

# **Public Policy for Progressives**

By

**Jonathan Lipow**

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## Preface

My career has been devoted to bridging the interstice between national security and public policy. This work culminated in the publication of my first book, *Survival: The Economic Foundations of American National Security*, back in 2016. In that book, which was intended to be a textbook for senior military officers, I illustrated how considerations of national security could and should inform perspectives on public policy.

Of course, 2016 was the culmination of two political trends as well. The first was the transition of the populist Right from an originally powerless fringe movement into the dominant force in the Republican Party due to the salesmanship of Donald Trump and his skill in tapping into a deep seated (and partially justified) resentment of working-class people – be they white, Latino, and increasingly even Black – with an “Establishment” that spares no effort to show its disdain for them.

The second was the rise of the populist Left, also once a fringe movement, into a powerful force in the Democratic Party, in no small part due to the salesmanship of Bernie Sanders and his skill in tapping into deep seated (and partially justified) resentment of the very same “Establishment.” That these two movements are related is vividly illustrated by the fact that an extraordinary 12% of those who supported Sanders in the 2016 Primaries voted for Trump in November.

Fortunately, while Trump and Sanders are men of very different temperaments, they share one important characteristic – neither of them is a totalitarian. As Sanders put it in an infamous appearance on Saturday Night Live, the difference between a “socialist” and a “democratic socialist” is “HUUUUUGE.” It certainly is. Bernie

Sanders, although sometimes confused, is NOT Lenin. And Donald Trump, although often (actually always) narcissistic, is NOT Hitler.

I think, however, that neither Sanders nor Trump – much like Micky Mouse in *Fantasia* - fully understands the dangerous forces that have been unleashed by their political success. In the hands of a skilled and ruthless politician, the populism espoused by Trump and Sanders can easily morph into something orders of magnitude more dangerous to our country.

Just as bad, the surviving portion of the “Establishment” – essentially the leadership of the Democratic Party and their enablers in the mainstream media – responded to the rise of angry populism not by addressing the concerns of the marginalized but by trying to shut them up. And so we had the IRS scandal, the Democratic National Committee emails, Russiagate, social media censorship that flies in the face of the Constitution, and so much more. Not surprisingly, this made angry people even angrier, and it was a short road from that to the seizure of the Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Observing all this, I decided that America’s toxic political climate had become the biggest threat to our country’s security. As such, I had a responsibility – having taken an oath to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution to the best of my ability - to do what I could to ameliorate that threat. I decided to focus on the aspects of this that I could realistically address and target an audience I had a realistic chance of communicating with - and from that emerged the idea of writing this book. How well have I done? Well, please read the book and be the judge.

Now, no one writes a book alone or in a vacuum, and I had a lot of help over the years with this one. First, I would like to recognize the people who taught me how to think and contributed to my intellectual development. Those would include Irma Adelman,

Peter Berck, Eli Finerman, Ken Kuttner, Yakir Plessner, Robert Powell, Clifford Sowell, and Brian Wright.

Of particular importance are three faculty I studied with at UCLA as an undergraduate who really taught me how to effectively develop intellectually rigorous ideas consistent with progressive values. Those would be Gerard Chaliand, Constance Coiner, and Raymond Rocco.

Then there are the people with whom I have served at the Naval Postgraduate School and Defense Resources Management Institute, without whose support (and constant criticism!) this book would not have been possible. Those would include Diana Angelis, Laura Arme y, John Arquilla, Marigee Bacolod, Don Bonsper, Doug Burton, Phil Costain, Michael Freeman, Ryan Garcia, Willian Gates, Elizabeth Gooch, Jason Hansen, Christian Hanson, Samuel Helfont, David Henderson, Mark Hladky, Steven Hurst, CJ LaCivita, Mitch McCarthy, Robert McNab, Francois Melese, Luis Morales, Michael Nixon, Daniel Nussbaum, Jessica Piombo, Allan Polley, Eva Regnier, Anke Richter, JT Sebastyn, Jay Simon, Ryan Sullivan, Troy Terronez, Larry Vaughn, Natalie Webb, and Sean Webeck. And of special note, my comrades from the "Iraq Wolfpack:" Peter Bertelsen, Andre Brown, Kevin Burgess, Michael Kwasnoski, and Erin Reeder. We are truly a band of brothers and sisters (and wolves!).

