

Political Left and Right since Antigone

Political Left and Right since Antigone

By

Frits Bienfait

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Political Left and Right since Antigone

By Frits Bienfait

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Frits Bienfait

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3448-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3448-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Foreword	viii
Part I: Introduction	1
1. The official birth of the political left and right: from a social trichotomy to a political dichotomy	2
2. The enigma	11
3. The instrument	15
Part II: Attempts to characterize the political left/right polarity	23
4. Tomkins' Polarity Scale, or: 'C'est le ton qui fait la musique'	24
5. Laponce.....	31
6. Bobbio.....	35
7. Negative Bias Theory	41
8. Casasanto	44
9. Left and Right are in the hands of the beholder	53
Part III.....	59
10. Testing the 'language and tradition' instrument	60
11. What Father does is always right!	64
12. Synthesis	67
13. Ideals!	70
14. Caveat	74
15. Moral questions.....	77
16. Some clarifications.....	87
17. A few flowers from the garden of left and right	93
18. Placcaet van de Staten generaal van de gevnieerde Nederlanden.....	99
19. The <i>Placcaet van Verlatighe</i> as a model for the American Declaration of Independence	103
20. New Brave World?	105
21. Embodied cognition.....	110
22. Antigone – continued.....	114
23. Epilogue.....	119

Appendix A 121
Left and Right in different Cultures

References 122

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Wouter van Beek, Meindert Fennema and Willem Desmense, whose contributions in earlier work were essential for the development of the ideas in this book; the indefatigable Derek Middleton for his imaginative work in translating the Dutch text, and Marjo Bartels, Micky Bramer, Hans van Dijk, Willem de Groot, Walther Micke, Peter Polhuis, Helene Reid, Jaap Roëll, Peter Schmitz, René Teijgeler and Sebastiaan Wiechers for their critical but always positive remarks, in their hope something valuable might result from a year of thinking together, Willem de Groot also for handling the machinery to transfer the result to Cambridge, and Adam Rummens at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for his kind encouragement and patience.

FOREWORD

The words ‘left’ and ‘right’ are used in the newspapers almost every day to denote political positions without saying what they have to do with politics, let alone how or why – or sometimes even, often with some aplomb, that they are ‘passé’. Even political scientists have difficulty explaining these terms, which is quite remarkable. What follows in this book is an explanation (or if I may be so bold, *the* explanation) of this phenomenon.

After a brief Introduction, a sort of ‘appetizer’, Part One sets out the indisputable facts, from which we derive the conditions that have to be met by a definition of the left/right political dichotomy. It then appears that ‘left’ and ‘right’ cannot be captured in a set of fixed terms or concepts, but that together they form a natural and obvious pairing for representing opposing political feelings and ideologies. The fact that the vast majority of people are right-handed plays an essential role in all this.

Part Two looks at some earlier attempts to find the sought-after definition, or at least some sort of explanation. It concludes with two chapters that describe relevant experimental research.

Part Three picks up where Part One left off, culminating in Chapter 12, Synthesis, with a description of the essence of the political left/right dichotomy – which may be considered to be a ‘definition’.

What follows in the remaining chapters is a series of examples showing how this dichotomy has been and is expressed. The book concludes with an attempt to describe how it may have emerged into our head and what we may expect in the future.

PART I

INTRODUCTION

No-one knows whether Antigone really lived, but she lives - and has been with us for 2,400 years. She was officially born in 442 BCE in Athens, where Sophocles wrote of her fate in his tragedy about her and her adversary Creon, ruler of Thebes.

Oedipus, one-time king of Thebes, has been dead for some years. His two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, had agreed to rule on alternate years, but Eteocles decided not to share power when his term expired. Polyneices left the city, raised an army and returned. In the resulting armed conflict both brothers were killed and Creon, Oedipus's brother-in-law, assumed the throne. Fearing chaos in the city, Creon refuses to bury Polyneices and orders, under penalty of death, that his body be left to rot on the battlefield outside the city.

Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and sister of the two brothers, defies the order and goes out at night to sprinkle sand over Polyneices' body, but is apprehended and brought before her uncle Creon. The conflict between Antigone and Creon seems irresolvable. Antigone argues that divine law requires that her brother receive the burial rites. Creon points out the inadmissible level of Polyneices' aggression and his duty not to leave Eteocles' death unpunished. The fact that the culprit is his niece, who has symbolically buried her brother, cannot make him deviate from his duty. His credibility would be lost and the city would descend into leaderless chaos.

Antigone can be translated as 'anti-born' and Creon as 'ruling.'

Welcome to the world of Left and Right!

