

PERRY ANDERSON

## *IDÉES-FORCES*

**H**OW IMPORTANT is the role of ideas in the political upheavals that have marked great historical changes? Are they mere mental epiphenomena of much profounder material and social processes, or do they possess a decisive autonomous power as forces of political mobilization? Contrary to appearances, the answers given to this question do not sharply divide Left from Right. Many conservatives and liberals have, of course, exalted the transcendent significance of lofty ideals and moral values in history, denouncing, as base materialists, radicals who insist that economic contradictions are the motor of historical change. Famous modern exemplars of such idealism of the Right include figures like Friedrich Meinecke, Benedetto Croce or Karl Popper. For such thinkers, in Meinecke's words: 'Ideas, carried and transformed by living personalities, constitute the canvas of historical life.' But we can find other major figures of the Right who attack rationalist delusions in the importance of artificial doctrines, upholding against them the far more enduring significance of traditional customs or biological instincts. Friedrich Nietzsche, Lewis Namier, Gary Becker were all—from differing standpoints—theorists of material interests, intent on sardonically deflating the claims of ethical or political values. Rational choice theory, hegemonic over wide areas of Anglo-Saxon social science, is the best-known contemporary paradigm of this kind.

### I

The same bifurcation, however, can be found on the Left. If we look at great modern historians of the Left, we find complete indifference to the role of ideas in Fernand Braudel, contrasted with passionate attachment to them in R. H. Tawney. Among British Marxists themselves, no-one would confuse the positions of Edward Thompson, whose whole life's

work was a polemic against what he saw as economic reductionism, with those of Eric Hobsbawm, whose history of the twentieth century contains no separate sections devoted to ideas at all. If we look at political leaders, the same opposition repeats itself even more pointedly. ‘The movement is everything, the goal is nothing’, announced Bernstein. Could there be a more drastic devaluation of principles or ideas, in favour of sheer factual processes? Bernstein believed he was loyal to Marx when he pronounced this dictum. In the same period, Lenin declared—in an equally famous maxim, of exactly antithetical effect—as something every Marxist should know, that ‘without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement’. The contrast here was not just between the reformist and the revolutionary. In the ranks of the revolutionary Left itself, we find the same duality. For Luxemburg, as she put it, ‘in the beginning was the deed’—not any preconceived idea, but simply the spontaneous action of the masses, was the starting-point of major historical change. Anarchists never ceased to agree with her. For Gramsci, on the other hand, the labour movement could never gain durable victories unless it achieved an ideal ascendancy—what he called a cultural and political hegemony—over society as a whole, including its enemies. At the head of their respective states, Stalin entrusted the building of socialism to the material development of productive forces, Mao to a cultural revolution capable of transforming mentalities and mores.

## 2

How is this ancient opposition to be arbitrated? Ideas come in different shapes and sizes. Those which are relevant to major historical change have typically been systematic ideologies. Göran Therborn has offered a penetrating and elegant taxonomy of these, in a book whose very title—*The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (1980)—offers us an agenda. He divides ideologies into existential and historical, inclusive and positional types. Among them, those which have had the greatest reach, spatial or temporal, have been characterized by a feature that was perhaps best caught by the English conservative T. S. Eliot, in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). We can readily substitute for his notion of ‘culture’ the term ‘ideology’. Eliot’s key observation was that any major belief system constitutes a hierarchy of different levels of

---

<sup>1</sup> Notes originally prepared for a conference in Mexico at the turn of the century, developed since.

conceptual complexity, running from highly sophisticated intellectual constructions at the top—accessible only to an educated elite—through broader and less refined versions at intermediate tiers, down to the crudest and most elementary simplifications at a popular level: all of these nevertheless unified by a single idiom, and supported by a corresponding set of symbolic practices. Only such a totalized system, he argued, was worthy of the name of a real culture, and capable of generating great art.