There have also been numerous friends and students whose insights either directly or indirectly contributed to my understanding of the issues addressed in this book. These include Fran Spector Atkins, Zeelie Brown, Lane Castro, Lori Duperon, Alisa Fineman, Zoe Forsythe, Ryan Hartwig, Joshua Hoke, Cherelle Lewis, Keena Mullins, Martha Rodriguez, Deanna Ross, Nathaniel Sawyer, Gary Simon, Sandra Wagner, and Belle Witte.



Needless to say, no book would exist without a publisher, and I have had a wonderful experience working with Sarah Palmer and Ben Williams at Ethics International Press. Their passion for their work and commitment to their mission shows up in literally everything they do.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My children Gabriel and Elinoar, who have taught me so much about life and love. And my parents Charles and Ruhama Lipow, who taught me perhaps the most valuable lesson of all – the difference between cynicism and skepticism, and why ethical conduct requires us to reject the former...and embrace the latter.



# Chapter One

## Science and Sentiment

*"I support the Left. Though I'm leaning, leaning to the Right."*

—From "Politician," by Perter Brown and Jack Bruce<sup>1</sup>

On 22 April 2017, over one million people - almost all of whom self-identified as liberals or progressives - gathered in over 600 major cities all over the world to participate in the first "March for Science." According to the widely respected organizers of the March, the purpose of the demonstrations was to give people an opportunity to "unite as a diverse, nonpartisan group to call for science that upholds the common good, and for political leaders and policymakers to enact *evidence-based policies* in the public interest."<sup>2</sup>

It was no accident that the March was scheduled for 22 April. Earth Day, the annual environmental "holiday," fell on that day. The hope was that the March would constitute a symbolic rebuke of newly elected President Trump, who had recently suggested that anthropogenic climate change, for which there is considerable scientific evidence, was little more than a hoax.

I chose not to participate in the March. While I regard myself as a (social) scientist, a political liberal, and an environmentalist - and I had definitely not voted for President Trump - something really bothered me about the March for Science. The reality was that almost all of the marchers held positions regarding climate change

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Peter, and Jack Bruce. "Politician." <https://genius.com/Cream-politician-lyrics>.

<sup>2</sup> March for Science. "*Our Mission*." <https://www.marchforscience.com/our-mission>.

and many other matters of policy that were as uninformed by scientific evidence as those of the former President.

The March was an exercise in mass self-delusion.

### Jonathan's "Little Red Book"

The purpose of this book is to offer those who identify with America's democratic political Left a guide to understanding how scientifically rigorous, evidence-based analysis can be applied in order to identify public policies that are both consistent with their values and likely to *actually work*. I decided to write this book after I read Mike Walzer's *A Foreign Policy for the Left*.<sup>3</sup> Walzer argues that people who identify with the political left have a bad habit of taking automatic positions on a wide range of issues rather than developing well thought out stances motivated by their basic moral principles. I agree with him on this but add that leftists also have a bad habit of taking automatic positions without reference to basic scientific principles and factual evidence. I believe this failing is every bit as problematic.

Illustrating this disdain for analysis and evidence, consider this comment offered by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a self-defined socialist, in an interview with Anderson Cooper of CNN:

"I think that there's a lot of people more concerned about being precisely, factually, and semantically correct than about being morally right."<sup>4</sup>

Look, recitation of mindless platitudes may earn you social acceptance from the cool kids. And right now, there is probably no one cooler than "AOC." At its heart, however, the idea of "the Left"

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<sup>3</sup> Walzer, Michael. *A Foreign Policy for the Left*. Yale University Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Renbaum, Bryan. "AOC's 10 Most Controversial Comments." *Baltimore Post-Examiner*, 4 July 2019.

is not about being popular with the cool kids. It is about making the real world that we live in a better place for all humanity – with a special emphasis on making the world a better place for those who are *most vulnerable*. The rest is commentary at best and white noise at worst. A commitment to a better life for all is the Left's most basic moral principle.

