End of the Left-Right Dichotomy: The French Case

By Alain de Benoist

Consider the frequently cited quotation by the French philosopher Alain: "When I am asked if the division between parties of the Right and parties of the Left, between leftists and rightists still has any meaning, the first thing which occurs to me is that whoever is asking the question is certainly not on the Left." [1] Alain would be surprised to learn that today this question, which he thought could only have been posed by someone from the Right, is on everyone's lips — at least in France.

During the past few years, all the Sofres opinion polls have shown that for most of the French people the Left-Right split is becoming increasingly meaningless. In March 1981 only 33% considered notions of Right and Left to be outdated and no longer descriptive of political positions. In February 1986, this figure was 45%; in March 1988, 48%; in November 1989, 56%. [2] This last figure was confirmed by two subsequent Sofres polls published in December 1990 and July 1993. [3] It does not seem to have changed since. As for the inverse opinion, according to which the Left-Right split still has meaning, since 1991 it has not been more than 33% of those polled, as against 43% in 1981.

This evolution is remarkable for three reasons. First, because it shows a growing tendency: from year to year the notions of Right and Left appear increasingly discredited. Second, it has only taken a dozen years for the credibility of the Left-Right split to decline by more than 20 points in public opinion polls. Third, because this development is a fact in all political circles and all sectors of opinion: in April 1988, a Sofres poll indicated that since 1981 this conviction had made the most progress within the Left. [4]

At the same time, however, most French people continue to identify themselves as either Left or Right — a paradoxical result confirming the extent of the gap separating political parties from their voters. But this kind of self-definition is also weakening. Whereas during the 1960s, 90% of the French people located themselves along the Left-Right axis, [5] by 1981 the number had dropped to no more than 73%, to only 64% in 1991.

All these figures show clearly that the Left-Right dichotomy which has structured the French political landscape for more than two centuries –what Emmanuel Berl described as "by far the most lively distinction for the mass of the French electorate," and Jean-Francois Sirinelli has more recently characterized as "in essence, the major French split," [6] is losing much of its meaning. This is all the more surprising since it was in France that the concepts Left and Right first saw the light of day. The general opinion is that this dates from August 28 1789, when the Estates-General, in session since May and transformed into a constituent assembly, began to debate in Versailles whether the king should have veto rights. This debate sought to establish whether in the constitutional monarchy being installed the monarch had any prerogatives over and above that of national sovereignty, i.e., a prerogative exceeding that of the representatives of the people organized in a body politic. To indicate their choice, those in favor of a royal veto were placed to the right of the speaker, while their opponents sat on the left. So the distinction Left-Right originally came about as a topographical accident. [7] It was to expand gradually into

all of Europe, then to the entire world, taking permanent roots in the Latin countries and, in a more circumstantial way, in Germanic and above all Anglo-Saxon countries. In France it took its contemporary meaning and became part of everyday language during the Third Republic. [8]

What are the reasons for the gradual erosion of the concepts of Left and Right? There are several ways to answer this question. One would be to ask about the exact meaning of the terms in order to establish whether they are attached to certain permanent themes or merely to attitudes (psychological traits, "sensibilities") where one would be able to locate their recurrence in certain well-determined political families, yet again to certain key concepts constituting the "hard core" whose heuristic value can facilitate analysis. For reasons too long to go into, such an approach would lead to an impasse, and that is why it is more fruitful to focus on the French situation. Today the three great debates which for two centuries in France have characterized the Right-Left dichotomy are essentially over.

The first of these debates concerns political institutions. Beginning with the Revolution and for over 100 years it was to pit against each other the supporters of the Republic, the partisans of the constitutional monarchy and those nostalgic for the monarchy by divine right. It was a debate bearing on the Revolution itself, which ended in the Restoration and the 1815 compromise which, in some way, marks the birth of modern France. Next, starting from the July Monarchy, it became a debate concerning the definition of the political regime — republic or monarchy– which culminated in 1875 with the establishment of universal suffrage and the definitive installation of a republic. From then on rightists became essentially republican, while monarchist movements were gradually east to the fringes of the political spectrum.

