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**Ideological weddings: something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue
Transcript**

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IDEOLOGICAL WEDDINGS: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BLUE

Professor Rodney Barker

New rights and new lefts in Britain as both the chronological and the short twentieth centuries draw to a close. How new is new, how left is left, and how right is right? Is there genuine innovation, or just a rearrangement of old arguments?

***1 PICTURE**

Weddings can sometimes leave the ordinary member of the wedding party a bit baffled: "What on earth is SHE doing marrying HIM?"

"Do her family realise what they're letting themselves in for?"

"Have you seen that uncle over there? What a disaster!"

"I'll be VERY surprised if it lasts the year."

There's something of that rather surprising "how can it ever work" mix in the two ideological clusters I'm going to talk about this evening, the New Left and the New Right, phenomena of political writing and argument in Britain from the mid-1950s to the 1980s of the last century.

But they're not unusual in being a sometimes odd mixture. All ideologies are patchwork quilts rather than garments made from a single cloth with a single pattern.

The New Left and the New Right have several things in common, starting with the first word in each of their titles. When political thinkers are not quite sure where they're going, but want to give an impression of clarity and direction, one of the rhetorical tricks is to add the prefix "new" to old names and titles. Advertisers have been doing it for years, usually with the addition of "improved".

And if "new" gets to sound a bit faded, there is always "neo" to try instead.

In political ideology we have had the New Left, the New Right, New Labour, and neo-conservatives and neo-liberals.

The two most developed and sustained were the first two, even though neither of them lasted

Each of them emerged at the end of, though still during, the Short Twentieth Century

So the old wedding recommendation for what the bride should wear sums things up, or some of them, rather neatly:

***2 PICTURE**

Something old,

Something new,

Something borrowed,

Something blue

Each of the two, New Left and New Right, was a cluster of threads and strands, some which you expect to find there, some which you'd forgotten about so that they seem almost new, some which seem borrowed from another ideological camp

altogether, and some so traditional that, whether it's the New Right or the New Left, it looks like a streak of the deepest conservatism. You might, in this case, want to add to "blue", "red", because there is a strand of radicalism, or something not just new but a bit innovative, in each of the New Left and the New Right. Each of them proposed departures from the existing way of doing things.

New Left and New Right and particularly the New Left drew on the recessive elements in the socialist and conservative traditions with arguments which had seemed dormant for a long time but which now re-emerged. But each too drew also on more than just socialism or conservatism

That is a warning against ever treating categories as anything more than labels which simplify things in order to help us understand them. That, after all, is what maps are.

The emergence of New Left and New Right illustrates how the closer you look at actual events, the more rough and ready general explanations appear, and how dependent they are on where you happen to be looking from. New Left and New Right, looking back, seem like the closing acts of the short twentieth century before the curtain was finally brought down by the collapse of Russian and East European Communist governments, and the end of the Cold War. They didn't seem at all like that at the time, they seemed like a new beginning, and may seem different again in the future.

Each illustrates, more strikingly than anything I've talked about so far, that ideologies are not neat and complete, that they are made up of bits and pieces, and are part of an intricate mixture of poetry and polemic, philosophy and policy, and the people whose arguments make up an ideology are not members of a special caste or group, but just anyone who has something to say which more or less aligns them with one category, set, or network rather than with another.

New Right and New Left overlapped, engaged with each other, and shared some at least common heritage. But I'll begin with the New Left, since it started a little earlier than the New Right

The New Left

It was, from our point of view, an ideology, and in that sense a bit of a rag bag of aspirations and aversions. But you have to start somewhere, so here is a quite representatively many threaded quotation from one of the leading New Left writers, the historian E.P.Thompson, from the 1960 collection *Out of Apathy*.

*3 PICTURE

"The wholesome dislike of reasons of state, the values of intellectual and artistic integrity, a sense of the real strengths within British traditions - ..Perhaps, without our knowledge, the key to change has been tossed into British hands, and the world waits impatiently upon us to turn the lock? The materials for a definition of socialist humanism lie on every hand. Our own intellectual traditions rise to meet our needs."

This is a fascinatingly dense piece of argument, containing a whole range of assumptions, aspirations, and aversions, and a rich mix of old, new, borrowed, blue - and red: And to get the flavour, since it is a mixture, we may need to look at those five ingredients in a slightly different order

And a word of warning: old, new, borrowed, blue (and red) are rough and ready categories, and overlap with each other

There's a **red** libertarian anarchism in the opening phrase, the "wholesome dislike of reasons of state".

