

The Priest's New Clothes

Yesterday's Minimum is Today's Maximum

Troploin

2007

In most old capitalist countries, religion has obviously declined as an institution and a social habit: fewer students in the seminary, a smaller audience at Sunday mass. But it flourishes as an attitude and a vision of the world. Stalinism and fascism (both secularized millenarianisms) promised paradise on Earth for later.

Since the end of "great ideologies," it is democracy that is permeated by religiousness. We're told to forget about an impossible revolution; the only way to a better world is to give everyone a fair part in the existing one. Communism can't be forced to have a human face, but capitalism can, providing we have reforms forever.

Confrontation didn't work; compassion will. This is the age of the righteous. If we can't prevent genocides, at least we'll bring genociders to court, that is, those genociders the great powers decide to define and treat as such. Moralized politics adds hypocrisy to cynicism.

In the past, the difference between the religious left and the socialist left was that the former would merely defend the poor, and the latter (verbally) incite the poor to attack this world. Attack is no longer on the agenda, neither is the effort to have the world "turned upside down;" self-defense is the order of the day.

This does not rule out militant action as long as it aims at protecting the weak against forces that can't be defeated, but just put under control. Struggle is still talked of, but the word loses the antagonistic connotation it had in "class struggle," and only means gathering a multitude so vast it will triumph by the sheer virtue of number and legitimate right, certainly not through violence. Zapatista sub-comandante Marcos wants "a civic and pacific insurrection," i.e., non-violent violence.

People dreamt of changing the world. They now try to save it, with obvious strong religious undertones; man is basically tainted by his tendency to go over the top and destroy himself as well as the rest of creation, so his excesses must be kept in check. Original sin has been secularized. Repent!

The objective is no longer to create another society, but to enable everyone to live in the one that exists. The problem is to gather all the have-nots: the homeless, the moneyless, the ones without a legal ID, without access to further education, without a vote, without social recognition, the sexually or ethnically discriminated against, and to turn them into haves, to provide them with a council flat, a minimum social income, a job, a voter's card, a few years in college, some social visibility and the acknowledgment of their sexual inclination or ethnic origin.

Nothing wrong with (part of) that; in fact, in 1930, except for sexual matters which hardly any party cared about, this would have been a standard social-democratic election platform, logically denounced as "reformist" by the far left, and even by some Labor party backbenchers or dedicated socialists in the US. It now is the program of nearly all leftists and many anarchists. Yesterday's minimum is today's maximum.

The criterion is that no one should be rejected, apart from a bunch of financiers and warmongers whose greed and hate (mortal sins, as we know) are supposed to be the cause of our misery. Providing he does his shopping on a bike, abstains from switching on the air conditioning in his car, or buying strawberries in winter, and has no racist or homophobic prejudice, the company executive has his place in society as much as the operative (nobody's a "worker" anymore) he may have to make redundant (but he will have him properly retrained). "Let's live together."

The religious theme of sharing has become secular. Nothing differentiates the social program of a free-thinking socialist from that of a left-wing bishop. The wealthiest man in the world, B. Gates, is also the one that gives the most to charity, foundations, vaccination in poor countries, etc.; if only all the rich could be that generous...

Logically, if sharing is what's required, taking into account the destitution of most human beings and considering European or US style minimum wage and unemployment benefits to be a fair wage and a decent income for Europeans and North Americans, wages and incomes in La Paz or Peking must be raised. Out of the price of an Ecuadorian banana in a European supermarket, 1.5 to 2 percent goes to the plantation worker, 10 to 15 percent to the owner of the plantation, and 40 percent to the supermarket.

If we reduce economy to a system of communicating vessels, the only way to increase the pay of the Ecuadorian worker is to drastically lower the profit of the supermarket's shareholders and the wages of its personnel, who are swallowing an overgenerous slice of the world's available wealth. Swedish cashiers are visibly grossly overpaid.

Making inequality the Number One enemy means that there will only be a redistribution process. In the past, the right described the economy as a cake which (unfortunately) wouldn't get any bigger if the poor got larger slices, while the left promised to have more cakes baked in a totally rearranged kitchen. Today, sharing is the buzz-word, and the far-left only asks for a more radical sharing out.

As it aims at cushioning what exists, reform is at one with a Christianity which no longer heralds a hereafter, merely a moralized here below.

Few Christians today seriously believe in the delights of Paradise or the torments of Hell. Few left wingers believe in a decisive break with this world.

This text is an excerpt from "The Continuing Appeal of Religion" by Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nestic, published by *Troploin* in 2006. *Troploin* can be contacted at AREDHIS, BP 20306, 60203 Compiègne Cedex, France. The complete text can be found at

<http://www.prole.info/texts/continuingreligion.html>

The French version ("Le Present d'une Illusion") is available at
<http:troploino.free.fr>.

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Fifth Estate #375, Spring 2007

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