The second major debate, beginning in the 1880′s, dealt with the question of religion. Pitting supporters of a "clerical" concept of the social order against those advocating a purely secular vision of justice, the debate took the place of the one about institutions and generated a polemic whose violence has now been somewhat forgotten. For some time, it came to be identified exclusively with the Left-Right split and became the touch-stone for all political life. "By comparison," wrote Rene Remond, "all other divergencies appeared secondary. Whoever followed the prescriptions of the Catholic Church was ipso facto catalogued on the Right, and the anti-clerical had no need to furnish any other proof of democratic sentiments and attachment to the Republic." [9] This was the atmosphere that eventually gave rise to the Dreyfus Affair (which lead to a shift of anti-Semitism from Left to Right and, for the first time, introduced the Left-Right cleavage in intellectual circles). This argument culminated in 1905 in the separation of Church and state. It left profound traces on French political life. It gradually lost its relevance due, on the one side, to the rallying of a party of the Catholic hierarchy to republican institutions and, on the other, to the appearance of a secularized theory of the traditional social order (from Auguste Comte to Taine) –a double movement which came to an end with a progressive dissociation of the Church from the counter-revolution. Subsequently, religious controversies continued to lose relevance and soon survived only in debates about state subventions for schools run by the Church.

The final debate is obviously the social one. It began in the 1830s when capitalism imposed itself on economic forms inherited from the past, paving the way for the class straggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the development of industrial society, the birth of socialism and the founding of the labor movement. Interrupted during the "Sacred Union" of WWI, it resurfaced in 1917. From 1920 on, to be on the Left no longer meant simply to be a republican

(since everybody was republican), or even secular (since by then there were Left Catholics), meant to be a socialist or a communist.

Before anything else, the social question raises the problem of the role of the state in regulating economic activity and the eventual redistribution of wealth. Divided between reformers and revolutionaries the Left identified itself with the rejection of the market economy –and even private property — and advocated a planned, centralized and state-controlled economy. Its objective was to assure collective emancipation through economic and social institutions in order to promote a kind of general contract via the collectivization of the means of production. In addition, the Left made purely quantitative and material demands: it denounced capitalism (the exploitation of labor and the inequalities in the distribution of wealth), without challenging its central objective (constant growth). It sought to ground itself in the working class and turn workers into a political force bearing a concrete program for emancipation. This statist and productivist project was to last decades before collapsing under the joint impact of the implosion of "real socialism" and the exhaustion of the welfare state, while the working class itself became increasingly reformist and eventually evaporated with consumerism and popular shareholding. As Remond put it: "In a short period of time, almost all the issues over which elections were fought, which did and undid majorities, which fed debate, which gave political life its colors have ceased to evoke passion, have lost their spark and have even disappeared from the scene." [10]

After WWII, the rapid rise in the standard of living was accompanied by a deep transformation of political practices as well as the behavior and value orientation of society. "In France, enriched by the 'Thirty Glorious Years,' the relaxation of economic constraints led to the relaxation of social controls." [11] On the other hand, the growth of the middle class began to erase confessional and sociological criteria for voting. In the 1960s, the more Catholic one was the more one was likely to vote for the Right. In the social context, the more one was a worker (or the more one felt to be one, for it is a subjective perception of social class which exercises the most decisive influence on political choice) the more one voted for the Left. Ten years later, this was no longer completely true. Various commentators have pointed out the specificity of the political behavior of the "salaried middle classes," whose numbers more than doubled between 1954 and 1975 (owing to the expansion of the service and public sectors), who vote mostly Left, and of those self-employed who vote mostly Right.

This trend has generally continued. The sense of belonging to a social class, as measured by opinion polls, fell from 68% in 1976 to 56% in 1987. Indeed, it is among workers that it has fallen the most, from 74% to 50%. As for the Catholic vote, it has become distributed across all sectors of opinion: between 1978 and 1988 the correlation between voting for the Right and religious practice fell by 20 points.

In 1981, the Left coming into power appeared to mark the victory of this new sociological model. In order to explain it, one used to point to urbanization, economic growth, etc. Shortly afterwards, the rapid diminishing of support for the Left among the very groups that had brought it to power, concurrent with the appearance of new parties and social movements, began to cast doubt on this schema and favored the appearance of competing models questioning the pertinence of the Right-Left split as much as its sociological foundations. This is when talk began about the "new voter," unconcerned with social or professional ties and of a very limited "rationality." [12] We were entering an era which has been described as "electoral self-service"

or “commercial democracy.” [13] As Jerome Jaffre has written: “Voters choose either Right or Left, whichever seems to suit them. This phenomenon is evidence for the ideological destructuring of the French that corresponds to the weakening of major parties.” [14]

This has resulted in a considerable increase in electoral volatility. In 1946 Francois Goguel calculated that at no point in France, between 1877 and 1936, did the balance of forces between the Right and the Left vary by more than 2%. Today 17% of voters for the far Left in the 1986 legislative elections voted for a right-wing party in the first round of the 1988 presidential elections and, inversely, 60% of Mitterand’s voters in 1988 refused to vote socialist in 1993.