It follows from this that a personal willingness to exercise intellectual honesty and emotional discipline in pursuit of a better life for all must be a self-defined progressive's most basic moral imperative. Obviously, if you are concerned with the welfare of people who are drowning, you have an obligation to go save them, rather than offer them platitudes about how the "One Percent" are responsible for their deaths. That means that you have an obligation to learn how to rescue people from drowning. And *that* means that you must work diligently to learn how to be a lifeguard, rather than spend your time babbling about "privilege" in the hope that the cool kids will like you.

### **Imagine**

There is, however, a far more important reason for this moral imperative. The first rule of medicine is "do no harm." Progressives must adopt the same ethos. Unfortunately, history has taught us that the Left is capable of doing quite a bit of harm. Progressives are uniquely vulnerable to seductive messianic and millennialist notions because dreams of a better world engender utopian fantasies. And the pursuit of utopian fantasies inevitably results in dystopian realities.

If there is one thing you really need to understand about messiahs, it is that they are – everywhere and always – false. To illustrate why any utopia invariably becomes a dystopia, let's do a simple thought experiment that focuses on one of the most popular riffs amongst totalitarian movements of the Left – the idea of "World Peace."

To be sure, peace is better than war. But a world in a permanent state of peace like that evoked by John Lennon's "Imagine?"<sup>5</sup> Frankly, I view our recurrent wars as preferable to Lennon's vision. To "give peace a chance," *everyone* has to subordinate *everything* that they believe to the over-riding "Truth" that nothing ever justifies violence. But what if even a few people believe that something is more important than peace, and are willing to use violence to compel the rest of us to follow their vision of "Truth?" Well, we would either surrender to them or defend ourselves. Either way, that would be the end of "World Peace." To prevent that, we would have to assure that no alternative visions of Truth ever emerge, and that means...that we are going to need thought police and re-education camps. Dreams of "World Peace" inevitably devolve into totalitarian nightmares.

How can progressives protect themselves from the powerful appeal of utopianism, and the dystopia it brings in its wake? The starting point in answering that question is to recognize that there is no prophylactic measure more effective at immunizing a person from the danger of becoming a totalitarian than the regular practice of *critical reasoning*.

### **Strange Fruit**

My concern with the vulnerability of the Left to totalitarian notions is very personal and rooted in my family's history. My father witnessed perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of this phenomenon in living memory when he was young.

Motivated by the racial and class injustice of the 1930s, my father joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1938. He was barely thirteen years old. His recruiter was Abel Meeropol, a teacher at the school my father was attending at the time. Meeropol, by the way,

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<sup>5</sup> Lennon, John, and Yoko Ono. "Imagine." <https://genius.com/John-lennon-imagine-lyrics>.

wrote the lyrics for Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and later adopted the orphaned children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>6</sup>

In 1938 and 1939, YCL meetings were all about the fight against fascism and the mythic heroism of the Lincoln Brigade in Spain. Kids love that kind of stuff. But then, on 23 August 1939, Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and within a month, the Soviet Union had joined the Nazis in the rape of Poland. And what of the "vanguard" that led my father's YCL group? They all changed their tune overnight and became isolationists and apologists for the Nazis. That lasted until Germany launched Operation Barbarossa. Then – overnight – the same vanguard became staunch members of the resistance to Hitler and ardent advocates of American entry into the War.<sup>7</sup>

This dismayed my father, but he was very young. And as he reached adulthood, he had to focus on his personal obligation to fight against the fascists and defend our country, and there was no time to think through the implications of what he had seen amongst his "comrades." That led him to Normandy and the Ardennes, and eventually to the linking up of the great allied armies in Germany. And in Germany, my father finally met his Red Army counterparts for the first time. And they told him stories of what the Red Army was really like. And what the USSR was really like...

My father, now a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, took this knowledge back with him from Europe, and – being the naïve and idealistic boy that he still was – sought to inform his comrades about what Stalin was actually doing in the USSR. Their

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<sup>6</sup> Blair, Elizabeth. "The Strange Story of the Man Behind Strange Fruit." *NPR*, 5 September 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Bellush, Bernard, and Jewel Bellush. "A Radical Response to the Roosevelt Presidency: The Communist Party (1933–1945)." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (1980): 645-661.

response? My father was expelled from the Party and branded a class traitor.<sup>8</sup>

### **Are We There Yet?**

Thankfully, few American leftists today are sympathetic to Communism. And virtually all American leftists are also certain that their good intentions would *never, never ever* lead them to become apologists for the likes of Stalin, let alone Hitler. But I am not so sanguine. Because I see signs that yet another totalitarian movement is gradually emerging on the Left.

