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CONTESTING LIBERTY

by Ursula Huws

There are certain moments in history when new faultlines appear in the political landscape. Suddenly, the two-dimensional divisions between left and right seem cut across by other fissures, running at right angles to them, or even in another plane.

One such moment occurred during the build-up to the Gulf War. There in the House of Commons was the Major/Kinnock/Blair generation (with a few honourable exceptions, such as Tony Banks and Dafydd Elis Thomas), speaking in almost a single voice in favour of the video-game aggression of the Western allies. And there, opposed to them, equally in agreement in their espousal of peace and dialogue, was the unlikely trio of Edward Heath, Dennis Healy and Tony Benn. In the 1970s, it would have been almost impossible to imagine such accord between these three diametrically opposed figures, representing in many ways the polar extremes of the parliamentary landscape of the 70s. Yet here they were, united, perhaps, solely by the fact that they were all old enough to have seen active service in World War II and therefore had first-hand knowledge of the human cost of war. The divisions between left and right had not, of course, been dissolved. It was just that on this issue something stronger had cut across these divisions, making them seem almost irrelevant.

The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, who combined a fierce republicanism with a curious intellectual elitism, is, to my knowledge, the only person who has attempted to theorise this shifting of the ideological terrain over time. Writing in the 1920s, he developed a theory of generations based on a 15-year rhythm which he related to that of the human life-span. We spend 15 years growing up, he hypothesised, then 15 years discovering who we are and forming our cultural and political identities. The next 15 years are spent pushing angrily upwards against the next generation (the 45-60-year-olds) who are actually running things. Finally, after the age of 60, we settle into a softened, more peripheral, role, dispensing elderly-statesmanly wisdom and forging intellectual alliances with the next generation but one (the 30-45-year olds) in their struggle with the intervening generation of rulers. According to Ortega, the power shift between generations does not come gradually but in a sudden upheaval, a moment in which a major ideological change takes place after which everything which preceded it suddenly seems hopelessly old-fashioned. He identified the moments at which such changes had taken place in the past (1888, 1903, 1918) enabling his readers to forecast similar changes in 1933, 1948, 1963 and 1978. Whatever the merits of the general theory (which - like astrology, or Gondratieff's theory of waves of technological change, or indeed any other cyclical theory - carries a somewhat distasteful whiff of reductionism about it, not to mention a complete absence of any awareness of class differences) it is undeniably the case that these years do appear, in retrospect, to have marked the beginnings of periods which had the character of watersheds, both politically and culturally.

It is hard not to agree that Europe was irrevocably changed after Hitler came to power in 1933, or again after the creation of the post-war Marshall Plan/welfare state consensus (and the 'new look') during the late 1940s. Nor after the moment (usually placed somewhere around 1963) the 'swinging sixties' were born; when the first generation of post-war children, weaned on the welfare state, hit the institutes of higher education, and the birth control pill, marijuana, white British rock music, and a new form of 'modern' social democracy burst almost simultaneously on the scene. Neither can we easily deny the seismic ideological shift which took place around 1978, which coincided with the triumph of Thatcherism and Reaganism but was also the moment when flared trousers, long hair, lifestyle politics, altruism and sociology were also rendered suddenly and irremediably out of date.

If there is indeed a pattern here, then we should expect a similar rupture to have taken place in 1993. Looking back, it is indeed possible to discern a few changes. You could cite, for instance, the death of the shoulder-pad, a new love affair between teenagers and the fashions and music of the early 70s, a record rise in the number of school students taking sociology A level, an extraordinary reluctance among the thirty-somethings to admit that they ever were yuppies, the final submergence of most academic discourse beneath a tidal wave of postmodernism, and, indeed, the triumphal appearance of Tony Blair and his new Labour party. However important these shifts may seem to those immediately engaged with them, however, on the grand Richter scale of ideological change, they do not add up to the sort of major upheaval we saw in the late 1970s. At the level of daily life, they do not appear to have left much discernible trace of their passing and one is left wondering what, if anything, has really altered.

