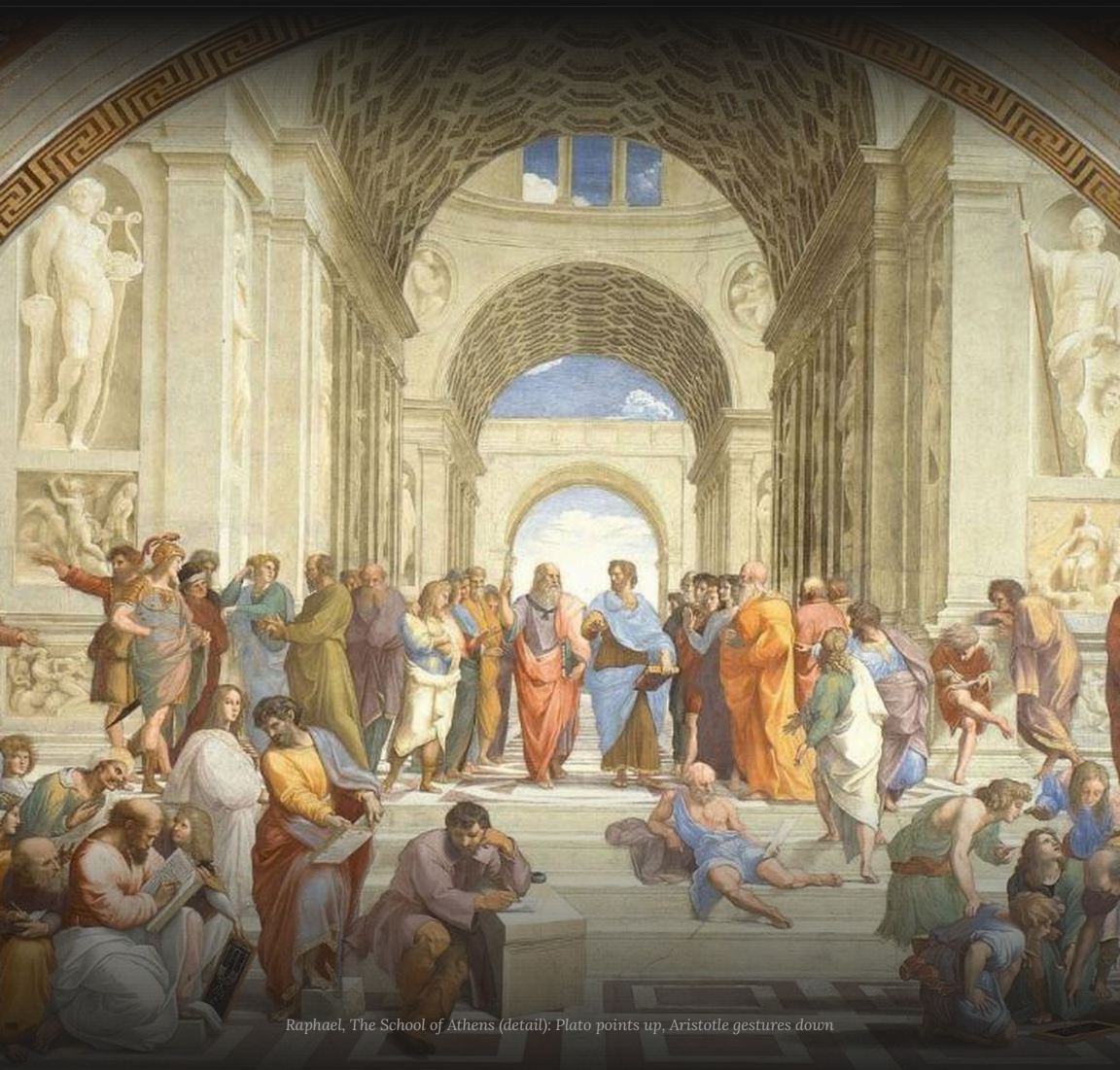
STAGE DRAFT · VERSION 1.0

UNDERSTANDING THE LEFT AND RIGHT

What They Are, Where They Come From, and Why People Hold Them

CLAUDE (AI)

from the ideas and direction of Nicholas Niehaus



Raphael, The School of Athens (detail): Plato points up, Aristotle gestures down

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SEEING CLEARLY · PART TWO

Version 1.0 · November 17, 2026

AUTHORSHIP

This book was written by Claude, an AI model made by Anthropic. It is AI-generated. Nicholas Niehaus originated the idea, set its scope, direction and framing, and supplied the working notes from which its central hypotheses are drawn. Content source: roughly 20 percent of the content comes from material he supplied (his notes and earlier drafts); roughly 80 percent is Claude's research and writing. The idea, direction and framing are his.

It combines and replaces two earlier drafts, *Understanding the Left* and *Understanding the Right*. The related argument that the left functions as a special interest group for the "marginalized" is developed separately in *The Lower Lobby*.

STATUS

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Synthesis: Essential Learnings

1. Left and right are a substance that takes many political forms. Their positions on trade, nationalism, science, immigration, federal power, war and free speech have switched sides repeatedly, but a stable core persists beneath the switches.
2. The core is a stance toward the given. The two sides disagree about whether unchosen human differences, and the inherited forms built on them, carry moral authority. The left answers no, or not much, and so reads most inequality as injustice and most inherited order as revisable. The right answers yes, or more than the left allows, and so reads much inequality as the result of real differences and much inherited order as the stored wisdom of what has worked. In the oldest terms: primacy of reality against primacy of the will, veritas against voluntas.
3. Equality is the content of the quarrel; the stance toward the given is its root. Bobbio's criterion, equality, fits the evidence better than any rival single criterion. The right does not reject fairness: it holds a different theory of fairness (proportion to contribution) where the left holds equality.
4. Most citizens hold their side as a loyalty, not a system. They inherit it from their families, fix it between about fourteen and twenty-four, and take their positions from leaders they trust. Coherent belief systems live among the minority who think about first principles; elites build the bundles and parties carry them to the public.
5. The grounding is real but modest. Political orientation is about forty percent heritable and shows up in early adulthood. Openness leans left, conscientiousness and a taste for order lean right, and self-reported disgust and threat sensitivity predict cultural (not economic) conservatism. The dramatic biological findings (startle reflexes, amygdala size, special negativity bias) have failed to replicate. The sides are roughly equal in bias and rigidity.

6. What differs most is moral ranking, not the ability to see reality. The left ranks protection of the vulnerable first; the right ranks order, loyalty and desert. Liberals spread moral concern wider, conservatives concentrate it nearer; the total is the same. Each side refuses truth where it threatens what it holds sacred.
7. Both moral systems are ancient. Foragers leveled would-be dominators for most of human history; hierarchy, coalitions and the defense of kin and the earned are just as old. Left and right each stretch band-sized instincts to the scale of the state, and differ in where they draw the new boundary of concern.
8. Motives are mixed and partly shared. Support for redistribution is driven mainly by compassion, then self-interest, and in a minority by envy, which alone predicts taxing the rich even when the poor lose (Sznycer et al. 2017). Zero-sum thinking drives both left redistribution and right immigration restriction, and upward mobility weakens it (Chinoy, Nunn, Sequeira and Stantcheva 2026).
9. Security breeds emancipative values. The claim that equality is a "luxury-morality" is strongly supported for cultural individualism, not for economic leveling, which is ancient.
10. People change little and narrowly. About three-quarters of adults stay put; those who move go right more often than left, by small amounts. Money, homes and children move only the views closest to them. Societies change mainly through generational replacement and coalition re-sorting.
11. Left and right are branches of one tree: the secularized moral inheritance of Christianity. The left took the equal worth of souls, the claim of the weak and the hope of redemption in history; the right took hierarchy, sin, providence and natural law. The genealogy of egalitarian morality as a Christian premise outliving its metaphysics ("the mold and the stench of Christ unburied") is strongly supported; whether such a morality must decay is a philosophical question.
12. The same philosophers served both sides. Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt were all claimed by left and right. Karp's claim that the far left and far right are Heideggerian is strong for the

intellectual far right, partial for the academic left and weak for the mass left. Philosophy often follows commitment rather than creating it.

13. The age of critique made unmasking power the highest intellectual task. It was right that domination often hides in what looks natural, but it never built a way to tell inequality caused by oppression from inequality caused by reality. Its tools now belong to the online right as much as to the campus left.

14. In America the substance worked through changing forms. The founders joined equal rights to unequal faculties, separating artificial privilege from natural difference; where that line falls is the American quarrel. The shift from equal rights to equal results dates from 1965–1971. Since about 2012 education has replaced income as the main divide: a "Brahmin left" against a "merchant right."

15. The left today is a coalition of groups voiced by a highly educated vanguard of about a fifth of adults. All its factions share the belief that most inequality is social and unjust, and that moral priority belongs to those ranked lower. The social-justice wave peaked around 2020 and has retreated in institutions since 2022.

16. The right today is held together by opposition to the left and by Trump. Nearly all its factions believe in a given order prior to will, but split on where it lives (nature and reason, custom, a people, strength, or God): a universal measure against a particular one. The American right, founded on the universal answer, has been drifting toward the particular.

17. The book's hypotheses fare best as accounts of structure and of elites, and worst as accounts of ordinary voters or as claims about one side alone. Where a fault is attributed only to the left, the evidence usually finds it on the right in another domain.

18. Beneath left and right lies one question: how much of the world must be accepted and how much may be changed? The left's characteristic error is to mistake reality for oppression; the right's is to mistake its own inheritance for reality. The deepest choice may be between a horizontal politics, man against man, and a vertical one, man against reality and himself.

Contents

Synthesis: Essential Learnings 4

Preface 8

PART ONE. WHAT LEFT AND RIGHT ARE

1 A Substance in Many Forms 11

2 Two Moralities 31

PART TWO. THE GROUNDING

3 Temperament, Genes and the Body 47

4 The Evolved Mind: Hierarchy, Coalition and the Herd 61

5 How People Become Left or Right, and Why They Change 73

PART THREE. THE SHARED ROOTS

6 One Tree, Two Branches: From Christianity to Marx 92

7 After the Death of God: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt 109

8 The Age of Critique: From Frankfurt to Paris to the Campus 124

PART FOUR. AMERICA

9 The Founding Quarrel, 1787–1860 141

10 Union, Industry and Reform, 1860–1945 156

11 The Long Realignment, 1945–2008 169

12 Populism and the Great Sorting, 2008–2026 184

PART FIVE. LEFT AND RIGHT TODAY

13 The Left Today 198

14 The Right Today 215

15 What Lies Beneath 231

Notes and Sources 241

Preface

This book replaces two earlier drafts, Understanding the Left and Understanding the Right. They were written separately, but the more closely each side was examined, the more it became clear that neither can be understood alone. Left and right grew from the same roots, define themselves against each other, borrow each other's tools, and trade positions over time. A book about one of them is half a book. This one treats them together.

It is a descriptive work. It asks what left and right are, what grounds them, why people hold them and change them, where they came from, how they developed in America, and what they look like today. It does not argue for a program or recommend a strategy; that belongs to separate work. It belongs instead to the larger project of seeing clearly, as part of an effort to describe how the human world actually works, and it should be read in that spirit: as an attempt to see the two great traditions of modern politics as they are, in their own best terms and in the light of the evidence.

The book's central ideas come from the working notes of Nicholas Niehaus, kept over several years, on the left, the right, equality, progress and the moral order of modern societies. Where the text speaks of "the working notes" or "the notes," and where it quotes a phrase without other attribution, the words are his. Those notes supply the book's working hypotheses: that left and right are a substance rather than a set of positions; that the substance is a stance toward reality and will; that egalitarian morality is a Christian inheritance outliving its metaphysics; that the left is driven by a movement against incumbents; and a number of others. Around those hypotheses, the book gathers the best available scholarship from political psychology, behavioral genetics, evolutionary science, political science, economics, intellectual history and American history, and tests each hypothesis against it. Some are supported, some are supported only in a refined form, some are contradicted, and some are philosophical claims that evidence cannot settle. The verdicts are given where the evidence is discussed and gathered in a table in the final chapter.

One related argument is not developed here. The claim that the left functions as a special interest group for those it deems unjustly marginalized is the subject of a separate paper, The Lower Lobby, and is mentioned in this book only where it fits.

The book is organized in five parts. Part One asks what left and right are and examines their moral core. Part Two looks for their grounding in temperament, genes, the evolved mind and the course of individual lives. Part Three traces their shared philosophical roots, from the secularization of Christianity through Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt, to the critical theorists and the French philosophers of the late twentieth century. Part Four follows the American story from the founding to 2026. Part Five describes the left and the right as they stand today, faction by faction, and the conclusion returns to the hypotheses and gives a verdict on each. Sources are given in numbered notes at the back of the book, chapter by chapter, so that the text can be read as continuous prose.

This is a first version, written by Claude, an AI, from Nicholas Niehaus's ideas and direction. It has not yet been reviewed by him, and it should be read as a serious draft rather than a finished statement of what he holds.

PART ONE

What Left and Right Are



CHAPTER 1

A Substance in Many Forms

Most people who argue about politics know what they are against long before they can say what it is. They can list the things the other side does, the policies it pushes, the words it uses, the people it admires and the people it despises. What they usually cannot do is name the single thread that runs through all of it. They speak of "them" and "they," and the vagueness of the pronoun is a confession. It means the opponent has not yet been condensed into something definite, with edges and a center. Fighting such an opponent, or merely trying to understand one, is like walking through fog: there is plainly something there, but nothing to take hold of.

This book tries to take hold of it, on both sides. It asks what the left and the right are, beneath the parties, slogans and causes that come and go. The working answer, which the rest of the book tests, is that left and right are a substance that takes many political forms. The forms change constantly. Free trade, nationalism, faith in science, hostility to immigration, enthusiasm for war, the defense of free speech: each of these has belonged to the left in one era and to the right in another. If left and right were only their forms, the words would have stopped meaning anything long ago. They have not. Ordinary people in dozens of countries place themselves and their opponents on a line from left to right and mostly agree about who belongs where. Something persists while the content rotates. The task of this first chapter is to find out what that something is, or whether it exists at all.

The question is older and harder than it looks, and serious scholars have answered it in incompatible ways. Some hold that the left is defined by its commitment to equality and the right by its acceptance of hierarchy. Some hold that the right has no ideas of its own and simply defends whatever order exists when that order is attacked. Some trace the division to two visions of human nature, one tragic and one hopeful. Some find it in temperament and moral intuition. And a growing number argue that there

is no essence at all, only two tribes that trade positions as the occasion demands. Each of these answers captures something real. The view this book will defend is that one of them reaches deeper than the others: beneath the quarrel over equality lies a quarrel over what is given and what is made, over whether reality, including human nature and its differences, carries authority over the human will, or whether the will may remake whatever it finds. Before that view can be argued, the alternatives need a fair hearing, and the history of the words themselves needs to be told, because the history already contains most of the puzzle.

Where the Words Came From

The terms began as seating arrangements. In the late summer of 1789, the National Constituent Assembly in Versailles was debating how much power Louis XVI should keep. The specific question was the royal veto: should the king be able to block the Assembly's laws absolutely, or only delay them? A related question was whether France should have a second, upper chamber on the English model. As the debate went on, deputies began to sit with those who shared their views. The monarchiens, led by Jean-Joseph Mounier, who wanted an absolute veto and an upper house, gathered to the right of the Assembly's president. The "patriots," who wanted at most a suspensive veto, gathered to his left. A deputy of the nobility, the Baron de Gauville, recorded that "those who were loyal to religion and the king took up positions to the right of the chair." The suspensive veto carried on 11 September 1789, and the habit of sitting by opinion hardened when the Assembly moved to Paris that autumn.[1]

It is worth pausing on what the first division was about, because it was not about economics. It was about the source of authority. On one side stood an inherited, sacred order: a king anointed by the Church, a hierarchy of estates, a body of custom that no one had chosen and that claimed obedience because it was there. On the other side stood the claim that law should flow from the will of the nation as expressed by its elected representatives. Already at birth, then, two different candidate essences are visible in the same quarrel. One is equality against hierarchy: the patriots wanted to abolish privileges of birth, and the right defended them. The other is the will of the people against an order that was given rather than

chosen. The two were tangled together from the first day, and much of the confusion in later debates comes from failing to separate them.

