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Commentaries

Political Left and Right: Our Hands-On Logic

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Abstract

The origins and immediate vitality of the left/right divide which emerged in French revolutionary politics from 1789 can only be understood against the background of a much older classification dynamic based on the primacy of the right hand, first described by Robert Hertz in 1909. This dynamic infused political thinking first in Versailles and since 1815 in democracies throughout the world. In the process, the classical left/right polarity acquired a new dimension: the complementary notions of ‘accepting’ and ‘questioning’ the existing social order. An essential feature of both the age-old classical polarity and the ensuing political polarity is that they are intimately bound up with local and evolving social contexts: there is no single content-based definition of left and right. As long as the majority of us are predisposed to use our right hand when acting in the world, ‘left versus right’ will remain the most important political antithesis in western-type democracies.

Keywords: political left, political right, polarity, Hertz, classification, order, anthropology, cultures

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The Enigma

“If you ask passers-by at random what the difference is between right and left, most say they do not really know, but this does not stop them from positioning themselves to the political left or right” (Gauchet & Rémond, 2002, p. 5). When political scientist René Rémond made this observation in the French journal *Le Débat* more than ten years ago, it also applied, remarkably enough, to himself – as well as to his colleague Marcel Gauchet, who added: “We are faced with a sort of enigma”. Rémond and Gauchet were not the first to make this observation, and certainly not the last. This complaint is sometimes used as justification for dismissing the whole left/right political polarity as mere rhetoric (Furedi, 2005) or simply as outdated (Lukacs, 2005). The purpose of the present article is to resolve Gauchet and Rémond’s enigma, and in the process discover why this dichotomy has been so persistent and remains vital to this day.

The Origins of the Left/Right Dichotomy

The political left and right were born in 1789 in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs* at Versailles, where Louis XVI had summoned a meeting of the Estates-General; Louis was beset with serious financial problems and urgently needed help to overcome them. Two days after the ceremonial opening on 5 May, and following a heated debate, two important motions were put to the vote during a sitting of the Third Estate. A choice had to be made between two visions on the verification of the credentials of the representatives: should each estate verify the credentials of its own members, as dictated by tradition, or should this be undertaken for all representatives in a joint sitting of all three estates?

The modernist Mirabeau realised that if the verification was done according to the rules, this would implicitly sanction the separation of the three estates. He therefore demanded that the verification of the credentials should be done in common by all deputies, which would in time diminish the relevance of the division into estates. Malouet, a moderate royalist, stood with the court for maintaining the traditional rules.

Given the large number of representatives (more than 500), a vote by roll call would have taken a long time, and so it was decided, apparently in the hope that there would be a clear majority for one side or the other, that Mirabeau's supporters would congregate to the left of the president of the sitting and Malouet's supporters to the right (Hindie Lemay, 1987). According to Runciman (1965, p. 145) this was an accidental choice and it could easily have been the other way around. In the sittings that followed, this division continued to be reflected in the way the representatives took their seats in the chamber. Those that adhered most to the ideals of the Revolution increasingly grouped themselves to the left of the president, while the supporters of the Ancien Régime congregated more to the right (Dorigny, 1989).

On 11 September 1789 an important vote was held on a royal legislative veto. Defended by a more or less royalist minority seated on the right of the president, it was rejected by the large majority on his left. The division into two ideologically opposed groups was by then so evident that many regard this date as the official birth of the left/right political polarity. See, for example, Defrasne (1975).

A Dichotomy That Will Not Go Away

During the highly turbulent period between 7 May and 11 September 1789, and after, four events took place which could, or even should, have ended or at least inverted this physical manifestation of ideological differences.

1. At the swearing of the Tennis Court Oath on 20 June, the delegates agreed to abolish the separate representation of the three estates, which thereafter held joint sessions as the recently self-proclaimed National Assembly in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*. This chamber had very poor acoustics and was totally unsuitable for a meeting of 1100 representatives. In a radical transformation of the chamber in the days and nights of 22 and 23 July, the seating arrangements were changed: rows of staged seating were erected along the side walls as in a modern sports stadium, and the desk used by the president and his assistants was moved to what used to be a side wall. As a consequence, the predominantly revolutionary Third Estate, which used to sit towards the back, now sat to the left of the president, while the highest ranks of the clergy and nobility, who were most sympathetic to the existing regime and used to sit at the front, now sat to the right of the president (Brette, 1902).

