What's it all about?

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At the end of 1994 a couple of things happened to me that have managed to keep me pretty busy since.

In October 1994 I started studying Computer Science at Trinity College Dublin. For the last 18 years, computer science has been a large part of my life. Today I'm back in Trinity working as a research computer scientist. In between times I've worked all over the world on some of the most interesting problems that I can think of: natural language comprehension, artificial intelligence, semantic modelling, complex systems analysis and on and on.

A few months later, in January 1995, I saw a documentary about Noam Chomsky in which he described himself as an anarchist. I decided that's what I was and that I was going to do something about it. I spent the next 15 years immersed in the world of leftist politics through the rise and fall of the anti-globalisation movement and the sub-culture that grew around it. This brought me into contact with some interesting and unusual ideas, movements, places, people, and situations.

What interests me, above all, is trying to understand how the complex systems around us work. The better we understand how things like brains and societies work as systems, the more likely we are to be able to affect those systems for the better. And human brains and societies are really, really complex systems - as complex as anything in the known universe. However, they are not beyond comprehension - they exhibit definite patterns of behaviour and while they are chaotic, they still have basically deterministic dynamics. The two strands of thought that have defined my adult life - computer science and leftist politics - have both provided me with analytic methods and practical experience that I have found very useful in building an understanding of how the world works and why human societies behave the way they do.

Over the last 20 years, I changed my mind many times about many things. Some of these changes of opinion had far-reaching consequences as to how I lived my life. Mostly they were gradual shifts in thinking but consistent incremental changes eventually turn into grand philosophical realignments. On occasion my evolving political

theory simply ran into reality-sized walls and I had to conclude that certain of my ideas and theories were simply wrong. I have indeed been wrong many times about many things. But, I keep trying - to improve my ideas, to build better theories, to understand the world better. My accumulated lessons have, I hope, at least made me less wrong as time has gone on.

"it is easy to believe what we would like to be true - it is much harder when reality contradicts our hopes"

At this stage, my worldview and basic understanding of how human societies function is, I think, relatively robust and likely to remain fairly stable into the future. This stability stems from a painful process of questioning many of my basic assumptions to identify and eliminate those where I found myself guilty of wishful thinking. It is easy to believe what we would like to be true - it is much harder to accept when reality contradicts our hopes.

Back in 2009, I withdrew from active politics and resolved to write down the lessons that I had learned. My original intention was to simply write my conclusions down as a great big book of political theory. However, by themselves, political theories aren't worth much - it's easy to formulate abstract theories that sound plausible. It's even easy to cherry-pick facts that purport to demonstrate the theory's correctness and it is generally difficult and laborious to evaluate its worth in practice. In assessing a political theory, the journey is at least as important as the destination: the events, experiences, influences and observations that cause beliefs to be adopted and later adapted or rejected. In my case, it is also simply more honest to present my story as an experimental process full of mistakes rather than a set of definite and correct conclusions presented by an authoritative voice.

Thus, on this website, over the course of the next year, I'm going to tell my story, warts and all. I'm going to try to describe, as accurately as I can, not just what I did, but why I did it and the theoretical thoughts behind it. This is not a work of political propaganda. I am not a member of any political organisation and have significant differences with all the strands of political thought that I know of.

This website is an experiment. One of the golden rules of the Internet is that "if nobody else is doing it, it's probably a bad idea" and I'm not familiar with any successful similar efforts. Perhaps it will turn into a spectacular car-crash and all the good reasons why people tend not to expose their life stories to the Internet will come home to me with a bang. Equally possible is failure with a whimper - if I discover that the web doesn't find me all that interesting and my resolve to publish withers under the resolute indifference of the world. However, I have thought about the various problems involved in publishing such a story at some length and I have come up with a plan that has, I think, at least some chance of being successful. In my next post, tomorrow, I'll explain that plan and my basic publishing schedule for the next year.

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