

A pragma-semantic approach to left-right divide¹

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“God laughs at those who deplore the effects of which they cherish the causes.”
Bossuet, *Sermons*.

If I chose this pompous title for my speech, it is because I am going to propose here a certain philosophy of political *language*² to address the left-right divide. I will try to show that these two words belong to a usage that combines two linguistic aspects: a *semantic aspect*, which concerns the things that words designate in reality; and a *pragmatic aspect*, which concerns the way speakers use words to act and produce effects.

On the one hand, the words ‘left’ and ‘right’ are what in pure semantics are called *index terms*, that is, expressions that, like ‘I’, ‘here’ or ‘now’, do not refer to anything specific, but always to something. On the other hand, the meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is, in my opinion, a perfect example of what the philosopher of language Saul Kripke called ‘deviation in usage’ and considered a confusion between the *reference of* an expression and its *description* in terms of definite properties (see Kripke 1982). Thus, the words ‘left’ and ‘right’ were diverted from their original use (that of their baptism on September 11, 1789) to become synonymous with typical descriptions of political discourse: *ideologies*.³

My presentation consists of four parts. First, left and right originally referred to a relationship with *power*; however, a confusion has emerged between power as such (as the *purpose of* politics) and the ideology that can embody it (as a *means of* justification to access power), while power does not refer to any particular ideology (section 1). Second, this approach to the left-right divide provides an explanation for a famous quote by the philosopher Alain, often quoted and always accepted but never justified (section 2). Finally, I will show the objections to my thesis on the left-right divide (section 3) and attempt to answer them by exploring the foundations of political power (section 4).

1

The political distinction between left and right gives rise to some fundamental disagreements. For de Benoist (2017), this distinction no longer makes sense and should be replaced by a

¹ This is the short version of my presentation, in order to meet the deadline; a longer version is available elsewhere, which looks at traditional analyses of the left-right divide before proposing an alternative approach.

² The following sections are drawn from two works: an article, “Naming and Order”, published in 2020; a book, *Politiquement parlant: essai de philosophie du langage politique* (manuscript), 262 pp.

³ An example of this descriptive approach to the left-right divide is the taxonomic analysis proposed by Rémond (1954) for the French right and for the French left by Julliard (2012).

new division between populism and elitism⁴. If others like Mouffe (2010) are right in maintaining the distinction between a 'left' and a 'right' populism, then the new cleavage claimed by the former only adds precision to the traditional cleavage⁵. Far from abandoning it, Bobbio (1996) presents the left-right distinction as an indispensable tool for the analysis of politics.

Who is right, and on what grounds should the division be abandoned or maintained? A three-step explanation can be offered for why the left-right divide no longer makes sense. First, the traditional opposition between the economic systems of capitalism and communism has disappeared since the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Soviet bloc. Second, the multiplication of new political themes (ecology, feminism, sovereignty, anti-speciesism, etc.) substantially empties the initial binary opposition between two political camps. Third, the field of political reflection that results from the profusion of new ideas is too complex to be reduced to a binary opposition. For example, environmentalism can be combined with antagonistic political positions, such as anti-capitalism or the 'green capitalism' of sustainable development; feminism can also be combined with universal secularism or indigenous communitarianism. In European countries, the collusion between far-left communism and far-right nationalism is referred to as the 'red-brown conspiracy', or the collusion between far-left anti-Zionism and far-right anti-Semitism. There is also talk of an 'Islamofascist' or 'green fascism' danger in Western countries, to highlight the incompatibility between the Muslim religion and democratic regimes⁶. As a result, the current political field seems too complicated to be reduced to a simple dichotomy.