## 3

Eliot was thinking, of course, of Christianity as the prime example of such a system, uniting the most arcane theological speculations with familiar ethical prescriptions and naïve popular superstitions in a single all-encompassing faith, sustained by sacred stories and images from a common stock of scriptural sources. The world religions that emerged in the so-called Axial Age certainly offer a striking initial test of any hypothesis about the role of ideas in major historical change. Few could doubt the enormous impact of these belief systems over vast areas of the world, and across millennia. Nor is it easy to identify their origins in preceding material or social upheavals on any scale commensurable with their own transformative influence and diffusion. At most we might say that the unification of the Mediterranean world by the Roman Empire provided a favourable institutional setting for the spread of a universalist monotheism, such as Christianity, or that a militarized nomadism in a desert environment under demographic pressure was likely sooner or later to find a distinctive religious expression, like Islam. The disproportion between imputable causes and ascertainable consequences appears to be a strong argument in favour of granting remarkable—even extraordinary—autonomous power to ideas in the civilizations of that epoch.

The political impact of these religions was not, of course, strictly comparable. Christianity gradually converted an existing imperial universe from within, without any significant alteration of its social structure. But by creating in the Church a parallel institutional complex to the state that survived the eventual collapse of the empire, it ensured minimal cultural and political continuities for the subsequent emergence of feudalism. Islam, by contrast, redrew the whole political map of the Mediterranean and the Middle East at a stroke, by lightning military seizure. We are still

in Antiquity, however. In either case, the belief systems that conquered the region did so without what we would later describe as a battle of ideas. No sustained ideological struggle was fought between pagans and Christians, or Christians and Muslims, as the terms of belief capsized in Rome or Cairo. Conversion proceeded essentially by osmosis or force, without articulated ideological collision.

## 4

When we move to the modern epoch, matters are different. The Protestant Reformation, unlike the teaching of either Christ or Mohammed, was a written doctrinal system—or rather a set of them—from the outset, developed in the polemical texts of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, before it became a major force or institutional power. Less distant in time, it is easier to track the proximate social and material conditions of its emergence: corruption of Renaissance Catholicism, rise of national sentiment, differential access of European states to the Vatican, arrival of printing, and so on. What is striking is now something else: the emergence of the Counter-Reformation within the Catholic Church, and therewith an all-out ideological battle between the two creeds, sustained at the highest levels of metaphysical and intellectual debate, as well as every means known to popular propaganda—we owe the term to this epoch—unleashing a titanic series of rebellions, wars and civil wars across Europe. Here, if ever, ideas appear to trigger and shape historical change. Indeed, no subsequent revolutions were to be set off as directly by questions of intellectual belief as the first great upheavals in the chain of modern state-creation in Europe: the Revolt of the Netherlands against Spain in the sixteenth century, and the Great Rebellion and Glorious Revolution in England in the seventeenth. In all three cases, the immediate precipitant of revolution was an outburst of theological passion: the breaking of sacred images in the name of scriptural purity in the Low Countries, the imposition of a new prayer-book in Scotland, the threat of Catholic toleration in England.

## 5

By comparison, the outbreaks of the American and French Revolutions in the eighteenth century were far more materially determined. In neither

case did any developed system of ideas motivate the initial assault on the old—colonial or royal—order. Rather, in the North American colonies economic self-interest of the narrowest kind—dislike of taxes levied to pay the cost of protection against the Indians and the French, seasoned with conspiracism—set off a rebellion against the British monarchy; while in France, a fiscal crisis triggered by the cost of helping the American rebels forced the summoning of a late feudal institution, the Estates-General, whose reforms were promptly swept overboard by the eruption of mass discontent in the countryside and the towns, under the pressure of a bad harvest and high grain prices. In both cases, the breakdown of the old order was an unpremeditated process, in which grievances of a material rather than ideological kind predominated. In the background, however, lay the cumulative critical culture of the Enlightenment—a vast store of potentially explosive ideas and discourses—waiting, as it were, to be activated in just such emergency conditions. It was this arsenal of pre-existing iconoclasm that converted a disintegration of the established order into the revolutionary creation of a new one, and the forging of an ideological imaginary with which we are still living today. The ideals of the American and—above all—French Revolutions have remained active inspirations to political action long after the institutions that each threw up have fossilized or been forgotten.

