

The Power of Ideas.

First, I would like to thank Herbert and Hans for the invitation to speak to you today. I am honoured to be invited. Catholic Social Thought transformed my understanding of the world, and also the possibility of how to act in the world, the very possibility of a politics that could resist the domination of the market without resorting exclusively to the administrative methods of the State. As a Jew, I also take this invitation as a great act of generosity and another opportunity to express my gratitude to the Catholic tradition of the common good and political economy for giving me the means to live a life of meaning and purpose.

One of the great things I took from reading the Encyclicals, and this begins in *Rerum Novarum*, is the idea of paradox, of something that sounds wrong but is right. One of the paradoxes developed by Leo XIII was the idea that the old is the new, that it is by beginning with the wisdom of the Bible and Aristotle that this new thing, capitalism, can be understood, humanised and domesticated. That Capitalism has a manic tendency to uproot, disrupt and subordinate, to turn creation itself, human being and nature, into a commodity and that this can only be resisted through relationships, institutions and a sense of vocation; through a politics of the Common Good.

I am often criticised by people in my Party, the Labour Party in England, for working so closely with faith groups and particularly with the Church and I always reply that at least Christians don't think that the free market created the world. And sometimes, when I am in the mood, I add that neither do they think that the State created the world. There was something inherited that was not created by us but was received, that constitutes us, which is creation. It is a real delight to be with you talking about the power of ideas and to embrace the idea of creativity, which requires us to be both faithful and transgressive.

This is the crucial terrain of the battle ahead for the opposite of what my mother taught me is true. She said, when I was demoralised and unhappy, she would say that 'where there's a will there's a way' but in politics, and in particular in the time we are in, it's the other way round, 'only where there's a way is there a will'. We can see this throughout our continent in different national and local forms. The domination of capital is unbearable, the free movement of people, the remorseless exploitation, the degradation of nature are a threat to

security, stability and of a loving family life but the alternatives of nationalism, state control and administrative direction are not a compelling alternative.

The power of ideas lies in a battle over sanity itself. Common sense, the way of the world, the fundamental assumptions about what works, what a human being is, what is reasonable, shape the possibility of shaping the world, of exerting power over others. This is where the power of ideas lies.

I have come to bring good news and bad, and being Jewish I'll start with the bad news. For us, history has taught us to begin there.

The bad news is that the Christian inheritance, and in particular, the Catholic political economy has been a marginal force in politics over the past forty years. Just as society has been besieged by the commodifying power of the market on the one side in the name of efficiency and the homogenising power of the state on the other, in the name of justice, so it has been that Catholic Social Thought has been marginalised by free market economics and state theories of justice, by Hayek and Keynes and does not constitute a sensible and compelling alternative to the status quo.

A constructive role for trade unions, a form of corporate governance in which workers are properly represented on boards, a system of regional banks and a vocational economy play very little role in either the European or the national debates. To make matters worse, the European Union is a remote administrative organisation that intensifies free movement and commodification. To paraphrase Gramsci, 'the new is dead and the old is yet to be born' and so all manner of morbid symptoms pertain; Islamism, nationalism and a disgusted rejection of the prevailing system with no constructive alternative in sight. We know the power of ideas and at the moment they lead to isolation, depression and polarisation. They are not our ideas.

Only where there's a way is there a will and at the moment there is no way and a sense of besieged drift is at work, a politics that can't change anything and a lack of common purpose. The situation is serious and made worse by the fact that my generation was brought up to believe that nothing was serious, that either the market or the state would sort all of this stuff out, that religion was declining, that racism was ending, that peace and prosperity were guaranteed. There was no sense of tragedy and of loss and it's all a bit shocking. That's the bad news.

The good news is that the fundamental ideas of human nature, of history and of reason, that are carried within Catholic Social Thought and the Labour Movement it shaped and nurtured, are the best ideas for our time with the right blend of radicalism and conservatism, the old and the new, of tradition and modernity, vocation and innovation. We are living in paradoxical times and yours is a paradoxical tradition that is to be treasured.

The renewal of these ideas will require a paradoxical blend of humility and courage, faithfulness and transgression, a certain stubborn creativity that can be guided by the fundamental ideas that are as beautiful as they are powerful, as simple as they are complex, as old as they are new.

So what are these ideas?

