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Karol Edward Soltan

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Liberal Conservative Socialism and the Politics of a Complex Center

Karol Edward Soltan

Some years ago the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski wrote the conservative-liberal-socialist manifesto and gained considerable sympathy for it, at least among those (including myself) concerned with the struggle against communism. Now that communism is all but dead, has the great cause of conservative-liberal-socialism died with it? Some think so, but they take too narrow a view of the significance of Kolakowski's manifesto. The larger cause to which that manifesto contributed was a certain form of politics of the center, which I will call interchangeably the politics of a complex or a principled center. This cause, I certainly hope, is not dead. It is in fact now facing its most ambitious task. But it is under perpetual threat, not only from various fanaticisms and extremisms, but also from other petty, small-minded and cynical forms of the politics of the center.

What is the politics of the center? Is it the politics of the middle class, which some have considered essential to democratic stability? Is it the politics of the median voter, the inevitable winner in certain very simple voting situations? Do we need to adopt the Aristotelian or the Confucian doctrine of the mean? It can be any of those. But at bottom, politics of the center is an effort to move away from extremes, however defined. It is also a battle against violence, destruction, and their influence in politics and in life generally, against war and revolution, but also against coercion. The center plays an important role in ethics and politics in a number of distinctive ways. In this essay I want to sketch the case in favor of politics that searches for and aims to create a morally and institutionally complex center, distinct from the center that is simply a balance of power.

We can trace a long and only intermittently glorious history of the politics of the center in action, including the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the United States Constitution of 1787, but also the altogether less glorious French regime established in 1830 with Louis Philippe as king, and Guizot as chief political mentor, trying to establish a "juste milieu" between reaction and revolution. More recently politics of the center has been best exemplified by those who created, reformed, and maintained the welfare state, avoiding the extremes of pure free-market capi-

talism and full state socialism (the work of a combination of Christian Democrats, Ordo Liberals, and Social Democrats in Europe, and New Deal Democrats with their allies in the United States). This is in many ways a glorious history to be sure, but it also leads to the not-so-glorious current state of democratic politics in the United States, as vividly described for us by Lowi, among others.

If we want to build a better world when we face moral complexity (multiple conflicting ends and ideals) and complex constraints, we need to be prepared to develop a complex program full of hybrids. If we want to maintain and enhance uniqueness of persons, cultures, institutions, and natural locations, then we must both protect and promote complexity.

More recently still, the politics of the center has had a significant appeal to dissident groups and the anti-communist opposition in communist countries. Kolakowski put forward a conservative liberal-socialist manifesto speaking in favor of an ideologically and morally complex center. Writing in 1978, he included a historical prediction: that his movement would never develop a mass following. Arguably it did, however: in the form of the trade union Solidarity, at least in its most complex incarnation of 1980–81. Under the pressures of partisan politics after the collapse of communism, Solidarity has split into various combinations of its compo-

nents, and conservative-liberal-socialism has returned to power in Poland only occasionally in the guise of coalition governments. But meanwhile in the West the politics of the center takes new forms. We find it in the international Communitarian Network, or the efforts to build a new program for the center left, a new Third Way.

The classical ideal of the center and of moderation, is represented best by Aristotle and Confucius, with their identification of virtue as a center between extremes, and of vices as those extremes. The degree to which contemporary politics of the center is, or ought to be, Aristotelian or Confucian, I leave to the side in this essay. I want instead to sketch a politics that pursues a different ideal: a complex center, reflecting and favoring moral, ideological, and institutional complexity. What is good about the politics of a complex center? If we want to build a better world when we face moral complexity (multiple conflicting ends and ideals) and complex constraints, we need to be prepared to develop a complex program full of hybrids. If we want to maintain and enhance uniqueness of persons, cultures, institutions, and natural locations, then we must both protect and promote complexity.