## 6

If the main legacy of the world religions was their introduction of a metaphysical idea of universalism, and that of the Reformation individualism, the ideological heritage left by the revolutions in the Age of Enlightenment lay essentially in the notions of popular sovereignty and civil rights. These were still only the formal means to the free determination of the shape of a society. What should that shape—the substance of a collective well-being—look like? This was the question that the advent of the industrial revolution posed to the nineteenth century. Three different kinds of answers were given to it. By 1848, the great battlefields of the age had been laid down. With *The Communist Manifesto*, Europe was confronted with the choice that later was posed across the planet: capitalism or socialism? For the first time, humanity was faced with clear-cut, radically antithetical principles of social organization. But there was an asymmetry in its formulation. Socialism received extended, variegated, self-declared theorization, as a political movement and as

a historical goal. Capitalism, as distinct from prodromes like Smith's 'commercial society', rarely if ever spoke its own name in the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth century—the very term was an invention of its opponents. Champions of private property, upholders of the status quo, appealed to more partial or traditional conceptions—invoking conservative or liberal principles rather than propounding any expressly capitalist ideology. These were far from a reliable substitute. Not a few conservative thinkers—Carlyle or Maurras—voiced fierce antipathy to capitalism; while a number of liberal theorists—Mill or Walras—looked with favour on the milder versions of socialism. If we consider the role of ideas in the nineteenth century, it is clear that socialism—above all in its Marxist, and therefore most intransigently materialist version—displayed far greater galvanizing capacity in political action than its opponent. It is scarcely an accident that no-one spoke of a capitalist movement. The power of the established order still rested to a much larger degree on tradition, custom and force, than on any ensemble of theoretical ideas. By the mid-twentieth century, on the other hand, socialism as an idea had achieved a wider geographical span of adherents than any world religion had ever done.

## 7

Still, the ideological universe was not exhausted by these opposites. There was another great motor force at work in this epoch, different in kind from either. As early as 1848 itself, nationalism showed itself to be a yet more powerful mobilizing movement than socialism in Europe. Two peculiarities defined it as a political idea, long before it spread triumphantly to the rest of the world. On the one hand, it produced very few significant or original thinkers, with an occasional rare exception like Fichte. As an articulated doctrine, it was incomparably poorer and thinner than its two coevals. On the other hand, just because of its relative conceptual emptiness, it was eminently plastic, and could enter into a great variety of combinations either with capitalism or with socialism—producing both the chauvinism that fuelled the inter-imperialist war of 1914, and fascism which unleashed its sequel in 1939, on the one side, and the revolutionary movements of national liberation in the Third World, on the other. The triumph of the national ideal across the globe demonstrated the lack of any necessary correspondence between

system and impact, the intellectual depth and reach of an ideology and its mobilizing power in the modern world.

## 8

The early twentieth century saw a cluster of major revolutions in key states on the periphery of the imperialist world: in order, Mexico, China, Russia, Turkey. They form a significant set of contrasts. The role of ideas in shaping the course and outcome of the revolutionary process was greatest in Russia and China, popular mobilization strongest in Mexico and Russia, nationalist appeal most powerful in Turkey. The republican revolution of 1911 failed in China, but the intense intellectual ferment behind it lived on, tributaries from it ultimately flowing into the communist revolution that succeeded in 1949. The Kemalist recovery in Turkey involved very few ideas, beyond national salvation, before importing an eclectic variety once the new regime was established. It is the Mexican and Russian Revolutions—far the greatest upheavals of this period—that offer the most striking contrast. In Mexico, a massive social convulsion was set off and ran a decade-long course without any major system of ideas either initiating or emerging from it. Viewed in purely doctrinal terms, the only developed ideology of the period belonged not to the revolutionaries but to the regime they overthrew—the *científico* positivism of the late Porfiriato. Here, if anywhere, political acts on a titanic scale were accomplished without anything more than elemental notions of institutional or social justice: a tremendous lesson to any too intellectualist vision of dramatic historical change. Only Mexicans can say what price was ultimately paid for the facticity of the Revolution, as the PRI state took shape from Obregón onwards.

The Russian Revolution followed a very different pattern. Tsarism was overthrown by spontaneous mass discontent, provoked by hunger and the hardships of war—a beginning far more innocent of ideas than Madero's revolt in Mexico. Within a few months, the Bolsheviks had come to power by popular agitation on themes no less elemental than those which moved Zapata or Villa: bread, land and peace. Once in power, however, Lenin and his party had at their disposal the most systematic and comprehensive political ideology of the epoch. Here the relationship between the causes and the character of the revolution—the

torsion between material origins and ideal objectives—was not unlike that which produced the Jacobin regime of the Year Two in France, but was much more extreme. Both the feats and the crimes of the Soviet state created by the Bolsheviks dwarfed those of the PRI state, ending seven decades later in a far more apocalyptic demise—the price in its turn of a homeric ideological voluntarism.

