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Right and Left As Political Categories An Exercise in “Not-So-Primitive” Classification

H. F. Bienfait and W. E. A. van Beek

Abstract. – Most citizens in Western-type democracies feel they can easily accommodate a variety of political viewpoints onto a simple one-dimensional scale, i.e., from left to right. With politics as complicated as they are, how is this possible? The authors answer this question, first, by identifying the first recorded instance of the left-right distinction, in the French General Assembly of 1789. Contrary to common opinion, this particular political history does not furnish sufficient cause for the preponderance of left-right distinctions, neither in Europe nor even in France. So, next they look into the significance of traditional left-right polarities in cultures all over the world. These manifest various types of polarities – one of which is left versus right – which carry a plethora of secondary meanings and culturally specific associations. Absent, usually, are ethical evaluations. The authors propose that these secondary meanings reveal a near-universal coherent classificatory system of notions, providing also Western democratic citizens with a tool to classify political ideas. [*Left-right, political science, classification, French Revolution*]

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The Puzzle

Throughout the world, in almost all countries, the spectrum of political parties is cast in the

well-known polarity of “right-left.” Whatever its local manifestations, like the “Republicans” versus the “Democrats” of the USA, or the Tories and the Whigs in England, or in the Netherlands where the “liberals” contrast with a “Green party,” or the Gaullists and the Communists in France, the politicians as well as the general public are able to locate such parties along this “left”–“right” spectrum. Not only is there general agreement about which ideas on existing issues are typically “left” and which are typically “right,” but also with respect to newly emerging issues, such as environmental politics, the public can easily locate different viewpoints in terms of this polarity. One should, therefore, expect that there is a clear and straightforward definition of this polarity in political thought. Indeed, political scientists have tried to define its basis, but, to their own astonishment, they had to recognise that they were unable to find a clear and consistent definition. Thus, while every Western citizen with a moderate knowledge of political thought can readily identify the left and right positions on virtually every political issue, the political scientist wonders how on earth he does it. This amazing fact has, until now, been waiting for an explanation. We propose a solution to this puzzle.

The routine historical explanation of the political left/right polarity is based on the seating arrangement of the first French General Assembly (see below), in which the proponents of the political ideas inspired by the Enlightenment were seated on the left, whereas those who supported

the *ancien régime* were seated at the right-hand of the president of the Assembly.

In this line of thought, "oriented to the new and the modern" would be associated with the left, and "conservative" with the right. However, political scientists realised that this association is inadequate. E.g., proponents of nuclear energy, clearly a modern solution of the energy problem, are considered to be "on the right," while those who want to conserve nature are positioned on the left, which is supposed to be progressive and not conservative. Mounier, in his classical paper (1951), presented a comprehensive review of proposals for the basis of the left-right polarity in politics: revolution versus the existing order; the disenfranchised versus the ruling class; labour and intellectuals versus farmers and the rich; justice and decency versus money; freedom versus tyranny; science and progress versus obscurantism and conservatism, showing the shortcomings of them all, and concluded: "On n'en sortira pas" (There is no solution).

A completely different approach was used by Laponce (1981). He realised that political theory would not solve the puzzle as long as it looked to the actual, always changing content of political ideas and ideologies. He went back to the classic work of Robert Hertz, who laid a foundation for classification studies in anthropology (1909). Hertz was followed by the founding fathers of French social science, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. In this approach, the left-right polarity is an instrument in classificatory systems, which in itself has little or no meaning, but simply provides a handy tool for categorisation of the external world. Two angles are important in their writings: (1) symbolic systems are internally coherent and logical; (2) polarity in thinking reflects the distinction between the profane and the sacred: the world of everyday experience versus the world of symbols, such as the Church, God, the totem, or whatever it may be (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). This point of departure was adopted by Laponce, and on this theoretical foundation he built his explanation of the left-right polarity. In his view, the political left-right distinction is based primarily on the structure of human classification, and secondarily in the historical incident of the first "Assemblée." A combination, thus, of Hertz and the contingencies of the French Revolution.