CHAPTER ONE

THE OFFICIAL BIRTH OF THE POLITICAL LEFT AND RIGHT: FROM A SOCIAL TRICHOTOMY TO A POLITICAL DICHOTOMY

In 1789 the French king Louis XVI had fallen into financial difficulties owing to the high cost of the wars he waged and to food shortages caused by poor harvests, all of which compelled him to convene the Estates General (*États-Généraux*). The previous meeting had been held as long ago as 1614, which illustrates just how serious the situation had become. His shortage of funds forced him to hold the assembly in a hastily converted depot for theatrical and operatic scenery, costumes and props, the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs* near his palace at Versailles.

However, the problems were not so serious as to prevent a heated argument at court between the architect Pâris and the royal household about the important matter of the size of the baldachin under which the king would sit when he presided over the assembly. In the end, Pâris made a regal structure (see Figure 1-1), but the wrangling delayed the ceremonial opening session, which took place a week later than planned. The deputies who had been drummed up from all corners of France had to wait all that time in and around Paris. They already feared the worst (higher taxes) and must have had plenty of time in the inns and cafes for lengthy debates about the state of the country, the court and other business.

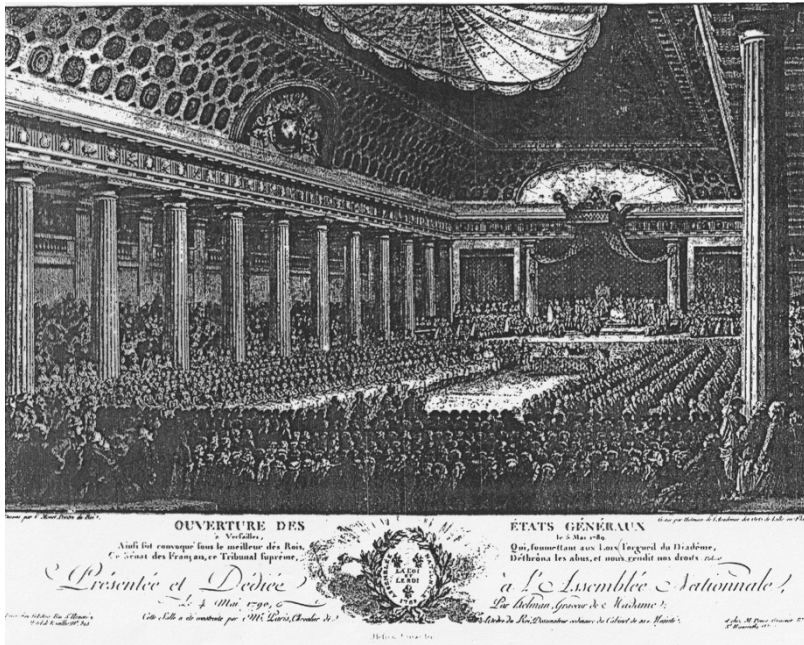


Figure 1-1: The Salle des Menus-Plaisirs

There was indeed no shortage of topics for discussion, because much had changed between 1614 and 1789. In 1648 the Dutch had finally managed to shake off the Spanish yoke and French intellectuals (the *philosophes*, or Enlightenment thinkers), influenced by John Locke, were devising new forms of government. Leibniz’s notion that we live in ‘the best of all possible worlds’ was considerably dented by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the publication in 1759 of Voltaire’s *Candide*. A constitutional monarchy, with England as the example, was an ideal now cherished by many; Rousseau’s ideas gave succour to the notion of the *volonté générale* – the will of the people. Against this background it was going to be a difficult task convincing the Estates General to solve the king’s money problems in exchange for a handful of favours.

On 30 April, perhaps not coincidentally in the week’s delay caused by the baldachin dispute, the Marquis de Ducrest made a proposal for changing the official names of the three estates of the realm represented in the Estates General – the clergy, the nobles and the commoners (higher bourgeoisie) – as *citizens on the right*, *citizens on the left* and *citizens at*

the back of the hall. Of course, this was not really about the forms of address, and so the king and his entourage decided to ignore the proposal. At the official opening of the Estates General on 5 May, see Figure 1-1 (Brette, 1902), the deputies were led by clerks to their traditional places: the clergy (First Estate) to the right of the king, the nobility (Second Estate) to his left and the commoners (Third Estate) at the far end, all in accordance with the protocol of 1614. After the opening address by the king, the convention was immediately closed and the clergy and nobles left the hall and went to their own meeting rooms elsewhere in the building.

The Third Estate remained behind in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*, where the discussion swiftly turned to questions such as how to maintain order during meetings and how to make best use of the time they had.

