# “There is no alternative”? The election without memory

https://www.e-ir.info/2010/04/25/%e2%80%9cthere-is-no-alternative%e2%80%9d-the-election-without-memory/

ANDREW ROBINSON, APR 25 2010

This election is not principally a social mobilisation, but rather, a media event. As early as the 1970s, Trevor Pateman (1974) was writing of British elections as not simply televised but as ‘television elections’, in which television performances mobilise meaning in massified audiences. So much more so today, with the social mobilisation of political parties little more than a dying memory. Yet today, we see a plethora of contentless neoliberal television polls determining who will succeed and fail in the characterological eyes of the audience of reality TV and talent-show audience. Is the general election much more than these televotes? There seems to be a lack of enthusiasm in the public mood for any candidate. Each is trying to perform the same role, like contestants seeking to be the next Maria or Dorothy. Brown is near-universally loathed. Cameron has inspired some, but millions remain wary of an unreformed Thatcherite Conservative Party. The LibDems are shining in the debates, but only, it seems, for being more honest and substantive than the rest, less prone to empty rhetoric (an appearance which is doubtless an effect of a particular strategy of political rhetoric). The Nazis of the BNP are ever more vocal, but serve simply to express openly the prejudices which other parties mobilise more ‘respectably’. It is hard to recall that just twenty-five years ago, elections were matters of passion and mobilisation. Where has all the energy gone?

The reason elections are now no more than a televised popularity contest is that the main parties have fused into something akin to a single party, indistinguishable on major issues. The most marked characteristic of the televised debates is the lack of distance between politicians on any of the major issues: in the two main parties, ‘everyone agrees’ that immigration is a bad thing, that public spending needs to be cut, that crime should be smashed with an iron fist, that workers must remain weak and unorganised, that benefits should be conditional on work, that education exists to serve the market, that the private sector should run or at least inspire the management of public services. Since the Menzies Campbell coup, the LibDems have come into the fold, muting their critical stance on the corrosion of civil liberties and welfare cutbacks. Aside from small radical parties who have no visible place in the televote, the rhetoric is a monotone, like singers performing the same song for the voting audience. We can evict Brown or evict Cameron, but the Big Brother house remains the same either way.

Elections only matter in terms of outcomes to the extent that they offer real alternatives. Such alternatives will only arise where there is contestation in social life and discourse. Today, under the watchful gaze of the tabloids and the iron curtain of the ever-expanding deep state, such contestation is at an all-time low. The legacy of Thatcher and Blair is a legacy of the closure of political space (Robinson, 2007). There have been corresponding changes in society: the *de facto* manufacture of public opinion by unscrupulous corporate-owned tabloids, the replacement of manufacturing with empty speculative industries focused on London as global city, the atomisation of social life and decomposition of community connections. Education has been dumbed-down by vocationalisation, lowering the level of discussion in society (Robinson and Tormey, 2003). Dissident voices have been marginalised to the point of invisibility (or anathematisation as madness, extremity), impoverishing it still further. The tabloids turn like rabid wolves on anyone who visibly questions the new orthodoxies, and hunts down new scapegoats. This decay reaches back into politics: the memberships of the major parties are at an all-time low, parties have problems obtaining candidates for low-level elections, a chunk of the electorate who stopped voting after Blair’s first victory have never returned.

While Thatcher as ‘vanishing mediator’ remains a controversial figure, her neoliberal reforms were locked-in and even extended by Blair. Even the tendency to move perpetually rightward has been locked-in. This corresponds to

the entrenchment of the political elite as a technocratic entity, hiding in bunkers behind layers of security, utterly split off from politics as contestation, content at its self-reproduction regardless of likely eventualities (a situation of which corruption, such as the ‘expenses scandal’, is a symptom). Conservative journalist Peter Oborne (2007) has called this the replacement of the Establishment by a political class.

Where does the political class come from? It is an outgrowth of the prolonged ‘state of exception’, the arrogation of executive power during the Thatcher years, in which repressive laws, drastic cuts and paramilitarised police were mobilised to smash social movements such as the trade unions. The Establishment, the old rulers of Britain, embraced this process for their own preservation. Little did they suspect that they would be its next victims. Once mobilised against social movements, it ultimately turned against its former paymasters. It now micro-manages social life through surveillance and decomposition. The effect of the Thatcher revolution has ultimately been the destruction of the social fabric, an effect felt equally across the political spectrum. It is a predictable effect: the principle of state command, the process of state dominance of everyday life, is disempowering across the board, except for the holders of state power. It is counterposed to horizontal forms of social life, to the autonomy of the everyday. The trauma is that the most radical critics of Thatcherism were proven right: the Miners’ Strike *did* prefigure the destruction of industry, regressive redistribution *didn’t* produce a golden age of growth which trickled down, capitalist principles *did* corrode public services, the paramilitarised police *have* been gradually extended and persistently misused.

Yet none of this can be said in the televote. Thatcher’s great victory, consolidated by Blair, was to lock down the political space so alternatives are publicly unspeakable. Politicians thus juggle two counterposed imperatives: the desire to channel dissatisfaction, and the need to avoid transgressions against an ever more unforgiving symbolic order. On some level, people are deeply dissatisfied, as is shown by the constant rhetorical appeals regarding change, hope, substance, radicality, community. Yet change cannot come if the constitutive trauma is not confronted. And this trauma is unspeakable, because the media is waiting to pounce on anyone who explicitly violates the taboos on criticising neoliberal dogmas regarding work, crime, migration, cohesion or welfare. Worse, people continue to mouth these policies as radical breaks with the present, daring confrontation of issues nobody else raises. Each critique is the utopian duplication of the order which it critiques: neoliberalism, but this time done properly, without its symptoms; the directionless negativity of discontent articulated to the substantive repetition of the present. Since the order producing the problems remains the same, can it be any surprise that the problems, too, remain the same? The trauma which grounds the current discontent has not been confronted, has not been re-opened, and the symptomatic acting-out remains the same. And there is no substantive choice, as long as the forced choice of neoliberalism remains untouched (c.f. Mkandawire, 1999). Without such choice, what can an election be but a talent contest between aspirants to the same symptomatic stance? It is little surprise that television, the ultimate space of the eternal present, should be the site of performance of a politics without memory.

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