Introduction

Ravi Kanbur is one of the world's top specialists in development economics. Born in India and trained in England, at Cambridge and Oxford, he has taught at a number of universities in the United Kingdom and the United States, and has held various high-ranking positions with the World Bank. In 1998, he was asked to lead the team that would prepare the 2000/2001 issue of the *World Development Report*, the Bank's flagship annual publication, which would focus on "Attacking Poverty." In June 2000, before the release of the report, Kanbur resigned over disagreements on the final version. At the time, some said that the divergences were minor. The head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, even argued that it was merely a dispute over the order of the chapters! Others suggested that much more was at stake and that the United States Treasury Secretary, Lawrence H. Summers, was himself involved in re-writing parts of the report.

Whatever the case, the matter certainly appeared important to Kanbur. At a conference he addressed later the same year, he raised the question indirectly through a discussion of the fundamental disagreements that underlie global debates on poverty and development.[1] Inside as well as outside international organizations, Kanbur explained, there are two broad, contending views on how best to attack poverty. The first view rallies most of the economists working in finance ministries, in international financial institutions, and in universities, and the second is primarily defended by those, not usually economists, who are associated with social ministries, aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Most social and political actors position themselves in line with one of these two standpoints, which Ravi Kanbur identifies as "Group A" and "Group B." According to Kanbur, "Group A"

[1] Ravi Kanbur, "Economic Policy, Distribution and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements," *World Development*, vol. 29, no. 6, June 2001, 1083–94.

believes poverty will best be reduced through structural adjustments that promote trade, foreign investment, and rapid economic growth. "Group B" contends instead that in a world where resources and power are unevenly distributed one cannot count simply on market rules and economic growth to alleviate poverty, and must address directly issues of distribution and redistribution.

Of course, Kanbur is aware of the political dimensions of these "disagreements." He identifies all the key actors and understands the depth of their oppositions. His very resignation from the World Bank was a consequence of this conflict between two worldviews. Still, Kanbur cannot find better names for the contenders than "Group A" and "Group B," or "Finance Ministry" and "Civil Society" tendencies.

Why not call "Group A" the right and "Group B" the left? After all, the first "group" privileges market rules and economic growth to counter poverty, and the second one has less confidence in the unfettered working of the market and places distributional outcomes ahead of growth as a priority. Most observers would recognize these opposing diagnostics as typical expressions of the left–right division. More to the point, these "groups" are not real groups. They constitute broad but loosely connected communities of values and ideas. What Kanbur sees is not a set of opposing "groups," but rather the expression of intellectual and political traditions that go far back in our common history and still matter very much in our collective lives.

Like many others, Ravi Kanbur may be reluctant to speak of the left and of the right, because he wants to give a relatively neutral, scientific character to the controversy he presents. Hence, he locates the core disagreements not in political ideas and values, but in differences over levels of aggregation, time horizons, and market structures. More, however, may be at stake in these analytical choices. Indeed, 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 neoliberal 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. 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," as Ravi Kanbur would say, and it does so in a significant and coherent way. To a large extent, it is this universal debate that makes contemporary politics intelligible within, but also beyond, the boundaries of nation-states.

The book starts with three claims. First, we believe that the world is constructed primarily through debates. This is not to deny the importance of material forces, technology, interests, or power relations, but simply to say that all these factors become socially and politically meaningful through the interpretations that we make of them. Before a country, a group, or a person can promote specific interests, one must first determine what these interests are, and make them understandable to others through discourse.

Second, we think of politics as global. Debates about the state of the world are conducted concurrently within, across, and above national borders, in processes that remain distinct but that are also interconnected and coherent. In other words, the old opposition between international and domestic politics is no longer tenable, if it ever was. Curiously, although this view of global politics is increasingly accepted, not much has been said about the nature and structure of global political deliberations.

Third, the ubiquity and the global character of debates do not mean that we live in a cacophonic world, a linguistic free-for-all where everybody would speak but no one would listen. On the contrary, there is a structure to our disagreements, a vocabulary and a grammar that make the process intelligible to all. In this grammar, the left–right dichotomy occupies a special place, as the most enduring, universal, and encompassing of all political cleavages.

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 debates 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 debates 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.

The first chapter explains what the left–right distinction means, and how it shapes politics. This distinction is critical, we argue, because it concerns not only interests but also deeply held values and principles. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate how profound and significant is the left–right opposition. Chapter 2 considers public opinion trends, and shows how, all over the world, ordinary citizens position themselves along the left–right spectrum, and organize their ideas and attitudes accordingly. Whatever social scientists may think of this dichotomy, it undoubtedly makes sense to the citizens of the world. Chapter 3 focuses on the discourse of elites, and presents two radically different portraits of global politics. The first is drawn by the right and appears relatively optimistic, the second comes from the left and offers a much darker picture of the world's past, present, and future.