The architect Pâris, who was responsible for this renovation, had therefore made an important, although unconscious, step in the physical confirmation of the left/right polarity. We will never know what would have happened if the president had been relocated to the other side of the chamber, but we can make an informed guess based on the following events.

2. In October 1789 the National Assembly relocated to Paris and from 9 November, following a brief stay at a Jacobin monastery, it met in the *Salle du Manège*. The left/right division went with it. In December 1791 it was decided to refurbish this chamber as well. The benches were set closer together and the president's seat was moved to the opposite side of the chamber, partly in a move to undo the division and radicalisation of the members into a *côté gauche* and a *côté droite*, which was considered to be increasingly problematic.

Dulaure (1793, p. 3) attempted to describe the new situation as follows: "In the Assembly the Patriots were in the habit of sitting to the right of the president, with the *Montagne* on the extreme right hand side. This used to be called the left hand side, but now the president's chair has been moved, this area is to his right. The opposite side, where the Aristocrats used to sit, used to be the right hand side, but is now to the left of the president". And he added: "I do not want to assert that the *Montagne* and those that sit around them are all members of this party; I know some who sit there who are not fanatical supporters of any party, but continue to sit there by force of habit". This 'force of habit', which just a few years previously had worked so well to maintain the left/right division in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*, had quite a different effect here. The newspapers could make neither head nor tail of it; reporters tried to explain the situation with phrases like 'the old left, now the right' and 'the old right, now the left', or 'those of the people' and 'those of the king', but none of these terms gained acceptance. The terms 'left' and 'right' remained popular labels for the political divisions in the Assembly, although now they had lost any physical relevance – and for the first time were used *purely to indicate political ideologies*. In May 1793 the National Assembly moved to the *Tuileries*, and the left-wing and right-wing members once more took up their logical seating arrangements, always from the viewpoint of the chair.

3. The conversion of the *Salle du Manège* was partly inspired by a desire to undo the ill-fated division into increasingly radical groups, but in this respect it was a total failure – with the well-known catastrophic consequences in the years that followed. This is why, when the Directory was formed after the fall of Robespierre at the end of the Terror in 1794, drastic measures were taken to prevent the formation of groups in the new parliament. In the new Council of Five Hundred, established in September 1795, the delegates were given numbered seats and every three months the seating arrangements were reshuffled by drawing lots. These measures were maintained during the Napoleonic period, and were indeed effective in preventing any ideological or geographically-based groups from being formed, also during the time that the Tribunat operated as the successor to the Council of Five Hundred. This arrangement meant that for a period of nineteen years, from 1795 until the fall of Bonaparte, the formation of ideologically motivated left-wing and right-wing factions in the parliamentary chambers was rendered impossible. The division into left and right was given free rein for five years at most (from May 1789 to June 1794), and more than one of these years was in a reverse form. One might suppose that after this rather unruly and confused start, those nineteen years would have been enough for the left/right polarisation to be forgotten or abandoned.

4. In 1814 Louis XVIII returned from England to take his place in the newly formed constitutional monarchy. The most prominent members of the new Chamber of Deputies and Chamber of Peers could count on the support of groups of varying size and composition. There were no organised parties because their existence would have been at odds with the free exchange of ideas between the delegates, but certain customs did arise, such as the

formation of groupings, with the conservatives to the right of the president and the liberals to the left (Vidalenc, 1966). And so the left/right polarisation was reborn within just a few weeks – to remain with us to this day.

It seems as if at the inception of the left/right polarity in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*, a magical power made it invincible to anything that would destroy it. But perhaps it was in fact the other way around: could it be that this classification principle had always been in existence and was simply waiting for the first opportunity to manifest itself in the political landscape, and never again to disappear from it?

