



Integral Politics

A SPIRITUAL THIRD WAY¹

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In this time of ideological upheaval, when the old ideologies of left and right, of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, no longer capture the political imagination as they once did, new political visions are required. Some have tried to formulate a “third way” between social democracy and conservatism. Others have proposed a more spiritually-oriented approach to transcend left and right. In what follows, I will present another vision, Integral Politics, based on Integral Theory.

What Is a Third Way?

Historically, third ways have usually cropped up when people found the existing two dominant political ideologies lacking. In the nineteenth century, socialism originally emerged as a third way between conservatism and classical liberalism (also known as free market capitalism). Later, in the twentieth century, social democracy developed as a third way between socialism and conservatism/free market capitalism. In this time of “exhausted utopian energies,”² where classical, nation-state based social democracy no longer appears to function in the context of a globalized society, it is no surprise that a number of politicians and theorists, such as the Democratic Party’s Democratic Leadership Council and Tony Blair’s New Labor party, have proposed a third way between social democratic and neo-liberal programs themselves. But rather than truly transcending the existing belief systems, too often the new program becomes the ideological center between the two dominant ideologies. Such a centrist third way is actually a compromise rather than a new political theory that overcomes the old ideologies by providing lasting answers to unresolved social problems.



A true third way for the twenty-first century should transcend beyond the preceding ideologies. Integral Politics offers this possibility. By mapping the relationship of all major existing ideologies to each other and by clearly presenting a new approach to politics, one that integrates the best of each *and* transcends their shortcomings, Integral Politics presents a true alternative to politics as usual.

The Integral Third Way

Ken Wilber, particularly in his recent writings, has presented a comprehensive map of the Kosmos and its evolution that lends itself to the mapping of political belief systems.³ To summarize briefly, Wilber argues that our ways of making sense of the world are merely the perspectives we take on the world. These perspectives can be organized in a way that helps us develop a more comprehensive or encompassing view. According to Wilber, there are at least two dimensions according to which we can organize perspectives. First, we can either look at the world from an interior perspective or from an exterior perspective. Second, we can either look at the world from an individual point of view or from a collective point of view. Put together, we end up with a two-by-two matrix of four main perspectives: subjective, objective, intersubjective, and interobjective. These four perspectives can also be summarized as “I,” “It,” “We,” and “Its” respectively.

In a third dimension, the phenomena seen from each of these perspectives evolves, in a stage-like fashion, where each later stage includes and transcends the previous stage, so that (from the “It” perspective), atoms evolve into molecules, which evolve into cells, which evolve into multi-cellular beings, and so on. The following figure diagrams the evolution of each of the four main perspectives.