Consider the Supreme Court confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh. People, the Left's behavior regarding Kavanaugh was creepy. And I know I am not alone in feeling this way. These words are from the always thoughtful Camille Paglia:

"I am wholeheartedly in favor of women students or employees knowing their rights and speaking up to defend them. However, the #MeToo movement has gone seriously off track in encouraging uncorroborated accusations dating from ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. No democracy can survive in such a paranoid climate of ambush and summary execution. This is Stalinism, a nadir of politics."<sup>9</sup>

Then there is the bizarre spectacle of watching America's Left suddenly become apologists for FBI and CIA abuses of power, as it became increasingly clear that elements within the US national security community participated in a profoundly unethical effort to pin vague charges of "collusion or treason or something" on Donald

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<sup>8</sup> That did not stop his being blacklisted during the 1950s. Part of my family's folklore is that when the FBI asked my father to document his expulsion from the Party, he discovered to his dismay that his mother had thrown out the letter he had received notifying him of his expulsion because "it said bad things about my son."

<sup>9</sup> Lehman, Claire. "Camille Paglia: It's Time for a New Map of the Gender World." *Quillette*, 10 November 2018.



Trump and his political associates. Again, I am not alone in noting this. Consider these observations from Glenn Greenwald, co-founder of *The Intercept*:

“Demanding that evidence-free, anonymous assertions be instantly venerated as Truth — despite emanating from the very precincts designed to propagandize and lie — is an assault on journalism, democracy, and basic human rationality. And casually branding domestic adversaries who refuse to go along as traitors and disloyal foreign operatives is morally bankrupt and certain to backfire on those doing it.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the most recent - and perhaps most dangerous - example of this rising tide of creepy totalitarian thinking among people who used to call themselves liberals is their almost total support for the prosecution of Donald Trump in New York for...well, it isn't clear what exactly he is being charged with. The convoluted case against Trump only makes sense if he has violated Federal campaign law. But only Federal courts could convict him of that, and Federal prosecutors, who are fully aware of the facts in this case – have not even charged him, let alone convicted him.

### **I Know There Is Something Going On**

As I mentioned above, what is “going on” is that a new totalitarian movement is emerging on the Left. It has no real name yet, and no card-carrying members. But many progressives find this movement seductive, while most others are intimidated by it. For convenience, I am going to characterize adherents of this movement as “the Woke,” although linguist John McWhorter has offered another good term for them: “the Elect.”

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<sup>10</sup> Greenwald, Glen. “The Deep State goes to War with President-Elect, Using Unverified Claims as Democrats Cheer.” *The Intercept*, 11 January 2017.

So who exactly are the Woke and what are they about? Honestly, I am not entirely sure, and neither are you. They seem to be an incoherent jumble of members of innumerable victim groups – or more accurately people who seem to feel *entitled* to speak for victim groups - seeking redress or recognition or something for (many) real or (some) imagined historical wrongs. The uniting theme, the totalitarian backstory needed to hold this all together is that all these wrongs invariably were or are perpetrated by a white European “patriarchy.”

Like all left-wing totalitarians, the Woke are concerned with noble causes. While America’s Communists are – in my eyes – deplorable, I do not deplore their very real concern with racial and class injustice. Similarly, I do not deplore the Woke’s concern for the rights of Native Americans, African Americans, women, LGBT communities, and immigrants. Nevertheless, I believe that the Woke are extremely dangerous.