## 9

The effects of the October Revolution, of course, were not limited to Russia. Towards the end of his life, Marx had envisaged the possibility of Russia bypassing full capitalist development, in a popular upheaval setting off a revolutionary chain-reaction in Europe. This was essentially the conception behind Lenin's strategy: no belief in the possibility of building socialism in an isolated and backward state like Russia, but every hope that the Soviet example would detonate proletarian revolutions across Europe, in societies where the material conditions for a free association of the producers, at a high level of industrial productivity, existed. History took the opposite course: blockage of any chance of revolution in the advanced West, spread of revolution in still more backward societies of the East. With this, the enormous political success of Marxism seemed to be the best refutation of its theoretical presuppositions. Far from superstructures following the determination of economic infrastructures—ideal systems reflecting material practices—the ideology of Marxism–Leninism, in more or less Stalinized form, appeared to be capable of generating, in settings without capitalism, societies beyond it. That gave rise, within Marxism itself, to the notion popular in the sixties and seventies, that relations of production actually had primacy over the forces of production, even defining them. But Marx's insights were not to be so easily turned inside-out. In the end, the forces of production had their revenge, with the collapse of the USSR itself, as the higher economic productivity of the lands where revolution should have taken place eventually overwhelmed those where it did.

What was the place of ideas on the other side of the struggle? The ideological deficit of capitalism as a declared order was never really remedied in its battle against communism. The term itself continued to belong essentially to the enemy, as a weapon against the system rather than its own self-description. At mid-century, however, the onset of the Cold



War, spelling all-out struggle between two antagonistic blocs, required an ideological gearing-up of capital to a quite new level of efficacy and intensity. The result was the standard Western conversion of the terms of the conflict: not capitalism versus socialism, but democracy against totalitarianism, the Free World against that of 1984. Whatever the broader hypocrisies of this construction—the so-called Free World included, of course, many military and police dictatorships—it corresponded to real advantages of the North Atlantic West over the Stalinized East. In the competition between the blocs, the banner of democracy was a decisive asset where it was least needed, among the populations of the advanced capitalist societies themselves, who required little persuading of the preferability of the conditions under which they lived. It was of far less effect, for obvious reasons, in the ex-colonial or semi-colonial world till recently lorded over by the Western democracies themselves. But in Eastern Europe and—if to a lesser extent—the Soviet Union, Orwellian imagery had more resonance, and the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty, preaching the merits of American democracy, certainly contributed to ultimate victory in the Cold War. Yet the central reason for the triumph of capitalism over communism lay closer to home, in the magnetism of far higher levels of material consumption, which in the end drew not just the deprived masses but the bureaucratic elites of the Soviet bloc—the privileged as much as, perhaps more than, the impoverished—irresistibly into the orbit of the West. Putting it simply, the comparative advantage of the Free World that settled the outcome of the conflict lay in the domain of shopping rather than voting.

IO

The end of the Cold War brought an entirely new configuration. For the first time in history, capitalism proclaimed itself as such, in an ideology that announced the arrival of an endpoint in social development, with the construction of an ideal order based on free markets, beyond which no substantial improvement can be imagined. Such is the core message of neoliberalism, the hegemonic belief system that has ruled the globe for close to half a century. Its origins lie in the immediate post-war era. At that point the established order in the West was still haunted by the shock of the Great Depression and faced with newly empowered labour movements arising out of the Second World War. To ward off the danger of any return to the first, and integrate the pressures of the second,

governments everywhere adopted economic and social policies designed to control the business cycle, sustain employment and offer some material security to the least well-off. Keynesian demand management and social-democratic welfare were the hallmarks of the time, together ensuring higher levels of state intervention and fiscal redistribution than had ever been seen before in the capitalist world. Railing against this ruling orthodoxy, a small minority of radical thinkers denounced all such *dirigisme* as in the long run fatal to economic dynamism and political liberty. Friedrich von Hayek was the leading mind and key organizer of this neoliberal dissent, bringing together fellow spirits from across the world in a semi-clandestine network of influence, the Mont Pèlerin Society. For a quarter of a century, this grouping remained on the margins of respectable opinion, its views disregarded or ridiculed.