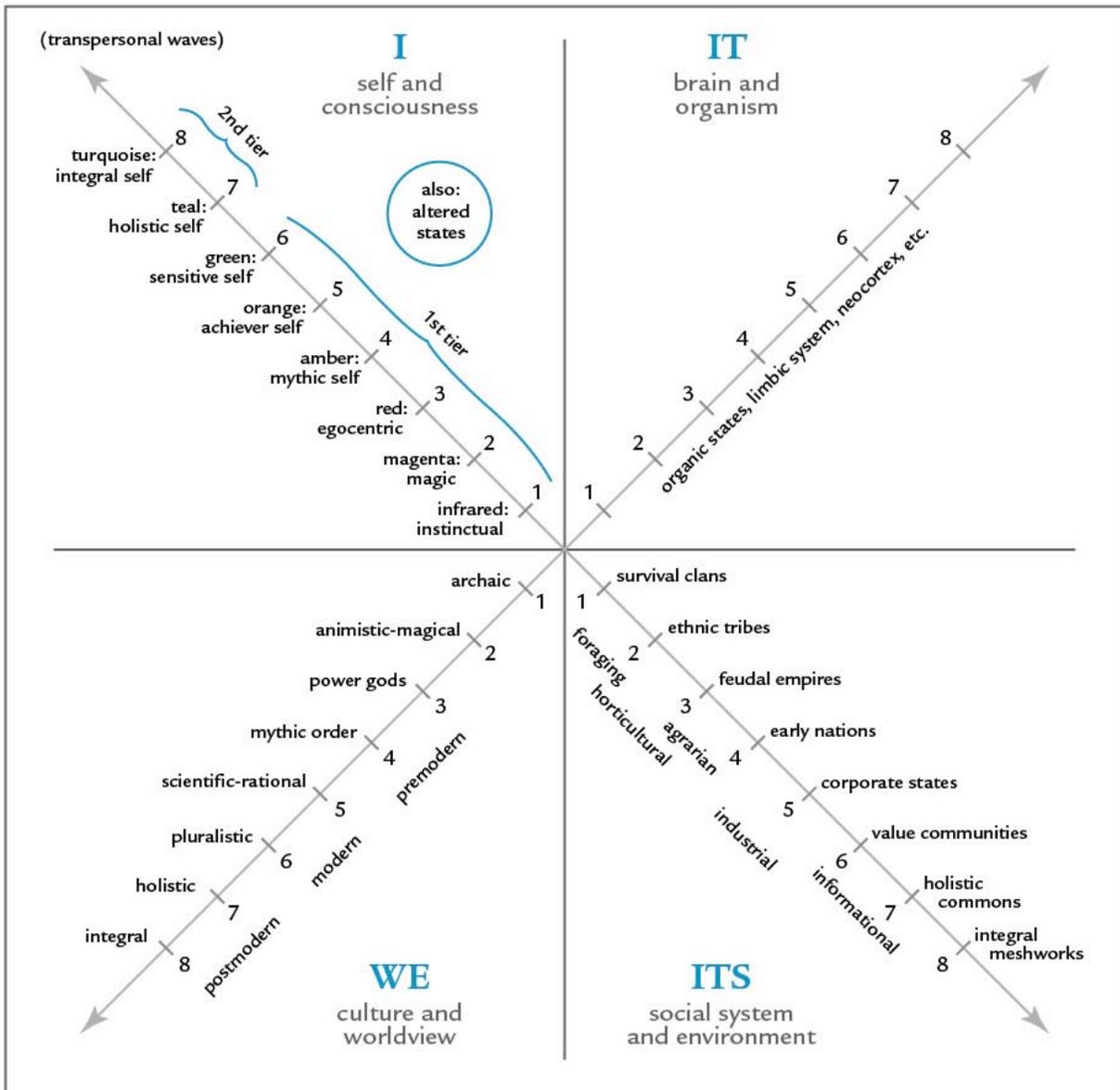


Figure 1. Evolution in the Four Quadrants

The resulting conceptual map depicts four quadrants that correspond to the classical ways of conceptualizing the world in both Eastern and Western philosophy. In the West, ever since ancient Greek philosophy, and especially since Immanuel Kant, the realm of philosophy has been divided into the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In the East, Buddhism has a similar conception in the form of the Buddha (subjective knowing), the Dharma (objective truth), and



the Sangha (intersubjective morals). Objective truth has been historically related to science, whose methodologies tend to research phenomena in the Upper-Right and Lower-Right aspects of any occasion. The subjective knowing from within an individual has historically surfaced in art, whose methodologies tend to express the interior subjective states of individuals. And taking an intersubjective point of view has historically elucidated moral truth and ethics that arise within the shared space of a given culture (Lower Left).

As sociologists since Max Weber have pointed out, the key achievement of modern society was the differentiation of these three spheres from one another. The key disaster of modern society was the further *dissociation* of these three spheres from one another. The initial separation allowed each sphere to develop according to its own logic, rather than being subordinated to religion, as was the case during the Middle Ages and before, when the Church determined what was true, what was right, and what was beautiful. The subordination of these realms to church doctrine made the further development of each realm very difficult. With the onset of modernity, the three realms of art, science, and morality were finally able to develop in accordance with the truths of each of their realms. This differentiation became so extreme that it has become a form of dissociation; each sphere became completely unrelated to the other and the sphere of objective truth, or science, has taken precedence over all other spheres. The Integral vision tries to overcome this fragmentation of modern society, not by re-imposing a new church doctrine or the dominance of another sphere instead of science, but by recognizing first the autonomy of each sphere and second that each sphere is intimately related to the other. The Integral vision reintegrates the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in an unforced and holistic embrace.

