

Life-affirming – life-averse. An alternative to the “left-right” division

By Andreas Peglau

*For just where fails the comprehension,
A word steps promptly in as deputy.
With words 'tis excellent disputing;
Systems to words 'tis easy suiting;
On words 'tis excellent believing;
No word can ever lose a jot from thieving.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: FAUST, Part 1

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The question of what is “right” makes no sense without assuming a “left” position. But where do these terms come from?

Origins

The political “left-right” division^[1] dates back to the French National Assembly of 1789:^[2] Looking at the scene from the front, with the king in the middle, the more anti-monarchist opposition sat on the left, while the more conservative, royalist opposition sat on the right. This seating arrangement was based on the spatial conditions of the British House of Commons, so it was not a French invention. However, those sitting on the left were not socialists or communists, but mainly members of the bourgeoisie, who in turn represented extremely diverse political orientations. The 1,315 deputies of the National Assembly, all of whom were male, were composed as follows:

“25% of them were members of the clergy, 18% belonged to the military (primarily nobles), 40% were lawyers or holders of public office, and 7% of the deputies were entrepreneurs; deputies from the countryside were underrepresented, and the common people of the cities were completely absent.”^[3]

As the French bourgeois revolution progressed, the boundaries between the left and right wings became blurred. The former opposition split into hostile groups that competed to see who could send the others to the guillotine first. In total, around 50,000 people were executed on the basis of their decisions. ^[4] Although they were committed to “human rights,” the deputies were far from granting these rights to the female part of the population.

Not least because she wanted to change this through a

“Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens,” Olympe de Gouges was sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal in 1793 and beheaded: “Her commitment was perceived as ‘an undesirable interference in politics, which was reserved for men.’”^[5]



Olympe de Gouges before the guillotine in 1793, ink drawing by Lavis de Mettais
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympe_de_Gouges

In the initial “left-right” division, “left” was by no means synonymous with progressive, humanistic, solidarity-based, democratic, emancipatory, or “good.”

The political attitudes and decisions of those who have since been regarded as archetypes of ‘leftism’ thus differed significantly from the self-image of most of today’s “leftists.”

Arbitrary interpretability

The words “right” and “left” also describe orientations in space. They do not in themselves represent any *political* content. It is therefore possible to associate these words with different meanings. And that is exactly what is happening.

Some examples: The development of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) since 2020 is widely perceived as fascist, i.e., right-wing extremist. Others claim that a “left-wing” [GDR 2.0 is currently emerging](#).

In the US, it has become common practice—at least among Republicans—to describe the Democrats, who also spread war and terror around the world, as “left-wing” and their former presidential candidate Kamala Harris as a communist.

Klaus Schwab, the former head of the World Economic Forum, which aims to establish a neoliberal world government, [\[6\]](#) is classified by some as a technocratic fascist – but by others as “the new Karl Marx.” Which is also meant as an insult.

On November 25, 2024, the “left-wing” daily newspaper *junge Welt* commented on the current *cancel culture* as follows:

“I personally no longer take left-wing activists seriously if they are not regularly labeled as right-wing, conspiracy theorists, (...), anti-Semites, supporters of terrorism, hate preachers, or conspiracy ideologues.”

The problem is that political affiliations to the left or right can neither be clearly proven nor refuted. On the one hand, because these categories cannot be clearly defined. On the other hand, because social reality is far too complex to fit into these pigeonholes.

Was Joseph Stalin, leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and mass murderer of his own people, politically left or right? Was the Soviet Union, even during the Stalinist terror that cost hundreds of thousands of lives, [\[7\]](#) a “left-wing” state?

Or: From 1933 onwards, tens of thousands of former German “left-wing” voters joined Nazi organizations. By 1949, many of them were ostensibly socialists again: as citizens of the GDR. [\[8\]](#) By virtue of the so-called reunification, the majority of the latter were declared good bourgeois democrats in 1990. Since the “Ossis” (East Germans) no longer vote in line with the *raison d'état* for the most part, they are often considered “brown” – even though their voting decisions are often based on a rebellion against rampant de-democratization. Are they now more “right-wing” or “left-wing”?

