



Watching Our Language: The Left-Right Language Barrier

This occurs to me when I hear many arguments about Left versus Right. For example, it's not uncommon for conservatives and liberals to debate whether groups such as the Nazis and Italian fascists were of the Left or Right. Of course, it's not hard to figure out who takes what position! What, however, is the truth?

Some will say that you can recognize the "Right" based on racial and nationalistic ideology, but the fact is that there simply is no unique correlation between groups which textbooks have labeled as rightist and such beliefs. For example, Italian fascism — and the ideology was born in Italy — never had a racial or ethnic component. And this changed only a few decades after its birth when, pandering to Hitler, Benito Mussolini enacted some anti-Jewish laws during the waning days of his regime. Even so, these measures were condemned at the time as *un-fascist*.



Then there was Francisco Franco in Spain. While labeling him a fascist is more than a stretch, it is fair to say that he was on the Right, as he was a traditional monarchist. Yet he certainly had no racial agenda. And the same can be said about the man who patterned himself after Franco, Augusto Pinochet of Chile. On the other hand, socialist Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe is well-known for his oppressive racial policies.

Of course, all the supposedly "rightist" men I just mentioned *were* nationalistic. But so were the communist Soviets and Chinese, and so are the present-day pseudo-communist Chinese and the old-line reds the North Koreans. The fact is that nationalism, a form of tribalism, is man's *default*, his norm all throughout history. Why, in the Bible itself we see how peoples such as the Samaritans, Jews, and others exhibited group patriotism and looked down on one another, yet no one even today thinks of labeling them Right or Left or considers it unusual. What is unusual is the rather odd anomaly known as the internationalism of contemporary Western pseudo-elites (and do you want to wager on what will be the norm 100 years hence?).

Of course, getting back to racial/ethnic agendas, it could be pointed out that as an example of elevating your group above others — and since nations typically have been defined by race and/or ethnicity — nationalism is *at least* a first cousin to ethnic and racial pride. But all this means is that most groups of every political stripe have kinship with such pride.

So the Right-Left picture is quite confusing, and the reason why is simple: They are provisional terms, as their definitions change from time to time and place to place. Thus, when we hear Left or Right, we



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must remember that political location is the same as physical location: We must ask, left or right of *what*?

The political sense of the terms originated with the French Revolution, with a rightist being one who wanted to preserve the monarchy and a leftist being one who wanted to establish a republic. Of course, in our time and place, those considered on the right are *Republicans*, ironically, and our ever-so-rare monarchists usually occupy institutions.

Now, some of the more thoughtful among us have realized how lacking our relative political terminology is and have promulgated a more logical way of classifying man's ideologies. They say that the spectrum shouldn't be viewed as Right-Left but, rather, as anarchy-totalitarianism. They point out that every government offers a certain amount of freedom — or, if you're a pessimist, you could say it squelches a certain amount — and this determines where it is on the spectrum. Of course, by these lights, regimes such as Stalin's and Hitler's wouldn't find themselves on the opposite ends of a spectrum but side-by-side, fraternal twins of tyranny. The spectrum is a perfect barometer of freedom, just what you'd expect to be born of liberty-oriented American minds. It also has a defect, however — one I'll address later.

Yet because many people will insist on Left-Right definitions, let's explore the matter a bit further. Because Right and Left are provisional terms, as their definitions vary based on time and place, we should understand what they mean in our time and place. Put simply, in contemporary America, the Right favors small government while the Left wants a large one. Note that I'm not here and now making a value judgment; I realize that liberals will say that they want a government big enough to provide for the poor and that the Right is indifferent to their plight, just as conservatives will say that they fear a government big enough to take everything you've got and that the Left has a control fetish. I'm simply stating a fact, and one that brings us to a certain language barrier. When liberals define Nazism and fascism as rightist, they are using textbook definitions that, as I've explained, are themselves contradictory. As for conservatives, they often are using the *current working American definitions* of Left and Right. And, by that standard, any big government — be it Soviet, Nazi, Italian fascist or something else — is *by definition* leftist.