We should note here that the Third Estate had about 600 deputies, and opinions on some subjects could differ widely. The Count of Mirabeau, who was a prominent supporter of reform and for that reason had had himself elected as a representative of the Third Estate, knew the practices and procedures of the British Parliament and proposed adopting some of them, including the rule that members addressed themselves solely to the president or chair (the Speaker of the House in the British Parliament) and that no-one could raise a new issue without first submitting a motion. Even the word ‘commons’ was bastardized into French as *communes* to indicate the commoners. It was undoubtedly also common knowledge that in the British Parliament the royalists sat on the Speaker’s right and the opposition on his left.

After two days of these discussions something happened which not only resulted in the Marquis de Ducrest achieving some of what he wanted, but also embodied an ideological dichotomy. A meeting of the Third Estate (*communes*) had to vote on a motion by the conservative royalist Malouet and a counter motion by the reformist Mirabeau. With hundreds of deputies voting, that would have been an interminable procedure, but a solution was found: to divide the meeting into two, with those supporting Malouet to assemble *at the right* of one of their members, and those supporting Mirabeau’s motion *at the left*. Most of the deputies moved to the right (Lemay 1987, p 189). One might naturally come to the conclusion that this procedure followed the example of the British Parliament, with supporters of the current regime or government on the Speaker’s right, but I could not find any explicit mention of this. A detail

like this – from our perspective and with what we know now potentially of great significance – was at the time probably thought not worth mentioning; it was just an ad hoc decision with a simple purpose. According to Runciman (1965, p. 145) this was an accidental choice and it could easily have been the other way around.

From various notes and comments in reports, memoirs and such like made by deputies and others present at the time, it appears that in the meetings that followed the reformers increasingly sat to the left and the conservatives to the right of the president, and not just when they were voting (Dorigny 1989).

After a series of often impassioned debates in the meeting rooms of the three estates, the idea emerged that instead of representing just one estate, each deputy should serve the whole French population (Tennis Court Oath, 20 June). The logical consequence was that the deputies should not meet as separate estates, but always in plenary sessions in what would from now on be called the *Assemblée nationale constituante* (National Constituent Assembly). In early July the king relented, after some resistance, and accepted this revolutionary development; from then on the three estates met as one body in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*. I have not been able to find any *official* change in the seating arrangements in the following month, but in the light of the developments a month later (described below), such a change would not have been very likely.

During the opening session on 5 May it was already apparent that the acoustics were terrible and there was soon a call to completely refurbish the chamber. Now that the deputies were no longer officially divided into the three estates, the chamber could be laid out to meet the rational requirements of Assembly protocol and acoustics. This all took place in a single frenetic burst of activity during the night, day and following night from 21 to 23 July.

The chamber was now laid out in the shape of an amphitheatre (see Figure 1-2). The president's chair was situated half way along one of the long sides of the chamber, with the secretariat immediately below him. The new layout meant that if everyone, by force of habit, went to find a new seat as close as possible to where their old one used to be, the deputies representing the commoners, who included most of the reformers and who used to sit at the back of the chamber, would now be seated to the left of

the president, and the clergy and nobles, previously seated at the front of the chamber, would be seated on the president's right.

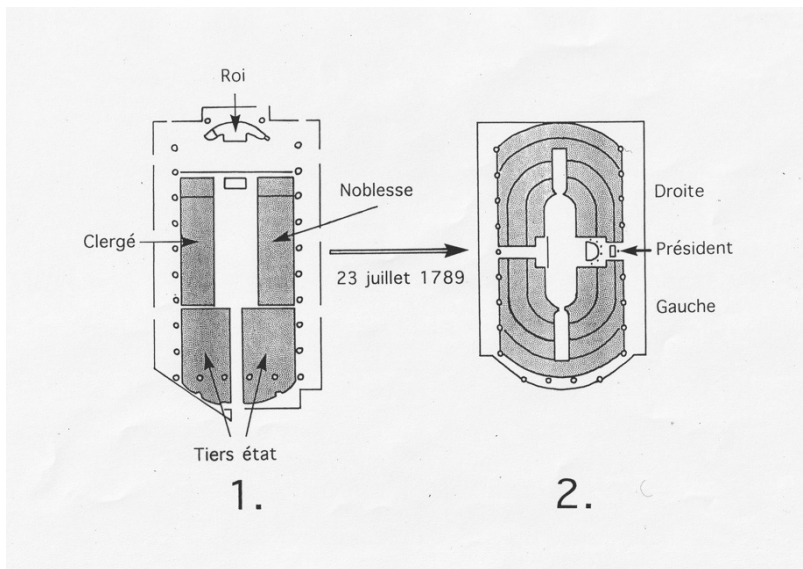


Figure 1-2: Old and new layout of the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs

The higher orders, the clergy and nobles – and the king if he still wanted to attend, could be driven in their carriages right up to the entrance to the chamber, which was to the right of the president. They therefore automatically entered on this side. The Third Estate always had to use the street entrance at the back, and so they automatically entered the chamber to the left of the president. This also ensured that the king would not run the risk of coming into direct contact with any members of the Third Estate; Pâris had no doubt learned his lesson from the baldachin dispute.