Social science studies also show that this is difficult to determine. They regularly demonstrate that positions considered “right-wing,” such as xenophobia, are endorsed in this country – to varying degrees – by voters of *all* parties. And this is despite the fact that most of them simultaneously represent democratic, and in some cases “left-wing,” positions. The most important fault lines here do not run between the parties, but within individuals. Most Germans are xenophobic democrats. [\[9\]](#) Experts cannot even agree on the definition, let alone the causes, of the phenomenon of fascism, which is considered extreme “right-wing,” nor on whether and how German National Socialism should be distinguished from it. Of course, there are answers to these questions—but they vary widely. A bibliography on National Socialism published in 2000 lists 37,000 writings. [\[10\]](#)

This disagreement is exacerbated by the fact that fascism is derived from *faszie* = fiber or rod, or from *fascio*, which stands for a bundle of rods, a union, or an alliance—again, words that have no political content a priori.

None of this means that political distinctions are unnecessary. On the contrary: in order to make *realistic* distinctions, we need terms that are associated with *content* that is as clear, objectifiable, and scientifically researchable as possible. This is not the case with “right” and “left.”

That is why there is also the risk of endless political debates in which people shout at each other, “You’re right-wing!” or, alternatively, “You’re not really left-wing!” . Endlessly because everyone can mean something different by it. If we add the criterion of the extent to which someone argues “Marxist” to the distinction, it becomes even more confusing. Because then we would first have to clarify which of all the Marxisms that have emerged over the last century and a half [\[11\]](#) is supposedly the correct one. And, of course, what is correct about Marxism. [\[12\]](#)

Alternatives

Both the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) [\[13\]](#) and his colleague Erich Fromm (1900-1989) [\[14\]](#) proposed a division into *life-affirming* and *life-averse* for political orientation—two terms that already have meaning in themselves. [\[15\]](#)

In this view, the category of *life-averse* includes not only the fascisms of the 20th century, but also, for example, the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries or the extermination of Native Americans by European invaders.

Everything that is truly valuable in “left-wing” but also humanistic thinking and action should, in my opinion, be classified as “life-affirming.” But this certainly does not include Stalinist terror.

With *this* classification in mind, we can also say about the Nazi system: regardless of whether it called itself “socialist” or whether it initially had anti-capitalist aspects, it was, on the whole, highly hostile to life.

FRG 2025

If we use the contrast between life-affirming and hostile to life, hypocritical, pseudo-progressive self-portrayals collapse.

This is also evident when I apply it to the current situation in our German country:

With its often sweeping defamation of refugees and migrants, the AfD focuses on aspects that are hostile to life. However, it neither invented nor monopolized this attitude [\[16\]](#) – nor can it be reduced to it.

However, it is not the AfD – especially since it is not in a position of power – that is currently acting in the most hostile manner toward life. Rather, it is the former and future governing parties, including their pseudo-progressive supporters from the “Left” party. In particular, those politicians who propagate massive arms deliveries, which fuel the war in Ukraine and permanently increase the danger of a nuclear war that would destroy us all.

It is hard to imagine anything more hostile to life than putting the existence of the world's population and the entire earthly life system at risk.

However, it would be wrong to blame this hostility to life exclusively on the government. As early as 1810, the French philosopher Joseph de Maistre [\[17\]](#) formulated the provocative statement: “Every nation has the government it deserves.”