On the level of political leadership, this destructuring of the electorate corresponds to a substantial move toward the center. [15] Not only has the Left finally accepted the institutions of the Fifth Republic and the principle of nuclear deterrence (which it resisted ferociously in the past), not only has the Right in large part come to terms with the Left on such issues as contraception, the death penalty and new models for authority in the family and society, but as soon as they come to power Right and Left alike seem increasingly inclined to adopt the same policies. The more rapid their alternation the clearer this identity becomes. In this regard, since 1981 the French have hardly seen any difference between the economic policy followed by the Left and that adopted by the Right. Neither have they seen the slightest difference between the social policies of Edouard Balladur and of Pierre Beregovoy, the foreign policy of Giscard d’Estaing and Francois Mitterand, the “security” obsessions of Michel Charasse and Charles Pasqua, the budget priorities of departmental or regional authorities controlled by the majority and those controlled by the opposition. Of course, the Right wants a little more liberalism (in the French sense of the word:, i.e., more free-market economics) and fewer social programs, while the Left prefers a few more social programs and a little less liberalism. On the whole, however, the political class does not seem to be tom apart all that much in the shifts between “socio-liberalism” and “social liberalism.”

This move toward the center has also affected intellectual circles, as witnessed by the collapse of critical thinking in an age when most of those who only yesterday would rash to refute the established order have been transformed into passionate defenders of liberal democracy, the New World Order, and the right to neo-colonialist interference on humanitarian pretexts. This move to the center, however, gives a strong impression of the end of something. Maybe only the end of modernity. This is Serge Latouche’s thesis: “The political form of modernity is running out of steam because it has run its course. Right and Left have essentially realized their programs. Alternation has succeeded extraordinarily well. The enlightened Right and the Left lay claim to the legacy of the Enlightenment, but neither of the two claims it entirely. Each sees itself as having realized its part of the legacy. The Left, whose imagination is tied to a radical version of the Enlightenment, used to worship progress, science and technology …. The liberal and enlightened Right, from Montesquieu to Tocqueville, exalted individual liberty and economic competition. The Left advocated well-being for all, while the Right defended growth and the right to enjoy the fruits of enterprise. Through shocks and crises, the modem state has achieved all that.” [16]

As Regis Debray has pointed out: “When there will be no more differences between Left and Right than between the services of a nationalized or a private bank, or between the TV news on a public or commercial channel, then we will switch from one to the other without regrets and, who knows, without even realizing it.” [17] We seem to have reached this point.

Some people may rejoice about this in the name of "consensus." They are wrong. First, because democracy is not the end of conflict but conflict mastered. For a political society to function normally, a consensus must be established over the framework and modalities of debate. But if the consensus results in the disappearance of debate, then democracy will also disappear. Even more than a plurality of parties, democracy implies a diversity of opinions and choices as well as the recognition of the legitimacy of a clash between them so that the adversary is not transformed into an enemy (for the opposition of yesterday can be the majority of tomorrow). But, if parties are no longer distinguished by anything other than insignificant differences in their programs, if current factions advocate basically the same policies, if they are no longer distinct regarding their objectives or even the means to attain them, in short, if citizens no longer see themselves confronted with real alternatives and choices, then debate ceases to have any raison d'etre and the institutional framework for it becomes nothing more than an empty shell which most voters, not surprisingly, prefer to ignore.

Too much consensus is also anti-democratic in another sense. Contrary to the advocates of the "political market" (who postulate that voters seek above all to rationally maximize their best interests at polling time), in effect voting is primarily a means of representing and affirming the self. [18] In a context where the homogenization of all social space by the middle classes is already depriving the concepts of Left and Right of any sociological content, if in addition the electorate feels that the parties vying for power provide no alternatives, this electorate can only lose interest in a political game which no longer allows the expression of a sense of belonging or affiliation through the ballot. The end of the "democracy of identification" (Pierre Rosanvallon) translates into a growing abstention which leads to social anomie and the exclusion of those socially marginalized and no longer concerned with power games. In both cases there is a great risk of ending up not with a society pacified by "consensus," but with a dangerous and potentially belligerent one characterized by other modes of affirming identity (religious, ethnic, national, etc.). These may not result in any desire for "dangerous purity" (Bernard-Henri Levy) but will be the logical consequence of the fact that it is no longer possible to function as citizens.