In this article we want to add to and amend Laponce's thesis. Indeed, left-right is a viable and seemingly inescapable way of classification among cultures, and the details of the French Revolution are of some importance. But, we think, in other ways than Laponce proposed. First, the left-right

arrangement of the French "Assemblée Nationale" in 1789 was most probably caused by an incident, it had a short and confused lifetime and it cannot be construed as a sufficient cause for the present right-left discourse in politics. Second, Laponce relied on a classical, but now in some aspects obsolete study. Considering later anthropological work, we are led to a different idea of the foundation underlying the political left-right opposition. But first the French Revolution.

"Birth" of Right and Left in French Politics

The scene is Versailles in the year 1789; the day, the 5th of May. The French king Louis XVI was in a terrible monetary predicament; so he called the "Etats Généraux" together. The "Salle des Menus Plaisirs," some 50 x 25 meters large, served as a meeting place. For this occasion the hall was laid out with benches and suitably decorated, with the seat of the King under a huge canopy. Benches followed the arrangement of the preceding session in 1614: at the head of the longitudinal hall the king and his courtiers were seated; facing him at his right-hand side the "first estate" (the clergy), at his left-hand side the second estate, the aristocracy. Behind them, the third estate, the bourgeois, filled the back of the hall. Bad acoustics made this hall not very suitable as a place of deliberation. Shortly after the famous oath in the "Jeu de Paumes" (the Fives Court) on June 20 – which is considered to be the psychological start of the Revolution (Schama 1989: 345) – it was decided to restructure the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs." A complete refurbishing was performed in a feverish hurry during the night, day, and night of 21 to 22 July, and on 23 July 10 a.m., at the start of the first meeting in the new arrangement, the situation had changed radically. Since the representation per estate had been abandoned, the hall could be furnished in a strikingly modern way: benches in two semicircles, in theatre fashion, and better for acoustics without doubt. The seat of the presiding authority was transferred to one of the long sides, between the two semicircles – and there was no more canopy.

What were the consequences for the seating of the representatives? During large meetings with repeated sessions in the same hall, most people tend to return every time to the place they occupied from the beginning onwards. There is no good reason why the representatives would behave otherwise – the more so since the "Salle" was to hold 1100 *délégués*, and in such a large crowd

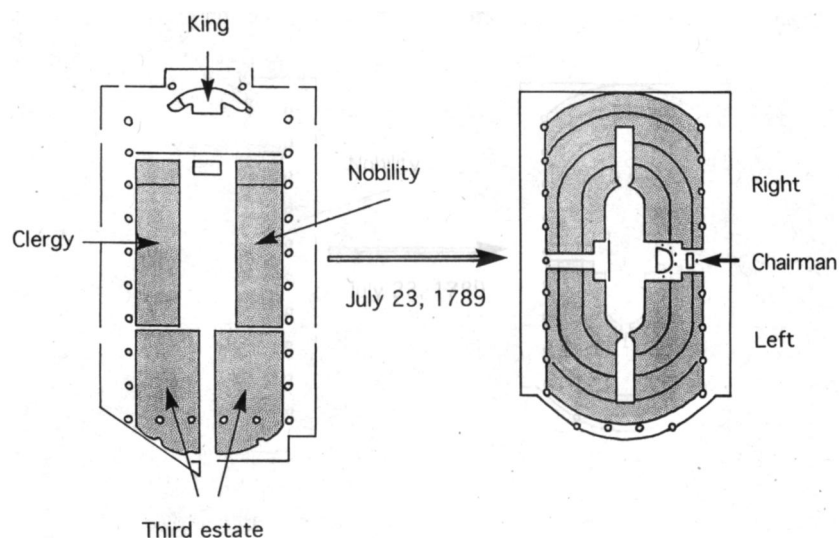


Fig. 1: Seating arrangement in the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs," before and after refurbishing. Redrawn after Brette 1902.

it is natural to look for friends and allies at the place where they formerly could be found. If the representatives indeed behaved in this way, it is easy to reconstruct what should be the result in the renovated hall, with the help of Fig. 1 which shows the situation before and after the renovation. Thus, at 10 a.m., July 23, at the opening of the session, the high aristocracy and the senior clergy suddenly found themselves, instead of shaded by the canopy for the king, now at the far right of the chairman. The third estate, up till then far from the king's chair, were now on the left-hand side of the chairman. This simple event, innocently evoked by the carpenters in their frenzied action, must have been the birth of left-right in parliamentary politics. Its first real manifestation was during the famous vote of 11 September 1789 on the judicial power of the king: the delegates sitting on the left of the chair voted for a significant reduction, the delegates at right to retain the ancient royal prerogatives.