The following chapters turn to history to explain how the global debate between the left and the right has evolved over time, from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Chapter 4 retraces the evolution of this opposition over the long period between the American Revolution and the end of the Second World War, which saw the emergence of the modern state system. Chapter 5 covers the period from 1945 to 1980, marked by the appeal of universal rights and by new world tensions. It examines the rise of the mixed economy, the expansion of the welfare state, the East–West divide, and the North–South conflict. In each case, we find, the left–right alignment defined the opponents and framed their disagreements.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on more recent trends. Taking stock of the failure of communism and of the ascendancy of liberal democracy, Chapter 6 explains that the last two decades have been dominated by a turn to the right, both domestically and internationally. In economic

and social policy as well as in global development, market rules, economic objectives, and efficiency have prevailed over state intervention, social preoccupations, and redistribution. Chapter 7 examines how at the turn of this century the left has been gradually forced to redefine its priorities and strategies, just as the right has become more sensitive to social concerns. In these years, the left–right debate slowly entered into a phase of more open dialogue and convergence. Yet, as we will see, this long-standing opposition is unlikely to vanish any time soon.

Finally, Chapter 8 extends the implications of our argument for the study of global politics. It considers, in particular, the relevance of left and right for the interpretation of emerging issues like the politics of identity, the war on terrorism, and environmental protection. This chapter also explains how the left–right debate sheds light on the main theoretical discussions that confront the community of political scientists today.

1 A clash over equality

On August 24, 2006, the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) took a vote in Prague on the proper definition of the term "planet." Following years of intense debate, the IAU's decision was far from insignificant. As a result of the vote, Pluto lost its status as the solar system's ninth planet, and was reclassified in the diplomatically named category of "dwarf planets." The dispute over Pluto's nature, which had been raging for years, had become a major source of embarrassment for astronomers in 2005, when Michael Brown, a scientist working at the California Institute of Technology, discovered Xena, a celestial body larger than Pluto. Although it was passed with a clear majority, the IAU's vote did not stop the controversy between opponents and fans of Pluto. While the discoverer of Xena himself maintained that the IAU decision was "the right scientific choice," astronomer Alan Stern of the Southwest Research Institute in Colorado – who had sold the US Congress on the idea of funding a space mission to the "last planet" – declared for his part: "This is a sloppy, bad example of how science should be done."[1] Given that Stern's dissatisfaction was shared by several of his colleagues, the IAU is likely to reconsider its definition of "planet" at its next triennial meeting, in 2009. The "Pluto war" is not over yet.

To some, the Pluto controversy may seem odd or atypical. Debates about definitions, however, are far from unique. There is no scientific agreement either on a question as fundamental as "when does human life begin?" In *Roe* v. *Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that established the right to abortion in the United States, Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote the majority opinion, explained that "when

[1] Govert Schilling, "Pluto: Underworld Character Kicked Out of Planetary Family," *Science*, vol. 313, September 1, 2006, 1214–15; Tom McNichol, "Beyond Cool: NASA Cost-Cutters Want to Kill a Pioneering Probe to the Ice-Cold Edge of the Solar System. First They Have to Reckon with the Pluto Underground," *Wired*, vol. 9, no. 4, April 2001, 116–28.

those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer." The Court ruled on different grounds, arguing that the mother's interest should be the first consideration in the first trimester of pregnancy, while the state's interests in protecting the unborn would prevail in the third.[2] It is doubtful that the progress of human knowledge will ever lead to a definitive, universally accepted answer to this difficult question. If anything, progress raises even more uncertainties of this type – concerning at what point clinical death should be declared, for instance. Reaching consensus on definitions does not become easier as we move from natural to social objects. What is a democracy? What is a just war? What is pornography? Who should be counted as poor? Where does Europe end? Is Québec a nation? All of these questions are matters for deliberation and debate.

Controversies about definitions are ubiquitous, in all fields of human knowledge, for two reasons. First, reality is not made of categories. We make up categories and apply them as best as we can to a world that is basically continuous, a seamless web of facts and events.[3] Second, naming something is also taking a stand. "Every name," writes Deborah Stone, "is a symbol, not the thing itself, and in the choice of names lies judgment, comparison, evaluation, and above all the potential for disagreement."[4] This does not mean that our discourses are pure inventions, totally disconnected from the "real world." What we say may be more or less accurate, or more or less supported by arguments and evidence. It means, rather, that in a social context, it matters whether Pluto is considered a planet, and whether life is said to begin in the first trimester of pregnancy.

People always debate about the proper categories and about their definitions. We care deeply about such debates because they provide

[2] United States Supreme Court, *Roe* v. *Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

[3] "Disputes about the truth of classification," writes Ian Hacking, "precede anything we now call science . . . There is nothing in the world but individual entities. Classes, groups, genera, are a fiction." Ian Hacking, "Inaugural Lecture: Chair of Philosophy and History of Scientific Concepts," *Economy and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, February 2002, 1–14, p. 5; see also Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, revised edition, New York, W. W. Norton, 2002, pp. 378–79.