With the onset of the stagflationary crisis of the early 70s, and the slide of the world capitalist economy into the long downturn of the ensuing decades, however, this rigorous and intransigent doctrine came into its own. By the 80s, the radical Right had taken power in the United States and Britain, and governments everywhere were adopting neoliberal prescriptions to deal with the crisis: cutting direct taxation, deregulating financial and labour markets, weakening trade unions, privatizing public services. A prophet without honour in his own lands during the 50s and 60s, Hayek was now consecrated by Reagan, Thatcher and other heads of state as the practical visionary of the epoch. The collapse of Soviet communism at the end of the decade appeared the fitting vindication of his long-held belief that socialism was no more than a ‘fatal conceit’.

But it was in the 90s, when the USSR was no more and Reagan and Thatcher had passed from the scene, that the neoliberal ascendancy reached its apogee. For now, without the friend-foe field of force of the Cold War, and without any need for the radical Right to be in power, it was governments of the Centre-Left in the advanced capitalist world who imperturbably pursued the neoliberal policies of their predecessors, with a softening of rhetoric and granting of ancillary concessions, but a consistent political drift in Europe and America alike. The test of a true hegemony—as opposed to a mere domination—is its ability to shape the ideas and actions, not so much of its avowed champions, as of its nominal adversaries. Ostensibly, the regimes of Clinton and Blair, of Schröder and D’Alema, not to speak of Cardoso and de la Rúa, came to power repudiating the hard doctrines of accumulation

and inequality that reigned in the 80s. In practice, they typically preserved or extended them.

## II

Beyond the transfiguration of the Centre-Left in the North Atlantic zone, neoliberal hegemony spread in the same period to the furthest corners of the planet. Fervent admirers of Hayek or Friedman could be found in finance ministries everywhere from La Paz to Beijing, Auckland to New Delhi, Moscow to Pretoria, Helsinki to Kingston. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw's book *The Commanding Heights* (1998) offered a panoramic tour of the 'great transformation' of the times, one fully as radical and infinitely further-flung than that which Karl Polanyi described when writing of the advent of classical liberalism in the Victorian epoch. Unlike Polanyi's narrative, of course, Yergin's and Stanislaw's account of the global victory of neoliberalism was full of enthusiasm for the liberating change that free markets bring. Alongside them came the second major development of the time: the crusade for human rights led by the United States and the European Union. For not all interventionism was frowned on by the neoliberal order. Though the economic sort—if redistributive—was reproved, the military kind was practised and applauded as never before. If the Gulf War, manifestly fought to secure the oil interests of the West, still belonged to an older pattern, its sequels set new parameters. The blockade of Iraq, with a steep intensification of bombing raids by Clinton and Blair, was a purely punitive 'humanitarian' enterprise. The unleashing of full-scale war in the Balkans with an aerial blitz on Yugoslavia no longer needed the United Nations even as a fig-leaf for NATO action, until after the event. In the name of human rights, international law was unilaterally redefined to override the sovereignty of any smaller state that incurred the displeasure of Washington or Brussels.

If it was the Centre-Left version of neoliberalism that set in motion this escalation of military prepotence, the essential vision of imperial power was there in the original doctrine itself. Hayek, after all, pioneered the notion of bombing countries that were recalcitrant to Anglo-American will, calling for lightning air attacks on Iran in 1979 and Argentina in 1982. Gramsci's conception of hegemony stressed the consent it functioned to secure—its definition as a power of ideological persuasion.

But it was never his intention to underplay, let alone forget, its backup in armed repression. ‘Consent plus coercion’ was the full formula of a hegemonic order, in his eyes. The neoliberal universe over which the hegemon of the period still presides has amply met both requirements. Today it is in some question, not so much because of the way in which the Wall Street crash of 2008 and its consequences had to be managed with further huge increases in the overall debt that brought it about, as because the threat of competition from China has forced a retreat from free trade and resort to state subventions in the West, amid a still further increase in the mountain of total debt worldwide. Yet there remains no consistent alternative to neoliberalism, as a governing system of ideas of planetary reach.

