

THIRD WAY MOVEMENTS

The term *third way movement* is an important feature of global public life that refers to a political, economic, cultural, or in some cases religious movement that is considered not to be associated, aligned or compatible with the factions that dominate the socio-political context of its time. In the modern era, such factions usually consist of “conservatives” on the one hand and “socialists” on the other (with the exception of the United States where the contrast to “conservative” is “liberal”). As a result, most third way movements claim to be neither conservative nor socialist (or liberal), and thus neither “rightist” nor “leftist,” but to represent a “third” position. In some cases, the term refers also to a movement or to a social group that is not affiliated with any other existing group of its time and/or its geographical and thematic space.

The description of what the third position exactly is, and which specific features it includes, varies strongly from movement to movement. It depends on the political, social and ideological context of a given society at a given time. In fact, the concept of “third way” ranges from notions of being an alternative to both the traditional rightist and leftist socio-political and ideological patterns, and thus of being opposed to both the competing conceptual mindsets and strategic frameworks of “left” and “right,” to the very contrary: to the notion of being an intermediate or even integrating approach between them (i.e., a unifying position between left and right). This latter notion sometimes includes new, overarching mindsets of noncompetitive and conciliatory characteristics, which are often proposed as the only appropriate approaches for the conditions of the globalized society of the 21st century, and beyond.

In sum, the meaning of “third way” ranges from opposing existing socio-political structures and their ideological traits to integrating their strengths and positive systemic features while eliminating their weaknesses. The method of this latter approach is often described as “to include and to transcend.” It follows that the basic dialectic in third way movements is to find a balance between the tendency towards opposition and alternative-building on the one hand, and toward integration and unifying mainstream modernization on the other hand.

Contemporary Movements

A good example of this dialectic is the interpretation of third way as proposed between the start of the 1990s and 2010 by leading politicians of the Anglophone New Labour parties, such as Tony Blair in the United Kingdom and Kevin Rudd in Australia, partially also by Democrat Bill Clinton in the United States, Jean Chrétien in Canada and post-socialist Massimo D'Alema in Italy, as well as by progressive left-of-center academic scholars like Anthony Giddens or Norberto Bobbio. Begun as an alternative to the then-prevailing conservative politics and branded as “new centrism,” it tried to combine neoliberal (i.e., rightist) economic policies with social justice and the modernization of the welfare state (i.e., core features of leftist democratic politics). In an attempt to meld the best features of the right (i.e., economy-centered entrepreneurial individualism, freedom, self-reliance) and the left (i.e., state-centered solidarity, participation, cooperation), this interpretation of third way claimed to be the newest political position needed to meet the post-polarization challenges of globalization by integrating capitalism and socialism. It was an attempt to redefine social democracy European style, and to provide the Labour parties and their international

ideological movements a more centered vision in order to attract more voters from the moderate sides.

Today, this third way movement—and others inspired by it—are seen as movements “from above” (i.e., elaborated and put into practice by parties and governments, their elites and advisors), not “from below” (i.e., through discussion and pluralistic decision-making in the civil society). After the end of the New Labour epoch in the United Kingdom in 2007 and in Australia in 2010, many independent observers speak of the end of third ways from above and their replacement by third way movements from below (i.e., by the civil society). Nevertheless, the New Labour interpretation of third way politics dominated the debate about how to best manage globalization in the Anglophone world, and beyond, since the 1990s.

Role of Globalization

Such an interpretation has not always been prevailing though. Third way movements were (and remain) inseparably connected to the rise of globalization from its very beginnings, including its pre-phases during the ascendancy of the British Empire to the first truly “global” power in history in the second half of the 19th century. They gave birth to both alternative and integrative movements throughout the past 150 years—that is, during the imperialistic second half of the 19th century, the totalitarian decades of the first half of the 20th century, the Cold War 1945–1989, the collapse of communism in 1991 and the rise of an early international civil society since the late 1960s. During its development over one and a half centuries, many of its features and implications have changed while the core idea remained intact. In fact, the term historically comprises movements as different as Synergism in the second half of the 19th century, a cluster of Freemasonry inspired political attempts to form integrative and

intercultural governments in Europe; the Threefolding movement of social reformer Rudolf Steiner after World War I in Central Europe which tried to propose a democratic alternative to both the rising Nazi and Communist parties; the (very diverse) anarchist movements between World War I and II, which promoted individualism, feminism and emancipation in an epoch of patriarchalism and uniformity; and the early “green” movements since the 1960s, which understood “third way” as a focus on the environment and on sustainable lifestyles instead of the economy-centered focus of the mainstream. During the Cold War (1945–1989), the term *third way* was also often used to identify so-called non-aligned countries (i.e., countries not affiliated neither with the East nor the West). The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was founded in 1961 in Belgrad and currently comprises 118 countries, primarily developing and emerging countries.

