Politics beyond the Mainstream research group

Rationale

The ‘mainstream’ has become a central concept in our post-political order, where liberal democracies cater for the moderate middle ground, removed from the extremism of both left and right, and from the perceived dangers associated with the margins of politics. According to often implicit normative assumptions, the mainstream is where common sense lies - the political trajectory best placed to govern our societies and enforce human rights. It is the best compromise, preventing excess, be it totalitarian or democratic, and minimising the dictatorial cravings of the few, who in their radical idealism, risk putting in jeopardy our democratic achievements, symbolised by the right to vote and human rights. ‘Mainstream’ normative values, it is also argued, act as a check against the passionate and irrational moods of the masses, thus preventing our complex and inter-dependent economic systems from falling prey to populist discourses. In short, they are the guardian of the liberal consensus – what some have termed the ‘end of history’. Of course, in the current economic and political climate, this understanding of the ‘mainstream’ leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, who defines the mainstream and where does the centre lies? Are alternative, dissenting voices to the mainstream norm necessarily a democratic rejection? Is the mainstream in fact ‘real’, or is it what Antonio Gramsci called a state of hegemony, whereby an elite has successfully implemented ‘a strategy aiming at the production of consent, as opposed to coercion’? If so, is it possible to either do away with it, or move its boundaries? If the mainstream is always contested and in a state of flux, does this movement represent a democratic adjustment – what Margaret Canovan famously coined the ‘redemptive side’ of democracy – or can it be more akin to a kneejerk reaction, a clumsy protest? These questions have no clear-cut answers, yet research of this fundamental source of contention is essential, because in many contemporary liberal democracies, the mainstream appears to be losing ground to the various movements posited beyond its borders. The growing electoral success of the extreme right and the rise in Euroscepticism across EU nation states, are just two examples of the mounting popular discontent, impacting on the mainstream in terms of policy and rhetoric. Similarly, the rise of alternative visions on the left situated in a global context, as exemplified by movements in Europe, South America and beyond, such as Occupy, the Indignados, the landless in Brazil and environmental activists has placed strain on the liberal democratic mainstream.

In this context, the Research Group ‘Politics beyond the Mainstream’ will bring together members of staff interested in politics outside and/or beyond the mainstream, as well as those researching mainstream politics itself, its creation, defence and contestation. Therefore, the group will comprise colleagues working in a variety of relevant areas such as extreme/radical politics (both left and right), terrorism, populism, Euroscepticism, immigration, ethno-regional groups, alternative social movements and political organisations, race and gender, discourse and socio-political identities, radical political and IR theory, political participation and the media (social and traditional) – in short areas where PoLIS and the University of Bath have a critical mass with clear research strengths.

For more detail, please email Dr Aurelien Mondon