result was a gradual redefinition of the body politic, possibly interpreted as a community of citizens (as the Marquis de Argenson had suggested in the 1730s, in his vision of a republic of citizens protected by the king, and as the Conde de Guibert was to suggest in the 1770s, in his vision of an army of citizens: *Ibidem* 112, 258), and a redefinition of sovereignty, probably interpreted in its turn as sovereignty shared between the king and the representatives of the nation, that pointed tentatively but clearly in the direction of a French version of the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

But, as we know with hindsight, things did not turn out like that. The course of events between 1789 and 1794 were never orientated towards the experience of an order of freedom but towards one of "patriotic paranoia" built up around the theme of "*la patrie en danger*" (Schama, 1989: 430, 579, 610). The steps along that road included, among other things, a campaign of de-Christianization; the establishment of a system of widespread denunciation, censorship and surveillance; the policy of extermination in the Vendée; the bloody celebration of collective assassinations like the September massacres or the so-called "vertical deportations" of "public enemies" (by immersion in the waters of the Loire), and what were called "Republican baptisms" or "Republican marriages", of a similar nature; the systematic criminalization of political adversaries out of the mouths of Marat and Robespierre and so many others, initially through verbal terrorism and then through actual terrorism; and the "logico-sentimental" festivals with an unequivocal totalitarian air *avant la lettre*, like the festivals in honor of the goddess Reason, where the new political class acted as high priests (Ozouf, 1976). All of this was reproduced, in a lower key, in the predatory foreign policy and authoritarian domestic policy of Bonapartism. The task of putting those memories behind them and reforming the corresponding institutions in order to ensure their congruence with an order of freedom was not going to be an easy one, as the French were to discover in the following century and a half.

In England, the extraordinary and prolonged excesses of uncivility that took place in France were avoided thanks partly to the earlier and more profound nature of her transformation into a commercial economy and plural society, and to the

relative importance of the juridical framework of common law and parliamentary tradition.

That transformation had occurred even though the country had had its own highly charged internal tensions to overcome. The civil war that took place in the first half of the 1600s was an expression of the profound antagonism between Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans, between Cavaliers and Levellers, and between factions within the aristocracy and the gentry concerning the prerogatives of the monarch and the powers of the Parliament at Westminster, and concerning the judicial system, local government and control of the militia. The Restoration did nothing to solve these problems, they were merely handed on to the next generation. Meanwhile, the tension continued to grow and it was to polarize around two social networks and two power structures. It came to be expressed in the form of political rivalry between the Tories and the Whigs, and between 'court and country'.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emerging out of the conflicts in England (and simultaneously in the United States), a gradual process of reform led to a representative political regime and the kind of relatively homogeneous public space in which, in principle, the authority and the citizens were on the same level. This gradual reformism was the result of a combination of political institutions and a political culture that had taken hold in the country at a relatively early date. We could go back as far as the times of the third Earl of Shaftesbury in the late 1600s and early 1700s (Klein, 1994). At that time the seriousness of the antagonism between court and country was already clear, and it was permeated by a cultural opposition with obvious political implications. The culture of the 'country', such as Shaftesbury tried to define and promote it, was the culture of a kind of politeness, understood as courtesy or the civilization of manners, that was substantially different to the civilization of court manners.

What distinguishes this kind of courtesy is the paradigm of 'polite conversation' that leads to a continuous flow of horizontal communications and the equality of the participants (Klein, 1994: 5ff.). Naturally, what this kind of conversation cannot admit is over-participation by those who wish to dominate the conversation itself. Consequently, the idea is to prevent anyone from monopolizing the conversation or trying to silence or crush their opponents by excessive argumentation, as generally

occurs at gatherings presided over by a 'strong personality' surrounded by his 'court'. For the same reason, any attempts at vehemence, solemnity, airs of self-sufficiency and pedantry, not to mention displays of envy or anger, are also to be avoided. And all for the simple reason that to allow or foster any of these behaviors kills off or substantially weakens the conversation, and converts it into a recitative by one or only a few people, reducing the majority to a role of deference and passivity.

The paradigm of polite conversation is a model for political relationships and for both a conception and a style of politics, including the manner of holding debates and taking decisions and applying them, when the aim is the practice of politics in a community of equals who are also diverse, autonomous agents with the intention of maintaining their diversity.

As a result, the question of 'politeness' was removed from the context of the 'court' and reappropriated by the 'country' (Klein, 1994: 22). In so doing, a difference was established between a 'true' and a 'false' politeness with very different civico-moral implications. False politeness is typified by courtiers who acquire a moral character of complaisance and servility conducive to their de-education in terms of freedom. Moreover, this false or court courtesy involves the habitual manipulation of people and appearances, correlated with the dissimulation of one's real intentions, for the purpose of achieving selfish objectives (Elias, 1983); the consequence of which is a de-education in terms of sociability. In contrast, at least according to the reading proposed by people like Shaftesbury, true courtesy reinforces habits of freedom by fostering reciprocal respect and facilitating the practice of cooperation, accustoming people to expressing their interests, ideas and political positions clearly and publically.

A number of traditions and circumstances were drawn together in the elaboration of a social philosophy of 'politeness' and its actual institutionalization. The backcloth was, without doubt, the transformations that took place in agriculture and commerce, finance and technology, social mobility and urbanization, together with the development of the gentry and urban middle classes, for whom the forums of sociability and access to political power multiplied. The immediate cause was the opposition between Whigs and Tories at the time of the Restoration

and the decades immediately following the Glorious Revolution. The Whigs felt that they were representatives of the interests and values of the 'country'. Their way of thinking was affected, in varying degrees, by the philosophy of traditional constitutionalism, by the thinking of John Locke, and by a complex, civic tradition. The predominant component of the latter was more appropriate to a model that we would call Athens rather than Sparta, Cicero's rather than Cato's, or Bruni's rather than Machiavelli's (Klein, 1994: 123ff.; Pocock, 1985: 215ff.) because "Athens", "Cicero" and "Bruni" are the referents for a model that adjusted increasingly well to the requirements of the society of that time: a complex, plural society, supported by a commercial economy, with the prospect of indefinite growth.

The model of 'politeness' is a model inclusive (not exclusive) of the political adversary. It was and continued to be a contagious model that eventually came to be shared by Whigs and Tories alike. The civilization of political conflicts took place in conjunction with a process of the relative approximation of substantive positions. In fact, in the early years of the eighteenth century, Shaftesbury had already suggested that one of the paradoxes of the state in his time was the confluence of the interests of the various parties, and even of 'court and country', around the common objective of upholding the liberties pertaining to the old constitution, the institutional balance of mixed government, and some of the other leading questions of state (Klein, 1994: 140ff.).