But it's both **old** and to some extent **borrowed** from a semi-anarchist tradition which was never more than on the fringes of social democratic thinking in Britain. On the whole social democrats had been rather optimistic about the use of governmental power

"The values of intellectual and artistic integrity": that has a slight whiff of elitism or at least professionalism about it which, again, draws on those socialists in the nineteenth century such as William Morris who had insisted on the importance of work as an artistic exercise, and those socialists in the twentieth century such as the Fabian Socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb for whom a socialist state would be a state administered by professionals, by experts

And then "a sense of the real strengths within British traditions". Something **old**: Traditionalism: it's not only conservatives who can claim tradition

Thompson was later, in 1973, to speak indignantly in defence of "this ancient protestant island"

And then the hope that Britain could turn the key for the imagined future: a radical utopianism that adds the colour **red**

And then back to both tradition and the ordinary common sense of reality, something which conservatives had usually been stronger at claiming but which Thompson is either borrowing or, more accurately, reclaiming: **"The materials for a definition of socialist humanism lie on every hand."**

And then what about something **New**?

The true novelty is in the mix, not in the ingredients, which taken on their own could come from a number of ideological clusters. Thompson's appeal to tradition, and to the resources already around us, is close to each of the following:

***4 PICTURE**

"Thus our generation is one which comes home again from years of distant wandering. We discover affinities with earlier generations of English who felt no country but this to be their own. We discover affinities with earlier generations of English who felt there was this deep this providential difference between our empire and those others, that the nationhood of the mother country remained unaltered through it all, almost unconscious of the strange fantastic structure built around her"

***5 PICTURE**

"there *is* something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person."

Novelty lies as much in the mix as in the ingredients. Taken by itself, any single ingredient could be either A# or Bß. And to say that an ingredient is not new does not disqualify the argument from being considered novel. Pizzas may not have any ingredients in them that have not been in use for centuries, but they are very different from fried onions, or tomato soup, or sliced bread. And even exactly the same ingredients, differently cooked, can give you a pancake or Yorkshire pudding.

I began with one man, and one book. But Out of Apathy (1960) was the work of several hands, and even if we go beyond a single book to a journal, the New Left Review, to which many contributed, we've only gone some of the way. It's always easier to boil an ideology down to one or two people, a few books, one journal.

But the New Left was always more, and more diverse, than one journal or one small group of intellectuals. The New Left wasn't just one or two academic authors

A vague movement of both political action and political ideas, international, but particularly to be found in the universities, from 1956 on

***6 PICTURE**

How did this sort of argument come to be developed? The circumstances:

The earliest we need go back is 1956:

1. Conservatives had been in office for 5 years and had won two general elections. They were to remain in office for a further 8 years. Alternative ideologies usually flourish the longer a government is in office.

Dissatisfaction with the apparent electoral dominance of one party was exacerbated by the claim that "ideology" in the sense of general principles to guide political action, what I would rather call "doctrine", let alone radical alternatives to the way things were currently being done, had had its day, and that there was now a consensus amongst all parties so that instead of grand choices, there was simply the politics of housekeeping, of fine tuning and small detail.

As John Osborne's Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 complained, there were no brave causes left to fight for

The social scientist Richard Titmuss reacted to this in 1959 with the comment that 'If it is thought that less divides us, there is less to argue about'

Hence *Out of Apathy*

2. There was a belief on the left that by being too nice, the left had been deceived into an acceptance of the status quo, and so there was talk of the 'failure' of parliamentary socialism (Miliband 1961)

The "failure" was both because the left had refused to challenge the status quo even when it had the electoral strength and justification to do so and that it had, as was once said of the Conservative politician Austen Chamberlain, "always played the game and always lost it" whereas its opponents had always ignored the rules of the game and always won. It had, too, failed to use its industrial muscle whilst its opponents had never worried about using their financial muscle.

3. But if consensus and an end of argument was felt to be deadening public life at home, there was a sense that abroad the Cold War between East and West masked very real similarities between the two sides, each of whom, though in very different ways, stifled argument and dissent, and imposed the rule of closed minds. So there was a reaction against the *organisation* of politics in East & West

So e.g. Thompson, in one of his essays in *Out of Apathy*, "Outside the whale": criticised the reaction against radical thinking as a capitulation to power and orthodoxy, akin therefore to subordination to party orthodoxy under Stalin. 'Pragmatic' orthodoxy was as objectionable as 'revolutionary' orthodoxy.

So it was argued that, though by very different methods, there was oppressive orthodoxy in both east and west, though of different kinds.

