

The Concepts of the Left and the Right (Online Article)

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Content

THE CONCEPTS OF THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT

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"The Left is free of sacred feelings; it has no sense of sanctity toward any existing historical situation. It takes a position of permanent revisionism toward reality, just as the Right assumes an attitude of opportunism in respect to the world as it is."

- Leszek Kolakowski, *The Concept of the Left*

What do the terms "Left" and "Right" mean? Ask somebody this question, and they will likely be at a loss about how to answer. We use these categories all the time, but we are not clear about what they mean; the distinction between the Left and the Right is unclear. This may partly explain why people often disagree about who is a leftist or not.

Given the ubiquity of the terms, it is important to clarify what they actually mean, or used to mean. I do so here, borrowing heavily from Leszek Kolakowski's excellent essay "The Concept of the Left".

Left and Right are relative terms; we can have a Left only in relation to a Right, and vice versa. We tend to situate movements and parties, and factions within movements and parties, as more or less left or right in relation to each other, without this meaning that they are on the Left or on the Right in an absolute sense. For example, we talk of the left-wing of the Democratic Party, which is to the left of the rest of the party, but we can still say that this left wing is essentially right-wing, though not as right-wing as the rest of the party.

However, the concepts Left and Right must have specific content which allows us to judge whether some movement or individual is left or right in relation to some other movement or individual. What is this content? Following Kolakowski, I would say that the concepts Left and Right are on a spectrum of utopian aspiration beyond vs opportunist adaptation to the status quo. One is more or less Left to the extent that one more or less senses and believes in the possibility of social change, and vice versa: one is more or less Right to the extent that he views the present status quo as unchangeable, adapting to it.

Kolakowski does not use the term "utopia" in the derogatory sense of "pipe dream". Utopia for him

concerns the historical possibility of realizing what ought to be (as opposed to how the world actually is in the present). To be a leftist or a utopian is to believe in the possibility, desirability and necessity of radical social transformation that will raise human well-being. The greater the possibility one recognizes for radical social transformation, the more leftist or utopian one is.

This sense of possibility is a state of consciousness that is the mental counterpart or theoretical expression of people's desire and striving towards radical change. Initially this utopian consciousness of possibility does not find expression in mass social movements and instead takes the form of individually-constructed models of how the world should be, e.g. those of Thomas More, Fourier, Saint-Simon, or Robert Owens. These models are artificial and impracticable. Gradually though this consciousness grips the masses and begins to drive their activity; it crosses from the realm of theory into the field of practical thinking and begins to guide human action. A good example of a utopian consciousness guiding masses of people to action is the Marxist socialism of the late 19th- and early 20th- centuries.

It should be noted that utopia is never realizable even if it guides popular movements. Nevertheless, it is essential because its ideals provide direction to the fight of these movements for social change. For example, socialism was the ideal the working-class movement of the late 19th- and early 20th- centuries strove to realize. It was an ideal that was not directly realizable and lacked detail, but it informed the decision-making of the leaders of the movement as the movement's long-term goal. Utopia is not a blueprint of the future, but rather a tool necessary for revolution. Of course, if a utopia is too distant from the actual historical possibilities for change that reality affords, the attempt to realize it becomes grotesque and leads to changes harmful for society.

The Left is thus characterized by a sense of human potential. It believes in the possibility of social progress and fights for it. It opposes existing reality and follows principles about what ought to and could be, regardless of what actually is in the present. In other words, the Left's principles or political ideology are based on the potential in the present for a better future, and not on what is already the case in the world. The Left believes that social relations and human nature itself are changeable, and it wants to change them for the better. It does not accept the authority of what exists, i.e. that we ought to accept some institution or widespread belief that currently exists simply because it exists, perhaps for the sake of being pragmatic. [1] For example, just because the majority of people today are nationalists does not mean that they have to be and that we should accept nationalism as inevitable.

