

SQUISHY TOTALITARIANISM AND THE LEFT-RIGHT SPECTRUM

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ABSTRACT: *The paper argues that the left-right spectrum is incoherent, and ought to be abandoned as a taxonomy for understanding political positions, and as a practical way of organizing party politics. Though there are a number of ways that the left-right spectrum has been characterized - for example, in terms of making time run faster (left) or slower (right) - the paper focuses on the question of state as against capital, and asserts that, far from being historically opposed forces, state and corporate power have a strong tendency to coincide, to coalesce into the same hands. Several historical justifications and applications of this principle of hierarchical coincidence are provided, from the British East India Company to the current Chinese state and the role of experts in American progressive politics.*

As a way of ordering political positions, the left-right spectrum is more or less the only game in town. It has great cultural currency in much of the world, and it has a certain legitimacy in what might be called the 'ordinary language' sense: it has meaning for us insofar as we use it all the time, arrange party politics around it, air it out around the water cooler, and so on. But as a framework or taxonomy of political positions, or for the purposes of research in political science, it has got to be optional. We have got to keep open the possibility that it is a flawed paradigm or could be replaced as an explanatory framework. The left-right spectrum is an historical artifact, like any other taxonomy of political systems. And it is an excruciating conceptual mess.

Now, it may be that at this point that many of us cannot think about politics without it. The spectrum widely shapes behaviors, affiliations, passionate commitments the world over. But it may also be that many assertions involving it - including characterizations of one's own position, and attacks on the positions of one's opponents, have far less meaning than one feels that they do as one is making them. It may be that what sounds clear under almost infinite repetition is in fact garbled nonsense, a kind of inarticulate noise taking the form of familiar syntax. It may be that even as we, say,

conduct party politics, we are engaged in a series of contradictions or have wandered into a limbo of pseudo-sense.

1.

The left-right terminology arose in revolutionary France in 1789, where it referred to the seating of royalists and anti-royalists in the Assembly. It is plausible to think of an early version of the conceptuality, though not the terminology, as emerging in Europe in the run-up to the Revolution, in figures such as Rousseau and Burke. The first use of 'left' and 'right' in something like their current political sense in English is attributed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution* of 1837. The left-right spectrum only crystallized fully with the emergence of Marxism, in the middle of the 19th century, and was not fully current in English-speaking countries until early in the 20th. Before that in the West, and in every elsewhere than in the West, there were other intellectual structures for defining and arranging political positions.

The left-right spectrum, since it is linear and not infinite, can be characterized in terms two extreme poles. One way to see that it is incoherent is that these poles are defined in a number of mutually incompatible ways. So, for example, in the 1930s it was Marxist communist as against fascism. But the left defines the right pole as fascist one minute, laissez-faire the next. The left pole could be a stateless society of barter and localism; or a world of equality in which people are not subordinated by race, gender, and sexuality; or a giant Pentagon-style welfare state; or a Khmer-Rouge re-education-by-execution regime. The Nazi Party, evangelical Christians, advocates of hereditary aristocracy, Ayn Rand go-go capitalists, and redneck gun enthusiasts are *all on the same side* in the left-right conceptuality. I think it is fair to say that the left-right spectrum was devised by people who identified as the left, and the opposite pole is a random grab-bag of people who have reasons to oppose Marxism. They have similar reasons to oppose one another, however. So do Elizabeth Warren, Kim Jong-un, and anarcho-primitivists.

There are various ways to try characterize the spectrum. For example, it is sometimes said that conservatives want time to run backwards, whereas progressives want to enhance the pace at which it runs forward. Either result would be surprising. But a central characterization, and the one I will focus on, begins with an opposition of state and capital. That conceptuality is central, for example, to contemporary American politics, as Democrats urge that government makes many positive contributions to our lives, while Republicans argue that it is a barrier to the prosperity created by free markets. On the outer ends we might pit Chairman Mao against Ayn Rand: state communism against laissez-faire capitalism.

