

# CONVERSATIONS WITH ALAIN DENEAULT

**Pascale Geoffroy, *Mouton noir*: What led you to write your many books denouncing the flaws of the system?**

A feeling that something was missing—a strong impression that a specific critical discourse, on a serious issue, was lacking in public life. This is the main motivation for writing an essay. After that comes your level of competence, in relation to the urgency of addressing the issue. You are not always in the best position to address it, but those who are in such a position often turn out to be part of the problem – like all those experts and academics who are in the pay of, or complicit with, organizations profiting from a toxic situation. So the question is to know if you can make an effort to become competent enough to deal with the issue adequately, within your limits. This is how *Paul Martin & compagnies* (VLB Éditeur) was published in 2004. Paul Martin at the time had just become Prime Minister of Canada, even though he had been Minister of Finance for many years while also owning shares in a shipping company that made active use of tax havens. This is why *Noir Canada* in 2008, and later *Paradis sous terre* [in English *Imperial Canada Inc.*], explicitly focused on Canada’s astonishing mining and industrial presence in Africa. Canada has abusively appropriated the title of “friend” of the continent, while the savings of Canadian citizens are used to help fund a gigantic plundering operation in the South. Then, from 2010 to 2016, my work involved pointing out the fundamental role played by tax havens in subjecting traditional states to high finance and big industry, under a corrupt, worldwide business regime based in ultra-permissive jurisdictions. These books were published by Écosociété in Quebec, and Rue de l’Échiquier and La Fabrique in France. [Three of them are or will be available in English as *Offshore: Tax Havens and the Rule of Global Crime*, *Canada: A New Tax Haven*, and *Legalizing Theft*]. Meanwhile, the books I have published with Lux – *Gouvernance*, *Médiocratie*, and *Politiques de l’extrême centre* – are intended to show the hollowness of the hackneyed management terms that pollute today’s institutional discourse.

**Rafal Naczyk, *Alter Échos*: What is “mediocrity”?**

When we want to name what is superior, we say “superiority,” and what is inferior is known as “inferiority.” But when we want to name what is average, we do not say “averageness”: the word is “mediocrity.” Mediocrity relates to what is average. A “mediocre” person is not someone who is utterly incompetent – he is not a scatterbrain who can’t show up on time, make a photocopy, or say hello to the right person at the right time. But neither is he a person who has initiative, strong beliefs, courage, or stature. This is a person who is functional and submissive. Being like this is not a problem. “Mediocre” is not a pejorative word: we are all “mediocre” in some way. “Mediocrity” becomes a problem when we find ourselves in a system that tells us that we have to be resolutely average citizens: neither completely incompetent to the point where we are unable to function, nor competent to the point where we know the strength of our critical power. “Mediocrity” is the average stage that has been raised up and granted authority. It is the average as an imperative requirement, even when we could aspire to something better.

**Alessandro Censi, *L’Unione Sarda*: Is our era truly the era of the mediocre at the social, political, and economic levels?**

Mediocratic modes have perfected themselves so that they are now efficiently applied on a very large scale. The current standardization of practices, operating modes, terminologies, even tastes and sensations, is unprecedented in history. The Treaty of Westphalia signed in the mid-seventeenth century, at the end of the Thirty Years’ War, pitted states in competition against each other; from then on, the bureaucratic development of public structures helped lay the groundwork for this standardization. Then the industrial revolution, with its frightening division of scientific labour, made crafts into jobs, artisans into workers, skill into execution. Later, after the Second World War, the growth of multinational companies in many sectors encouraged the development of processes and methods that ensured their administrative control throughout the world. Finally, financialization has blindly emphasized and consolidated this evolution. If we look at the word “mediocre” and how it has evolved in terms of philology, from La Bruyère’s *Characters* in

the seventeenth century to Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and, in the twentieth century, Lawrence Peter's sociological intuitions and the social observations of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, we see writers shifting from a set of characterological and individual questions to another set of questions that are social and institutional.