It is probably only with hindsight that we will know for sure, but there are now signs that rumbling beneath the bland surface of the political terrain is a potential earthquake the aftermath of which will leave few of us occupying precisely the same grid-points on the philosophical ordnance survey map as we did before. It is an upheaval which throws together elements from the libertarian left and the libertarian right and, in opposition to them, creates the potential for unlikely alliances between elements both of social democracy and of high Toryism. At its centre is a new focus on individual liberty and autonomy and a critique of all those structures which constrain it, whether they are merely bureaucratic or more aggressively coercive.

A latter-day Ortega might argue that the shift has only been made possible now by two things: the presence in the managerial mainstream of society of a critical mass of people whose views were formed in the 1960s; and, in the generation of graduates immediately behind them, the presence of large numbers of people who, with varying degrees of reluctance and distaste, were taught sociology in the 70s and early 80s by this 60s generation.

Evidence for this comes in the extraordinary success among the Tory faithful of *Saturn's Children: How the State Devours Liberty, Prosperity and Virtue*, by Alan Duncan and Dominic Hobson (Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1995).

For those familiar with the output of the Adam Smith Institute and other right-wing think-tanks over the past decade and a half it would be easy to dismiss this as yet another product of the 1980s. It advocates, for instance, the total privatisation of education, the legalisation of all drugs and the cutting of all overseas aid. It castigates the Church of England as socialist, deplors the decline of marriage and bemoans almost any form of state regulation whether this applies to planning, road safety or the National Curriculum. It endorses the famous Smithite Thatcher dictum that 'there is no such thing as society; only individuals' and reiterates the 'trickle-down' theory of wealth creation which proposes that the plight of

the poor can only be improved if the rich become richer. Quoting Adam Smith extensively, it advocates an unfettered free market in virtually everything, even lauding the 'rough nobility' of the currency speculator (p 155).

On the face of it, this would seem to offer nothing new. Yet to regard the book as a mere continuation of the right-wing libertarianism of the 80s would be to miss some important changes. The first clue lies in the title - a grand classical reference to Saturn - the Roman name of the Greek god Kronos who is supposed to have devoured his first five children to prevent them taking over his power. Finally, his wife Rhea, gave birth to her sixth child, Zeus (Jupiter, in Roman mythology), in secret. In due course, Jupiter grew up, tricked his way into Saturn's presence, administered an emetic which made his father vomit up his older siblings, and, together with his brothers, attacked and defeated him .

Such cultural references are typical of the authors, who ransack the history of ideas in the same spirit of contemptuous vandalism curiously combined with uncomprehending deference that their architect contemporaries misappropriated the features of classical architecture to paste onto their breeze-block boxes during the 1980s.

The cover of the book also indicates their anxiety to place themselves in the mainstream of the history of European thought. It reproduces the famous Goya painting of Saturn devouring his children. It is a violent and horrific image which combines two of Goya's obsessions, gigantism and cannibalism, and we are clearly intended by Duncan and Hobson to interpret the figure of Saturn as a representation of the all-devouring state and to identify ourselves and our liberty with the hapless victim - an interpretation quite horrifying to any serious Goya scholar.

From such references to classical high art, and from the self-consciously 18th century cast of much of their language, it is evident that Duncan and Hobson intend their book as a weighty statement, to take its place in the grand tradition of British political writing going back to Adam Smith, and Hobbes before him. They stamp crossly through the history of European philosophy, demonising Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche collectively as German state-worshippers, dismissing virtually all nineteenth century English thought - whether Tory or not - as utilitarian and reserving a special virulence for the vein of Christian socialism which they see as running from Ruskin via Tawney and Gaitskell direct to Tony Blair.

But much of their analysis would not be out of place in a libertarian socialist work of the 1960s: their glorification of 14th century poll-tax rioters and 18th century smugglers (not to mention 20th century VAT evaders) as heroic champions of the people; their willingness to claim radical figures like Wilkes and Paine as their ancestors; their enthusiasm for Shelley; their suspicion of the romanticisation of the mediaeval which underlies much of the writing of Ruskin and Morris.