We can apply this conception of the universe to political belief systems, mapped out on a matrix much like the one above (figure 1). On one axis of the matrix we can map the degree to which a political ideology believes that interior or exterior factors shape the individual or society. For example, conservatives tend to believe that interior forces shape us; we've all heard their



argument that it is the values and lifestyle of the individual that leads to poverty. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to believe that exterior forces shape us, that poverty, for example, is the result of unjust political or economic forces. On the second axis we can map the degree to which an ideology emphasizes the role of the individual versus the role of the collective. To use some extreme ideologies as examples, fascism typically focuses on the collective and the interior, in the sense that it is concerned with the interior motivations of people, their values or culture, and with the collective orderliness of society. Libertarianism also views the individual's values as being the key forces for the individual's success or failure in life, but is primarily concerned with the individual. Leftist ideologies, such as anarchism on the one hand and state socialism on the other hand, view the primary causative forces as being exterior, usually in the form of the economy or the government. Anarchism focuses on the individual, generally opposing collective forces such as the state, and state socialism focuses on the collective. These examples are taken from the more extreme forms of political ideology, but this model also applies to the more moderate forms, such as "new left," "old left," "new right," and "old right." One can diagram the result of this analysis as in figure 2 below.

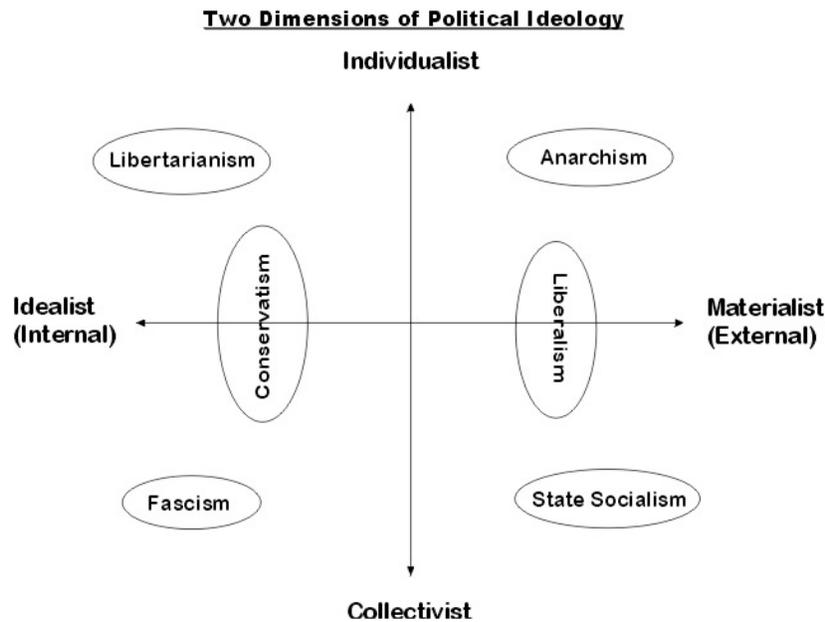


Figure 2. Two Dimensions of Political Ideology

However, the above figure shows only two out of four dimensions of politics. The first dimension is the extent to which an ideology focuses on the individual or on the collective. The second dimension is the extent to which an ideology focuses on exterior or interior causation.

The third dimension of political ideology is of key importance for Integral Politics: its degree of inclusion/embrace. Every belief system exists in progressively deeper contexts. While some ideas or arguments take physical need as their only context, others emphasize emotional truths, traditional/ethnocentric truths, or, at the next level, universalistic truths. In other words, while fascistic ideologies rely on arguments that reference ethnocentric truths, liberal ideologies rely on arguments that reference rational/universal truths. This distinction of truths is hierarchical, going from physical to emotional to traditional to rational, each step transcending and embracing its predecessor, all the way to the soul and spirit. It is possible to have a politics that makes reference to this highest level of soul and spiritual truths/contexts. Integral Politics recognizes this nested hierarchy of increasingly deeper and wider contexts.