The basic set of distinctions on both sides and in the middle rests on the idea that state and corporation, or more broadly political and economic power, can be pulled apart and set against each other. This brings us to the

Principle of Hierarchical Coincidence (PHC): *hierarchies tend to coincide.*

Corollary: *resources flow toward political power, and political power flows toward resources; or, the power of state and capital typically appear in conjunction.*

As a practical matter, PHC means that if you centralize any hierarchy, whether of experts, races, capital, the Party, or whatever it may be, you are in reality recommending hierarchy in every dimension. So, if a hierarchy of education or expertise is important in your society (it's a 'meritocracy'), then resources and political power will flow toward experts. I will return to this example at the end

But the fundamental dimensions I want to pick out initially are economic and political. I will not try to show historically that PHC is true - though I intend to do that elsewhere. Here, I am going to assert flatly that it is more or less obvious, and everyone knows it to be true. A white-suprematist polity in which black people were wealthier than white people, for example, would be

extremely surprising. It would be no less surprising if regulatory capture were not pervasive. We could keep trying to institute reforms to pull economic and political power apart: I wonder what it would take empirically to show that this is counter-productive. It's counter-productive because when you beef up the state to control capital, you only succeed in making capital more monolithic, more concentrated, and more able to exercise a wider variety of powers. (Consider the relation of Goldman Sachs to the Treasury Department over the last several decades, or Halliburton and Defense, or AT&T and NSA. The distinction between "public" and "private" is rather abstract in relation to the on-the-ground overlap.) And I do think that one mark of the nonsense at the heart of the left/right spectrum is that it appears to be entirely immune to empirical refutation: it survives all as a trope in the face of all the massive data with which it is incompatible.

The contemporary form of the merger of state and capital is what I think of as the dominant variety of hierarchical power in the world today:

squishy totalitarianism: the political/economic/aesthetic/psychological system or syndrome shared in common, for instance, by contemporary China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States. It is characterized by a complex so-called 'technocratic' merger of state and capital; large-scale mechanisms of subject-formation such as compulsory state education and regulation/monopoly ownership of the media; welfare-state or 'safety-net' programs that stabilize consumption and render populations (within limits) secure and dependent; a relative tolerance for some forms of diffuse dissent and scope for individual choice, particularly in consumption, combined with pervasive state and corporate surveillance; overwhelming police and military force and sprawling systems of incarceration; entrenched extreme hierarchies of wealth and expertise; regulation of the economy by monetary policy and central banks in conjunction with banking concerns; an international regime of national

sovereignties combined with international state/corporate mechanisms for the circulation of wealth.

State and economy are merged in different permutations in Iran and Egypt, in China and Japan, in the US and the EU. Squishy totalitarian regimes want their citizens/subjects fundamentally to conceive themselves as consumers and receivers of benefits from the state, and want them to think of their freedom as primarily a freedom to choose between different things to buy or as a release from need and vulnerability to need through state benefits (these are, however, real freedoms). Then your economy will be a self-stimulating spiral of growth, your tax coffers will fill, and your elites will grow in wealth, prestige, knowledge, and power.

2.

The familiar picture is that, to the degree that you reduce the power of the state, you increase the power of capital, and vice versa. Putting it mildly, this claim is unhistorical. The rise of capital, its consolidation into a few hands, and the enduring structures of monopoly or gigantism to which it gives rise are inconceivable without the state. Even Marx saw this, in a limited way: he regarded the modern state as the agent of the bourgeoisie. At the end of the "Communist Manifesto" and elsewhere, however, Marx recommends placing communications, banking, agriculture, transportation, and so on in the hands of the state, during a revolutionary period that will culminate in a stateless paradise. But placing all these dimensions in the same hands - whatever you call these hands ('dictatorship of the proletariat', for example) - is not terribly different in practice than letting them all drift into the hands of robber barons, because whoever actually makes the decisions with regard to these things or has them at their disposal, is the dominant class or group.

We might say that the current Chinese state combines the most fearsome features of Maoism and corporate capitalism. It's all devoted to generating maximum cash

and directing it to the very top of the hierarchy. And yet the Chinese state also attempts to bestride the earth with the iron boot of collectivist totalitarianism. Now, your basic taxonomy of political and economic systems or ideologies would regard this as an incoherent merger. A conventional political scientist associates capitalism with John Locke and Adam Smith, with republicanism and individualism: 'liberalism,' in short. And in this line of thinking, if socialists reject free enterprise and engage in grand redistributivist schemes, then they require a big, extremely powerful state. So for a long time people thought of the Chinese system as combining opposed or contradictory elements. At a minimum, I'd say no one is so sure anymore.

We should think instead of the contemporary Chinese state as a provisional culmination of both state socialism and corporate capitalism. In ideology, they are opposites. But we don't live in a textbook for a course on political ideologies. We live in a world where, *from the outset, capitalism depended utterly on state power, and the basic practical thrust of left statism was annexation of the economy to new hierarchies*. The Soviet Union was a variety of monopoly capitalism, and modern America is a variety of state socialism.