It isn’t that the Woke are going to be seizing power and lining up people to be shot. Among totalitarian movements of the Left, only the Communists have ever shown the ruthlessness and organizational discipline required to consistently exploit mass violence and terror to promote their “vision thing.” While obviously capable of violence, the Anarchists never seem to get far beyond sporadic bombings and assassinations...and the wild parties that they hold to “celebrate” each G-7 summit. Their one attempt at rule, in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War, ended in utter defeat at the hands of the Communists, who liquidated the Anarchist POUM regime without breaking a sweat, an event vividly described in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*.<sup>11</sup> As for the Woke? They aren’t even a match for the Anarchists. So far, I gather that the only genuine

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<sup>11</sup> Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

victim of Woke violence was a college professor who was assaulted and sustained a few minor injuries.<sup>12</sup>

### **Inspiration Porn**

The Woke are committing sins, but they are not sins of commission. They are sins of *omission*. What the Woke are creating is a movement so bereft of common sense and coherent thinking that it is literally a joke. Consider the following “analysis” from a group called “Left of Liberal” that recently cropped up on my Facebook feed:

“Every ‘why my disability didn't stop me from living’ article can be summarized as having access to resources materially and socially. Which results in a fascinating intersection between ableism and classism, as the resulting inspiration porn - used against disabled folks via the “why are you more impacted than this person in the article” - essentially boils down to shaming people for not having the resources required to mitigate the disability.”<sup>13</sup>

I am not entirely sure what any of this means (partially because the writing is atrocious). But what I think it is saying is that to successfully overcome disabilities or hardships, and then share your story with others who face disabilities or hardships, is an act of *aggression* against them. Hmm – really? Maybe it serves to help others figure out how to emulate your success; helps them identify what material and social resources they will need to access in order to succeed; and, above all, boosts their morale and fighting spirit by showing them that it is possible to win? Just...maybe?

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<sup>12</sup> Volokh, Eugene. “Protesters at Middlebury College shout down speaker, attack him and a professor.” *The Washington Post*, 4 March 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Left of Liberal. “Every “Why my Disability” ...”. 18 November 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/leftofliberals/photos/a.2113615532247362/2163807257228189/>.

At its core, the Woke are building a movement that subverts the Left and renders it impotent in the face of its very real theocratic and fascist enemies. It sets male against female, straight and cis-gendered against LGBT, Black against white, and the working class against the intelligentsia. It debases science with various offshoots of the meaningless pseudo-science known as “critical theory” – a field so rigorous that one of its leading journals published a (fabricated) paper that purported to chronicle endemic rape culture...at a dog park.<sup>14</sup> Above all, however, the Woke teach young and idealistic students that they should seek refuge in “safe places” rather than learn how to overcome their fears...and their enemies.

It is almost as if our enemies invented this thing.

### **Ableists of the World, Unite!**

The best way for progressives to avoid falling for the seductive and self-defeating siren call of totalitarian movements like Communism or the Woke - while preserving their central moral principles and successfully promoting the political objectives that follow from these principles - is to engage in the regular practice of critical reasoning. That means testing hypotheses and questioning assumptions. That means recognizing failures and learning from mistakes. Above all, that means being honest, not just with others, but with ourselves.

It also means embracing what I think I will call “policy ableism.” Some public policies really are better than others, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with shaming bad policies - or the politicians that are promoting them.

This book will focus on policy ableism, but it will not dwell too much on the myriad failings of policies supported uncritically by much of

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<sup>14</sup> Lindsay, James, Peter Boghassian, and Helen Pluckrose. “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship.” *Areo*, 10 February 2018.

the American Left. Rather, it is my hope that you will find this book an exercise in what “Left of Liberal” and their ilk would define as “inspiration porn.” It turns out that there are numerous policies that the Left should advocate and America could implement that are “able” – evidence and logic suggest that they might actually be successful at furthering the goal of a better life for all. That will be the focus of what follows. Because that is, in the *final* analysis, all that matters. It is my sincere hope that you will finish this book feeling inspired by what is possible– not demoralized by what is not.

This book is organized into a series of chapters that survey the current socioeconomic and political challenges facing the United States that are – or should be – of concern to America’s political left. Following a foundational chapter that introduces many of the themes that will be addressed throughout the book, there will be chapters on a wide range of topics. We will cover monetary policy, taxation and income redistribution, privatization and government ownership, health care, social security, immigration, racial and ethnic relations, education, and environmental challenges. Each chapter will conclude by offering practical and realistic policy options consistent with generally progressive moral values.