## 12

The reasons for its strength are not to be found in its economic sway alone. For beneath neoliberalism lies a much older set of ideas and values that came to acquire the term liberal in the nineteenth century, and the relationship between the two is one of the most central, yet least discussed issues raised by the dominance of the first.<sup>2</sup> At its core, contemporary neoliberalism is essentially an economic doctrine, whereas liberalism proper was a set of political doctrines that first took systematic shape as a self-declared outlook not in Britain but in France, in the thinking of Constant, Guizot and Royer-Collard, before it generated economic theorems in the work of Bastiat. In the next generation Tocqueville would follow; in Britain his friend and contemporary John Stuart Mill, equally productive in political and economic arguments. Key tenets of this classical liberalism, along with protection of private property, were constitutional restraints against arbitrary rule, representative government with a limited suffrage, and safeguarding of individual liberties—in Constant’s formula, modern as distinct from ancient freedom, which was based on active participation by citizens in public affairs. By the end of the century, industrialization had produced a labouring population that required integration in some fashion into the

---

<sup>2</sup> Here just one title commands the field—Alexander Zevin’s eye-opening history of the *Economist*, from the era of Peel and Gladstone to the times of Blair and Cameron, *Liberalism at Large* (2019).

state if it was to be stabilized, so the suffrage was widened, and in the course of the next century, after a long struggle for them, voting rights were extended not only to male workers but to women, in what eventually came to be called liberal democracies. To these political systems the masses in the West became attached, if in practice more for the civil liberties they assured than for the popular self-determination they advertised, providing a sturdy sociological foundation for the official claim that this was the Free World, and anything else was despotism.

The neoliberal ideology that swept the economic board in the last two decades of the twentieth century thus overlaid a prior belief system, from which it was derived but to which it could not be reduced, one that was not only older in the advanced countries of the West, but in substance richer and more diverse—allowing at the limit, though they always remained marginal in the panorama of liberalism as a whole, liberals who rejected not only classical laissez-faire, but even capitalist private property itself, as in cases like Russell or Dewey at different stages of their careers. Neoliberalism was an inherently thinner body of thought, with less popular appeal, than liberalism in its classical sense. Not unlike capitalism itself, of which it was the most radical expression and theorization, it was consequently a term which its most adroit exponents preferred to disavow, as if it were a slander invented by malcontents. Typically, in the columns of the *Financial Times* or the *Economist*, 'neoliberal' will appear only in scare quotes, or be banished altogether. All the more care must be taken to deny or avoid it, given that the pioneering theorists of neoliberalism could be embarrassingly candid in their dim view of democracy, the treasure-chest of liberal values as understood by exponents of earlier or less radical versions. Mises, after all, had saluted fascism as a salvation from socialism in Italy; Hayek openly advocated winnowing universal suffrage. For both, the *Rechtsstaat* was a higher value than democracy, which could be a threat to it and needed to be curbed if so: not an idea readily confessed by periodicals, or politicians echoing them, that depend on significant circulations or numbers of voters.

Why then, if its doctrines are thinner and its criers fewer, has neoliberalism become so much more powerful and pervasive an ideology than the liberalism on which it rests? The answer, familiar to any Marxist, is that the material infrastructure of any developed society is what all

the rest depends upon—without it there can be no bureaucracy, no army, no assembly, no media, no hospitals or schools, no prisons, no high or low culture: everything requires a functioning economy to operate. So where not wanted, liberal constitutions or parliaments, liberal newspapers or podcasts, liberal arts or beliefs, can be dispensed with, as a working economic system cannot. That is the *sine qua non* of any political or cultural order. To which the central claim of neoliberalism adds that only one now exists—‘There Is No Alternative’, in Thatcher’s irremediable dictum. Positive approval of its principles as desirable is not required: negative resignation to them as inevitable will do. Not by accident, the first radical—and for a long time successful—implementation of a neoliberal programme by any government came under Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship in Latin America. Neoliberalism could become a well-nigh universal growth across the former Third and Second Worlds without need of the liberal subsoil that had nourished it in the First. Half a century later, we continue to face the most successful political ideology in world history.