But there is also a different type of politics of the center, which I will have to consider: a small-minded, pragmatic, and technocratic politics of cynical compromise and balance-of-power politics. Politics of the center often takes this small-minded and superficial form, unappealing to the intellect and uninspiring to the passions. This form of politics of the center aims for a balance of power among the dominant interests and pressure groups, instead of a balance of attractive ideals and institutions. Lowi's picture of American politics as a bankrupt form of interest-group liberalism gives a detailed and appropriately depressing illustration. This sort of center often suffers, and ought to suffer, from a legitimacy deficit. A more morally and intellectually appealing politics of the center promotes not a balance of interests, or of pressures, but an attractive form of the balance of ideals.

The small-minded politics of the center remains content with the shallowest incrementalism, all in the name of rejecting dangerous dreams and extremists' utopias. It is dominated by the politics of small steps, in opposition to any larger and more inspiring vision. There is no big picture or big story of politics, it confidently proclaims. This claim seems to me a misunderstanding and a caricature of a crucial form of division of labor, the division of work into stages. A familiar example is the writing of papers or articles. We do proceed incrementally, from draft to draft, rarely producing the finished product in one sitting. But the division of labor into stages is better served if we do not simply start writing one chapter at a time. We have some outline of the whole at the beginning, though it may be vague, sketchy, and subject to continuing revision. In a similar way the politics of the center does require a big picture, even if it mostly proceeds incrementally.

Can politics of the center be made more appealing both to the intellect and to the passions? An attractive form of center would be a complex hybrid, not an equilibrium in the battle of political wills, but an attractive balance between the pulls of conflicting ideals and institutional requirements. It would develop some big story toward which its incremental steps contribute. Along the way it would fight the more common view, about the politics of the center. According to this view centrist politics is to be sure boring, bland, superficial, and uninspiring, but at least it is not dangerous. It does not have blood on its hands. You don't really aspire toward the center, but you settle for it. We defend it in the way Churchill defended democracy: It is the worst style of politics, except for all the others.

To combat this inclination toward small-mindedness, the politics of the center requires special attention to the distinction between the politics of interest and the politics of principle. The

principled politics of the center values moral and institutional complexity, and it draws on multiple traditions of political thought. It appreciates and promotes both civic republicanism and constitutionalist liberalism. It promotes self-limitation and moderation. It opposes an extremism of ends, in which we aim for the immediate transformation of reality in light of one supreme ideal, not balanced by any other ideals. Such an extremism favors a kind of one-sidedness in which the requirement of consistency trumps the attractiveness of balanced complexity. The politics of the center also opposes an extremism of means, which adopts violence and destruction whenever they seem to be a cost-effective instrument. For the politics of the center, by contrast, both violence and threat of violence (with the resulting coercion) are perpetual *opponents*.

The goal of a principled politics of the center is a complex and balanced composition, inspired by the slogan "unity in diversity," not unity alone, and not diversity alone. This requires opposition to all forms of pure unity, the obviously objectionable ones ("one nation, one party, one leader"), but also the less obviously objectionable, such

as the institutional purism of laissez faire market radicalism (the more market, the better), or of democratic radicalism (the more democracy, the better). It favors a certain kind of unified pluralism, including moral pluralism, and hence maintains substantial skepticism toward moral and political theories such as utilitarianism or Rawlsian contractarianism. Against uniformity, fusion, synthesis, and blending, it favors hybrids and balance (the center, the mean, and the middle). Faced with a choice of fish soup or a full blown aquarium, it always picks the aquarium.

This kind of a center is a point of balance between competing pulls of different ideals and competing requirements of different institutions. It is a center that is also frontier territory, where conflicting influences overlap. The center as frontier: We adopt an attractively contradictory set of metaphors. The politics of the complex center is inclined to a rhetoric of "neither this nor that." It is neither the party of liberty, nor the party of equality, and it is not the party of tradition either. It is not the party of the market, nor the party of democracy. It is neither this nor that. It favors hybrids or third ways.