I have found no information on who sat on the benches opposite the president, which was previously the narrow space between the areas reserved for the clergy and nobility and the seating for the commoners. Perhaps this was a sort of refuge for those who wanted a quiet chat with someone from the other side.

All in all, Pâris had created a well-ordered space to accommodate the left/right division. However, his floor plans and hand-written specifications,

held in the Besançon public library, contain no indication of anything other than purely architectural and design considerations.

At the end of August and in early September the sittings were tumultuous. Two opposing groups emerged, each with deputies from all three estates. Unfortunately, the diarists among those present at the time were far more interested in the points of contention than in details about who sat where. We therefore do not know exactly how this metamorphosis from a three-way division of social orders into two opposing ideologies took place. The newspapers give us a few clues: ‘Uproar among members of the clergy’ (10 August), ‘A voice called from the gallery to the benches of the nobility’ (29 August), and reports that on 9 September François-Henri de Virieu called the *communes* demagogues, pointing to those he accused. As so often in these types of gradual processes, the realization dawned that something had been afoot for a while, but it was difficult to tell when it had all started – simply because until then nothing had seemed particularly out of the ordinary (Castaldo 1989).

On 11 September, still in 1789, it finally became clear to everyone that a revolution was taking shape. It was the day the National Constituent Assembly voted on how much power the king should have to intervene in legislative questions, granting him a suspensive veto. Those who wanted to limit the power of the king as much as possible found themselves to the left of the presiding volunteer and those who were in favour of maintaining the royal prerogative were to his right. For most parliamentarians it was now no longer their social rank (Estate) that determined where they sat, but their political ideas. A truly revolutionary event! In France that day is still often regarded as the birth of the political left/right divide.

In October 1789, at the insistence of deputies and Parisians, the National Constituent Assembly moved to Paris and on 9 November, following a brief stay at a Jacobin monastery, the Assembly continued deliberations 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 an attempt to undo the division and especially the radicalization of the deputies into a *coté gauche* and a *coté droite*, which was considered to be increasingly problematic (e.g. Defrasne 1975).

Dulaure (1793) 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* [a slightly raised area in the chamber] on the extreme right hand side. The opposite side, where the Aristocrats used to sit, was on the right hand side, but is now to the left of the president.' He added: 'I do not want to assert that the deputies on 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 division in the Assembly, although they had now 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 president.

The conversion of the *Salle du Manege* 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, after the fall of Robespierre at the end of the Reign of Terror in 1794 and the founding of the *Directoire*, 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 arrangement 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 Tribunal 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 reign for five years at most (from May 1789 to June 1794), and more than one of these

years was in a reversed form. One might suppose that after this rather unruly and confused start, those nineteen years would have been enough for the left/right polarization to be forgotten or abandoned.

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 organized parties because their existence would have been at odds with the free exchanges 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 polarization was reborn within just a few weeks – to remain with us to this day.