We may ask how credible is this story, which depends so heavily on the "force of habit," projected by us into the behaviour of those independent spirits – and independent thinkers they were and wanted to be. First, how plausible is their seemingly sheepish behaviour, just seating themselves as before, and then looking for the chair in another direction? And, second, how willing were they to adopt the terms "left" and "right," not only for the seating arrangements of their meeting hall, but also as a characterisation of their political opinions? If the left-right division stemmed from a hazard of seating arrangements, why did it "stick"? These questions are answered by the course of events

after a similar refurbishing, two and a half years later. There we shall see that the further history of French political seating offers no clue to the stubbornness of this right-left polarity in French politics.

(Laponce [1981] supposed that left and right seating originated in the church St. Louis in Versailles, during the first meeting after the oath at the "Jeu de Paumes," where it was decided to end representation by estate. The General Assembly met there at June 22, because the king had denied entrance to the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs" that day. The accounts of what happened in the church are partly contradictory, and there is no mention of a seating arrangement left or right from a president. The next day, the representatives were admitted again to the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs," but the king had taken strict measures to ensure the classical seating arrangement of the estates: clergy and nobility were seated first, and only thereafter the members of the third estate could enter to take their old places under the close scrutiny of a Master of Ceremonies. Finally, the king made his appearance; he gave a speech in which he told the representatives to restore the representation by estate, walked away, and left the assembly in confusion and anger.

The result of all this was that any kind of seating arrangement that might have arisen in the church St. Louis was neutralised, and that the representatives, precisely by returning to their familiar places, only had to wait for the birth of left and right by relocation of the presidential chair [Fig. 1]. A preliminary relocation of the presidency before the 23rd of July might have