**Mathieu Dejean, *Les Inrockuptibles*: How did the mediocre take power, according to you? Since when have people been rewarded for being average?**

There are two branches to the genealogy of this appropriation of power. One goes back to the nineteenth century, at a time when crafts were progressively being made into jobs. This implied that work was standardized, meaning that it became an average thing. A standardized average was required to organize large-scale production on the alienated basis with which we are familiar, and that Marx has described with great penetration. This average work has been made into something disembodied, that keeps on losing meaning, and that is no more than a "means" for capital to grow and workers to subsist.

The other aspect of the appropriation of power involves the transformation of politics into a culture of management. Fundamental principles, consistency, and general directions have gradually been abandoned in favour of approaches based on circumstance. Actors must now be "partners" in projects based on well-defined interests, that do not include any reference to the common good. Under this system, we become citizens who "play the game" and submit to all kinds of practices foreign to the fields of belief, competence, and initiative. This art of managing is called "governance."

These two phenomena led twentieth-century thinkers to note that mediocrity is no longer a marginal affair, involving a certain number of not very clever people who are nonetheless able to make themselves useful: it has now become a system. Professors, administrators, and artists are forced to comply with hegemonic ways of doing things in order to survive. At the political level, this means that every issue is analyzed from a "problem-solving" perspective. The current situation in France is a perfect example: in response to terrorist attacks, the response is to blast through, looking for a surgical solution, instead of stepping back and being more subtle, which is what the situation requires.

**Michel Abescat, *Télérama*: At the origins of mediocracy, you also insist on the increasing power of “governance.”**

Governance is the political aspect of mediocracy’s genesis. This harmless-sounding term was introduced by Margaret Thatcher and her collaborators in the 1980s. Under the guise of ensuring the sound management of public institutions, the idea was to apply to the state the supposedly more efficient management methods used by corporations. Governance, which since then has enjoyed great success, is a neoliberal way of managing the state under which public services are deregulated and privatized, while institutions are modified to meet the needs of corporations. We have moved from politics to governance, and governance tends to be confused with democracy when in fact they are opposites. Under the regime of governance, we are all invited to become cooperative little partners, sharing the same average vision of the world within one single perspective, which is liberalism.

**Nicolas Monier, *Technikart*: It’s hard to speak of incompetence in the business world, since competence is so hard to assess. One can be good in one area, less so in another. You’ve raised the issue of mediocracy – what is your feeling on this topic? Can we be mediocre at work, and if so, how?**

I try to make a distinction between mediocrity and incompetence. They are not synonyms. Established power does not want utterly incapable people who don’t show up on time, are likely to ignore instructions, and are thrown off course by the idea of filling out a form. On the contrary, mediocrity comes at a cost. For lighting technicians, for instance, working on a trash TV show is very demanding: they have to meet standards, follow guidelines, and be able to work as a team. The result, however, is surprisingly poor – far more than if the person had been thinking creatively about lighting a play or a film shoot. A lot of work is involved in both situations, but the first case implies a narrowly normative set of parameters. Mediocracy consists in forcing the lighting technician to work within these norms – which prevail in that they embody the average – and to show herself, necessarily, as average, regardless of her genuine skill as a craftsperson. One can certainly be a very competent mediocre person: a person who is industrious, servile, and lacking any beliefs or

passions of their own. If this is who you are, the future is yours. Power institutions need this kind of subject as managers and directors. What they really hate is to have to deal with people who are politically and morally committed or who are deeply original in their thinking and methods. Mediocratic modes have been brought to perfection under modernity, which is why they can be efficiently applied on a very large scale. The standardization of practices, ways of operating, terminologies, maybe even tastes and sensations, is unequalled in history.

