

LEFT-WING CONSERVATISM

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Democrats in the UK, a party that had some influence in the 1980s but are almost entirely unknown today, who are against the wokeism dominating the current political debate, and who seek to preserve local customs, and use the very conservative sounding slogan “family, community, nation” as their header on their website.

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The labyrinth of contemporary political nomenclature is difficult to navigate. What, for instance, unites political ideologies which are generally considered ‘left-wing?’ The late English philosopher Roger Scruton wrote, “My own view is that left-wing positions largely come about from resentment—I agree with Nietzsche about this—a resentment about the surrounding social order.” In an essay for this magazine’s 2014 Winter edition called “What is Left?” Scruton discussed the common elements of the theories we tend to consider as belonging to the Left of the political spectrum. At the heart of the matter, he wrote, is the fact that a left-wing intellectual is a Jacobin, who believes the world is “deficient in wisdom and justice, and that the fault lies not in human nature but in the established systems of power.” In writing that, Scruton refers back to the French Revolution and the *Estates-General*, where the nobility sat to the right of the king and the ‘third estate’ sat to his left. It is from this arrangement we have inherited the terminology of the Left-Right political spectrum. However, is a conservatism that is in some sense ‘left-wing’ conceivable?

The meaning of the terms of Left-Right have shifted. Few, if any, contemporary thinkers will associate the political Right with nobility and monarchism, although such movements

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and supporters of such institutions tend to self-identify as pertaining to the Right. Ever since the appearance of Marx and his spectre of communism haunting Europe, politics has put economics at the centre of political debate. This is one of the two main achievements of communist thought in the West; on the one hand they have made economics the central concern, rather than what conservatives speak of as immaterial values, and secondly, they realised that while the economic questions were now central, they could not compete with capitalism which had gained a global monopoly as an economic theory, and instead shifted to radically changing culture. This is—through people like Antonio Gramsci—the family tree of what we today call ‘wokeism.’ But the key to understanding this shift in terminology from a conservative perspective, is that socialism (of which communism is sometimes considered a variant) and liberalism are two sides of the same coin. They are both *radical* ideologies based on abstractions and a utopian vision of society. Conservatism, on the other hand, bases its worldview on an understanding of human nature and the traditions and customs of local cultures.

When we speak of Right and Left today, it is primarily to economic theories we tend to refer. A person on the Right of the political spectrum is deemed to favour free markets, breaking trade barriers and increasing human autonomy. The Left is now typically thought of as restricting the operations of the market, imposing protectionism and setting limits to human conduct. For this reason, Thatcher and Reagan, who based their economic policies on the work of Hayek, Friedman, and others, are considered on the Right. On the Left, however, we have those who seek to curb the market’s actions, such as—to a moderate degree—Social Democratic governments in Scandinavia or, more drastically, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. This picture, while more contemporary and relatable than 18th century France, still remains a pastiche. Recent years, with Brexit, the rise and fall of Trump, and calls for independence in Scotland and Catalonia, show there is a new dimension to the political spectrum. Populism vs. elitism, localism vs. globalism, traditionalism vs. wokeism. The list can go on. Yet we can discern some essential unifying principles; there are those who seek to destroy and rebuild society according to a blueprint of their own, and there are those who seek to preserve and develop the institutions we have and which have upheld our society thus far. We also have those who want to let the markets reign supreme, and those who think there are limits to what the markets should be able to do. With this in mind, is there scope for a ‘left-wing conservatism?’

