

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL POLITICS: MOVING BEYOND RIGHT AND LEFT

by Corinne McLaughlin "

"All great truths are paradoxes" was a profound teaching of ancient philosophers. This perspective might be useful today in addressing social issues and creating a new "transformational politics". As *Washington Post* writer E.J. Dionne comments in his popular new book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*:

"We are suffering from a false polarization in our politics, in which liberals and conservatives keep arguing about the same things when the country wants to move on... Liberalism and conservatism are framing political issues as a series of false choices... On issue after issue, there is consensus on where the country should move or at least on what we should be arguing about, liberalism and conservatism make it impossible for that consensus to express itself... We are encouraging an 'either/or' politics based on ideological preconceptions rather than 'a both/and' politics based on ideas that broadly unite us." ¹

However, a centralist: or compromise perspective is not exactly the answer. Compromise is not the most effective way to deal with polarities, as sometimes the deeper wisdom in each side is lost. Compromise usually includes half of each position, and can be seen as the midway point between two polarities:

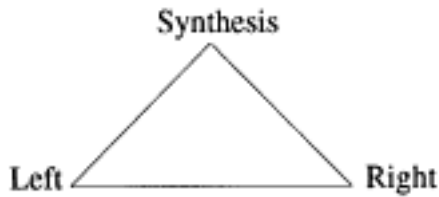


To create a new politics that can transform both the individual and society--a "transformational politics"--a fundamental

shift is needed. We must address our polarized, adversarial way of thinking and create a profound change at a deep level. Our entire political structure is based on a dualistic approach that may contribute in a major way to our lack of effective solutions. We must be willing to discover the best in both Left and Right and raise them up to a higher level of unity--a true synthesis. Einstein reminded us that we can't solve a problem on its own level. "Two sides disagree," he said, "because they're both wrong." We need to broaden our consciousness so that we can appreciate the need for both sides of an issue and hold the highest of both in our consciousness at the same time. Then we see a political issue seemingly framed as a paradox on a lower level is a great political truth on a higher level.

Often we can best perceive one polarity by experiencing the contrast of its opposite -- e.g., the color red is more vibrant when seen at the same time as blue. The alternation between opposites is what creates consciousness or awareness. On another level it's what creates electricity. The great poets knew the secret of polarity and often put two words with opposite meanings side by side, as Shakespeare did in his sonnets. Just as each atom needs both positive and negative particles to be complete and build a physical object, so we need both sides of a political issue to construct a whole picture of reality. But to truly transcend the polarities -- to achieve what psychologist Carl Jung called the "creative function"-- we have to go to a higher level. What's needed is a political application of the model of Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli: two polarities are drawn at each end of a straight line, and a triangle is drawn from each end of the line up

to a point above, the point of synthesis:



To move into this position of synthesis, we must be willing to see the good in an opponent's position, and realize each one only has a part of the whole view. It also helps to distance our selves from the problem and develop more detachment and impersonality--to not see our position as our identity that can be threatened by any change. By focusing on the positive of each side and raising each of them up to a higher, intuitive level, they can unite to create a synthesizing solution. The mind and the emotions always function in polarity--wherever there is one idea, there is an opposing one; wherever there is an emotion, there's also an opposite one. Only the intuition can transcend polarity and know true synthesis.

For example, the polarities of democracy (equality and inclusiveness) and hierarchy (rank ordering based on demonstrated ability and quality) can be synthesized into "empowering leadership". The highest aspect of democracy acknowledges future potential and encourages its development through equal opportunity and political rights. The highest aspect of hierarchy acknowledges current abilities and honors leadership and talents. The synthesis, therefore, is a type of transformational leadership that creates "power with" others, rather than "power over". It is a leadership that models the full expression of abilities, yet creates the conditions that empower each person to develop his/her own full potential.

The Conservative Right promotes values of self-help, hard work, and initiative. The Liberal Left promotes values of generosity,

tolerance and inclusiveness. The rugged individual is the Conservative model of the American citizen--ambitious, assertive, and entrepreneurial, believing strongly in the notion of personal freedom, even of making money at the expense of the community or environment. The collective individual is the Liberal model--identified primarily with a work, ethnic or sexual group, believing in social justice even at the expense of over-sized government. The synthesis can be the "caring individual" who cares deeply about self and others, about self-development and social change, about individual freedom and social justice, according to Mark Satin.²

Until we recognize and appreciate the contribution of both Liberal and Conservative principles we'll remain in polarized positions and will be unable to draw out the best of each to create a higher synthesis. The Left archetypally pushes for *changing* what is outworn and no longer needed in a society, and the Right pushes for preserving what is best in a society. Liberals guarantee that evolution will proceed and inertia won't set in. Conservatives guarantee that things won't change too fast and create chaos, leaving people confused.

