The strange geography of political positions

Right of the Sun and Left of the Moon

J. M. LALLEY

Géronte. . . . Il me semble que vous les placez autrement qu’ils ne sont; que le cœur est du côté gauche et le foie du côté droit.
Sganarelle. Oui, cela était autrefois ainsi; mais nous avons changé tout cela.

Molière

Proudhon disait: “Je rêve une république si libéral que j’y fusse guillotiné comme réactionnaire.”

Emile Faguet

DR. RUSSELL KIRK has told us that such designations as “Right” and “Left” have little or no relevance to the divisions of American political opinion, and yet these imported terms have been so thoroughly absorbed into our vocabulary that the politicians, no less than the Washington correspondents and the editorial writers, would now be lost without them. Many Americans, however, still find them confusing and sometimes paradoxical. From reading certain journals one might be led to believe that the Right, and especially the Far Right, is somehow sinister; from reading others one might well become alarmed about the dexterous contrivances of the Left.

What we seem to need is some fixed and arbitrary point of reference from which all tendencies to Right or Left can be determined. How convenient it would be if our political topography could be reduced by the Messrs. Rand and McNally to a map
on which Right will be always East, and Left always West, even though one may be pointing the top of the atlas toward the southern instead of the northern pole, and even though—when the map is extended far enough—East eventually becomes West, and vice versa. The value of such maps depends no doubt on certain universally accepted conventions, which, as we are reminded in *The Hunting of the Snark*, need not correspond to the cosmic realities. Nevertheless by progressively increasing the distances between parallels of latitude we can flatten and immobilize our round and spinning earth for the vast convenience of ships’ captains and members of the American Automobile Association.

Is it possible, then, to make a sort of Mercator’s projection of our political whirligig and to draw some prime meridian that will definitely separate Right from Left—as Greenwich separates East from West or as the 180th meridian (with a bulge here and there) separates tomorrow from today—and thereby enable us to determine to a precise number of degrees, minutes and seconds the longitude of any given politician? In the parliaments of continental Europe, it seems, there was such a line; it was projected through the chamber from the middle of the presiding officer’s desk and passed, presumably, through the midriff of the midmost middle-of-the-roadier. The distance at which a legislator placed himself on one side or other from this line indicated the exact measure of his desire to hold back the tides of change or to hurry them along.

Most of these parliament chambers, we are told, had semicircular floor patterns with the benches or desks of the members arranged in a series of widening arcs, suggesting that if the seats on the peripheral tier were extended far enough to complete the circle, Extreme Right and Ultra Left would eventually meet, as do Far East and Far West on our schoolroom globes. The presiding officer sat in front of the foremost row, facing the chamber as a schoolmarm faces her class; and so when he glanced to his right what he saw was the Left, and vice versa, which I suspect may sometimes be the case with our journalists.

This general design is said to be traceable to the Salle des Machines of the Tuileries at Paris, the converted theater in which the French National Convention sat from early May, 1793, until late October, 1795. The first half of this period covers the fourteen or fifteen months that are known historically as the Reign of Terror when the benches of the Right were conspicuously empty, their more recent occupants having been expelled and driven into hiding or sent to the guillotine. In the second half, which is known as the Thermidorian Reaction, it was the Left that vanished as most of the chief Terrorists went the way of their victims.

It appears, however, that the designations of côté droit and côté gauche did not originate in the arrangements of the Salle des Machines but some years earlier in the rococo interior of the Salle des Mens Plaisirs du Roi. This was the vast colonnaded hall at Versailles where in the fateful summer of 1789 the deputies of the Constituent Assembly were striving to put together a Constitution “like a pudding from a recipe,” as a sarcastic English visitor described it, and were beginning to quarrel bitterly about the ingredients. It was no doubt natural in the circumstances that deputies of more or less like opinions should have fallen into the habit of sitting together throughout the stormy sessions, but it seems to have been no more than accident that those who were attempting to halt the course of the Revolution should have chosen places at the president’s right.

As far as one can judge from the contemporary prints, the disposition of the
benches (gradins) was somewhat different from that in the Salle des Machines. They were erected in front of the colonnade on either side of the hall, so that one set of deputies confronted another across an open space in the center, much like the arrangement in the British House of Commons. At the middle of one side there was a gap in the benches to make room for the elevated desk and chair of the president; directly opposite him was a similar gap occupied by the tribune, or orator’s pulpit, from which the Abbé Sieyès emitted his maxims, the Abbé Maury his witticisms, and the Comte de Mirabeau his thunders. Behind the colonnades were the public galleries.