In the face of this general confusion, I want to defend this dichotomy for two main reasons. The first is that the multiplication of new political themes does not prevent the general organization of the political discourse into two exclusive and exhaustive fields. The second is that such a division does not have to be associated with any particular ideology, since it transcends the times and places in which it manifests itself. Although the left-right division originated in the particular historical context of the French Revolution and was initially based on a single criterion (for or against royal absolutism), it does not depend on it and can be maintained as an organizing principle of political thought. However, a central question remains to justify this principle: why a binary opposition? To answer this question, I will propose an analysis as impartial as possible and based on analogy with a field of thought that has nothing to do with politics: Kant's theory of judgments (2006) and its conceptual modification proposed by Kripke's anti-descriptivist theory (1982). Kripke's idea was that it is

⁴ See below for a program where de Benoist was invited to speak on the left-right divide: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tWqud-zS-c&ab_channel=RTFrance

⁵ See in particular the debate between De Benoist and Mouffe, which deals with the left-right distinction through the 'cross-cutting' theme of populism:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E_9c8B1cPg

Another position similar to Alain de Benoist's was defended by Denis Collin, in the same program and more recently:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq2kkg1_TAw&t=955s&ab_channel=RTFrance

⁶ The term 'Islamofascism' (as a synonym for 'Islamofascism') has been criticized for combining ideologies without common historical roots and for concealing a far-right Islamophobic discourse. For a genealogy of the political concept of Islamism, see Loty (2019).

a mistake to think that all judgments of necessity are automatically *a priori judgments*, that is, judgments whose truth does not depend on recourse to experience. There would be judgments that are necessary without being *a priori*, and are therefore *a posteriori*; and there would be judgments that are *a priori* without being necessary, and therefore contingent. It is exactly this way of thinking that I propose to apply to the case of the left-right divide: there would be policies that are right-wing without being conservative, and which are therefore progressive; and there would be policies that are conservative without being right-wing, and which are therefore left-wing. The common view of political scientists about political attitudes (assuming there is one) is similar to the view of pre-Kantian epistemology and logical empiricists about the nature of judgment. Just as the latter considered the words ‘analytic’ and ‘*a priori*’ logically equivalent (and the same applies to their respective opposites ‘synthetic’ and ‘*a posteriori*’), the former seem to equate conservatism with the right and progressivism with the left.⁷ This is tantamount to thinking that there can be no conservatism *by definition*, just as there can be no progressive right. But before refuting this widely shared opinion, we must agree on the expressions that make it up. I must therefore propose an initial definition for the concepts of right and conservatism, before considering their contradictory opposites of left and progressivism (see the Appendix of definitions, on page 13).

As the name suggests, ‘conservatism’ can be characterized as the attitude of those who wish to keep something, or not change it. The great difficulty, often unnoticed, is the identification between *what* should be conserved and *how to conserve* it. Although it may seem paradoxical to want to conserve what no longer is (having been), we can speak of a certain conservatism whose aim would be to restore an order of things derived from tradition or a natural order. As for the identity of what is to be conserved, it could be a moral order, a type of government that has fallen into disrepair, or the natural environment. To simplify the notion without distorting it, I will call *conservatism* the political attitude of one who makes the group the measure of all political norms and privileges collective institutions (family, state, religion) over individual wills or, to put it another way, coexistence over existence. Progressivism is therefore the opposite attitude of those who make the individual the measure of all political norms and privilege individual wills over collective institutions, that is, the existence of each individual over coexistence with others. The question then arises: to what extent is conservatism necessarily right-wing?

This brings me to the main point. I argue that the modality of right for ensuring social harmony is the *maintenance of the* established order, while the modality of left is based on the *transformation of* this order. Nothing new so far. But I also believe, above all, that the left-right divide is the victim of a profound confusion between the notions of conservatism and the right, and that this confusion is of the same kind as that between *a priori* judgments and necessary judgments since Kant. The confusion is that between *ends* and *means*: to be necessary is to always be true, to be *a priori* is to observe this state of affairs without recourse to experience, and a proposition can always be true without being known *a priori*. Same thing here: to be right-wing is to be in power, to be conservative is to propose a model of society in

⁷ In a diagram of political space, Parenteau & Parenteau (2008: 194) consider conservatism as the main political ideology of the ‘right’, and progressivism as that of the ‘left’.

order to gain power, and a policy can be right-wing (if it is in power) without being conservative. With reference to the founding event of September 11, 1789, it is possible to rephrase the word ‘right-wing’ to distinguish it from ‘conservatism’: it will be *conformity to a political state of affairs*, whatever that may be. There are two main types of political state of affairs (or ‘social order’, if you will): *economic*, which refers to the norms of the forms of production and exchange of material goods among the members of a community; and *moral*, which refers to the norms of behavior of individuals in public space.

