

THE PROGRESS REPORT

Left Wing and Right Wing

By Fred E. Foldvary

Nowadays the terms "right wing" and "left wing" have become blurred, but they still have some meaning. In the United States, right-wing ideas and movements are associated with traditional values, conservative ideologies, support for a strong military, resistance to legal equality or protection for disfavored minorities, censorship of expressions of sexuality and nudity, nationalism, disfavor of too much immigration, and much reverence and support for symbols of the state, such as the flag.

Left-wing ideas and movements had once been associated with a tolerance for diverse religions and races, opposition to censorship, basing morality on reason rather than tradition, favoring equality before the law, "liberal" ideologies centered on human beings whatever their nationality, a disdain for military assertiveness, and opposition to privilege. In today's era of "political correctness," the ideology of the "left" is no longer so "liberal," as some left-wing principles have become inflexible dogmas. Some "progressives" favor the censorship and suppression of expressions and ideas that cross their zero-tolerance line. For example, teaching too much Shakespeare is not tolerated because it is European and while-male oriented.

The word "liberal" has become confusing, since "liberalization" means increasing economic freedom, whereas other times a "liberal" policy in the US means favoring a greater role for government and less economic freedom for individuals. In Europe, "liberal" still means favoring liberty, whereas in the US, liberals tend to favor stronger government and less individual liberty. How did these words get so confused?

Originally, back in the 1700s, the terms "right" and "left" as applied to politics had a clear meaning. The "right" wing was based on tradition and upheld both traditional moral values and traditional institutions and power relationships. Historically, in Europe and America, power was based on the institutions of church and state, the Caucasian (white) race, the male sex, and those owning property, especially land.

The "left" arose in opposition to right-wing domination. Left-wing ideology was centered on reason, and the liberal philosophers concluded that there was in nature no reason for master/slave relationships, but rather that human beings have equal moral worth and should have equal rights. Moreover, no particular religion was based solely on reason, hence all religious practices should be equal before the law. Tradition could be observed voluntarily as custom, but should not be enforced by law. These were the original "liberal" ideas, since they favored liberty rather than authoritarian rule by church and state and the landed aristocracy.

Historically, during the 1800s the liberals in European parliaments sat on the left side of the president's chair, a habit that began in 1789 in the French Estates General, where the nobility sat on the King's right side. Thus the name "left wing."

If liberals and the left began as favoring liberty and opposed to privilege, how did they end up supporting big government and new privileges? This confusion originated in large part with the socialists of the early 1800s who failed to distinguish between treating symptoms and treating causes.

The main culprit was Jean Charles Leonard Simonde (1773-1842), known also as Sismondi. Seeing the poverty and unemployment of his time, he blamed the market economy, and proposed a government intervention and a welfare state as a remedy. Henry George would much later point out that the problem was not the market but the land tenure system based on privilege, and the tax system that penalized labor rather than sharing the rents in accord with the equality espoused by liberalism.

It was Sismondi who came up with the concepts of class struggle, the proletariat who owned nothing but their labor, and the surplus product that went to the capitalists. Karl Marx later adopted these ideas, which are now considered to be "Marxist." Sismondi split the liberals into two camps. One would continue to favor free markets and civil liberties, and the other, in their quest for equality and sympathy for workers as underdogs, went the route of socialism or the welfare state.

In Europe, it was clearer who was the ruling class, since the aristocracy, big industrialists, and landowners continued to wield power and favor right-wing policies. But the United States had no historic aristocracy, and many classically liberal ideas became encapsulated in the US Constitution, such as democracy and free speech and the market. These liberal ideas became part of American ideology and became traditional, hence also became "conservative."

So in America the "conservative" Right is split into classical liberals who favor free markets and minimal government, and the traditional authoritarians who favor enforcing traditional values and nationalist policies such as a big military and banning the burning of the US flag. The "liberal" Left is now Sismondian, favoring intervention and the welfare state, hence not truly liberal in the classical sense of favoring individual freedom.

Classical liberals in the United States thus came to call themselves "libertarians," to distinguish themselves from the Sismondian "liberals". Libertarians favor both free markets and civil liberties, basing their views on reason rather than tradition and authority. Libertarians disdain nationalism and privilege.

But most libertarians, not having read the works of Henry George, have fallen into traditional policies regarding land, favoring the allodial policy of the title holder keeping the rent, a privilege violating equality with respect to the resources of nature.

The purest classical liberals are therefore the geoists, who favor individual liberty both in economics as well as in personal life, and who recognize the equal right to the benefits of land, as manifested in the economic rent of land. This policy of "equal rights for all, privileges for none" is the true left-wing ideology, in the original sense and meaning.

But since today, the terms "liberal" and "left wing" have become blurred and co-opted by the Sismondians, both libertarians and geoists say they are neither left nor right, nor in between, but off the left-right spectrum altogether. Nevertheless, it is important to know the origins of the left/right distinctions and understand which view is "left" once the historical clutter has been cleared away.

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