Dualistic Thinking

More than a century ago the French anthropologist Robert Hertz (1909/1973) wrote a monograph on left and right customs and traditions in cultures around the world. He was able to do this because at that time the Western colonial powers had penetrated all inhabited continents and westerners had been in contact with most of the world's cultures. Army officers, doctors and missionaries with an interest in the peoples they lived among, and often with time on their hands, had recorded all sorts of observations and the new science of anthropology had set out to collect these observations and compare and contrast them. Hertz reviewed the ways in which various peoples, tribes and other communities structured important concepts, phenomena and aspects of their universe by attributing them to two spheres in a dualistic symbolic classification.

The studies by Hertz, as well as his predecessors and those that followed him, produced strikingly similar results from different parts of the world. Some examples of the left/right polarities from peoples and tribes in different cultures are given in Table 1.

The commonalities are indeed astonishing. Assuming that modern humans evolved in Africa and the Nyoro have remained there ever since, but that the Mapuche migrated over thousands of years through East Asia, across the Bering Strait and down through North America into South America, it is quite miraculous that the left/right dual symbolic classifications of these two peoples (still) resemble each other so closely.

According to Hertz, “The whole universe is divided into two spheres: things, beings and powers attract or repel each other, implicate or exclude each other, according to whether they gravitate towards the one or the other of the two poles” (Needham, 1973, p. 8). He thought this dichotomy was based on a religious preoccupation (the sacred versus the profane), but dualistic thinking is in itself a sufficient explanation for the origins of the two spheres. Together they unite the opposite and complementary sides of important aspects of the universe (male in one sphere, female in the other, both making up humanity; day in one, night in the other, both making up the full daily cycle, etc.).

Almost all cultures place certain concepts and phenomena in the right hand sphere and their opposite or complement in the left hand sphere; other concepts seem to vary more between cultures or races. Male is always right and female is always left. Power, stability, order, certainty, security, hierarchy and tradition are usually associated with the male in the right hand sphere, while weakness, danger, uncertainty, subversion, novelty and informality are associated with the female in the left hand sphere.

Table 1

Left and Right in Different Cultures

The Nyoro in East and Central Africa:		Ambon (Indonesia):	
left	right	left	right
woman	man	female	male
subject	chief	below	above
queen	king	earth	heaven of sky
hated	normal, esteemed	spiritual	worldly
bad omen	good omen	coast or seaside	land or mountain
danger	security	exterior	interior
death	life	behind	in front
barrenness	fertility	new	old
sorrow	joy		
adultery	fidelity		
poverty	wealth		
black	white		
evil	good		
impurity	purity		
odd	even		
soft	hard		
long hair	shaven hair		
animal skins	bark cloth		
illegitimacy	legitimacy		
alien dialect	Nyoro language		
savagery	civilisation		
disorder	order		
sickness	health		
The Mapuche in Chile:		Greece, 400 BC:	
left	right	left	right
woman/child	man	female	male
junior	senior	curved	straight
below	above	dark	light
evil	good	evil	good
sickness	health	movement	rest
death	life	plurality	one
black	white	even	odd
night	day	unlimited	limited
layman	priest	oblong	square
sorcerers	ancestral spirits		
poverty	abundance		

Note. All data from [Needham \(1973\)](#), pp. 180, 182, 192-196, 328.

The logic behind the contents of the two spheres is evident. The masculine sphere contains ‘power’ – men are generally stronger than women – and also ‘right’, because most people are right-handed, which is probably genetically determined ([McManus, Davison, & Armour, 2013](#)), and so their right hand is stronger and more adept. ‘Strong’ is readily associated with ‘healthy’, which is therefore also placed in the masculine sphere, and so the opposites ‘sickness’ and ‘death’ fall within the female sphere. By a further process of association each sphere obtains its own logically consistent set of meanings.