The hybrids of the complex center are mixtures of institutions, ideas, and ideals. We find many advocates of such hybrids in the long history of the republican and constitutionalist traditions. Among the most ancient was the ideal of a balanced constitution, a mixed government of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, balancing the interests of the many, the few and the one. Not every balance, and not every hybrid, then, turns out to be attractive in the long term. But some are: systems of

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checks and balances among the three branches of government, or federalism and other forms of mixing of levels of government (local, provincial, state, regional, and global), and perhaps most significantly the hybrid system of democratic states and the global market.

In contemporary politics, the communitarians of the Communitarian Network are most likely to support the kind of hybrid positions that reflect a commitment to a complex center. This is because they are really communitarian liberals and because their communitarianism reflects, at least at its best, the conflicting attractions of the conservative and socialist inclinations. The common good must balance individual liberty, and the common good is in part inherited, and must be cherished and preserved. In part it must be created in new forms.

If we search for and aim to create a center of moral, institutional, and ideological complexity, we will not be happy being identified as communitarians, however. The name suggests, contrary to fact, that we are just another group of monists, replacing liberty or utility with community, and it suppresses the real complexity that is our goal. We would be better off calling ourselves liberal socialist conservatives. If we are inspired more directly by Canadian politics, we could call ourselves also liberal progressive conservatives.

Principled centrists draw in equal measure on liberal constitutional and civic republican themes of political thought. Being good constitutional liberals, we strive to diminish coercion, the shadow of the threat of destruction, in all of politics and in life more generally. And we establish procedures that give to all persons maximum respect compatible with equality of respect for all. As a means to this end, we give maximum power (subject to the constraints of other ideals, of course) to the smallest decision-making units. Above all, we give to each individual maximum liberty compatible with equal liberty for all. Given a choice, we give (in the spirit of subsidiarity) decision-making powers to the smaller rather than the larger body.

Being good civic republicans we promote the common good in its various forms as a counterweight to selfish individualism. But being, as we are, advocates of a complex center, the idea of a common good makes us also a bit nervous. It sounds too uniform and has been aligned for too long with simple-minded support of the state, and neither state socialism nor state conservatism was a pretty thing to behold. A better counterweight to selfish individualism is not a call to promote the common good, but to protect and improve the world.

This alternative slogan has at least two virtues. First it makes explicit the conflict between two aspects of the common good,

protection and improvement, the goals of security and development, the effort to follow and maintain the rules of our institutions, and the effort to improve them. In thus pursuing the "common good," we must be both conservative and progressive.

But in what sense, and for whom, must this be a *common* good? We protect and improve many aspects of the world, which is complex and plural, requiring different types of loyalty and creativity, shared among different cross-cutting groups. The state is sometimes a useful instrument and sometimes an impediment. Often to protect and improve the world, we must establish and maintain individual autonomy against collective pressure, in this way giving room, for example, to entrepreneurial, artistic or scientific innovation.

Drawing on the republican and the liberal traditions, we act to promote a liberal-conservative-progressive program. But we are conservative-liberal-socialists as well.

To be conservative is to be always aware of the imperfections of human nature and the imperfections of the world; hence the great value of protecting what we have and skepticism about shifts to supposedly better alternatives. We understand so little about

the possible consequences of those alternatives, that it is dangerous to experiment. We should not underestimate the human capacity for destruction and evil, either; hence the importance of providing for defense, security, protection, maintenance, and conservation.

When we do turn to reform, it must be also in a style that recognizes human limits, supporting an open society, both self-limiting and deliberative institutions, a division of labor both into tasks and into stages. Given human limits we must (usually, but not always) work cooperatively with others and follow the injunction to do our part within a larger division of labor and in the development of the traditions and institutions we have inherited. We are not on our own.