Throughout the eighteenth century, these tentative agreements were threatened by the partisan excesses of both sides, and by the pretensions that both parties nourished of entrenching themselves in power (Langford, 1989: 719ff). However, it is strange how their way of doing so, by means of bonds of patronage and the close links between politics and the interests of an increasingly differentiated society, should lead to consequences as unforeseen as they were undesired yet favorable to civilization of the political conflicts. The era of political supremacy of Robert Walpole was characterized by his attempts to reinforce party ties by means of patronage. This caused party tensions to run high (even causing disaffection with the incipient party system on the part of people like Lord Bolingbroke) and gave rise to notoriously tumultuous and controversial elections, such as that of 1734. However, years

later, the departure of Walpole from power constituted a test of the degree of civilization of party conflicts and attitudes among the public when it came to summing up a political rival. In his case, he was allowed to go with his property intact, and even with his political dignity intact (*Ibidem*, 186). This undoubtedly occurred for ambiguous reasons, partly as an opportunistic concession to circumstances, but also because politics had lost some part of that moralizing indignation that predisposed political rivals to demonize each other. The political game had become a game of coexistence among people who lived and let live, and who foresaw that they would continue to do so, while probably alternating in power for generation after generation. (And that was not, moreover, interpreted as *carte blanche* for corruption, as time would show).

The increasing involvement of Parliament in the private affairs of an economy that was diversifying and growing in a spectacular manner, was combined with the development of a complex culture, full of 'sensitivity', in which the people devoted themselves to their economic interests and public affairs. To a greater or lesser degree, this 'gentlemanly' culture was to affect a wide spectrum of the population, as the spread of the titles 'Mister' and 'Mistress' among almost everyone who had any pretensions to respectability suggests (Langford, 1989: 65ff.). The final outcome was the formation of a broad political consensus on fundamental questions, relative not only to expressly political institutions but also to the guidelines of the socioeconomic order.

The state that arose at this point was to be a relatively small, but firm and flexible, state that would meet the needs of foreign policy, including war (Langford, 1989: 677ff), with an effectiveness which its rivals, particularly France, in spite of her demographic size, natural wealth and hegemonic pretensions, were conspicuously lacking. As a result of this, England, at the decisive moment, would successfully oppose the French revolutionary-authoritarian state and defeat it without, moreover, endangering the fundamentals of her own public freedoms, the momentum of her economy and social development, and her political and cultural diversity.

From 'top and bottom' to 'right and left'

In general terms, the political system of the *ancien régime* emphasizes the superior position of the monarch, and its symbolic space is principally

constructed on a vertical axis. What the turbulent evolution of public debate and the institutions that I have just described did during the 1700s was to alter radically that topographical structure, and to substitute one space defined by its verticality by another defined by its horizontality, in which all the participants were on the same level. This horizontal space was then organized according to a criterion of laterality, of right, center and left, because that differentiation responded best to, or was most congruent with, the principle of equality. This principle requires the initial equidistance of all political factions from the center of power, and all the more so if the laterality takes the shape of a semicircle where each segment, one beside the other, is confronting a merely virtual focus of power (like the president of an assembly who is only empowered to call upon speakers) from which they are all separated by the same distance. This spatial configuration seems to be more congruent with a principle of equality than the one adopted by the French Convention in which some deputies were located on the 'plain' and others on the 'mountain' (the former supposedly closer to real political power, and the latter supposedly endowed with greater political virtue). One alternative is the scenario in which the parties that support the government and those in opposition sit opposite one another, equal to equal, on ground that is also marked by strongly lateral symmetry, owing to what was the supreme authority having been removed from the debating space. After his displacement, he is confined to his palace and warned to exercise a merely ceremonial function in politics, having been substituted in the chamber by a Speaker attentive only to the correct observation of the formal rules of debate. (In this, the British case, where whichever party is in government sits on the righthand of the Speaker, construction of the symbolic space in terms of right, center and left is difficult to adjust to the topography of the place of debate but, with that reservation, it was to become more or less accepted, presumably through the influence of continental European political practice and discourse).

The question now is why precisely are *some in particular* on the right, and *others in particular* on the left? The historical answer is well-known and many consider it little more than accidental. In the month of August, 1789, in the first sessions of the French Constituent Assembly, those closest to the political position defending the prerogatives of the crown placed themselves on the right, while those

who were more inclined to place the center of gravity of the state among the representatives of the nation, thereby reducing the prerogatives of the crown to a minimum, placed themselves on the left. (There was to be a "second invention" of this model in Germany during the revolution of 1848. In the parliament at Frankfurt, those in favor of strengthening parliamentary powers to the detriment of the princes tended, once again, to place themselves on the left, and their adversaries on the right: Nagle, 1998: 18). But, contingencies apart, there does appear to be a certain logic in this spatial distribution of those closest to the monarch (or the princes) on the right, and those most distant, on the left.

The relative moral primacy attributed to the 'right hand' and to the 'right' in general in the majority of known civilizations, and in Western tradition in particular, is a commonplace in sociological and historical studies (Laponce, 1981: 29ff.; 69ff.). The law is associated with the idea of upright and right; and something similar occurs with the original foundations of the religious and temporal powers from which that law derives, or which guarantee it. God has his chosen at his right hand, and the monarch tends to do the same. Etiquette and custom give precedence and preference to whoever is situated on the right. The reasons for these historical phenomena do not concern us here; but it is interesting to note that, at the time this shift towards modernity took place, the collective imagination was impregnated with this kind of spatial symbolic valuations. And the underlying idea is clear: the right appears to be 'closer' to what is 'above'.

It must be remembered, however, that, from the outset, there was a basic ambiguity in the relationship between 'top and bottom' and the emergence of an order of freedom. To begin with, the latter was as likely to be threatened or encouraged as much from above as from below.

In principle, support for freedom can come from above. The Christian religion offers the interpretation that "God wants us to be free", or that Jesus Christ came to Earth in order to set human beings free. That, for example, is the nucleus of Dostoyevsky's interpretation in his narration of the Great Inquisitor (Dostoyevsky, 1964 [1879]). In a similar way, the impetus for a benign authority that increases or protects the freedom of all in defiance of the intermediate powers (or the "inquisitors great and small") who

try to prevent it, can also come from above. The same image recurs when the supreme authority is conceived of in an institutional or impersonal way. This happens when it is identified with a central state which stands firm against the despotism of local powers or oligarchies that try to prevent the free circulation of ideas and beliefs, people and goods. Likewise, it happens when the supreme authority is seen to embody the authority of the law or Constitution that guarantees freedom for everyone. On this point, the Founding Fathers of the United States were to introduce the important recommendation that the guarantee of the law and the state *also* be exercised against the tyranny of a majority willing to sacrifice both the public good and the rights of other citizens to their passion or interests (as James Madison pointed out in 'The Federalist Papers', N° 10).