**Victoria Gairin, *Le Point*: According to you, the expert is the figure that best embodies mediocracy. Isn't this a paradox? We tend to think that experts bring society to a higher level.**

Edward Said is a theorist who has dealt with this paradox head-on. He makes a distinction between the expert and the intellectual. The expert, as we think of him today, is too often a person who works within a given set of parameters, and who knowingly disguises discourses based on interest. He represents the powers that hired him in his getup as a disinterested scientist. Intellectuals, on the contrary, study questions that they find interesting in themselves, without any particular sponsor. The expert does not simply give people his knowledge to provide them with tools for deliberation: he sets up an ideological position as an objective referent – as a provider of knowledge. At the university, students now face a real question: do they want to become experts or intellectuals? This is assuming, of course, that the university, which is now extensively subsidized by corporations, is still capable of making this choice possible. More and more often, expertise means selling your brain to those who will use it to make a profit.

**Léontine Bob, *Technikart*: What are the unmistakable signs of an extreme centrist?**

From a moral point of view, extremism means refusing to tolerate everything that is not oneself. The extreme centre is an ideological and communications strategy that sets up as “normal,” “pragmatic,” “levelheaded,” “reasonable,” “rational,” or even “necessary” and “true,” a discourse that is actually radical and whose optional nature is denied. An interest-based discourse, destructive in terms of ecosystems, deeply unjust in terms of social issues, and imperialist in terms of geopolitics, is dressed up in the finery of reason, hope, and necessity. Ideological marketing prevails over political thought. A political program presented as a requirement of nature, as if it obeyed fundamental laws, no longer attempts to locate the cursor somewhere on the left/right axis, but tries to suppress the axis in the name of necessity. Once this program has been presented as inevitable, a subservient press can assign negative labels (“dreamer,” “irresponsible,” “paranoid,” “populist”) to everyone who fails to endorse it. What is this program? Bigger profits for multinationals, bigger dividends for shareholders, greater access to tax havens, fewer rights for workers, less money for public services. Citizens see public institutions dwindle away or dissolve, leaving them alone to face their destiny in a world no longer ruled by politics, but by corporate “governance.”

**Aude Lancelin, *Journal du dimanche*: In contrast to the political black hole of the “neither left nor right,” which absorbs all kind of scattered forces, the far right has absolutely no fear of being different and asserting the singularity that makes it irreconcilable with others. What does the increasing power of the far right tell us?**

The extreme centre wants to abolish the left/right axis and replace it with a position peremptorily presented as levelheaded, rational, and necessary. This was effective for a time, but it is a dangerous game leading to a new form of alternation, which was unfortunately illustrated by the presidential election in France in 2017. The new system does not pit the left against the right: it pits proponents of a power that is economically violent, but that does provide a few marginal concessions for various constituencies, against those who are nostalgic for a state that openly

asserts its brutal origins. Elections are now chiefly a matter of defining what degree of violence is acceptable on the part of a state that is subordinate, in all cases, to the power of finance, business, and industry. On this issue, the far right is lazy, no longer even defending the status quo, but actually advocating for the death wish. Its aim is to reduce France to its essence, an essence on which foreign elements are supposed to be living as parasites. If only these parasites were removed, France would find its truth again and could sink into the deep sleep of those who are at one with themselves. However, not all of those who vote for the Front national are impelled by such morbid fantasies. Lynda Dematteo, an anthropologist specializing in these issues, explains that many of the people who vote for such extremist parties do so in a carnivalesque spirit, hoping to bring down the public institutions that they despise. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, even though he is a good, well-behaved boy – and in some ways is not as far left as an atypical Gaullist such as François Asselineau – has always found it difficult to attract these far right voters (even though he has been courting them for a long time) because he requires a minimum degree of commitment from them. For instance, they would have to support an ecosocialist transformation of maritime technologies. This is expecting too much from these voters.