Mass Psychology of Fascism

Wilhelm Reich, a student, colleague, and ultimately opponent of Sigmund Freud, then devoted himself to the connections between 'above' and "below" – using German fascism as an example. From 1930 to 1933, he lived in Berlin and, as a Jew, communist, and sex researcher, was among those whom the National Socialists regarded as their main enemies. In 1933, his "Massenpsychologie des Faschismus" was published in exile in Denmark. [\[18\]](#)

The essence of Reich's decades of research was that children are born with the potential to be good people in a good world and to create a good, humane society. However, the oppression that begins at birth, especially through patriarchal-authoritarian upbringing, alienates them from themselves and causes *justified* anger to build up inside them until it becomes destructive. Exacerbated by humiliation in the production process and mass media stupefaction, they gradually become walking time bombs, and thus also potential fascists. [\[19\]](#)

And that is precisely where, Reich recognized, they were picked up by organizations such as the NSDAP. To vent their pent-up anger, they were offered scapegoats to blame for their own deficient existence: people who spoke, thought, looked, loved, and lived differently, Jews, Russians, communists, social democrats, homosexuals, people with different skin colors or disabilities, and many others. [\[20\]](#)

In addition, the masses, who had been raised in an authoritarian manner for generations and whose self-esteem was severely damaged, were looking for an omnipotent father figure, a "leader" who would relieve them of responsibility and independent thinking, absolve them of guilt, show them the right way – and at the same time effectively translate their neurotic-infantile fantasies of revenge and grandeur, their destructive impulses, into action. Adolf Hitler was obviously the perfect choice for this role. Hitler owed his popularity to the fact that his personality structure – including his psychological disturbances – corresponded to the "mass individual structures of broad circles." "The more helpless the mass individual is due to his upbringing," Reich wrote, the more strongly "the identification with the Führer" is imprinted on him; every National Socialist feels "in his psychological dependence as a 'little Hitler'."

The fact that National Socialist "mass organization succeeded" was therefore "due to the masses and not to Hitler." [\[21\]](#) Hitler was merely an effective figurehead—one that was heavily promoted, especially by German, but also by US and other capitalists in their fight against emerging Bolshevism—and one that was easily replaceable!

Reich concluded that anyone who wanted to prevent fascism in the long term had to fight not only the NSDAP and Hitler, but also the entire patriarchal-authoritarian socialization that made fascist excesses possible in the first place by producing destructive character structures on a massive scale. He no longer considered lasting protection against such excesses conceivable without a psychological-psychoanalytical understanding of social processes, without serious upheavals not only in economics, politics, and culture, but also in upbringing, education, and sexuality.

In the heavily revised new and English edition of "Mass Psychology of Fascism," published in 1946, he drew the following conclusion, now based also on the experiences of World War II:

„Even today, as a result of fallacious political thinking, fascism is still being considered a specific national characteristic of the Germans or the Japanese. (...)

My character-analytic experience, however, shows that there is today not a single individual who does not have the elements of fascist feeling and thinking in his structure. (...)

Correspondingly, there is a German, Italian, Spanish, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish and Arabian fascism. (...) One cannot make the Fascist harmless if, according to the politics of the day, one looks for him only in the German or Italian, or the American or the Chinese; if one does not look for him in oneself; if one does not know the social institutions which hatch him every day." [\[22\]](#)

We and "Taurus"

And, of course, with these considerations in mind, Joseph de Maistre's statement that "every nation has the government it deserves" is all the more true when one looks at the current German government.

It is easy to say to oneself, with good arguments, "I am completely different from Chancellor Friedrich Merz." Or, as was written on banners during the commemorations of Liberation Day on May 8, 2025: "Nothing could be more ,right-extreme" than to attack Russia with *Taurus* cruise missiles!"

This statement is also true if we replace "right-extreme" with "life-avers." But at the same time, we must admit that without the silence, acquiescence, or even cheering of the vast majority of the German people, the current escalation of the government's warmongering would not be possible. And even the unfortunately far too few who publicly demonstrate against it at least pay taxes—which finance every activity of the state. Including the manufacture and delivery of *Taurus*.