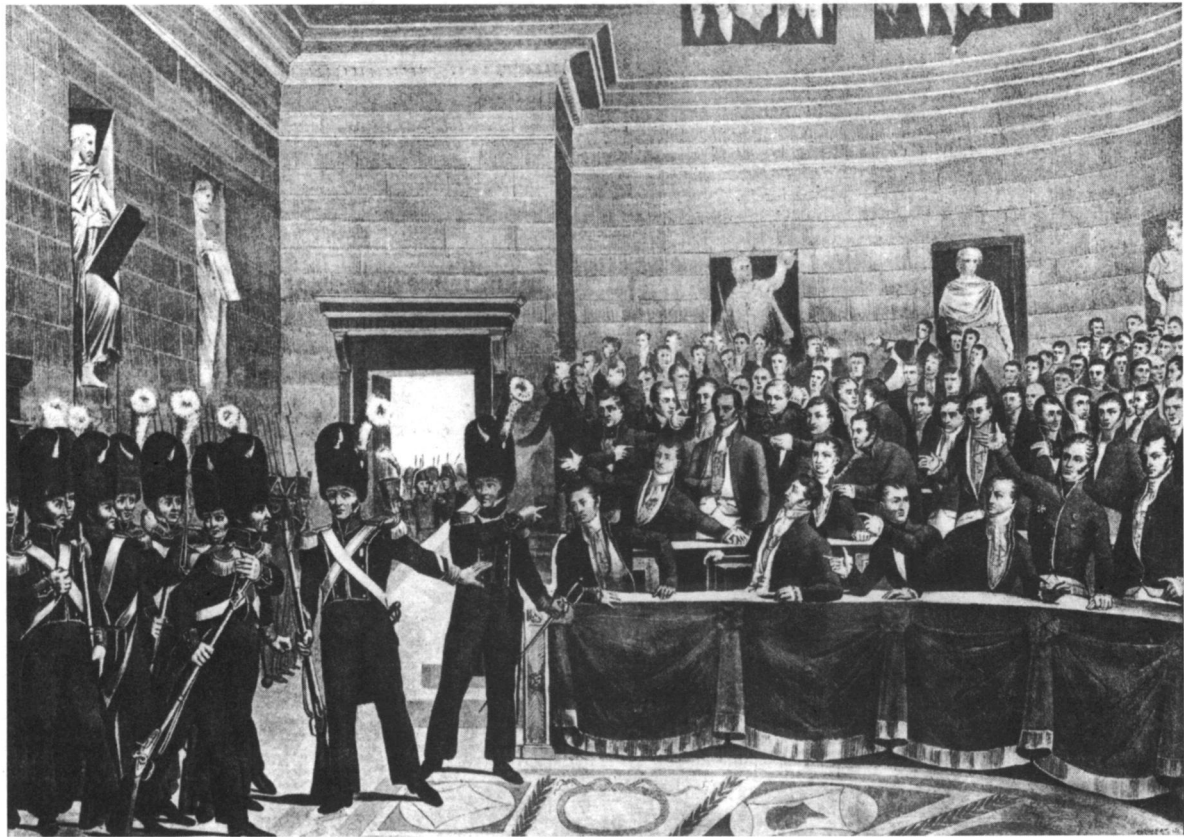


Fig. 2: Manuel removed from the “Chambre des députés” in 1823. Print taken from Dayot 1902. Note the hilt for the swords at the left side of the officers, and the curvature in the wall, indicating that the scene is at the extreme left of the chairman.

taken place, but we could find no reference to such an event.)

In December 1791, the Assembly had in the mean time moved to the “Salle du Manège” in Paris, again a decision was taken to refurbish the conference hall in order to make it better suited to its needs. The benches were put closer together (the Assembly now counted 760 members) and the chair was positioned slightly askew on the other side of the hall. In fact, the purpose was to do away with the very division between “côté gauche” and “côté droite,” which was loathed by many. The restructuring resulted in the “left” benches becoming right, and most of the “right” ones becoming left of the chair. How did the delegates react? Where did they choose to sit down? They simply resumed their old places. But now confusion was born: what was to become of the former “right” and “left”? In June 1792, a few months after the refurbishing, the newspapers noted: “The extreme left side is filled, the rest of the hall is empty. The tribunes and the former left applaud.” People tried to do away with such clumsy terms as “former left” and “former right” and replaced them with terms

with more content: “side of the people,” and “side of the king,” but to no avail. Six months later, the Assembly had in the meantime been followed by the Convention, the delegate Dulaure writes: “In the legislative meeting the patriots used to sit at the right-hand side of the chairman; on the extreme right is now the so-called Montagne. That place used to be called the left-hand side; but as the seat of the chairman had been replaced, the place is now at his right-hand side. The opposite side, where the Aristocrats attending the meeting used to sit, was the right-hand side. Now it is on the left-hand.” The Aristocrats remained in those places at the end of the Legislative Assembly, when it was transformed into the Convention. Dulaure: “I do not want to indicate that the Montagne and its environment only consists of members of that party; I know some who do sit there but have no true allegiance to whatever party; they just are guided by general interest, but the power of habit makes that they stay there” (Dulaure 1793). This last remark answers the first question stated above. With regard to the second question: just by going back to one’s old seat

after the refurbishing, the Montagne, originally left, became seated at the right, and the patriots or Gironde, originally right, became seated at the left – but the “left-right” indication of political polarity, although now completely devoid of its topological sense, remained popular.

The refurbishing of the Salle du Manège was partly inspired by a wish to thwart the fatal fission of fanatical minds, but in this respect it was in vain, with the known fatal consequences in the two years that followed. Thus, after Robespierre’s fall in July 1794, marking the end of the “Terreur,” when the constitution for the “Directoire” was drafted, extreme precautions were taken against group-formation. In the new “Conseil des Cinq Cents” (November 3, 1795) the delegates had no benches, but sat on separate, numbered chairs: each month lots were drawn to decide seating. These measures must have effectively prevented group-formation in the hall. The custom of drawing of lots was retained in the Napoleonic period, for as long as the “Tribunat” functioned as the successor of the “Conseil des Cinq Cents.”

So for 19 years, from 1795 until 1814, the formation of a political left wing and right wing inside the legislative body was impossible. All together it could freely manifest itself for not more than about five years (from 1789 till June 1793, in which more than one year in reverse order, and between August 1794 and November 1795). After this very hazy start of the left-right political distinction, one would surmise that twenty years without a recognisable polarity would efface the memory of left versus right. But they did not.