I will now return to the basis of the binary opposition between the conservative right and the progressive left. If the term ‘progressive right’ can be misappropriated for common sense, it is to the extent that emancipatory progressivism is equated with the ‘left’s challenge to the established order; and the term ‘conservative left’ faces an epistemological obstacle as long as conservatism is associated with the right’s respect for the established order. The concept of ‘liberal-libertarian’ introduced by Clouscard (2008), however, seems to be a case in point: the *libertarian* side refers to the emancipatory progressivism of individuals while the *liberal* side corresponds to the economic situation of market capitalism, which produces a citizen-consumer synthesis peculiar to right-wing progressivism. Movements like Georges Sorel’s revolutionary syndicalism or Ernst Niekisch’s national Bolshevism seem to be illustrations of left conservatism, since their desire to defend social bodies like the family or the working class is combined with the obligation to overthrow existing capitalist political institutions. In this sense, ‘conservatism’ does not mean maintaining the established order, but rather establishing an alternative economic order. Another possible case of left conservatism is Proudhon’s anarchism, which Isabel (2017) describes as a program of defending the working class in the name of traditional moral values such as family and work. This is a far cry from the usual libertarian image of anarchism.⁸

One objection to the existence of such ‘left conservatism’ is that Proudhon, Sorel, and Niekisch shared *antisemitic* views that are simply incompatible with the historical universalism of the left inherited from the French Revolution, and that they also inspired the fascist movements of the 1920s.⁹ In this case, no antisemite can be left-wing, and being antisemitic would be a sufficient condition for being right-wing (or, better yet, extreme right-wing). But we may doubt this relationship between concepts of antisemitism and the right. Some commentators have argued that Proudhon’s attitude derives from his assimilation of the Jew to capitalism and thus symbolizes a ‘left-wing antisemitism’. However, it is probably to preserve the two *implicative* relationships between antisemitism and the right and then between capitalism and the right that Sternhell (2012) has portrayed Sorel’s proto-fascism as being ‘neither right nor left’, maintaining the traditional designation of fascism as an ‘far right’ ideology. But how can someone be ‘far right’ (thus part of the ‘right in general’) and be ‘neither right nor left’? Sternhell must explain such a contradiction, unless

⁸ Georges Sorel (1847-1922) is considered the father of revolutionary syndicalism and the introducer of Marxism in France, while being inspired by Proudhon; Ernst Niekisch (1889-1967) was the main influencer of the ‘left wing’ of the Nazi party, through the brothers Gregor and Otto Strasser.

⁹ On Sorel’s antisemitism, see in particular the historians Shlomo Sand: *Georges Sorel en son temps* (Paris, Seuil, 1985) and Sternhell (2012).

it is merely rhetorical. An alternative explanation is as follows. Either we must admit that there are right-wing anti-capitalists and therefore deny the linkage between right and capitalism in order to save the claim that Sorel was far-right. Or we can open the debate and admit that this 'far right' is a clumsy expression for a new political attitude on its own right, namely 'neither right nor left'. The question is what this form of 'third way' means and what its representatives want, as well as what they do not want. A third option, which I will defend here, is to reject the two previous ones, maintaining the thesis of a 'left conservatism'. Returning to the case of Proudhon, we can explain the difficulty in admitting this kind of conservatism in the following way: the deep influence of the Marxist notion of 'ideology of false consciousness' is undoubtedly responsible for the causal connection established by Marx and Engels (2014) between the social order and the economic order, that is, the causal relationship from infrastructure to superstructure. This connection does not seem to appear in Proudhon, and the common sense of political scientists may be akin to the unconscious result of the victory of Marx's dialectical materialism over Proudhon's utopian socialism. The difficulty in admitting the existence of a conservative left and a right-wing progressivism is, in any case, the same as the difficulty in admitting the existence of a *posteriori* necessity (and *a priori* contingency) among Kant's readers. Overcoming this epistemological obstacle presupposes, first of all, a more precise definition of the first term, and then a distinction between a common meaning and a more particular meaning of it.

