In this excerpt from their book, *Left and Right in Global Politics*, political scientists Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien make the case that “global politics is first and foremost a debate between the left and the right,” not one that is static, but one that “changes through time and space.”

As widespread and as universally understood as they may be, the notions of left and right are not well thought of in the social sciences and in intellectual discourse. They seem somehow too simplistic and too binary. They also seem too political, bringing all arguments down to a face-to-face between two sides, and leaving almost no space for more dispassionate, balanced inquiries and debates. Moreover, international affairs have usually been understood as a distinct realm, shaped by the balance of power between states rather than by an ideological conflict that, many suggest, is restricted to domestic politics. And even there, in national politics, have not the notions of left and right lost most of their meaning and relevance, in an era defined by widely accepted neo-liberal policies or encompassing alternative programs such as the “Third Way?”

This book argues, to the contrary, that global politics is first and foremost a debate between the left and the right. This is so because the left–right cleavage expresses enduring and profound differences about equality, and equality is one of the most fundamental issues of controversy in any political community. On the right stand conservatives and liberals who believe it is not only sufficient but also best to let individuals work their way forward, in a context guaranteeing them equal rights and fair opportunities. On the left are those who contend that equality remains an illusion without collective institutions assuring truly equal conditions for all.

The debate between the left and the right changes through time and space, and it does not incorporate every possible conflict and event. This conflict nevertheless structures most of our disagreements, and it does so in a significant and coherent way. To a large extent, it is this universal division that makes contemporary politics intelligible within, but also beyond, the boundaries of nation-states.

Global politics is thus constructed through an ongoing debate between the left and the right. Indeed, the politics of the world, no matter on what scale, is most often a politics of left versus right. Whether they take place in global forums, in international organizations, in national legislatures, or in local associations, all our political discussions are connected to the old, universal conflict over the meaning of equality, which divides progressives and conservatives. This is not to deny that there are civilizations, national identities, and other cleavages that shape global politics. But none of these differences governs our deliberations as thoroughly as the debate between the left and the right.

Understanding the nature of our disagreements gives us a key to apprehend the world, and no key opens as many doors as the left–right key.

Like Hobbes and Locke, those on the right tend to be pessimistic about human nature, about the fight for life, and about the possibilities of progress through collective action or public intervention. At best, they think, such interventions will be ineffective. At worst, they will create perverse incentives or be captured by special interests seeking privileges. The ideal for them is to let individuals use their talents and their drive to succeed, so as to assure economic growth and social progress, which in the end will benefit all of society. The state’s primary role, in this context, is to protect individuals and their property, in a society that remains potentially dangerous, greed and envy being indelible features of human nature.

For the left, human nature is, on the contrary, a source of optimism, each person being seen as fundamentally good and compassionate. Problems start with the organization of society, which creates inequality and
may corrupt character. This implies that only collective and public solutions can provide adequate responses to social ills. Insecurity, here, is associated less with threats to individuals and their property than with the always uncertain fate of vulnerable persons, in a society driven by competition. The state must of course prevent violence and theft, prevention being preferable to punishment, but it should also create equal opportunities, offer protection against social risks, and redistribute income, to counter the perils associated with a market economy.

In a tongue-in-cheek comment in *Policy Options*, Canadian philosopher Joseph Heath contrasts these opposite views of human nature by proposing that each side endures its peculiar kind of unthinking militants. The left, he writes, attracts “bleeding hearts,” persons “who have never met a claim to victimhood that does not cry out for redress and compensation,” and seem “temperamentally incapable of saying no to the underdog.” The right, on the other hand, must deal with “jerks,” who want to cut taxes and social programs “simply because they don’t care about anybody but themselves,” are unabashedly self-interested, and “may even have a mean streak.”

The language of left and right does not only belong to experts and activists. In public opinion surveys all over the world, self-placement on a left–right scale stands out as something of a “superissue,” which “tends to assimilate all important issues” and consistently proves to be one of the best predictors of a person’s political attitudes and behavior. In most countries, political life is defined by this dichotomy.