In order to develop their argument that the history of the last two centuries has been a history of creeping collectivisation and destruction of individual freedom in all spheres, they draw heavily on the work of sociologists and thinkers of the left, quoting, for instance, Weber on bureaucracy, Willmott and Young on the isolation of life in high-rise blocks and Marcuse on anomie. Yet they also rant against 'the warped inventions of sociology and its brothers in intellectual infamy, anthropology and psychology'. One is left with the suspicion that their relationship to sociology is as oedipal as that of Jupiter to Saturn in the myth they have chosen as their symbol.

Many of their present-day targets are also those of large sections of the left. They deplore, for instance

the injustice of tax perks for the rich, the increasing seizure of power by central government from local authorities, and the ways in which the benefit system creates unemployment traps and poverty traps. When it comes to Duncan and Hobson's view (largely derived from Harold Perkin ') that our society is now governed by bureaucrats whose only goal is to perpetuate their own interests, some 1970s Marxists would also agree that there is a new managerial and professional class, with interests which are distinct from those of either capitalists or workers, and which is to be found equally in both public and private sectors.

To reject such ideas simply because one finds some of their holders' other views distasteful is to walk into a dangerous trap. This book reminds us forcibly that ideas like 'liberty', 'autonomy', 'flexibility' or 'choice' are not private property but are reclaimed and reinvented by each generation. During the 1960s and '70s they were the playthings of the left. In the next generation they were reappropriated by the right. If the new left is too afraid to handle them again, for fear of contamination by their previous holders, socialism will find itself jumped into the unenviable role of the enemy of individual freedom. It will be open to representation as the defender of bureaucracy and of rigidity. It will become the killer of initiative and creativity; the wet blanket, the kill-joy, the ultimate party-pooper.

A more constructive approach might be to examine the divergences between the libertarianism of the right and that of the left.

One critical difference is in the meaning given to the notion of the individual. In the neo-Whiggery of Duncan and Hobson, like that of their 18th century idols, the word turns out to refer not to a single person at all but to the family (consisting of a male head, a dependent wife and children who are, implicitly, their private property). In their view, 'the family is not the first rung in a state hierarchy but the main obstacle to the exercise of state power and the last bastion of individual privacy and liberty'.(p334). The liberty of individual women and children - for instance to economic independence, or to freedom from physical abuse, within the family is not considered.

Another difference can be discerned in their contradictory attitude to large corporations. Essential to their argument is the acknowledgement that capitalist organisations are now so large and monopolistic that the individual proprietor so beloved of the apologists of the free market has largely been replaced, on the one hand by the corporate shareholder and on the other by the professional, salaried manager, neither of whom has the adventurous verve or the commitment to success of the 18th or early 19th century capitalist. Yet they propose no restraints on the centralised power of these global monopolies. On the contrary, the only solution they offer is a reworking of the ideas of Charles Handy, the favourite apologist of middle-class casualisation, who gets upwards of £10,000 a shot to lecture middle-aged executives facing redundancy on how they are now becoming 'portfolio men'. Their fantasy is that the growing army of the self- (or semi-) employed will become a new generation of owner-proprietors, recreating the self-reliance, thrift and creativity of the early capitalists. This model ignores the reality that it is still the multi-national corporations which call the tune. Two and a half centuries of capital accumulation cannot be so easily wished out of existence.

To make their case, they have to resort to a statistical sleight-of-hand whereby all the members of the vast army of casual workers in Britain, whose existence is now only too apparent, if still underestimated, in the official figures, are converted into autonomous independent 'consultants'. In reality, of course, the majority of self-employed and temporary workers are no such thing. They are much more likely to be doing shifts at Burger King or on the Tesco checkout, risking their lives on unsafe building sites, selling

things on commission, cleaning offices, packing Christmas cards or home sewing for £1 an hour.