Finally, the fourth dimension of politics, according to the Integral vision, is the type and direction of change that is desired (just as movement or time in the realm of physics is sometimes considered the fourth dimension). Some ideologies argue that social change should occur in a revolutionary manner, others in a reformist manner, and yet others argue that there should be no change at all, or even a regression. The AQAL model makes a distinction between *translation*, which is change within any given level or context, and *transformation*, which is transcendence to a new and higher level/context. This roughly corresponds to the distinction between reform and revolution. Furthermore, some ideologies argue that change should move to a higher level, while others argue that we need to return to an earlier level. For example, some radical ecologists argue that society should return to a social organization based on hunter-gatherer tribes, while socialists typically argue that society should find a new form of organization that transcends the current one and has never existed before. Integral Politics argues that all four of these dimensions must be considered when developing political analyses and policies. Integral Politics thus provides a “third way” in the sense that it transcends and integrates the existing belief systems in all dimensions.

Integral Politics and Spirituality

As a post-rational form of politics that lies beyond ordinary rationality, the practice of Integral Politics requires a spiritual orientation. The use of the term spirituality presupposes a distinction between religion and spirituality. For our purposes, religion is a specific set of beliefs and practices oriented toward a realm beyond the ordinary; spirituality is an openness toward the non-ordinary, toward the miracle of life and nature, toward the supra-rational. Integral Politics is related to spirituality because it requires intuition from its practitioners, a capacity to see things holistically, and openness to realms beyond the merely rational. One can become more attuned to Integral Politics the same way one becomes attuned to the spiritual—through contemplative



practices such as meditation. Integral Politics does not merely add spirituality to politics. Instead, it finds a place for spirituality in politics and a place for politics in spirituality.

Spirituality plays a role in Integral Politics in that it embraces the multiplicity of existence and simultaneously seeks to support mankind's quest for unity with Spirit. Historically, Western monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, have been what Nietzsche called "Apollonian." That is, they have tried to push toward the direction of God and the embrace of the One, toward Spirit. Basically, they have moved humans in the direction of ascent. The sad result, however, has too often been a rejection of or dissociation from what came before, of the earlier levels, such as the earth, the body, the sensual, and the emotive. To reverse this process, Nietzsche advocated a different type of attitude, one he called "Dionysian," which would bring people back in touch with their basic desires and their bodies. He advocated a descent back down, a renewed embrace of the many, instead of a striving toward the one.

Integral Politics, recognizing the full spectrum of consciousness, from body to emotion to mind to soul to spirit, does not view ascent and descent as an either/or option, but as both/and. Pure ascent too easily leads to a dissociation from the prior levels of being. Pure descent too easily leads to regression. Instead, what is needed is an ascent to higher levels of being that simultaneously and consciously reintegrates the levels that went before. In political practice this means that while we seek higher and more appropriate forms of social organization, probably in the form of a better global polity and global economy, we also need to re-embrace and reintegrate community, individuals, and the earth.

The Principles of Integral Politics

Based on the foregoing, one can outline some core principles of Integral Politics. None of these are meant as hard rules, but rather as mutually agreed-upon guidelines for what Integral Politics ought to encompass.



1. Integral Vision: Integral Politics is based on a vision that is capable of integrating opposites and holding them as nondual. Applying this to the four-dimensional map outlined earlier, this means that one needs to realize that political reality, like all reality, involves individual and collective, interior and exterior, less and more complex levels of development, the embrace of the many and the striving for the one. Every effort to create a greater unity, whether on a regional or global level, must simultaneously include a reintegration of what went before, of the national, the communal, the individual, and the earth. Ken Wilber calls this approach AQAL, or “all quadrants, all levels”.