At the end of the twentieth century, a rapprochement took place between the left and the right. In national politics, this movement toward the center saw the right soften its stance on market competition, individualism, and a leaner state, while the left was coming to terms with the legitimacy of the market, the virtues of competition, and the need for efficiency. On the left, the most articulate rendition of this ideological adjustment came from Third Way advocates such as Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, and Anthony Giddens, who proposed a modernized social-democracy, sensible to the challenges raised by globalization, neoliberalism, post-industrialism, and new social movements. In global politics, a similar process took shape around the idea of a new development consensus, able to combine the right’s preference for markets and competition with the left’s concern for social justice. For a time, this new compromise seemed sufficiently powerful to bridge the long-standing gap between the views defended by the global financial institutions and those of the United Nations.

The rapprochement, however, soon showed its limits. In global politics, it never erased the enduring and numerous differences between the left and the right over globalization, growth, inequality, and the governance of development. The UN agencies continued to be critical of a world that remained profoundly and increasingly unequal, while the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO remained confident that the international system was heading in the right direction and could become more equitable with good policies and modest reforms. In domestic politics, Third Way discourses gradually gave way to more classical assertions of social-democratic values, as the right came back to power in most of the Western world in the beginning of the 2000s, and as the left was reaffirming its strength in Latin America and in other countries of the South.

In the first round of the French presidential election, in April 2002, Lionel Jospin’s “plural left” coalition splintered into its various components and many dissatisfied voters abstained, allowing the head of the far-right National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, to end up with more votes than the socialist leader and to qualify for the second round against centre-right candidate Jacques Chirac. Around Europe, wrote an Italian newspaper, political circles were “hit by a thunderbolt.” The event, however, was not without precedent. In 2000, the far-right party of Joerg Haider had been included in an Austrian coalition government, creating quite a stir in the European Union. A year before, the Italian left had been defeated by the center-right coalition of Silvio Berlusconi, which also included far-right elements. A month after the French shock, the Dutch far-right, whose leader — Pim Fortuyn — was assassinated during the electoral campaign, obtained spectacular results, and helped bring about the victory of a centre-right coalition. Even Denmark and Norway had turned to the right in the previous months.

Five years after Blair’s victory, the European social-democratic left was
losing ground to center-right parties that capitalized on economic insecurity and on fears about globalization, national identity, and immigration. These parties maintained their neoliberal orientations, but blended them with more populist and nationalist arguments, borrowed from far-right parties they had roundly denounced until then. When necessary, mainstream conservatives even accepted formal alliances with the far-right, to form broad government-winning coalitions. In the United States, the Republicans also regained control of both the presidency and Congress, and they moved determinedly to the right, to implement tax cuts that undermined the federal government’s capacity to fund Medicare, social security, education, and debt reduction, and disproportionately benefitted the richest one percent of Americans.

Social-democrats, admitted Giddens, faced a critical juncture. Their situation was not uniformly bad. For one thing, they were still in power in many countries of Western Europe, and making progress in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Moreover, the comeback of the right appeared somewhat superficial because it was more opportunistic than anchored in a strong and appealing vision of the future. Often, center-right parties simply “normalized” the themes of the far-right to take advantage of popular anxieties about immigration, multiculturalism, and crime. Still, the left had “a good deal of rethinking to do” to adjust to a new, more competitive political reality.

For Giddens, it no longer seemed necessary to speak of a Third Way. This label, he explained, had proven useful to specify what the new center-left was not, and to differentiate it from unformed social-democracy. This positioning, however, was now accomplished, and the left could assume power and govern on the basis of its core historical values. With a populist right back in power, it became in fact more important to stress again the opposition between the left and the right, or between social-determinism and neoliberalism, rather than insisting once more on the distinctive character of the contemporary center-left. The Third Way was no longer necessary and the social-democratic identity could come back.

This reaffirmation of the traditional left–right division implied as well a return to the core concern of left–right politics: equality. In a book published in 2005, Giddens and his co-authors made “the case for a new egalitarianism,” and deplored the growing inequalities brought by decades of neoliberalism. By contrast, during his 2007 electoral campaign, rightist French president Nicolas Sarkozy argued unabashedly against egalitarianism and in favor of order, authority, work, and merit, a discourse that had been shunned by the country’s center-right until then. In recent years, American politics also displayed a strong left–right polarization over cultural values and redistribution.