The Right, on the other hand, is characterized by the belief that radical social change is impossible. It takes a fundamentally conservative attitude towards existing reality and portrays existing conditions as unchangeable facts, e.g. that some unemployment is inevitable or that society will always be based on the pursuit of profit because human beings are by nature profit-seekers. Because it does not believe that the present can significantly change, the Right is occupied with how best to adapt to and navigate this present, taking advantage of it as much as it can. While the Left's politics are in the service of ideas, the Right's politics are merely tactics for taking and keeping power. At best, it wants to make the existing world run more smoothly and be a bit fairer. It seeks so-called 'practical' or 'pragmatic' solutions as opposed to radical change.

One could reply here that there have been right-wing forces that aimed to radically change society, such as the Nazis. This is arguably true, though it should be noted that the Nazis left the economic structure of society basically intact and practiced fundamentally opportunist power-politics. Moreover, right-wing attempts for social transformation always aim to revert society to a previous state of its existence, not to move it forward. They want a return to the past, be it an actual or a mythical one.

From the definitions I gave it should be clear that the Left and the Right are ideological attitudes, or better yet, sensibilities, rather than sociological groups. To be on the Left or on the Right is to have a certain sensibility or orientation with regard to the possibility of social transformation. Someone who believes in this possibility is on the Left; someone who doesn't is on the Right. People, movements, and parties share this sensibility to different degrees and evince it on different issues. It is very rare that a person or group is consistently leftist on all issues. Importantly, no social group is necessarily left- or right-wing. For example, the workers or the oppressed are not necessarily on the Left; they may hold reactionary positions that the Left must oppose to remain true to its ideology. In other words, the Left is not about being in uncritical solidarity with the workers or the oppressed. It defines itself on the level of ideas, which may or may not be the ideas that the workers or the oppressed currently have.

Given that the Left is defined by its utopian goals and ideas, it cannot afford to abandon them. The Left is under constant pressure to make ideological compromises in order to gain power, but it cannot do so because it would be abandoning its reason for existence and thereby cease being the Left. Inevitably, the Left has to compromise on a tactical level with adverse historical circumstances, but it needs to recognize compromises as such, i.e. as falling short of its ideology. If it starts substituting its ideology for tactical compromises, it becomes part of the Right, and is in this way defeated even if it successfully gains power. The Left does not want power at all costs; defeats are preferable to ideological capitulation in the name of being 'pragmatic' or 'realistic'.

On the other hand, the Right's opportunist flexibility and pragmatism is its greatest strength. The Right is primarily after power and is willing to say anything that would help it gain and keep power, including pretending to have leftist positions and ideas. For example, the Leftist slogans of "freedom" and "equality" have become universally popular and accepted, forcing the Right to appropriate them as well. The Left's response to such appropriation can only be to define itself ever more precisely, explaining what politics and policies its ideals entail at each specific historical situation. For example, it can posit that on the topic of immigration, freedom and equality entail today that all migrants receive full citizenship rights, a position that the Right cannot accept. By being specific about what ideological positions Leftism entails at each issue, it can distinguish itself from any rightists that present themselves as Leftists (and there are many of those).

This consideration suggests that it is insufficient for the Left to define itself in the general terms I provided in this article. To say that the Left stands for radical social transformation is too vague a definition to allow us to distinguish concretely between Left and Right forces and parties today. A full definition of the Left today would require situating the Left position concretely in the political conflicts of today. Such a definition is beyond the purview of this article. Still, I think even my general definition makes evident that a party like AKEL cannot be considered Left. AKEL is a party of the status quo that repeatedly makes opportunist alliances with Right-wing parties to be in government. Despite its avowed goal of communism, in practice the party never attempted more than minor social reforms, and always prioritized adapting to the nationalist and corrupt political environment of Cyprus. It is a Right-wing party through and through.

[1] It should be noted here that of course the Left is not against any and all kinds of reality. The Left is in opposition to what exists only insofar what exists is contrary to its ideals and goals. It is possible that we achieve a free and just society that the Left would not oppose. The Left aims to change the world and realize its values, it does not oppose the present for opposition's sake.

Any views expressed are the author's.

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