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A Sense of the Left

Norberto Bobbio's book on the Right and Left marks a significant moment in the author's long and distinguished career as a political thinker. Published during the Italian electoral campaign of 1994, *Destra e Sinistra* is one of his most topical and personal writings, whose popular success in Italy is not hard to understand.[1] Acclaim for its clarity, elegance and feeling is justified. The text, however, is more complex and less conclusive than it may appear. What are its theses? Bobbio's starting-point is the increasing frequency with which the notions of 'Right' and 'Left' are rejected in political discussion today—despite, he points out, their continued and even accentuated use in electoral competition. Why, he asks, is the traditional opposition between Left and Right now so often repudiated? There are currently three ways of contesting the dichotomy, he suggests. The first is to relativize the dyad by insisting on an 'Included Third': namely a moderate Centre situated between Left and Right, occupying most of the actual space of democratic political systems. The second way of

rejecting the distinction is to dwell on the prospects of an 'Inclusive Third', integrating and superseding the legacies of Left and Right in some synthesis beyond them. The last is to point to the rise of a 'Transverse Third', penetrating across the camps of Left and Right, and displacing them from relevance—the role, he notes, often accorded green politics. Bobbio's response to each of these claims is a firm *fin de non recevoir.* The existence of a Centre, however dominant, does not alter the contrast between polarities of Left and Right on each side of it. Notions of a synthesis beyond Left and Right typically conceal ambitions by one pole to absorb or neutralize the other. Finally, movements of opinion extending across Left and Right tend to redivide, like the Greens, into new versions of them. Nor, Bobbio further observes, do similarities between authoritarian movements of Right and Left, or shifts of individuals from one to the other, affect the political distinction itself. They relate to another opposition, which sets Extremists and Moderates apart in their attitudes to democracy—a fundamental contrast, but one orthogonal to the polarity of Left and Right, which does not cancel it: indeed in situations of crisis tends to yield before it, as in Italy in the early 1920s or 1940s.

If none of these reasons for doubting the validity of the dichotomy between Left and Right is valid, what then explains its intellectual rejection today? The real basis of the current opinion, Bobbio suggests, lies elsewhere. The distinction between Left and Right loses its meaning if one of the two ceases to exist. Without saying so directly, Bobbio implies that historically this has never occurred. But there have been situations in which one side has suffered such a deep defeat that its survivors have tended to argue that the distinction itself has lost all meaning, in a strategy of consolation designed to conceal their own weakness. Such was the stance of the Italian Right in the immediate post-war years, after the debacle of fascism made the Left seem all-victorious. Today the boot is on the other foot. In the wake of the collapse of communism, it is above all on the Left—or former thinkers of the Left—that the temptation to deny the distinction can be observed. The real reason for the new scepticism is once again a move of self-protection, compensating for an experience of defeat with a rhetoric of supersession.

Once Bobbio has dismissed the reasons subjectively adduced for discarding the dichotomy of Left and Right, and located the objective reasons for the tendency to deny its validity, he has still to found the opposition as a rational political framework that has lost none of its force today. After considering a number of unsatisfactory attempts to do so—coding Right and Left as tradition versus emancipation, sacred versus profane, and so forth—Bobbio offers his own definition. The division between Left and Right, he argues, is one of attitude

[1] Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e Sinistra, Ragioni e significati di una distinzione politica,* Rome 1994; a revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1995, to which all page numbers below refer. Translated into English as *Left and Right,* Cambridge 1996.

towards equality. Given that human beings are manifestly at once—that is, in different respects—equal and unequal, 'on the one side are those who think men more equal than unequal, while on the other are those who think them more unequal than equal'.[2] This is the permanent, underlying contrast between Left and Right. It is accompanied by another. The Left believes that most inequalities are social and eliminable; the Right that most are natural and unalterable. For the first, equality is an ideal; for the second it is not.