To be liberal is to struggle to diminish the role of violence and destruction in social life, to diminish the power of threats, and hence of coercion. In the extreme case this means eliminating all coercion, both private and public, for a kind of deeply peaceful stateless utopia. The more conservative versions recognize the impossibility of eliminating both the state and violence, given human imperfection, but they still aim for a society that comes as close as possible to the model of voluntary organization, or a contract, based on arrangements in which coercion plays no role.

What does it mean to be a socialist then? It may require the pursuit of a certain kind of common good, or it may counter the

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liberals' commitment to freedom with a commitment to equality. But some versions of socialism seem much more continuous with the liberal tradition, and they are more likely to appeal to a "post-materialist" generation. Where the liberal wants to diminish the power of threats, the socialist (on this view) wants also to diminish the power of promises, to create a society that works without relying on any incentives or manipulation, neither the use of threats nor the use of promises, neither fear nor greed. This is a society without dependence, which does not rely on conditional promises or on contracts. Both state and market have withered away, and production is possible without incentives, so distribution can be according to need, as in the familiar communist utopia.

A more conservative version of socialism recognizes that human imperfection makes the socialist utopia impossible to achieve, but also finds a variety of achievable approximations. The most urgent desires, the most indispensable ones, can be satisfied unconditionally (based on need rather than contract) through various social insurance schemes. This is the program of the welfare state. The less urgent desires can be abandoned. The Buddhist strategy is more radical: to abandon all desire, and thus to achieve the only stable form of desire satisfaction. But one can fight consumerism without adopting the Buddhist strategy to the full.

The role of incentives in achieving collective purposes, including production, can be diminished by the adoption of a division of labor in which tasks are intrinsically rewarding and hence require fewer incentives. When institutions are intrinsically rewarding or legitimate, people are willing to sacrifice for them without incentives. Tasks and institutions become ends in themselves, worthy of sacrifice on their own account, not simply as means to something else. The world then turns away from its preoccupation with instrumental rationality and the consequentialist thinking that is its symptom, and more of life becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to something else. That is one way to conceive of the overcoming of alienation, though perhaps talk of alienation is too quaint for contemporary ears, its rhetoric impossible to separate from the political program of the enemies of capitalism and of the competitive market.

A politics of the complex center loves decentralized institutions that have the capacity to reflect the complexity of the world. So we love markets. But we are not content with the level of

complexity the market represents. It is, so to speak, too market-centered and unbalanced. We aim for a more appropriately balanced institutional context for the market. In the domestic sphere this seems to require some combination of a welfare state, capable of managing the economy, and a broad range of institutions of a civil society. It is not yet quite clear what is required to perform the same balancing trick for truly global markets. But this is what we, supporters of a complex center, aim to discover and to bring about.

For the same reasons of decentralization and complexity, we also love the typical institutions of the modern constitutional state: separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism. But we are not content with this level of complexity either. It is too

dependent on a simple system of sovereign territorial states. We work to develop instead a more complex global constitutional order, in which the powers of the territorial state are more limited, and balanced by the powers of other institutional arrangements. It would be a constitutional order that would also help us improve and protect the world, both in the small and in the large, both in culture and in nature. The step-by-step evolution of the European Union can serve as a model here.

The main contemporary project for the advocates of the politics of the center is then, as I see it, the development of a global constitutional order that supports and limits global markets and balances the requirements of development and conservation. This is hardly a goal for political centrists in the more ordinary sense, proponents of the political program of the median voter, whoever he or she may be. Politics of the principled and complex center does not support conformity. It sees no problem concluding that a whole society may be extremist and blind to the parochialism of its concerns. The center it searches for, and the moderation it aims for, may be for now, or for a long time, or perhaps even always, rejected by the powers that be and the population at large. It is not the politics of the center of the existing political spectrum, shifting as the spectrum shifts. And it is not simply a reaction to communism, ready to collapse when communism breathes its last. Its most ambitious global task is only beginning.

Karol Soltan is a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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