This is the direction in which things are headed today. Everything confirms it: the multiplying corruption scandals, which discredit both Left and Right politicians; the dominant individualism encouraging civic irresponsibility and turning in on oneself; the contrast between stated ambitions and the insignificance of results; the transformation of the political game into a media spectacle where "making things known" always counts more than "knowing how to do things"; the intellectuals' conceptual impotence and social anomie. As a final result, the political class seems to be increasingly made up of professionals alien to society and of parties which have become mere machines to sell electoral goods for the sole profit of their present leaders. In other words, in market terms, political life is characterized by a decreasing supply in the face of ever more indifferent, because disoriented -demand.

As for the move to the center, although it constitutes one of the causes of the current clouding of the Right-Left split, it is itself the consequence of a whole series of broader events. It has resulted from the accumulation of discomfort and disillusion brought about by the collapse of predominant lately-hegemonic ideologies and socio-historical models. Typified by the implosion of the Soviet system, this collapse has mined many hopes and has resulted in a false belief in the "end of ideology," i.e., the disappearance of one of the most powerful resources of political thought and imagination. The blurring has increased confusion and fudged differences. But it has

also created conditions for a greater acceptability of the idea that many phenomena are "ineluctable," for example, the "laws" regulating the market economy and the uncontrolled growth of technology. All these phenomena are deemed inevitable because we have lost the habit of questioning the meaning of outcomes, resulting in the assumption that it is no longer possible to validate decisions. This denies the very essence of politics and reduces it to a simple technique of administrative management. The rise of technocracy and the role of experts already set the stage. This legitimates the belief that political choices are simply a matter of technical rationality, allowing only one possible solution. This is a denial of the very essence of politics. But it is also a denial of democracy, since for the experts, "pluralism always results either in misunderstandings or in a lack of rationality: on one side there are competent experts and on the other incompetents. For the latter to be rational and informed it is sufficient to accept the opinion of the former." [19]

From this viewpoint, one of the today's most salient features is the nation-state's growing inability not only to steer a society characterized by the dilution of social relations, but also to react to the internationalization of national spaces and markets, the development of a global economy and the planetary deployment of information. Today the nation-state can no longer deal with problems such as unemployment, drugs, economic instability and social ostracism. Divested of its means, the state is increasingly reduced to the daily management of phenomena which transcend it, i.e., to find short-term solutions while continuing to perfect techniques of social control and repression. As Sami Nair has put it: "The crisis of the welfare state is first of all the crisis of the nation-state's inability to deal with the internationalization of capital. Today the structure of the capital market and thus the forms of the resulting competition are determined by transnational oligopolies against which the traditional nation-state has hardly any response …. The state is confronted with a tragic dilemma it cannot resolve: either drastic protectionism with very uncertain economic and social consequences, or capitulation before the major poles of the international economy." [20]

The problem is that, in this regard, both the Right and the Left have already accepted capitulation. Once again, this is one of the reasons for the move to the center, as well as the blurring of the distinction between Left and Right. This is not really surprising for the Right, which has long since allied itself with money and the wealthy classes. According to Bernard Charbonneau: "While justifying the state's protection of economic interests, patriotism has become its own caricature: chauvinism. The role of the best people in justifying the whims of the richest makes it impossible to distinguish between a genuine aristocracy and a so-called 'elite' defined exclusively by money." [21] In so doing, however, the Right has betrayed itself. "Those values which the Right espouses are exactly those by which it is judged. The criticisms the Left makes of the Right are nothing compared to those the Right should be able to make of itself. Capitalism claims the virtues of property, and it supports the dispossession of millions of people by capitalism in order to safeguard private property, bringing about the largest undertaking of expropriation in modern times. It exalts the motherland and for the glory of one nationalism it feeds a will to power which tends to destroy all other motherlands. It upholds authority and character, while on the whim of one, be it monarch or owner, it transforms all others into serfs. While defending liberty, the Right everywhere gradually slides into monopoly…. Against Marxist materialism, it sets itself up as a champion of the power of the spirit, but serves a social class whose sole reason for being is economic activity…."[22]

The classical Right has always been in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, it has to respond to the exigencies of profitability, competitiveness and modernization, which are vital to its interests; while on the other, to continue enjoying the support of its voters, it has to appear to embody traditional values (authority, family, patriotism, etc.), which are exactly those which oppose the logic of the commodity and what Jurgen Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld" by "economic and administrative sub-systems." As long as capitalism remained tied to the nation-state, this dilemma could still be managed. Economic modernization could be presented as part of national greatness, sometimes even as triumphant nationalism. In a world economy which seeks to suppress all local particularities that act as an obstacle to its movement or threaten to slow its expansion, this is no longer the case. Liberal capitalism no longer has a "national strategy": globalization of the economy has led it to make the state's primary task to support this process of globalization with appropriate legislation –an assortment of new forms of internal control to disarm all kinds of social resistance.[23] This can be seen in France with the conversion of most of the Gaullist program to the very economic liberalism excoriated by General de Gaulle — with the consequent appearance on the political margins of social protest movements which tend to widen the gap between politicians and voters.