Liberty is not a dividing-line between Left and Right, Bobbio goes on, in the same way. Anyway incommensurable with equality, as the status of a person rather than a relation between persons, it is the value that sets moderates apart from extremists within each camp. But in the opposition between Right and Left, it occupies the position of means rather than ends. Characteristically, Bobbio indulges no pious harmonics. Liberty cannot be equated with equality, and there is no reason to think the two always compatible. If some kinds of equality do not affect liberty, others—necessary constraints, like universal public education—do. It is over issues like these that Left and Right essentially join battle. Bobbio concludes his book with a personal avowal. Equality has always been the 'pole-star' of his political life. The inequalities of this world—from the impoverished and excluded within rich Western societies, to the huge mass of misery in the poorer countries—remain staggering. It is enough, he writes, to look out at the 'social question on an international scale, to realize that the Left, far from coming to the end of its road, has only just started out on it.' The task is enormous. But the aspiration for an ever greater human equality, of which the rise of women's liberation is one of the most certain signs today, is—as Tocqueville understood already a century ago—'irresistible'. Bobbio ends his book by urging us to look beyond the immediate skirmishes of the day, to the long sweep of the 'grandiose historical movement' bearing it forward.[3]

The Logic of the Distinction Between Right and Left

This is a powerful conclusion, that can leave few unmoved. We owe it the kind of intellectual respect Bobbio has always practised—a dispassionate critical scrutiny. Two sets of reflections are prompted by *Destra e Sinistra.* One concerns the inner logic of Bobbio's argument, the other its exterior context. Let us look at the first. Bobbio's central claim is that the distinction between Left and Right remains alive and well, since it is based on two fundamentally different views of equality, which set Right and Left permanently apart. In the exposition of this difference, however, he tends to run together a number of propositions that are logically independent of each other. We can distinguish four of these, which concern what we may stylize as the issues of (i) the factuality; (ii) the alterability; (iii) the functionality;

[2] *Destra e Sinistra,* p. 105; *Left and Right,* p. 66.
[3] *Destra e Sinistra,* pp. 128–132; *Left and Right,* pp. 82–86.

and (iv) the directionality of human inequality. In Bobbio's characterization, the Left holds the view that the natural inequality of human beings is less than their equality, that most forms of inequality are socially alterable, that few if any are positively functional, and that more and more will prove historically ephemeral. The Right, on the other hand, is committed to the view that the natural inequality of human beings is greater then their equality, that few forms of inequality are alterable, that most are socially functional, and that there is no directionality in their evolution.

The two packages thus presented are, however, dissociable. The first element in each poses an initial problem. Since the ways in human beings are at once similar and dissimilar differ so radically-Bobbio's illustration is the common fact of mortality, and the variable forms of death—how could they be aggregated in a single calculus, to yield a final balance? Bobbio's solution is in effect to introduce a specification: only those aspects of their nature that help people to live together—*per attuare una buona convivenza*—will be reckoned into the sum.[4] A conservative might reply that this is to build a *petitio principi* into the calculation from the start. Here we may overlook this difficulty, to note a greater one. There is no necessary connection between the first and second parts of each package. It is quite possible to believe that human beings are naturally more equal than unequal, and yet that most forms of inequality are ineliminable—and it is no less possible to believe that human beings are naturally more unequal than equal, and yet that many social inequalities can and should be eliminated.

These are not mere formal paradoxes. There is, after all, now a considerable literature bearing on the problems they might represent. To take only the second alternative, a growing body of thought has been concerned with the possibility that socially egalitarian programmes could ultimately have a counter-finality: by eliminating artificial forms of inequality, founded on power and culture, they could eventually highlight and crystallize natural forms of inequality far more dramatically than ever before, in a new hierarchical order founded on the genetic code. This was already the vision conjured up in Michael Young's *Rise of the Meritocracy*, the work of a moderate social-democrat in the 1970s.[5] More recently, similar projections have come from liberal or neo-conservative writers in the United States—Mickey Kaus or Charles Murray. Common to all these authors, who span the spectrum from Left to Right, is the foreboding that class divisions once cancelled, occupations would be determined by biological endowments—essentially degrees of innate intelligence—leading to new and harder forms of stratification, as endogamous strategies of marriage selection, now possessed of accurate genetic knowledge and choosing for comparable DNA, perpetuated a hereditary mental elite.