Both George Orwell and J. R. R. Tolkien described themselves as “Tory anarchist.” This sounds like an oxymoron. How can someone who describes himself as a Tory—traditionally supporting ‘throne and altar’—also be an anarchist who, typically, seeks to abolish these very institutions? The answer is that what Orwell meant by joining these two terms was someone who dislikes all politicians equally, knows that society needs the rulers and the ruled, but also knows that any system is bound to have its defects. Orwell remained, however, very much a man of the Left. He campaigned for and supported the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, and he supported the political Left in Britain. Yet the values he cherished and put forward as estimable in books such as *The Lion and the Unicorn* are local patriotism, protection of the inherited customs and traditions, and upholding a cohesive community. These are all traditional Burkean conservative ideals and ideas. In line with his thought, we also find other great British figures, such as Kenneth Clark who made the famous television series *Civilisation*, and who despite his patrician manner (as one biographer describes him), always voted for the Labour Party. Another example is the Christian author, Malcolm Muggeridge. Interestingly, both these men converted to Catholicism late in life.

Malcolm Muggeridge

In 1970, Malcolm Muggeridge published a text called *The Great Liberal Death Wish*. In this short text, Muggeridge put forth—it can be said with hindsight—a prophetic claim. He argued that with the ever-increasing liberal idea of personal autonomy and pursuit of richness which characterised the Western society of his day, we would see the sacrifice of babies, the mentally ill, the elderly, and children born with disabilities. Without any appeal to intangible and immaterial values, we are left with a narcissistic gaze into an abyss, at the end of which we find nothing but our insatiable desire for more wealth and uninhibited licence to do as we please. We fall back on mere carnality and lose sight of the things which draw us out and beyond our present predicament, such as beauty and goodness. This, many conservative-minded people feel, is reflected in modern architecture, which they hold leaves local communities desolate and soulless, because such buildings are meant not for dwelling, but for the temporary subletters who can be anywhere and

nowhere.

This appeal to higher values and towards matters that are not merely material has a long pedigree within conservative thought. In Britain, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had, in his trilogy starting with the novel *Coningsby*, argued for much of what Orwell, Clark, and Muggeridge would later argue for. He presented a story of an England which was a *home*, in which the settlers and inheritors of the lands could feel they belonged. The story is one motivated by love and community, and not uprootedness and resentment. Yet, the 'social conservatism' Disraeli advanced, sometimes referred to as One Nation Conservatism, introduced trade unions and social welfare. The idea was that no man should be left behind. One Nation Conservatism differs from socialism in that it is not aiming to take care of everyone and become a social and political behemoth, but rather represents a paternal care for those who are the most vulnerable in society. Similarly, in Germany, Count Otto von Bismarck introduced social welfare, and he too represents a social conservatism.

In America, the political cognomens become even more complex. There, conservatism is sometimes used as a term to refer to what we call 'classical liberalism' in Europe, and 'liberalism' is sometimes used to mean social or progressive liberalism, inspired by people such as John Rawls. One writer, however, stands out for our purposes in the American panorama, and he is often overlooked in political discussions, and this is the author Norman Mailer. Mailer used the term "left-conservative" because for him it "alludes simultaneously to his admiration for Marxist and historical change and his respect for Edmund Burke's commitment to the preservation of one's cultural heritage." Despite the reference to Marx, Mailer believed in small-scale entrepreneurship and business, and so what emerges in his works is a vision of society as consisting of Burkean "little platoons" (family, church, and the complex associations of civil society) rather than supranational corporations.

In our own time, we have seen the rise of calls for Burkean ideals within Social Democratic parties. Think only of the Social Democrats in the United Kingdom, a party that had some influence in the 1980s but are almost entirely unknown today, who are against the

wokeism dominating the current political debate, and who seek to preserve local customs, and use the very conservative sounding slogan “family, community, nation” as their header on their website. Within the Swedish Social Democratic Party, there have always been advocates of a form of social conservatism, with at least one former Member of Parliament describing himself as a “left-wing conservative.” Some contemporary writers who might be called left-wing conservatives are Nick Cohen, Rod Liddle and Timothy Stanley, all based in England.

So, is there a left-wing conservatism? If by this we mean someone who cherishes the local and particular, the tried and tested, community and family, who seeks to help those who are the most vulnerable in society and who sees that there are limits to what the market can and ought to affect, then yes—there is scope for calling oneself a left-wing conservative.