The words did not immediately become the names of worldviews. The historian Marcel Gauchet, in the most careful study of the pair, showed that seating by side was suppressed after the fall of Robespierre, revived in the parliaments of the Restoration after 1815, and then partly displaced after 1848 by the language of colors, the "reds" against the "whites." The Third Republic adopted the spatial terms as names for parliamentary groups, but only around the time of the Dreyfus Affair, at the turn of the twentieth century, did "the left" and "the right" become general identities in French political life, labels that ordinary citizens applied to themselves. From France they spread outward. In Britain they entered common speech only in the late 1930s, carried by the Spanish Civil War.[2] The pair is younger, as a popular identity, than most people assume.

Gauchet noticed something else that matters for everything that follows. The two sides did not hold their labels in the same way. The left embraced the dichotomy and wore its name proudly. The right often denied that the division meant anything. The French philosopher Alain, writing in 1931, put it in a famous quip: when someone asks him whether the distinction between right and left still makes sense, "the first idea that comes to me is that the man who asks the question is certainly not a man of the left."[3] The asymmetry runs through two centuries. The left has usually understood itself as a tradition with a direction, the party of emancipation and progress. The right has more often understood itself as a resistance, a check, a defense of what exists against those who would tear it down. Whether that self-understanding is accurate is one of the questions this book must answer.

Thomas Jefferson, watching the French terms from Monticello, thought the division was older than any parliament. Writing to Lafayette in 1823, he argued that the parties of Whig and Tory "are those of nature." They exist in every country, he said, under whatever names: aristocrats and democrats, côté droit and côté gauche, ultras and radicals. And he offered a theory of their roots in temperament: "The sickly, weakly, timid man fears the people, and is a tory by nature. The healthy, strong and bold, cherishes them, and is formed a whig by nature."[4] Jefferson's theory is a useful reminder that claims about which side is the party of the strong and which the party of the weak are as old as the division itself, and that they have been made in both directions. Jefferson assigned strength and boldness to the party of

the people. Other observers, as later chapters show, have assigned it to the party of order. Neither assignment can be settled by assertion; it has to be tested.

The deepest difficulty for anyone who believes left and right have an essence is that so many of their positions have switched sides. Consider free trade. In 1789 the French left was the party of markets against royal monopolies and guild privileges. In nineteenth-century Britain, free trade was the great cause of the Liberals, Richard Cobden and John Bright and later Gladstone, against protectionist Tories; the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 split the Conservative Party. In America, the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democrats were the party of limited government and low tariffs, while the Whigs and then the Republicans were the party of tariffs, banks and federal spending on roads and canals. By the late twentieth century, the arrangement had inverted: the right of Thatcher and Reagan championed markets and free trade, and the left was the party of regulation and, often, protection. Then, in the decade after 2016, the populist right turned protectionist again, culminating in the sweeping tariffs of 2025.[5]

Nationalism moved the other way. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was a cause of the left. The nation, sovereign and composed of equal citizens, was the alternative to dynastic monarchy and the universal Church, and its heroes were revolutionaries like Giuseppe Mazzini. Only toward the end of the century, in France with the Boulanger crisis and the Dreyfus Affair, did nationalism migrate to the right, where it has mostly stayed. Trust in science shows the same kind of reversal on a shorter clock. In 1974, Americans who called themselves conservatives expressed the highest trust in the scientific community of any ideological group. By 2010 they expressed the lowest, and the decline was steepest among the best-educated conservatives.[6] A century earlier, the most fashionable "scientific" cause in America, eugenics, had been largely a progressive enthusiasm. Immigration, too, has changed sides: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organized labor and many Democrats were the restrictionists and business Republicans the advocates of open labor markets. Foreign war passed from the liberal internationalism of Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman to the hawkish right of Reagan and the younger Bush, and is now passing again, as much of the populist right turns skeptical of foreign commitments. The defense of free speech belonged to the left of the 1960s, the Free Speech Movement and the civil-libertarian lawyers, and in the 2010s became a rallying cry of the right against campus

speech codes and the moderation of online platforms. Even the class base of the parties has turned over. In the 1950s and 1960s, left parties across the Western democracies drew their votes from the less educated and the less well off. By the 2010s, the more educated voted for the left while the higher-income still voted for the right, a pattern the economists Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty, studying more than three hundred elections in twenty-one countries, named "Brahmin left versus merchant right."[7]

The political scientist John Gerring, analyzing American party platforms and presidential speeches from 1828 to 1996, found that each party had a coherent ideology within a given epoch but that the content changed dramatically between epochs. The Democrats moved from an anti-statist Jeffersonian creed to a statist populism and then a universalist liberalism; the Whig-Republican tradition moved from a statist nationalism of tariffs and internal improvements to an anti-statist creed of free markets.[8] What persisted through these transformations was the constituencies and the antagonism, not the doctrine.

From facts like these, the historians Verlan and Hyrum Lewis have built the strongest current case against any essence at all. In The Myth of Left and Right, they argue that the "essentialist" theory, the idea that each side is unified by an underlying philosophy, is simply false, and that the truth is a "social" theory: issue positions are bundled by tribal membership and conformity, not by logic.[9] Their evidence goes beyond the historical reversals. Survey research since the 1960s has shown that most citizens do not hold tightly organized belief systems. The political scientist Philip Converse established in 1964 that only a small, educated, attentive minority of Americans held political views that hung together in the way ideologues' views do; most people's opinions on one issue predicted little about their opinions on another.[10] Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe, returning to the question half a century later, found Converse's picture largely intact: ideological identification is better explained by attachment to groups than by commitment to principles.[11] Christopher Ellis and James Stimson found that roughly one in three Americans who call themselves conservative hold liberal positions on both economic and cultural policy, while almost no self-described liberals hold the reverse combination; for many people, "conservative" names an identity tied to religion, patriotism and a traditional way of life rather than a program.[12] Most tellingly, the political scientists Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope ran an experiment in which

Americans were told that Donald Trump supported either a liberal or a conservative version of a policy. Respondents moved toward whatever position Trump was said to hold, and the most movable were self-identified conservatives and strong Republicans, who followed him to liberal positions such as a higher minimum wage.[13] Loyalty to the leader outweighed loyalty to the principle.

The cross-national evidence is, if anything, harder on the idea of a single essence. The psychologists Ariel Malka, Yphtach Lelkes and Christopher Soto examined World Values Survey data from ninety-nine countries and more than three hundred thousand people, asking a simple question: do people who are conservative on cultural matters, such as religion, sexuality and tradition, also tend to be conservative on economic matters, such as markets and redistribution? In the typical country, they do not. The average correlation between the two kinds of conservatism was slightly negative. In much of the world, especially in formerly communist countries, people who want cultural order also want economic protection from the state. The familiar Western bundle, cultural traditionalism joined to free markets on one side and cultural liberty joined to redistribution on the other, appears mainly among politically engaged citizens of rich Western democracies.[14] A 2026 study comparing Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea, India, Japan, Britain and the United States found that where people placed themselves on a common left-right scale had only a weak relation to their positions on a common set of issues, near zero in several Asian countries; the content of the labels was largely national.[15] And a study of German political candidates found that what people associated with "left" and "right" was more informative when they described the other side than when they described their own: each pole is defined more sharply by its enemies than by itself.[16]

If the story ended here, the conclusion would be that left and right are labels for shifting coalitions, held together by loyalty and opposition, with no inner substance. But the story does not end here, and the skeptics' own evidence points to the limits of their view. Three things persist across the reversals. The first is the left's commitment to reducing inequalities of income and condition. From the moment socialist parties entered the left in the middle of the nineteenth century until today, redistribution has been the most stable content of the left in Europe and America; even as the left's voters became more educated, the income gradient of voting, though weakened, persisted.[17] The second is the right's defense of inherited religious and moral order, of family authority, and of distinctions held to be

natural or earned. What counts as "traditional" moves, but the defense of what is inherited against what is proposed is visible from Burke to the present. The third is each side's self-understanding: the left as the party of emancipation and progress, the right as the party of order, realism and inheritance. Beyond these, there is the antagonism itself, which persists even when positions are swapped. Two tribes could trade issues indefinitely; they would not keep, for two centuries and across dozens of countries, the same basic attitudes toward inherited inequality and inherited order.

There is also the matter of who holds the bundles together. Converse's finding that most citizens are not ideological cuts both ways: it means that the coherent belief systems that do exist live among elites and activists, the people who write, organize, argue and lead. The political scientist Hans Noel has shown how these bundles form. Using a content analysis of American opinion writing from the 1830s onward, he found that a single liberal-conservative division took shape among intellectuals in the early twentieth century and was consolidated by the 1950s, decades before the parties themselves sorted to match it. Liberal intellectuals embraced civil rights long before the Democratic Party did; the parties followed the thinkers.[18] Noel's "coalition merchants" build bundles according to what they take to be moral and logical affinities, and then the parties carry the bundles to the public, who adopt them largely through group loyalty. On this account, the tribal theory is right about how most people hold their views and wrong about where the views come from. The bundles have a logic, even if it is a negotiated and contestable logic, and the logic is made by people who think about first principles. The question of the essence is therefore a question about that logic.

❦

The Candidate Essences

The most influential modern answer comes from the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio. In 1994, as Italy's postwar party system collapsed and commentators declared the distinction between left and right obsolete, Bobbio published a short book arguing the opposite. The distinction remains meaningful, he wrote, and its most stable criterion is the attitude toward equality. The left holds a horizontal, egalitarian picture of society;

the right a vertical, inegalitarian one. More precisely, the left regards most inequalities among human beings as social, and therefore removable, while the right regards them as natural, and therefore ineradicable, sometimes even beneficial. The left emphasizes what human beings share; the right, what distinguishes them.[19] Bobbio was careful to say that equality is relative. Everyone is egalitarian about something; the questions are always equality of whom, in what, and by what criterion. The left is simply the side that wishes to reduce more inequalities, and more kinds of them. He added a second, independent axis, liberty against authority, which separates the democratic center-left from the authoritarian far left, and the democratic center-right from fascism. Reviewers objected that the equality criterion was generous to the left, and that much of what the right defends is not inequality in general but particular institutions, such as property, family and nation, that happen to produce inequality.[20] But Bobbio's criterion fits the most durable fact in the record, the persistence of the redistributive cleavage, better than any rival.

The book's own formulation of this contrast is compact. Each side has a ruling value that it never sacrifices. For the left, it is egalitarian compassion, equality of worth leading to inclusion, a horizontal value, captured in the parent's vow, "I love all my children equally." For the right, it is hierarchical excellence, leading to merit, a vertical value, captured in the frank admission, "I love Tom the most." One line sums up the left's version of fairness: "None may have two while some have none." Bobbio's horizontal and vertical are the same images, reached independently.

A second family of answers denies that the right has a substance of its own. In 1957 the political scientist Samuel Huntington distinguished three theories of conservatism. On the aristocratic theory, conservatism is the ideology of a particular class, the feudal nobility resisting the rise of the bourgeoisie. On the autonomous theory, it is a set of timeless values, order, justice, balance and moderation, valid anywhere. On the situational theory, which Huntington endorsed, it is "that system of ideas employed to justify any established social order, no matter where or when it exists, against any fundamental challenge to its nature or being, no matter from what quarter."[21] Conservatism, on this view, is positional: it has no ideal of its own and defends whatever exists when it is threatened. The theory explains the reversals elegantly. When the welfare state becomes the established order, its defenders become the conservatives, and the market reformers who attack it become the radicals. Soviet hard-liners in 1989 were called

conservatives, and in Huntington's sense they were. The theory's weakness is that it cannot explain a right that seeks to overturn the existing order, whether the fascists of the 1920s, the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions, or the contemporary populist assault on the administrative state. The intellectual historian Mark Lilla has drawn the necessary distinction: the conservative, in the tradition of Burke and Oakeshott, defends an inherited society out of prudence about human nature; the reactionary holds a theory of history as decline from a golden age and is, like the revolutionary, a creature of historical drama, sometimes seeking a restoration and sometimes a redemptive upheaval.[22] The radical right can be more eager for change than the center-left. "Change against order" therefore cannot be the essence.

Michael Oakeshott offered a third account: conservatism as a disposition rather than a doctrine. "To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss."[23] Oakeshott's enemy was the "rationalist" who believes society can be redesigned from a blueprint drawn by reason. The historian Jerry Muller, in the introduction to his anthology of conservative thought, located the substance of conservatism in a recurring family of arguments rather than a fixed set of institutions: that institutions which have survived embody knowledge no one person possesses; that abstract reason is a poor guide to complex societies; that imperfect human beings need habits, institutions and even prejudices to restrain them; and that reforms produce unintended consequences. Muller distinguished such conservatism, which defends institutions because they have worked, from what he called orthodoxy, which defends them because they are true or divinely ordained.[24] That distinction will matter later, because it marks a fault line inside the right itself.

Friedrich Hayek, who is often counted on the right, refused the label of conservative altogether. Conservatism, he wrote in 1960, "by its very nature cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving." He disliked its "timid distrust of the new as such" and proposed that political positions be arranged not on a line but on a triangle, with conservatives, socialists and liberals in the classical sense each occupying a corner.[25] Hayek's triangle anticipates what survey researchers later confirmed: the economic and cultural dimensions of politics are distinct, and the alliance

between market liberals and cultural conservatives that defined the postwar Anglo-American right was an alliance between two different things.

The Anglo-American quarrel has a famous founding text in the exchange between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine over the French Revolution, which the political theorist Yuval Levin has called "the great debate" and treated as the birth of the modern left and right.[26] For Paine, legitimacy comes from reason applied to first principles, above all natural rights, and each generation is sovereign over its own affairs; he called "the vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave" the "most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies." For Burke, legitimacy comes from inheritance, prescription and the slow accommodation of experience, and society is a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."[27] At stake were nature and history, justice and order, choice and obligation, reason and prescription. Both men were liberals in a broad sense; Burke had defended the American colonists. Their debate was a debate inside modernity about how much of the human world is chosen and how much is given. Russell Kirk, who did more than anyone to construct an American conservative canon in the 1950s, began his list of conservative principles with the belief in a transcendent order or natural law that rules society as well as conscience, and he included an explicit rejection of egalitarianism: civilized society requires orders and classes, and the only true equality is moral equality.[28]

Thomas Sowell gave this quarrel its most influential modern statement. In A Conflict of Visions, he argued that enduring political conflicts flow from two tacit "visions," intuitions about human nature that people hold before they reason. The constrained vision, which he traced through Adam Smith, Burke, Hamilton and Hayek, takes human moral and intellectual limits as given and fixed. It therefore distrusts grand designs, relies on systems that coordinate dispersed knowledge and channel self-interest, such as markets, traditions and constitutional checks, and thinks in terms of trade-offs rather than solutions. "The constrained vision is a tragic vision of the human condition," Sowell wrote. The unconstrained vision, which he traced through William Godwin, Condorcet, Paine and, in the twentieth century, John Rawls, holds human nature to be malleable or perfectible, believes that articulated reason and good intentions can identify and implement solutions, and attributes social ills to bad institutions.[29] Steven

Pinker later renamed the two the tragic and the utopian visions and argued that evolutionary psychology and behavioral genetics support the tragic one.[30] Sowell himself acknowledged that his visions do not map perfectly onto party labels: Marx, with his iron laws of history, fits awkwardly, and fascism, which concentrated decision in a few hands, is not an unconstrained vision.

