

LTI's reflection on #GE2015: “thick” and “thin” choices

Immediate reactions to the UK General Election result have focused on inaccurate polls, shy voters, the rise of nationalism in the UK (SNP, UKIP), the UK's wider relationships with continental Europe (including the EU), and the implications for mainstream political parties. Additionally, electoral reform seems to be in the air once more.

In this post, we try something different. It seems to us that “choice” was one of the key themes of the election. For example, the party leaders argued that we, the electorate, were confronted by an important choice at this election: between market forces vs the state, between the union and the nation, between economic stability and social justice. Here we make a strategic distinction between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ choices. We argue that too often we are presented with ‘thin’ choices and that we need to uncover ‘thick’ choices.

Nowhere is the 'thin' notion of choice more apparent than in the contemporary fusion of the consumer and the citizen. In this view, public life is an extension of the marketplace; public choices are merely the aggregate of immediate wants. On the surface such a conception of politics appears deeply attractive. The market-state appears sensitive to our personal shifts in mood and taste, upon which the consumer conveyor-belt of possibilities ultimately depends. Never are we asked to consider the basis upon which our choices rest. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the debate over the future organization of the NHS. Citizens have an interest in the way that the NHS is organised, how its care is delivered and the ways in which its practitioners understand that care. Yet, there has been a tendency to see patients as consumers passively waiting on a service—as if all we are concerned with is the service as it affects us as individuals. However important that is, we should also be concerned with the status of the practitioners who provide the service and the ethos of personally-directed care in which they work. We may then understand excellent medical care as a relationship rather than a service chosen by me, the service user from a service provider. How then is it possible to escape this passive and insubstantial understanding of choice? The answer is to refuse one of the fundamental presuppositions of market-logic: that we choose alone.

This 'thicker' vision of choice involves unearthing the presuppositions of our shallower choices and testing them beside things which cannot be easily quantified like love, compassion, and friendship. Politics in this guise cannot be merely a matter of the passive satisfaction of immediate wants but involves new choices: the challenge of nourishing association, the dilemmas of care, and the rewards of common endeavour. Only a market-society, indifferent to these deeper choices, can treat the existence of zero-hours contracts as the stuff of neutral decision. What individual choices should we disallow for richer choices together? Although some may value the flexibility of such employment, does that mean that we should be indifferent to the suffering they cause?

The hardest case may be the environment because it is in the discussion of the environment that choice seems to operate least well. Having said that, the adoption of the Ecosystem Services

Approach by the Coalition does presume choice. In other words, the services that the environment provides are presumed to offer us choices: enjoyment of the countryside, a secure supply of food and other materials. Yet, emphatically, the environment is not created nor fully sustained by the choices that we make. Once more, only a more relational understanding of the environment—of the ways in which it supports us but also opposes us—will enable us to move from thinner to thicker choices. A thicker account of choice requires us to recognize that we may not choose as abstract individuals but only as people choosing with others in systems and processes that shape our choosing—and in the context of an environment that has not chosen us at all.

In sum, what is needed is a fuller account of the context of our choices as a way of making thicker our understanding of choice. How to think of this? There is no ready agreement here. For one of us, thicker choices emerge from an acknowledgement of the social context in which we find ourselves. For the other, thicker choices compel us to think teleologically towards a common good. Despite the differences between these two positions, there is a degree of overlap in what is being rejected: the story of the asocial individual. For both of us such a rejection has a theological basis.

Such a rejection is expressed in many ways, but perhaps most crucially through the language of the world as ‘creation’. Any turn to personal choices is always qualified by the sense that our existence is a gift and that our actions should exemplify a quality of giftedness. Our decisions should open up spaces not just for us and our wants, but break the cycles of destructive self-involvement which a culture of consumerism appears to engender.

Involved in this alternative is the affirmation that not all forms of choosing are equally conducive to shared interests. Instead of being seduced by a language of limitation and constraint (the sense that any denial of personal choice is a violation) what needs to be recaptured is a sense that larger and fuller lives are achieved by the denial of some aspects of our choosing. This is true in the case of the environment where our immediate choices are limiting our ability to respond to pressing challenges in the future. Public messaging around climate change continues to have limited effect, in part because we are captured by our vision of choice. While environmentalism appears to offer us ‘hair shirts’ and constraints, the market persists in its appeal to growth and technological fixes. What we need to capture is a sense that living with the grain of our environment is the most freeing thing we can do. Instead of a language of constraint, the “thicker” chooser might prefer the language of ‘being at home’ in the world and holding on to what is precious. Such an ethos may deny us all manner of things in the short-term, yet may be capable of keeping the possibilities of the future radically open. The same can be said on issues of poverty and social exclusion. Individual charity (the immediate choice) is undoubtedly a virtue, yet a society in which justice and care are public expectations is one in which new departures are possible, even if some ‘thinner’ options are inevitably denied in the process.

Recent Church campaigns around issues of the living wage, international development and climate change have been concerned with helping citizens deepen their appreciation of the shared effects of our private choices. While the short-term immediacy of the ‘thin’ choice is always attractive (those

cheap jeans or that convenient service), layers of advertising and consumer-mystique hide its social and environmental costs. We may want no-strings enjoyment, but such non-commitment on the part of the consumer may rest on the marginalization of lives and communities which are hidden from view. The answer to the problem of hidden costs is not to capitulate to market logic in the form of 'ethical consumerism'. That will only have limited effects at best. To be truer to the language of creation, we need new settings in which to carry out our choices.

What might the theological suggestion about 'thicker' choices mean for contemporary politics? While this post seeks to avoid any trite plea for participatory democracy, the big political parties would need to reconnect with their diverse and rich traditions of choice through care.

- For Conservatives thorny questions must be asked concerning the manifest tensions between the flourishing of civil society and the efficient running of a marketplace. While Conservatives advocate a plan for economic recovery, what is the Conservative vision for fostering a society of neighbours? In short, how do we encourage communities where it is easier to care for others and keep our friends?
- For the Labour Party, whose identity and grammar is still tied to the activity of government, what is their prescription for a market and state that feels inhuman? And how can the power of the government provide space for non-market values like generosity and empathy?
- For Liberal Democrats, heirs to the original party of choice and freedom, there may be the most disquiet about our distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' choices. Yet, this would be unwarranted. Our point is not that choices must be thrown over for stale conformity, but rather that any personal choices we make must be tied to a larger conception of what it means to live a good life with others. This profoundly theological notion has been the buttress of British liberalism from Gladstone to Grimond- although the language of liberty has often been confused with 'thinner' alternatives in recent decades.

Allied to the conception of community that is being promoted here is the notion that our consuming and producing is not a vindication of our choices, but the choice of Another who inscribes creation with a longing for beauty, justice and healing. Any attempt by market-processes to encroach upon this already chosen description is nothing short of a false teleology, which attempts to deny the world's inherent giftedness and replace it with acquisitiveness. Viewed through this wider lens, the most pressing political choices faced by this society are not merely ones of electoral reform or constitutional process but issues of moral formation. We can either continue with institutions that press upon us the chimeras of immediate satisfaction or we can opt for modes of life and politics which sensitize us to the hidden choices behind our choices.

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