Let us begin with the fundamental one of human nature, of what we, as people, are actually like. We do not begin with the opposition that dominates the conflict between left and right, which is the idea that people are either competitive or co-operative, selfish or altruistic, individual or communal. It took me thirty years of studying and teaching in universities and attending too many seminars and talks on these very themes to realise that not only can this never be resolved but there is not much point in asking the question in this way.

It took Catholic Social Thought to make me realise that it is best to begin somewhere else and that is with the idea that the human being is a social being with a natural tendency to realise themselves through relationships and through work. We inherit language, parents, faith, a sense of place that is true of all of us and particular to each of us, these parents, this faith, this place. Each person is capable of sin and grace, good and evil and as social beings, a large part of what determines who we become is given by the incentives to vice or incentives to virtue that exist in the society we are born into. If there is a reward for selfish and greedy behaviour, then that will predominate. If there is a real reward for faithfulness and skill, then that too will grow in strength. That is the central idea; that we are social beings who need each other to flourish, we are dependent beings with a tendency to liberty, to live our life from within according to commitments that are our own but that those commitments are inherited.

Central to my understanding of this view of human nature are that love and work are of fundamental importance to people and that are

both are captured by the idea of 'Labour'. In English, when a woman has a child it is called being in Labour, the act of birth, the care and compassion required for family life are captured by the term labour.

The same is true for work, which is the transformation of the external world through the application of expertise, knowledge and energy.

Both meanings of Labour, family and work involve difficulty, tiredness, pain and suffering. I am sometimes rendered almost paralysed by the thought of my family and my work. My arms ache, my heart breaks and I'd really prefer to watch the television and eat a pre-cooked meal on my own. We are constituted by inheritance, pain and relationships, that is who we are.

That is why I called the political form of these ideas 'Blue Labour', as in Miles Davis, Kind of Blue, or the blues. Love and work are bloody and demanding and they are necessary. In both of them, they can be full of vice or virtue. Family life can be abusive, faithless and damaging, or it can be loving, faithful and supportive, it is invariably a mix of those things, or 'on the spectrum' as contemporary psychologists like to say.

It is vital that this is at the centre of what we say. There are no easy answers. This will not be resolved by a consumer answer, or a welfare answer. The answer involves participation, the active reconciliation of estranged interests, the building of relationships where none exists, a relentless negotiation. A defence of humanity through a vocational democracy.

One of the great things about Catholic Social Thought is that it is not utopian, and does not lead to terror and violence. It begins with the idea that we are fallen, 'by your sweat shall we live' and so it already factors in sin, interests, toil and trouble into the anthropology.

Another way of putting this is that without the modest virtues, those of honesty, diligence, courage, patience and compassion there will be no big changes, only more of the same, a different kind of managerial tyranny. So we can assert that we have a thick and complex view of human beings, that we are social beings, capable of love and grace, just as much as selfishness and isolation but the way it goes in the battle between vice and virtue is down to the incentives that exist in society and that, pretty much, is what politics is all about. The conditions under which people can flourish together.

That is the second great truth that follows from this, which is that you cannot do it on your own, that the realisation of your own

creativity can only be achieved with others, with the support of others. We are social beings.

And this brings us to the *Rerum Novarum*, this new thing, this capitalism. The key battle of ideas here is to argue, with reason, that human beings and nature are not commodities. That left bereft of protective institutions, of a sense of place, of earning and belonging, then the local, democratic and vocational solidarities, which are complex and embedded will be replaced by more abstract and general forms of solidarity in the form of nations, peoples and empires. This is where the wisdom of subsidiarity is to be found, locating power and authority close to people and amenable to democratic control rather than distant and remote. People will never, and have never simply viewed themselves as an economic unit, there is more to life than that. When the politics and economics of our society become managerial, procedural and abstract people feel abandoned.

In my experience in community organising with London Citizens we built a common good, a common campaign between catholic and protestant congregations, Sunni and Shia Mosques, Unions and local groups around the pursuit of a living wage, the idea that people should be paid enough to live. It was remarkable. First that it was led by faith communities and the poor, second that on the issue of the dignity of labour, or work and family life, each of those communities could find, within their traditions, a genuine sense of ownership of the cause. The idea that there is more to the human being than utility is a central part of the power that our ideas have.

It is vital, however, not to conceive ideas as abstract and generalised principles that need to be imposed. The idea of the common good and the practices built around them are based on the primacy of relationships, of love, with all its complications, of developing reciprocity rather than domination as the core value of society. One could almost say that relationships, reciprocity and responsibility are the core trinity of the new politics.