When Louis XVIII came back from England to take his place in the newly formed constitutional monarchy, the “Chambres Législatives” were freshly installed. Vidalenc (1966) describes the course of events: “The most prominent members of the two chambers could count on support of groupings of varying size and composition. Surely, there were no organised parties as yet, as their existence would go counter to the free exchange of ideas between delegates; yet some habits did develop, like the custom to group themselves in the hall, seating the conservatives at the right-hand of the chairman, the more liberal ones at the left.” A print has been made (Dayot 1902) of the arrest of the left-wing liberal Manuel in 1823, on the Spanish issue: in a dramatic pose the soldiers stand next to a man on one of the extreme left benches (see Fig. 2; the soldiers have their swords on the proper left-hand side, which means that there was no reversal due to the printing process.) The

left/right arrangement had restored itself – to stay with us until now.

Right and Left as “Positive” and Negative”?

The idiosyncrasies of French parliament seating can hardly be a sufficient explanation for the ubiquitous dissemination of the left/right polarity in politics. Right and left entered politics in a crooked way, haphazardly and seemingly as a minor incident. Yet, once it had manifested itself, notwithstanding the efforts to suppress it, it always came back. All over the modern political landscape left and right are defined as the dominant political polarity, irrespective of previous history, irrespective of seating arrangements. In England, the governing party is on the right-hand side of the hall, whatever its political colour; but even if Labour is seated on the right, it is still leftist. In the Israelian Knesset, the parties are arranged mainly on the basis of size, but the Jerusalem Post uses left and right the same way as in France, England, Germany, or the Netherlands. After Mounier (1951), as mentioned above, many others have tried to define the content of “left” and “right” in politics, e.g., Tixier (1954), Lefranc (1973), Cauté (1966) Kleerekoper (1968), a number of authors in *Encounter* (Lasky 1977), and Schweisguth et al. (1994), etc. But they all had to admit that they, too, could not find a consistent and convincing basis for linking actual political issues to the left-right polarity.

Laponce rightly distanced himself from the content-focused efforts to define right and left in politics. Indeed, since Robert Hertz’s seminal article on the preeminence of the right-hand (1909) and the subsequent interest of other anthropologists in classification like Rodney Needham (1960, 1973, 1987), classification studies have become part and parcel of anthropological analyses of culture. Hertz, and his contemporaries Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, recognised the fundamental proclivity of human cultures to classify, to order, to structure their universe. All human cultures divide their world into clear categories, through language and other symbolic systems. In doing so, most cultures use pairs of conceptual opposites, like male-female, warm-cold, high-low, strong-weak, and right-left. According to these sociologists, the basis of the bipolarity is the opposition between the profane and the sacred, between this world and the supernatural world. Sacral versus profane, the holy versus the mundane, was in their view the fundamental opposition, which was translated into

more mundane, accessible, and comprehensible terms as male-female, high-low, etc, and in this way provided a basis for structuring the world. Cultures use minor differences in their daily world to order the world at large. Given the fact that both our hands seem equal but in practice are not, left-right is such a pair. Humankind is predominantly right-handed, a small genetically determined physiological difference that neatly fits in the pair of opposites, and can be plausibly associated with the pairs of strong/weak and male/female. A minor somatic difference is often used to structure and mark a major division in cultural perceptions and concepts. And the universality of right-handedness made the right-left pair accessible as the almost universal symbol of the most fundamental cultural and religious polarities. Hertz et al. thus construed a pervasive sacral complex where "right" was associated with the spiritual universe, with strong, male, superiority, older, the sun, light, life. Left, in contrast, implied weak, female, inferiority, younger, the moon, dark, and death. So "right" in political parlance embodied stability, safety, formality, traditions in obvious contrast with "left," with its instability, threat, informality, new, and revolutionary aspects.

Laponce, so far in full agreement with the above-mentioned anthropologists, then proceeds with the question, why in continental European politics the left is considered to be "positive" and the right "negative"? After all, in Hertz's approach the "right" is the positive side, representing the "Good." Laponce (1981: 43) now follows a somewhat tortured reasoning, as follows:

Compared to religious and social systems, politics – democratic politics especially – is a system of challenge and opposition; it seeks "re-equilibrium" through disequilibrium. If politics appear to destabilize the religious and the social order, it will tend to be located perceptually at the negative pole of the overall perceptual system. Consequently, by a simple and necessary reversal of signs, what would be positive in the social and the religious system will become negative in the political system and vice-versa.