Another important difference between Duncan and Hobson and the left libertarians of the 1960s is in their attitude to the state. The generation which came to adulthood in the 1960s was the first - and perhaps the only - pure product of the post-war welfare state. Born in NHS maternity wards, weaned on free milk and orange juice and educated in a steadily expanding system which made many the first members of their working-class families to enter university, they took many aspects of the state for granted. Secure in the belief that they would not be left roofless or starving or penniless in their old age, they felt free to criticise it on the one hand for its collusion with international capital and on the other for its failure to respond more generously to the needs of the population. In this model the state was a rigid and authoritarian kill-joy parent. Its police attacked anti-war demonstrators and arrested soft drug users. Its bureaucrats harassed claimants and - like jealous husbands - checked out women's bedrooms for evidence of male visitors before allowing them their social-security payments. Its censors tried to close down magazines in which sex was freely discussed and theatres in which actors took off their clothes. Creative self-expression, sexual liberation and political protest were closely linked and the state was the enemy of all three. Yet there was an extraordinary confidence that all this could be changed for the better. The sixties had provided evidence that enormous cultural changes could be achieved without violence - witness the speed with which it became socially acceptable for young couples to live together without being married - and the generation which had pioneered these changes didn't want to stop there. As the 1970s opened, they began to demand that the state be democratised and made answerable to its workers and users. There were calls, for instance, for hospital practices to be changed so that women could have more control of the process of childbirth; for community centres to be set up on housing estates; for worker's control in nationalised industries; for better public transport; for nurseries; and for refuges for battered women. But many of these demands still had the experimental quality of untested ideas yet to meet serious opposition. There was still a quality of innocence about them. This attitude to the state is encapsulated for me in a badge which reads 'Help Make ILEA Sillier' with which I was presented by my new and radical colleagues in 1971 when I went to work for the Inner London Education Authority's Television Service (a six-channel cable network linking all the schools in London which was later killed off by the advent of colour). The thought that fifteen years later they would be campaigning unsuccessfully for the very survival of the institution would have been inconceivable. Even more ironic is the way in which these critics of bureaucracy and champions of individual liberty became identified by the right as the representatives of the former and the enemies of the latter.

This brings us to yet another critical difference between the libertarianism of the right and that of the left: their attitude to democracy. Although they do not say so in so many words, it is clear that Duncan and Hobson would prefer it if the franchise had never been extended beyond property-owning men. They repeatedly lament the fact that 'it is in the nature of a democratic political system that a majority will always be voting to expropriate the property of a minority without their consent' (p 91). Here, the solution they propose is to turn the entire population into rentiers by guaranteeing every adult a 'modest competence' or 'sufficiency'. In their words, to realise the 'dream of a country in which every individual is an owner, an investor, an inheritor' (p 234).

Their proposed means for doing so is interesting, since it involves a considerable overlap with ideas coming from other parts of the political spectrum. It is the idea of replacing all existing means-tested benefits and tax allowances with a 'citizen's income' (or 'basic income'). This idea is already on the agenda of the Green Party and, in a modified form, as a 'negative income tax', on that of the Liberal Democrats. And it is increasingly receiving serious attention on the socialist left. Duncan and Hobson

draw on the studies published by the Citizens Income Research Group to make a strong case that such a benefit would be economically viable and would contribute constructively to the elimination of unemployment and poverty traps. However there is one critical difference between their proposal and those usually advanced: their basic income would be payable only to adults and not to children. Denying children the benefit would, of course, have the effect of impoverishing single-parent families and undoing much of the potential redistributive effect. To accord children the status of 'individuals' would be too threatening to their social model which - for all their filial rebellion against Saturn - is rooted in the power of the father over his children.

The details of these differences are perhaps less important than the fact that these subjects are up for debate in a new way. To formulate a new left response to them may well involve revisiting some of the libertarian ideas of the 60s which their former holders (now respectable citizens running local authorities or practising psychotherapy) shrugged off in embarrassment when they cut off their hair. In the process, some existing loyalties may have to be questioned and new alliances forged between those too young, and those too old to have surfed to jubilant property ownership on the crest of the mid-80s boom. Fundamental questions will have to be addressed about the meaning of terms like 'liberty', 'rights', 'independence' and 'fairness' - ideas which are too important to be left to the likes of Duncan and Hobson.

Even their conception of Saturn should not be left unchallenged. Those who still believe in the possibility of a welfare state might like to be reminded that Saturn was celebrated by the Romans as the ruler of the Golden Age. During the annual seven days of Saturnalia (which roughly correspond to Christmas), slaves were freed, war was halted, executions were postponed and time was devoted to feasting and exchanging visits and gifts.

Liberty, prosperity and virtue have all been contested territory in the past. Let us contest them again now.

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