


Right and left wing in America – a history

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It is hilarious here on many forums to read right-left discussions. That's because everyone is talking past everyone else, each with their own definition of right and left.

Right and left – from the French Revolution to Karl Marx

The original right-left metaphor came when the French tried to copy our revolution that produced our republican Constitution. (Contemporaries universally considered ours the most left government in the world, with anarchy, a non-governing position, marking the far left.) The French intelligently based the right-left metaphor on sovereignty. The few governing the many was right, and the many governing themselves was the left. Oh, and the left was prospering thanks to the innovation of *free enterprise*.

Then Marx weighed in in 1848 with a claim that his communism would produce a society yet more prosperous and egalitarian than the republicanism of the US. The New Left was born, or at least the *notion* of a new left.

Within Marx's lifetime his concept fell apart, conclusively shown not to be able to produce prosperity or a more class-free society. What *didn't* go away was the hot promise of a better life when workers unite and march. And so one authoritarian after another, *co-opted Marx's outline*.

The original right wing: social democracy, then the leadership principle

Bismarck moved social democracy to the right (the original right) to protect the Hohenzollern dynasty. Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and many others greatly updated Marx's thinking, moving it even further right:

- A socialist society would not come as quickly as Marx thought; it would take several generations.
- Meanwhile, those industrialists know a thing or three and can be useful, especially for rearming. If they'll play ball...
- A class-free society? Get serious. *Nationalism* is the new ballgame... One people, one language, one religion, one nation.
- Marxist materialism? How dated! *Idealism* drives the energy of a nation.

Lenin, Stalin, and Communist despotism

And then came Lenin and Stalin. Lenin's Bolsheviks bested the more orthodox Marxian Mensheviks and won Russia, soon the Soviet Union. Mao did the same in China, but soon had to hide out in the hills. For those of you have not noticed, those three men were absolute despots, the most brutally authoritarian of authoritarians.

But Stalin rearranged our thinking. In Stalin's pea brain there were three forms of government—Leninism/Stalinism, fascism and social democracy. There was no American republicanism anymore; Roosevelt had turned it social-democratic. Marx put free enterprise to the right of communism; ergo, fascism and social democracy, which controlled but did not eliminate capitalism, were right wing!!! And he had *Vremya* and *Pravda* say so. Franklin Roosevelt was "right wing." Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party of America was "right wing." Even *Trotsky* was "right wing."

You can see we are rather far afield from the original by this point. All three main forms of socialism were vying for supremacy by claiming to be the true left. So much did they struggle, that they collided in a little clash known as World War II. During which the fascist nations started a real-estate grab, which the social democrats in parallel with the communists eventually countered. After the fascists were sidelined, social democrats and communists squared off in an impasse known as the Cold War. Until at last the communists failed because they didn't have... wait for it... wait for it... they didn't have capitalism.



Leon Trotsky

America gets wise

However, the war sobered up America, which collectively decided that it had been our republican freedoms and free enterprise that had prevailed over the decadent socialisms of Europe and the rest of the world. “Let’s rid ourselves of the rot, and focus on our longtime values of peace and prosperity.” Just thinking that way finally jump-started our economic engines after two decades of social-democratic malaise. For more than a decade there, it was challenging to find anyone who would admit to being a progressive. (A *progressive* is an American social democrat.)

But there was one more major wrinkle. Ayn Rand’s Objectivist followers realized it would not be possible to pry back “left” to its true meaning of peace, prosperity and self-governing as the nutso belligerent soshes had fixated on the term, so, fine! To them, “left” refers to authoritarian state socialism; “right” refers to republican self-government.

As you can see in this thread, oddly, it is that Objectivist version in most common use these days even though it is a thorough inversion of the original.

What’s the point here? There’s no fixing this mess. Either stop referring to left and right in politics or say what you mean by the terms.

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