[4] *Destra e Sinistra*, p. 105; *Left and Right*, p. 66.
[5] Michael Young, *Rise of the Meritocracy*, London 1972.

The validity or otherwise of these visions need not concern us here. What they point to, however, is something that Bobbio's argument passes over. For he writes as if views of human nature—and so of equality or inequality—were a question of ultimate philosophical choice, beyond which is no appeal. But in fact they are subject to scientific evidence, whose volume has been steadily increasing in recent years. Still—he might reply—so far few conclusive findings that bear on his theme have been reached. The prospect of further advance, however, casts a shadow over his distinction. Already, within his scheme, there is no reason why differences of viewpoint about natural or social inequality should be very extensive. Theoretically we could imagine that the natural variation in human beings of the estimated edge either of inequality over equality, or vice-versa, was too small to generate any systematic political differences, indeed that there could be a cross-over in the list of particulars of each—since there is no reason why each side should weight every element consistently by inversion with the assessments of the other. To base the distinction between Left and Right on ontological judgements of the balance between human equality and inequality, in other words, is rest it on a frail foundation—which the further development of science could strike away, by imposing inescapable convergence on a common empirical standpoint.

The Uses of Inequality

What then of the third element in Bobbio's set? Though he gives less attention to this, could it provide a more stable dividing line? In principle, all parties might agree on the factual balance between natural equality and inequality, and on the alterability or otherwise of social inequalities, yet differ fundamentally over the question of whether the latter should be regarded as functional or dysfunctional for a flourishing society. Here questions of normative evaluation, unamenable to scientific arbitration, would enter into their own. Bobbio might have been expected to dwell on them. In fact, he touches on this third element in his characterization of Right and Left only cursorily, noting that inequalities are often viewed not just as inevitable but also as positive on the Right, without referring much to the opposite standpoint on the Left, which he perhaps took as self-evident.

But here, at any rate, we would appear to be on the surest ground for differentiating Right from Left. Nevertheless, a difficulty arises. Is it the case that the Left, as it actually exists in Europe today, denies all functionality to social inequalities? It is enough to observe the universal tribute paid to the market, and its incentive structures, to realize that this is not so. In many countries, actual indices of economic inequality have, indeed, notoriously increased under administrations of the Left as much or more as under those of the Right. Such has been the practice of recent decades. The theory of productive inequality, of course, has been developed mainly on the Right, above all in the powerful work of Hayek. The Left has by and large adapted to it, with softening but not necessarily effectual caveats. It is perhaps

significant that Bobbio has never directly engaged with Hayek. He has, by contrast, referred approvingly to Rawls, the thinker of the moderate Left who has theorized justice as 'fairness', allowing economic inequalities only to the extent that they improve the lot of the worst-off. The formalism of the Difference Principle, however, leaves that extent absolutely indeterminate-potentially justifying virtually every inequality of the existing capitalist order on the grounds of the historically unprecedented productivity, benefiting every poorest citizen, that it has unleashed. It is little surprise Hayek himself could declare his fundamental agreement with Rawls, when *A Theory of Justice* first appeared.

The third component of Bobbio's package is thus also more precarious than it seems. He is aware of the difficulty—that, in practice, the economic policies of Left and Right in the West appear to exhibit ever diminishing differences. He tries to resolve it by dismissing the practical 'compromises' the Left may have to make as irrelevant to the 'ideals' it continues to stand for, with which alone his intervention is concerned. But the two cannot so easily be separated. Bobbio himself, after all, appeals to the empirical fact that party politics in Italy has never been so shrilly and insistently coded in terms of Left and Right as today, to give weight to his claim that the ideal distinction still holds. But there was a still more striking feature of the Italian electoral campaign of 1994. Never had the programmatic differences between the principal parties been so narrow as they were then, consequent, of course, upon the conversion of the former Communist Party to more or less neo-liberal economic doctrines, symbolized by the pilgrimage of its leader to secure the *placet* of the City of London during the campaign. In 1996, the programmatic convergence of the two blocs went even further, to the point where each side publicly accused the other of copying its platform. These are facts which tell against Bobbio's ideal types, and from which he cannot consistently insulate them.