By extension, one might assume that left-handed people would arrange the concepts and symbols in exactly the opposite way. Indeed, [Casasanto \(2009\)](#) saw that right-handers tended to associate rightward space with positive ideas and leftward space with negative ideas, but that left-handers showed the opposite pattern, associating rightward space with negative ideas and leftward space with positive ideas. In a subsequent study, right-handers had to perform difficult tasks with a bulky ski glove on their right or left hands. Afterwards, the subjects who had carried the glove on their right hand, and thus had been more efficient with their left hand in performing the task, found the objects on the left hand side of the pictures they were shown to be more positive than those on the right: a literal *Umwertung aller Werte* (transvaluation of all values) within a few hours ([Casasanto & Chrysikou, 2011](#)). These results indicate that the process of accrediting a sphere with the epithet 'good' operates within all of us to this day. But apparently, left-handers always have had to give way to the overwhelming majority of right-handers in determining how concepts were attributed to the right and left spheres, for example when the right/left division was expressed in religious and other public ceremonial functions (see further under 'Acting in Dual Polarities: Traditions and Customs').

The further removed a concept or symbol is from association with 'male' or 'female', the weaker is its attachment to the corresponding right or left sphere. The core concepts for right, besides 'male', are 'strong' and 'life', and for left, besides 'female', are 'weak' and 'death', whereas peripheral ideas such as 'hair length' and 'coast' are less tied down to one sphere or the other. In Central Africa the idea of the 'coast' is clearly not nearly as significant as it is on the island Ambon and does not appear on the list of right or left categories (see [Table 1](#)). On Ambon, however, where dangerous spirits emerge from the sea, the coast stands for 'danger' and therefore belongs to the left. This is why the Ambonese preferred to build their temples high up on the mountainsides, where it was safe, and which therefore belong to the right.

[Needham \(1973\)](#) emphasised that individual concepts and symbols are not always and everywhere, without exception, allocated to the same polar spheres. Their allocation is based on what people *experience* to be the essence of a sphere, or on associating *what is felt* with elements or categories already present in one of the spheres, and such feelings are always influenced by social, religious or other contexts – which can vary. Context has most influence on those peripheral concepts or symbols, which are only weakly or indirectly related to the core categories of 'man' and 'woman'. In an Indian culture, for example, in the sun/sky antithesis, the sun, which illuminates the sky, belongs to the male sphere and the sky belongs to the female sphere. But in the sky/earth antithesis, the sky is logically considered to be male, because it fertilises the earth with rain, and the earth is female ([Coomaraswamy, 1942](#)). In ancient China, all aspects of life were subject to the yin/yang duality and the division into left and right depended on the situation. For example, during an official mourning or celebration different hands were used for greeting or kept hidden ([Granet, 1934](#)). The key determinant was which aspect was considered to be most relevant in a specific context, either for the sphere or the specific element. In some cultures, a certain religious or moral connotation may have distinguished one sphere from the other, but this was not necessarily always and everywhere the case. For example, 'evil' does not necessarily mean 'morally bad' and so does not necessarily morally taint the sphere in which it resides; it may refer more generally to 'that which causes harm or damage', such as disasters and pestilence. [Granet \(1934, p. 297\)](#): "The Chinese do not have the urge to divide things up into Good and Evil".

We have now left the standard way of thinking in science – which would seek to precisely define what belongs to 'left' and what to 'right' – far behind us. A physico-chemical proposition that metals are heavier than non-metals is simply disproved by the fact that aluminium is lighter than iodine; but someone who observes that the people living in a certain region favour the left hand cannot immediately conclude that the whole idea of the favourite right

hand can be thrown overboard: there may be special circumstances that explain this deviation from the rule, as in Granet's example from ancient China mentioned above. We have entered a world of constructed cultural experiences, which are strongly influenced by the continually changing context, but at the same time have their own coherent internal logic, as described above. And this logic appears to be the same everywhere in the world.