Social psychology has produced its own candidates. In 2003 John Jost and three colleagues published a meta-analysis of eighty-eight samples from twelve countries arguing that conservatism has two related core dimensions: resistance to change and acceptance of inequality. Both, they argued, serve psychological needs to manage uncertainty and threat; conservatism correlated with dogmatism, intolerance of ambiguity and the need for order, structure and closure, and correlated negatively with openness to experience.[31] Jost later gave his book-length synthesis the title Left and Right: The Psychological Significance of a Political Distinction, deliberately echoing Bobbio. He argues that the two dimensions travel together because, in modern societies, the dominant direction of challenge has been egalitarian, so that defending the status quo and defending hierarchy have usually been the same thing.[32] Chapter 3 examines the psychological evidence in detail, including the parts of it that have failed to replicate. For now it is enough to note that Jost's two dimensions are Bobbio's equality and Huntington's resistance to change, given a psychological basis. The political theorist Corey Robin pushed the equality dimension to its limit, defining conservatism as "the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of the subordinate classes," a reaction against emancipation from below that is happy to embrace radical change when change restores hierarchy.[33] Lilla and others have objected that Robin collapses conservatism into reaction and makes his thesis unfalsifiable, since almost any defense of any existing distinction can be described as a defense of hierarchy. Robin's account is best read as the strongest competing hypothesis to the right's own self-understanding: the right says it defends what works; its critics say it defends who rules.

Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators located the division in moral intuition. Liberals, in their research, build morality mainly on two foundations, care for those who suffer and fairness; conservatives draw on these and also on loyalty to the group, respect for authority, and sanctity or purity.[34] A revised version of the theory split fairness in two: equality, favored by liberals, and proportionality, the principle that rewards should

match contributions, favored by conservatives.[35] The split is important, because it reconciles Bobbio with the right's own understanding of itself. The right does not, on the whole, believe in inequality as such. It believes in desert, in the idea that people should get what they have earned, and it accepts the inequalities that desert produces. The research of Adam Waytz and colleagues adds a striking finding: liberals and conservatives do not differ in how much moral concern they feel, but in how they distribute it. Liberals spread their concern widely, to all of humanity, to animals, to nature; conservatives concentrate it on nearer circles, family and nation. In a task where participants allocated a fixed budget of moral regard, the total was the same; only its distribution differed.[36] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, and later Dan Kahan, offered a related "cultural theory" in which people's perceptions of risk are shaped to protect their preferred way of life, hierarchical, individualist or egalitarian; in American data, the right turns out to be an alliance of two of these cultures, hierarchists and individualists, while the left is egalitarian and communitarian.[37]

Finally, the political theorist Michael Freeden has offered a method that can make sense of all of this. Ideologies, he argues, are arrangements of political concepts, with some at the core, some adjacent, and some at the periphery. Each ideology fixes the meanings of contested concepts such as liberty, equality and justice in its own way. The periphery can change, sometimes radically, while the core endures. On Freeden's analysis, the left's traditions have relatively stable cores, equality and the human capacity to improve society. Conservatism has a thinner core, consisting of two convictions: that change should be resisted when it is unnatural, and that social order has origins beyond human design, in nature, in God, or in organic growth. Its other content is borrowed, mirror-fashion, from whatever it is defending against.[38]

How do these candidates fare against the evidence of the previous section? The equality criterion survives more of the reversals than any other. Free trade was egalitarian when it meant abolishing aristocratic monopolies and became inegalitarian, in the left's eyes, when it meant exposing workers to capital; the left's stance on markets followed its judgment of their effects on inequality. The class reversal on education is real, but the income cleavage persisted. The equality criterion struggles with nationalism, which can be fiercely egalitarian among fellow citizens, and with the current alignment on immigration. The moral-circle candidate, universal against near, explains the present cultural divide over

immigration, nation and family better than equality does, but it was reversed in the nineteenth century, when the nation was the left's wider circle against the narrower loyalties of province and dynasty. The positional theory explains the reversals but cannot explain the radical right. The theory of visions illuminates the intellectual traditions on both sides but has little direct support in mass opinion and is complicated by the existence of utopian rights and tragic lefts. Psychological dimensions are real but, as Malka's cross-national data show, the cultural and economic dimensions are not naturally bundled outside the engaged citizens of Western democracies. And the no-essence theory is right about mass opinion and wrong about elites, about the long persistence of the redistributive and religious cleavages, and about the psychological dispositions that predict ideology in childhood, before any party cue could have reached the child.

The best summary of the scholarly evidence is therefore a layered one. There is a formal constant: two poles, defined in large part by opposition to each other, one identifying with emancipation and the other with order and inheritance. There is a relatively stable substantive core, strongest on the left: the reduction of inequalities taken to be socially caused. On the right, the most durable content is the defense of inherited moral, religious and family order and of distinctions taken to be natural or earned. There are at least two separable dimensions, economic and cultural, which different countries and eras project onto a single line at different angles. And there is, in the mass public, a great deal of tribal loyalty that holds the bundles together. Every serious account must respect all four layers. But the layered summary leaves the central question open. Why does the left see most inequalities as social and removable, and the right see them as natural and enduring? What makes one side read a difference as an injustice to be corrected and the other read the same difference as a fact to be lived with? That is the question this book places at the center.

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Reality and Will

The hypothesis of this book is that the substance beneath left and right is a stance toward the given. "The real question," as the working notes put it, "is: Does reality govern us, or do we govern reality? This is THE question,

THE point, THE drive." The right, at its core, holds to the primacy of reality: there is a structure to the world and to human nature that precedes human choice, that was not made by us, and that obliges us. The left, at its core, holds to the primacy of the will: what appears fixed is largely constructed, what is constructed can be reconstructed, and the human will, individual or collective, has the right and the duty to remake it in the service of justice. The difference is, in the oldest philosophical terms, the difference between realism and idealism, "the modern form of whether the world is made or merely found." In the language of medieval theology, which the book borrows, it is veritas against voluntas, truth against will.

The vocabulary is old because the quarrel is old. Thomas Aquinas defined law as "an ordinance of reason for the common good": law binds because it expresses a rational order that exists before anyone commands it. Against this "intellectualist" view, the late medieval voluntarists, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, held that the good is good because God wills it, not the reverse; the divine will is prior to any order of reason. Historians of ideas such as Michael Allen Gillespie have traced how this theological dispute, once secularized, became a dispute about human sovereignty.[39] Thomas Hobbes gave the voluntarist principle its political form in a single Latin sentence: "authoritas, non veritas, facit legem," authority, not truth, makes law.[40] When Rousseau located legitimacy in the general will, and the revolutionaries of 1789 located it in the will of the nation against an order given by God and history, they were heirs of this line. When Joseph de Maistre replied that constitutions are not made but grow, and that a written constitution which is merely willed is a nullity, he was speaking for the other. Sowell's two visions belong here too. The constrained vision takes human nature as given and builds within its limits; the unconstrained vision treats it as material to be shaped. Sowell's constrained against unconstrained is, in this book's terms, veritas against voluntas.

The hypothesis does not claim that the left is ignorant of facts or that the right possesses them. Its claim is subtler. "The real disagreement between the Left and the Right," on this view, "is not over fact but value," and the left's axiology, its ranking of values, forces its epistemology. The right ranks truth first: what is so must be faced, whatever its consequences. The left ranks the reduction of harm first, and when truth and harm reduction conflict, truth gives way. Hence the observation that "the fight is not over facts. The fight is over which facts matter and what ends society

must pursue." Science can measure differences between people; it cannot say which differences should count. A finding that individuals or groups differ in some ability or disposition does not, on the left's premises, refute the commitment to equality, because that commitment was never a scientific claim. It is a moral claim that uses science where science helps it: "Inequality harms. Harm is immoral. Therefore unequal outcomes are immoral, regardless of cause." From the right's side, this looks like reality being disqualified rather than refuted. From the left's side, it looks like refusing to let nature, or what passes for nature, ratify injustice. "I live in the world of is; they live in the world of ought," the working notes record, and then add the more generous and more accurate qualification: "They're not in error; they're in commitment."

The same idea can be put in terms of maps and territory. A map is a representation; the territory is what it represents. A realist morality treats moral rules as a map that must answer to the territory, to what actually produces flourishing or ruin, and it judges actions by their results. A voluntarist morality treats the map as authoritative in its own right and judges actions by their conformity to it, by the intention behind them, by whether they include or exclude, affirm or wound. On this account the left "does not make content claims, only in-group claims": its statements function to hold a community together around shared commitments, a logic of cohesion, while the right hears them as claims about the world and answers with a logic of correspondence. The right's favorite slogan, "facts don't care about your feelings," misfires precisely because it addresses a correspondence claim that was never made. The left is not saying something false about the world so much as saying something binding about the group.

From here the hypothesis draws its sharpest conclusion: the left's quarrel is not finally with the right at all. "Their beef is with reality, not the Right." The structures the left opposes, hierarchy, scarcity, biological limits, differences in ability, the trade-offs every policy faces, the link between conduct and consequence, are features of the world before they are features of any regime. The right, capitalism and the inherited institutions of the West stand, on this view, as the representatives of that world, the messengers of an order nobody designed. Because the order cannot be argued with, its messengers are blamed. "If they understood that the constraints they hate are simply features of human existence, they'd stop hating the people in front of them. They'd discover the enemy was never

you; it was the nature of reality they misunderstood." Seen this way, the left's many causes are "waves on the surface of the deep of their voluntarism." Race, sex and sexuality are not the substance of the left but the successive materials on which a single will works. The notes compress the whole difference into a mathematical image: it is a problem of the order of operations, in which "the left puts self before God (will, voluntarism) and we put God before self (truth, veritas)."

Two features of this hypothesis need emphasis before it is tested. First, it is not a portrait of villains. On the book's account, the left did not set out to deny reality. It began from a premise it held to be self-evident, the equality of human beings, and from a definition of goodness as not causing harm, and it followed these with honest consistency until they collided with facts that could not be accommodated. "The Left didn't set out to deny reality but made a priori mistakes that forced them to deny reality later." The problem lies "less in their beliefs and more in the order of operations of their beliefs." Nor is the left's aim dismissed. The wish to overcome the limits that cause suffering is, on this view, the right goal pursued by the wrong method; the engineers who flew to the moon did not deny gravity but mastered it. Second, the hypothesis is offered as an account of the deep structure of the two sides, especially as they exist among the people who think about first principles, not as a description of every voter. A great many people who vote for the left apply realist standards to their own work and constructivist standards to their own grievances, and a great many on the right do the reverse in other domains.

The left's best defenders would describe the same divide differently, and they deserve to be heard in their own terms. Every appeal to "reality," they would say, has historically been used to justify domination: it was natural for kings to rule, for men to lead, for some races to serve, for the market to decide who eats. What the right calls realism, the left calls fatalism, the habit of dressing up the existing distribution of power as the order of nature. The left does not deny facts; it denies that facts about how things are settle how things ought to be. On this view, the human will is the faculty that translates reality into moral progress, and the history of reform, from the abolition of slavery to the enfranchisement of women, is a history of discovering that what was called natural was in fact made, and could be unmade. The book's reply is that this is indeed a correction of reality; the left simply treats some parts of reality as morally invalid on the strength of its prior premises. But the defenders' point stands as a

description of how the left sees itself, and it explains why the left experiences the right's appeals to nature not as honesty but as cruelty.

How does the hypothesis fare against the evidence? It has real strengths. It explains why the founding quarrel of 1789 was about the source of authority, a given order against a sovereign will. It explains the pattern in the reversals that the equality criterion alone cannot: positions move, but the right keeps defending what it takes to be given, family, nation, sex, religion, desert, while the left keeps treating these as made and therefore open to remaking. It absorbs Bobbio rather than competing with him, for Bobbio's own formulation was that the left sees inequalities as social and removable and the right sees them as natural. The question of what is given and what is made is the metaphysical root of the attitude toward equality; equality is the content, and the stance toward the given is the reason the content takes the form it does. It also fits Freeden's finding that conservatism's thin core is the belief that order has extra-human origins, and the psychological finding, reviewed in Chapter 3, that conservatives are more likely to attribute social differences, such as differences in class and achievement, to genetic causes. Interestingly, the same research finds that liberals are more likely to attribute sexual orientation to genes, which is what the hypothesis would predict if each side calls "given" whatever it wishes to protect and "made" whatever it wishes to change.[41]

The hypothesis also faces serious difficulties, and an honest account must state them plainly. The first is that much of the right is voluntarist in economics. The libertarian and market-liberal wing celebrates choice, consent and contract, the sovereign individual making his own way, and it is the left that insists on the given realities of power, dependence and circumstance that make some choices less than free. The second is that the left often claims scientific realism against the right. On climate, vaccines and evolution, it is the left that presents itself as the party of the facts and the right that is accused of wishful thinking, and the collapse of conservative trust in science between 1974 and 2010 is a real phenomenon, not a slander. The third is that some of the most extreme forms of the right have been the most voluntarist of all. Carl Schmitt's political theory rests on the sovereign decision, and fascism exalted will, vitality and the remaking of the nation; Nietzsche, the philosopher of the will to power, has been claimed by the far right as often as by the far left. The fourth is that no one has measured the hypothesis directly in mass opinion. It is an

interpretation of the deep logic of the traditions, not a finding of survey research.

These difficulties do not refute the hypothesis, but they sharpen it. The defensible version is not that the right believes in reality and the left does not. It is that the two sides disagree about whether unchosen human differences and inherited social forms carry moral authority. Where the question concerns physics or epidemiology, both sides claim the facts and accuse the other of ignoring them. Where the question concerns the human order, sex and family, ability and desert, nation and inheritance, the right tends to treat what it finds as binding and the left tends to treat it as revisable. The libertarian is voluntarist about exchange but realist about human nature and its differences; he wants free contracts precisely because he believes people differ and should keep what their differences earn. The fascist is voluntarist about the nation's destiny but treats the nation itself, its blood and soil, as a given that no individual may choose to leave. The left, for its part, is realist about the physical world and voluntarist about the human one. In this refined form, the hypothesis is a claim about where each side locates authority over human life: in an order that precedes the will, or in the will that would reorder it. That is the sense in which left and right are, on this book's account, a dispute about reality and will.

Two further patterns follow from the hypothesis and recur throughout this book. The first is the dynamic of the left as a movement against incumbents. If the inherited order has no authority of its own, then whoever stands highest in it, the incumbents, holds a position that is presumptively unearned, and whoever stands lowest holds a presumptive claim to redress. The working notes describe the left's drive as moving in two directions at once. One runs from outside to inside: inclusion, the admission of those who were excluded, whether immigrants into nations or newcomers into institutions. The other runs from inside to outside: the assertion of will against given categories, as when a person declares an identity that the given order denies. "Both are un-incumbent," and "the direction is determined by who is the morally valid person" in the left's eyes. Seen in these terms, the deepest political line is "not left vs right but in vs out." Chapters 2 and 13 develop this idea, and the related claim that the left functions as a special interest group for those it deems unjustly marginalized; the latter is argued in full in a separate paper, The Lower Lobby, and is not restated here.

The second pattern is that left and right are bound to each other in a kind of dance. "The Left and the Right operate mimetically, mirroring one another," and "most of their 'positive' belief is just negative belief, i.e. disagreeing or rejecting whatever the other says." The empirical finding that each side is defined more sharply by its opponents than by itself supports this, and so does the long history of positions switching sides when a leader or an enemy takes them up. On this book's account, the dance is real but it is not the whole truth. Beneath the mirroring lies the quarrel over the given, and the mirroring is how that quarrel looks in the daily life of politics, where most people inherit their side's positions and take their cues from its leaders. Here the book's two hypotheses meet the scholars' layered summary. The tribal theory describes the surface; the equality criterion describes the stable content; the hypothesis of reality and will describes what lies beneath the content and gives it its shape.

The asymmetry Gauchet found in 1789 also looks different in this light. If the left is the side that treats the human order as made, it naturally has a program: there is always something more to remake. If the right is the side that treats the human order as given, it naturally lacks one: its task is to defend what is, and it tends to define itself against whatever is currently proposed. This is Huntington's positional theory, but explained rather than merely described. It also explains why the right has so often been the party that "the man who asks the question" belongs to: the right is suspicious of the very framing of politics as a choice among designs. "The Right is the way things are (descriptive); the Left is the way things should be (normative)." The book will argue in its later chapters that this asymmetry has costs for the right as well as for the left, and that the present condition of both sides can be understood by asking what happens to each when its own premise is pushed to its limit.

