

The entry builds on my last, "Opening Ideas" (10/20/2009), in which I laid out the certain elements of the competing ideological frameworks on the Right and Left in American politics. My general thesis is that these competing frameworks are stifling innovation. Today, I look more deeply into the similarities and the key differences between the worldviews advanced by each party, in an effort to explore ways to transcend the battle.

The Right and the Left Share a Commitment to Individual Freedom, but Maintain Radically Different Ideas About the True Nature of That Freedom

In developing an intellectually concrete third way in American politics, one could begin by thinking about what the Right and Left share. Americans on both sides of the aisle share a commitment to individual freedom. Nevertheless, each side is deeply suspicious about the other side's commitment to this value. The suspicion shared on the Right and the Left emanates from each side's vastly different perspectives on the value of equality.

The Left believes that equality is the prerequisite of real freedom. Thus we have Rousseau's famous opening lament in [*The Social Contract*](#): "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." In contrast, the Right believes that inequality is a necessary consequence of real freedom, and that real freedom would be sacrificed if the government strives for real equality. Indeed, the free market almost ensures inequality. As Hayek protested, "A claim for equality of material position can be met only by a government with totalitarian powers."

This profound difference in perspective means that the Right and the Left attach different meanings to equality and inequality. Where the Left sees a problem, the Right sees an accomplishment. Where the Left associates risk with public inaction, the Right perceives danger in public interference. This different perspective with regard to equality casts liberty in a very different light for the Right and the Left.

The Left's focus on equality entails seeing one's freedom as bound up with that of others. The spirit of this idea is captured in these words of the famous labor organizer, Eugene V. Debs:

"Years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not

one bit better than the meanest on the earth. I said then and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

Notice that Debs is concerned about more than equality of opportunity. On the Left, the social justice movement is concerned not just about where people start, or about their equal treatment under the law. The Left is concerned about outcomes. As Martin Luther King wrote:

"Deeply woven in to the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that we are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see hunger, to see [people] victimized with ill health, when we have the means to help them. Rich and poor, we have entered the same mysterious gateway of human birth, into the same adventure of mortal life. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother, [we are our sister's sister]. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

In stark contrast, the Right's concept of freedom emphasizes man's need for protection from his fellow man. In the words of Ayn Rand:

“Civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men.”

Rand, again:

“The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.”

The Left's concept of true freedom is all about positive freedom: the freedom to have, to do, to satisfy one's needs, to express oneself, to self-actualize. Equality matters because an individual measures his or her capacities in respect of similarity to others.

The Right's concept of true freedom is all about negative freedom: the freedom to avoid domination at the hands of another. Equality doesn't matter because an individual measures his or her capacities in respect of difference from others. To be free is to be unequal.

The Politics of Fear

As a result of these different perspectives on equality and liberty, the Left and the Right are animated by very different fears. Above all, the Left fears abandonment. The animating image of fear on the Left is of a poor person left without sufficient resources by society. As FDR said, "True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence."

On the other hand, above all, the Right fears enslavement. The animating image of fear on the Right is of a productive person compelled to turn over their property and labor to an all powerful master, the State. In the words of conservative thinker Thomas Sowell, "Liberalism is totalitarianism with a human face."

Against the backdrop of pervasive fear, there are no promising third-ways in American politics today. There is the extreme Left, occupied by true socialists and communists willing to sacrifice individual freedom to the interests of the community in a version of Rousseau's general will. You find them in extreme left wing advocacy groups. There is also the extreme Right, willing to sacrifice community in the quest for a romanticized, frontier-conception of freedom that pits man against nature, all by himself, unrestrained by the bonds of civilization. You find them out there in [compounds in the hills of Idaho](#).

In the center of American politics today, we do not find a coherent third way, but rather a series of trade-offs and compromises that don't seem to be animated by any coherent vision. The concessions are negotiated settlements between the powerful forces on the Right and the Left. People in the center, people who think "outside the box," are often understood to be masked ideological wafflers, or worse, pawns or political opportunists, who bend their principles in order to cling to political power. Because there is no "there" in the center of American politics, no one stands up to advocate for ideas that defy easy characterization as leaning to the Right or the Left, or that may combine elements of Right vs. Left thinking. For this reason, promising ideas are often ripped to pieces by both sides. Stuck in ideological holding cells, innovators become increasingly limited.

For example (one of many!), the promising idea to use nonprofit insurance cooperatives to control health care costs has been attacked from both [the Right](#) and [the Left](#). The Right is afraid that cooperatives would be government-run programs in disguise. The Left fears that they would be free market programs in disguise. Surprise, surprise!

Is there a way out of this prison? In my next piece, I will lay out some ideas about this. Stay tuned...