

The inadequacies of the term ‘third way’

by Chibli Mallat

Today is Monday, September 21. Today there are two major events on the American scene, one which is poised to dominate the US and world media, the other to be entirely passed over. The one which will make irruption on television screens world-wide is one of an embarrassed, sometimes angry president, replying to the grand jury’s barrage of questions. The one which will be completely ignored is a gathering involving Clinton himself, Tony Blair, a few other heads of state and government, and a mainly academic audience, meeting over a full day in New York to “open the dialogue”, as the organisers choose to call it, about “strengthening democracy in a global economy”. Question one: of the two events, which one will weigh more in history? Judging by media coverage, the first, of course.

Question two: of the two events, which one should weigh more in history? The sad Clinton-Starr saga does not need further elaboration, and The Daily Star has dwelt recently on the ingredients of the leadership malaise it has projected world-wide (The Daily Star, 17 September). The New York event needs some background, to help answer the second question.

Three panels have been announced, which don’t yield much of a clue on the conference.

The only intriguing and unusual vocable is social investment; the rest is about workers, technology, civil society and other familiar terms in American democratic liberalism/ Blairite socialism. The importance of the event, if any, lies elsewhere: it marks the first dialogue, at such high level, on what is being increasingly described as the “third way”.

The stakes are high, and the answer will shape the future of global politics. The conference comes after a series of small meetings between Tony Blair and academics “engagés”, which culminated last May in a day-long seminar at 10 Downing Street. It has developed in a sign of the times into a website-informed discussion between leading dons in Britain (www.netnexus.org), including a library of papers on the “third way”, in which the latest, by a Cambridge University fellow, dwells precisely on the importance of what he calls “social capital”. Blair and Clinton are looking, beyond the three-century dominance of the divide in world politics between left and right, to a “third way”.

The New York University law school conference is an “opening”. Still, it can already boast an intellectual pedigree, with a nebulous group of pundits, including British professor Antony Giddens and Geoff Mulgan, director of the Demos institute probably the most influential leftist think-tank of the 1990s in Britain. It may also include celebrities of “the end of history”, such as Francis Fukuyama, of “the clash of civilisations” perhaps, Samuel Huntington, of the “decline” of American dominance, and Yale historian, British-born Paul Kennedy, and for some, the articulated or surmised version of what to do about it.

I have my own choice of candidates in the US, to include some of the sophisticated reflection on constitutional law by such leaders in the field as Harvard and Stanford professors Laurence Tribe and John Hart Ely. More universalism than constitutional expertise is needed, however, much as it determines essential parameters for the rule of law. “Third wayism” is, in this universal search, a particularly inappropriate rallying word.

First, it is too formal, and appears as some vague compromise between rabid

capitalism and human beings. If soothing, it remains empty.

Secondly, it shuts out non-western countries, especially those in the Muslim world where “the third way” was a slogan for decades against both western and soviet models. “No west, no east”, went the most famous slogan in Iran until the 1990s. The solution, that is the third way, is Islam.

Surely Islam is not what the western ‘third wayists’ advocate, or want to stand against. “Islam as the third way”, a powerful rallying point for the Khomeynist revolution in the ‘70s and ‘80s, didn’t even cross their mind.

This is serious, because in such ignorance, it is also ignored the entirety of the Muslim world.

Thirdly, and despite the passage of time, the “third way” was the great advocacy of the most terrible dictatorships in the 20th century, poised as Nazis and Fascists were to offer an alternative to socialism and capitalism.

So is there a better word ? Those who have been following some of my recent columns on this page on the Lebanese presidential elections will have recognised a strong intellectual debt to Robert Fossaert, the author of *La Societe* (in eight large, clear volumes). Fossaert is a banker, economist, historian and sociologist who will rank next to Weber and Marx.

My choice in his summa (plus a few other books published here and there, one which includes a programme for a successful France, *Cent millions de Français contre le chômage*) is what he calls the economic logic of *Valeur de Developpement*, which should replace the dominant *Valeur d’Echange* itself having replaced *Valeur d’Usage*, which prevailed as a logic of production until the thirteenth century capitalist renaissance started looking at goods mainly in their commercial (echange) rather than immediate usage.

Developpement being too vague (everything develops), my suggestion for the conversation is to focus therefore on an equivalent of *valeur d’exchange*.

Let’s call it *valeur de civilisation*, and the New York conference, an opening dialogue in search for “values of global civilisation”. In this appellation is room for Toynbee, Huntington, Khatami and others. This is surely better than the “third way”, especially if the attendants in New York start reading Fossaert.

People around the world today, Monday, September 21, will be thinking far less about the future of mankind than about the presidential sit-com cum TV trial.

Professor Chibli Mallat’s latest book, *Presidential Choices 1998: Challenges of the Millennium*, is in press at Dar al-Nahar. He wrote this article for *The Daily Star*