Anthropologically, this does not hold water. Politics, whatever its formal or informal arrangements, form part of the societal system at large, and whatever its internal discussions, follow the same logic of categorisation. Anthropological studies abound with political systems with inherent strife and even violent warfare, but which were all permeated by the same classification polarities as the rest of social life. Politics is not the reverse of order, it is the order itself, and discussion, revolt,

rebellion, and even regicide may simply be part of it (Simonse 1994). So, the more discussion and internal rebellion there is, the stronger the system is structured. There is neither a logical nor an anthropological reason to see politics as the negation of order.

Right and Left: Part of a Wider Categorisation

The problem Laponce poses is inherently false. Spurred by the holy-profane distinction of the French sociologists, he falls into the pit of evaluative opposition: left-right / good-evil. That is a bridge too far; in fact it is a political statement, like when the German social democrat Oskar Lafontaine entitled his recent book "Das Herz schlägt links." For two reasons one should avoid this evaluative opposition. The first is that Hertz et al. never extrapolated left-right or sacred-profane to truly evaluative oppositions. In their view, the opposites were simply classifications, not evaluations. The sacred and the profane need each other, cannot exist without each other. They are opposed but complement each other. This complementarity is fundamental: left and right are of one body, male and female have to join, sacred and profane derive from each other. In much of their classification writings, this complementarity is "sous-entendu," but it still is crucial. So, also in the Hertzian paradigm, good-evil for political classification purposes is irrelevant.

Nevertheless, the attribution of positive and negative qualities to left-wing and right-wing political ideas – i.e., in the evaluative, or moral sense – is the real state of affairs in many countries. But this is not the case everywhere, and seems to depend to a large extent upon local political circumstances and their outcomes (e.g., experiences with Hitler's Third Reich in occupied countries). So they are best treated as secondary characteristics of the left-right polarity in politics. That is approximately on a par with the characteristics as Mounier operationalized them.

The second reason for turning down this part of Laponce's thesis is that anthropological classification studies have continued since the French founding fathers. One major change in ideas since the beginning of the 20th century is the demise of the opposition sacred-profane as the most important duality in human thinking. No longer is the domain of the sacred seen as a category *sui generis*, that is the logical antithesis of the profane. This particular opposition has been shown

to derive from an untenable theory of the origin of religion (Durkheim 1912), and as a particular phenomenology of religion that had run its course before World War II (van Baal and van Beek 1984). One problem is that in many religions the opposition sacred-profane hardly applies, whereas in these cultures binary oppositions do abound. In classification studies, the sacred-profane dichotomy is no longer seen as being fundamental to dualistic thinking.

Needham, of course, is an exponent of this new tradition, but the main figure is evidently Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his work, classifications play a major part, and more than anyone else he has highlighted the cultural systematics he called "structure." Binary oppositions – like left-right – in his approach play a major role, but with two provisos. First, the main and fundamental dichotomy in his work is between nature and culture, which precludes any evaluative categorisation. Second, all binary oppositions are – indeed – linked, but are always mediated by a tertiary encompassing concept, which unites the two. Opposites always complement each other, and always both together form one whole (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 1973, 1975).

A classic example in anthropology is a moiety system in Australia, where the tribe consists of two halves (moieties), one with the crow as a totem, the other with an eagle-hawk. If one tries to find what makes the characteristics of the first group, such that they are consigned a Crow as a totem, the puzzle cannot be solved. The trick is to compare moiety A with moiety B the same way as one compares a crow with an eagle-hawk. Both totems are birds, large birds who eat meat. But one is a carrion eater, the other a bird of prey, one stays low in the air, the other soars high in the sky, one is black, the other is multicoloured. This natural opposition then is used for the categorisation of the groups in question: both are human, both are kin, both are in fact the same group, but the division of labour between the groups follow the lines of the birds: one moiety associated with women, camps, cooking, and therefore left, the other with men, hunting, killing, and of course the right-hand side. Evidently, in both moieties there are men and women, old and young, and both moieties look quite the same to the occasional outsider. However, the world is divided along the lines of this social opposition, and the birds in question are used as a handy emblem of that division (van Baal and van Beek 1984: 219 f.)