The monied Right has no principled convictions, only principled interests. "This is why, among other reasons, it shows itself so magisterial in its mastery of what one might call the relativism of ideologies. All representations can serve it on the condition that they do not challenge its system of interests."[24]

The Left has followed the same path. Fifteen years ago it was still an old republican bedrock, coated with socialist and communist or even anarchist sediments. This heterogenous mixture was generally unified by the same political culture, common sociological references and, as it was claimed at the time, a certain ethics. Since then its political culture has fallen apart. The working class has seen its contours eroded. As for "ethics," it is best not to mention it! Discredited by the defeat of "really existing socialism," the communist wing has not survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The anarchist trend is no more than an erratic underground stream. As for the socialist and social democratic wings, which were the main components of the Left, they have been dealt a major blow by the crisis of the welfare state.

Socialism espoused an emancipatory ideology meant to allow man, beyond all forms of domination and social exploitation, to recover his self, i.e., to be restored to himself in all his authenticity. Achieving this aim presupposed a radical transformation of society as organized by triumphant capitalism. The whole history of the labor movement revolves around the debate regarding the nature of this transformation and the best means to carry it out. Some claimed it had to take place through a violent rupture, others by gradual evolution. The former only succeeded in installing unprecedented forms of dictatorship, while the latter have been reduced to perpetually postponing the project, having failed to find an alternative to the capitalist system or to propose a viable project of social reconstruction.

It was already paradoxical to identify the state as the agency of emancipation since the main characteristic of the paternalist-state model is to strip individuals of their autonomy in exchange for security. Today, under the weight of bureaucratic burdens and fiscal impositions, all models of intervention from above have collapsed. Along with this, the discrediting of the idea of progress has ruined optimistic visions of a future seen to coincide automatically with an ideal of emancipation. The Left, heir of Descartes, wished to change the world and subdue nature. Now it

realizes that the results are not too brilliant, that the achievement of modernity is passing it by and that the subdued nature is in a pitiful state. As for a socialism which presented itself as the "civilization of labor," it must henceforth confront the problem of free time.

During the past few years, all Left ideological constructs as well as those of the managerial New Class have become either considerably weaker or have collapsed altogether. Nair writes: "For more than a decade, the crisis over representing the future, the evaporation of the grand organizing narratives of the future (socialism, communism) has intensified. This process entails considerable cultural, political and sociological displacement; essential ingredients of socialism as a vision have collapsed. We are now witnessing a progressive disappearance of the main values of the Left. The concept of exploitation is gone from the polemical vocabulary, while that of equality, at best, is only stuttered with some compunction in political confrontations. Already derailed in its bureaucratic form in the East, socialism is equally in trouble in its democratic version."[25] Peter Glotz adds: "The Left has been philosophically disoriented since its concept of progress has been destroyed and the humanism of the Age of Enlightenment has become a universal concept. Its economic theory is breached because the crisis in Marxism has, like it or not, stripped it of its own economic vision; and it is further threatened by the loss of an old advantage: the solid organization of unions and workers' parties. The Left finds itself disoriented in the post-modern age."[26]

In 1981 in France, the Left triumphed politically against the background of ideological confusion. It might have been able to seize this occasion to restructure its identity. What happened, however, was the opposite. Not only did Mitterrand's rise to power accelerate the confusion, but the Left assimilated the "managerial culture" so well that, redoubling its efforts, it suddenly adopted and perfected everything it had previously denounced. Beginning in 1982-3, the adoption of a new economic policy brutally confirmed the move toward the center. The critique of capitalism was abandoned, and with it the idea that the state, even if not the motor of the economy, might at least have the right to oversee the private sector. Add to this the rehabilitation of the notion of profit, the apology for the market and "entrepreneurial culture," greater growth in capital revenues as compared to labor and the picture is complete. By abandoning the Jauresian idea that the state is first of all a balance of forces between the social classes, the Left has chosen to put the freedom of capital before the freedom of citizens, and has laid its statist identity to rest without, however, trying to recenter itself in society. In short, acting as if the final stage in social organization had been reached and as if it would be impossible for people to act collectively, it has implicitly enshrined the mercantile West as the unsurpassable ideal. The result will be unbridled Stock Exchange, corruption at the highest level and the promotion of crooks-turned-politicians such as Bernard Tapie as paradigmatic "winners."