The model that the rest of this book uses can now be stated. Left and right are two long-lived traditions, born in the quarrel over whether authority comes from a given order or from the sovereign will, and defined at their core by opposite answers to one question: do unchosen differences among human beings, and the inherited forms built upon them, carry moral authority? The left answers no, or not much, and so it reads most inequality as injustice and most inherited order as revisable. The right answers yes, or more than the left allows, and so it reads much inequality as the result of real differences and much inherited order as the condensed wisdom of what has worked. Around this core, each tradition carries a periphery of

positions that changes with circumstance, leadership and coalition, and in the mass public both traditions are held together largely by identity and loyalty. The substance is a stance toward the given. The forms are whatever that stance requires in a given place and time.

The chapters that follow test this model from several directions. Chapter 2 examines the moral core of the two traditions: equality and order, compassion and envy, intention and results. Part Two asks whether the division is grounded in something deeper than ideas, in temperament, genes and the evolved human mind, and how individuals come to hold their views and why they change them. Part Three traces the shared philosophical roots of both sides, from the secularization of Christianity through Rousseau and Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, to the age of critique. Part Four follows the American story from the founding quarrel to the present. Part Five describes the left and the right as they stand today, faction by faction. The conclusion returns to the hypothesis and gives a verdict on each of its claims.

CHAPTER 2

Two Moralities

Every politics rests on a morality. Beneath the quarrels over taxes, borders, schools and courts lies a quieter quarrel about what the word "good" means, whom it is for, and how it is measured. Left and right do argue about facts, and they often get facts wrong in predictable directions. But when the facts are settled, they still disagree, because they are not asking the same moral question of those facts. One side looks at a gap between two people and asks how it can be closed. The other looks at the same gap and asks whether it was earned. The first question measures a person against other people. The second measures a person against the work, the results, and the order of things that produced the gap.

Aristotle saw this more than two thousand years ago, and his description has hardly aged. "Democracy," he wrote, "arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal. Oligarchy is based on the notion that those who are unequal in one respect are in all respects unequal; being unequal, that is, in property, they suppose themselves to be unequal absolutely."[1] Each party, he thought, held a piece of justice and mistook it for the whole. He added a second observation that matters even more. Everyone agrees, he wrote in the *Ethics*, that "what is just in distribution must be according to merit in some sense," but they "do not all specify the same sort of merit": democrats count free birth, oligarchs wealth, aristocrats excellence.[2] The quarrel is not between people who care about justice and people who do not. It is between people who disagree about what counts.

This chapter describes the two moralities that sit under modern left and right. The previous chapter argued that the deepest axis between them is a stance toward the given: whether the order of things, including the inequalities in it, is something to be respected or something to be remade. Here that stance is followed into moral life. The chapter first sets out what each side means by "good," in terms its best defenders would accept, and

states this book's hypothesis about the difference between a morality of intentions and a morality of results. It then turns to motives: compassion, envy, and the zero-sum mind, where the evidence is now unusually good. It ends with the question of origins, and with the claim, made first by Nietzsche and now accepted in some form by many historians, that the modern egalitarian conscience is Christian morality living on after the faith that gave it a reason.

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What Each Side Means by "Good"

Start with the left's own understanding of itself, at its best. The left sees a world in which people are born into very unequal circumstances through no doing of their own: rich or poor parents, healthy or sick bodies, safe or violent streets, favored or despised groups. It sees that these starting points shape almost everything that follows. And it concludes that a decent society owes its members a correction. The philosopher John Rawls gave this view its most influential form. "The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust," he wrote; "nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts."[3] On this view, no one deserves his talents or his starting place, and so no one deserves the full rewards that flow from them. Equality is not envy; it is the recognition that so much of what separates people is morally arbitrary. The left's characteristic virtues follow from this: compassion for those who suffer, attention to those who are overlooked, a widening of the circle of concern to include strangers, foreigners, animals and the planet, and a suspicion of any hierarchy that claims to be natural. Its slogans, from "the voice of the voiceless" to "no one left behind," express a moral seriousness that its opponents often fail to credit.

The right's own understanding of itself, at its best, begins elsewhere. It sees a world in which goods do not fall from the sky but are produced, by work, skill, saving, discipline and risk, and in which institutions that took centuries to build can be wrecked in a generation. It holds that people are entitled to what they make and to what is freely given to them, and that a society which severs reward from contribution will soon have less to share. The philosopher Robert Nozick answered Rawls directly: "Whether or not

people's natural assets are arbitrary from a moral point of view, they are entitled to them, and to what flows from them."[4] Friedrich Hayek argued that "social justice" was a mirage, a demand that the impersonal outcomes of a free order be judged as though someone had chosen them.[5] The right's characteristic virtues follow from this: responsibility, gratitude to those who came before, loyalty to family and country, respect for proven institutions, and admiration for excellence. Its maxims, from "if any would not work, neither should he eat" to "a hand up, not a handout," express a moral seriousness that its opponents also often fail to credit.

Moral psychology has measured these two pictures with some precision. Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues found that people who call themselves liberal build their morality mainly on two foundations, care for those who suffer and fairness, while conservatives draw more evenly on those two and on three others: loyalty to the group, respect for legitimate authority, and sanctity or purity.[6] The difference has replicated widely in Western samples, although it is smaller and less tidy elsewhere, and there is evidence that it partly flows from political identity rather than causing it.[7] The most useful refinement came when the researchers split "fairness" in two. In the newer version of their questionnaire, given across many nations, fairness as *equality* (everyone gets the same) goes with the left, and fairness as *proportionality* (people get what they put in) goes with the right. [8] That one split resolves an old confusion. The right is not against fairness; it holds a different theory of it, the one Aristotle called distributive justice "according to merit." The left is not against desert; it doubts that most present rewards were deserved.

A second measurement concerns not what people value but how far their concern reaches. In a set of seven studies with tens of thousands of participants, Adam Waytz and colleagues asked people to draw their "moral circle," the range of beings they feel obliged to care about, from family and friends out to all humanity, animals and nature. Liberals drew wider circles; conservatives concentrated concern on family, community and nation. But when people were given a fixed budget of moral concern to distribute, the total did not differ.[9] Neither side cares more. They care about different things in different proportions: one spreads concern thin across the distant and the abstract, the other piles it up close to home. This is the empirical shadow of a difference this book's notes describe more sharply, as a difference in the "locus of concern," with the left's self defined in others and the right's in what it can control and answer for.

Within these measured differences lies the hypothesis this book takes most seriously about the moral divide. It is that the left has come to hold an *input-based* or *intention-based* morality, while the right holds, or ought to hold, a *results-based* morality. The modern morality that dominates Western institutions can be named by its working rule: "people-over-everything," even when "everything" includes the truth, profits and other things that are better for people in the long run. The same morality has gone by many names in this book's working notes, and the list is itself an argument: "Maternal Morality," "Need-Based Morality," "Input-Based Morality," "Intention-Based Morality," "Herd Morality," "Slave Morality," and, most memorably, "None may have two while some have none." On this hypothesis, moral worth in the dominant culture comes not from what a person does to the world but from his attitudes toward it. You cannot grow or shrink in moral value by what you achieve in the real world, the territory. You can only become a better or worse person according to how well you conform to the map, the approved set of beliefs and sentiments. The left's working syllogism runs: inequality harms; harm is immoral; therefore unequal outcomes are immoral, regardless of their cause. And the corollary follows: it is never the person's fault, always the system's.

Against this stands a results-based morality, whose motto in this book's notes is blunt. "Hell is paved with good intentions," and that proverb is "the best expression of the utility and value of results-based morality": "THE RESULT DOESN'T CARE ABOUT INTENTIONS." The notes add the inverse no one mentions, that heaven can be paved with bad intentions, as markets turn private greed into public plenty. They also offer a striking genealogy of altruism itself. Altruism, on this view, began as a technology for group survival, a way of getting a result. "ALTRUISM IS RESULTS-BASED MORALITY." Over time it drifted and ossified into an intention-based ritual, valued for how it feels and how it signals rather than for what it achieves; meanwhile capitalism arrived as a superior technology for the same end, one that makes strangers serve each other's needs at scale.

This hypothesis has a long and distinguished pedigree, which is the first reason to take it seriously. Kant opened his moral philosophy with the purest statement of intention-based ethics ever written: "It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will." A good will, he went on, is good "not because of what it effects or accomplishes" but "only because of its volition."[10] Long before Kant, Augustine had compressed

Christian ethics into a single line about the inner disposition, "Love, and do what you will."[11] And in 1919 Max Weber drew the distinction that this book's hypothesis restates. He contrasted an "ethic of ultimate ends," or conviction, with an "ethic of responsibility," which answers for "the foreseeable results of one's action." His portrait of the conviction ethicist could have been written yesterday: "If an action of good intent leads to bad results, then, in the actor's eyes, not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God's will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil." Weber's example was the revolutionary syndicalist, a man of the left.[12]

How well does the hypothesis fit the evidence? The answer depends on which sense of "results-based" is meant, and the senses come apart. In the *distributive* sense, the hypothesis is well supported. Proportionality, the principle that reward should track contribution, is measurably a conservative foundation, and equality and need are measurably liberal ones.[13] The welfare studies discussed below show the same thing: the right asks first whether a recipient contributed or tried, the left whether he is in need. That is exactly the difference between a morality that ties reward to output and one that ties it to condition. In the *institutional* sense, the hypothesis also has support. The left's moral language is far more likely to locate responsibility in systems and structures than in individual choices, and the right's in persons.[14]

In the narrow sense of how individuals judge single acts, however, the hypothesis does not hold. In the moral dilemmas psychologists use to separate rule-following from outcome-weighing, such as whether to sacrifice one person to save five, people on the left are, if anything, *more* willing to judge by consequences, and religious and conservative people more likely to hold that some acts are wrong whatever their results.[15] And partisans on both sides judge a policy by whose policy it is about as often as by its effects; a large review found the two sides equally biased in evaluating evidence that flatters their own team.[16] So the honest verdict is mixed. The left is not a party of people who ignore outcomes in their private reasoning. It is a moral culture in which public standing comes increasingly from holding the right attitudes toward the right groups, and in which the outcomes of policies aimed at those groups are judged leniently because the intentions behind them are judged good. That narrower claim is supported. The broader one, that the left as such cannot reason from results, is not. Weber's own conclusion is worth keeping in view: he thought a mature politician needed both ethics, and he was as

hard on the cynic who cares only for results as on the saint who cares only for purity.

The same distinction between inputs and outputs explains, on this book's account, how the meaning of equality itself has moved within living memory. The equality the American founders proclaimed and the civil rights movement completed was equality of standing and of rules: the same law for all, the same vote, the same right to compete. It was an equality of inputs, and the results were left to the people who competed. The newer demand, carried by the word "equity," is an equality of outputs: if groups end up unequal, the rules themselves are presumed guilty. The working notes trace the sequence as "equality → Sameness → equity," and they describe its terminus as "Sameness," a demand not merely that people be treated alike but that they come out alike, so that difference itself becomes suspect. Once disparity is taken as proof of injustice, the notes argue, "ownership becomes theft" and "inheritance becomes injustice," because every advantage that cannot be shown to have been earned from nothing is presumed to have been taken from someone.

That the meaning of the word has shifted is not in doubt; the change from "equal opportunity" to "equity" in the language of American universities, corporations and governments in the 2010s is a matter of record, and the next chapters on the left today document it. Whether the shift was a logical outworking of the original principle, as the hypothesis holds, or a departure from it, as many liberals who championed the civil rights settlement now argue, is a genuine dispute. The case for the hypothesis is that once equal moral worth is accepted as the axiom, every remaining disparity calls for an explanation, and an explanation in terms of unequal ability or effort is ruled out in advance as insulting; what remains is discrimination, visible or hidden. The case against it is that the founders and the civil rights leaders explicitly held equal worth together with unequal outcomes, and that most Americans still do: in 2019, nearly three in four Americans, including majorities of Black and Hispanic Americans, said race should not be a factor in college admissions.[17] The safest conclusion is that the logic the hypothesis identifies is real and has captured much of the left's educated elite, but that it is not the morality of the left's mass base, which remains closer to the older equality of rules.

The right's morality has its own characteristic failure, which a fair account must name alongside the left's. A morality of desert, loyalty and order can harden into a morality of mere possession, in which whatever

exists is presumed to have been earned and whoever is on top is presumed to deserve it. Aristotle's oligarchs, who thought that being unequal in wealth made them unequal absolutely, made exactly this mistake. The results-based morality this book defends is not that. It asks whether a position was won by producing something real, and it is as hard on inherited idleness as on subsidized idleness; it measures the heir against the founder, and the founder against reality. Whether the existing right holds such a morality, or only the possessive version of it, is a question Chapter Fourteen takes up.

One more piece of the moral picture deserves mention here because it opens the oldest working note in the book's source material: "A plea for mercy is a plea for injustice." The point is precise. Justice gives each his due; mercy gives less punishment, or more help, than is due. A moral culture that leads with compassion will therefore, by its own logic, keep asking for exceptions to desert, and if those exceptions become the rule, the rule is no longer justice. Moral philosophers since Anselm have wrestled with how mercy and justice can both be virtues, and most have answered that mercy is good only as a free gift laid on top of justice, never as a replacement for it.[18] The left's moral seriousness lies in its refusal to let justice harden into cruelty. Its characteristic danger, on this account, is that mercy becomes the whole of morality, and then justice itself starts to look like an offense.

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Compassion, Envy and the Zero-Sum Mind

Why do people support taking from some to give to others? The question is as old as politics, and the answers have usually been partisan. The left's answer is compassion and a sense of fairness. The right's older answer, voiced by thinkers from Tocqueville to Nietzsche, is that envy plays a larger part than its owners admit.

Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about America in the 1830s, distinguished two passions for equality. "There is indeed a manly and legitimate passion for equality," he wrote, one that spurs all men to wish to be strong and esteemed. "But the human heart also nourishes a debased taste for equality, which leads the weak to want to drag the strong down to their level, and which induces men to prefer equality in servitude to inequality in freedom."[19] In his second volume he went further. Democratic peoples, he

wrote, love equality more than liberty; "for equality, their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible… They will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism, but they will not endure aristocracy."[20] He also noticed a paradox that has haunted egalitarian politics ever since: the more equal conditions become, the more galling the remaining inequalities feel.

Nietzsche turned this observation into a theory of morality. In the *Genealogy of Morals* he argued that the noble, strong and healthy create values by affirming themselves: "good" means us, the fortunate, and "bad" means the lowly. The weak, unable to act, create values by negation. "The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values."[21] Resentment, a slow, impotent hostility toward those above, reverses the noble scale: the powerful become "evil," and weakness, humility and suffering become "good." The German philosopher Max Scheler accepted the mechanism but redirected it. Christian love, he argued, flows from abundance and is not ressentiment; but modern humanitarianism and the demand for levelling are. He predicted that resentment would be strongest where equality is formally proclaimed while real differences of power and wealth persist, which is a description of every modern democracy.[22] In 1966 the sociologist Helmut Schoeck made envy the central problem of social order. Envy, he argued, is universal and ancient, every society must contain it, and egalitarian programs try to appease it but cannot, because envy feeds on ever smaller differences.[23]

This book's working hypotheses stand squarely in this line, and they press it further. "Equality is the will to power of the bottom half." Equality is "a shield, not a principle," "the god of those who fear comparison," and "not a principle chosen after reasoning but a preemptive psychological defense mechanism." Equality is "the luxury-morality of people who have forgotten how the world works": for those whose material needs are met, more wealth adds little, so they seek a surplus in moral feeling instead. And beneath the demand for equality, the hypothesis holds, is something harder. "The un-incumbents want not just power but revenge." When people first believe that all are equal and the belief obviously fails, they shift to the claim that all *ought* to be made equal, which amounts to saying that reality itself is unjust. The full account of this, the argument that the left operates as a special-interest group for those it deems unjustly marginalized, waging what this book calls an "ontological class war," is developed in a separate paper, *The Lower Lobby*, and is not restated here.[24]

The working notes behind this book also pose a sharper question than most of the tradition did. They observe that the left often seems uninterested in whether the lives of the poor actually improve in absolute terms, and very interested in whether anyone has more than they do, and they ask directly: is that envy, or a herd instinct to keep the whole together, "or something else?" That is a testable question, and it has now been tested.