In October, 1789, after the famous “march of the maenads” on Versailles, the Assembly followed the captive court to Paris, and after a few crowded and uncomfortable sittings in the archepiscopal palace near Notre Dame, took possession of the Salle de Manège, or riding school of the Tuileries. Here the general design was that of an indoor amphitheater, probably not much unlike one of our professional hockey rinks or basketball courts. Around the piste, or central ellipse where the riding track had been, the benches rose in tiers. As far as this architecture permitted, the arrangements of the Salle des Menus Plaisirs were preserved; they were also to be reproduced in the debating rooms of the Jacobin Club, a fact overlooked by the British in their fondly cherished notion that a political assemblage whose members sit vis-à-vis like antiphonal choristers is somehow in less danger from its radical components than one in which all sit facing forward like a congregation.

At the Manège, too, the monarchists took their places at the Right of the president; but it was not quite the same Right as at Versailles. Many of its former members had resigned in anger or alarm and had returned to their provinces or were preparing to emigrate; their places were filled by some who had been but recently of the Left. The completion of the Constitution of 1791 and the election of the Second (or Legislative) Assembly brought an entirely new and much younger set of deputies into the Manège, and with them new alignments of Right and Left. Then suddenly everything was thrown into confusion by a decision, taken apparently for acoustical reasons, to reverse the positions of the presidential desk and the orator’s tribune. Overnight Right became left and Left right.

Gradually the divisions became vertical rather than lateral; it was no longer a matter of Right or Left so much as of Down or Up, permitting new and more fanciful names to be devised for the factions. The extreme revolutionaries—Jacobins and Cordeliers—took over the topmost benches at the left end of the hall and so became known as the Montagnards, or mountaineers. Just beneath them sat the Brissotins, or Girondists, ardent and eloquent republicans all, and for the moment the darlings of the galleries. At the bottom, or on the benches nearest the boarded-over riding ring, was the Marsh (marais), and just above it the Plain. These consisted of indépendants, men who from policy or timidity dissociated themselves from all factions but voted in most cases with the Right. Near the president sat the New Right—à droite mainte-nant, mais autrefois à gauche, as a contemporary lampoon had put it in the case of Antoine Barnave. Feuillants mostly, they were now working desperately to save the Constitution and what was left of the monarchy their leaders had done much to impair. There was also a counterpart of the Old Right; it seems to have included a group known as the ventrus (or big-bellies), men who would not permit a mere revolution to interfere with something as important as their dinner and so were often absent.
from the Assembly when their votes were needed.  

With the final destruction of the monarchy, the imprisonment of the royal family in the Temple and the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly, the New Right vanished. Some of its leaders had fled, some were already in prison, but a few former members turned up in the National Convention to sit with the Mountain or Plain and to vote for the death of Louis XVI. Meanwhile the Brissotins had descended from the Mountain to become the Republican Right. This party of the émeutes, which had brought up the sailors and roustabouts from Marseilles to help in the storming of the Tuileries, was now the party of law, order, property, and federalism. It controlled the ministries; its orators dominated the Convention; it could usually obtain enough support from Marsh and Plain to carry its motions. But the Mountain and its clubs controlled the Commune, and the Commune controlled the mobs; within three weeks after removal of the Convention to the Salle des Machines the Brissotins were forcibly purged from it.

So now we have traced the historical genesis of our terms through the protean topography of the French Revolution, but it has not helped us to find our meridian. Let us try the lexicographers. In the American Dictionary of Politics (1949) Professor Catheryn Seckler-Hudson defines the "Left" for us as "those political groups whose views are considered radical or in advance of the general norm of political action or thought at a given time or place." In the same valuable handbook Professor Arnold J. Zurcher tells us that the "Right" is "a popular designation for conservatives." Turning backward in the book—since here, by an alphabetical incongruity, Right is more advanced than Left—we find a conservative to be "one who follows the philosophy of conservatism." Turning one page farther back we find Professor J. Roland Pennock explaining that there are really two kinds of conservatism. One represents a "general and uncritical opposition to change of any sort," which is just about as clear and succinct as a definition can be; the other kind, however, requires a bit of a mouthful, viz:

A reasoned philosophy, associated with the English writer Edmund Burke, directed toward the control of the forces of change in such a way as to conserve the best elements of the past by blending them into organic unity with new elements in an ever-evolving society.

In this interpretation Professor Wilbur W. White, compiler of White's Political Dictionary (1947), appears to concur, but he is perhaps more explicit. Conservatism, he tells us, means a political point of view which desires to "conserve" and maintain everything essential and valuable in a nation's past and to accept only such innovations as are absolutely necessary, and which do not offend any fundamental traditional ideas. A conservative usually believes in authority (though not in extreme authoritarianism), in the preservation of the family and moral values; he will safeguard the traditional role of aristocracy in a society and will try to restrain the influence of broad masses in the direction of the state . . .