Bobbio might reply that if such convergence has occurred in the rich countries, it has not in the poor countries in the world, where the overwhelming task before the Left—he insists—lies. But there too—in Latin America, in Black Africa, in South Asia—privatization and deregulation, the triumph of the market, are the doctrines of the hour, implemented by politicians and parties once of the Left as frequently as by forces of the Right. What does this tell us about Bobbio's fourth proposition—the directional trend of global inequality? Here it is noticeable that there is an asymmetry in his account. When he touches on the last element in his contrast between Left and Right, he refers only to the Left—which is to be encouraged on its path by a longer sense of the movement towards greater equality in human history. What view the Right might take of this prospect Bobbio does not suggest. But we can deduce that it must be unpalatable. Broad directionality of any kind, perhaps, might be thought incompatible with the traditional outlook of the Right.

In fact, however, we have before us a very recent example of a doctrine of the moderate Right with strong directionality, which bears directly on Bobbio's thesis. Famously, Francis Fukuyama's claim is that world history has reached a categorical, though not chronological conclusion, since there is no longer any viable alternative to liberal capitalism, whose incentive structures demand approximately the levels of inequality that now obtain in the advanced countries, and whose dynamic is now visibly starting to draw the poorer countries along the same path, towards a common, necessarily competitive, necessarily inegalitarian—prosperity.[6] Fukuyama could calmly agree with Bobbio that the movement of history is towards greater equality, since this is just what his Hegelian theory of the struggle for recognition recounts. He would merely note that the movement must halt somewhere, and that we can already see its stopping-place in the kind of societies we have, give or take a few minor reforms on which all can agree. It is not clear how Bobbio, lacking any comparable historical theory, would reply. His concluding pages form a powerful moral statement. But is it an accident that they equivocate at one crucial point? The long-term trend towards ever greater human equality, Bobbio repeats, is 'irresistible'. Yet he writes in the same breath that this civilizing movement is 'not necessary', but only 'possible'.[7] The contradiction between the two claims needs no emphasis.

Politics Without a Left

Bobbio's theoretical defence of the distinction between Left and Right, for all its eloquence, may thus be more vulnerable than it appears. If we ask why this should be so, the answer surely lies in the difficulty of constructing an axiology of political values without coherent reference to the empirical social world. Bobbio often writes as if he could separate his ideal taxonomy nom contemporary history, but, of course, he cannot. In practice, he admits the political scenery of the present into his account selectively, for the purposes of his argument. But it is in that present that the deeper reasons and limits of his intervention lie.

Bobbio spent the 1950s to the 1980s arguing against the traditions of Italian Marxism, first in their official and then their heterodox forms. From the start he was an outstandingly courageous, consistent and civil opponent of communism in his own country and abroad, from the standpoint of what he wished to be a liberal socialism. When communism collapsed in the Soviet bloc, however, Bobbio did not exult. His reaction was the very opposite of triumphalist. While greeting the overthrow of the Warsaw Pact regimes as a great episode of human emancipation, the end of an inverted utopia, his immediate fear was that Western capitalism now lacked any external pressure to reform itself in a more humane direction, of the kind the Soviet threat had once

[6] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London 1993.
[7] *Destra e Sinistra*, p. 132; *Left and Right*, pp. 85–86.

represented, in a world in which the larger part of humanity, outside the zones of Western privilege, remained the damned of the earth.[8]