In 2017 a team of evolutionary psychologists led by Daniel Sznycer, working with Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, published thirteen studies of more than six thousand people in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Israel.[25] Their theory was that the human mind processes redistribution as an ancestral scene with three parties: someone in need, someone better off, and oneself. Three motives respond to that scene. Compassion is directed at the needy. Envy is directed at the better off. Self-interest asks what one stands to gain. They pitted these three against a fourth candidate, a pure taste for fairness, meaning a desire for equal outcomes or impartial rules as such.

The results were clear. All three motives independently predicted support for redistribution in every country. Compassion was the strongest, self-interest next, and envy smaller but reliable. A taste for fairness, in the narrow sense the researchers measured, added little or nothing once the motives were counted. Then came the finding that bears most directly on the envy hypothesis. People were offered a choice between two tax policies. In one, the rich were taxed more heavily and the poor received less; in the other, the rich were taxed less and the poor received more. Between about one in seven and one in six respondents (13.7 percent in the United States, 16.7 percent in Britain, 17.9 percent in India) chose the policy that hurt the rich even though it also hurt the poor. The only reliable predictor of that choice was envy. Support for redistribution in general did not predict it. As Tooby put it, "envious people are willing to hurt the poor to get what they want."[26] Compassion, not envy, predicted actually giving one's own money, food or time to the poor.

What does this do to the envy hypothesis? It confirms it in part and corrects it in part. It confirms that a levelling motive exists that is not about helping anyone: a minority would rather the top had less than that the bottom had more, and the emotion driving that preference is envy. Tocqueville's "debased taste for equality" is real and measurable. But the same evidence shows that the main engine of support for redistribution is compassion, not envy. And it shows something the partisan versions of the

theory never predicted: in the American samples, envy did not differ by party.[27] Democrats scored higher on compassion and on expected personal gain, not on envy. Envy is a human emotion, not a left-wing one. The right's own politics of grievance, studied by scholars such as Katherine Cramer in rural Wisconsin, shows resentment toward cities, elites and public employees of just the kind Nietzsche and Scheler described, aimed in a different direction.[28] Ressentiment, it seems, is available to any group that feels it is looking up.

The evidence also supports, more than it refutes, one specific part of this book's hypothesis. The notes identify the founding premise of the egalitarian left as a belief about causes: that those at the bottom "were excluded unjustly rather than didn't qualify for success by Reality's terms." Political scientists have found that this is exactly where the moral disagreement over welfare turns. Michael Bang Petersen and his colleagues showed that people everywhere carry a "deservingness heuristic," an evolved readiness to help the unlucky and to refuse the lazy, inherited from small bands in which cheaters had to be detected.[29] When a welfare recipient is described as unlucky, Americans and Danes, otherwise far apart, agree almost entirely on helping him; when he is described as lazy, they agree almost entirely on refusing.[30] The large differences between nations, and between left and right, come mostly from different default beliefs about who the poor are and why they are poor. Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva and Edoardo Teso found the same at the level of beliefs about mobility: Americans are more optimistic than Europeans about the chance of rising, and telling people that mobility is low raised support for redistribution, but only among those already on the left.[31] Left and right, in other words, largely share a morality of desert. What they dispute is a fact: how much of where people end up is due to effort and ability, and how much to luck and structure. This book's hypothesis is right that this is the hinge on which the left's moral case turns. Whether the left's answer is a myth is an empirical question, and the evidence on it, taken up in later chapters, gives neither side the clean victory it wants: both inherited traits and circumstances of birth matter a great deal, and both are, in Rawls's sense, unchosen.

The second motive the new research illuminates is the zero-sum mind, the belief that one person's or group's gain must be another's loss. This book's notes make a sharp claim here. Two paradigms of progress compete: "equality vs ascent — man against man or man against reality/himself."

Equality as the highest good, on this view, makes morality relational: what matters is the distance between people, so any person's rise reads as a widening gap and success itself starts to look like an offense. Ascent measures a person against reality and against his own former self, and "ascent is positive-sum." A related note puts the cost plainly: "The battle against reality yields infinitely better returns than the marginal returns we get from reshuffling things around on a static zero-sum pie."

In 2026 the economists Sahil Chinoy, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira and Stefanie Stantcheva published the most thorough study yet of zero-sum thinking in American politics.[32] Surveying about twenty thousand Americans and tracing their ancestry back four generations, they measured how strongly people believe that gains for one ethnic group, one nation, citizens or one income class must come at the expense of others. Zero-sum thinking strongly predicted support for redistribution and for race- and gender-based preferences, which are left positions. It also predicted support for restricting immigration, which is a right position. On average, Democrats were more zero-sum than Republicans about ethnicity, trade and income; Republicans were more zero-sum about citizenship. And within each party, the more zero-sum members leaned toward the other party's typical position on the issue where they were zero-sum: zero-sum Democrats were more restrictionist, zero-sum Republicans more redistributionist. The authors concluded that zero-sum thinking "is not mainly a partisan issue."[33]

The deeper finding concerns where the zero-sum mind comes from. People whose families had climbed the economic ladder over the generations were markedly less zero-sum. So were immigrants and their descendants. Younger Americans, raised during decades of slower income growth for the bottom half, were more zero-sum than older ones; across the world, people who grew up during fast economic growth were less so. And people descended from those who lived under slavery, the most completely zero-sum arrangement in American history, were more zero-sum today, whatever their race.[34] Beliefs about whether life is a fixed pie or a growing one appear to be learned from experience, and handed down.

Here the evidence lends real support to the book's distinction between equality and ascent, and also corrects it. It supports it because zero-sum thinking does drive the left's redistributive agenda, and because the cure for zero-sum thinking appears to be exactly what the ascent paradigm prescribes: real growth, real mobility, real experience that the pie can be

enlarged. It corrects it because zero-sum thinking also drives the right's restrictionism and its trade protectionism. The zero-sum mind is not the left's essence; it is a shared vice that each side directs at a different target. The book's sharper formulation, that a morality whose reference point is other people will tend toward zero-sum resentment while a morality whose reference point is reality will tend toward positive-sum effort, survives the test. The assumption that the first describes the left and the second the right does not survive it unaltered.

Finally, the claim that equality is a "luxury-morality." The best cross-national evidence on values, gathered over decades by the World Values Survey, points in the same direction: as societies grow richer and more secure, their people shift from what Ronald Inglehart called survival values toward self-expression, tolerance and egalitarian concern for outsiders.[35] That is consistent with the hypothesis that egalitarian universalism is a morality that security makes affordable. It does not, by itself, show that the morality is mistaken; a richer society may simply be able to afford virtues a poorer one cannot. Chapter Four returns to this question, which is among the most important in the book.

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The Christian Root and the Unburied God

If the egalitarian conscience is not simply envy, and not simply compassion, where did it come from? Most human societies in history were openly hierarchical. They took inequality of rank, sex and birth for granted, as the ancient world did, and Aristotle's description of democrats and oligarchs was a description of a quarrel among free men only. The belief that every human being has equal moral worth, that the slave and the emperor stand equal before the ultimate judge, is not a human universal. It has a history.

Nietzsche was the first to state the thesis that now dominates the scholarship on this question, and he stated it as an accusation. "The *democratic* movement," he wrote in 1886, "is the inheritance of the Christian movement."[36] Two years later he was blunter: "The poisonous doctrine, 'equal rights for all,' has been propagated as a Christian principle."[37] For Nietzsche, socialism, anarchism, democracy and humanitarianism were Christianity with God subtracted: the same slave morality, the same

exaltation of the weak, the same suspicion of the strong, now pursued on earth instead of awaited in heaven.

What is remarkable is how much of Nietzsche's genealogy later historians have accepted while reversing his verdict. Karl Löwith argued in 1949 that modern philosophies of progress, from Hegel to Marx, are secularized Christian hopes for the end of history: providence becomes progress, the Kingdom of God becomes the classless society.[38] Brian Tierney traced the language of natural rights to medieval canon lawyers, and Larry Siedentop argued that the very idea of the individual, a being of equal moral standing prior to any social role, was invented by Christian thought from Paul onward.[39] Charles Taylor showed how the modern "social imaginary" of universal benevolence and human rights grew out of Latin Christian reform movements.[40] The historian Tom Holland, in a widely read synthesis, argued that the modern Western conscience, including the secular humanist's concern for victims, is Christian in origin even where it is most hostile to Christianity.[41] The scriptural sources are not hard to find: the first shall be last; there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free; the laborers hired at the eleventh hour receive the same wage as those who bore the heat of the day.[42]

This book's hypothesis accepts Nietzsche's genealogy and draws from it the sharpest conclusion in its whole argument. "WOKE IS THE MOLD AND THE STENCH OF CHRIST UNBURIED." The image is exact. God, on this account, was killed but never buried or replaced. The morality that the Christian God had grounded, the equal worth of every soul, the priority of the least, the sanctity of the victim, remained in force after the metaphysics that justified it was abandoned. What remains is "a map floating without the territory": moral commands with no account of the reality that makes them binding, a morality cut off from its metaphysics, and therefore free to drift wherever the will of its holders pushes it. Egalitarian morality, the notes say, is "Christianity's afterlife." The secular left translated the Christian vocabulary point for point: sin became privilege, salvation became liberation, the original fall became historic oppression. The notes add a darker reading, echoing Nietzsche: "the christian moral perspective is just the POV of the will to power of the bottom half," which is why equality, in this view, is the will to power of the bottom half. And they apply the same analysis to the intention-based morality described above, finding its source in Augustine's "participationism," an ethic in which goodness lies in the orientation of the will and the inner life rather than in outcomes in the

world. The West itself, on this account, is "a synthesis of two truths and a lie": the classical ethic of excellence and the realism of the natural order, joined to the Christian lie of equality.

How does this hypothesis fare? Its genealogical half stands on solid scholarly ground. The claim that modern egalitarian universalism grew largely in Christian soil is held, with differences of emphasis, by historians of political thought across the spectrum, from Löwith and Taylor to Siedentop and Holland. It has serious opponents. Hans Blumenberg argued that modernity is not stolen Christian property but a legitimate new answer to questions Christianity had left open, and many historians stress Jewish, Stoic and Enlightenment sources of human equality that do not run through the Church.[43] The Stoics spoke of a single human city long before Paul; the Hebrew Bible put the image of God in every human being. But the weight of scholarship supports a strong form of the genealogy: the specific Western conviction that the weak, the poor and the victim have a special moral claim owes more to Christianity than to any other single source.

The second half of the hypothesis, that a morality cut from its metaphysics becomes unstable and decays, is a philosophical claim, and evidence cannot settle it. But it is not an eccentric claim. In 1958 the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, herself a Catholic, argued that modern moral words like "ought" and "obligation" are survivals from a law conception of ethics that made sense only with a divine lawgiver, and that using them without one was like keeping the notion of "criminal" after abolishing criminal law.[44] Alasdair MacIntyre built *After Virtue* on the same insight: modern moral discourse consists of fragments of older schemes whose context has been lost, which is why moral argument today is interminable.[45] Anscombe and MacIntyre drew different conclusions from this book's: they wanted to recover a lost framework, not to bury it. But they agree with its diagnosis that the modern conscience is running on borrowed foundations. Against them stand the great secular moral philosophies, Kant's, Rawls's, Habermas's, which hold that human equality can be grounded in reason alone. Whether those groundings succeed is one of the open questions of modern philosophy. The working notes behind this book dismiss them in one word, "cope," but a reader should know that some of the ablest minds of the last two centuries have thought otherwise, and that the matter is unsettled.

There is a further complication that a fair account must record. The right, too, lives on Christian capital. The natural-law tradition, the dignity

of the person, the sanctity of life from conception, the duty to work and the condemnation of idleness ("if any would not work, neither should he eat") are Christian, and the American religious right is the most Christian political force in the developed world.[46] The parable of the talents, in which the servant who buried his talent is cast out, is as much a part of the Gospels as the laborers in the vineyard. Christianity contains both moralities: proportional desert and unconditional grace, the talents and the vineyard. The modern left inherited one strand, and much of the modern right the other. This is why this book's notes regard "christian nationalism" as "a contradiction": on their account a right that wishes to escape the egalitarian conscience cannot do so while holding onto the faith that created it. Most of the existing right does not agree, and Chapter Fourteen describes the resulting fault line.

The two moralities, then, are not strangers. They grew from a common root, they share a psychology of desert, compassion and envy, and they divide over where the good is to be found. One measures people against each other and seeks to close the distance. The other measures people against the world and against their own best selves, and seeks to climb. This book's notes give the relation a memorable shape. Personal morality is vertical: each person strives upward. Collective morality, in the modern West, is horizontal: the group levels. Together they form "the shape of a 'T'," and the person who strives to rise finds, once he passes the halfway mark, that the collective morality turns against him. Whether the vertical and the horizontal can be aligned, or whether one must yield, is the question that runs beneath every chapter that follows.

PART TWO

The Grounding



CHAPTER 3

Temperament, Genes and the Body

The first two chapters treated left and right as ideas: a stance toward the given world, and two moralities that grow out of that stance. This chapter and the next ask what lies under the ideas. The hypothesis this book puts forward is blunt. "Political issues are, at bottom, psychological issues, differences in brain structure." When a person of the right argues with a person of the left, "you are not dealing with ideas—you are dealing with different nervous systems." On this view the philosophy is downstream. "The core that keeps regenerating even when specific ideologies die is a psychological-moral structure — the psychology precedes the philosophy." Marxism dies and critical theory rises; critical theory fades and a new vocabulary of equity takes its place; but the same kind of person keeps reaching for the same kind of answer, because "personality precedes politics." The same thought explains why argument so rarely changes anyone's mind. If the deepest layer is temperament, then "the deeper conflict is hardware": in this book's working formulation, "harm-avoidant, short-range, emotion-centered minds versus truth-oriented, long-range, results-centered minds."

This is a strong claim, and it can be tested. Over the last half century, psychologists, political scientists and behavioral geneticists have measured the personalities, emotions, bodies, brains and genes of hundreds of thousands of people and asked how each relates to their politics. Some of what they found supports the hypothesis better than most of its critics would expect. Some of the most famous findings, the ones that made headlines about "conservative brains" and "liberal genes," have collapsed under larger and more careful study. And some findings point in directions the hypothesis did not anticipate. This chapter goes through the evidence in three steps: what is inherited, what the emotions and the mind's habits show, and what the difference between the sexes reveals.

One warning belongs at the start, because it governs everything after it. Most of this research measures "left" and "right" in one of three ways: a

single question asking people to place themselves on a scale from liberal to conservative, batteries of questions on particular issues, or attitude scales built by psychologists. When the issues are split into two families, social or cultural questions (religion, sexual morality, tradition, crime, immigration) and economic ones (taxes, markets, the welfare state), the results often differ sharply between them. Almost every psychological and biological predictor of the right is much stronger for cultural conservatism than for economic conservatism. The largest test of how the two families travel together, using the World Values Survey across ninety-nine countries, found that within most nations cultural and economic conservatism are not positively related at all; on average they are slightly negatively related, so that people who want cultural order often also want economic protection from the state.[1] The neat American package of free markets plus traditional morals appears mainly among the politically engaged in rich Western democracies. Whatever the body grounds, then, it grounds the cultural side of left and right far more clearly than the economic side. That fact will matter for every conclusion in this chapter.

