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Why I Am a Left Libertarian

Jeff Riggerbach

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Many libertarians say the traditional Left/Right political spectrum has become meaningless and useless. But to the extent that this is true for them, this is only because they have allowed themselves to be befuddled by political fraud and, perhaps, by a weak background in political history. The spectrum is just as useful and meaningful as it always was, which is very. It is necessary only to clarify one's thinking about the past century in American politics to see that this is so.

But let us begin at the beginning — with what the left/right spectrum meant when it was created during the French Revolution. Murray Rothbard has written that 18th Century “liberalism” was “the party of hope, of radicalism, of liberty, of the Industrial Revolution, of progress, of humanity; the other [party] was Conservatism, the party of reaction, the party that longed to restore the hierarchy, statism, theocracy, serfdom, and class exploitation of the old order.” And according to Will and Ariel Durant in their book *The Age of Napoleon*, it was in the French Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1791 that the terms Right and Left were first used in this political sense. As the Durants tell it, when the assembly convened, the “substantial minority dedicated to preserving the monarchy ...

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occupied the right section of the hall, and thereby gave a name to conservatives everywhere.” The liberals, meanwhile, “sat at the left.” Some fifty-odd years later, after another French Revolution (the one that took place in 1848) had unseated the last French king, Louis Philippe, the same seating arrangement was revived for the newly elected legislative assembly of the Second Republic. As has often been noted, two of the newly elected legislators who sat together on the left side of that assembly in 1848 and 1849 were the free market economist and publicist for free trade Frederic Bastiat and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first man ever to publicly declare himself an anarchist.

This conception of the Left/Right political spectrum also guided the political understanding of the 20th Century libertarian activist and writer Karl Hess, who wrote forty years ago that on “the far right [...] we find monarchy, absolute dictatorships, and other forms of absolutely authoritarian rule,” while the Left “opposes the concentration of power and wealth and, instead, advocates and works toward the distribution of power into the maximum number of hands.” Just as the farthest right you can go is absolute dictatorship, Hess argued, so “[t]he farthest left you can go, historically at any rate, is anarchism — the total opposition to any institutionalized power, a state of completely voluntary social organization.”

Now, if we take this model of the Left/Right political spectrum and apply it to the politics of today, what follows from that? First, that all dictatorships, whether they are called communist or fascist, are on the Right. This is, of course, contrary to the doctrine set forth a few years ago in a ridiculous and unfortunately somewhat influential book called *Liberal Fascism*, in which the author, Jonah Goldberg, attempts to prove that fascist dictatorships like the one Adolf Hitler ran in Germany in the 1930s and early 1940s were and are Left-wing dictatorships, because they were socialist and socialism is a Leftist phenomenon). In fact, exactly the opposite is the truth of the matter. Fascism and socialism *are* the same thing, but they

speculative anthropology. And in its pages, I ran across Langer’s remark that “popular usage ... commonly confuses and degrades the real sense of words.” Yes, yes, I understand that popular usage ultimately determines the correct meanings of words. At the same time, however, there are numerous words whose popular usage is so confused and degraded that serious students and teachers of the disciplines in which those words need to be used have specified more precise meanings for them in their professional work. “Anarchy” is one of those words. “Capitalism” is another. “Selfishness” is a third. My advice to serious students of and writers on fields like political theory, economics, and ethics is to do just that — be precise with the meanings you attach to the words Right and Left as they apply to political theory. Follow the guidance of the traditional Left/Right political spectrum. Abjure the foolish attempts of people like Noah Goldberg to make sense of a modernized spectrum that puts Barack Obama and Rand Paul at opposite ends, with totalitarian communists and anarchists (who are nothing but fully consistent libertarians) to the left of Obama and with both Adolf Hitler and Gary Johnson to the right of Rand Paul. Clarify your thinking about this spectrum.

Just the other day, a libertarian wrote on Facebook that he couldn’t imagine what a Left libertarian would be since the left favors big government so the concept of a Left libertarian is a contradiction in terms. This is what the confusion and degradation that come with popular usage of ill-understood words leads to. Be clear in your own mind, at least, about what Left and Right actually refer to. Understand that we libertarians (along with those ancoms who favor a purely voluntary collectivist society) *are* the Left in the America of the early 21st Century. It is not the concept of a Left libertarian that is a contradiction in terms; it is the concept of a Right libertarian that is a contradiction in terms, that is logically incoherent, that is, in fact, laughable on its face.

alism” a package of homilies and government programs that had traditionally been presented to the American public by the Republican Party, the party of big business, the party that was in favor of capitalism but opposed to the free market. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” consisted mainly of government programs introduced by his Republican predecessor, Herbert Hoover, laced with a generous dose of the bribery of the electorate first popularized by Otto von Bismarck. Some will object that conservatives have historically been for individual liberty and free markets, but this view is uninformed and ahistorical. The Republicans who opposed the New Deal opposed it mostly because they weren’t running it themselves; they took their libertarian rhetoric from true liberals, the classical liberals who are labeled “the Old Right” today by the historically confused. These people, many of them publicists like H.L. Mencken, Albert Jay Nock, and Isabel Patterson, had joined the Republicans after being forced out of the Democratic party, apparently in the belief that only by doing so could they oppose FDR’s policies. The party adopted their rhetoric, but they employ it only to dupe that subset of the electorate that cares about such things; then, once in power, they do as FDR did, the precise opposite of what they claimed to believe in.