I end this section on a note of skepticism. The strong separation between right and left rests on a forced opposition between the *economic* and the *moral* order: deciding when a moral value is binding on everyone within a given social body is no more obvious than deciding when a statement is true only by virtue of the meaning of its terms in a given language. And just as the Kantian separation between analytic and synthetic rests on a belief in radical empiricism, so the left-right division rests on a belief in radical individualism. There is no doubt some arbitrariness in the left-right and conservatism-progressiveness distinctions, as well as in the analytic-synthetic and *a priori a posteriori* oppositions; but this gives no reason to abandon these distinctions, and Bobbio's (1996) idea that left and right are variable attitudes connotes the idea of a distinction of *degree* (not *type*). Explaining the logic of these attitudes is the next topic of my talk.

2

I turn now to the *pragmatic* aspect of *the* left-right divide. A famous quote by Alain reflects a distorted use of this division at the semantic level. What is *not* left-wing *is* right-wing and vice versa, for Bobbio (1996), because nobody would be 'neither left nor right' in politics. Although so-called 'centrists' sometimes claim this positioning outside the divide, neither Bobbio nor Alain accept it. I quote the latter:

When asked if the division between right and left, between people on the left or on the right, still has any meaning, the first thing that comes to mind is that the person asking the question is certainly not on the left.¹⁰

Why? Alain's explanation of the text is more rhetorical than logical. Let's talk about logic here. And pragmatic logic, in the sense of an analysis of the consequences of a speaker's words in the mind of his interlocutor. I think that my thesis that the right implies the will to maintain a state of affairs (and the left the will to change it) is able to explain and support this quote.

The 'logic' of this statement would be the following: saying one is neither left nor right means 'being *right*' from the point of view of a *left-wing* agent (who wants to change the established order), while it means 'being *left*' from the point of view of a *right-wing* agent. And since the interlocutor Alain considered himself 'left-wing', he equated those who say they are 'neither-left-nor-right-wing' with right-wing agents. So Alain is partially right. Being neither left nor right implies not being left-wing, and therefore not wanting change; but it does not necessarily mean wanting to maintain the established order, any more than an agnostic is an atheist. Pragmatic logic concerns the practical *effects of* political attitudes, and this logic reduces the relation of contrariety to one of contradiction: he who does not want the change of an established order may also not want its maintenance, but the result is the same if he who does nothing to change a situation contributes to its maintenance. Alain is right on this point. But the person who does not want the established order to be maintained may also not want it to be changed. The ambiguity here lies in the notion of *will*: not wanting something is not the same as wanting its opposite, even if the person who does not act in a way that does nothing: contributes to the maintenance of the *status quo*, willy-nilly.¹¹

The use of modal concepts can help clarify the logic of the left-right divide here. Assuming that the right wants to maintain a state of affairs, and the left wants to change it, it is possible to define the political spectrum on the basis of a graduated list of convictions. For the left, the future society is better than the current one; therefore, the current society must be changed. The 'far left' wants its *necessary change*, the left its *de facto* change, and the center left its *possible* change. For the right, the future society is no better than the present one. The far right wants its *necessary* continuation, the right its *de facto continuation*, and the center its *possible* continuation. Whatever ideological programs are claimed, the political attitude is the end that ideologies must serve as means. The abolition of privilege, the redistribution of wealth, or the separation of church and state have been means claimed by the left in the past; gender identity, veganism, or transhumanism may be its main claimed means in the near future.

