



Revisiting The Third Way

The title was regrettable, misunderstood and misinterpreted yet the issues raised in the book still have relevance for the renewal of social democracy today

Anthony Giddens

My book *The Third Way* was first published in 1998. I first of all planned to call it *The Renewal of Social Democracy* (which eventually I relegated to the status of sub-title). If I had published the book under the original title, it would have been clear that it was rooted firmly in social democratic traditions. However, it would probably have reached only a limited audience of academics and policy specialists and I wanted to attract a wider readership. I wasn't by any means the first to use the term "third way" itself, which crops up recurrently in the history of political thought – used most often by authors on the left but also occasionally by those on the right. The phrase was resurrected by the Swedish Social Democrats in the late 1980s, but its return to popularity came mainly from its adoption at roughly the same time by Bill Clinton and the thinktank to which he was closely connected, the Democratic Leadership Council. The "third way" was self-consciously associated with the invention of the term the "New Democrats" in the US – and later with "New Labour" in Britain under the leadership of Tony Blair. I wrote the book initially in part as a result of taking part in dialogues which Bill and Hillary Clinton had established with Tony Blair in 1997 and which continued in expanded form for some years afterwards.

On its appearance *The Third Way* did in fact spark a lot of attention in the Anglo-Saxon world. What I didn't anticipate was just how great an impact the book would have in a diversity of other countries around the globe. Its success allowed me to meet and talk at first hand with a large number of centre-left leaders in those countries. At that point there was world-wide interest in Clinton and Blair, who had led their respective parties out of a long period in the electoral wilderness. Yet in the end I came to regret having chosen the title *The Third Way*, even if it did bring the book so much attention. The reason was precisely that "the third way" became so widely associated specifically with the New Democrats and New Labour. Although I was sympathetic to some of the core policies of both I had a lot of reservations too, especially as the years passed. The "third way" became a corrupted term, not just because of some of the policies followed by the two parties but because of the attacks on them by critics, especially from the left. Some of these seemed to me misinterpretations – such as the idea that New Labour was ideologically empty, had abandoned the ideals of the left, or was a continuation of Thatcherism with a softer face. But these misinterpretations increasingly came to be how the "third way" was seen, as a weak, poorly-developed substitute for left-of-centre thinking, rather than, as I intended, a means of promoting its revival.

So let me reassert what in my terms the "third way" (tw) was about, and what it was not. The tw for me was NOT a "middle way" between left and right, socialism and capitalism, or anything else, but a left-of-centre political philosophy, concerned with exactly what was stated in my original title, the renewal of social democracy. It was NOT a succumbing to neo-liberalism or market fundamentalism. On the contrary, I argued that social democrats had to move beyond two failed, or compromised, philosophies of the past, one being neo-liberalism, the other being "old-style social democracy," characterised by a top-down state ownership of the "commanding heights of the economy" and Keynesian national demand management. The tw was NOT merely some sort of pragmatism. On the contrary, the values of the left retain their essential relevance, but as I saw it far-reaching policy innovation was needed to realise them in a world experiencing major social and economic changes. I identified these changes as the intensifying of globalisation; expanding individualism; the growth of reflexivity; and the increasing intrusion of ecological risk into the political field.

So far as globalisation is concerned, some more “nots” are in order, given the misunderstandings of the notion that abound. Globalisation, I argued, is NOT a single force, but a complex set of influences. It is NOT to be identified solely with the global marketplace – the communications revolution is at least equally important as a driving influence. Nor is it an implacable power before which we must all bow down. Rather it is a fractured and contradictory one – in the emerging global age, although we are all far more interdependent than ever before, nation-states retain a great deal of influence because they are the prime source of political legitimacy, and of legal and military authority. Individualism, I asserted, operates at the opposite pole from globalisation but is deeply influenced by and at the same time influences it in return. The rise of individualism remains as contentious as when I first wrote the book. Many see it as essentially noxious, as undermining social solidarity and common moral commitments, but for me important elements of emancipation are involved - the capacity for self-determination and an escape from the fixities of tradition and habit. Individualism isn’t intrinsically the enemy of social cohesion or common morality; rather, these have to be recast in terms of more active forms of mutual obligation and personal responsibility than in the past.

When I wrote *The Third Way* the internet was in its infancy. Yet for the most part the internet has deepened and extended processes that were already visible at that time. I referred to these generically as the increasing reflexivity of modern social life. Reflexivity means that individuals and groups have regularly to decide how to act in relation to a flow of incoming information relevant to those decisions; its advance fundamentally alters the nature of politics and government. Political support becomes more de-aligned than in the past and levels of party membership start to plummet. Attitudes of deference to authority figures, and established institutions, including politicians and parliaments, decline. The consequences are multiple and shifting. Activism can increase, but often operates outside the orthodox sphere of parliamentary government. At the same time, disillusionment with politicians and the orthodox parliamentary process can produce periods of widespread apathy.

Finally, there is the increasing intrusion of ecological risk into the mainstream of political life. We are living “after the end of nature” in the sense that many formerly natural processes have become anthropogenic – they are influenced, sometimes even determined, by human intervention. Climate change is the most significant and far-reaching expression of this process, but its impact stretches much more widely. I would have included a more extensive discussion of climate change had I been writing the book today. The crucial theme I introduced, however – the penetration of “outer” and “inner nature” (the human body and even mind) by science and technology – remains intact. The opportunities this circumstance produces are dramatic and far-reaching. Yet they are accompanied by risks quite different from any we have had to face in the past, because we can only to some extent use past experience to guide us.

The point of the book, to repeat, was to find a way beyond market fundamentalism on the one hand and old-style social democracy on the other, and to apply this framework to political problems ranging from those of everyday life (such as the future of the family) through to issues of a global scale. The core preoccupation of social democrats should be with the re-establishment of the public realm, public institutions and public goods, following the long period in which market-based philosophies ruled the roost. The public sphere is not the same as the state; reform of the state has to be high on the agenda, wherever it is unresponsive to citizens’ concerns, captured by producer interests or has become overly bureaucratic. Markets have their distinctive qualities – chief among them their fluidity, capacity to respond to a multitude of pricing signals and to stimulate innovation - and social democrats should recognise and help deploy these. However, markets need regulation to shape them to the public purpose. In the book I picked out especially the need to regulate world financial markets, which I identified, to quote from *The Third Way*, as “the single most pressing issue in the world economy.”

In the work I gave a lot of attention to civil society – the Big Society, as the Tories now call it. Yet civil society will not flourish if the state is pared back. Public goals can best be achieved if there is an effective and dynamic balance between the state, marketplace and the civic order. Each acts as a check on the other and also provides a stimulus and challenge to them. The recovery of community, civic pride and local cohesion should be a major concern of social democratic politics. These can't be founded (Tories take note) upon nostalgia for a disappeared - and often imaginary - past of social harmony but have to be achieved through new mechanisms. This theorem applies to the family as well as other areas.

Because it was so widely misinterpreted I gave up using the term “the third way” itself some years ago. Yet, as I hope I have shown, most of the issues that I raised in the book are still with us.

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