Acting in Polarities: Traditions and Customs

Rituals, social conventions, traditions and customs were often based on a division of the universe into two spheres, and the left/right antithesis provided an extremely convenient metaphor to give concrete expression to this division. Left and right can be used in various ways to express the two spheres in everyday life: the king commands his strongest warrior or trusted companion to sit on his right – his 'right hand man'. You eat with your right hand, not the left hand, which is associated with sickness and death and is just about good enough to wipe your bottom with. The Nyoro medicine man "places a wand on the left shoulder of the client and says: 'Sickness be gone ... sorrow be gone ... barrenness be gone'; then he places the wand on the right shoulder and says, 'Come wealth, come children, come long life ... come all goodness'" (Needham, 1973, p. 305). More examples can be found in the rich scientific and popular literature about left and right (Fritsch, 1968; Hertz, 1909/1973; McManus, 2002; Needham, 1973). In anthropology this cultural logic of thinking in polarities has become a central phenomenon in the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968) who, taking his cue from Hertz, found a similar logic in marriage rules, totemism and myths. The notion of linked polarities as a way to make sense out of a bewildering world has proven to be very productive, especially when linked to body symbolism. Mary Douglas (1973) has shown how our body offers the most convenient repository cultural symbolism all over the world; thus the polarity between our left and right side comes in very 'handy', as our body seems to be symmetric, but in fact is not *completely* so. Almost nobody is ambidextrous – and the dynamic for dividing aspects of the world into 'left' and 'right' is thereby almost a given. Which aspect ends up at what side, however, is a cultural and historical choice, our point in this essay.

Anthropology has made clear that the role of the division into left and right does not depend on the complexity of the culture; it has been noted first in small-scale societies as these tend to be more homogeneous, but can also be seen in our complex culture, operating through the contingencies of history. The events leading to the French Revolution just illustrate how in a chaotic situation some order was created by this cognitive mechanism of left-right classification.

One crucial medium for transferring the left/right polarity from one generation to the next, again either consciously or unconsciously, is language. Every adult knows that the 'right hand' refers not just to a part of the body, but also metaphorically to a trusted companion, follower or subject. 'Droit' in French also refers to the law, as it does in Dutch and German. Every language carries traditions and customs embedded within it as sayings, idioms and expressions, as can be found in any explanatory dictionary. For more on how the metaphorical use of words and phrases can lend new meanings to them, see Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and on the possible neurological processes involved Anderson (2010).

Since prehistoric times, we may conclude, humans have tried to make sense of the confusing plethora of phenomena in their world by dividing their impressions, observations and interpretations into two spheres. And this is exactly what happened during the first turbulent meetings in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*. The representatives needed

to get to grips with the great diversity of political opinions and objectives in order to deliberate on and treat them in a consistent manner. For them, our basic classificatory opposition pair was already available as a vehicle for structuring their political ideas.

Embedding Politically Relevant Ideas in the Existing Left/Right Polarity

Most of the concepts and phenomena listed in [Table 1](#) have in themselves no political significance, with the exception of terms like ‘king’ and ‘chief’, which are both found on the right hand side. One would therefore be forgiven for questioning whether there is indeed a connection between the classical and the political left/right polarity, or whether they are in fact entirely separate things. But on further investigation, we cannot ignore the signs. Concepts like stability, order, certainty, security, hierarchy and tradition are usually prominent in Hertz’s right sphere, and these are ideas that frequently feature in the manifestos of political parties that are considered by the media and the public to be ‘right-wing’. On the other hand, the political parties associated most with the weak, the poor, reform/revolution, the informal and the new are generally considered to be ‘left-wing’. Moreover, the manifestos of ‘right-wing’ parties contain many items considered to be on the ‘right’ in the existing polarity, but almost no items from the opposite end of the spectrum; the same goes, in reverse of course, for the ‘left-wing’ parties.

It is therefore possible to consider ‘politics’ to be an additional culture which emerged in 1789 in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs* and has taken its place alongside other cultures, with the same rules and patterns for placing ideas and terms into a right and left sphere. This is no surprise, because the inhabitants of the land called ‘Politics’ already carried this polarity within themselves. And it is because the same pattern can be seen in western-type democracies across the world, that in February 2013 the European media were able to state that ‘Ecuador re-elects left-wing President Correa’, in the justifiable assumption that their readers would consider this meaningful information, even if they had no idea where Ecuador is, let alone the political situation in that country (Correa’s politics are characterised by solidarity with the poor). The average European needs no introduction to understand what ‘left’ and ‘right’ mean in politics. In the Netherlands the readers of the paper with the broadest appeal have no difficulty at all in using these terms; in fact, quite the opposite.