¹⁰ In Emmanuel Beau de Loménie: *What do you call the right and the left?* Paris: Dauphin, 2000: p. 21-22.

¹¹ This supports the idea that only those who do not play have already lost: besides the idea that one cannot lose a game in which one does not play, the case of the political game is unique in that everyone participates; in fact, everyone is subject to the effects of collective decisions (unlike private games), so one must play to win.

3

To summarize my central thesis: *the root of the problem is the problem of the root*, that is, the belief, strongly rooted in common sense and political science, that the concepts of 'left' and 'right' must have their own content to be meaningful. The 'root' that is constantly sought is added to the *operative* meaning, which is content with 'form': the concepts of left and right take their meaning from logical relations, oppositions and moral inferences between previously accepted ideologies.¹² These inferences link ideologies and are a guarantee of minimal consistency on the part of political agents. An example of a recurrent inference rule in political discourse is the case of the *reductio ad hitlerum*, which was taken lightly by its founder Leo Strauss, but which I take very seriously because it constitutes a kind of dishonest moral blackmail or mind manipulation.¹³

Let us consider the following as a provisional conclusion of my reflection. First, 'right' and 'left' are defined in relation to a certain 'political state of affairs'. And in a representative democracy, this state of affairs is manifested in the criteria of *political power* and *public opinion*. It is these two parameters that explain the different possible political positions. The political state of affairs corresponds to one or the other of the two parameters of power and public (or 'dominant') opinion. Sense 1 refers to politics as an activity to gain or maintain power, as opposed to sense 2 of politics or *metapolitics*:

- In the sense of state of affairs, 'right' refers to any attitude or thought that conforms to what is in power or holds power; while "left" refers to any attitude or thought that does not conform to what is in power or holds power;
- In the sense of state of affairs, 'right' refers to any attitude or thought that is in accordance with the dominant view (i.e., the dominant culture¹⁴ or mentality in a given political space); while 'left' refers to any attitude or thought that is not in accordance with that dominant view.

The first meaning of the left-right division is based on the goal of power and therefore refers to the notion of 'politics' as a social activity whose purpose is the conquest of power to organize the common space. Faced with this Machiavellian approach, the second meaning of

¹² All these formal (or content-free) relations are described in detail in chapter 6 of my book *Politically Speaking: Essay on Philosophy of Political Language* (manuscript, 262 pp.).

¹³ On the origin of this *reductio ad hitlerum*, its analogy with the logical rule of *reductio ad absurdum* and its use in politics (when Bolsonaro accused Nazism of having a 'left-wing' origin to discredit his main political opponents: the PT; see the link below:

https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/en-israel-jair-bolsonaro-assure-que-le-nazisme-etait-de-gauche_207092_2.html),

see Schang (202X).

¹⁴ 'Culture' here does not mean the heritage of the various recognized artistic productions (literature, painting, music, etc.); in the broadest sense, it designates the set of attitudes or ways of being characteristic of a place or time; whether we call it 'mentality' or *Weltanschauung* (intuitive representation of the world), the dominant culture that here constitutes the sense of states of affairs designates, in any case, what leads a collective majority to act or think in the same way.

the division is much more reminiscent of Gramsci in associating politics with the broad notion of ‘culture’: a set of dominant opinions within a whole (it can be a social category, a state, or even a civilization grouping several states). Let us look at the advantages, consequences and new problems that may arise from my non-descriptive, operative or functional definition of the left-right opposition.