Recently, mainstream third way politics, such as those proposed by sociologist Anthony Giddens and the Clinton/Gore Democratic Leadership Council, have suggested that we can realize that an individual’s rights must accompany responsibility for the collectivity. But that is just one way to integrate one of the many dichotomies. The key lies in finding forms of social organization that simultaneously preserve and promote individual rights and collective goods. We need a society in which, to quote Marx, “the full development of the individual is a condition for the full development of all.”

Left politics typically assumes that we are primarily shaped by exterior factors and right politics assumes we are shaped by interior factors. Integral Politics recognizes and respects the interiors of each individual and of society just as much as we recognize the exterior factors that play a tremendous role in people’s lives.

2. Integral Morality: Added to the “all-quadrants, all-levels” vision is an Integral morality, which Wilber calls the “Basic Moral Intuition.” It seeks to preserve and promote the deepest development for the greatest number of beings. In practice, since we cannot willfully rearrange the interiors of individuals or societies (though we can coax these via education), Integral Politics would take interiors into account mainly by creating the objective (exterior) conditions that would allow a maximum of interior development for individuals and society.



3. Translation and then Transformation: The Integral perspective identifies when progress should be incremental, that is, within any given level of development, and when it should be qualitative, from one level to the next. Transformation (revolution), the move from one level to the next, is only advisable once the options for action on any given level are exhausted and society and its members are ready to move to the next level. If the conditions for transformation are not given, then more translation (reform) within the current level is necessary. Integral Politics recognizes the appropriateness of both reform and revolution, but that each has its place and time, depending on the circumstances and the stage of social development. Integral Politics generally seeks to move society ahead to the next higher level, but only when and if it is ready.

4. Pathologies of Development: As a critical theory, Integral Politics recognizes when a particular institution or social arrangement has become pathological and is either blocking further development or is actually operating counter to the basic moral intuition. For example, poverty acts as a hindrance to individual and social development because poverty limits an individual's access to the resources needed for development (such as adequate medical care, education, food, shelter, etc.). Also, when one group or individual is oppressing another group or individual, this makes the full development of the oppressed impossible or at least very difficult. But just as there can be external blockages to or pathologies of development, there can also be internal ones. For example, a culture that denies the existence of development and believes that it represents ultimate wisdom, would reject any transformative or spiritual practices that attempt to carry that culture to a new level of awareness. Here, of course, education policy figures very strongly because we need to find ways of ensuring that the less fortunate have an opportunity to develop to their fullest potential.

An Application of Integral Politics: Globalization

Globalization is perhaps simultaneously both the most complex and the most important issue of our time. It is thus worthwhile to hear what Integral Politics would say about it. An important



feature of all development is that each movement to a new level represents greater inclusiveness. That is, when atoms combine to form molecules, they include both the features of atoms and add the new features or characteristics of molecules. This continues down the line to cells and multi-cellular organisms. The same is true for individual subjective development (the Upper-Left quadrant), where physical sensations are incorporated in emotions, which are incorporated in the sense of group belongingness, which is incorporated in the process of reasoning. Particularly relevant to the concept of globalization are the collective quadrants, where the units of social development expand from clans, to tribes, to nations, to regions, and finally to the globe, each level more encompassing than the previous.

However, within each of the aforementioned quadrants there are several developmental lines. This means that the dynamic of increasing inclusiveness applies not just to the four quadrants, but to different social lines of development, such as economic, legal, moral, and political. In other words, increasing global inclusiveness is a natural consequence of human development. The issue for our time is discerning the speed at which each line is moving toward a global embrace and whether this particular form of globalization is healthy or pathological.

Examining today's world, we can see that the contemporary manifestation of globalization does not represent a balanced globalization along all possible dimensions or lines of human experience. Today, only some aspects of human development are globalized, while others are excluded. Specifically, economic and some cultural lines tend toward the global, while the moral and political dimensions remain largely stuck at the national level (with the European Union potentially representing a notable exception, but one with its own pathologies). Integral Politics would classify this imbalance as a form of pathology because the different lines of development are dissociated from one another in the sense that the neo-liberal economic project denies any validity to the development of a global polity.