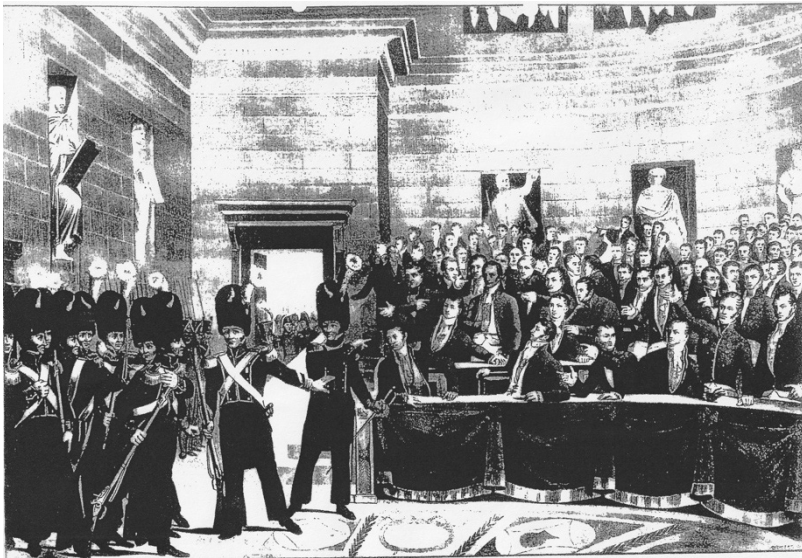


Figure 1-3: Arrest of Jacques-Antoine Manuel in the chambres des députés

An engraving from 1823 illustrates this nicely (Figure 1-3). It depicts the assembly room of the Chamber of Deputies at the moment the left-wing deputy Jacques-Antoine Manuel was arrested. Given the curvature of the chamber, it is clear that what we see is the extreme left flank of the assembly room. The image cannot have been reversed in the engraving or

printing process, because the hilt of the commanding officer's sword can be seen on his left-hand side (Dayot 1902).

Although the above would seem to document the emergence of a recognizable political left and right reasonably well, it does not explain everything. It remains puzzling. In 1789 there was a quarrel with a king; well, he was beheaded – but left and right remained. Their existence, therefore, does not depend on the monarchy. Then why did this political left/right persist? The beginnings of an answer were given by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss: if you have to take difficult decisions, the most fruitful strategy is to formulate the problem as pairs of opposites.

But why this division into a left and a right, which relates to our bodies but has *nothing* to do with politics? The next chapter goes deeper into this enigma.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ENIGMA

‘If you ask passers-by at random what is the difference between right and left, most say that they do not really know, but this does not stop them from positioning themselves to the political left or right,’ said French political scientist René Rémond in 2002 in an interview with the historian Marcel Gauchet, who added: ‘We are faced with a sort of enigma’. (Gauchet & Rémond 2002).

They said this more than two centuries after the birth of the political left and right, and in their own country, no less. Rémond had written a standard work about ‘the right’ and Gauchet was a historian and expert on the left/right dichotomy. Whence their uncertainty? Sure enough, in the intervening two centuries ideas had been put forward in answer to the straightforward question of what left and right stand for – including the definitions given by the Larousse publishing house, which show a definite shift in thinking over the years:

1. *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (1865–1976): ‘Left is where the opposition sits. The influence of the centre right, which is reactionary, is answered by centre left, which tends towards liberal ideas.’
2. *Nouveau Larousse Illustré* (1896–1924): ‘The left is the side of parliament where the members with more or less progressive [*avancées*] views sit.’
3. *Larousse du XXeme siècle* (1928–1933): as the previous edition, but with a minor amendment: ‘The left is the side of parliament where the members with more or less so-called [*dites*] progressive views sit.’
4. *Grand Larousse Encyclopédique* (1960–1964): ‘The dividing line between left and right has not remained static: it has shifted and most of the ideas now held by the right were originally formulated by the left’ (followed by an extensive description of these shifts in French politics).

The Larousse became increasingly less confident in its definition of left (and right), and with good reason. In 1938, the French sociologist Emmanuel Mounier gave a long, very intelligent and in many aspects still now valuable enumeration, of the current views about the foundations of the left versus right dichotomy, in which he showed that none of them were satisfactory. Most of those from the French politics of his day no longer resonate with us, except possibly a few:

- Left-wing freedom as opposed to right-wing dictatorship – was the Soviet Union, surely a prime example of left-wing politics, a model of freedom?
- Left-wing justice and decency as opposed to right-wing money-grubbing – a case in point being the 2009 UK parliamentary expenses scandal, in which both Labour and Conservative MPs made excessive allowance and expensive claims.
- Left-wing science as opposed to right-wing obscurantism – is nuclear power favoured by the left?

And so on.

Mounier decided that a good definition was not possible: ‘On n’en sortira pas’ (There’s no solution) (Mounier 1938). In 1954 Gilbert Tixier showed how in France, following the humiliating defeat by Prussia in 1870–71, the left first pushed for a revenge war and the right was opposed to this – until the turn of the century, when the roles were reversed (Tixier 1954).

Not only was it virtually impossible to clearly define the left/right polarity in terms of political positions, but whatever substantive differences there were could just as easily be reversed. The 1960 *Larousse* seems to have taken both lessons to heart. In the Netherlands, Kleerekoper (1968) provided numerous examples in his country of opinions which had been held in turn by both left and right, and concluded that these labels had become increasingly ineffective. He argued that the degree to which people wanted to maintain or eliminate privileges is a measure of how far their politics lean to the right or the left respectively. For us, a question that remains is how this can be a basis for deciding for or against nuclear power, for example; and the phenomenon of the ‘Soviet elite’ still niggles. And why the left in the Netherlands is for nature conservation is equally spurious, particularly considering that the first to show any concern for that issue, in the late nineteenth century, belonged to the ‘squandering, hunting and shooting’ elite.