### **You Would Be Better Off Reading Some Other Book**

A warning and two caveats (only two?) are in order. First, the warning. I suspect that most progressives will find much of this book as unpleasant a read as children supposedly find Lemony Snickett’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which begins by cautioning its young readers that “you would be better off reading some other books.”<sup>15</sup> Few people, regardless of their ideological identities, are likely to enjoy hearing that scientific evidence suggests that their cherished political positions are literally ridiculous.

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<sup>15</sup> Snicket, Lemony, and Tim Curry. *The Bad Beginning*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

Yet, as we shall see, logic and evidence strongly suggest that some policies currently popular among American progressives are indeed literally ridiculous, such as opposition to charter schools and nuclear energy. Meanwhile, other policies widely advocated by progressives – such as a \$15 minimum wage – are not silly, but large bodies of evidence suggest that they are ineffective and essentially a waste of time. On the other hand, readers might be pleased to know that progressives’ instinctual support for universal health insurance and liberal immigration policies are well supported by both logic and evidence.

### **MythBusters!**

Now a caveat. It is important to understand that there is literally no such thing as “settled science.” Science deals in the interpretation of facts, but it does not deal in “Truths.” Scientific theories are just placeholders – the stuff we pencil in until we come up with something better...to pencil in. The pursuit of “Truth” is the purview of art and religion.

Scientists are trained to develop a good grasp of our current understanding of the world around us, and they are paid to then demonstrate that our current understanding is wrong or inadequate and hopefully explain why. In other words, science is all about “mythbusting,” a term I borrow from a popular TV show, which regularly conducted highly entertaining if sometimes poorly designed science and engineering experiments (often involving explosives!).<sup>16</sup>

By definition, scientific mythbusting is a messy business. Statistical analyses often contradict each other, and many fields of science are today suffering from a crisis of replicability – studies or experiments are repeated, and the results prove to be inconsistent with the

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<sup>16</sup> Discovery Channel. “Mythbusters.” <https://www.discovery.com/tv-shows/mythbusters/>.

original finding.<sup>17</sup> There is also the problem of “statistical power.” Often, the same statistical evidence validates competing theories – including theories that *directly contradict* each other.<sup>18</sup>

Matters get worse when dealing with social science. Social scientists study human beings – the way we think, feel, and above all organize ourselves in pursuit of our private and common goals. This creates two additional problems not faced by other scientists. First, social scientists are themselves human beings, so in a sense they are studying their own behavior. That raises problems about objectivity. Second, while physicists may study the behavior of sub-atomic particles, their research cannot convince sub-atomic particles that they really ought to behave differently. However, research on the behavior of human beings can, and occasionally does, convince human beings that they should change their behavior. It is for this reason that social science can never be a pure science. Social scientists can never fully separate their “positive” research – the exploration of how things actually are – from their “normative” research, their analyses of how things ought to be.

As a result of all this, I strongly recommend that *everything* you read in this book, and basically every other book or article (or TV show) that engages in “pop” interpretations of scientific findings in general, and social scientific findings in particular, should be treated with some healthy skepticism.

### **Economics Without Apology**

Now a second caveat. My own area of training and expertise is economics (I hold a PhD in Agricultural and Resource Economics from UC Berkeley). Due to the limitations of my professional

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<sup>17</sup> Staddon, John. *Scientific Method: How Science Works, Fails to Work, and Pretends to Work*. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, Robert. “Economists Should Be More Careful with their Statistics.” *Econlib*, 2 April 2018.

training and experience, my focus in this book will necessarily be on the economic aspects of public policy, although I will occasionally reference results from other fields. As a result, important matters such as LGBT and reproductive rights and responsibilities will only be mentioned in passing.

Now, lamentably, many progressives regard economics with great suspicion. Indeed, instinctual hostility towards economics is a textbook example of the Left's tendency to take automatic positions without reference to either basic moral principles or scientific evidence. For example, many progressives believe that Adam Smith, the founder of the field that later came to be known as economics, invented capitalism or justified its excesses. This is simply untrue. Smith's seminal contribution, *The Wealth of Nations*, described the systemic features of the capitalist institutions that were already emerging a hundred years earlier to replace the feudal order in Europe, and analyzed both their virtues and vices. And far from preaching that greed is "good," Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* - the book that laid the ideological foundation upon which *Wealth of Nations* was built - strongly associated "good" with social solidarity and concern for the plight of others:

"How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrows of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no



means confined to the virtuous or the humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility.”<sup>19</sup>

The field that ultimately evolved from Smith’s work is a serious and rigorous attempt to understand how people behave, particularly when confronting problems of scarcity. In this respect, it qualifies as a form of scientific inquiry. It is also inevitably forced to address issues like “How *should* people behave when confronting questions of scarcity?” In this respect, it qualifies as a form of philosophy. The reality is that, more than any other scientific discipline, save perhaps for medical research, the philosophical foundations of economics are driven by the central moral principle of the Left – pursuit of a better life for all.