Not only that, the economic globalization that has been occurring over the past thirty to forty years is leading to ever increasing economic polarization between the different peoples of the world. For example, according to World Bank data, in 1960 the income ratio between the world's wealthiest 20 percent and the world's poorest 20 percent was 30:1; today this ratio is about 75:1, with no sign of slowing down. This economic polarization represents dissociation within the economic line of development, where wealthy groups become ever richer while the poor grow poorer or at least stagnate economically. The difficulty with these dissociations, both within the economic line and between the economic and the political lines, is that they present serious social justice issues and create blockages for further development. The massive amount of poverty in today's world makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for the poor to achieve their fullest potential. Also, the dissociation between economic and political globalization means that economic processes are divorced from political ones, and thus devoid of democratic oversight, meaning that powerful economic actors can do as they please, while the less powerful suffer the consequences.

Toward a New Exterior Logic: Global Neo-Keynesianism (An Integral Political Economy)

If we take the principles of Integral Politics seriously, we must strive to *preserve and promote the deepest development for the greatest number of beings*. In practice, this means that we need to find ways to balance economic and political development through a globalized polity, so that future economic processes do not lead to even greater economic polarization. Historically, this particular imbalance is nothing new, as economic integration has frequently advanced more rapidly than political integration. In the following I roughly outline a progression of economy-polity relations that provides an idea as to what the next stage of our politico-economic organization might be.



With the emergence of capitalism and the explanation of its functioning that Adam Smith first provided, one can say that there was a phase in which the economy was primarily national and the polity was not supposed to intervene much in the economy. The polity was thus practically non-existent as far as the economy was concerned (except to enforce contracts perhaps). This was the phase of classical liberalism, of the basically unregulated national economy, which began in Western Europe around 1800 and lasted until the 1930s (most economies were, of course, only an approximation of this description—in reality all economies were mixed, with the balance tending to favor the market). This phase ended as a result of its own instability, as exemplified by the Great Depression. The next phase was classical Keynesianism, which, in accordance with the principles outlined by Maynard Keynes, gave a significant role to the national polity in guiding the national economy (along with some limited international controls, which made national controls possible). This phase lasted until the early 1970s, which is when Keynesianism collapsed due to its inability to manage the contradictions between the demands of the business sector and the general population. The practical result was the increasing indebtedness of the Western welfare states (and also eventually a debt crisis for the Third World). The increase in world trade began to create increasing pressure to bring about a new system of politico-economic management, as companies chose the most favorable locations for investment, whether those were within or outside of the polity which regulated them. Thus, the late 1970s thus represent the beginning of a global regime of economic neo-liberalism that was accompanied by the persistence of national politics and the ideology of neo-liberalism, as represented by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. This is basically the phase and type of globalization we are still experiencing.

The next phase will in all likelihood be a catching-up of the polity to the same global level at which the economy is already operating. In other words, because international neo-liberalism is unsustainable, due to the increasing polarization and environmental destruction it produces, we can expect to see a new phase in the near future, that of global neo-Keynesianism, when the



polity becomes global too and can (re-)regulate the global economy. An example of this process is the European Union, which is currently introducing a stronger regional (Europe-wide) polity, precisely so that it can better deal with its region-wide economic, social, and ecological problems.

Many prominent economists have already floated proposals for creating a global neo-Keynesian political economy, such as former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz, Harvard development economist Jeffrey Sachs, economic Nobel laureate James Tobin, and global financier George Soros. Their proposals range from introducing a global tax on currency speculation (the Tobin Tax) to the creation of a global central bank to international capital controls. The primary objective of these proposals is generally to dismantle the current regime of “beggar thy neighbor” in which countries compete to offer the best investment opportunities for free-floating capital by dismantling all national restrictions or controls on investment (ranging from environmental to labor to human rights regulations). Most importantly, global neo-Keynesian controls can also contribute to a reversal of global economic polarization.