Despite the initial possibility of the 'top' being associated with freedom, the overriding impression in the collective imagination is that 'those at the top' are opposed to freedom. This is due to a number of factors.

Firstly, there has been a long, dense historical experience of ambivalence among the traditional public authority and its immediate circles towards an order of freedom. At times the authority has considered this order, its institutions and related groups as useful allies in its fight against the privileged estates; at others, it has seen it as a danger. The upper classes have also acted ambiguously: at different times, the land-owning aristocracy has both opposed and associated with the cities; at different times, it has both committed itself to the path of development of agricultural and commercial capitalism, and tried to obstruct it. The same strategic insecurity can be observed among the urban bourgeoisies, opting for a policy of ensuring their incomes, and the guild authorities, against whom rural industry has been compelled to defend itself. Nevertheless, the same ambiguity has been visible among 'those at the bottom'. Peasants could either help the development of agricultural capitalism, with the *coqs de village* becoming farmers, or they could hinder it. Among the *sans culottes* could be seen some factions of the French Convention, and later François-Noël Babeuf believed he could see the bases of a social movement that was to recover, in some way, the fundamentals of the traditional peasant community or 'corporate village' (Lefebvre, 1963). In fact, the possibility of an authoritarian-collectivist pincer movement by the top and the bottom uniting their

efforts against an order of freedom promoted by those 'in the middle', an ever-present fear, was to occur in the (traditional) form of Caesarism. Bonaparte was only the paradigmatic expression of this phenomenon, which recurred at intervals over the next two centuries, embodied in a series of so-called charismatic figures.

However, what ultimately changed the memory of the ambivalence of the supreme power towards an order of freedom into the memory of its hostility was the historical contingency that, at critical moments during the 1800s, the authority found itself confronted, more openly in France and less so in England, by the ascent of a political regime corresponding to that order of freedom, and by its principles corresponding to the supremacy of the law and political equality. In short, the momentum in favor of the spread and development of an order of freedom became essentially a struggle against what was 'at the top'. The monarchies toyed with their self-image of 'enlightened despotism', in which there is more than a spark of truth - a fact that has been emphasized by successive generations of accommodating courtiers and *litterati*. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, that image has been unable to prevail against the fact that monarchies have tended to do everything possible (and impossible) to perpetuate the class system and inequality before the law, and to find a "third way" between the market economy and mercantilism (and guild corporativism) that would reinforce their own powers and those of their ministers, and safeguard existing privileges. Some were forced to adapt to circumstances; others perished in the attempt, amidst greater or lesser confusion.

The confrontation happened for various reasons. On the one hand, conflict was difficult to avoid because some of the institutions and doctrines of what was called the monarchical absolutism of the 1600s and 1700s had acquired a considerable *vis inertiae* and they were heading for a collision with the institutions and ideas proper to an order of freedom. On the other, however, there was a deliberate attempt in some countries to fuse the phenomenon of religion and anti-religiosity with the phenomenon of political revolution. This occurred in the drafting of the French Constitution and its interpretation, which was aimed at making the oath to be taken by priests the touchstone for their inclusion or exclusion from political society, and with the aggressive foreign policy of the

Girondists. This forced the King and Queen (who were already ambivalent figures) into an extreme position. It led to them becoming (and to be seen as) subversives undermining the Constitution and allies of the enemies of the country, and therefore doubly “traitorous”, just at the time of the “patriotic paranoia” (expressed with eloquence in *La Marseillaise*: Schama, 1989: 597ff.).

In short, the shift to modernity reduced the level of public authority in three ways. The authority had to respect an order of freedom: freedom of belief, of expression and association, of social mobility and of economic decisions. Everyone, including the authority, was required to submit to the supremacy of the law. And there was a demand for political equality that would (potentially) make all the members of society into citizens and, therefore, into voters eligible for public posts (leaving aside the fact that the actualization of this possibility depended on the electoral laws of the moment). All of this was contained in the conversion or the transformation of a vertical symbolic space into a horizontal one. For the aforementioned reasons, the conversion occurred in a way that meant that those closest to authority, and most reticent when faced with demands for freedom and equality, initially came to be situated on the right, and those furthest away from it and most demanding, on the left. Thus the vertical plane of the political symbolic space rotated in such a way that the top, when projected onto the horizontal plane, moved around to the right, and the bottom, to the left.

Two styles of politics

The manner of the initial shift towards a horizontal space bears some relation to the various ways in which that space is *used* at a later date. In general terms, it is possible to advance the following orientative proposition: that the more uncivil the transition to the horizontal space, the more uncivil will be the use to which that space is put, or at least the more costly in time and effort (and human lives) will be the process of civilizing political life in general, and the conflicts between right and left in particular. Ideally, the result of a civilized political society should be manifested by the predominance of a non-polarized scenario, in which political rivalry takes place between adversaries not enemies, and in a civil style of political debates or encounters.

In principle, horizontality should correspond to a symbolic equidistance of all the political

segments, for example those of the right and left, with respect to power, and therefore, to the parity of their politico-moral status. However, in general terms, there is an abiding latent tension in the symbolic balance between the right and the left. Their rivalry is marked, from the outset, by the pretensions of each one to present themselves as more morally worthy than their opponent. The original right locates itself close to the traditional foci of the maintenance of order, while the original left appears as the promoter of a new political order, associated with the tone of permanent debate and dissent appropriate to modern political activity (Laponce, 1981).

From this point on, a number of possible scenarios exist for a display of their rivalry. Some reflect the attempts of those on the right or the left to devalue and stigmatize their opponents. This can reach the extreme of excluding them from political life, and even assassinating them, as occurred in France during the revolution. This is the ‘terrorist scenario’ in which a strict, systematic and explicit application of the principle of political terror against dissidents is carried out. However, from the outset, there always existed the other ‘civil or civilized’ alternative that consists of establishing a *modus vivendi* between political adversaries, based on reciprocal tolerance and recognition of the legitimacy (and not the mere factuality) of opposing political opinions. The place *par excellence* where this experiment in tolerance was undertaken was, as I have indicated earlier, the England of the 1700s. Without going into the details of the complex trajectory of reciprocal accommodations between Whigs and Tories which occurred from, let us say, the time of Robert Walpole (between 1740-1760) to Lord Melbourne (in around 1830) (Cecil, 1945) or even later, it is enough to remember that their frequently intense rivalry, based on very solid internal ties of patronage, political principle, sociability and economic interest, was no obstacle for two interconnected phenomena of extraordinary importance.

On the one hand, they came to basic agreements on fundamental matters such as public liberties, the limits of government, the rule of law, private property and the market economy (compatible with disagreements over the degree of government intervention in the economy, the role of the church or foreign policy). The development of these agreements highlighted a tendency to place the center of gravity of the contents of public policies around the central axis of a relatively broad though

fluctuating consensus. This is reflected in a combination of economic policy that tended to liberalize the economy and different experiments in social policy (like the welfare system characterized by the benefits complementary to market wages introduced by the magistrates of Berkshire in the 1790s: Johnson, 1991: 374), complemented by social volunteers. It is also reflected in the confluence of people originating from different political positions when it came to reconciling the English state with the movement in favor of Irish emancipation, or with the movement for reform that led to the Bill of 1832.