The question that economics ultimately confronts is: How should scarce resources be allocated in order to promote the general welfare of humanity? That was on Adam Smith’s mind when he authored *The Wealth of Nations*. It was on Karl Marx’s mind when he authored *Das Kapital*. It was on John Stuart Mills’ mind when he authored *The Subjection of Women*. It was on Thorstein Veblen’s mind when he authored *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. It was on John Maynard Keynes’ mind when he authored *The General Theory*. It was on Gunnar Myrdal’s mind when he authored *An American Dilemma*. It was on Friedrich Hayek’s mind when he authored *The Road to Serfdom*. It was on W. Arthus Lewis’ mind when he authored *The Theory of Economic Growth*. It was on John Kenneth Galbraith’s mind when he authored *The Affluent Society*. It was on Milton Friedman’s mind when he authored *Capitalism and Freedom*. It was on the minds of Irma Adelman and Cynthia Morris when they authored *Economic Growth and Social Equity in Developing Countries*. It was on Hernando De Soto’s mind when he authored *The Other Path*. It was on Dambisa

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Penguin, 2010.

Moyo's mind when she authored *Dead Aid*. And it was on Thomas Piketty's mind when he authored *Capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

The early economists pressed for freedom of religion and conscience, argued for women's rights, and, above all, took an uncompromising stand hostile to the institution of slavery. All this long before any of it was fashionable with the cool kids. In fact, the reason why economics is often called "the Dismal Science" is that early economists had a bad habit of ruining dinner parties by lecturing the other guests about the profound evil of forced servitude. The nickname was actually coined by Thomas Carlyle, who was trying to delegitimize economists opposed to his "visionary" proposal to reintroduce slavery to the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

And nothing has changed. Today, economists devote great intellectual effort to understanding how to overcome the legacy of imperialism in the Global South. How to mitigate the environmental damage wrought by industrialization. How to minimize the violence and manage the wars that have always dogged humanity and now endanger our survival. How to mitigate the damage of the cyclical downturns in economic activity foreshadowed by Pharaoh's dream of fat and lean cows. And how to mobilize the massive resources required to move life as we know it into Space – something that astronomers and physicists tell us is absolutely necessary if there is to be any future for us or any of the other creatures that inhabit our planet.

I offer no apology for being an economist.

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<sup>20</sup> Carlyle, Thomas. "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question." *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* (December 1849): 672-73.

## Chapter Two

### The Ways and Means of Production

*“...for working people to be free, they must seize control of the means of production.”*

—W.E.B. DuBois<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter One, I offered a loose definition of what it meant to be a leftist, arguing that the most basic moral principle shared by all people of the Left was a deep commitment to a better life for all, with a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable. What this really means is that to be a leftist, one’s focus must be on the future, and one’s moral commitment must be to make that future – if not a shining city on a hill – at least a better place for humanity than it is today. Ultimately, that is why I define myself personally as a leftist. My ambition in life is to leave this world at least a little better off than it was when I entered it.

This broad definition of what it means to be “on the left” allows for a widening of what the Left can and should stand for - and who stands on the Left. To be sure, liberals like Joe Biden, socialists like Bernie Sanders, and anarchists like Dolores Huerta are clearly leftists. But by my definition, libertarians like Rand Paul and forward-looking patriots like Mitch Romney would qualify as leftists as well (whether they like it or not).

In juxtaposition to the Left’s focus on the future, the focus of the Right is on the past. This is the reason why “progressive” and

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<sup>1</sup> Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Autobiography of WEB DuBois*. Diasporic Africa Press, 2013.

