Article Review

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In Steven Lukes’ Epilogue for “The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought”, titled “The Grand Dichotomy of the Twentieth Century”, Lukes gives a defence of the left-right dichotomy as a versatile mechanism for describing political movements in politically disparate nations.

He articulates its merits, attempts to introduce a unifying framework for defining what, specifically, is ‘The Left’ and ‘The Right’, and details how the left and right manifested in the Twentieth Century. It’s a well-reasoned article, but suffers in a few ways, namely by trying to force a robust definition of a term that has substantively changed its meaning over two centuries, and by focusing almost exclusively on the Western experience, and neglecting how the dichotomy has manifested in the Global South and the East.

This Review will aim to summarise Lukes’ 25-page article into a mere three pages and provide some shallow analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of his arguments.

Lukes opens by defining the left and right as broad, but ultimately uniting ideological scaffolds, related by origins, histories, identities, and traditions. Lukes defines the left, in specific, by its “commitment to the principle of rectification”, and as a corollary the right in its opposition to it (Lukes 2003: 612).

In doing so Lukes enables us to define what injustice needs to be rectified in different ways based on the time period and region we are looking at, without reducing the left to any specific, and often temporary, policy or sociological objectives. The left of one can be focused on universal suffrage and other forms of democratic inequality, the left of another focused on class inequality and labour exploitation, and we can use a universal framework to consistently package both movements in a singular and testable left. It is not bogged down by defining the left as singularly reformist or radical, nor of the elites or the workers. The only necessary precondition to the left is an acknowledgement that unjustified inequalities exist, and by association that the right acknowledge there are the same inequalities that are instead natural, inevitable, desirable, or sacred.

He rejects definitions of the left (and corollary definitions of the right) that sanitise the history of left, reduce the ideas of the left to their correlates, essentialise the left based on mutually exclusive principles (because those principles are contested on a left/right dichotomy themselves) and definitions that use nominalism to define the terms distinctly based on localisation (Lukes 2003: 609).

Although it’s easy to appreciate the benefits of such a mission, the objective is ultimately a distraction. The definition that is most useful is the one dominated in the minds of the people that use the terms, which given the ubiquity of the dichotomy in the modern era, is an individual under or uneducated in political science. The popular definition is how the tribalism of mass support will manifest, and the platform in which movements will evolve and adapt into the “New Left” and “New Right” into the future. More importantly, we can intuit, without research, that Lukes’ definition cannot be dominant, given his definition is too novel, and uses reasoning too many layers removed from the kind of primitive intuition we can expect the masses to reach on their own without education.

Having a unifying framework is helpful, but its detached from the reality of how these terms influence the world materially. If the way the term is used in the US is entirely detached from how the term is used in China, with no intersection, then that is how we ought to characterise them – instead of fabricating a reality more intellectually convenient. If the definitions of the terms have evolved from the French Revolution through to the Digital Age its not merely dishonest to design a universally defining framework for interpreting the terms through the ages, but it’s also an abstraction that obscures the material incentives the movements advocates had in those time periods. Such a framework trains us to package those advocates into convenient ideological boxes that obfuscate the truth and lead us to faulty conclusions (citation needed).

It’s important to appreciate that the left/right dichotomy is a heuristic that helps us rapidly understand very different political environments without intense study and research. Like all heuristics, the dichotomy will sometimes fail, or contradict itself. The appropriate response in those circumstances is to drop the heuristic and invest in developing a true understanding of the contradicting ideas absent the dichotomy, not to abstract the heuristic further to create an intellectually consistent concept. The left/right dichotomy is not scripture, and identifying errancies is expected, and not something to studiously avoid.

After building a framework to interpret these terms across disparate time periods, Lukes borrows from other thinkers to describe the “Three Lefts” and the “Five Rights” of the 19th and 20th centuries.

His three lefts are inspired by the ideas of Hobsbawm. They are:

1. The Liberal Left – Anti-monarchist, anti-autocratic, and apparently moderate that dominated the politics of the 19th century.
2. The Socialist Left – Focused on class struggle, a planned economy, that initially allied with the first left. He identifies the second left split into an authoritarianist left in the USSR and a socially democratic left in the west. It dominated the 20th century until the mid-70s, before losing much ground during the rise of neo-liberalism and struggled to hold onto its gains.
3. The Independent Movements of Identity Politics – Single issue movements like women’s liberation, civil rights, and environmentalism. Internationalist and, according to Hobsbawm, politically unimportant.

(Lukes 2003: 618)

Lukes appropriately draws attention to Hobsbawm’s dismissal of the “Third Left”. He intelligently observes the crisis of the second left was caused by the third, due to the second’s hierarchical structure, and then articulates its relative import on a global scale, even if it’s too early to call it a success (Lukes 2003: 621-622).

Unfortunately, Lukes offers no fair criticism of Hobsbawm’s neglect of Eastern Left movements and Islamist Leftism, especially Ba’athism, in his description of the “Second Left”, which had a very different character to Western Social Democracy.

Indeed, Lukes carries on the erasure of Eastern Leftism by writing “There is no longer any political movement or party, national or international, which integrates recognisably left-wing issues and campaigns within an overarching framework of ideas” (2003: 619). Apparently the 91 million members of the Chinese Communist Party aren’t worth the title “party”. Has the still dominant ‘Eastern Left’ of China, Vietnam, Nepal et. al. shifted to the right in the past half century? Certainly. Is it fair to claim it has abandoned an “overarching framework of ideas”? Absolutely not.

Lukes then uses Eatwell & O’Sullivan’s five stages of the right to paint the comparative. They are:

1. “Genuine” Reactionaries – Reacting to the French Revolution, these reactionaries condemn individualism and reason. We’ll leave the subtle “no true Scotsman” of future reactionaries alone in this essay.
2. Burke’s Moderate Right – Advocates of limited government that pragmatically compromise with the left.
3. Activist Radical Right – The radical strain of the ‘Second Right’, with an aggressive and romantic vision of nationalism.
4. Racist Radical Right – The post-war anti-immigration, sometimes anti-intellectual, populist form of the right.
5. Neo-Liberal Right – The Reaganite and Thatcherite neo-liberal movement.

(Lukes 2003: 622)

Lukes calls the fifth stage ‘near-hegemonic’ and ends his epilogue by asking a question; “has this newest right prevailed”. His response to the question is, in his time period, “unanswerable” (2003: 626).

The newest right certainly appeared to be approaching an indisputable hegemony in 2003 but has in recent years experienced increasing backlash from both the left and the right. A possibly new, anti-globalist and populist 6th right has emerged, or perhaps the 4th right has simply been born-again for the internet age and has emerged as a serious politically destructive force alongside the ascendency of Donald Trump in 2016. Further, although there has yet to be any popular success, the neo-liberal order finds itself under assault by a resurgent second left propped up by the unified momentum of most of the third left under the banner of leaders like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Ultimately both leaders have failed, Jeremy Corbyn more spectacularly through failing to keep the third left behind him, but there’s no early indication the surge is temporary, and it seems inevitable another socialist leader will replace them, if not in Britain and the US, then in some other nations around the world.

Finally, it again neglects the dominance of the left in the East, which is especially useful to consider when answering the question in the wake of the US’s decline as a superpower in relation to China. The same coercive forces the US used under Reagan and Bush to enforce a neo-liberal agenda on the global stage can likewise, by China, be used to dismantle it. The question may have been unanswerable in 2003, but we can certainly answer it in 2021 - The newest right has not (yet) prevailed.