With increased attention being paid to processes of globalization since the end of the Cold War, the term was further enlarged and claimed for by a variety of different currents and political movements worldwide. Since then, it has been particularly contended between the rising global civil society and diverse political “middle ground” movements favorable to both globalization and social justice. The often dissent or even dissident character of these movements—as for example practiced by the civil society movements in Eastern Germany after the transition to national unity in 1990 which proposed a third way from below to meld socialism and capitalism and to institutionalize civil society as “basis democratic” part of the state—was in most cases made possible by a perspective that refuses to confine itself to local, regional or national perspectives, trying instead to cultivate a broader view, often related to global ideas and their connection to local solutions. In this sense, third way in recent years has increasingly been interpreted as an attempt to overcome the dichotomy of “global” and “local” in order to establish a connecting mindset branded as “glocal.”

Nevertheless, there remains a continuing dialectics between the “anti-globalization” dimension of contemporary third way movements (as part of their alternative tendencies) and their pro-globalization of social democracy dimension (as part of their integrative tendencies). The latter comprise a variety of organizations and groups, among them Ole von Uexküll’s Right Livelihood Awards (sometimes called the Alternative Nobel Prizes) and the Club of Rome, an alliance of alternative and green scientists founded in 1968 that regularly produces reports on the state of the world and of humanity, in most cases searching for progressive non-mainstream solutions for the most pressing global and international problems. In recent times, artists like Joseph Beuys and civil society activists like Nicanor Perlas and Ulrich Rösch have revived the threefolding movement, evolving it towards the leading conceptual and theoretical framework within the international civil society. Threefolding (sometimes now also called fourfolding) today holds that the evolution of democracy consists in overcoming the focus of politics on political parties as main agents of public discourse, by further emancipating the mutual independency of the four typological societal discourses and order patterns in democratic societies: (1) economy, (2) politics, (3) culture, and (4) religion. While strictly independent from each other, all four discourses and their different viewpoints should be systematically included in every decision-making process giving them equal importance. In many ways, Perlas’s interpretation of third way as threefolding (fourfolding) is the diametric opposition to Giddens’s interpretation of third way as New Labour: Whereas Perlas proposes, on the bases of his teacher Rudolf Steiner, a civil society way from below that works according to the principle of ad hoc alliances of diverse groups and includes the logics, patterns and needs of the so-called third world to an equal extent to those of the West, sustained by new liberation technologies, global communication systems, new forms of community orientation and public shareholdership in technology and finance, Giddens

remains the main theoretical agent of a third way from above, through governments and elites, structured according to the unifying social positions of globalized Western post-socialism. The competition between these two different concepts of third way continues to produce a variety of valuable contributions on the future of globalization both in theory and practice.

Criticisms

There have been some founded criticisms regarding

- the inner contradictions of the term *third way movements* between protest, opposition and alternative building on the one hand and the aspiration to create a new, unifying paradigm on the other;
- the exploitation of the term by left-of-center political mainstream parties;
- the limitation to Europe, the United States and Latin America, excluding arising new global powers like China and South East Asia and their increasingly global aspirations, where similar attempts do not exist;
- the sometimes confusing variety of meanings attributed to the notion, which endangers it to become meaningless because of covering too many different, often even opposed concepts;
- the focus of most third way concepts on the relationship between economics and politics, and the wide neglect of culture and religion; and
- the often unbridgeable difference between the theory of the term and its political and social practicability.

On a qualitative level, some scholars have questioned whether third way movements are indeed alternative or integrative phenomena, as claimed throughout the past centuries.

They have pointed to the long-standing existence of such movements since the mid of the 19th century, which often formed their own exclusive mainstream, while in most cases not being able to overcome the polarization between left and right. Other commentators have questioned whether the ascendance of third way movements since the 1990s implies a decline of the nation state and a withdrawal of traditional party politics favoring the rise of pre-political and contextual (cultural) politics from below, to which most current third way movements declare to belong. These skeptics have argued that a mutually interdependent relationship exists between the modern democratic state and civil society, and that thus no clear distinction between mainstream ways and third ways can be made. Such a perspective would appear to transcend the dichotomizing view of contemporary third way movements as being based on civil society conceived as opposed to political parties, governments and their elites.

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See also Globalization; Social Movements; Civil Society; New Left; Political Reorganization; Emancipation; Solidarity; Modernization; Transnationalism; Democratization

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