In applying these ideas it is necessary to notice what we have lost by the EU becoming about the unhindered movement of people, money and things and not about how it began, with co-determination in corporate governance, a stress on vocation in the labour market and with regional banks.

The paradox of contemporary European politics is that the country with the greatest degree of labour representation in its corporate

structure, the most intense system of vocational interference in labour market participation, the greatest degree of constraint on finance capital in its banking system generates the greatest value and is the most competitive within the international economy. Another way of saying the same thing is that while Catholic Social thought has been vindicated in its practices of a balance of interest, the importance of place, the preservation of status, solidarity and subsidiarity in the organisation of a political economy it has yet to be articulated or organised as a political force.

Neither economic liberalism nor Keynesianism can conceptualise vocation, virtue or labour value as economic categories, neither can give a primary economic value to intermediate institutions, whether they be the corporate governance of a firm, vocational colleges, regional banks or supporter owned football clubs, they can only conceptualise the state or the market, and all forms of particular association are viewed as at best 'cultural' or at worst 'obstructive'. They can give no conceptual status to place, to the specificity of place and the necessity of institutions in generating virtue and value within it.

It is also necessary to take the argument out and present a constructive alternative to the relentless pressure of commodification and centralisation, with its resultant sense of powerlessness, that is generated by the joint sovereignty of financial markets and the administrative procedural state. It is necessary to assert and organise around the necessity of tradition, of an inheritance, as a condition of meaningful action, the preservation and renewal of virtue, of good practice within decentralised institutions that function within the economy and the democratic participation of workers in the governance of the economy which underpins the well-being of their families, their colleagues and their neighbours.

The overriding paradox is that a democratic and vocational 'resistance' to modernity, defined as the joint sovereignty of financial markets and public administration, is the most efficient, competitive and sustainable modern position. The tragedy is that such a reasonable political position is unavailable within the mainstream of European politics, indeed there are those who argue that it would be illegal and an infringement of EU rules concerning competition.

The political task is to organise estranged interests, in which capital and labour play an important role, around a politics of the common good which upholds virtue, vocation and value as economic categories; subsidiarity, status and solidarity as political categories

and places relationships, reciprocity and responsibility at the heart of both the public and private sectors. This is what Blue Labour is about as a political force within British Politics. It asserts the mutual necessity of tradition and innovation, of liberty and solidarity, of co-operation and competition, the necessity of tension for the common good, of honouring the dignity of labour as a condition of competitive success.

In terms of our idea of what a person is, of what it means to be human, then I would say we inherit the most realistic and compelling one. When it comes to our theory of history, that those societies based on a diverse range of institutions that uphold the dignity of labour within the economy, then I would also say that we are strong.

The Post-war German social market reconciled catholic and protestant, bosses and workers around an idea of the Common Good and it worked. It worked in terms of productivity and innovation and it worked in terms of social peace and prosperity.

One might say that the tragedy of contemporary European politics is that Germany remains misunderstood as exclusively fiscally conservative when this is only one aspect of its economic system. It is also characterized by a vocational economy in which labour market entry is regulated by self-organised institutions which preserve and renew the traditions of a particular craft, by regional banks that are constrained to lend within their region, by the significant representation of the workforce in the corporate governance of firms and by the co-determination of pensions by capital and labour. In other words a competitive economy that is characterised by the plural governance of non-pecuniary institutions that uphold and embody a virtue that is irreducible to state or market definitions or domination. None of these have been generalised as necessary features of a European economic system which has become increasingly characterised by the free movement of labour and capital within a framework of remote directives.

The economic debate remains polarized in terms of stimulus or austerity, Hayek or Keynes, as if we have learnt nothing in the intervening eighty years.

Germany has successfully exported its goods but not the virtues of its economic system.

For that reason the European Union appears as a technocratic and administrative system, detached from the civic institutions that give our continent life; our free cities, universities, churches and

vocational institutions that embody traditions of self-government over many centuries and promotes, in contrast and as its highest priority, the free movement of capital and labour within its sphere. The EU thus appears as a force hostile to the particular institutions and coalitions that constitute a politics of the common good and an enforcer of unmediated procedural domination in which any impediment to the free movement of the factors of production is dismissed as populist and reactionary. It is not a mystery, in such an environment that democratic politics itself is seen as powerless and subordinate and that all manner of morbid systems should emerge, in Italy as well as England.

Our ideas will have no power unless we can tell a plausible story of why they work, how they work and why they are better than our rivals. There is a lot at stake in getting it right.

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