Professor White, too, sees in Edmund Burke—recognized by Macaulay, Acton and Morley as the brightest light of British Liberalism—the true "father of British Conservatism." The Professor carefully warns us not to confuse conservatism with reaction. A reactionary, it appears, is one who wants to "return to an earlier, more conservative [and presumably more congenial] social or economic or political order," a definition that would certainly have applied to the socialist William Morris, with his fastidious
hatred of smoke, steam and machinery. Even less should conservatism be confused with "fascism," which is in a way its antithesis, since fascists are revolutionaries who have "no real reverence for traditional values and customs." But Professor White does not help us much with our problem of locating Right and Left; for though he makes an effort to explain them, he seems to believe that both terms have been extended to include so many incompatible elements as to make them well-nigh meaningless.

So let us go back to Professor Seckler-Hudson's indication of Leftward as the direction of advance. The concept she gives us is one of historical progression, and the image it raises is rather like that of an old-fashioned army on the march, with the radical lancers serving as a point for the advance guard, with the philosophical conservatives and their heavy baggage train of usages, traditions, symbols, institutions and other spoils of time lumbering slowly along somewhere near the rear, and with the reactionary stragglers and deserters long since lost along the route. Right and Left, then, can only be determined by the point at which the procession is observed, for, as even Bergson acknowledged, the human mind is habituated to think of movement only in terms of the unmoving.

Must we, therefore, assume as our "general norm of political action or thought"—our zero meridian, in other words—a sort of historical reviewing stand permanently occupied by the publicists and professors of political science? Apparently so. But does not the notion of advance also convey the notion of destination, of a terminus ad quem, a point at which Absolute Left will be reached and the progress ended? The Marxists, at any rate, avow such a goal, to be realized when the materialist dialectic has achieved its ultimate synthesis, when history and politics alike shall come to an end in the beatific realization of the classless society and the withering away of the state.

The Jacobin Leftists of 1793-94, considered by Professor J. T. Talmon to have been the precursors of modern totalitarian communism, had likewise such a goal. It was to have been attained when every last rebel against the dictatorship of the volonté générale had been destroyed by the Terror, when the last obstacle to liberty, equality, and fraternity under the reign of republican virtue had been removed. But because the Jacobins had swallowed Plutarch and Livy along with Rousseau, they were inclined to envisage their austere and virtuous republic as a reconstitution of ancient Sparta or Early Rome. This made them in a sense stubborn reactionaries; and in the same sense it places all of us far, far to the Left of Robespierre and Saint-Just.

Conversely, though, if we set our zero mark at one of these ardently pursued but still unrealized revolutionary goals it places everybody now living, Comrade Khrushchev and Senhor Salazar, Mao Tse-tung and Monsieur Tshombe, La Gurley Flynn and Mr. Robert Welch, very far to the Right. With this cartography, indeed, it also becomes possible to imagine the Messrs. Buckley, Goldwater, Tower, Dodd, Humphrey, Douglas, Bowles, and Schlesinger combining in chorus like the politicians of Titipu, to sing

And you are Right,
And we are Right,
And all is Right as Right can be!
And in that happy harmony let us leave them.

"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators, Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?" So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply, "They are merely conventional signs!"—The Hunting of the Snark, II, 9-12.

The floor pattern of the Salle des Machines seems to have resembled a partly opened fan. The session chamber was 160 feet long but only 60 feet at its widest. Some historians like Michelet and Pariset say it was so densely packed that a deputy could not move hand or foot without disturbing his neighbor. Lenotre, on the contrary, says that the place was much too large and that even before the purges there were many expanses of empty seats. This, if correct, was fortunate, for the ventilation is said to have been very bad and the Revolutionists, like eighteenth-century folk in general, seem not to have been much addicted to washing. Marat, to whom the habit proved fatal, was of course the notable exception.

J. T. Shipley (Dictionary of Word Origins) thinks it was a matter of rank and ceremony, that the nobles were given seats on the right as the place of honor, "leaving the left to the Third Estate." Contemporary representations of the scene at the opening of the States General, however, show the First Estate (clergy) seated to the right of the King, the Second (nobility) on his left, and the Third (commons) in the rear.

The Jacobins met at first in the long narrow library under the roof of the Dominican convent from which they derived their nickname. Later they moved to the chapel, where the arrangement was repeated on somewhat larger scale.

The members of the Constituent Assembly had declared themselves ineligible for election to the Legislative Assembly.

V. M. Vaublanc, Mémoires.

E. g., the elegant and eloquent Barère de Vieuzac, whose subsequent career as a Terrorist and member of the dread Committee of Public Salvation was to earn him the sobriquet of "Anacreon of the Guillotine."

On vous a parlé de deux classes de citoyens, des Messieurs et des Sans-Culottes; prenez la bourse des premiers et armez les autres!—Camille Desmoulins, May 8, 1793.


"Lycurgue fut peut-être un Proudhon qui fondait une république si sévère qu'il savait n'y pourrait pas vivre.—Faguet.