More spectacularly, the turn of the twenty-first century gave rise to a strong resurgence of the democratic left in Latin America, with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998), Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil (2002), Néstor Kirchner in Argentina (2003), Tabaré Vásquez in Uruguay (2005), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006), Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2006), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2006), and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2006). The new Latin American left sometimes proved populist and controversial, as in Venezuela and Bolivia, but often it chose a prudently reformist course, close to the spirit of the Third Way, as in Chile and Uruguay. In either case, the left benefited from a widespread desire for more social justice, in countries where democratization and market reforms had failed to reduce profound inequalities and enduring poverty. Populist leaders deployed an anti-American, anti-globalization discourse and experimented with nationalization and strong-armed interventions, but they also invested in social programs and in redistributive measures, in a more or less clientelistic manner. More orthodox with respect to the market, public administration, and the world order, reformist governments also undertook to improve social programs and income distribution. Across the continent, the politics of left and right became alive, and was very clearly defined around the question of equality.

In Taiwan and Korea, similar debates on democratization and neoliberalism took place but, in these cases, it was leftist social movements that moved non-programmatic political parties to adopt redistributive and welfare state reforms. In South Africa, achieving effective redistribution proved difficult and the African National Congress may even have failed in this respect, but political debates were also consumed by equality and by the possibilities of social justice in a neoliberal world. In the Kerala state of India, the social-democratic Left Democratic Front defeated the neoliberal right by a landslide in 2006, building on its previous success in alleviating poverty, in a region with a very low aggregate income. In
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The democracies of the different continents, then, the long historical debate between the left and the right was reaffirmed through competing visions of equality.

The same dividing lines manifested themselves in world politics, as the new development consensus defined in the wake of the 2000 Millennium Summit rapidly showed its limits. This consensus, indeed, always remained imperfect. Reflecting their distinct mandates, constituencies, and values, the UN agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions continued to differ, the former insisting on social justice, the latter placing more emphasis on economic growth.

Fundamentally, the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions maintained their contrasting approaches towards globalization and governance. The Bretton Woods institutions’ oft-repeated view that “growth is the tide that lifts all boats” was openly contested by the UN Secretary-General, who reiterated his belief that “no rising tide in the global economy will lift all boats.” For UN agencies, globalization and growth could have positive effects only if they were “grounded in a human-rights approach and the human empowerment concept of development.” This outlook, however, carried little weight with the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO, who simply did not consider the promotion of human rights to be part of their mandate. From their perspective, global economic integration not only increased “the size of the cake,” but it also responded to an innate human desire “for expanded horizons and freedom of choice.” Above all, both sides disagreed over the proper role of states and markets. For the Bretton Woods institutions, most of the time “government intervention distorts and/or rigidifies markets and makes them function less well.” Kofi Annan, on the contrary, held that “there is no autopilot, no magic of the marketplace,” and called for stronger public institutions, able to compensate the losers in globalization.

Behind the new development consensus, the reform agenda proposed by
the Bretton Woods institutions and by the UN continued to express the traditional clash of values between the left and the right. The financial institutions systematically emphasized the policy space already available to developing countries. They thus highlighted these countries’ capacity for “self-help,” as well as their leaders’ need to pay more attention to good governance, corruption, fiscal adjustment, trade liberalization, and private-sector development. The UN ascribed much more weight to the systemic constraints on development, and pushed for governance reforms much more ambitious than those considered by the WTO or the IMF.

The debate between the left and the right had evolved, as the two sides adjusted to a new world context, but it continued to define the most enduring and fundamental divide in global politics.

Throughout this book, we have seen a structured conversation between the left and the right, at work over a remarkable range of ideas, going from the nineteenth-century workers’ right to vote to the contemporary claims of ethnic minorities to be recognized and treated as equal, and from the fight for socialism to the recent idea of a Global Compact. In a world where democratic politics seems hard pressed to follow the rapid and global expansion of market forces, the universal prevalence of this language should be seen as a hopeful sign. The lack of cohesive and encompassing ideologies that can articulate the divergent expectations of citizens is indeed one of the most pressing problems of emerging democracies. Without a common currency to articulate differences, political debates tend to remain inchoate, and centered on personalities, images, and patronage. Arguing collectively becomes difficult, and democratic deliberation is impaired. This book suggests that global politics is already endowed with such a common currency. This is good news for democracy, and good news for the world as well.

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