What Is Inherited

The most solid finding in the whole field is that political attitudes run in families for reasons that are partly genetic. The method is the twin study. Identical twins share all their genes; fraternal twins share about half; both kinds usually grow up in the same home. If identical twins resemble each other in their politics much more than fraternal twins do, some of the resemblance must come from genes. In 2005 three political scientists, John Alford, Carolyn Funk and John Hibbing, applied this method to tens of thousands of American and Australian twins who had answered questions on school prayer, the death penalty, immigration, property taxes and similar issues. Identical twins agreed far more often than fraternal twins, and the authors estimated that something like forty to fifty percent of the variation in an overall conservatism score was genetic.[2] The paper caused an uproar in a discipline that had treated political views as purely learned, and its critics raised fair objections: twin studies assume identical twins are not treated more alike than fraternal twins, and husbands and wives match

each other on ideology more closely than on almost any other trait, which complicates the arithmetic.[3]

The finding nonetheless survived. The largest test, published in 2014, pooled more than twelve thousand twin pairs from nine studies in five democracies (the United States, Australia, Sweden, Denmark and Hungary), collected over four decades and using nineteen different measures of ideology. Genetic influence appeared regardless of country, decade or measure.[4] A later review summed up the field: ideology is "about 40% heritable," across countries, samples and methods.[5] Heritability here means a share of the differences between people within a particular population at a particular time; it is not a statement that forty percent of any one person's views come from genes, and it says nothing by itself about differences between groups or eras. But within those limits it is one of the best replicated results in political science.

Three details make the finding more interesting, and each bears on this book's hypothesis. The first is timing. Genetic influence on political attitudes is nearly absent in childhood and adolescence. Before about age twenty, twins resemble each other mainly because they share a household. The genetic signal appears when young adults leave home and begins to shape their views as they choose their own surroundings, friends and reading.[6] Children repeat their parents; adults become themselves. That pattern fits the hypothesis that a person's "type" asserts itself once the family's hold relaxes.

The second detail is what is inherited. The 2014 study found that genes shaped people's positions on the content of politics (order, punishment, sexual morality, tradition) but had little influence on whether people accepted the labels "left" or "right."[7] Party identification in the earlier American study was likewise mostly learned. People do not inherit a party or a vocabulary. They inherit dispositions, and those dispositions attach to whatever the politics of their era offers. This is close to what the book means by a substance that takes many forms.

The third detail is how the genes act. No single gene for ideology exists. When researchers scanned whole genomes for variants linked to political attitudes, none reached the threshold of reliable significance; the trait appears to depend on thousands of tiny effects, most of them probably acting through other traits such as cognitive style, personality and religiosity.[8] One recent study used the most informative design available, comparing biological siblings and adoptive siblings within the same

families. It found that a genetic score built from variants associated with educational attainment and cognitive performance predicted slightly more social liberalism and less authoritarianism, even within families, though much of the effect ran through the education people actually went on to get, and the authors flag the study's small size.[9] This result has a bearing on a claim examined at length in the chapter on the left today: the description of the left as the political home of the weaker human types, which this book's source notes call "dysgenic." In the narrow genetic sense that word carries, the little evidence we have runs against it. Genetic variants linked to cognitive ability tilt people toward the cultural left, not away from it. Fertility runs the same way: across Western countries the religious and the conservative have more children than the secular and the liberal.[10] Whatever the word is meant to capture, it is not captured by the genetics.

Personality research tells a parallel story. Psychologists summarize personality with five broad traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability. In large American samples, openness predicts liberalism and conscientiousness predicts conservatism, with effects comparable in size to those of education and income, and both traits matter more for social than for economic attitudes.[11] A meta-analysis of seventy-three studies put the correlations at roughly −.18 between openness and conservatism and +.10 between conscientiousness and conservatism; the other three traits barely registered.[12] These are small effects. A correlation of .18 means personality explains a few percent of the variation in ideology. But the openness link is close to universal in Western samples, and it is what one would expect if the right is, among other things, a preference for the known and proven over the new.

Here a striking reversal appears. In post-communist countries, openness to experience predicts support for markets, not for the state, because there the market was the new and untried thing.[13] The trait is stable; its political direction depends on what the surrounding order presents as change. The same pattern shows up in authoritarianism, which in many former communist countries attaches to economic statism and nostalgia for the old regime, and in the gender gap, examined below, which has reversed its direction within living memory. A disposition does not carry a fixed political label. It carries an attitude toward the established and the novel, and the established varies.

Causation is also less simple than the correlations suggest. A study using twins argued that personality and ideology are linked mostly because the same genes feed both, not because personality causes ideology.[14] Panel studies in the Netherlands, Germany and the United States found that earlier political views sometimes predicted how people later described their own personalities, so that politics partly shapes self-description.[15] The cleanest picture is that a common inherited temperament shows up both in how a person describes himself and in what he believes.

The most powerful test of the claim that politics is mainly "hardware" comes from history rather than the laboratory. In 1945 the German people were divided by an accident of military occupation. For four decades East Germans lived under communism and West Germans under a market democracy. The two populations were, for practical purposes, genetically the same. After reunification, two economists, Alberto Alesina and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, compared their views. East Germans were markedly more in favor of state provision and redistribution, and more likely to believe that luck rather than effort drives success, than West Germans of similar circumstances; the gap was largest among older East Germans who had lived longest under the regime, and it narrowed after reunification at a pace the authors estimated would close it within one to two generations.[16] One political system, imposed for forty years, moved a whole people's economic preferences far more than any personality trait moves an individual's.

This bears directly on one of the sharper hypotheses in this book's source material: that "communism and socialism persist because those type of people do," that the doctrine's survival despite its failures "likely highlights a permanent architecture of mind of some type of person." Half of this is supported. Dispositions are partly inherited and stable across a lifetime, and some people are drawn to collective security and leveling in every generation, as the evolutionary evidence in the next chapter will show. But the German case shows that how widely such views are held is not fixed by the population's makeup. A regime can manufacture them in a generation and lose them in another. The "type" supplies the soil; institutions decide how much of it is planted.

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Fear, Disgust and the Habits of Mind

The best known form of the hardware hypothesis comes from psychology rather than genetics. In 2003 the psychologist John Jost and his colleagues published a meta-analysis of eighty-eight samples from twelve countries under the title "Political conservatism as motivated social cognition." They argued that conservatism has two cores, resistance to change and acceptance of inequality, and that people adopt it partly to manage fear and uncertainty. Conservatism correlated with fear of death, perceived instability, dogmatism, intolerance of ambiguity, and needs for order, structure and closure, and negatively with openness and with tolerance of uncertainty.[17] In the following decade a wave of studies sought the physical roots of this pattern. A 2008 paper in *Science* reported that people who reacted more strongly to threatening images, measured by skin conductance and the startle blink, supported more "protective" policies such as defense spending and the death penalty.[18] A 2011 brain-imaging study of ninety London students reported that conservatives had a larger right amygdala, a region involved in fear, and liberals more gray matter in the anterior cingulate, a region involved in monitoring conflict.[19] A team led by John Hibbing argued in a major review that conservatives are more responsive to negative stimuli of every kind, and that this "negativity bias" underlies the whole preference for order and protection.[20] For a time it looked as if science had found the right's nervous system.

It had not. The *Science* study rested on forty-six people. When a team ran a preregistered direct replication with more than two hundred participants, plus conceptual replications in the United States and the Netherlands, the original result did not appear; they found no evidence of a stable physiological trait underlying ideology.[21] A second team, which included one of the original authors, reanalyzed the 2008 data and found that the physiological measures had very poor reliability. In new samples in Denmark and the United States, physiological reactions to threat did not predict ideology overall; what did predict social conservatism was people's own report of how negative the threatening images made them feel. Their verdict: "Overall, we find little empirical support for the claim."[22] A study of about four thousand Americans using five behavioral measures of negativity bias found "no consistent evidence for a relationship of negativity bias to

either ideology or self-reported personality."[23] And when the brain finding was retested with 975 young Dutch adults, ten times the original sample, the amygdala difference shrank to a trivial size and the anterior cingulate difference vanished.[24]

What survives is narrower but real. People who report being easily disgusted, especially by contamination, lean to the cultural right. In a sample of more than twenty-five thousand Americans the correlation was about .17, rising to about .27 for contamination disgust; it held in an international sample from 121 countries and survived controls for personality and demographics. But it predicted social conservatism, not economic conservatism.[25] Self-reported threat sensitivity behaves the same way. The strong version of the biological story, in which conservatives' bodies and brains react differently to danger, has failed. The weak version, in which people who feel the world as more dangerous and more contaminating prefer cultural order and boundaries, has held. In the language of the hypothesis, the evidence supports different settings in how people experience the world, not visibly different machinery.

The second strand of this research asks whether one side thinks more rigidly or more honestly than the other. This book's formulation, quoted above, pairs the left with "harm-avoidant, short-range, emotion-centered minds" and the right with "truth-oriented, long-range, results-centered minds." The left's own scholars long said nearly the opposite: that the right is more rigid, more dogmatic and more biased. Both sides can now be checked.

On bias, the best evidence is a 2019 meta-analysis of fifty-one experiments involving almost nineteen thousand people. The experiments measured a simple thing: whether people judge identical evidence differently depending on whether it supports their side. Both sides did it, to almost exactly the same degree. In the authors' words, "Liberals ($r = .235$) and conservatives ($r = .255$) showed no difference in mean levels of bias across studies."[26] Defenders of the asymmetry view replied that such experiments cannot separate bias from reasonable prior beliefs, and that the information environments of the two sides differ;[27] but the core result has stood. Intolerance shows the same symmetry. Studies of the "ideological conflict hypothesis" find that people are intolerant of groups whose values oppose their own: liberals are as hostile to religious conservatives as conservatives are to groups they see as liberal, and earlier

findings of a one-sided right-wing prejudice reflected which target groups researchers chose to ask about.[28]

On rigidity, a 2023 meta-analysis of more than three hundred samples found that right-wing attitudes, especially social conservatism, do go with self-reported rigidity, such as a felt need for closure and dogmatism. But the link was weak or absent when rigidity was measured by behavior on cognitive tasks, and inconsistent for economic conservatism.[29] The decisive test came in 2025, when scholars on opposite sides of the question ran a preregistered adversarial collaboration, with an independent moderator running the analyses, on more than six thousand Americans with extremists of both sides oversampled. They measured rigidity as failure to update beliefs after evidence. Social conservatism was associated with slightly less updating, a difference so small (a standardized effect of about . 05) that ideology explained about one percent of the variation; economic conservatism showed nothing. Extremity on either side predicted less updating, and stable individual differences, regardless of politics, explained about a quarter. The authors advised their field to "move away from asking who is more rigid."[30]

The left's mirror image has also been found. For decades psychologists measured right-wing authoritarianism, a cluster of submission to established authority, aggression toward deviants and conventionalism, and doubted that a left-wing version existed; the scale's inventor called it "the Loch Ness Monster" of the field. In 2022 a team built and validated a measure of left-wing authoritarianism with three parts: aggression against those seen as part of the hierarchy, top-down censorship, and hostility to convention. It shares a core of traits with its right-wing counterpart. Compared with right-wing authoritarianism it shows less dogmatism, more negative emotion and stronger support for centralized state control, and it predicted aggression in a laboratory task and self-reported participation in political violence.[31] Other work links a style of signaling one's own virtue and victimhood with darker personality traits, independently of politics.[32] Such people are a minority of the left, as authoritarians are a minority of the right; but the old picture of a rigid right facing a flexible, tolerant left is not what the evidence now shows.

Where, then, does the hardware formulation stand? Its contrast between "emotion-centered" and "truth-oriented" minds is not supported as a general description: motivated reasoning is roughly equal on both sides, and the measured differences in cognitive style are tiny. Cognitive

ability itself, often invoked on both sides of this argument, predicts social liberalism and low authoritarianism modestly (a meta-analytic correlation of about −.20 with right-wing attitudes) but does not reliably predict economic leftism; several studies find it goes with market-friendly economics.[33] Neither "the left is smart" nor "the right is smart" survives as a general claim.

But a reworded version of the formulation does survive, and it is important. The two sides do differ in what they put first when values collide. The left weights avoiding harm to the vulnerable more heavily; the right weights order, loyalty and proportional desert more heavily. That is the pattern in moral foundations research, examined in the previous chapter. It shows up where truth and harm compete. A 2023 review in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, written by scholars from several disciplines and political leanings, argued that most suppression of research by scientists themselves is driven not by malice but by "prosocial" motives: the wish to protect groups seen as vulnerable from findings thought to be harmful.[34] Studies of "taboo trade-offs" and "forbidden base rates" find that people treat some comparisons as morally contaminating and refuse to make them even when the numbers are in front of them.[35] This book's source notes describe exactly that: an ideology that "declares that certain facts must not exist" and so must build "taboo topics, prohibited metrics, unmeasurable standards, moralized interpretations… so that no one inside the system must face contradictory evidence." The observation is accurate for domains where the protected value is harm to a vulnerable group, which are domains the left guards. The symmetry evidence shows the right has its own guarded domains, where the protected value is the nation, the faith or the market, and its own refusals. So the honest form of the hypothesis is this: neither side is more truth-oriented in general; each refuses truth where truth threatens what it holds sacred, and the left holds sacred, above all, the protection of those it sees as weak. "Truth that causes immediate pain feels immoral," as the notes put it. That is a real difference in moral ranking, not a difference in the capacity for truth.

A related claim in the source notes concerns learning from results. "My framework: results → adjust belief • Theirs: moral narrative → reinterpret results." On this view the left "literally *can*'t iterate," because a morality judged by intentions has no use for feedback from outcomes, while a morality judged by results must keep checking the world. The research on

how people actually update gives this claim a mixed but instructive verdict. The legal scholar Dan Kahan's experiments on "identity-protective cognition" found that on questions bound up with group identity, such as climate change or gun control, the most numerate and reflective partisans on both sides were not the most accurate but the most polarized: skill at reasoning was put to work defending the group's position.[36] People do treat threatening facts as threats rather than data, as the notes say, and they do so on both sides. Yet when the economists Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva and Edoardo Teso showed people in five countries accurate but discouraging information about how hard it is to climb from the bottom of the income ladder, it was respondents on the left who changed their policy views, becoming more supportive of measures such as education spending; respondents on the right absorbed the information without changing their policy preferences, plausibly because they did not trust government to fix the problem.[37] Responsiveness to results, in other words, depends on which results and which remedy. Each side updates readily where the evidence supports what it already wants to do, and resists where the evidence points toward a remedy it distrusts. The difference the notes perceive is real at the level of moral theory, where one tradition does judge by intention and the other by outcome, as the previous chapter argued; it is not visible as a general difference in how the two kinds of mind handle evidence.

The psychology of authoritarianism adds one more piece. The political scientist Karen Stenner showed that authoritarianism, measured by whether parents value obedience or curiosity in children, is a stable predisposition favoring "oneness and sameness," and that it lies dormant until it is activated by what she called normative threat: the sense that a society's moral consensus is breaking down or its leaders are failing. Under such threat authoritarians become sharply less tolerant, while people who are merely conservative about change, attached to stable institutions, may become more tolerant in order to protect those institutions.[38] Others have shown that American politics has sorted along this child-rearing measure since the 1960s, so that the parties now divide people who prize obedience from people who prize independence.[39] The deeper point is that the right contains at least two psychologically distinct temperaments. One, rooted in seeing the world as dangerous, seeks security and order; the other, rooted in seeing life as a competition, accepts or welcomes hierarchy.[40] They correlate only modestly. The first maps roughly onto cultural conservatism

and the second onto economic conservatism. "The right" in psychology is a coalition, and so, by the same evidence, is the left.

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Mother and Father

The most provocative form of the hardware hypothesis in this book's source material is about the sexes. It holds that the left is, in its moral style, feminine and maternal, and the right masculine and paternal. "The Right is a Patriarchy with an external focus… the Left is a Matriarchy with an internal focus." The father sets "limits, structure, consequence, accountability, challenge, demands, reality-testing"; the mother gives "care, protection, comfort, unconditional acceptance, emotional support." On this view the modern left "substitutes the state for the father and makes it act like a mother," producing "a father's job performed with a mother's psychology," a government that "never demands, judges, enforces boundaries directly, offers unconditional protection." In its strongest statement: "MASCULINE IS WILL TO POWER AND EXPANSION WHILE FEMININE IS WILL TO PROVISION AND CONTRACTION." The notes extend this to the theory of truth itself. Truth as correspondence, matching the inner map to the outer territory, is masculine; truth as coherence, keeping the inner relations of a group harmonious, is feminine; and "feminization is driving the shift from correspondence to coherence." The darkest image is "the devouring mother," a care that keeps its children dependent, "people-as-infants… not victim-mindset but child-mindset, exacerbated by feminization."