On the other hand, they developed a style of political behavior that was concomitant with habituation to pacific coexistence and an absence of reciprocal fear among political adversaries. This habituation had three consequences.

Firstly, certain rules of fair play were drawn up that aimed at eliminating certain abuses, such as demagogic rhetoric, and money for votes. In this way, step by step, politics was slowly purged of the elements of “imposture and corruption” denounced by the critics of the system in the eighteenth century. In fact, basic corruption had just been eradicated at the time that, in the United States, the “party machines” that initially lived off the corruption of local politics were being invented and began to proliferate (Johnson, 1991: 395, 906).

Secondly, certain customs and dispositions were established with respect to the use of the coercive apparatus of the state in the face of political dissidence, and even in the face of mass movements. These movements were not generally greatly feared (Johnson, 1991: 364), doubtless because each party judged it unlikely that the masses would be used by their political adversaries to destroy them (as occurred during the French revolution). This shaped the character of a political class that drew back when it came to employing the coercive apparatus of the state against political dissidence, that maintained a modest policing force, that operated with a decentralized system of local administration, and that became accustomed to living with vocal, tumultuous political opinion and a relatively high degree of dissidence and volatility among parliamentary groups. This civism was in marked contrast to the incivility of a political class accustomed to bloodbaths like the Terror, the civil war and Bonapartist repression in France, or the brutality of the American wars of

independence and the Carlist wars, in which no quarter was given, in Spain (*Ibidem*, 627-666).

Thirdly, there was the spread of a conception of politics whereby it was interpreted as an activity aiming at the the preservation and consolidation of an order of freedom by people mindful of actual experience. An activity that marked the limits and means of application of these principles for the effective attainment of its objectives. This conception of politics is compatible with a mixture or combination of very different political languages, but it is ill-fitted to a school of single thought or axiomatic-deductive reasoning because it is located at the other extreme from a vision of politics as a ‘rationalist’ or ‘constructivist’ activity (to use the terms employed by Oakeshott: 1991; and Hayek: 1978; respectively). In other words, it is at the other extreme from the vision of the French revolutionaries. On the other hand, neither does it fit in well with an excessively moralizing conception of politics, that is prepared to stigmatize a political adversary as immoral, because it corresponds to an attitude of “live and let live” and takes for granted an opponent’s ‘legitimacy’. There is not, however, a fundamentally moral or epistemological relativism; but rather the conviction, or the suspicion, that scientific or moral truth, not to mention ‘political truth’, is usually arrived at by a process of gradual discovery, through permanent debate among presumably sensible people frequently acting in good faith.

3. An eventful return to origins

In short, in the genesis of the ‘modern’ order of freedom we can perceive a double possibility: either a civilized society, or a terrorized society that is destroyed by its political conflicts, the outcome of a host of underlying socioeconomic and cultural conflicts. We can also gauge the fragile and precarious nature of that order given the ease with which it can give rise to its antithesis and subsequently be replaced by it. An order of freedom may come to exist. It may cease to exist. And it may be recuperated. To some extent, recent history can be read as a drama of its imperfect realization, its loss and its (provisional) recuperation. And in each act of the drama, the characters representing the political right, center and left play relatively different roles.

Historically, the mere emergence of an order of freedom (and its corresponding symbolic space) was not sufficient for its full and effective realization. Almost everywhere, but particularly in continental Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century, it enjoyed no more than a moderate triumph in the best of cases. The liberal order coexisted with other historical forms of a collectivist or corporatist nature, some of them left over from the past and others still emerging. Its political representatives did not know how, or were unable, to incorporate the union movement into that order, neither did they accommodate religious traditions, or clean up their own justice apparatus from its contamination by the corresponding networks of *caciques* and oligarchies. To be fair, they did not know how or could not do this *in time*, since it must be recognized that they advanced a long way down the road to achieving these aims. Neither were they able to civilize the process of formation of the nationalisms of that era. As a result, they allowed themselves to be swept along by the development of political nationalisms, and by the relatively generalized obsession with the building of 'nation-states'. The realization of that *idée fixe* had two fateful consequences for the liberal order. On the one hand, it encouraged a policy of "national aggrandizement" in each country that led to predatory foreign policies, the generalization of those policies and, consequently, the endemic instability of the world system of national states. On the other, as Lord Acton (1985 [1862]: 431) foresaw with such perception, it generated an internal situation within each state whereby the ethnic groups that differed from the dominant nationality were reduced to the condition of second class subjects or citizens (assuming they had not already been excluded, expelled or exterminated).

As a result, although this 'moderate triumph' of an order of freedom was accompanied by extraordinary economic growth, a substantial improvement in living standards, the consolidation of public liberties and the state of law, and the explosion of an astonishing scientific and artistic creativity throughout the century from the fall of Napoleon to the outbreak of the First World War, it is hardly surprising that, over the same period, European societies came to question that order. The tragedy of the Great War set the seal on its disgrace, and out of the resulting confusion emerged an option in favor of a so-called transcending of liberalism. The relatively central or

moderate parties of the right and left felt tempted to experiment with some variety or other of statism whereby the state would be attributed with greater power and responsibility, initially in defining collective problems (Douglas, 1989; Gusfield, 1981), and later in solving them. Curiously enough, large numbers of those on the right and the left then began to compete with each other to enlarge the state. As a result, the liberal center, stranded between them, became blurred and confused (as is clearly confirmed by the analysis of the evolution of the German national-liberals). However, from its fringes were to spring forth the extreme forms of authoritarian statism that appeared to incorporate the spirit of the times and, for that reason, attracted the corresponding masses of 'ideological', opportunistic and authoritarian intellectuals and young people. These extremes of the right and left went on to create the Nazi and communist totalitarianisms, that is, the antitheses of an order of freedom.

I shall not go into an analysis of that long, diverse and eventful evolution, nor the roles of the right, the center and the left, nor the uses that this division of the political space was put to by each side, nor the (enormous) influence of the organizational, institutional and cultural factors on the one hand, and certain crucial events (like war itself) on the other, in that evolution and those roles. It is obviously a subject that requires separate treatment due to its length and complexity. However, I shall briefly examine a later historical phase that is more familiar to us. It is my belief that during this phase we can see a process of the recovery of an order of freedom, occurring at the same time as a convergence towards the center, or a 'centering', of the right and left.