The advantages are as follows:

- the diversity of ideological content (in time and space) does not change the meaning of the concepts of left and right, as long as they are *essentially* meaningless¹⁵ and based on non-ideological parameters (power and dominant culture);
- the words ‘extreme’ and ‘centre’ are here dissociated from their positive or negative moral connotations, which constitute the evaluative (pejorative/important) use of political concepts; they are no longer associated with ideologies, but with a type of attitude related to the exercise of power (sense 1 of the state of affairs) or to the surrounding culture (sense 2 of the state of affairs);
- the (relatively) new concept of *extreme centre* makes sense: as a contradictory conjunction of characteristics borrowed from the left and the right, it constitutes the type of centre whose sole aim is to hold on to power (‘right-wing’ pragmatism, without any ideological content) through any public discourse likely to satisfy dominant opinion; this type of centre is therefore flexible, in the sense that no ideology of its own prevents it from applying any programme according to contexts, or from making highly variable electoral alliances;
- as opposed to ‘extreme center’, ‘extreme right’ and ‘extreme left’ refer to two types of right and left whose discourse and program conform to a basic ideology; ideological clarity is the quality that constitutes both the failure of extremes, when their ideological rigidity becomes a fundamental obstacle to their rise to power in parliamentary political systems (here we find an explanation for the centripetal force often associated with seizing power: any government has to deal with contradictory forces in order to stay in power, even if it means compromising its initial political commitments);
- this definition confirms the idea of the relativity of the notions of right and left in time and space (the French left is different from the American left; an ideology is not essentially left and right, as nationalism and liberalism have demonstrated in French history);¹⁶
- the two meanings of ‘political state of affairs’ (in relation to power or culture) allow us to clearly distinguish political concepts such as ‘conservatism’ (preservation of a

¹⁵ This is another way of formulating what Ernesto Laclau called ‘empty signifiers’ (see Laclau 1977): despite their contextual content, ‘left’ and ‘right’ attitudes are mere ideological variables regulated by inferential relations.

¹⁶ Note that on the Wikipedia page on the French political party La France Insoumise, the latter is defined by a set of ideologies that include ‘left-wing nationalism’. There is therefore a ‘left’ and ‘right’ nationalism, just as there is a ‘left’ and ‘right’ sovereignty and a ‘left’ and ‘right’ populism. It is by admitting these unwanted terminological difficulties that the functional explanation of the left-right divide finds its explanatory value.

model of culture, in the second sense of state of affairs) and ‘legitimation’ (preservation of a type of power, in the first sense of state of affairs), and to order political ideologies according to whether their content designates a relation to power or a relation to culture (with a certain representation of the world);

- this definition reconciles the two meanings of ‘metapolitics’, which is sometimes the disinterested study of the general concepts of politics, sometimes the technique interested in changing dominant mindsets in order to gain power (see below).

My operational definition of the left-right divide has several consequences for the use of these two opposing concepts, and the audience will judge the explanatory value of my thesis in light of the following few effects. Thus:

- in democratic political systems where the right-left opposition is used, the right refers to the parliamentary majority and the left to the parliamentary opposition (in the sense of the state of affairs);
- an agent may be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’ depending on the existing power (sense 1 of the state of affairs) or dominant culture (sense 2 of the state of affairs), although he or she expresses the same political opinion (or ideological preference) in both cases;
- two contemporary agents (belonging to the same history) with the same political views can be respectively ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’, depending on the political space they belong to and the state of affairs that constitutes their own political space.

On the other hand, the following effects of my theory can be a good reason not to accept my central idea if they create new problems that the theory produces and cannot solve. These problems are as follows:

- statements like ‘the left is in power’ or ‘the parliamentary opposition is right-wing’ become absurd or contradictory statements: if the left designates what is not in power (sense 1 of the state of affairs), then ‘the left is in power’ is equivalent to the thought that what is not in power is in power;
- how to define ‘left’ and ‘right’ if the meanings 1 and 2 of the political situation do not coincide (i.e. if a policy applied in power does not correspond to the dominant culture or the opinion of the corresponding public space)? This means that the same party can be ‘left’ (in sense 1 of the political status) and ‘right’ (in sense 2 of the political status) at the same time;
- dominant opinion or culture (political state sense 2) has no explicit boundaries or modes of recognition, so the second criterion of the left-right divide is useful in theory but unusable in practice.