What went wrong in our thinking is that we believed the account these ideologies gave of themselves. But the scrim of philosophy, theory, ideology, rhetoric was always thin. There are capitalist theoreticians who have fantasized and recommended stateless free markets, and there are communist theorists who have fantasized no markets at all, always slightly glossing over the fact that what they actually meant was an entire permeation of every aspect of life, including markets, by the state. But these were indeed fantasies. What these people wanted appeared to be entirely opposed. But they were each devoted to their own sort of hierarchy, and hierarchies tend to coincide. They were designed to rationalize or moralize what is really a single indefensible system, or to enhance the self-esteem of ideologies while pursuing the hard work of subduing populations

and gathering up all the resources for people like themselves.

The cold war disguised the fact that the systems were, in playing out their real essences, converging toward a situation in which state and economy are fully integrated and held in very few hands: a truly permanent, systemic, chronic, sclerotic hierarchy. One of the meanings of 'globalization' and the various 'international mechanisms' that go with it, may be a premonition of a world system of this variety. (One name is 'technocracy.' If you insist you could call it 'late capitalism' or 'neo-liberalism', with the proviso that it is enthusiastically statist.)

3.

The main historical point I want to make is that the rise of capitalism is not explicable without state power, which has increased throughout the capitalist period. The modern nation-state and capitalism have the same origins, or arose together, or really - simplifying slightly - are one thing in different dimensions or aspects.

Economists who undertake as broad a project as 'defining' emerging capitalism or tracing its history invariably connect it to the emergence of the modern state. Michel Beaud in his *History of Capitalism* finds the state connection criterial:

What one in any case should remember is the importance of the state in the birth, the first beginnings of capitalism; this is linked, too, to the national character of the formation of capitalism: there is no capitalism without the bourgeoisie, which developed within the framework of the nation-state at the same time as the rise of *nations* occurred. . . . Within Europe itself, the primary transforming factor is the state. National unity, currency standardization, juridical coherence, military strength and the beginnings of a national economy: all these were created and developed by the state, or with the state as organizing principle.¹

The events that economic historians focus on in the development of capitalism are, for example, the rise of the city-state of Venice and the great banking families of Europe, such as the Medici; the sixteenth-century influx of South American gold into the economy of Spain and into this same financial system; the development of securities, futures and other "abstract" instruments and markets for them in Holland and Great Britain; enclosure of internal commons and the establishment of international tariffs and free-trade zones; war both internal and external to establish and police boundaries and territorialize and commodify and garrison entire regions and continents²; manufacturing, trade, and technological development in part to equip belligerents in civil and international strife; and so on. In no case can we imagine these developments in the history of capitalism without simultaneous developments in the crystallizing and internationalizing state. Even the sort of figures who later came to be considered conservative icons, such as Smith, Hume, and Ricardo - both in their historical and prescriptive moments - centralized in their accounts the role of state action in regulation of internal markets and conducting international trade.

One way to read this history is, as Marxists do, to say that it shows that liberal republicanism and constitutional monarchy were bourgeois forms. Another is simply to read it as showing that state and economic power are indissoluble, and hence that attacking capital by beefing up the state or adding capital flatly to the state portfolio is not promising as a road to justice. If we looked at previous state or quasi-state forms, such as the ancient empires, the coincidence of economic, political, and military power is just as pronounced; it could hardly be otherwise. Leftists got into this confusion in part because under Marx's influence they came to perceive only economy as reality, and hence to hold that political hierarchies are not real hierarchies at

¹ Michel Beaud, *A History of Capitalism, 1500-2000*, trans. Tom Dickman and Anny Lefebvre (New York: Monthly Review, 2nd ed 2001 [originally published

1981]), 42-43.

² See Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

all. This delusion reached a literally psychotic state, so that Stalinist Russia or Maoist China - two of the most rigidly and murderously hierarchical societies in world history - could be justified on egalitarian grounds.

However, as I have already indicated, Marxism also yields insights that could be used to think about these matters differently. Indeed, strands of leftist economic thought are currently being used to clarify this situation even as other strands are dedicated to obscuring it. An example is Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin's book *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. They write:

As capitalism developed states in fact became more involved in life than ever, especially in the establishment and administration of the juridical, regulatory, and infrastructural framework in which private property, competition, and contracts came to operate. Capitalist states were also increasingly major actors in trying to contain capitalist crises, including as lenders of last resort. Capitalism could not have developed unless states came to do these things. Conversely, states became increasingly dependent on the success of capital accumulation for tax revenue and popular legitimacy.³

The political and economic institutions in capitalism are completely interdependent and mutually entwined, for Panitch and Gindin, which in one respect is just what Marxists would predict. But if political hierarchy is epiphenomenal while economic hierarchy is real, then one can institute a totalitarian political regime without even noticing that one is in fact advocating inequalities of the most extreme variety. On the other hand, if only political oppressions are real and economic inequalities merely natural and salutary, you get, in the name of liberty, varieties of "free-market" capitalism which are deranged in their practical oppression. Political and economic hierarchies tend to coincide, but in my view neither is any more real or fundamental than the other. Either is both.

³ Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso, 2012), p. 3

4.

An early model of squishy totalitarianism was provided by East India and West India Companies in the 17th and 18th centuries, state/capitalist hybrids or state-enforced and regulated private monopolies fielding public/private armies around the globe, but by their own lights engaged primarily in maximization of profits for shareholders, who in turn were often government officials. The profits reaped were presented as being also of patriotic service to the home countries and of humanitarian service to the peoples with whom the companies were trading or whom they were conquering. Similar state/private hybrids have been central to the construction of all large capitalist economies, and would include entities such as Fannie Mae and American utility companies. "Infrastructure" and military supply are constructed or repaired in the current American economy through state contracting, and the entire economy of the DC region is dominated by Federal contractors. The US fields public-private armies all over the world, partly in defense of commercial interests.

Adam Smith describes the justification of such entities:

Some particular branches of commerce, which are carried on with barbarous and uncivilized nations, require extraordinary protection. An ordinary store or counting house could give little security to the goods of the merchants who trade to the western coast of Africa. To defend them from the barbarous natives, it is necessary that the place where they are deposited, should be, in some measure, fortified. . . . [I]t was under pretence of securing their persons and property from violence, that both the English and French East India Companies were allowed to erect the first forts which they possessed in that country.⁴ (*Wealth of Nations*, 731-32)

He points out that it was trade which required distant countries to recognize one another officially and exchange ambassadors.

⁴ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1976 [first published 1776]), pp. 731-32

Both state and company fleets defended company monopolies, others plying the trade routes being considered pirates. This is the origin of the very idea of monopoly capitalism. Investors stood to earn huge profits if all went well, and the capital of these companies would be invested in turn in government bonds, enabling a permanent military establishment, particularly an unprecedented construction of naval forces. These bonds would pay an extremely reliable return, funding yet more company expansion. Military needs would be fed by private textile and steel mills which would employ millions of people. Labor would have to be organized on a quasi-military basis, but wages would establish a reliable pattern of domestic consumption. Certainly such policies were disastrous for many people all over the world, and were a familiar mixed bag in terms of their effects at home. They also led to one of the most entrenched and unjust domestic and international hierarchies ever devised, or the first really global hierarchy, in which the immiseration of the third world was interlocked with the prosperity of the first.

The state has been a key force in territorialization of many dimensions of the world and human experience, turning them into property. The consolidation of the European nation-state took place in complement to the annexation of whole continents, and one central function of the rule of law is the establishment of private property. Ownership of intellectual property - like the ownership of land - cannot possibly be maintained without exhaustive bodies of records and archives of various kinds, a central function of the state from time immemorial, necessary to taxation and to trade. It has gotten to the point where state and corporation mutually enforce ownership of sequences of tones, strings of symbols and other abstract pseudo-objects.

To take another example, one way to frame the debate between Democrats and Federalists (or Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians) in the early American republic is as a debate between an agrarian, or quasi-feudal (and of

course slave) interest and an emerging market and financialized economy centered in New York.⁵ It was the capitalist interest that demanded a larger, more active state. Hamilton's primary concerns were securing a tax base, paying the national debt, establishing a national bank that could stabilize currency values and facilitate credit markets, closely regulating and taxing foreign trade in both directions, and creating a military establishment capable of crushing internal rebellions and resisting incursions from other nations. He explicitly conceived these as measures to establish a capitalist economy.

By the 1890s the American government was being bailed out by J.P. Morgan, a gesture which the state has repaid to the financial sector many times, and in response to which the idea of a central or national bank was expanded to include uniform regulation of currency under the Federal Reserve. These mechanisms for mutual stabilization of state and capital were refined and internationalized throughout the twentieth century, though they still have their problems. Such steps ended up being taken by every emerging capitalist economy, and required larger and larger structures of state surveillance and control of various sorts of transactions. It was primarily with regard to the development of such economies and the shifts from an agrarian to a manufacturing to a service model, for example, that education was made compulsory and has come more and more to be regulated at national levels.

5.