In 1979, at the Metz congress of the Socialist Party, Mitterrand and his friends argued that "economic rigor, as understood by those in power, is a formidable lie." In 1992 the socialist project, titled "A New Horizon," stated: "Yes, we believe that the market economy is the most efficient means of production and exchange. No, we no longer believe in a break with capitalism." This is what enabled Michel Rocard to redefine socialism as a "kind of tempered capitalism" (sic).

Today Left and Right worship the same god: the cult of performance, efficiency and profit. This can be seen in the answers to questions regularly posed to the French by Sofres seeking to find what terms evoke positive or negative responses. In November 1989 one of these polls allowed

one to state that the word "liberalism" garnered positive responses from 59% of the socialist sympathizers, whereas a majority of UDF voters looked favorably upon the term "social-democracy."[27] Between April 1981 and October 1990, when Mitterand was head-of-state, the terms which received the most positive responses in public opinion were "profit," "capitalism" and "participation"; while those which had lost the most were "socialism," "unions" and "nationalization." In 1992 Roland Cayrol concluded: "The tendency toward convergence over liberalism, competition, participation and profit is the law of the decade.[28]

The Right had already been corrupted by its possession of wealth; the Left was corrupted by acquiring this wealth. The Right allied with wealth contributed more than the Left to the destruction of the values which it pretended to advocate. The Left, as it came to be allied with wealth, contributed more than the Right to prevent the advent of the new society it wished to bring about. In short, the Left has lost its principles before a Right which never cared too much about having any, thereby confirming Bernard Charbonneau's claim: "To describe the evolution of the Left and of the Right is to trace the curve of their respective self-betrayals. How living moral became instantly paralyzed in the idea, how the fury of the struggle progressively deformed the idea into a self-serving lie, and how, animated by the same will to power and using the same means, different ideologies have ended up dissolving themselves in the same chaos. This is their history."[29]

The Right has lost its main enemy: communism. The Left has chosen to collaborate with its own: capitalism. As a result, the Right can no longer mobilize its voters by denouncing the "red menace," while the Left can no longer rally its own by proposing "to change society." This, however, does not prevent them from periodically attempting to revive extinct arguments. But the symmetrical myths of anti-communism and anti-fascism, polemical evocations of a bygone era, cannot forever serve to economize on profound thinking nor to hide the emptiness of ideas.[30] Some day it will be necessary to reconstruct values and reformulate identities.

For now, that remains far into the future. While the populist Right is looking for identity, thanks to the immigrants, the Left exhausts itself in various "renewals" and "regroundings," or seeks to regroup on the margins of political life by advocating aid to oppressed minorities, solidarity with the most impoverished, and the straggle against social ostracism. However sympathetic they might be, and assuming they are responding to an authentic commitment to altruism and not to a straightforward need for a clear conscience and moral comfort, such aims are unfortunately also an admission of defeat. To replace ideological with purely moralizing criteria, to reduce militant activity to first aid for the war-wounds of change and justice to a profane version of that caritas theologians in the Middle Ages defined as a kind of non-erotic love is only an attempt to correct the faults or excesses of a society we cannot change, i.e., to reinforce it. By seeking remedies merely for a few consequences of the degradation of social relations, by changing into a charitable lady in the best of traditions of that paternalism it previously denounced, the Left is implicitly demonstrating it no longer thinks itself capable of acting on the causes of the problems. However, to act in politics is to build, not just to repair. Today, in opinion polls, solidarity wins clearly as a positive value to the Left, over and above justice, class straggle or equality. What remains undone is to combine this theme of solidarity with an aspiration for "autonomy," which should not become the alibi for a new form of individualism and thus of indifference to others. Social action cannot be confined to the administering of alms. The ideal of solidarity implies the creation of new public spaces where active forms of citizenship can be

articulated.