**Pierre Thiesset, *La Décroissance*: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and French President Emmanuel Macron claim to be very close. When they met at the last G7 summit, they publicized their friendship and affinities all over the Internet. How would you describe their ideology? Are they perfect representatives of what you describe as the “politics of the extreme centre”?**

The best we can do to avoid the traps laid for us by these two political clowns is to stop talking about them and pay no attention to the distractions it is their job to provide. They are instruments of the giant machine designed to help liberal ideologues gain time and exhaust their opponents. Any critique that invests in fighting them is fencing with intellectual ghosts. Is it relevant to be compulsively offended when Emmanuel Macron dares to call his “book” *Révolution*, to make fun of his preachy tones, or to denounce the way he reduces political parties and public institutions to management? Is it relevant to spend every moment criticizing the utter emptiness of Justin Trudeau’s discourse, or to be in despair because he has two second languages that he doesn’t master, and

smiling is his only dialect? What else is there to say about these scarecrows of capital, whose only purpose is to provide us with an outlet for our political anger at the end of a road that leads nowhere? The trap is to make an issue of these sorry public figures. If we do not avoid the trap, once we have had enough of Macron – it won't take long – capital will throw us another specimen from the same category, just as Macron himself replaced François Fillon, with whom he was clearly identical in relation to economic and social issues. It is far more relevant to ask who is sponsoring these two puppets. Backers have funded the current president of the French Republic so generously, and promoted him so extensively in the media, that it is not exaggerated to speak of an appropriation of the presidency. It is also relevant to remind people of the Liberal Party of Canada's consubstantial identification with Bay Street, in Toronto, where Canada's financial establishment is located. The public policies defended by Emmanuel Macron in France in terms of taxation or the destruction of labour laws, and the absence of any political project on the part of the Trudeau government in Canada – a government dedicated to endorsing the reactionary decisions made by the preceding Conservative government – are the work of powerful industrial, commercial, and financial actors who can pay whatever it costs to provide a party with the presidency or a legislative majority. Best, then, to go directly to these actors. This is what the Congolese did when they made an appropriate decision to demonstrate directly in front of the headquarters of Total, the French-based energy multinational, in order to denounce France's unwavering support for the violent and corrupt regime of Denis SassouNguesso. Quebec students did the same in 2012 when they systematically demonstrated in Montreal's financial district to protest government decisions. A better diagnosis will lead, over time, to even better strategies.

The two buffoons are also the symptom of a constituency that has broken with any system of political values. In France, those who voted for Emmanuel Macron and the political fantasy embodied in *En Marche!* are mostly people for whom the private sector and its operating modes are a framework that can never change. Life is experienced through the alienating myth of the individual. This is a being who is accountable only to himself and can act only within one basic element: the private corporation (this may mean that the person incorporates himself, or

works for a public institution that has taken on all the characteristics of a private entity.) Macron's voters, whether they supported him in the first or second round, are also "good people," people who choose to display feelings that are morally *good*. This attitude, which remains worthy, is ideologically appropriated by *En Marche!* as a "political corporation" and framed in the shallow vocabulary of business management, so that once we are engaged in this perspective, we are invited to invest our hopes, our joys, our moral feelings and all our good faith exclusively in the world of work as seen from a liberal point of view. This is where the radiant perspectives of Macron and Trudeau converge. Their old, deeply ideological, and intellectually shabby discourses are displayed in a "positive" way, and this is enough to make them sound like music to those who will play them again in their own environments with a deep belief in their own good faith.

Nothing is more favourable to these two sunny young vendors of felicity than to find themselves confronted with sour-faced opponents – Marine Le Pen or Stephen Harper – who are perfect foils for them. As symptoms, France's sudden and unusual interest in a Canadian Prime Minister (it is unlikely that Trudeau senior was ever given as much attention despite his greater calibre), and the curiosity expressed by the entire planet for a character as obviously insignificant as Emmanuel Macron, say a lot about the predominance of image over thought today.