## 13

There are those who would passionately contest such a verdict. In the advanced countries, the objections alleged against it started early and ran roughly as follows. We should be on our guard, critics argue, against the dangers of overestimating the influence of neoliberal doctrines as such. Certainly, times had changed since the 1950s or 60s; markets had gained more power at the expense of states, and the working class was no longer the force it once had been. But taking the decades since the benchmark of Thatcher’s victory in 1979 as an epoch, in at least the advanced countries public expenditure has remained high and welfare systems more or less intact. Much less altered than could appear on the surface; it was a mistake to think that neoliberal ideas made a significant difference to them: deeper sociological constants held the post-war consensus in place. Even in the realm of ideas themselves, far more politicians disavowed than endorsed the harsh medicine of neoliberalism, whose actual radius of attraction was very narrow. Did not, after all, Clinton and Blair make clear that they stood for a Third Way, expressly equidistant from both neoliberalism and old-fashioned statism? Likewise, what of Schröder’s firm commitment to a *Neue Mitte*—a New Centre—or

Jospin's principled declaration in favour of a market economy but not, emphatically not, a market society? Since then, we have seen the compassionate conservatism of Bush's 'no child left behind', the intrepidity of Obama's 'audacity of hope', the sobriety of Merkel's 'debt brake' and Hollande's 'pact of responsibility', the dynamism of Abe's 'three arrows', Biden's 'inflation reduction' and Macron's 'contract with the nation', or simplest and emptiest of all as a watchword for its opposite, Starmer's 'change' (*plus ça*).

Some of the conventional objections have more weight than others. It is perfectly true, of course, that neoliberal ideas are not to be attributed with magical powers of political suasion on their own. Like all major ideologies, this one too has always required affective supplements—typically nationalism—and material practices—instrumental or ritual—for its grip to hold. Meanwhile, the practical basis of neoliberal hegemony is to be found in the primacy of private consumption—of commodified goods and services—in the daily life of contemporary capitalist societies, reaching new levels of intensity in the last four decades; and in the rise of speculation as a central hub of economic activity in worldwide financial markets, penetrating into the pores of the social fabric with mass marketing of mutual and pension funds—a development of which we are witnessing only the beginnings, as it spreads from North America to Europe and into the Southern hemisphere. If public expenditure in the advanced capitalist states remains high, it is now increasingly hybrid and diluted by infusions of private capital that extend into every kind of service—from hospitals to prisons to tax-collection—that would once have been regarded as inviolate domains of public authority or collective provision. Neoliberal hegemony does not so much prescribe a specific schedule of innovations, which can vary significantly from one society to the next, as determine the limits of what is possible in any of them.

A good measure of its general sway is the conformity of all Northern governments, regardless of nominal political colour, to the imperatives of military blockade, occupation or intervention outside the Atlantic zone. The social-democratic regimes of Scandinavia, for example, which once had a reputation for a certain independence in foreign policy, regularly acting as jackals loping alongside the larger Western predators—Norway helping to seal Israeli dominion in Palestine, Finland brokering the bombardment of Yugoslavia, Sweden assisting renditions

in the War on Terror, all four joining the pack in Ukraine. The emptiness of the rhetoric of the Third Way as an ostensible alternative to it was always the surest proof of the enduring ascendancy of neoliberalism.

#### I4

What are the lessons of this history for the Left? First and foremost, that ideas count in the balance of political action and the outcome of historical change. In all three of the great cases of modern ideological impact, the pattern was the same. Enlightenment, Marxism, Neoliberalism: in each case a system of ideas was developed, to a high degree of sophistication, in conditions of initial isolation from, and tension with, the surrounding political environment—with little or no hope of immediate influence. It was only when a major objective crisis, for which it was in no way responsible, broke out, that subjective intellectual resources, gradually accumulating in the margins of becalmed conditions, suddenly acquired overwhelming force as mobilizing ideologies with a direct grip on the course of events. Such was the pattern in the 1790s, the 1910s, the 1980s. The more radical and intransigent the body of ideas, the more sweeping its effect, once unleashed in turbulent conditions. Today we are still in a situation where a single dominant ideology rules the greater part of the world. Resistance and dissent are far from dead, but they continue to lack systematic, uncompromising articulation. None will come, experience suggests, from feeble adjustment or euphemistic accommodation to the existing order of things. What is needed instead, and will not arrive overnight, is an entirely different spirit—an unflinching and where necessary caustic analysis of the world as it is, without concession to the arrogant claims of the Right, the conformist myths of the Centre, or the *bien-pensant* pieties of too much of what passes for the Left. Ideas incapable of shocking the world are incapable of shaking it.