The first two ‘problems’ are not a major obstacle to my theory; in particular, the contradiction produced by the statement ‘the left is in power’ rests on a descriptive use of the word ‘left’ here, so that a functional use would reformulate it as ‘the former left party is now in power’. On the other hand, the ambiguity of the state of affairs parameter can be a fatal difficulty if

my central thesis rests on it. I must therefore make a final analytical effort by devoting myself to a full explanation of the concept of the state of affairs. On it depends the new meaning of the left-right political opposition in terms of *hegemony*.

4

The greatest danger for politics is that it is deprived of meaning, and the goal of political science is to explain the reasons for this. The notion of *extreme center* was presented here to highlight this phenomenon of our time: the discrediting of politics and the climate of frivolity that accompanies electoral processes within democratic political systems. What good is politics if it consists of stating everything and nothing at the same time, without new practical effects accompanying official speeches reduced to ‘elements of language’? This is the accusation I have just made against this extreme center attitude, a nihilistic variant of centrism whose mode of action consists in not trusting any particular ideological structure. But to say everything without practical consequences is to say absolutely nothing. The sole imperative of seizing or maintaining power largely explains the crisis of confidence in today's democracies, and the moralistic discourse of the ‘danger of *extremes*’ will not be able to hold sway for long without honest reflection on the expected relationship between the rulers and the ruled.

I have proposed some *metapolitical* avenues of reflection to participate in this effort, and the terminological clarifications provided earlier help to show the double meaning of metapolitics and the genesis of the left-right divide.

In its first, speculative sense, metapolitics is a meta-discipline that is no more concerned with associating a certain content to the notion of ‘left’ and ‘right’ than meta-ethics would be concerned with determining the meaning of the notions of good and evil. In both cases, the aim is to study the use of concepts independently of the values associated with them, and my explanation of the use of the concepts of left and right has been formulated in terms of formal and functional relations.

In its second, activist, sense, metapolitics originates in the work of the German philosophers Hufeland and Schlözer and takes on the meaning of political laws superior to human decisions, according to a natural order of things. Joseph de Maistre used this notion to justify his counter-revolutionary positions, and needless to say this meaning is absent from my current thinking on politics. The far more interesting meaning is that of so-called ‘Right-wing Gramscism’, derived from the unorthodox Marxism of Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci (1983), culture is not a mere superstructure, that is, the side-effect of an infrastructure that establishes relations of production within a given society (and a consequent power relation between those who hold power and those who are subject to it). The autonomy of the cultural sphere would imply that it would be possible to modify this culture in order to subvert the order of relations of production, essential in orthodox Marxist theory, and bring the proletariat to power through a transformation of culture in the broadest sense (changing mentalities to take power through ideas, within democratic political systems). The reason why this Gramscism was labeled ‘right’ is that it was recovered in the French context by several

think tanks labeled extreme right, such as GRECE (Groupe de Recherche et d'Etudes pour la Civilisation Européenne) and the New Right of Alain de Benoist.

The second sense of metapolitics shows the relation of implication between the two senses of the state of affairs, which here is indispensable for making sense of the concepts of left and right: if everything that is susceptible of modifying the dominant opinion is susceptible of modifying the conduct of power, then it is the satisfaction of sense 2 (Gramscian) of the state of affairs that constitutes a *necessary* condition for the satisfaction of sense 1 (Machiavellian) of this state of affairs. This is consistent with the correct definition of the political system of democracy, where political power is the expression of the general will resulting from prevailing opinion.