[4] Stone, *Policy Paradox*, p. 310.

the narratives through which we see the world, our communities, and ourselves. We care as well because debates contribute to change the world. As we name and rename our environment, we shape our cultures and our social relations. In recent years, these discursive processes have been key preoccupations for constructivists, a group of scholars who call attention to the importance of ideas and language in politics. To further advance the constructivist project, however, analysts must better take into account the content and structure of social debates, as well as the dialectical nature of political interactions. This implies keeping in mind that disagreements are part of the human condition. In political life, no disagreement is as profound as the left–right opposition. It is to this quintessential political debate that we can now turn.

Left and right in global politics

The right begins for us much further left than you think. (Édouard Vaillant, socialist member of the National Assembly, Paris, 1907).[5]

From the beginning of the modern era, the public sphere in which social and political debates take place has had supranational dimensions. The ideas of the Enlightenment, for instance, circulated across borders, in both Europe and America. Yet, as the philosopher Charles Taylor explains, it is only recently that the public sphere "has been imaginatively expanded to include all the (properly behaved) members of the global community."[6] In this sense, political debates are increasingly global. Of course, the world public sphere does not encompass all possible debates, many issues being mostly of concern for politics on a smaller scale. Its existence, however, provides every debate with a global connection. More specifically, the world public sphere creates a shared background and vocabulary, which helps to bridge local, national, continental, and global deliberations.

Current analyses of world politics note this public sphere, but they are rarely attentive to the structure of global deliberations. If anything,

[5] Marcel Gauchet, "La droite et la gauche," quoted in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire. III. Les France: 1. Conflits et partages*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p. 417 (our translation).
[6] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 179.

they tend to assume that current debates lack coherence, compared to those that prevailed in the past. Globalization, write David Held and Anthony McGrew, disrupts "established paradigms and political orthodoxies," and leaves us without "coherent readings" or clear political "responses."[7] This diagnostic is not new. At the beginning of the 1990s, Anthony Giddens was already arguing that globalization had emptied the terms "right" and "left" of much of their meaning, each political perspective being "in its own way exhausted."[8] In a similar fashion, Zaki Laïdi concluded that the end of the Cold War had engendered a "world without meaning," devoid of clear collective projects to debate. In the past, proposed the French scholar, sharp cleavages between the left and the right, between the East and the West, and between the North and the South gave rise to well-defined claims and identities, and they generated coherent understandings of the world. With the disappearance of these cleavages, social actors would now lack common references, and fight instead over identity, religion, and culture, engaging in conflicts condemned to be endless and unsolvable.[9]

We argue, on the contrary, that today's global debates can best be understood as an expression of the old conflict between the left and the right. After all, what is it that divides partisans and adversaries of globalization if it is not a left–right conflict over markets, public intervention, and social justice? Interestingly, after they announced the end of traditional politics as a consequence of globalization, Held, Giddens, and Laïdi all attempted to define new objectives for the contemporary left. Held, for instance, seeks to define a global social democratic alternative, to establish a cosmopolitan common ground.[10] Likewise, Anthony Giddens, who was the foremost proponent of a "Third Way" beyond the left and the right, now wants to move "beyond where third way thinking has got so far," and to define a new

[7] David Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002, p. 2.
[8] Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994, pp. 78 and 251.
[9] Zaki Laïdi, *A World without Meaning: The Crisis of Meaning in International Politics*, London, Routledge, 1998.
[10] David Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, pp. 163–67; Held and McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, pp. 130–31.

progressive agenda for the world.[11] Zaki Laïdi also has his own proposals for a renewed left, better able to address globalization and modernity.[12] Fascinated by the social and political transformations of their era, these authors first announced the end of old cleavages and ideas, then identified a new division around globalization, which they found insufficiently rigorous, and ended up trying to reinvent the distinction between the left and the right. The left–right divide, however, may have been there all along.

Few notions, indeed, are as ubiquitous as the idea of a division between the left and the right in politics. 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.[13] In most countries, political life is defined by this dichotomy. The left and the right have distinct views on globalization and they have reacted differently to the war in Iraq. The two sides also take different positions on nuclear energy, on the future of the European Union, and on same-sex marriage. The right now dominates in American and French politics, while the left has come back to power in Latin America and India. Everywhere, newspapers analyze the respective stands, strengths, and divisions of the two camps, to evaluate where a country, or the world, seems to be heading.

Ronald Inglehart suggests quite appropriately that the core meaning of the distinction "is whether one supports or opposes social change in an egalitarian direction."[14] The question, however, may be more complex than it seems. Indeed, if there are emotional disagreements about what constitutes a planet, one can easily imagine that there is no consensus on what exactly are the left and the right in politics.

Many political scientists actually think that the two terms are better left undefined, as vague notions that play useful roles in political life

[11] Anthony Giddens, "Introduction. Neoprogressivism. A New Agenda for Social Democracy," in Anthony Giddens (ed.), *The Progressive Manifesto*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003, pp. 1–6.
[12] Zaki Laïdi, *La gauche à venir: politique et mondialisation*, Paris, Editions de l'Aube, 2001.
[13] Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 292–93.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 293.