A typical manifesto of a right-wing party, then, will contain ideas and policies that guarantee the continuity of the existing social order (backed by a strong legal apparatus and the military) and support industry and commerce in order to provide economic growth and food security, as well as distrusting all things foreign or alien which could threaten or disrupt the existing order. Its core philosophy can be described as an unquestioned acceptance of the world as it is, in the same way that fish experience water: it simply is and there is no reason to question it. Our job is to live and prosper in it, and if the world changes, to adapt – just as the salmon adapts its biochemistry in response to a change in the salt content of the water when it leaves the sea and swims up the river.

A typical left-wing party manifesto will contain proposals and policies that seek to improve the existing social order or replace it with an alternative that has not yet been able to emerge because of the course of history, but which promises to liberate us from the straitjacket of the current regime and benefit those in the world who have not been able to fulfil their potential. What the existing order calls justice is injustice, because it stands in the way of a new and better world. The core of left-wing politics can be defined as the idea that the world does not necessarily have to be the way it now is. And this gives rise to questions – precisely as formulated in June 2014, when the clock on the Bolivian Congress building was reset so that from then on it would turn ‘anti-clockwise’, by Foreign

Minister Choquenuanca, of the government which by the media is described as 'left-wing'. He said the change had been made to show the Bolivians that they could question established norms. Congress Leader Elio added that the change raised the need to put an end to injustices in the North with a new world order that would be born in the South – also beautifully in line with our description of the essence of the left.^{i,ii}

Hertzian Features of the Political Polarity

An essential feature of the Hertzian left/right polarity is the fact that binary opposition itself is relatively independent of content; we tend to think primarily in polarities, and a specific concept or phenomenon can switch sides depending on the context or its particular 'opponent', such as the sky in the case of sun–sky–earth. The political polarity also displays this feature. For example, in France after 1871 the political left harboured a desire for revenge following defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, but around the turn of the century the political context changed: the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair and the emergence of pacifism, especially among the political left, led to the left abandoning and the right adopting the desire for revenge (Tixier, 1954). Mounier (1938) put science and technology, which in the optimistic nineteenth century would help us build a better society, within the orbit of left-wing thinking, but the left has since lost its original admiration for science and technology: their appropriation by the big corporations and the development of the atom bomb in the twentieth century put them squarely in the right-wing camp. The Soviet Union, in the 1920s a model state for the left and a place of pilgrimage for artists and idealists, changed under Stalin into a rigid dictatorship in which it was unwise to ask questions. Mounier (1938) already came to doubt whether this regime actually deserved to be called left-wing. At lower levels, such switches are more common and transient in nature: in 2010 the Dutch left-wing Socialist Party opposed the raising of the retirement age from 65 to 67, a conservative attitude which many people interpreted as a shift to the right – but the party insisted it was an expression of their left-wing solidarity with the weaker members of society (Bienfait, 2010). Other examples can be found in Mounier (1938).

It is these major and minor switches which have always thrown up insurmountable obstacles to finding a fixed allocation of ideas in the left/right polarity in terms of content – any political content seems to flounder continuously: "On n'en sortira pas" concluded Mounier.ⁱⁱⁱ

Conclusion: Was the Birth of Left/Right in the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs Accidental?