The number of attempts to define the ‘cornerstone’ of the left/right dichotomy are too numerous to count. Those who want to delve into this can refer to Mascolo (1955), Tixier (1954), Touchard (1977), Gombin (1971), a whole series of English-speaking intellectuals in two numbers of *Encounter* (Lasky and Thwaite 1977), Rémond (1982) and Bobbio (1996), who asserts that ‘equality’ is the basic principle underlying the political left as opposed to ‘inequality’ for the right. All these attempts, with the exception of Bobbio, whose clear argument is well worth reading and is discussed later in this book (Chapter 6), have made little lasting impression. They explain some of the differences, but not others, as discussed in detail by Mounier (1938) and Kleerekoper (1968).

Political experts have also chipped in, simply declaring that the concepts of left and right have since become ‘obsolete’ or ‘irrelevant.’ In France, Francois Mitterrand claimed (1977): ‘The old left-right division is blown away by the strong wind of history.’ In the Netherlands it has always been the stance taken by the D66 party, which since 1997 have called themselves ‘social liberals’; in 2000 the leader of the parliamentary party in the House of Representatives said ‘Right and left are out.’ Five years later, Lukacs (2005) noted drily that ‘Right and left still have some meaning, even today. But not much.’ In the same year, Furedi: ‘Concepts like left and right are mostly rhetorical in nature,’ going on to rather irritably remark that commentators nevertheless continue to find it hard to do without them (Furedi 2005).

Which brings us right back to Rémond and Gauchet. The enigma is actually even bigger than they said. In June 2009 Dutch radio news reported a military coup against the Honduran president, ‘the left-wing Zelaya.’ Further characterization was thought unnecessary. In February 2013 the European media were able to state ‘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 were characterized by solidarity with the poor). The average European citizen feels absolutely no need for an explanation of what ‘left’ and ‘right’ mean in politics. In the Netherlands the readers of the papers with the broadest appeal have no difficulty at all in using these terms; in fact, quite the opposite. They usually (intuitively) know quite well whether they themselves lean to the left or the right, and how far; and if they hear it about someone else they take it to be sensible information. The fact that we cannot *say* what these terms actually mean does not seem to matter.

There seems to be a sort of ‘knowing’ so deep within us that we cannot quite put our finger on it, but we can consult it – and then the answer comes quickly and is pretty reliable.

In other words, somewhere within us there must be some sort of instrument that enables us to attach political meaning to the terms ‘left’ and ‘right.’ This instrument has to meet three requirements: first, that no special training or education is needed to be able to use it; second, that it delivers more or less the same outcome for everyone; and third, that it works without our being aware of it or having to think about it.

This instrument was described more than a century ago and is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

THE INSTRUMENT

I have a very dear friend, but she has a problem. She's always thinking about what she is doing. If she's on a swing, she counts how many times she goes backwards and forwards. She can only stop on an even number, because she believes uneven numbers bring bad luck. She also always starts things on the right, because the left-hand side is unlucky. Things like tying her shoelaces, making sandwiches, swimming, walking past a post on the right, and so on.

If I grab her and pull her past on the left-hand side and then let go, she runs back on the left, turns round and comes back on the right-hand side. If it is really too far to go back, the next time she does the same thing because then it is an even number, and then she goes back to going past on the right.

(Jessy, 16 years old, children's page in the VPRO TV guide no. 30, 2002).

Our instrument has to make do with the two words 'left' and 'right' to do its mysterious work, perhaps by drawing on the meanings we attach to these two words.

Structuring by dualistic thinking

At the beginning of the previous century the European colonial powers had more or less reached the limits of their expansion. Army officers and Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries with an interest in the peoples they lived among had recorded all sorts of observations and the time was ripe to collate these observations and compare and contrast them. In 1909 a study by the young anthropologist Robert Hertz was published in the French journal *Revue Philosophique*: 'La prééminence de la main droite: Étude sur la polarité religieuse' [The pre-eminence of the right hand: A study of religious polarity] (Hertz 1909). He 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. When humans first started to think about the world around them, they found themselves

surrounded by an abundance of forms that threatened to overwhelm them, for want of something to hold on to. That may be why they began the gargantuan task of bringing *order* to the universe, and the most elementary way of structuring phenomena is a dualistic one, or dividing things into two groups: this here, that there.