**Clément Arbrun, *Les inrockuptibles*: In a *Guardian* opinion piece, journalist Jesse Brown said Justin Trudeau was "the political equivalent of a YouTube puppy video," more likely to provide entertainment on social media than play the part of a strong, distant political leader. Is this part of the modernization of political communications?**

This is not true – puppies are far more interesting. And the "modernization" in question has been happening for a long time. In 1961, American historian Daniel J. Boorstin denounced "pseudo-events," the omnipresence of insignificant "celebrities," and the sanctioning of constraints imposed by television on social life. Günther Anders had already thought about this in Germany. It is distressing to see that such old tricks still work so well. People love Justin Trudeau because he lets himself be photographed rather than speak. When he has to take a position on something without having a text to read from, you know his

advisors are chewing their nails. He rarely utters a sentence that includes even one subordinate clause: we are served a laborious string of clichés. French speakers see Trudeau as the son of a bilingual family who grew up mostly in English, and who finds it difficult to express any idea fluently in French. But the same is true for English speakers – a professor of political science once told me that they find Trudeau hard to follow because he is a French speaker who keeps searching for words in English. Actually, his native language is communication-speak and what he is searching for are the words that communicators have prepared for him. This gives him a remarkable plasticity, especially since his party, the Liberal Party, views society essentially as a series of fragmented constituencies. His strategists are interested in a sociology without a society. The federal government maintains the status quo, providing de facto endorsement for years of pro-business policies implemented by the previous Conservative government. This tells us how wide is the extreme centre – a position that presents as normal, pragmatic, necessary, and responsible policies that we have every reason to challenge since they are in fact deeply ecocidal, unjust, and imperialist.

**Olivier Petitjean, *L'Observatoire des multinationales* website: Are the Trump phenomenon and the rise of the far right in Europe in some ways the consequence of our political incapacity [as we face multinationals whose power goes beyond the scope of national sovereignty and international institutions]?**

I discuss this issue in a small work called *Politiques de l'extrême-centre*. The idea of the extreme centre is key to understanding the Trump or Le Pen phenomenon. Since the 1980s, there has been a thrust to present as normal, neutral, and pragmatic policies that are in fact extremely inegalitarian and destructive. To make them seem acceptable, these policies have been dressed up to look levelheaded and necessary. The extreme centre has deliberately sought to abolish the left/right axis and exclude all other voices. Alternation today takes place between those who are in favour of a state that is violent but civilized and those who, like Trump or Le Pen, want to return to the violent origins of the state. In other words, our only remaining established alternatives involve people who want to make us drink cod liver oil with sugar and people who will make us drink it straight: in both cases the political discourse and its basis are the same. There is no longer any discourse aimed at bringing about

deep social change. Economically, Emmanuel Macron wants to give slightly more rights to slightly more actors, but in relation to a shared corpus that is the same as for someone like Fillon. Trump, Fillon and Le Pen, on the other hand, are overtly violent, and they're comfortable with that. Ultimately, you might say that voters now choose between candidates – identified by tendentious media as suitable for high office – who differ according to their degree of violence; there is no option to choose between projects that are different in nature.

**Natalia Wysocka, *Métro* (Montreal edition): Do you think that throughout this US election campaign, too many people have remained stuck in a posture of indignation?**

We face a technocracy that cloaks traditional symbolic violence with a kind of softness and legitimacy. But what emerges from [Donald Trump's] violent statements is a prefiguration of fascism. This is someone who tells his opponent [Hillary Clinton] that if he were in power, she would be either jailed or murdered – someone whose comments on women are so filthy they can't even be repeated. It is surprising that the violence expressed by these politicians is seen by some voters as violence *against* the system, when they actually embody the violence *of* the system. Trump uncovers the hidden violence of the extreme centre regime.

**Ralph Elawani, *Spirale*: In another recent book, the very short *Politiques de l'extrême centre*, you criticize a number of extremely specific demands adopted by one group or another. These are sensitive issues that divide people: the right to carry arms if you are a conservative, for instance, or the rights of sexual minorities if you are a "liberal." In other words, you seem to be attacking a machine that does not face any countervailing power, unlike political parties. What force can oppose a multinational? Where do you locate yourself in relation to liberalism? Is liberalism simply an acceptable representation of capitalism? Is it simply a tool that can be used to make us swallow anything?**