This is exactly the way the left-right division is viewed by present-day anthropology: the fundamental divisions are social, and the body is

used as a symbolic vehicle to express the social distinctions. Mary Douglas, in her follow-up to Mauss, said: "the ... body is always treated as an image of society and ... there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension" (Douglas 1973: 98). Throughout many societies in various continents, this view has been shown to be productive.¹

An overly narrow focus on the laterality problem, as Laponce shows, precludes us from seeing the wider picture: humankind always uses body symbols for distinguishing between human groups. Left-right is one, but male-female is more important. Studies in the genderedness of human society abound, and in much larger numbers than laterality studies. Also other opposition pairs, which may derive from human perceptions, may be used, like warm-cold, high-low, and before-behind. Laterality is but one expression of many, all related to our bodily existence.

Here we should enter a caveat, long after Hertz. Not all cultures have the same correlation of left and right. Several instances have been found where left is associated with maleness, order, power, and the supernatural, while the right-hand correlates with women, material things, weakness, and decay. Each rule does have its exception: Granet's China case is an example, although not very strong (Granet 1973) and so is the Zuni case. Much stronger and clear-cut examples are the Mofu of North Cameroon (Vincent 1978) and the Himba of Northwest Namibia (Crandall 1996). In both cases, the common correlation is indeed reversed, for different reasons. The Himba case, Crandall argues, offers a glaring correlation between male, left, ancestors, strength, and God, while the female side is the right-hand, the nonsacred cattle, everyday life, and weakness. Here, the Hertzian paradigm is neatly inverted. Crandall explains this by the notion of "symbolic parallax," arguing that the ultimate state of existence of death is the one which decides the laterality, and for the dead Himba during a funeral the directions are reversed. Thus, after death, life is "normal" again. Vincent takes her Mofu example to be much more "normal." She has no compunction in "male" staying "left" and does not seek to reduce it to an inverted laterality; instead, she treats it with the dignity of "just another way of classifying." She argues, in fact, that in the region (North Cameroon) the

¹ Beidelman 1961; Maybury-Lewis 1989; Kourilsky et Grapin 1968; Demieville 1968; Martinet 1968; Douglas 1967; Wieschhof 1939.

left-male connection is much wider than just the Mofu case.

Not only can lateralisation differ between adjoining cultures, the significance of the left-right distinction can vary greatly. The Kapsiki,² neighbours of the Mofu, do not share the inverted lateralisation of the Mofu; instead they have the more usual right/male association:

right (<i>kwazema</i> , lit. "the eating side")	left (<i>kwagwela</i> , lit. "the other side")
the sun	the moon
sacrifice	menstruation
red beer	white beer
dry season	rainy season

Nothing unusual so far. But, more important, their main classification is not in terms of right/left. If right/left is reversed, it is always tied onto the central division, which is between male and female: all objects in their material culture, the ways to construct a compound, personality, and character, everything is either male or female. Not specific objects are "male" or "female," but the form in which it is shaped. A granary can be either "male" or "female" depending on its shape: a round squat granary is *kwalimale* (female), a slender high one *kwaliza* (male). Both are essentially the same straw-plated granary, with the same function. This holds also for a tomb or a basket. A seat from which one can see visitors enter is "male"; if visitors cannot be seen entering, the place is "female." The entrance room of a Kapsiki compound has a male and a female side: the male side is on the higher ground, the female on the lower; whether left or right is not relevant. This example shows that lateralisation can vary in direction and in significance. For some cultures, laterality is simply a minor aspect of gender.

Thus, structuralist and neo-structuralist studies have given a new post-Hertzian insight into classification processes, and the question of the ubiquity of the left-right distinction in politics has to be rephrased. First of all, it is not a ubiquity, it is a cultural choice. But on the other hand, it is the most obvious choice to be made. It is true that in all Western political systems plus all those that derived from them through colonial heritage or in other ways, the left-right distinction is en vogue. The question is twofold: what other ways to differentiate between political parties were there,

what other symbols were available? In short, how self-evident is the left-right division?