Many of the same libertarians who say the traditional Left/Right political spectrum is now meaningless and useless also say that, beginning in the 1930s (or, according to some, beginning around the turn of the 20th Century), the terms Left and Right changed their meaning. But in fact they did not. What happened is that popular usage of these terms changed, as more and more citizens with less and less education decided to follow the lead of confidence men in public office.

As it happens, while I was beginning work on this podcast episode a few days ago, I was reading the American philosopher Susanne Langer’s three-volume work, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, her swansong, an altogether remarkable discourse on problems in theoretical psychology and what you might call

are both products of Right-wing thinking. Socialism has never really been on the Left. The original socialists, in the early part of the 19th Century, were advocates of the ideas of Henri Saint-Simon, a former monarchist and thoroughgoing conservative, a Right-wing defender of the *ancien regime* who had decided that the industrial revolution and the end of monarchy in France had to be taken into account by those who wanted a big government to run everyone’s lives as the kings of old had done. In effect, they transferred their allegiance from the king to a hoped-for technocracy, which could engineer the perfect society by applying “scientific” ideas to the job (but only if it had unlimited power to do so).

Two brief quotations from Ayn Rand seem relevant here. “Fascism and communism,” she wrote, “are not two opposites, but two rival gangs fighting over the same territory ... both are variants of statism, based on the collectivist principle that man is the rightless slave of the state.” And, again Ayn Rand: “There is no difference between communism and socialism, except in the means of achieving the same ultimate end: communism proposes to enslave men by force, socialism — by vote. It is merely the difference between murder and suicide.” And fascism, socialism, and communism are, quite evidently, all “forms of authoritarian rule,” to refer back to Karl Hess’s words. So all three belong on the Right side of the traditional Left/Right political spectrum. Adolf Hitler was a Right-winger. So was Joseph Stalin.

And so are today’s self-proclaimed “progressives.” As Richard Ebeling pointed out recently, these “progressives” are, ideologically speaking, “the grandchildren” of Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Imperial Germany in the last two decades of the 19th Century. As Ebeling writes, “Bismarck persuaded Kaiser Wilhelm to initiate a series of government programs and controls to gain political support of the ‘working class’ population that became the basis and inspiration for the modern Welfare State around the world.” As Bismarck himself put it, “My idea was to bribe the working class, or shall I say, to win them over, to regard the state as a social in-

stitution existing for their sake and interested in their welfare. ... Life insurance, accident insurance, sickness insurance ... should be carried out by the state.”

Sound familiar? It should. For this is the song that has long been sung by both Republicans and Democrats. These two parties, widely and absurdly believed to represent Right and Left, respectively, in American politics, are in fact no more different from each other than are Lewis Carroll’s Tweedledum and Tweedledee. They differ only on which Bismarckian welfare state programs should be given the most money and on how much any given Bismarckian welfare state program should have its budget increased in any particular year. That all Bismarckian welfare state programs should enjoy annual budget increases is taken for granted by both Republicans and Democrats. Today’s America is really governed by a single conservative party with two wings: the Republicans and the Democrats; if we choose to vote for a major party candidate at all, we have no real choice but to elect someone who wants to expand government and reduce individual liberty, that is to say, a conservative, a Rightwinger. “Statism” is a synonym for conservatism. Statism is the politics of the Right.

But if both Republicans and Democrats, both conservatives and modern “liberals,” as well as self-styled “progressives,” are on the Right, who is on the Left? The answer is: libertarians. Libertarians are almost the only true leftists left in this country. When I interviewed the longtime anarcho-communist Murray Bookchin for *Reason* magazine back in 1978, he made some comments on the Left/Right political spectrum that are well worth rehearsing today. “The American left today as I know it,” he told me, “is going toward authoritarianism, toward totalitarianism. It’s becoming the real right in the United States. We don’t have an appreciable American left any more in the United States.” Before our conversation was over, however, Bookchin acknowledged that there was, after all, an American Left worthy of mention. “People who resist authority,” he said, “[people] who defend the rights of the individual, who try in

a period of increasing totalitarianism and centralization to reclaim these rights — *this* is the true left in the United States. Whether they are anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, or libertarians who believe in free enterprise, I regard theirs as the real legacy of the left, and I feel much closer, ideologically, to such individuals than I do to the totalitarian liberals and Marxist-Leninists of today.”

Bookchin was convinced, he told me, that Marxism was “the most sinister ... form of totalitarianism. ... I don’t think,” he said, “that the Soviet Union and China are accidents, aberrations; I think they follow from Marxism-Leninism. I think that Leninism comes out of Marx’s basic convictions.” Still, he said, “I believe in a libertarian communist society.” On the other hand, Bookchin added quickly. “I believe that any attempt on the part of a libertarian communist society to abridge the rights of a community — for example, to operate on the basis of a market economy — would be unforgivable, and I would oppose the practices of such a society as militantly as I think any reader of your publication would. If [a libertarian communist society] assumed any totalitarian forms, any authoritarian forms whatever, I would oppose that. And not only that: I would join your [free market] community in fighting it. ... If socialism, which is what I call the authoritarian version of collectivism, were to emerge, I would join your community. I would migrate to your community and do everything I could to prevent the collectivists from abridging my right to function as I like. That should be made very clear.”

In other words, what Bookchin was calling for was voluntary communism.

Some libertarians are in the habit of saying, “We libertarians are neither Right nor Left; we are libertarians.” But no matter how emphatically they thump their chests while saying this, they’re wrong. They have allowed themselves to be deceived and misled by a political confidence game foisted on the American electorate beginning in the 1930s, when an opportunistic demagogue named Franklin Delano Roosevelt began passing off as the newest kind of “liber-