The literature on the events that took place in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs* (Dorigny, 1989; Gauchet, 1997; Hindie Lemay, 1987) suggests a gradual development of the political left/right polarity following the vote held on 7 May 1789 during a sitting of the Third Estate, as described earlier. Was it by chance, as Runciman (1965) would have us believe, that on 7 May the royalists who joined with Malouet assembled to the right of the president, the king's representative, while those who challenged the existing order, led by Mirabeau, gathered to the left? We will probably never know. Oppenheimer and Trail (2010) demonstrated an 'effect of spatial orientation on political attitudes' among US citizens; in 1789 the deputies in the Estates-General demonstrated an increasingly obvious 'effect of political attitudes on spatial orientation'. What we *can* establish with a reasonable degree of certainty is

that during that summer at Versailles the old 'Hertzian' left/right polarity took hold of the political discourse at the first possible opportunity – and has not let go ever since.^{iv}

As long as the majority of us are predisposed to use our right hand when acting in the world, we can expect that 'left versus right' will remain the most important political antithesis in Western-type democracies. Political thought, through the medium of the 'Hertzian' polarity, has added its own fundamental duality: 'accepting' (right) as opposed to 'questioning' (left) the existing order.

Notes

i) In the European countries that belonged to the Soviet bloc until 1989/90 there now seems to be some confusion about the political meaning of the concept 'left'; in Poland it could sometimes also mean 'accepting the social order' (M. Kossowska, personal communication).

The cause of this phenomenon may be found in the young Soviet Union. Basically, the Bolsheviks saw their revolution as 'left' against the 'right' of the Mensheviks, a logical thing to do. So, when Lenin came to power, he defined the new Russia as left. Right then was defined by him as the side of the past, of the counter-revolutionaries. Thus, from then on the content of the left-right divide did not originate from public opinion, but was *defined by the ruler* and his adherents.

Under and after Stalin, all political distinctions within the only official political party were weeded out, it was simply and by definition left; the right was defined as fascism and the major threat to the Soviet Union. In this way, the official left had now turned into "us" (as it is) versus right "external enemy" (as it should not be). Apparently then, after breaking up the Soviet bloc, this use has persisted in countries that were part of it. (See also the remark of Mounier [1938] on the Soviet Union, which we will mention in the following paragraph.)

ii) The essential difference between the present left and right in the British and French parliaments is that for the French it is the *ideological* differences that determine who sit on the right and the left, and for the British the decisive factor is *power*. If the Labour party is in power, it *sits* on the right, but it *is*, for the British too, left.

iii) Laponce (1981), who was the first to recognise the importance of Hertz's work for political science and who also distanced himself from a rigid definition of political polarity, proposed that in continental European politics the left could be considered to be 'positive' and the right to be 'negative': "If politics appears to destabilise the religious and the social order, it will tend to be located perceptually at the negative pole of the overall perceptual system. Consequently, what would be positive in the social and the religious system will become negative in the political system and vice-versa" (Laponce, 1981, pp. 44-45). Anthropologically, this does not hold water. Politics, in whatever formal or informal shape, is part of the whole social system and follows the same logic of categorisation (Bienfait & van Beek, 2001). A more recent attempt to characterise the political polarity with regard to its content was by Bobbio (1996), who defined 'equality' (left) versus 'inequality' (right), as its essence.

iv) For an experimental approach to testing the posited intermingling of political and cultural polarities, it may be useful to consider some characteristics or categories which are strong in one sphere but absent from the other, and to look for degrees of unconscious association with the two spheres in people's minds (Casasanto, 2013). Ideally suited might be the pair even/odd, which has no political significance. In societies all over the world it is used in the numbering of buildings along streets, as shown in recommendations by the World Bank: "The numbering progression starts from the designated point zero of each street. *By convention* [our emphasis], buildings on the left side of the street are assigned uneven numbers, and those on the right receive even numbers, all of which increase in the direction of progression" (Farvacque-Vitkovic, Godin, Leroux, Verdet & Chavez, 2005, p. 146).

One might object that the pair even/uneven has no evident linkage with the basic pair male/female, so that the Nyoro could place 'even' on the right, whereas the ancient Greeks had reasons, based on their Pythagorean cosmology, to place it on the left (see Table 1). But modern cosmology differs fundamentally from that of the Pythagoreans and our present appreciation of the pair even/uneven is most easily explained, we think, by the association of 'even' with 'in balance' and 'stable', thus placing it on the right.

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Competing Interests

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