We should be under no illusions, however, that global neo-Keynesianism is an end-point in our politico-economic development. It too will sooner or later suffer from similar internal contradictions that national Keynesianism suffered, and we, as a global society, will then have to look for a new systemic logic. However, until then, global neo-Keynesianism is the most likely alternative.

Toward a New Cultural Logic

A key element of Integral Politics is the attention it pays to the intersubjective, cultural side of things (Lower-Left quadrant). My discussion of globalization thus far has been about finding a new systemic or external logic; that is, I focused on a discussion of the exterior, interobjective, social side of things (Lower-Right quadrant). The insight of Integral Politics is that solutions that



focus exclusively on the exterior (the social-systemic) will be deficient if they are not accompanied by a focus on the interior (the cultural). In other words, global neo-Keynesianism, as a type of integral political-economy, needs an Integral culture if it is to move from a mere translation to a transformation of our society. Governments and their populations will be unwilling to implement global neo-Keynesianism if they do not also feel a certain amount of solidarity and compassion for the world beyond their national borders. The peoples of the world must be willing to think in terms of humanity, rather than in terms of their own nation, more than ever before.

This expansion of human sympathy to cover the globe, however, is only one part of what integral culture means. Another part implies the ability and willingness to integrate individual and collective, interior and exterior, ascent and descent. Integrating individual and collective, in terms of globalization, means that the benefits many receive from global trade, culture, and interaction cannot impinge upon the integrity of each and every individual on the planet. For example, this would mean that we need to actively protect the rights of indigenous cultures, of minorities, and of those granted less structural power in general. At the same time, the rights that individuals have cannot be divorced from their responsibility to society and to the environment. Integrating interior and exterior in the global context means that the move to a new global systemic logic has to be accompanied by a new cultural logic.

Finally, integrating ascent and descent means that while we develop a new global consciousness and a new global political-economy—in other words, new higher integrations—we also must take care of what went before, of our community and our natural ecology. A global neo-Keynesianism needs to be accompanied by a return to the local (not local tribalism, but a cosmopolitan one). We need to do this because we are human and have limited human scales of reference, such as the local community and the local environment. These human scales become more important precisely because the global is also becoming more important.



The local becomes more important in the age of globalization not just because of its more human scale, but also in the name of democracy and social justice. As power leaves the national level and becomes a global matter, it also becomes more removed and more abstracted from everyday experience and everyday individual concerns. One way to reinvest the individual with power and responsibility is by returning power to the local community. Practical examples for such a process can include greater local self-sufficiency in the sphere of production (more local trade), the introduction of local currencies (which have many economic and ecological benefits), and greater autonomy in decision-making, particularly as far as the expenditure of state revenues is concerned. The expansion and empowerment of democracy at the local level must, of course, be accompanied by a democratization of power at all levels, from local to global.

Some might say that globalization cannot be combined with a call for localization. This, however, is not necessarily true. We could honor both by globalizing such things as solidarity, communication, and the production of products that can only be produced in limited locations (e.g., tropical fruit, rare medicines, sophisticated technology), while localizing the production of basic goods (e.g., staple foods, basic household goods, simple electronics), which form our connection to the earth and to our community. Ultimately, Integral Politics means integrating oppositions that were previously considered mutually exclusive.

While the Integral Politics outlined here does not constitute a concrete political platform, it is possible to generate concrete policies out of these principles. Integral Politics can help move politics beyond the typical left-right stalemate and present a true “third way,” one that brings politics to a new level and finds not merely compromises, but solutions that emerge from a higher understanding, from the unforced unification of opposites. Integral Politics can also answer our basic human desire for Spirit by recognizing the validity of spirituality and by giving spirituality an important role in formulating a politics for the third millennium.



Endnotes

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Tikkun*, July-August 2001, pp. 44-49

² Habermas, "The crisis of the welfare state and the exhaustion of utopian energies," 1989

³ Consult Wilber, *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*, 2001; *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, 1995; *A brief history of everything*, 2000



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