This rule is not limited to ‘primitive’ people, but applies to us as well. Some years ago I had a small fire in my house. Once the firefighters had gone, all that was left of the burnt out room was a black sooty chaos. A few hours later a man from a cleaning company turned up. He gauged my state of mind, which was frayed to say the least, and said slowly and clearly: ‘You just have to do one thing: put everything you want to keep on *one* side of the room [one sphere] and everything that can go on the other side [the other sphere]. I shall come back in three days,’ he said slowly and firmly, but gently. ‘Do – you – under – stand – me?’ He had me structure things dualistically. I would not have been able to do anything more complex, such as what can go, here, what I want to keep, there, and what I have doubts about, in the middle. But that was not necessary. Dualistic was possible, necessary and sufficient.

The research by Hertz, as well as by his predecessors and those who followed him, produced results strikingly similar in different parts of the world. Some examples of the two ‘spheres’ from peoples and tribes in different continents are listed in Appendix A. If we assume that modern man evolved in Africa, and that the Nyoro people have remained there ever since, but the Mapuche migrated over thousands of years through Asia, across the Bering Strait and down through North America into the tip of South America, it is quite miraculous that the left/right dual symbolic classifications of the two peoples still resemble each other so closely.

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 one pole or the other.’ He thought this dichotomy was based on a religious preoccupation (the sacred versus the profane), but dualistic thinking is in itself sufficient explanation for the genesis of the two spheres. Together they unite the opposite and complementary sides of important aspects of the universe, such as male in one sphere, female in the other, together humanity; day in one, night in the other, together the daily cycle; and so on.

Reports from correspondents from all over the world showed that in almost all cultures certain concepts belong to the right and their complements to the left, and that the left/right division of other concepts varies depending on the culture or tribe. Male is always right and female is (nearly¹) 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.

There is a logic to the division of attributes, concepts and phenomena between the two spheres. The male sphere contains ‘power’ – men are generally stronger than women – and also ‘right,’ because most people are right-handed (80%–95%, depending on how left-handed and right-handed are defined), which is genetically determined (Norris 2005, McManus et al. 2013),² and so their right hand is stronger and more adept. ‘Strong’ is readily associated with ‘healthy,’ which therefore belongs in the male sphere, as opposed to ‘sickness’ and ‘death’ in the female sphere. By a further process of association each sphere obtains its own logically consistent set of meanings (see also the ingenious experiments by Casasanto in Chapter 8).

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 of Ambon and therefore does not appear on the list of right or left categories. On Ambon the beach is where the

¹ See Chapter 14: Caveat.

² One may wonder what in the structure of the human body could be the cause of the asymmetry needed to produce this imbalance between left- and right-handedness in the final product. And why are we not *all* right-handed (or all left-handed)? The simplest answer to the first question is that the most important building blocks of our body, amino acids, are themselves asymmetrical, and in the same way for everyone. The second question is harder. As far as I know, there is no definite answer to it (yet). It could be that this is decided by the way in which a certain protein folds, during or after its synthesis, and that the chance of folding one way is about six times as great as folding the other way (see Lebreton et al. 2018).

island meets the ocean, where dangerous monsters may emerge from the waters, which is why the beach belongs to the female sphere.

Individual concepts and symbols are not always and everywhere, without exception, allocated to the same polar spheres. Their allocation is determined by what people *experience* to be the essence of a sphere or by associating *what they feel* with elements or categories already present in one of the spheres. Such feelings are always influenced by social, religious or other contexts – which can vary.¹

Context has most influence on the peripheral concepts or symbols, which are only weakly or indirectly related to the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ 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, heaven is logically considered to be male, because it fertilizes the earth with rain, and so the earth is female (Coomaraswamy 1942). In ancient China, all aspects of life were subject to the yin/yang polarity and the division into left and right depended on the situation, for example which hand was used for greeting and which kept hidden during official mourning or celebration.

In such situations, the division into left and right is determined by which aspect is considered to be most relevant in a specific context, both for the sphere and the specific element. A certain religious or moral connotation may distinguish one sphere from the other, but this is not necessarily always 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 – in the Old Testament unpleasant for the Egyptians, but for the Jews a blessing (Exodus 7–12).

We are now in a very different way of thinking from that of political scientists such as Mounier, Rémond and Gauchet, who tried to take a more ‘scientific’ approach and sought to capture the essence of left and right in two fixed words, such as might be used in a mathematical or physico-chemical treatise. A mathematical proposition that all prime numbers end in 1, 3 or 7 is refuted by the single prime number 19, but someone who observes that a tribe or community living in a certain region favours (in some context) 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 local deviation from the rule. *We*

have entered a world of intuitive experience, which is strongly influenced by the potentially changeable context, but at the same time has its own internal logic. And this logic seems to obey the same set of rules wherever we may be in the world.