The recovery of an order of freedom

The Western European world that rose up out of the ruins, the deaths and the immense sufferings of the Second World War, and the destruction of Nazi totalitarianism and its allies, was only able to develop safe from Soviet invasion or internal communist subversion. In these precise geo-historical conditions, a gradual resurgence of an order of freedom took place. There was a slow, gradual learning process (which there had not been either the knowledge or the ability to undertake in the geo-historical conditions of the inter-war period) on the part of both the élites and the masses, across a wide spectrum of the symbolic space of the right and left.

Primarily, they learned how to value the *efficacy* of an order of freedom in serving as a framework for a series of public and private actions aimed at solving the fundamental problems of the societies in question. Proof of the efficacy of the postwar order of freedom on both sides of the Atlantic, in Europe and in the United States, can be measured by its two successes. Firstly it showed itself capable of a military victory over Nazi totalitarianism, and then of the military containment of communist totalitarianism that led to the latter's defeat. In other words, although the liberal order appears to be *soft* and to exhaust its capacity for decision-making in innumerable debates and wordplay, at the moment of truth it can defeat states that boast of their strength and specialize in the arts of terrorization. Secondly, the liberal order, with a market economy complemented by a welfare system with an appreciable state component, has ensured the basics of sustained economic growth, a high level of employment and a high degree of social mobility and social cohesion. This has taken place in a continuous, accumulative way (in spite of recurring setbacks) over several generations. As a result, the social structure of advanced societies has altered. Rural society has changed in nature. Professional, wage-earning, urban society has created new middle classes; and the working classes have become increasingly internally differentiated, and sufficiently 'bourgeois' to reject their supposedly 'class identity', not to mention a so-called 'class project'.

Although a judgement on the efficacy of an order of freedom does not immediately and automatically become a judgement on the legitimacy or moral desirability of that order, including its market economy and its military defence apparatus, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating": the masses have become accustomed to these institutions, and value them as useful and sensible. Parts of the élites remained in doubt, because they were socialized in the interwar period or during the war, and inherited the semi-collectivist pre-conceptions of the earlier era; but, as Pascal declared in the famous fragment 233 of his *Pensées* that begins "*en faisant tout comme s'ils croyaient, en prenant de l'eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc*": to believe, you have only to follow in the footsteps of the converted (Pascal 1958/1658-1662: 96). The leaders and their supporters who were most reticent about the 'liberal model' were obliged to adapt to the situation and, encouraged by their own social bases, began to practice the daily routines

that are fundamental to an order of freedom: they would undertake political campaigns, listen to what their supporters were telling them, observe how they survived and prospered in the economic conditions of the moment, and try to win elections and even to govern with sufficient electoral and parliamentary support, etc.

The postwar period has been that of the long march of European democratic socialism not merely towards 'moderation' but to what is, strictly speaking, a position at the 'center' in the sense outlined above (see section 1). In the circumstances of the time, this translated into support for a policy favorable to a market economy tempered by a welfare system with a dominant public component, and the Atlantic Alliance. This was evident in the resolution of the Congress of Bad Godesburg in Germany in 1959, and in the political positions of Hugh Gaitskell and Anthony Crosland in the United Kingdom; but these are simply examples of a general tendency. Along the road, the social democrats encountered the conservatives and the Christian Democrats, with their respective burdens of semi-collectivist, authoritarian bad habits from their own past. But the latter also adopted the objective of uniting the social economy of the market (of ordo-liberal inspiration) with the welfare state (the conservative legacy of Otto von Bismarck and Benjamin Disraeli, partly redefined by Lord Beveridge). And all of them tended to tone down any strident nationalism (that they had felt, or been infected by, in the past) influenced, no doubt, by the incongruence existing between an attitude exalting nationalism and the realities of international capitalist integration, the process of European construction and the Atlantic Alliance, as well as the unhappy historical memory of where such nationalist exaltation had led them. (The exception was perhaps the Gaullist phenomenon; but let us not forget that France had a particularly humiliating memory of the World War that, combined with the frustrations of Indochina and Algeria, had generated a state of confusion in many people, inspiring them to seek consolation, compensation and a guide in a relatively benign combination of nationalism and Caesarism).

The confluence of social democracy and Christian democracy, though supported by society and indulged by a large part of the *intelligentzia* (eloquently reflected in the literature on the 'end of ideologies': Bell, 1988 [1960]) and by what was called the technocracy, was never complete. It

continued to serve as a backdrop on which to highlight party identities and the belonging to one or other of the lateral segments of the political symbolic space. But the convergence of public policies towards the center had the effect of civilizing relationships between the moderate right and the moderate left of the postwar. The animosities and passions of the past had dissipated to such an extent that the efforts of party leaders, officials and militants to reactivate them opportunely at election time, by whipping up electors' fears of the imminent arrival in power of a 'radical left' or a 'reactionary right' became increasingly artificial and even counterproductive, until they were replaced by more profitable methods.

It is obvious that the success of that confluence had its limits: economic, cultural, and sociopolitical. Far outstripping a tendency that had begun in the earlier period, the growth of the market economy combined with an extraordinary development of the state. Whereas, in the decades prior to the First World War, European states directly controlled around 10% to 15% of Gross Domestic Product, a percentage that rose to between 20% and 25% after that war, (Maier: 1975: 581), in the years following the Second World War it rose to around 40% and was set to rise as far as 50%. This was accompanied by the parallel development of the bureaucracy and the large numbers of the population directly or indirectly dependent on the public sector, as well as a plethora of regulations and interventions in the private sector. In the seventies and eighties, the negative effects of the rigidities generated by this situation on the level of employment and economic growth became obvious; and since the sixties there has been abundant proof of an ill-defined cultural malaise, one of whose manifestations were the events of May, 1968.

The sociopolitical limits of the success of this convergence are underlined by the emergence of a curious social configuration in which we can observe a mixture of corporatism and a *sui generis* variant of the 'court society' of earlier times. In order to comprehend this, it is necessary to broaden our perspective to embrace society as a whole. The fact is that the basic consensus between the moderate right and left was not a consensus reduced to within the political class. Both sides had their business and union connections, and they were on good terms of understanding with the Churches, with the main media groupings and with

a world replete with academics, *litterati*, artists and intellectuals: understandings that were based on a meeting of minds, but also on the shared experience of the handouts, subsidies and salaries from public funds. Doubtless the pacts and arrangements (or fixes) among these segments of the élites in each country bore witness to the process of civilization of the normative conflicts of the past (such as, for example, the conflicts between capital and labor, or between religion and secular culture, that had had such terrible effects in a not too far distant past). But these arrangements, together with the growth of the public sector, finally created the conditions for the development of two, three or more sub-societies built around social networks in whose central area it was possible to detect relatively hierarchized social configurations dominated by élites that negotiated and concluded major matters among themselves in the secure knowledge that their pacts (such as the corporatist pacts of that period, or those of the consociational democracies, for example) would be respected by everyone else.