“liberal” are terms associated with the Left, while terms like “conservative” and “reactionary” are associated with the Right. Indeed, it has long been this way. The terms “Right” and “Left” were first used in 1789, when those supporting a return to monarchy sat on the right and those supporting the revolution sat on the left in France’s newly formed National Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of the conservative Right is the preservation of quaint traditions (such as constitutional monarchy) and valuable social institutions (such as marriage) besieged by the relentless logic of the modern world and the anomie it brings in its wake. The focus of the reactionary Right is the restoration of some idealized past, be it the Antebellum South, the Caliphate, or the Roman Empire. Much as with leftist dreams of future utopias, rightist dreams of past greatness have the potential to devolve into a nightmarish totalitarian present. The Left has communism. The Right has fascism and theocracy.

Donald Trump, for example - although certainly not a fascist - is essentially a reactionary. While his ideological orientation lacks coherence, the “MAGA” (Make America Great Again) movement associated with him is clearly focused on restoration of some imagined America of the past. Consider the four identifiable core elements of Trump’s agenda. Limits to immigration aimed at restoring America’s past demographic balance. Limits to international trade aimed at restoring America’s past industrial prowess. A Supreme Court that focuses strictly on the Founders’ original intent when they wrote the Constitution. And a gradual withdrawal from “foreign entanglements” - the network of international alliances that our country has painstakingly built since World War Two.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrews, Evan. “How Did the Political Labels ‘Left Wing’ and ‘Right Wing’ Originate?” *History Channel*, 5 December 2019.

## Das Kapitalist

Let us now consider the main intellectual fault line that has always divided the Left – differing views over how a society's productive resources should be organized and managed. Or, in other words, differences over the control and ownership of the “means of production.”

So, what exactly do the terms “socialism” and “capitalism” mean? A good working definition of socialism is that it is a system where government controls the means of production – the machines, buildings, and natural resources that we use to produce the material goods that we need to survive and thrive. In contrast, capitalism is a system where individuals privately own and control the means of production. It is literally that simple.

But what does it really mean to be a “socialist” or “capitalist?” These concepts...are not so simple. When a person calls herself a “socialist,” she is taking an ideological position, and saying that she believes that the future of mankind is best served if governments own and/or control the means of production.

A self-described “capitalist,” however, is *not* saying that she believes that the future of mankind is best served by private ownership or control of the means of production. “Capitalist” is just the job description of someone who owns, manages, or allocates capital. Anyone with a bank account or a brokerage account qualifies, at least to some extent, as a capitalist – even if she identifies herself as a progressive or a theocrat or whatever.

In a practical sense, the real analogue of “capitalist” in a socialist system is not called a “socialist.” The correct term is “bureaucrat.” It is the job title of those assigned to manage the means of production in a socialist system. Similarly, the real analogue for “socialist” in an

ideological sense is not “capitalist,” but rather “libertarian” or “classical liberal.”

Correctly understood, libertarians belong on the left of the political spectrum. On many topics, such as national security policy and civil rights, libertarians almost invariably hold views popular amongst other democratic leftists. What makes them different is that libertarians embrace the idea that private rather than public ownership is the path that will lead to a brighter future for humanity.

And libertarians, like all leftists (and all human beings), are not immune to the siren call of totalitarianism. Ayn Rand and her ideology of “Objectivism” represent a totalitarian stream in libertarian thought. To add injury to insult, in Rand’s most popular book, *The Fountainhead*, the protagonist commits....an act of terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, however, “totalitarian libertarianism” does not pose an active threat to humanity. Mass violence requires the organized use of force by large teams of people, and as they say in high school sports – there is no “I” in team. Rather, libertarian totalitarians resemble the Woke – their sins are of omission rather than commission. I also note that Objectivism, like the Woke movement, enjoys its greatest purchase on college campuses amongst emotionally vulnerable young people.

### **Talk To the (Invisible) Hand**

Both socialists and libertarians often forget that the means of production are nothing more than...*a means to an end*. That end is to make the world a better place for all humanity. But describing yourself as a socialist or libertarian implies that you regard either government or private ownership as desirable ends in and of

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<sup>3</sup> Rand, Ayn. *The Fountainhead*. Penguin Canada, 2014.