At least two objections can be raised against this ideal account of democracy. On the one hand, is the adequacy of a discourse in relation to a dominant culture a necessary condition for the exercise of political power? One can find many cases where political power is exercised without the support of or agreement in principle with a dominant culture, as is the case when the powers that be direct the national agenda in the interest of a minority of people in the political space. This can be called 'formal' democracy, that is, a political situation in which the government in power has met the formal criteria of representative elections to come to power, but does not express or no longer expresses the general will after taking power.¹⁷ In particular, power can dispense with following the general will when it judges that an electoral decision was made for the wrong reasons, and that it is the duty of politicians to rectify that decision in the name of political 'virtue'. The principle of *epist(em)ocracy* embodies in Brennan (2016) this notion of selective sovereignty of the people in modern democracies, and the undemocratic nature of this way of maintaining a political state deserves examination, but will not be here. On the other hand, it is also questionable whether a political party's agreement with a cultural state of affairs (in the sense of 2) is a sufficient condition for governing. A certain political orientation can come to power (and thus become 'right-wing') without agreeing with the general will of a given democratic system, which may be the case when the president, the government and the parliamentary majority are chosen 'by default' in legal democratic elections.¹⁸ There is, therefore, a kind of logical independence between the two types of political situation in parliamentary democracies. The seizure of power does not imply that the governmental discourse remains in line with the general will expressed in elections, and this seizure of power can even occur without the agreement of that will. Despite the difficulties of giving a concrete and stable meaning to the two meanings of the political 'state of affair', metapolitics aims to change dominant opinions and thus legitimize the coming to power of a previously minority ideology. According to Gramsci and

¹⁷ The reintroduction of the Treaty on European Union in France by the vote of the National Assembly in 2008, after the rejection of this treaty by referendum in 2005, is an example of the divergence between the decision of the people's representatives and the initial will of the people. Conformity with prevailing opinion is therefore not a necessary condition for the exercise of power.

¹⁸ In a two-round plurality system, a candidate may finish second in the first round and obtain an absolute majority in the second round without obtaining a nominal majority of the votes cast: it is conceivable that the number of abstentionists and blank ballots is so high that the future president would be elected by a minority of voters if these 'non-votes' were not taken into account in the final count. The 'formal' democracies ignore these forms of dissent and only take into account the numerical results of the second round.

de Benoist, militancy and propaganda work for a change in dominant opinions and the coming to power of new ideas on the basis of a supply that determines demand. The notion of change is therefore not particularly ‘leftist’ when it says nothing in advance about what is or is not good to do to secure the common good. Instead, change inevitably has a practical goal: the seizure of power, which is the Machiavellian meaning of the concept of ‘right’ and is based on the conquest of dominant opinion in the Gramscian sense of the term. The significance of the relationship between the two types of political situation is in any case problematic: does dominant opinion make political power, or the other way around, or are the two instances independent of each other? To imagine that it is power that makes (or breaks) dominant opinion would make democracy a mere formal appearance of political freedom, insofar as citizens’ responsibility towards the voting process does not imply the real autonomy of their reason. But this problem of circularity between power and public reason goes far beyond my reflection on the left-right divide, whose meaning, in any case, presupposes a predefined formal framework. With or without a ‘real’ democracy at stake.

Thank you.

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Appendix: Definitions

Right vs Left

Right

Maintain the current political state (in order to preserve social harmony).

Left

Change the current political state (in order to achieve political harmony).

Political situation

Economic

The production and exchange of material goods between people in a public space.

Moral

Norms of behaviour of individuals within a public space.

Conservatism vs Progressivism

Conservatism

A political attitude that sees the group as the model for all political norms; it gives precedence to collective institutions (family, state, church) over individual wills and to coexistence over existence.

Progressivism

A political attitude that conceives the individual as the model for all political norms; it gives precedence to particular wills over collective institutions and to existence over coexistence.

An example of right-wing progressivism

Liberal-libertarianism (Clouscard 2008)

- liberalism = economic situation (therefore right-wing)
- emancipation of the individual from collective norms (progressivism)

Progressivism vs Left

- What 'right-wing progressivism' means here is usually called 'center-left'.
- The choice of the phrase 'centre left' is based on a confusion between 'progressivism' and 'left'.

An example of left-wing conservatism

National-Bolshevism (Niekisch 1929)

- anti-capitalism (therefore left-wing)
- defense of collective institutions: family, working class (conservatism)

Conservatism vs Right

- What 'left conservatism' means here is generally referred to as 'far right'.
- The choice of the term 'extreme right' is based on a confusion between 'conservatism' and 'right'