After a point, these sub-societies developed into entities similar to court societies, not only with their pyramids and distribution networks of political and economic resources, but with social status, media influence and cultural reputations as well. It would be difficult for this kind of social configuration to become established in the United States as a whole (although it could take root in localized areas), because it is a country that houses such an enormous society, spread out over a continent, and accustomed to incessant mobility with a somewhat 'nomadic' moral culture of free individuals. People, in order to be free and to feel themselves to be free, continually use the mechanism of flight (or of "exit" in Hirschman's terms: 1970). They free themselves by exiting from places and from organizations: from the suburbs or cities where they were born, from unions, from Churches or from political parties. After all, the majority are descendants of emigrants, many of whom were freeing themselves by exiting from Europe (no less).

Europe, in contrast, seems more likely to lend itself to a repetition of some version of the court societies of the past. Its peoples certainly seem more deferent to authority (in either a person or a group) and more sedentary. They usually prefer to use mechanisms of fight (or "voice") or silent loyalty (or acquiescence) within organizations. The extreme case is the cultural *milieu*, although at first

sight it seems unlikely to offer much promise for demonstrating the pervasiveness of this inclination because it is made up of people whose professional ethos would seem to demand loyalty to their free convictions, reasonings, likes and personal feelings. However, it is clear that a relatively marked tendency to cultivate limited bounded spaces that are susceptible to monopoly on the part of the cultural confraternity can be observed in the European cultural media and its most typical representatives. The result is the vigorous defence of a species of cultural nationalism that allows the exclusion of outside competition: and from there we go on to the generalized obsession for ensuring a public monopoly on education, the care in controlling access to the market of reputations, the metamorphosis of schools of thought into lobbies aiming at the occupation of a professional field, and their preoccupation with establishing alliances with the *correct* political, economic and media groups for achieving their goal. Possibly, what these cultural élites (or some of their components) in fact achieve by this is to reveal to us their secret vocation to become courtiers in a 'right-wing' or 'left-wing' (conservative, progressive, Christian democratic, socialist, liberal, lay, nationalist or confessional, etc.) court.

This long experience of pacts and compromises compatible with the cultivation of the differences, the political rivalries refracted into a thousand combinations of agreements and disagreements in economic, social and cultural life, has eventually given 'a natural air' to the division between the moderate right and left in European life. This natural air is probably what led Norberto Bobbio to defend the thesis of the permanence of the 'central' nature of the dyad of right and left well into the 1990s. In spite of their doctrinal differences having been reduced even further by that time, he did so without understanding that the key to the division (and its deceptive naturalness) lies less in their doctrines than in the habits and institutions, memories and feelings, interests, organizational links and professional careers that have been created around that division (Bobbio, 1995; my criticism of Bobbio in Pérez-Díaz, 1997: 121-131). In reality, when it comes to clarifying these doctrinal differences, although politicians continue to trot out the familiar refrain suitable for all audiences, many academic commentators are unable to avoid somewhat confused language. Thus, for example, while Bobbio proposes the general formula that "on the one hand, there are those who consider

that men are more equal than unequal and, on the other, those who consider that they are more unequal than equal" (Bobbio, 1995: 146), some British academics, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of the present-day left, offer us the curious proposition that: "this new left (deliberately uncapitalised) represents neither the old left nor the New Left, but rather seeks to transcend both categories, and to leap beyond the old dichotomies accepted by New Right and New Left alike in a true *Aufhebung* - that untranslatable German word conveying both abolition and incorporation of contending opposites in a process of resolution in a higher plane - which Hegel saw as the third moment in the dialectic" (Andrews et alia, 1999: 2).

In the late seventies and the eighties, the breakthrough came when a coalition of a moderate, conservative right and a liberal center decided to stabilize an uncertain situation by opting for a domestic economic policy of liberalization, privatization, deregulation and the restriction or reduction of the public component in the welfare system, as well as a foreign policy of (relative) confrontation with communism. Curiously enough, the fundamentals of this strategy were to be successful. In fact, European social democracy, after some hesitation, found no better way of opposing the right than of co-opting its program. François Mitterand was among the first to see the light when, in 1981, after having been elected on the basis of a 'classically left-wing' program, and having attempted to apply it, he ceased to rebuke his ministers for advising him to adopt what he saw as policies more appropriate of Margaret Thatcher and accepted their advice (Yergin and Stalisnaw, 1998: 302). From that time on, the direction of the course of events could no longer be concealed and Tony Blair in Great Britain soon signed up to it with his political project (and so, probably, did Gerhard Schröder in Germany). The political militants of the moderate left were occasionally heard reciting their odes to lost identity, unrenounceable utopia and elusive revolution and this added an existential touch to the maturation process of successive generations, but it did not alter the final phase of their conversion into 'realistic and responsible' political leaders. When the time came, they placed themselves more or less in the center of the political scenario; they sought the votes that they needed from there; and they governed from there when they had the opportunity to do so. In other words, the most elemental

instinct of preservation (of power) made them adjust their aim and 'center themselves'.

Nevertheless, moving towards the center did not only mean reaffirming the fundamentals of the market economy, with the adjustments required by the critical circumstances of the seventies, eighties and nineties; it also meant lining up unequivocally in support of the central strategy of the Atlantic Alliance in dealing with the Soviet Union. This was a complex strategy defined primarily by the United States, with a heavy component of military confrontation (promoted by Ronald Reagan), and an appreciable component of human rights diplomacy (promoted by Jimmy Carter).

Once again, the apparent verdict on events suggests that the strategy was successful. In effect, partly as a consequence of Western pressure and partly owing to its own internal weaknesses, the Soviet Union collapsed shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. That was the end of communist totalitarianism, at least in its paradigmatic form. It was to be a strange exit from the drama of history for an actor of such grandiose and apocalyptic pretensions; an exit in clear contrast to the terrible, suicidal exit from history of Nazi totalitarianism. The communists disappeared *en douceur*, as if dissimulating. Some soon converted into hardened (and apparently, in many cases, into predatory) capitalists, intent on their own particular privatization of public goods for private profit), others assumed the forms and language appropriate to social democracy, with greater or lesser success, and yet others became national-communists.

The tragicomedy was over. Perhaps. Perhaps the curtain has fallen; perhaps it will be raised again. In any case, the manner of this denouement - provisional, like all the dramas of human history - calls for some additional commentary.

The past as part of a plausible future

The disappearance of the last important vestiges of the extreme forms of the right and left (for the present) has coincided with an accentuation of the process of re-centering undertaken by the moderate right and left since the end of the Second World War. The way in which the extreme left, totalitarian communism, has disappeared, with its representatives desperately trying to merge into the background in order to survive, prosper, or find

some meaning to their lives, is a kind of homage to our 'environment', which is no more than the system of sociopolitical organization that makes it possible for them to survive, prosper or 'live with meaning'. For them, and for the masses around them, this may be an opportunity to experience the *efficacy* of an order of freedom that Western European societies experienced after the Second World War.