In saying this, I'm not right now trying to tweak liberals; I realize they recoil at the thought of being lumped in with Nazis. For my part, although our provisional terminology is often useful to identify who's who and what's what in the here and now, we could limit the use of left and right to turn signals, directions, and boxing rings. I'm simply pointing out that unless "liberals" and "conservatives" (and these are provisional terms, too) understand the relative and fluid nature of the political terminology they're using, they can argue till they're blue in the face. They'll always be talking past each other, as they speak a different language while debating in the same one.

Now, when I made the point about the Left=big-government classification recently with a politically oriented young man, he replied that he wasn't using the American definitions of Left and Right but rather the world's. The problem is, what would this be? Usually when people say this, they're not actually thinking of the world but of Western Europe, which, provisionally speaking, is to the "left" of us. Yet it should be noted that this changes nothing, as the Left=big government/Right=smaller government definitions hold across the West. It should also be noted that the West is hardly the world. What is the understanding of Left and Right in Russia? China? Zambia? Saudi Arabia? Morocco? Of course, insofar as the rest of the globe has accepted Western-born political terminology, the understanding may be the same. But the point is that a world of understandings is a lot to factor into



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the equation.

Moreover, the terminology would still be a relative thing, as the world is always changing. Besides, if we're going to consider all places when defining time-and-place terminology, why not consider all times? We could then factor in the French Revolution definitions of Right and Left, and who knows? Since we all eschew monarchies and believe in having a republic, maybe we're all leftists!

If you're dizzy by now after being turned left and right, right and left six ways to Super Tuesday, I've done my job. The point is that using relative terms when absolutism is needed, as if they had transcendent meaning, is silly and authors confusion. There is a better way.

This brings me to the defects of the anarchy-totalitarianism spectrum. It certainly isn't relative, as anarchy is anarchy and totalitarianism is totalitarianism no matter the time or place. The problem is that it doesn't provide enough data.

The typical Left-Right-spectrum advocate focuses on the details of governance, tends to get them wrong, and downplays the significance of tyranny when classifying regimes (a *textbook* Left-Right classification system tells us little about the amount of freedom a government allows). The anarchy-totalitarianism spectrum is, again, a perfect barometer of freedom; the problem is that it is merely quantitative, not *qualitative*. What is the nature of the liberties denied or allowed? For example, do the government's laws remove social or economic freedom? Is sodomy, spanking children, or something else outlawed? Obviously, even a government of just a few laws can be bad if they're the wrong laws.

There is an obvious answer to this problem. At the end of the day, there isn't Left and Right or liberal and conservative. And, even though we certainly want neither anarchy nor totalitarianism, that shouldn't be the focus, either. You see, freedom and government, of the right types and in the right measure, take care of themselves if we focus on something else: the true and untrue.

A good government recognizes Absolute Truth and puts it into action insofar as doing so is its legitimate domain — and it does nothing to violate it. The West understood this at one time, back when we spoke not of Left and Right, of things meaningless without a point of reference, but of *the* point of reference: orthodoxy. Sure, man's conception of Truth wasn't always entirely accurate, but he understood that it existed. He grasped that the "center" wasn't defined by the consensus beliefs of the people, which could be and often have been mistaken, but by Truth. And error wasn't defined by departure from the Left or Right, but by departure from that true center. It had a name, too: "Heterodoxy" — or, dare I say, "heresy."

Oh, I know what's coming: "Who is to say what Truth is?" And this is the problem. We're so awash in moral relativism, in the idea that there is nothing transcending man with which to measure ourselves, that all we can do is compare ourselves to each other. So then, believing that "man is the measure of all things," we simply argue about what man, or group of men, will be the measure of our political terminology. Will it be one with absolute power, a handful with clout, or a democratic determination by all and sundry? But it doesn't matter. Until we realize that man cannot be his own yardstick, our political terminology will always reflect the character, meaning, and transiency of taste. We'll always just be arguing about the flavors of the day.



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