Over the next few months and year, one suspects, as Communism fades from view, the parameters of political debate will be reshaped closer to the eastern European model - where the major dividing line at present is between those who want a more rapid, and those who (for various reasons) want a slower transition to the market. Even this, though, will not clearly replicate the Western ideal of a 'spectrum', with calibrated 'Left' and 'Right' arms, because the forces on either side will remain disparate and fluid. On the 'slower transition' side — at present the losers — will be found both social democrats and nationalist reactionaries, old-style Communists acting in defence of the old order and new-style trade unionists acting in defence of living standards.

One response from the western Left to these seismic political shifts is to argue that it all doesn't really matter to 'us', anyway; 'we' gave up on Soviet-style socialism years ago: and it's all just a matter of the collapse of 'stalinism', rather than socialism, anyway. However, there is something a little hollow about this sort of disclaimer. After all, regardless of subsequent disclaimers, the tradition of 1917 has had a seminal influence on the character of the Western political lexicon over the last three quarters of a century. Indeed, the very conception of 'the political spectrum' in Western politics is itself the product of the two epoch-making events of modern European history: the French Revolution (which coined the vocabulary of 'Left' and 'Right') and the Soviet Revolution (which created the divisions within the left-of-centre spectrum which we take for granted today, and more particularly the conception of calibrations of 'leftness' defined by proximity to, or distance from, the revolutionary absolute).

Perhaps it is this schizophrenia which explains the mood of defensiveness and 'return to fundamentals' which seems currently to be abroad in leftist politics. After a decade of pragmatism and compromise, it's asserted, now is the time for the Left to return to its traditional role as conscience of the labour movement and guardian of maximalist rectitude. On the face of it, one might have thought the times demanded something radically different: a comprehensive rethinking of the 'boundaries' of politics and of the instincts and assumptions underlying them, for instance. But what if it is precisely the fear of the loss of 'identity' which this process might create which causes otherwise well-intentioned people to fall back on the eternal truths?

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