But what point have our Western European societies reached *now*? According to the logic of the argument that I have developed, the majority may be considered to have come to understand, through their own experience, not only the efficacy but also the legitimacy of the order of freedom. In other words, it is the actual experience behind merely verbal declarations (like the answers in opinion polls) of support for, or the attribution of legitimacy to, liberal democracy, the market economy and a culture of tolerance that adds *solidity*. And only to the extent that this is so, will they have solved what we could call the paradox of an order of freedom.

An order of freedom is not simply *freedom* but an *order* of freedom: an institutional framework that allows the greatest possible freedom for each and every one of us. But the preservation of that order rests on people's free decisions: it will only work if people genuinely want it to work. This means that individuals cannot just decide that each one of them will be free, but that everyone else will be too. The paradox of an order of freedom is the following: if, taking this order of freedom as their *starting point*, people freely decide to opt for their own freedom but not that of everyone else, and therefore they attain their freedom at the expense of someone else, the *finishing point* becomes an order of domination and servitude.

The paradox can be resolved only if individuals develop a disposition favorable to an order of freedom as such, which means freedom for everyone without exception. In other words, they have to opt for an order of freedom as an end in itself, and not for its efficacy or instrumental value in achieving other objectives (even economic growth or the growth of knowledge).

Naturally, such a reflection would be totally lacking in sense for a communist totalitarian like Lenin when he asked the question: "Freedom? For what?" apparently leaving his visitors puzzled. Nowadays, for the third generation of his disciples, at least one answer appears to be obvious: freedom

to survive, prosper and (perhaps) to enjoy life. Nevertheless, for a very large number of Western Europeans today, Lenin's question was put by someone who simply had not fully understood the significance of what he was asking; because many of them have discovered, through experience, that the full meaning of the term "freedom" is only significant in the *context* of an order of freedom

To some extent, this is the discovery made by someone who has returned to the starting point after a long and eventful pilgrimage. That starting point was the "initial shift" towards freedom by the modern world that occurred when a complex of inter-connected institutions were established in Great Britain during the eighteenth century, consisting of a representative political regime, the market economy (with the logical consequence, in the long term, of a society undivided by noble estates) and a culture of tolerance. These institutions brought with them the principle of equality before the law, and a lateral horizontal division of the political symbolic space which could be used, and under certain conditions has been used, for civil or civilized purposes. This assumes a consensus on the objective of preserving the order of freedom and, therefore, a convergence towards the center or a "centering" of the political positions of the moderate right and left. It is allied with a civilized relationship between these two segments of the political class that derives from an absence of reciprocal fear; with political debate that can be very intense but is mainly devoted to problems and the public policies corresponding to solutions, and not to spatial-symbolic identities (like 'the right' or 'the left', for example); and with calls from politicians for a voter's final decision to be orientated "towards the problems", and not "towards party images" (in the terms of Giovanni Sartori: 1976: 328ff.).

To some extent, all of this was already *in nuce* in the initial experience. Part of it was lost over the following centuries. Part of it developed and matured in dramatic fashion, through an experience of loss and recuperation of 'Hegelian dimensions'. The original situation has been altered for us by two important circumstances. Firstly, what was originally political life for 'the few' has become, in principle, political life for all, or at least for many. It is true that 'the many' are 'part-time citizens', so to speak, but that does not prevent them from having the decisive vote at the end of the day, when it is time to take stock and plan for the future. Secondly, Western societies have experi-

enced for themselves the benefits of an order of freedom, through the immense suffering caused by its antithesis, the totalitarian orders of the twentieth century. The lesson was half-learned by the time the Nazi horrors ceased to exist; and the experience seems to have been rounded off by the decline and disappearance of communism.

Postscript: observations on the present

Even though we may have reached a time of relative maturity in the process of extraordinary enlargement of the sphere of political responsibility, it is only wise not to overlook the fragile and provisional nature of any apparent moment of maturity because it is always under threat. If the liberal order of the past deviated so many times from its true path, led astray by uncivil nationalism, religious or anti-religious fanaticism, and class arrogance or resentment, there is no reason to believe that it could not happen again in not so very different ways. The liberal order has always had its Achilles heel in processes of socialization, and they continue to be its weak point. People's authoritarian and collectivist habits are longstanding: they are rooted in multiple daily experiences, they are reproduced again and again through multiple channels, and they continue to be transmitted to the following generations.

In this respect, it is interesting to note how widespread the mentality of those who do not want to lose control of others usually is in Western societies, and of how, therefore, they are unable to internalize the ethic appropriate to an order of freedom. At heart, these individuals want to control the lives of those around them and, by association of ideas, they consider it desirable and acceptable that "someone" should control what happens in the world. They have a complex about "playing God", who is omniscient and, in principle, omnipotent. Nations, political parties, the authorities, public opinion itself, the people, and their equivalents, are all imitations of the same thing: powerful entities with knowledge who control the world. They feel that they form a vicarious part of these entities. From their point of view, anything outside this kind of control is "dangerous disorder" and as a result, they are incapable of understanding that there is another kind of order. It seems to them absurd to even talk about a spontaneous order in which people follow their own inclinations, their interests and their ideas freely or spontaneously; and in which, when everything is added together,

the result is an order that functions on condition that certain game rules are respected.

However, it must be remembered that this mentality is anchored in an experience of institutions and organizations. Liberal ideas are counter-intuitive for those who are accustomed to command or to being commanded throughout most of their daily lives. It is the daily experience that makes up the “structure of plausibility” of the collectivist or illiberal mentality. That will only change when the majority of people spend the greater part of their time continually exercising their freedom of choice (at work, during leisure hours, or both).

At the present time, the dominant tendency in advanced societies is, in fact, to broaden the sphere of individual freedom of choice. This can be observed in the sphere of production thanks to the development of flexible organizations as well as to the creation of internal spaces for discussion and to the balance of power at the heart of major enterprises. It is likewise manifested in the sphere of consumption and the use of free time by the increase in the ‘critical mass’ of discriminating consumers and users. It is also noticeable in the sphere of different kinds of association and identity, as we can see from their diversity, and the extraordinary rise in voluntary membership of associations of all kinds.

It is true that there are strategies orientated towards preserving the opposing features of the aforementioned court society. These strategies have different (party political, commercial, cultural or other) sources and enjoy the support of numerous professional sectors. This is particularly true of those occupying key positions in communication and information systems, who tend towards a dramatic simplification of public debates, and who exaggerate the propensity of the media to de-contextualize reality, to re-construct it in a way that fits in with the operative needs of the moment, and to sell it to the public in blocks that attract attention and can have an immediate political impact (Douglas, 1989: 18). It is also true that the effect of party or media (or any other) manipulation can find fertile ground in a quantitative increase of education in a society when this is *not* accompanied by a qualitative improvement in the education processes. As a result, we may find ourselves in a society of well-informed people who are practically incapable of forming value judgements, in contrast with those who, after processing information, are capable of judging “without anger

or greed” as Erasmus would say (1984 [1511]: 52), and without letting themselves be taken in by the modern equivalent of the sophists whom he ridiculed five hundred years ago.