4. Into this mixture of content and discontent broke two events which, at least for those on the left who saw the Soviet Union as on the side of progress even if it had made mistakes, were a huge intellectual shock:

First: The invasion of Hungary in 1956

Second: the Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Communist Party Congress in the Soviet Union, in the same year

The first was tanks against the people

The second was both a rejection of Stalin, and at the same time a continuation of "democratic centralism"

5. A result of this was to break the monopoly of Marx, and to make accessible a 'liberated' Marx [alienation, ideology]

6. But the reaction against orthodoxy and control in both east and west, the rejection of the kinds of political methods associated with Soviet Communism - democratic centralism, leadership - involved not just a freeing up of Marx and broad debates about where things were and where they should be going, but also a debate about how politics should be conducted.

If Leninism abroad and conformity at home were out of the door, then all forms of hierarchy, all elites, were under scrutiny.

One of the consequences of that was one which men on the left had perhaps not anticipated.

If Leninism, the leadership of a party, was out of the window, so was patriarchy, the leadership of a gender, men.

The reaction against patriarchy developed slowly, but by the time of the publication in 1979 of a collection of essays edited by Hilary Wainwright, Lyn Segal, and Sheila Rowbotham entitled *Beyond the fragments*, the authors were not only able to make the case once again, but to look back on twenty years experience of what it was they were criticising, and what they were proposing.

Direct politics meant co-operation, wide involvement, and a stress on discussion and participation, rather than leadership and direction.

And whilst this did not necessarily involve a rejection of representative politics, it did involve putting a value on direct action as an equally important, or more important, way of making voices heard, and an emphasis on a rather less heroic form of politics

than had been frequent on the left:

***7 PICTURE**

In rejecting patriarchy and the privileging of men, feminists at the same time were rejecting heroic and over serious male political methods.

The feminist campaign against the US Cruise Missile Base at Greenham Common from 1981 was characterised by humour, theatre and satire, as well as by robust opposition to nuclear weapons: "take the toys from the boys"

The feminist strand in the New Left was to prove both one of the most long lasting and one of the most radical

This was both new and old, drawing once again on recessive, or submerged, traditions within radical politics:

And it wasn't only feminism which emerged, or was noticed again, in the loose alliance of themes and recessive themes which made up the new left:

workers' control, from guild socialism and syndicalism

anarchism: Colin Ward - against planners *and* landlords.

7. At the same time there was a re-assessment of "utopianism" and the commune-ism of Morris, most notably by Thompson who had already in 1955 written a major study of Morris, presenting him as the humanist, or culturally sensitive version of what Marx was doing at a more theoretical level.

Morris was attractive because of his assertion, or use, of imagination but also because of his account of work.

This rediscovery of utopianism was accompanied by a re-statement of assumption that political action, and government, can never do more than provide the context and facilities within and with which people will build their own cultures.

But is that a radical assumption, a socialist one, or a conservative one. The point is that taken by itself it could be any of them, and gets its full ideological colour when it associates with other ideas. You may tell an idea, as you may tell a lady, by the company she keeps.

The re-discovery of Morris and the new attention to the cultural and moral dimensions of Marx's work enabled a new attention not just to economic class, but to culture, and to the interrelatedness of things, the personal is political very early on.

But paradoxically an insistence on utopia was paralleled by an insistence on practicality, on using what was to hand and using it now, and not waiting, as some Marxists had done, for the correct point on the revolutionary road.

So eutopia rather than utopia

8. The resulting mix had few new *ingredients*: the novelty was in the way it drew together existing strands, some of which had been dormant or recessive for most of the twentieth century

NEW RIGHT emerges a little later than the New Left, and in part as a reaction to it but, like the New Left, it couldn't be summed up by one or two people or one or two arguments,

Though at least it doesn't have the added complication of university politics, or the theatre of direct action.

There's no New Right equivalent of Greenham Common (at least not until the tactics of the hunting lobby in the new century)

It was in part a reaction to Harold Wilson and 6 years of social democratic government from 1964

In part a reaction to the New Left and a defence of what the New Left attacked.

Whereas the New Left was a mixture of many themes, the New Right was an alliance between two principal themes: cultural and social conservatism, and economic liberalism, a defence of hierarchies and the idea of a single dominant tradition on the one

hand, and of markets and capitalism on the other.

But that didn't necessarily make it more coherent, or reduce the potential stress between its various elements. At its most basic, after all, the juxtaposition of social conservatism to economic liberalism was a version of the tension between a collective, social idea of identity, and an individualistic one.