Dualistic action

Rituals, social conventions, traditions and customs were also often crafted around a division of the universe into two spheres. The left/right antithesis provided an extremely convenient metaphor for giving concrete expression to this division. Left and right are obvious to us – the symmetry of the human body was probably the primary source of inspiration for the development of dualistic thinking – and 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, which is associated with disease and death and is good enough to wipe your bottom with. The Nyoro medicine man places his 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 good.’ (Needham 1973).

More colourful examples can be found in the scientific and popular literature about left and right (Hertz 1909, Fritsch 1964, Needham 1973, McManus 2002). From this literature it appears that left and right play a similar role not only in the traditions and customs of ‘primitive peoples,’ but also in our own. Traditions, customs and beliefs are continually passed on from one generation to the next, consciously or unconsciously – and of course we were also once ‘primitive.’

Language

The other medium for passing on the left/right polarity from one generation to the next, again either consciously or unconsciously, is language. Children are often taught to use ‘the right hand’ from an early age, and every adult knows that the right hand is not just a part of the body but also refers metaphorically to a trusted ally or companion.

The Dutch Van Dale Dictionary gives the following for *links* (left): ‘located on the left-hand side’ – followed by meanings that have nothing to do with a physical location or direction, such as awkward, clumsy,

askew, unfriendly, bogus, deceptive, and in phrases such as '*iemand links laten liggen*' (to ignore somebody) and *linkse streken* (mean tricks). *Links* is derived from *link*, which means dangerous, mean, cunning, sly, shady, crooked, risky (and is etymologically related to the English 'link').

The definition of *rechts* (right) as an adjective contains nothing that deviates in meaning from 'the right-hand side,' but the definitions of *recht* ('straight') from which it is derived, include: '*op rechte wegen gaan*': have nothing to do with underhand dealings; '*de rechte weg is de beste*': honesty is the best policy; *recht door zee gaan*: keep to the straight and narrow, to be sincere about one's intentions; *recht geraken*: to bring things into line or create order, usually implying a financially healthy situation. Also one deviation: *hoe linker hoe flinker, hoe rechter hoe slechter*: left ear burning a symbol of praise, right ear burning a symbol of evil. For *recht* as a noun: justice, equity, fairness and other meanings derived from these.

Similar definitions and meanings are found in all European languages, including classical Greek and Latin. And in Tibetan, we find: 'Is he not the person they trust? Yes, he is their right-hand man.' Right always stands for reliable, respectable, reputable, solid, correct, proper, safe, and left for deceptive, dangerous, crooked, and also things like sick, homosexual and mad (language cares nothing for what we now consider to be proper or 'politically correct').

Thus, since prehistoric times humans have tried to make sense of the confusing plethora of phenomena around them by dividing their impressions, observations and interpretations into two spheres – and this is exactly what happened during the first turbulent assemblies of the Third Estate in the *Salle des Menus-Plaisirs*. The deputies needed to get to grips with the huge diversity of political opinions and objectives in order to deliberate on and treat them in a consistent manner. And like the cleaner ordering me to divide my sooty possessions into two, in Versailles they realized that the assembly, in all its chaotic jumble of 600 viewpoints, had to divide into two to vote on *two* motions. They chose to make that division by forming two groups, one to the left and one to the right of a colleague– the *handiest* way of doing it.

This age-old dualistic system, to be so succinctly described more than a century later by Hertz, was simply waiting to be used by the deputies in Versailles to accommodate their political ideas. Nothing has changed since

then: everyone imbibes their language with their mother's milk, and is brought up with the traditions in a process that remains unconscious from our earliest years. The instrument, so long sought for, that we use to know what in politics belongs to the left and what belongs to the right, must then be our capacity to compare political ideas with the knowledge, long established deep within ourselves, about what belongs in each of the two spheres. How we do that is the subject of Chapter 21: Embodied cognition.

Finally.

Robert Hertz studied with the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Five years after the publication of his 'La prééminence de la main droite: étude sur la polarité religieuse' the First World War broke out and on 13 April 1915, during a senseless attack on the town of Marchéville, Hertz died in a hail of machine gun fire having taken just a few steps. Many of his fellow students of Durkheim shared his fate in that war, and so the work of Hertz and his colleagues remained largely unknown outside the small circle of sociologists and anthropologists who worked on developing his ideas, such as Hertz's younger colleague Claude Lévi-Strauss. This obscurity only came to an end following the publication of Rodney Needham's *Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification* (1973), which explores and expands on the work of Hertz's colleagues and students.