The metaphor has a scholarly history. The linguist George Lakoff argued in 1996 that American conservatives and liberals reason about the nation through two models of the family, a "strict father" and a "nurturant parent."[41] Lakoff wrote as a man of the left who preferred the nurturant model, so the fact that his structure matches this book's from the other side is itself telling. Political scientists later tested whether people's views of parenting predict their politics and found that they do, and that they help organize otherwise scattered opinions into a coherent ideology.[42] The child-rearing measure of authoritarianism described above is the same idea in another form: whether a parent prizes obedience and manners or curiosity and independence is one of the strongest single predictors of

American partisanship in the current era.[43] At the level of how people imagine authority, the parental metaphor is well grounded.

The evidence on actual sex differences is also more substantial than many expect. Across sixty-seven countries, women score higher than men on the moral foundations of care and fairness, and also on purity; the differences are consistent across cultures and, strikingly, larger in more gender-equal countries.[44] The same "gender equality paradox" holds for personality differences across fifty-five cultures and for economic preferences across seventy-six countries: men and women differ more, not less, where they are freer and richer, which is hard to explain if the differences were simply imposed by unequal societies.[45] Men score higher on social dominance orientation, the preference for group hierarchy, in virtually every culture studied.[46] Among the largest of all psychological sex differences is in interests: in a meta-analysis of vocational interests covering more than half a million people, men leaned strongly toward working with things and women toward working with people, a difference of nearly one standard deviation.[47] This book's source line "Women look at people, men look at things" restates a robust finding. Studies of political tolerance have long found that women are, on average, less willing than men to extend civil liberties to disliked groups, a gap often traced to women's greater concern with threats to order and safety.[48]

So the hypothesis is not fanciful. There is a sex-patterned moral style, care-weighted on one side and dominance- and proportion-weighted on the other, and in the modern West it lines up with left and right. But three facts limit what follows from it.

The first is history. Before the 1980s, women in most Western democracies voted to the right of men. They were more religious and more attached to church parties, and observers of the time explained this with a story about women's natural attachment to tradition and order. Only as post-industrial societies changed did women move to the left of men, producing what scholars call the "modern gender gap."[49] A difference that reverses within two generations cannot be a fixed biological fact in its direction, even if the underlying traits are stable. The traits did not change; the politics they attached to did.

The second fact is marriage. Two economists, Lena Edlund and Rohini Pande, showed that the American gender gap opened as marriage declined: as more women lived without a husband's income, more of them looked to the state for security, and women's political shift to the left tracks the fall in

marriage and the rise in divorce.[50] Cross-national work points the same way, linking the gap to divorce risk and women's position in the labor market.[51] This finding fits the book's image of the state as a substitute father with uncomfortable precision, but it changes its meaning. The state is not acting like a mother because women's psychology has taken over government. Women who no longer have a husband's protection are rationally turning to the one institution that offers it. The "maternal state" is in large part a replacement for the provider husband.

The third fact is the recent divergence of young women. In Gallup's American data, liberal identification among women aged eighteen to twenty-nine rose from twenty-eight percent in 2001–07 to forty percent in 2017–24, while among young men it stayed near a quarter; the gap grew from three points to fifteen. Gallup's own conclusion was that "gender is the key predictor of attitudes, not educational attainment."[52] But a study of half a million young Europeans across thirty-two countries found the picture uneven: in fourteen countries no meaningful gap, in seven a stable small one, and in eleven a widening gap, in only six of which young men had moved right as young women moved left.[53] A change concentrated in one cohort over a single decade has to be explained by things that changed in that decade (social media, the shifting ratio of women to men in universities, the politics of sex and abortion, the economic position of young men), not by biology, which did not change. Biology can explain why the sexes lean as they do when given the chance; it cannot explain the timing.

Two smaller points complete the test. The overlap between the sexes is very large. Even the biggest sex differences in moral foundations are modest, and most of the variation in ideology lies within each sex, not between them; tens of millions of women are on the right and tens of millions of men on the left. "The left is feminine" can describe a moral style and a statistical tilt; it cannot describe the people. And the correspondence-versus-coherence claim, that one sex seeks truth by matching the world and the other by keeping the group in harmony, has not been tested directly. It is consistent with the findings on people versus things, on tolerance and on care, and with the evidence that harm-based concerns drive much suppression of disfavored findings; it remains a hypothesis, not a result.

What the body grounds, taken together, is this. Left and right are not arbitrary costumes. Stable, partly inherited dispositions (openness or

caution toward the new, sensitivity to threat and contamination, the weight a person gives to care over order and desert, the comfort a person feels with hierarchy) predispose people to one side, appear in early adulthood, recur across cultures, and show a real tilt by sex. In that sense the psychology does precede the philosophy, as this book's hypothesis says, and people do bring "themselves with them" into politics. But four findings set firm limits. The headline biology of fear, startle and brain structure has failed replication. The cognitive habits of the two sides, their bias, rigidity and intolerance, are close to symmetric. The dispositions shape cultural politics far more than economic politics, which rests on other foundations examined in the next chapter. And the direction in which a disposition points is not fixed: openness favored markets in Warsaw and the state in Washington, women voted right and then left, and East Germans became statists under communism and began to lose it after. The body supplies the temperaments. History and institutions decide which side each temperament ends up on, and how many people end up holding each.

CHAPTER 4

The Evolved Mind: Hierarchy, Coalition and the Herd

The previous chapter asked how individuals differ and found real but modest differences in temperament, partly inherited, that tilt people toward one side. This chapter asks a deeper question. Why do human beings have these dispositions at all? Why do the same quarrels, about leveling and rank, about who belongs and who does not, about whether suffering has a villain, recur in every age and on every continent? The hypothesis this book puts forward is that the answer lies in the long human past. "The ultimate origin is not philosophical but psychological, the ancient human impulse to interpret constraint as injustice." This impulse "predates literacy... The philosophy changes; the psychology stays the same." Its most developed form in the source material is a claim about herds. Human beings survived for hundreds of thousands of years in small groups facing a dangerous world. In such conditions "cohesion was the survival technology," and two moral rules followed: no one may fall behind, and no one may get too far ahead. "Altruism (pull back the fallen) and egalitarianism (pull down the exceptional) are two expressions of the same outdated survival algorithm: keep the herd tightly clustered so predators can't pick anyone off." The people of the left, on this view, "aren't malfunctioning; they're expressing an older operating system. The conflict now emerges because the environment changed but the psychology didn't."

A second form of the hypothesis concerns scale. Moral instincts evolved for kin and small bands; they were never designed for a world of eight billion strangers. "The left versus right all boils down to if they are internal focused or external focused... they are just expressing their brain preferences... the brain chemistry changes less slowly than does the economic and social Reality so that was good when we were local tribes, but now that it is globalized, it is terrible." Care for those who would otherwise die is, in this account, "parental instincts misapplied... we are

applying to outsiders what was meant for internal affairs." "Globalization unlocked a whole new application layer that the trait never evolved for."

Evolutionary psychology and anthropology have a great deal to say about each of these claims. The evidence supports more of them than a reader trained in the standard social sciences would expect. It also complicates them in one decisive way: the ancient software is not found on one side only.

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The Egalitarian Ape

Begin with the claim that leveling is ancient. It is, and the evidence for it is among the most important findings in the study of human nature. Chimpanzees and gorillas live in steep dominance hierarchies in which an alpha male monopolizes food and mates. Humans are close cousins of these apes, yet the mobile hunter-gatherer bands that represent most of human history were strikingly egalitarian among adult men. The anthropologist Christopher Boehm spent decades explaining why. His answer was that foragers are not egalitarian because they lack the urge to dominate. They are egalitarian because the many subordinates band together to stop any would-be dominator. Ridicule, gossip, refusal to cooperate, desertion and, in extreme cases, execution keep the bully and the braggart in line. Boehm called this a "reverse dominance hierarchy": the group as a whole dominates its strongest members.[1] Among the !Kung of southern Africa, a successful hunter was expected to speak modestly of his kill, and the others would mock the meat as worthless to keep him from growing proud. The leveling impulse the source notes describe, to "pull down the exceptional," is real, and it is as old as our species.

So is the sharing impulse. Foragers share large game widely, because a big kill is unpredictable and sharing it insures everyone against the days when they come home with nothing. The same people do not share everything. Families keep their own gathered food, tools and personal goods, and differences in skill and prestige are tolerated and even admired. The economic psychology that follows from this was the subject of the study by Daniel Sznycer and colleagues discussed in Chapter 2: support for redistribution today is predicted by compassion for the needy, by self-interest, and by envy of the better-off, three motives that make sense in an

ancestral band where food was shared, where every member gained from insurance, and where anyone who grew too strong was a threat.[2] Envy, on this account, is not a modern vice but an ancient alarm against being dominated. So is the "deservingness heuristic" studied by the political scientist Michael Bang Petersen: people everywhere distinguish the unlucky, who deserve help, from the lazy, who do not, because in a band that pooled food the first problem was to detect those who took without giving.[3] When Americans and Danes are told that a welfare recipient is unlucky or lazy, their famously different views of the welfare state almost disappear; what differs between the two countries is mainly their default picture of who the poor are.[4]

But the same evidence shows that hierarchy is just as ancient. The reverse dominance hierarchy exists precisely because the urge to dominate never went away; it had to be held down by force. And forager societies were not flat in every respect. The anthropologists Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White distinguished two routes to status that run through all human history: dominance, which is taken by force or the threat of it, and prestige, which is freely given by others to people whose skill, knowledge or generosity they want to learn from or be near.[5] Experiments show that both routes work in modern groups too, and that people defer to both kinds of leader.[6] Foragers suppressed dominance but rewarded prestige. A great hunter or a wise elder had more influence and, often, more wives. A study of thirty-three nonindustrial societies found that higher-status men had more children across every kind of economy, from foragers to farmers.[7] The source notes say that "inter-human competition (hierarchy) is a value of the survival game" and that "competition and the desire to be better than others is born from mating instinct." That too is well supported. Status striving among men is tied, in every society studied, to reproduction.

The human animal is therefore not a herd animal in the way sheep or cattle are. It is a coalitional primate with two opposed sets of instincts, both evolved: a drive to rise, and a drive to keep others from rising too far. Boehm described human nature as fundamentally ambivalent on this point.[8] What the source notes call herd morality is real, but it is half of the inheritance. The other half, the drive for rank, prestige and mates, is just as old, and it is the half the right speaks for. In evolutionary terms, the left and right of a modern society can be read as the political expressions of these two halves, which is close to the substance this book proposed in its first

chapter: whether the given order of rank is to be accepted and managed or leveled.

One human institution shows the tension with unusual clarity, and it is one the source material treats with its strongest emphasis. "MARRIAGE IS THE BIGGEST SOCIAL PROGRAM OF DYSGENICS IN HISTORY," runs the note, "the UBI of relationships," "a compromise so we don't kill each other." The claim is that in the natural state a few high-status men would have many mates and many men none, and that enforced monogamy redistributed women to men who would not otherwise have won them. Stripped of its moral verdict, this is close to the leading scholarly account. In a 2012 paper titled "The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage," Henrich, Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson noted that about eighty-five percent of the societies in the anthropological record permitted men to take more than one wife, and asked why normative monogamy spread so widely. Their answer was that polygyny leaves a pool of unmarried, low-status young men who compete violently for mates and status. Monogamy shrinks that pool. It reduces crime and rape, lowers the age gap between spouses, raises men's investment in their children rather than in seeking further wives, and spreads reproduction more evenly among men. Societies that adopted it, they argued, out-competed those that did not, which is why it spread.[9] The note's description of what monogamy does, a leveling among men that keeps the peace, is supported. Its moral verdict is the reverse of the scholars'. Henrich and his colleagues regard this leveling as one of the institutions that made the West strong: it harnessed male energy to work and children instead of to fighting for mates. The case is instructive for the whole book. The institution most dear to the traditional right, lifelong monogamous marriage, is itself one of history's great egalitarian devices, and a successful one. Leveling is not always the enemy of strength. Sometimes it is how a group becomes strong enough to win.

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Kin, Tribe and the Widening Circle

The second form of the hypothesis concerns the reach of moral concern. Here too the evolutionary foundation is firm. The biologist W. D. Hamilton showed in 1964 that natural selection favors helping relatives in proportion to how closely they are related, because relatives share one's genes.[10]

Robert Trivers showed in 1971 how help could also evolve among non-relatives who return favors over time.[11] These two mechanisms, kin altruism and reciprocity, explain why human generosity is strongest toward family and toward those who will pay it back. The economists Jung-Kyoo Choi and Samuel Bowles added a darker third mechanism: in a world of frequent war between groups, altruism toward one's own group and hostility toward other groups could evolve together, because groups whose members sacrificed for each other in battle defeated groups whose members did not. They called this "parochial altruism."[12] Human kindness, on this account, was born alongside human enmity; generosity within the group and suspicion of outsiders are two sides of the same evolved package.

The source notes put this sharply: "all morality is ultimately genetic," and morality "gets messed up when it becomes not genetic." They also contain one of the source material's most striking images, the ancestors who thought of themselves not as isolated selves but "from the POV of a gene," each person a "node in a kin-line" running from the burial mound to the unborn. Anthropology confirms that this kin-centered identity was the human norm for most of history. Joseph Henrich's study of what he calls WEIRD psychology (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) argues that the individualism of modern Westerners is historically unusual. He traces it to the medieval Church's long campaign against cousin marriage and extended clans, which broke up kin-based institutions in Western Europe and, over centuries, produced people who think of themselves as individuals, trust strangers, and apply impartial rules. A study he co-authored found that the length of a population's exposure to the Western Church predicts how weak its kinship ties are today and how individualist, impartial and trusting of strangers its people are.[13] The universalist, individualist moral psychology that modern liberals take for granted is, on this evidence, a recent cultural product, not human nature. The kin-line self described in the notes is the older and more widespread form.

Against this background, the claim that the modern left applies in-group software to the whole world gains real support. The clearest evidence is a 2019 study by Adam Waytz, Ravi Iyer, Liane Young, Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, who asked thousands of people to draw their "moral circle," the range of beings they feel moral concern for, and to divide money among family, friends, nation, humanity, animals and nature. Liberals spread their concern further, toward humanity, animals and the natural world.

Conservatives concentrated it on family, friends and nation. The authors described the difference as one between universalism and parochialism, and found it across seven studies.[14] The philosopher Peter Singer, a utilitarian of the left, had made this widening the very definition of moral progress in his 1981 book *The Expanding Circle*: from family to tribe to nation to all humanity to all sentient beings.[15] The source notes refer to the same idea as "Singer's circle" and treat it as the left's founding error. The descriptive part of the hypothesis is therefore well supported. The left's moral concern does extend further than the right's; it does draw on mechanisms evolved for kin and for small groups; and evolutionary psychologists have long argued that intuitions built for small bands misfire in mass societies, a problem they call mismatch.[16]

What the evidence does not support is that the misfiring is found on one side only. A nation of three hundred million people is not a tribe. Neither is a church of a billion members or a political party. The historian Benedict Anderson called nations "imagined communities," because their members will never meet most of their fellows yet feel bound to them as kin.[17] The psychologist Ara Norenzayan has argued that large societies became possible only when religions supplied "big gods" who watched strangers and bound them into a moral community far larger than any band.[18] Patriotism, religious brotherhood and loyalty to a party are all extensions of kin and band psychology to vast populations of strangers. When a conservative feels that his nation's fallen soldiers are his brothers, he is applying in-group software to people he never met, exactly as the liberal does when she feels for refugees on another continent. The two sides do not differ in whether they extend ancient instincts beyond the band. They differ in where they draw the new boundary: the right at the nation and the faith, the left at humanity or beyond. That is a real and important difference, and the source notes are right that it organizes much of politics, from immigration to foreign aid. But it is a difference in the scope of an extension that both sides make, not a contrast between an evolved, realistic morality and a misapplied one. The right's circle is also an artifact of civilization.