And there is something else that connects us "down here" with those "up there." Objectively speaking, it is not only the oppressed who always live in—holistically speaking—inhuman conditions, but also the oppressors: Exploiting people, dumbing them down, being responsible for mass misery, rapid environmental destruction and wars, for hundreds of thousands of deaths, is anything but desirable; it amounts to a completely wasted life, regardless of whether the perpetrators realize it or not. Who would want to trade places with them?

But they can only accomplish their deeds because they are sufficiently supported by their subjects. The state structures and the authoritarian elements instilled in us make us, consciously or unconsciously, accomplices of those in power, complicit in the life-threatening actions of our state – even if we classify ourselves as politically "left-wing."

It is therefore in the interest of *all of us* to create humane conditions.

Addendum

[Oskar Lafontaine on November 10, 2025, in Nachdenkseiten:](#)

"The examination of conscientious objectors' consciences also shows how perverse thinking can sometimes be. Shouldn't we examine the consciences of those who allow themselves to be sent to war to kill people they don't know? And if so, wouldn't it also be justified to keep the new warmongers out of public service? **According to Article 26 of the Basic Law, which makes the preparation of a war of aggression a criminal offense, they are not only enemies of our constitution but, what is much worse, enemies of life.**"

Sources and notes

- [1] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politisches_Spektrum.
- [2] <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstituante>.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz%C3%B6sische_Revolution.
- [5] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympe_de_Gouges.
- [6] <https://tkp.at/2025/04/24/klaus-ist-raus-steht-das-wef-vor-dem-zusammenbruch/>.
- [7] [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gro%C3%9Fer_Terror_\(Soviet_Union\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gro%C3%9Fer_Terror_(Soviet_Union)).
- [8] The vast majority of Nazi criminals and officials went to West Germany, where they often continued to be politically active. Although partly “prescribed” by the SED leadership, anti-fascism was much more deeply internalized by the citizens of the GDR – right up until the 1990s (cf. <https://www.manova.news/artikel/die-schattentrager>).
- [9] <https://www.manova.news/artikel/379-rechtsruck-in-deutschland>.
- [10] Siemens, Daniel (2019): Sturmabteilung: Die Geschichte der SA (Storm Troopers: The History of the SA), Munich, Siedler-Verlag, p. 454.
- [11] “Today, the term ‘Marxism’ encompasses very different movements, some of which are only remotely connected to the foundations laid by the works of Marx and Engels” (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxismus>).
- [12] Cf.: <https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/menschen-als-marionetten-wie-marx-und-engels-die-reale-psyche-in-ihrer-lehre-verdraengten-download-des-gesamten-textes/>.
- [13] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Reich.
- [14] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Fromm.
- [15] Of course, not everything can be classified without contradiction in this scheme. For example, abortions are clearly hostile to the unborn child, but for the mother concerned, they often have a life-affirming, and in some circumstances even life-saving, significance. Early public education about contraceptive options and the free distribution of contraceptives that have been tested for side effects are likely to be the best methods for resolving this conflict of interest.
- [16] See <https://www.manova.news/artikel/die-schattentrager>.
- [17] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_de_Maistre.
- [18] <https://psychosozial-verlag.de/programm/1000/2940-detail>.
- [19] <https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/menschenbilder-gut-geboren-boese-gemacht/> and <https://apolut.net/sind-wir-geborene-krieger/>
- [20] <https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/euthanasie-in-nr-deutschland-lebensunwertes-leben/>
- [21] All quotations from Wilhelm Reich (2020): The Massenpsychologie des Faschismus. The original text, Psychosozial-Verlag Gießen, see also <https://andreas-pegiau-psychoanalyse.de/hoerbuch-wilhelm-reich-massenpsychologie-des-faschismus-1933/>.
- [22] Reich, Wilhelm (1946): Mass Psychology of Fascism. Third, revised and enlarged edition. New York: Orgon Press, pp. 6-7 (Theodore- Wolfe-translation)

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Tip for further reading:

[People as puppets? How Marx and Engels suppressed the real psyche in their teaching](#)