Liberalism consists of a variety of ways of thinking about social organization, using freedom as a basic premise. And yet, to a far greater degree, members of the body politic actually manage themselves (and are aware of doing so) in terms of public constraints, and the conditions that make freedom possible can be identified with these constraints. The question of freedom chiefly arises in relation to one's status within the

collective debate on the constraints that the group wants to impose on itself to organize social life. In *Politiques de l'extrême centre*, I wanted to emphasize the fact that in North America, the left/right spectrum is subordinate to a fantasy of “freedom.” The left/right axis extends from left libertarians to American-style “liberals,” then to French-style liberalism, then to ultraliberalism and the right-wing libertarian movement, and so on. The fantasy of “freedom” provides us with a negative view of social constraints. We are missing the boat, because this leads us to exclude the parameters and conditions of freedom. As soon as we stop thinking in these terms, it becomes apparent that this vague idea of freedom as an ideal that should be fought for, and that should never encroach on the freedom of others, is a dead end; the point is to think about the whole social context in which the principle of freedom is applied.

**Faustine Lefranc and Sylvain Derne, *Mediagonal* website: Your pamphlet *Politiques de l'extrême centre* ends with an ironic allusion to *Indignez-vous*, the short book published a few years ago by Stéphane Hessel [available in English as *Time for Outrage*]. Where Hessel says “Get indignant!”, you say “Get radical!” How can a citizens’ radicalism be asserted?**

There’s something really annoying, even depressing, about “Get indignant!”, because if we look at recent history, it is a step backwards.

Until recently the idea of *altermondialisation*, as the anti-globalization movement is generally referred to in French, had been developing. Before September 11, 2001, a geopolitical dialectic between *altermondialistes* and capitalists was emerging throughout the world. This was not some kind of absolute ideal, but it was very promising. You could sense a tendency for the *altermondialiste* movement to grow: so many people are suffering as capitalism deploys throughout the world with almost nothing to stop it. But now, some events have been used – let’s say it like that – to create a tailormade enemy: the Arab, the Muslim, *the terrorist*. So now we are waging “war on terror,” which is ridiculous because the terrorist is not a historical figure, but someone who has a particular strategy. We are at war against a strategy, while war itself is another strategy. A strategy is at war with another strategy – we don’t know what we are talking about! The French Prime Minister speaks of war, although the Constitution does not allow him to do so in the ad lib framework in which he found himself. For the prime minister to say he is

at war, there must be a parliamentary vote, because when the prime minister expresses himself, he is not giving his opinion in a bar – he is someone who holds an office! The Fifth Republic is not only questionable in its terms, but misunderstood in its application – and in any case, most French officials have completely forgotten what it might mean. So things are going very badly.

Beyond this digression, what is interesting about *altermondialisme* is that there was necessarily, at a basic level, an intellectual commitment on the part of those who took a position in relation to this word. (At this point, we are still talking about language). Being an *altermondialiste* involved two things: an idea about the state of the world economy under neoliberal globalization, which gives full power, on a certain scale, to groups that no state is able to regulate; and an idea of alterity, otherness, a capacity to not return to the narrow confines of nationalism, but to develop a world based on the same principles as the Internationale. There were memories and references here.

What happens when we get to indignation? Indignation is a feeling. If we see it not as a spark plug that may cause the engine to ignite, but as an end in itself, we start competing to be indignant. This is what happened with the hundredth anniversary of Zola's *J'accuse*, in 1998: everyone produced their own personal *J'accuse*. In the same way, we had an Indignation Festival that lasted three or four years – it was all about who would be most indignant. So everyone was more indignant than everyone else, but this did not lead to anything much in terms of critical analysis. It was interesting for a while, as a point of entry; but since it did not lead to anything else, predictably, the whole thing collapsed. People are indignant, but this is a movement that leads to nothing if there is not a discourse to go along with the indignation. Stéphane Hessel did have a discourse – it was the discourse of the French National Council of the Resistance, based a certain vision of the Republic – but this was not emphasized by those who read and commented on his pamphlet. We had feelings, soulful moments... and as usual, with the help of a subservient press, Capital gained time! “Get radical” means “Get back to the actual meaning of things,” to the point where basic actions are seen to be needed.