Our culture of Western Europe is just one among the many, and our culture is just as prone to categorise as any other culture. In Europe, laterality towards the right dominating over left has been marked through the ages, and both Christianity and the many local and regional variants of European culture sported the association between left/female/compassion/weakness/danger and the right/male/order/strength/safety counterpart. See in a dictionary of any Western language the secondary meanings of the words for "right" and "left."³

Laponce tries to give in his book a logical set of reasons why a division in before and after (or higher and lower), a hierarchical division, was transformed into a left-right laterality. His tour de force, however ingenious, is, in our opinion, quite unnecessary. The simple fact is, that most cultures all over the world, not only the Europe-based ones, have chosen this polarity to structure and classify their universe, including the realm of politics. We are, therefore, almost forced to conclude that the left-right distinction, with all the concomitant associations spelled out, being the most obvious, ready-to-use and culturally relevant distinction at hand, would have occurred in politics anyway (see also Bienfait 1993).

The Puzzle Solved

Can we now answer the question at the beginning of this article, namely, how every Western citizen with a moderate knowledge of political thought can identify the left and right positions on virtually every political issue? Yes, we can.

The form in which the fundamental polarity has manifested itself in Europe, from time immemorial, lives on in our words, our expressions, our uses, that is, in our heads. It has given us the framework for the classification of political wishes, impulses, and viewpoints. For some of these, their place in the polarity is evident: the wish to preserve the generally accepted order is clearly on the right,

2 Research on the Kapsiki was carried out by W. E. A. van Beek from 1972–73, with return visits each five years; the last, in December 1999, was financed by the Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen through its Pieter Lambertusz Huibrechts fund.

3 We lack in our technological culture one important underpinning of the left-right distinction: eating. In most cultures people eat with their hands, and left-hand eating is never "right." Even where the left is male, people eat with their right hand. The left hand is for other activities, often including sexual contacts: the Mofu and the Kapsiki caress with their left hand. Our use of cutlery has effaced that strict division, though we do have standardised our hand-use in steering our utensils: cutting meat with one's left hand is not done. But our sexual laterality is gone, we think.

while ambitions to overthrow this order are just as clearly on the left. But other issues can be located along the left/right axis as well.

Environmental politics, mentioned in the introduction, is a good example. The wish to conserve, in this case nature, should be on the right, at first sight. But it appears to be an issue which is embraced by the left, as is shown by the names of strongly left-wing parties in the Netherlands ("GroenLinks" – GreenLeft) and Germany ("Grünen" – Greens). The association of "nature" with "left" may have followed another route: conservation of nature is a struggle against the forces of industry and the existing economic powers, together a formidable fortress of the right. Nature, by contrast, is seen as weak (a characteristic of "left" in itself), and in her desperate struggle against the threats from the right she finds her allies, logically, at the left.

It appears that it is not some objectively defined property of nature which determines its place along the left/right axis, but the way in which we interpret it. In earlier times, nature was experienced as a fearsome power, capable of inflicting unpredictable disasters, and which we could not influence. It was therefore of no political relevance. But now that we can make more or less reliable weather forecasts, we do not notice any significant influence of crop failures on our food supply, and on the other hand are beginning to realise that human activities develop harmful forces to which nature has no answer, our ideas about nature are changing and she is transformed into a vulnerable, threatened friend, with human enemies, and thus politically relevant. (Our appreciation for science, two centuries ago still a favourite of the left, seems so go the opposite direction.)

Parallel with the continuous developments in our world, changes occur in our appreciation for the factors that determine our (political) life. This simple fact is the most important cause of Mounier's despair, and of all those others, who found that the classification of our political viewpoints along the left/right axis shows such large variations, both in place and in time. It is the current context that determines how we classify our political feelings in the ancient polarity: ancient but fully alive.

And what about the carpenters at Versailles in 1789? Was their contribution irrelevant? What would have happened if they had put the chair at the other side of the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs"? The result of the carpenters' work was that political and spatial ordering suddenly coincided on that 23rd of July. This merger gave the left/right

polarity in political meetings its vitality and its force to return, whenever the possibility was there. Thus, if we must speculate, we can guess that in case the carpenters would have realised that other scheme, the left/right division would have appeared somewhere else at another time, e.g., as it did after 1815 in the "Chambres Législatives." The left-right division in politics was not so much constituted by the short incidental history of the "Salle des Menus Plaisirs," but by our cultural proclivity to use the most convenient symbols at hand.

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