For two centuries there has been a Right and a Left, but their contents have constantly changed. There is neither a metaphysical Right nor an absolute Left, only relative positions and systems of variable relations, constantly forming and reforming. They cannot be abstracted from their context. “In every era, certain oppositions disappear or lose their importance, while others, seemingly secondary, suddenly assume a pole position.”[31]

The current crisis of Right and Left does not mean that either will no longer exist, only that this dichotomy as it has been understood until recently has lost its rationale. It has had its day. Current events provide ample confirmation. Whether it is a question of the Gulf War, the war in the former Yugoslavia, GATT, German reunification and its ramifications, the Maastricht Treaty and the single European currency, Islam in France, cultural identities or biotechnologies — all the debates of the last few yearss have produced conflicts impossible to account for in terms of the traditional dichotomy. The: fault lines cut across everything, penetrating to the very heart of both Right and Left. Although they have not yet led to real reclassifications, according to all accounts this is the beginning of a long process of regrouping.

There will be new splits in the future. In an age when the imperative of solidarity is imposing itself irresistibly, when ancient forms of exploitation of some by others tend to give way to new forms of alienation bearing down on everyone, when work is no longer the major source of social cohesion, these new cleavages will lead to unexpected regroupings and will draw fluid boundaries, be it around modernity and postmodernity, work and unemployment, production or the environment.

Modern societies have passed from extensive to intensive capital accumulation, i.e., from the systematic search for spaces for realizing profits to the general transformation of all forms of human activity in commodities. To set a limit to this process, not in order to suppress the marketplace but in order to prevent it from substituting itself for all kinds of social relations and to refute the idea that market values are socially paradigmatic as well as to prevent their destabilizing effects; to recreate organic forms of solidarity and to develop the economy for the benefit of all in the name of the common good and against Right and Left management, to initiate a European anti-oligopolist strategy challenging the internationalization of capital and the phenomenon of transnational and extraterritorial markets which determine economic realities, to find at last, before the steamroller of a homogenous world, the means to safeguard the diversity of peoples and cultures without cultivating xenophobia or hatred m these are the objectives around which men and women who today still belong to different camps will rally around tomorrow.

Then it will become clear that concepts once regarded as contradictory are in fact complimentary. Jose Ortega y Gasset’s saying is well-known: “To be on the Left or to be on the Right is to choose one of the many ways available to people to be an idiot; both are forms of moral paralysis.”32 Charbonneau has written: “Discussion of principles between Left and Right is absurd, because their values complement each other…. Liberty in itself or order in itself can only be the lie which dissimulates tyranny and chaos. Truth belongs to neither Right nor Left, neither is it in equal distance from the two. Rather, it is contained in the tension of their extreme exigencies. If one day they have to meet each other, it will not be in denying what they are but in going fight to the end of themselves.”[33] He concluded: “The time has finally come for us to

reject Left and Right together, in order to reconcile within ourselves the tension of their fundamental aspirations."[34]

It is not a matter of "neither Left nor Right" but of salvaging their best features. It is a matter of developing new political configurations transcending both.

Notes:

1. Pen Name for Emile-Auguste Chartier, Elements d'une Doctrine Radicale (Paris: Gallimard, 1925)
2. Sofres opinion poll, in Le Point (November 27, 1989), pp. 62-65. The same poll revealed that most socialist sympathizers no longer saw a significant difference with the Right over issues such as human rights, culture or social welfare, while a majority of RPR-UDF voters said they no longer saw a difference with the Left over issues such as education, crime or information policies.
3. Le Point (December 3, 1990), pp. 56-57; Le Nouvel Observateur (July 1, 1993, p. 42.
4. Cf. Le Nouvel Observateur (April 1, 1988), pp. 42-43.
5. Cf. Emetic Deutsch, Denis Lindon and Pierre Weill, Les Families Politiques Aujourd 'hui en France (Minuit, 1966), pp. 13-14.
6. Interview with Le Magazine Litteraire (April 1993).
7. The date most frequently cited is August 28, 1789. Some writers, however, cite August 11 and still others the month of September. In their Histoire Parlementaire de la Revolution Francaise (published in 1834), Buchez and Rouzhold claim that the Right-Left polarity appeared before June 27. In any case, the August 27, 1791 L'Ami des Patriotes already talks of "Right" and "Left" in the body of the Constituent Assembly.
8. Cf. Marcel Gauchet, "La Droite et la Gauche" in Pierre Nora, ed., Les Lieux de Memoire, Vol. 3: Les France. 1: Conflits et Partages (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), who shows that the popularization of the terms took place later than generally believed.
9. La Politique n'est plus ce qu'elle etait (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1993), p. 26.
10. Ibid., p. 21.
11. Jean-Francois Sirinelli, "La Morale Entre Droite et Gauche," in "Morale et Politique," special issue Pouvoirs, No. 63 (1993).
12. In this regard, Nonna Meyer and Pascal Perrineau note that "even the concept of political 'rationalism' is relative. A voter faithful to the party which seems to best defend the interests of his social class or the values of his religion is no less rational than one who switches. Those who swing between parties belonging to the same political family are no more rational than those who cross the Left-Right boundary." (See Les Comportements Politiques (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), p. 87.
13. Cf. Denis Jeambar and Jean-Marc Lech, Le Self-service Electoral. Les Nouvelles Famillies Politiques (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 21-22 and 151-162.
14. La Tribune de L'Expansion (March 23, 1992).
15. Cf. Francois Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, La Republique du Centre. La Fin de l'Exception Francaise (Paris: Calman-Levy, 1988).
16. "Le MAUSS est-il Apolitique?" in La Revue du Mauss, Nos. 3/4 (1991), pp. 7071. In a similar spirit, Jacques Julliard could note that "it is from its own success that the Left has come out exhausted: it is passing away for having realized in two centuries the essence of its program." ("Une Quatrieme Vie pour la Gauche," in Le Nouvel Observateur [February 25, 1993], p. 44).

