

Neither Left Nor Right

BY LEONARD E. READ

“Why, you are neither left nor right!” This observation, following a speech of mine, showed rare discernment. It was rare because I have seldom heard it made. It was discerning because it was accurate.

Most of us seem always to be reaching for word simplifications—handy generalizations—for they often aid speech. They take the place of long, drawn-out definitions. Yet, care must be exercised lest these word-shorties play semantic tricks and do a disservice to those who use them. Such, I fear, is the case with “left” and “right” when used by libertarians who, I hope to demonstrate, are neither left nor right in the accepted parlance of our day.

“Left” and “right” are each descriptive of authoritarian positions. Liberty has no horizontal relationship to authoritarianism. Libertarianism’s relationship to authoritarianism is vertical; it is up from the muck of men enslaving man. But, let’s begin at the beginning.

There was a time when “left” and “right” were appropriate and not inaccurate designations of ideological differences. “The first Leftists were a group of newly elected representatives to the National Constituent Assembly at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. They were labeled ‘Leftists’ merely because they happened to sit on the left side in the French Assembly.

“The legislators who sat on the right side were referred to as the Party of the Right, or Rightists. The Rightists or ‘reactionaries’ stood for a highly centralized national government, special laws and privileges for

unions and various other groups and classes, government economic monopolies in various necessities of life, and a continuation of government controls over prices, production, and distribution.” (Dean Russell, *The First Leftist* [Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education, 1951], p. 3.)

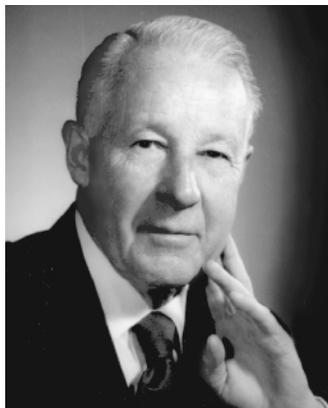
The leftists were, for all practical purposes, ideologically similar to those of us who call ourselves “libertarians.” The rightists were ideological opposites: statists, interventionists, in short, authoritarians. “Left” and “right” in France, during 1789–90, had a semantic handiness and a high degree of accuracy.

But “leftist” was soon expropriated by the authoritarian Jacobins and came to have an opposite meaning. “Leftist” became descriptive of egalitarians and was associated with Marxian socialism: communism, socialism, Fabianism.

What, then, of “rightist”? Where did it fit in this semantic reversal of “leftist”? The staff of the Moscow apparatus has taken care of that for us, and to their

advantage: Anything not communist or socialist they decreed and propagandized as “fascist.” This is by way of saying that any ideology that is not communist (left) is now popularly established as fascist (right).

Let’s take a look at Webster’s definition of fascism: “Any program for setting up a centralized autocratic national regime with severely nationalistic policies, exer-



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cising regimentation of industry, commerce, and finance, rigid censorship, and forcible suppression of opposition.”

What, actually, is the difference between communism and fascism? Both are forms of statism, authoritarianism. The only difference between Stalin’s communism and Mussolini’s fascism is an insignificant detail in organizational structure. But one is “left” and the other is “right”!

Where does this leave the libertarian in a world of Moscow word-making? The libertarian is, in reality, the opposite of the communist. Yet, if the libertarian employs the terms “left” and “right,” he is falling into the semantic trap of being a “rightist” (fascist) by virtue of not being a “leftist” (communist). This is a semantic graveyard for libertarians, a word device that excludes their existence. While those with Moscow relations will continue this theme, there is every reason why libertarians should avoid it.

One important disadvantage of a libertarian’s use of the left-right terminology is the wide-open opportunity for applying the golden-mean theory. For some twenty centuries Western man has come to accept the Aristotelian theory that the sensible position is between any two extremes, known politically today as the “middle-of-the-road” position. Now, if libertarians use the terms “left” and “right,” they announce themselves to be extreme right by virtue of being extremely distant in their beliefs from communism. But “right” has been successfully identified with fascism. Therefore, more and more persons are led to believe that the sound position is somewhere between communism and fascism, both spelling authoritarianism.

The golden-mean theory cannot properly be applied indiscriminately. For instance, it is sound enough when deciding between no food at all on the one hand or gluttony on the other hand. But it is patently unsound when deciding between stealing nothing or stealing \$1,000. The golden mean would commend stealing \$500. Thus, the golden mean has no more soundness when applied to communism and fascism (two names for the same thing) than it does to two amounts in theft.

The libertarian can have no truck with “left” or “right” because he regrets any form of authoritarian-

ism—the use of police force to control the creative life of man. To him, communism, fascism, nazism, Fabianism, the welfare state—all egalitarianism—fit the definitive description that Plato, perhaps cynically, gave us centuries before any of these coercive systems were evolved:

The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be habituated to letting him do anything at all on his own initiative; neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war as well as in the midst of peace—to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matter he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals . . . only if he has been told to do so. . . . In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and, in fact, to become utterly incapable of it.

Ascending the Degradation

Libertarians reject this principle and in so doing are not to the right or left of authoritarians. They, as the human spirit they would free, ascend—are above—this degradation. Their position, if directional analogies are to be used, is *up*—in the sense that vapor from a muckheap rises to a wholesome atmosphere. If the idea of extremity is to be applied to a libertarian, let it be based on how extremely well he has shed himself of authoritarian beliefs.

Establish this concept of emerging, of freeing—which is the meaning of libertarianism—and the golden-mean or “middle-of-the-road” theory becomes inapplicable. For there can be no halfway position between zero and infinity. It is absurd to suggest that there can be.

What simplified term should libertarians employ to distinguish themselves from the Moscow brand of “leftists” and “rightists”? I have not invented one but until I do I shall content myself by saying, “I am a libertarian,” standing ready to explain the definition to anyone who seeks meaning instead of trademarks. 