Sometimes a visualization exercise can be helpful in developing unifying or synthesis thinking about an issue. After guided imagery for relaxation, a person is asked to spontaneously visualize a symbol for the best in each position lying on opposite ends of a straight line. The two symbols are then visualized interrelating, dancing and blending together, being raised up to a higher point at the top of a triangle, representing a higher level of consciousness, where an image or symbol of synthesis appears. This symbol is then analyzed for its deeper meaning and applied to the issue under discussion. The first step in synthesizing Left and Right polarities is learning to really listen to those with opposing positions, to find the grain of truth in each. For example, Project Victory organized a "mediated dialogue" at the Los Alamos Labs in

Berkeley for over 350 nuclear weapons designers and peace activists--the entire spectrum from Right to Left--using an approach of reciprocity and mutual respect. The key was asking people to enter a dialogue with a willingness to be changed by it. "Because people really listened to each other, and weren't preoccupied with making their own case or trying to prove the other person wrong, they each discovered new insights," noted organizer Craig Schindler. "New options emerged that otherwise would not have because there was a broader understanding." A key step was to explore the interests or goals behind the different policy disagreements and brainstorm new approaches to meeting shared interests.

Likewise, Pathways to Peace, an NGO at the United Nations based in Northern California, brings together peace groups from both Left and Right each year to work together on a project, for the International Day of Peace. By planning an event relating to peace, participants have to try to embody peace and create a peaceful process among themselves. Being with such a diverse group united around a higher purpose has helped them learn to deeply listen to each other and look for the kernel of truth and the positive intent in each position.

Another technique for helping people transcend the Left/Right polarization used by Search for Common Ground in Washington DC is to show both groups their own and their opponent's propaganda films. Each side finally notices that they both employ the same exaggerated portrayals to evoke fear of their opponent and to smugly suggest that their own side has all the answers. When supporters of both disarmament and strong defense sat together to view each other's films, it was harder for each side to hold onto certainty of its own position and act smug about having all the answers.

The philosophical dividing line between the Right and the Left is sometimes defined as a disagreement over whether social problems

result more from economic factors or from a breakdown in individual values. Conservatives argue that if our problem is with values, what is the good of more spending. Liberals argue that having good values doesn't help if there is not equal economic opportunity for all. The current policy deadlock in Congress tries to separate economics and values from each other, with neither Conservative nor Liberal admitting any wisdom in the other's perspective. Cornel West, director of the Afro-American Studies Department of Princeton, sees the importance of both: "We must acknowledge that structures and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values go hand in hand. The economy and politics are not only influenced by values but also promote particular ideals of the good life and good society." For example, although the poor may suffer from some of their values--like smoking--more than the rich, they also suffer from inadequate diets and a lack of access to health care, both of which can be partly cured by government spending.³

Drexel Sprecher, founder of Vision and Integrity in Politics, has worked on a synthesis of the best in both Liberal and Conservative positions. He notes that Liberalism is based on the assumption that human nature is originally virtuous, but became distorted by the institutions of society. When Liberals change institutions, they often have unpleasant surprises when human nature doesn't respond positively. Conservatism assumes human nature is inherently selfish or sinful and therefore civilized institutions are required to deter their aberrations. Conservative views of the market and the justice system select their use of rewards and punishments to keep human nature in check. The synthesis of these polarities would be a view of human nature that is neither inherently good nor bad but rather developmental.. Humans develop into greater and greater degrees of virtue, such as unselfishness and self-discipline. The present degree of human development is what the

Conservatives describe, and the ultimate potential of humanity is what Liberals actually describe.

Sprecher also notes that Liberals see human nature as "spontaneous and creative" and conservatives as "impulsive", and so needing order. The Liberal approach results in spontaneity, but also reckless impulse. The Conservative approach results in order, but also excessive, restrictive conformity. The synthesis could be creative order -- order that supports rather than suppresses creativity.