It may rightly be objected that the development of information and communication technologies is multiplying exponentially the ability of people to enter into horizontal communication with one another, and making it increasingly possible to avoid having to pay the price of submitting to the influence of those who control the nodes of communication. And that, although the education system may be metaphorically like the open sea on which educational enterprises frequently navigate with somewhat surrealist charts, either at the mercy of the four winds or becalmed, there are other factors that can compensate for the deficiencies of the formal education system and contribute to people’s education in forums outside it. These include the family, family networks, diverse voluntary associations and even some teaching or research centers. There are still more factors like the immense amount of stimulation from economic and social reality and, therefore, of opportunities for experimentation with that reality, the diversity of information sources, the circulation of ideas, and the culture of “individual realization” and its two ethical correlates: personal responsibility for one’s own errors of judgement and tolerance of diversity. All are factors favorable to the formation of an attitude of personal, reasonable openness to the world.

In these conditions, how can this evolution be transferred into the public sphere, the political symbolic space and party conflicts? A full answer to this question would need an inventory of the possible tendencies; so here I shall limit myself to what I consider a probably dominant ‘civil’ tendency in the long term. (Although I warn the reader that, in view of my normative position in favor of an order of freedom, I feel I may be biased in my weighing up of the probabilities that this tendency will ever be effectively realized).

I understand, primarily, that the ongoing evolution increases the weight of traditional objections to the over-evaluation of the horizontal symbolic space understood as an electoral space: namely, that it fails to take into account the multi-dimensionality of that space, or the fact that the positions held by the parties on different political problems are situated in a space with various dimensions such as a religious or an economic

dimension, or the dimension of the identity of the community in question, etc. These positions can only be considered as if they were located nearer or further away, to either the left or to the right, from a central point along a line, or from a central band in a parallelogram, and then only if there is a systematic and sustained consistency among all these dimensions. For example, if parties that are pro-capitalist are always 'Catholic traditionalists' and defenders of a peripheral nationalism. It is obvious, however, that this combination of positions is not immutable and responds only to a series of local historical contingencies. They could equally well be anti-capitalist, agnostic and "peripheral nationalists"; or pro-capitalist, Catholic and supporters of the primacy of a central state.

In order for the theory of the electoral space to work, it has to be based on the premise that the space of public debate and electoral competition is homogeneous or uni-dimensional (or at least that it allows a reasonable weighting of its different dimensions). Empirically, this premise has always been extremely problematical (see the classic position in Downs, 1957; and the critical observations in Converse, 1964; Stokes, 1966; Sartori, 1976), although the relative political stability from the fifties to the seventies induced many to think that, with all its defects, (among others, the impossibility of measuring the direction of the causality between party support and location in the space: Mavrogrodatos, 1987), the electoral space was functioning in an essentially correct way. It was even suggested that a relatively consolidated internal consistency existed between party positions on public policies (as Barnes, with some reservations, suggested in his study of the Italian case: Barnes, 1971).

However, with the focus on questions like the connection between positions with respect to the Church, positions for or against state intervention in the economy, and positions of greater or lesser hostility towards the Soviet Union, it is obvious that a certain consistency was to be expected from a large part of the general public. It could now be argued that the circumstances of the last twenty or thirty years have placed matters at the center of public debate that are not so easily assimilable by the symbolic space of right and left: matters concerning the international judicial and economic systems, terrorism, largescale pollution, narco-trafficking and emigration, for example, or questions of national and supranational identity. But not even the 'classic' subjects of that division, refer-

ring to economic and social policy, are any longer susceptible to reduction to the dichotomic schema. Like almost everything else, they are no longer susceptible to just one of the two solutions on offer but require a multitude of solutions that have to be applied at different levels (supranational, national, local, etc.) In other words, the complexity of the situation is increasing, and the multiplicity of points of view and interests is such that solutions must be sought on a case by case basis and, with growing frequency, they must be experimented with at local levels and then implemented more widely afterwards if they are successful. If, under these circumstances, politicians try to impose their dichotomic solutions they can only do so by having previously reduced the status of the majority of people to the level of subjects or followers of their leaders, and attributing them with only elemental knowledge of the problems at issue.

That was more likely to occur in the past than it would today. We know that many citizens allow themselves to be swayed by party preferences, the feeling of being situated within one band or another of the symbolic space, or the confidence that 'their' leaders inspire. It all means that they are better defined as "orientated towards the party image" than "orientated towards political problems". Nevertheless, this has not prevented the existence of a critical mass of citizens more orientated towards the problems and relatively independent or distant as regards the parties, and largely "unattached". It seems likely that the conditions that I have outlined will be favorable to an increase in this kind of voter and it will increasingly make them the key to the success of one party or another. This likelihood is related to the growing importance of two phenomena, one related to social networks of belonging, and the other to the function of the image (or the "ideology") in the decision-making process of the party vote.

We know that belonging to some kind of social network is, ultimately, a good predictor of a party vote, and probably of a position in one part or another of the symbolic space (Zuckermann *et alia*, 1998). But the dominant tendency in the long term seems to be a loosening of the ties that bind individuals to the social networks to which they belong; or at least the reformulating of those ties as being voluntary ties compatible with the private space of the individual and with the multiplicity of his links with *other* networks (increasing his possibilities of *exiting* from any one of them).

Furthermore, the traditional function of an image or ideology is to save people the time and expense of seeking information and forming their own judgement when they are confronted with problems of which they have scant knowledge (Bawn, 1999). However, the costs of the alternative strategy that consists of concentrating our decision-making process on matters that we know about, and provisionally suspending judgement on what we do not, while remaining alert and disposed to learn in the light of new developments, are *equal* (or perhaps less) in terms of time and expense than recourse to the image (or the ideology).

When hesitating between these two alternatives, what may tip the balance in favor of the former is the “philosophical effect” implicit in the on-going evolution. By this I mean that, contrary to the common impression that we are facing a slow process that is reducing the role of ideas, and leaving us to flounder in acritical pragmatism, I believe that we are witnessing a process that reevaluates a philosophy of freedom and, specifically, a political philosophy of the order of freedom. The dramas of the twentieth century have not been simple “equations of strength”, but dramas *with meaning*. The meaning of the fight against the totalitarian orders (and, by derivation, against the many other forms of authoritarian statism of the twentieth century) and the eventual victory over them, has been the reaffirmation of that political philosophy.

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