To be fair, it ought to be pointed out that it is also "passing away" for having seen a part of this program realized . . . . by its opponents. Gerard Grumberg and Etienne Schweisguth claim that while the Right defends primarily economic liberalism and the Left primarily cultural liberalism, philosophical liberalism seems to reconcile everyone. "The strong link between cultural liberalism and a Left stance on the one side, and between economic liberalism and a Right stance on the other might lead one to ask if these two liberalisms do not form the two opposing poles of one and the same dimension, which would be nothing other than the Right-Left dimension itself." ("Liberalisme Culturel et Liberalisme Economique," in Daniel Boy and Nonna Mayer, eds., L'Electeur Francais en Question, CEVIPOF (Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1990). But they also observe that "the growth in the two levels of economic liberalism and cultural liberalism has rendered visible a very weak connection between them," which has a paradoxical result: "Economic liberalism and cultural liberalism have a strong statistical relation as opposites in the Right-Left dimension, but they are only very weak negatively opposed to each other." Ibid.
17. Que Vive la Republique (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1989). Cf. also Max Gallo, La Gauche est Morte, Vive la Gauche (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1990).
18. For a critique of the theory of the "political market," see especially Pierre Merle, "L'Homo Politicus est-il un Homo Oeconomicus? L'Analyse Economique du Choix Politique: Approche Critique," in Revue Francaise de Science Politique (February 1990), p. 75.
19. Pierre Rosanvallon, "Repenser la Gauche," interview with L 'Express (March 25, 1993), p. 116.
20. "Le Socialisme n'est plus ce qu'il Etait," in L'Evenement Europeen, No. 1 (1988), pp. 101-102.
21. L'Etat (Economica, 1987), p. 153.
22. Ibid.
23. Cf. Andre Gorz, "Droite/Gauche. Essai de Redefinition," in La Revue du MAUSS, Vo. 4, No. 4 (1991), pp. 16-17.
24. Nair, op. cit., p. 104
25. Ibid., p. 95.
26. "Le Malaise de la Gauche," in L 'Evenement Europeen No. 1 (1988).
27. Le Point (November 27, 1989), pp. 62-65.
28. "La Droite, la Gauche et les References Ideologiques," in Sofres, ed., L'Etat de l'Opinion 1992 (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 67.
29. Op. cit., p. 152.
30. On anti-fascism, see Karl Dietrich Bracher: "Anti-fascism is not a scientific idea. It is an ideological and political concept whose utility has been to mount an alliance against the Nazi horror, but which has also served to define democracy too restrictively." Cf. also Annie Kriegel, "Sur l'Antifaseisme," in Commentaire (Summer 1990), pp. 299302, who qualifies anti-fascism as a "Stalinist myth par excellence," and attributes it to the triple character of being, "an obscure concept, a concept of variable dimensions and a constantly changing concept."
31. Etienne Schweisguth, Droite-Gauche: un Clivage Depasse? (Documentation francaise, 1994), p. 3.
32. La Revolte des Masses (Livre-Club du Labyrinthe, 1986), p. 32. Ortega returned to this often, notably in a 1930 article ("Organization de la Decenia Nacional") and in a 1931 collection ("Rectification de la Republica") where he qualifies the terms Right and Left as "sterile words" and as "the vocabulary of the past."

33. Op. cit., pp. 150-151. 34. Ibid., p. 158.

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