Liberals also assume the world is rational, says Sprecher, and believe rational laws can make a difference. Conservatives assume the world is pre-rational, and so set up rewards and punishment to control the chaos. The synthesis would be setting up a system that rewards the dimensions of human nature that you want to reinforce positive qualities or virtues (rather than negative qualities to punish). A practical example would be to pay civil servants based on output that actually benefits the world, rather than purely the numbers of hours of activity performed, as today. Likewise, schools could be given funds based on the achievement of their graduates (fluency in basic subjects, involvement in community service, etc.), rather than current allocations that are not reward based.

The notion of empowerment links government assistance to personal responsibility, and is being promoted by those on both the Left and Right who see the need for a "New Paradigm" (a new set of assumptions about reality.) An example would be allowing the poor to eventually buy the government housing now provided for them, so they can own it themselves, feel responsible and keep it safe and dean. A similar idea is that of a government funded educational voucher system where parents can choose their children's schools and thus make them more competitive. This is already being tried in several states -- Minnesota, Idaho, Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Ohio. A new idea of "workfare" instead of welfare ties welfare

payments to jobs or job training by a variety of tax breaks for the working poor. This helps the poor acquire dignity and the habit of work, giving them a better chance to improve themselves. Republican as well as Democratic supporters of these ideas have formed a New Paradigm Society that meets monthly to discuss new policy proposals from this perspective.⁴

Right vs. Left, Capitalism vs. Socialism (individual ownership vs. central ownership), is synthesized in the model of worker-owned cooperatives, such as the highly successful Mondragon cooperatives with over 20,000 workers in Spain. Investing based solely on highest return vs. outright donations to good causes is synthesized into "social investment"-investing in companies that express good values. "Doing well by doing good" is the slogan of the Social Investment movement. The Liberal urge to help the poor and the Conservative emphasis on entrepreneurship has been synthesized into ideas like FINCA and the Grameen Bank which give the poor of the Third World very small loans to start businesses, and depend on peer relations to pay them back. In the polarization between environmentalists and industrialists, a synthesis of the environmentalist's knowledge of energy-efficient ways to create products and the industrialist's knowledge of production techniques that are cost-effective is reflected in the growing new "market approach to environmental problems". A recent gathering organized by Project Victory with corporate representatives and environmentalists discussed ways co reduce toxic waste in the Silicon Valley and successfully modeled non-adversarial communication and identified specific strategies for collaborative work.

On the abortion issue -- the Conservative position of "right to life" vs. the Liberal "freedom of choice" -- a new synthesis might honor the ethical complexities of both sides and look to see what each side has in common-- not wanting abortions to occur, discouraging unwanted pregnancies, and promoting some

form of birth control. Each side holds sacred a different principle: the pro-choicers honor the principle of freedom above all; the right to lifers honor life itself as most sacred. A unifying approach would synthesize the best of both sides -- the sacredness of both mother and fetus -- rather than continue the emotionally devastating focus on abortion. Instead of focusing all the argument between each side on exactly when life begins, and whether abortion is murder, the focus could be shifted to conscious conception and preventing unwanted pregnancies through a national education campaign funded by the government. Both sides could find a whole range of options on which they could work together, such as promoting adoption and reducing infant mortality rates.

To create a truly "Transformational" politics, new ways of thinking are needed, as there are no complete roadmaps as yet. An expansion in consciousness is required, and a developing ability to transcend apparent paradoxes and enfold them into a higher unity. An identification with the good of the whole, rather than just with one's own groups needs, will take us far in creating a new approach. "Whole systems thinking" reveals how all the parts of a system are actually interrelated and interdependent -- not separate. A spirit of goodwill towards those with opposing views, a win/win rather than win/lose approach, a release of self-righteousness, and a compassionate, healing spirit are the keys to this new "Transformational" politics.

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1. E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1991, p. 11.
2. *New Options for America*, The Press at California State University. Fresno, 1991, pp.183-4
3. *Rehatching the Chicken-Egg Debate*, The Washington Post. April 18, 1991.
4. "An Infusion of Vision", *Newsweek*, December 3, 1990, pp. 24-5 "The Idea Man with a "Vision Thing", The Washington Post, December 5, 1990, p. C-1.