The mutual reinforcement of economic and political hierarchies that has occurred in its capitalist permutations at least since the 17th century is a kind of apparently infinite spiral of increasing oppression in which the right and left have colluded since there have been a right and left. In oscillating between liberal and conservative or Democrat and Republican, we oscillate

⁵ A good treatment of these matters is found in Robert E. Wright, *One Nation Under Debt: Hamilton, Jefferson, and the History of What We Owe* (McGraw-Hill: 2008)

between beefing up one segment of the hierarchy or another, and if I had to identify a direction of history, it would be simply be in terms of ever-increasing inequality of both power and wealth.

The idea that free markets are historically distinguished from large, powerful states is, in short, a completely ahistorical ideology, shared by the capitalist right and the communist left and even by almost everyone in between. In this regard and in a number of others, we might think of the left-right spectrum as a single ideology rather than as a taxonomy of opposites.

Ayn Rand and Vlad Lenin, Kim Il-sung and Barry Goldwater, Barack Obama and Rand Paul, Francois Mitterand and Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Fidel Castro, Friedrich von Hayek and Leo Trotsky, Slavoj Žižek, and Augusto Pinochet, for all I know, disagreed on several matters. But they agreed on this, or said they did: the state was a force that was historically pitted against private capital. To reduce one was to increase the other and to increase one was to reduce the other. They vary inversely and the balance between them that you recommend constitutes the fundamental way of characterizing your political position. The left-right spectrum stretches from authoritarianism on the one end to authoritarianism on the other, with authoritarianism in between. It makes anything that is not that incomprehensible. It narrows all alternatives to variations on hierarchy, structures of inequality, or profoundly unjust distributions of power/wealth. And also as a single ideology, it is merely false.

My suggestion would just be this: sort political positions into hierarchical and antihierarchical, vertical and horizontal. Then we can see that Francisco Franco, Chairman Mao, Hillary Clinton and Dick Cheney are all, with slightly varying emphases or intensities, on the same side: that is, they are on the upper end.

6.

I'm going to conclude with a contemporary application of these insights, if such they are, to American progressive 'meritocracy' and its centralization of a hierarchy of knowledge, understood by and large as performance on standardized tests. This, again, is as real a hierarchy as any of the others and tends to coincide with them in the long run. People such as, say, Robert Reich, Hillary Clinton, or Cass Sunstein think that they have devoted their careers to remediating the hierarchy they are themselves perched atop, and they propose to remove it specifically by its ever-more thorough exercise. They are enjoying it, claiming it, and imposing it, and simultaneously they are identifying it as the problem they are trying to fix. Decades of welfare-type programs, racial remediations, top-down educational reforms, and so on have, I think, intensified and made more thoroughly structural and immovable the inequalities they were apparently intended to shift. For example, Sunstein prescribes the 'nudge', or setting up a structure of incentives that lure people to the desired outcomes, but the whole thing effortlessly assumes that people like Cass Sunstein understand what each of us should be nudged toward.

People like Reich and Sunstein exemplify the ways class and race are articulated or actually made now: they move back and forth from academia to think-tank to state, through the archipelago of social-science expertise, epistemic prestige, and real power. Reich and Sunstein and their ilk take on the neutral voice of the social scientist and they are chock full of statistics. This voice is an extremely central example of the 'unmarked' position of privilege: they do not implicate themselves in their advocacy. But the social sciences - overlapping with a medical model of pathologies and also a criminal-justice discourse - have been the nexus of racial and class construction since the early twentieth century. (Before that the experts and professors measured your skull and tried to fit your people into the sequence of evolution.) All the state-implemented racial and class

transformations, each layer of new welfare and housing programs, each new war on poverty and discrimination, has been justified by the social sciences. Many have been unalloyed disasters, but expertise always gets it right this time, by its own account.

You ought, it seems, to be silent before expertise. You must bow to the facts; the claim of expertise is to a special power to declare what is real. And yet the categories of the statistical tables just recirculate and reinforce the wretchedly problematic race and class taxonomies, and the whole thing presupposes that we have a right to gather information on them so we can address their problems: their problems as named by us. The power dynamics are completely inbuilt, the numbers a kind of spectral emanation of the a priori stance and categories.

A long century of this has left us fundamentally untransformed. These hierarchies are more extreme and intransigent than when it all started. How have Democratic administrations done at ameliorating income inequalities, for example? That failure is completely predictable, because the solutions and their rhetorics are imposed by direct exercises of domination by the very people who are the problem; they are imposed from the very top of the hierarchy. That just is not going to have emancipatory effects: not last time or the time before that, and not next time.