First sightings, and first use of the term, in **1968**, but flourishes as the New Left is starting to fade, in the 1970s.

The ideological wedding dress (and as with the New Left, the order does not follow the neatness of the lyric):

A} Borrowed: economic liberalism (and red libertarianism?)

hostility to socialism and Keynesian economics,

active support of capitalism,

championing of the market, of property, and of the positive functions of economic inequality;

individualism both normative and methodological, sustaining an advocacy of individual responsibility in opposition to collective provision;

who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first

B} Blue and Old

The positive new right as an aspiration to a particular form of society

Antagonism towards contemporary and "progressive" education

hostility to universal social services and a fear of a 'dependency culture' amongst the ordinary working population;

moralism and patriarchy, a puritan suspicion of 'permissiveness', of feminism, and of unorthodox households;

a 'no nonsense' anti-intellectual populism;

But if to be blue is to conservative with a small c, and to be red is to be radical and to want to take action to make things different, there was a red element as well as a blue in the New Right

(Barber points this out in 1976)

The conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott had spoken of a conservative disposition, a liking for things as they are. That gives the conservatism of common sense, where what you want and what you have are more or less the same, so that it makes sense to say you're not an ideologist, you have no theories, it's just a matter of looking at the world as it is.

But if there is no one dominant view of what is worth while, or how life should be lived, or, even worse for this way of looking at things, if the overall character of the world in which you live is a long way from what you want and how you want to live, then to argue for those things may still in a general sense be to stand on the right rather than on the left, but it involves a radical rather than a conservative approach to politics. The blue is joined by red.

The best example of this is the conservative writer Roger Scruton

In *The Meaning of Conservatism*, first published in 1980, Scruton was already describing a society not where the things he valued were dominant, but where they were one set of values and practices amongst others. That is not how Scruton present it. He describes not a society of many values and ways of living, but "society" and threats to society. In other words, those elements in society which you approve of are "society", the others are "enemies". In these circumstances the argument becomes radical right rather than conservative:

orthodoxy is embattled: 'a society really does have enemies...those enemies seek to undermine it, and ...it is the duty of the government, as it is the expectation of the citizens, that they should be prevented by every means to hand.'

Defence of a common national identity against "what was once called the alien wedge"

constraints on speech are justified in the maintenance of the traditional values of society, and it is their removal, not their imposition, that needs justifying.

In these circumstances the radicalism of the right becomes more pronounced, and it becomes a matter not just of being partisan amongst competing values and practices, but of working for a different society, albeit one which it is argued previously existed. In these circumstances, Scruton argued, "a conservative is also a restorationist". The use of the term "restorationist" suggests, and I'm sure is meant to suggest, historical parallels.

And for Scruton this "resoration" is a task which government is fully entitled to carry out:

conservatism as government is inherently opposed to liberal individualism: 'In politics, the conservative attitude seeks above all for government, and regards no citizen as possessed of a natural right that transcends his obligation to be ruled. '

C So the borrowed, the blue, the old and the new face the problem of how to relate radical economic individualism to radical social conservatism

There were two solutions, one in the the idea of the family, the other in arguments of the political and economic theorist F. A. Hayek

Family

Hayek and tradition

***8 PICTURE**

Religion and commerce, the church and the market

So the NEW is in the mix, and in the radicalism, the full collage, not the detailed components.

But where are the New Left and the New Right now?

Each was part of the final explosion which destroyed the traditions it tried to assert

New Left and New Right were attempts to save old ideologies, but in doing so, they exploded them

This was so because there was a difference between conservatism and "right": The new right sought to achieve by radicalism what no longer existed but which conservatives had sought only to preserve. In so doing, it went a long way to destroying conservatism

The new left was part of the fading away of both Marxism and social democracy.

But as with all explosions, it's not all destruction, and sometimes, like the explosion of a poppy head, new growth is the result, and some of the components of both New Left and New Right have been catapulted out and have taken root or continued to flourish

One of the most radical successors to the New Left, and one of its most radical components, has been feminism; another has been a politics of identity rather than class; a third a preference for direct rather than indirect politics, doing things at a local level or in small groups, rather than going up through the representative levels to Westminster and back

The new right has re-asserted markets as vigorous ways of responding to preferences and meeting demands, and the sometimes rather different stress on traditional households

So to return to the New Left and the New Right as marriages of, if not opposites, then certain rather different participants, if the household has dispersed somewhat, several of its various members are nonetheless flourishing.