His presentiment soon took specific shape in Italy, as a swelling chorus of voices on the Left, or former Left, declared the distinction between Right and Left henceforward an anachronism. This was just the kind of reaction to the events of 1989-91 that Bobbio had warned against. Better than anyone, he could see the psychological springs of it, as he unerringly depicts them in *Destra e Sinistra.* Against this relaxation of moral and political tension, he intervened with great force to reaffirm the enduring identity of the Left. But, if this gave all its strength to his polemic, it also fixed its limit. We might say that Bobbio's gaze remained too eastward. From Liberation onwards, he confronted a Left dominated by the most powerful communist movement in the West, which demanded the best of his intellectual energy. His critique of it always remained much stronger than his alternative to it, after the demise of the Partito d'Azione and the hopes of a 'liberal socialism' it had embodied for him. He was attracted by what he saw of Labourism in Britain, from a brief acquaintance during the Attlee years. But in Italy there was no equivalent. By the 1970s Bobbio saw himself as more or less a social democrat, in a country without social democracy. But he never gave the same degree of attention to the dominant Western version of the European Left that he did to the Eastern. Social democracy remained a benign background haze, rather than an institutional phenomenon sharply focused in its own right.

Perhaps, unconsciously, Bobbio even avoided looking over his shoulder too much at what was taking shape behind him in the Britain of Wilson or Callaghan, the France of Mitterrand, the Spain of González. At all events, it is the repression of this experience that marks the limits of his intervention in *Destra e Sinistra.* For, by 1994, those who argued against the continuing validity of the categories of Right and Left were, of course, prompted to do so not just by the collapse of communism in the East but by the demoralized effacement of social democracy in the West. The abandonment of full employment and reduction of social security, and the universality of neo-liberal doctrines for economic growth put in question the traditional contrast between Left and Right in a more painful and pointed way than Bobbio's formal conspectus admits. The terms Left and Right are themselves, of course, as he concedes, purely relative. A Left could survive in an all-capitalist system—purged of any residual resistance to the market—that was to the right of anything now in the centre. That would be even be true today, if we compared—say—the record of recent Labour rule in New Zealand with that of the Swedish Moderates.

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[8] 'L'Utopia Capovolta', *La Stampa* 9 June 1989, translated as 'The Upturned Utopia' in NLR 177, September–October 1989, and then republished in Bobbio's book of the same title, *L'Utopia Capovolta,* Turin 1990.

In practice, however, it is doubtful how long the vocabulary of Right and Left would persist in such conditions. Europe, which invented the distinction, is inclined to think it has become universal. But that is not the case. In the United States, where a close approximation to an all-capitalist system has long existed, the terms Right and Left retain a limited currency in academic literature, but have virtually no purchase in public or popular discourse. This is not a foible of American cultural tradition, but an accurate reflection of the minimal difference, and sporadic interchangeability, between the country's two parties. We need simply note that the domestic policies—including health-care proposals—of the Democratic Administration headed by Clinton are far more conservative than those of the Republican Administration led by Nixon. No clear-cut line of principle, of any sort, separates the two duopolists. A very similar situation—potentially perhaps even more pronounced—now obtains in Japan, with the liquidation of the former Social-Democratic Party and the split of the LDP. There is no sense in which the current government and opposition in Tokyo, essentially formed from the same magma, can be intelligibly classified as respectively Right or Left. Since the United States and Japan together form the larger and more dynamic part of the advanced capitalist world, there is reason to wonder whether Europe might not move towards the same horizon too.

This is not to argue that the concepts of Left and Right should be abandoned. Bobbio's passionate call to retain them merits our fullest sympathy. But they will not be saved by shutting one's eyes to the evacuation of their content by the trend of established politics today. A purely axiological defence of the idea of the Left, bereft of any historical theory or institutional attack capable of shaking the status quo, will not pass muster. Bobbio once looked to liberal socialism for such a challenge. Today he redescribes social democracy as liberal socialism, in a notable lowering of expectations—yet at the same time describes liberal socialism as a typical figure of the Inclusive Third, whose deceptive attempts to escape the dichotomy of Left and Right he elsewhere criticizes. The lesson of his book, however, is that the opposition between Left and Right has no axiomatic guarantee. If the Left is to survive as a meaningful force, in a world overwhelmingly dominated by the Right, it will have to fight for a real alternative to it.

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