The same reasoning applies to the claim that care for the weak is "maternalism misapplied." Parental care is the oldest and strongest form of human altruism, and compassion for strangers clearly borrows its machinery; the faces that most trigger care are those that look young and helpless. But the claim that this borrowing is a mistake is a moral judgment,

not a finding. Evolution explains where an instinct came from; it does not settle whether a later use of it is good. Writing, music and mathematics also run on brain systems that evolved for other purposes.

Coalitional psychology explains one more feature of modern politics that the source notes observe: the strange bundling of unrelated positions. Why should a person's view on gun ownership predict his view on climate science, or her view on abortion predict her view on tariffs? John Tooby and Leda Cosmides argued that human beings have specialized mental machinery for tracking alliances, signaling loyalty and adopting the beliefs that mark membership in a coalition.[19] In a well-known experiment they and Robert Kurzban showed that people automatically sort others by race, but that this sorting fades when the same people are shown cues of a cross-cutting alliance, such as team jerseys, suggesting that race is encoded largely as a proxy for coalition.[20] Beliefs, on this view, are partly badges. People adopt their side's positions as a package because holding the package signals loyalty. The psychologists Cory Clark, Bo Winegard and colleagues titled a review of this work "Tribalism Is Human Nature," and found liberals and conservatives similarly tribal.[21] This supports the notes' observation that left and right "operate mimetically, mirroring one another," and that much of each side's "positive" belief is "just negative belief, i.e. disagreeing or rejecting whatever the other says." Coalitions define themselves against each other.

Two further findings about the evolved mind explain why such coalitions hold their members so firmly, and both match observations in the source notes. The first concerns imitation. "People are mimetic," the notes say, and "most people don't think for themselves and they are basically just copies of an original." The anthropology of cultural learning agrees that human beings are, above all other animals, copiers. Henrich and his colleagues have shown that our species' success rests less on individual intelligence than on the capacity to learn from others, and that this learning follows two biases evolved for good reasons: we copy the prestigious, and we copy the majority.[22] In an ancestral world where no one could test every belief for himself, copying the successful and the common was usually the wisest course. A person who reinvented every custom from first principles would have starved; a person who did what the respected elders did, and what most of the band did, usually survived. The result is that most of what any person believes about politics was never reasoned out. It was absorbed from parents, teachers, peers and admired figures, and it changes when

they change. This is not a defect of one side. It is the normal human way of holding beliefs, on the left and the right alike, and it explains how a moral fashion can sweep through a class or a generation within a few years, as the chapters on recent American history will show.

The second finding concerns reasoning itself. "People use words first to defend their internal psychology," the notes observe, "and then only second to communicate and then third to pursue truth." The cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber reached a strikingly similar conclusion in their argumentative theory of reasoning. Reasoning, they argued, did not evolve mainly to help individuals find the truth in private. It evolved to persuade others and to evaluate others' attempts to persuade us, and so it works best in argument with people who disagree, and worst when a person reasons alone or among the like-minded. Left to itself, reasoning searches for justifications of what one already believes; this is why the "confirmation bias" is so stubborn and so universal.[23] The implication matches the notes' darker remark that "the less someone reasons, the more probable it is that it's because it's for psychological defense," but it extends it to everyone. A group in which everyone shares the same view, whether a faculty lounge or a partisan media audience, loses the one check that makes human reasoning work. The source notes' claim that an ideology which "forbids facts" must cut its own "feedback mechanism" describes what happens to any coalition that stops arguing with outsiders. It is not peculiar to the left, though the left's dominance of universities, newsrooms and other institutions that produce knowledge gives its version larger consequences, as later chapters discuss.

The kin-line hypothesis also has a population-level form in the source notes, and it must be examined honestly because the notes mark it as important. "Culture is biologically and racially determined," one entry reads, with the qualification "I don't mean this claim exactly this way but it captures the point most closely for now." The idea is that culture emerges from the physical makeup of the people who carry it, so that differences between peoples' cultures, including their politics, rest on differences in their biology. The scholarly evidence on gene-culture coevolution confirms that genes and culture have shaped each other over thousands of years; the spread of the gene for digesting milk among herding peoples is the standard example.[24] Within populations, as the previous chapter showed, political dispositions are partly heritable. But the evidence on the political and moral differences between peoples points mainly to institutions and to

culture transmitted by learning. The two Germanys, genetically one people, developed sharply different economic values in forty years and began to converge after reunification.[25] Children of immigrants carry some of their ancestors' cultural values for generations, such as views on women's work traced to whether their ancestors farmed with the plough, but these values persist through teaching in families and fade as families assimilate, which is what learned culture does.[26] And the genetic tools that could test group-level claims directly do not yet work across ancestries: genetic scores built in European samples lose much of their predictive power in other populations, so current genetics cannot settle the question in either direction.[27] The population-level form of the hypothesis is therefore not established by the evidence available; the best natural experiments point toward institutions and transmitted culture as the main drivers of the political and moral differences we can measure between peoples.

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Villains, Scarcity and Safety

The third part of the hypothesis is the deepest: that the left's founding impulse is "the ancient human impulse to interpret constraint as injustice." "Humans have a deep longing to blame suffering on villains instead of on reality (or themselves)… the inability to accept that suffering comes from reality rather than malice." On this view the oppressor narrative is not a theory reached by reasoning but an instinct dressed up as one. The pattern "existed long before Marx, e.g. early Christian heresies… peasant revolts that promised a world without scarcity if elites were removed."

Cognitive science supports the existence of such an impulse. The psychologist Justin Barrett described what he called a hyperactive agency detection device: human minds evolved to over-detect agents behind events, because mistaking a rustle of wind for a predator costs little while mistaking a predator for the wind costs everything.[28] Kurt Gray and Daniel Wegner showed that people perceive moral situations as a dyad of an agent who causes harm and a patient who suffers it, and that when they see suffering without an obvious agent they tend to supply one, a process they called "dyadic completion."[29] When a harvest fails or a child dies, the mind wants someone to blame. Many cultures have blamed witches. Modern people blame corporations, governments, elites or, in the other direction,

immigrants and conspiracies. The tendency is universal, and it is precisely the tendency the notes describe.

But it is not confined to the left. Belief in conspiracies, the purest form of blaming hidden villains for impersonal misfortune, is found on both sides and, in the United States in recent years, somewhat more on the right.[30] Blaming immigrants for wage stagnation or crime is as much an act of finding a villain behind a constraint as blaming the rich for poverty. The economists Pascal Boyer and Michael Bang Petersen have described a set of "folk-economic beliefs" that come naturally to the evolved mind and that economists consider mostly mistaken: that trade is a contest in which one side's gain is the other's loss, that immigrants take a fixed stock of jobs, that profit is extracted from others rather than created.[31] These intuitions fit the life of a small band in which goods really were roughly fixed; they misfire in a growing market economy. They are found on both sides. The landmark study of zero-sum thinking by Sahil Chinoy, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira and Stefanie Stantcheva, published in the *American Economic Review* in 2026, found that Americans who see the world as zero-sum are more likely to support redistribution and race- and gender-based affirmative action, positions of the left, and also more likely to support restricting immigration, a position of the right. Democrats were more zero-sum about ethnicity, trade and income, Republicans about citizenship. In the authors' words, "zero-sum thinking is not mainly a partisan issue."[32] The same ancient intuition feeds the left's view of the rich and the right's view of the foreigner. The impulse to "interpret constraint as injustice" is a human universal that each side aims at a different villain.

The Chinoy study adds something else that bears directly on the hypothesis that constraint breeds this way of thinking. People whose families climbed the economic ladder over the generations are less zero-sum today. People whose ancestors lived in places where gains really were zero-sum, most starkly in counties with high shares of enslaved people in 1860, are more zero-sum, whether their ancestors were enslaved or not. Americans born after about 1970, who grew up in slower-growing times for the bottom half, are more zero-sum than older Americans, and across the world people who grew up during faster economic growth are less so.[33] Zero-sum belief, in other words, is learned from experience and passed down in families. Where the pie grows, people come to believe it can grow. This is strong support for one part of the source material's thinking, that the resentment of rank feeds on stagnation and is dissolved by growth. It

also shows that the impulse is not the fixed property of a type of person. It rises and falls with the economy a people lives in.

That brings us to the last and most testable claim in this part of the hypothesis: that egalitarian morality is a product of safety. "Equality is the luxury-morality of people who have forgotten how the world works." "When survival costs disappear, people imagine nature has no limits." "The Whole emerges in danger; the Individual emerges in safety." Equality, on this view, "appears only in very specific historical conditions." The largest body of cross-national evidence on values in existence speaks directly to this. The political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, using the World Values Survey across about a hundred societies and several decades, found that as societies become materially and physically secure, their people shift from what they call survival values toward self-expression or "emancipative" values: tolerance of outsiders and of homosexuality, gender equality, individual autonomy, demands for a voice in decisions. The shift tracks existential security closely across countries, and it proceeds largely by generational replacement, as people who grew up in secure conditions replace those who grew up in insecure ones.[34] In a later book Inglehart summarized the logic: when survival is precarious, people close ranks behind strong leaders, cling to familiar norms and reject outsiders; when survival can be taken for granted, they become open to new norms and to outsiders.[35]

This is a striking confirmation of the source notes' insight that "the Whole emerges in danger; the Individual emerges in safety," and that individuation, including the freedom to adopt identities once forbidden, "emerges with safety." It also confirms the sense in which the left's cultural program is a "luxury": it is what people come to value once survival is secure. Inglehart and Pippa Norris went on to argue that the populist right of the 2010s is a "cultural backlash" by older and less secure citizens against this generational shift.[36] Their account and the source notes describe the same historical movement, one from inside and approving, the other from outside and alarmed.

But the evidence forces a refinement that matters for the whole book. What security produces is the cultural left, individual autonomy and tolerance, not the herd. The herd morality the notes describe, the instinct that "none can fall behind" and "none can get too far ahead," is ancient forager egalitarianism; the emancipative values that bloom in safety are its near opposite, an individualism that dissolves the group's claims on its

members. The modern left carries both: a very old economic leveling and a very new cultural individualism. And the right carries both kinds of inheritance too: the threat-calibrated instincts of group defense, loyalty and purity, which Inglehart's data show strengthening under insecurity, and the ancient striving for rank and the cooperator's demand that rewards match contributions. The hypothesis that the left runs an "older operating system" and the right a newer one is therefore half right in a way that changes its meaning. Each side runs some of the oldest software in the species. The economic left runs the forager's leveling and sharing; the cultural right runs the band's defenses against danger and contamination. The cultural left runs software that only affluence could install; the economic right runs the very old logic of desert and rank, harnessed to a market that is new.

What evolution grounds, then, is not one side but the quarrel itself. Human beings are built with a drive to rise and a drive to keep others from rising too far, with love for kin and suspicion of strangers, with an instinct to find a villain behind every misfortune, and with a tendency to close ranks under threat and open up in safety. Every human society must settle these tensions somehow, and every settlement is unstable because both sets of instincts remain. Left and right, seen this way, are the two great coalitions into which modern people sort themselves according to which of these instincts they feel more strongly and which dangers they fear more: domination from above, or chaos and decay from below. The source notes put the underlying problem in a sentence that the evidence bears out: "technological change is faster than biological adaptation." Minds built for bands of fifty now govern nations of hundreds of millions. Neither side has escaped that mismatch. Each sees clearly the instincts that misfire in its opponents and less clearly its own.

CHAPTER 5

How People Become Left or Right, and Why They Change

There is a saying that nearly everyone has heard and nearly everyone attributes to Winston Churchill: if you are not a liberal at twenty-five you have no heart, and if you are not a conservative at thirty-five you have no brain. Churchill never said it. The earliest strong version comes from a French jurist in 1872, who himself credited it, wrongly, to Burke; Churchill's name was first attached to it in an American newspaper in 1986.[1] The saying survives anyway because it compresses a theory that many people hold without examining it. The theory has three parts. People start on the left because the young feel more than they know. People move right as they acquire experience, property and children. And so the right is the politics of adults and the left the politics of the young, the sheltered and the dependent.

A version of this theory runs through the notes from which this book was built. The hypothesis there is blunt. People are "liberal when they're younger, and then when they are older, they become more conservative, particularly when they have kids." "The more you have, the more you want to protect, which is partly why people grow more conservative as they grow older. We fear to lose more than we desire to gain." People "grow weak in proportion to their distance from reality, consequences," so that "a moral-narrative ideology rises during comfortable times because reality's feedback is weak." And underneath all of it sits a harder claim: that politics is, at bottom, "a battle of types of people," fixed early, and that a person's side is in large part "determined ontologically," by what kind of person he is rather than by what arguments he has heard.

These are empirical claims, and unlike many claims about politics they can be tested. Over the last sixty years, political scientists have followed the same people for decades, compared identical and fraternal twins, studied lottery winners and men whose draft numbers were drawn at random, and

tracked how whole generations vote from their first election to their last. The results do not flatter the folk theory, and they do not flatter its critics either. Some of the hypothesis survives intact, some survives only in a narrower form, and some is contradicted. This chapter sets out what is known, in the order in which a life unfolds: where people start, what moves them once they are adults, and how whole societies change sides even when most individuals do not change at all.

Three kinds of change have to be kept apart from the beginning, because almost every popular argument about the subject confuses them.[2] The first is aging: individuals change as they grow older. The second is the generation, or cohort: people born at different times were shaped by different events and carry those differences through life. The third is the period: everyone shifts together with the times, after a war, a recession or an unpopular president. A single snapshot showing that seventy-year-olds are more conservative than twenty-five-year-olds cannot tell these apart, because the seventy-year-old differs from the twenty-five-year-old in age and in generation at once. Only following the same people over time, or careful modeling across many surveys, can separate them. A fourth kind of change matters as much as the other three and is the most often overlooked: the parties themselves move, re-sorting which groups they appeal to, so that a person can vote differently in 2024 than in 2004 without having changed a single conviction. Much of what looks like individuals changing their minds is the menu changing, not the diner.

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Where People Start

The first and strongest fact about political orientation is that it begins at home. In 1965 the political scientists M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi interviewed some seventeen hundred high-school seniors and their parents, and Jennings and his colleagues kept interviewing the same families, and eventually the seniors' own children, for more than thirty years. When the seniors were in their late teens, a parent's party identification predicted the child's strongly, with a coefficient of about 0.55 on a scale from zero to one; when the seniors' own children were interviewed in 1997, the figure was nearly the same, about 0.47.[3] Controlling for parental education, income and the climate of the school barely

changed the estimate. What changed it enormously was how political the household was. In homes where politics was rarely discussed, transmission was weak; in highly political homes, children very largely became copies of their parents. Party identification and religiosity were the two things parents passed on most reliably. Specific opinions on specific issues were passed on far less well.

That last finding matters for what follows. What children inherit from parents is mainly a team and a church, not a set of reasoned positions. They learn which side "people like us" are on before they can say why.

A child also inherits genes, and some of the resemblance between parents and children is genetic rather than taught. Twin studies, which compare identical twins (who share all their genes) with fraternal twins (who share about half), have now been run in many countries with many measures, and they converge on a finding that surprised the political scientists who first reported it in 2005: roughly 30 to 40 percent of the variation in broad political attitudes within Western populations can be traced to genetic differences.[4] The finding has proved one of the most replicated in political science. But its details matter more than its headline. What is heritable is the content of attitudes, positions on order, sex, punishment, tradition and authority, and not the labels. A survey question that simply asks people to place themselves on a "left-right" scale shows little heritability, and party identification shows almost none; it is learned from family and community.[5] No individual gene for ideology has been found, and large genome-wide studies have found no single variant of meaningful effect, which means the genetic influence is spread across thousands of tiny effects, almost certainly working indirectly through temperament, cognitive style and religiosity.[6] People inherit dispositions, not the political vocabulary of their era.

The timing of genetic influence is the most revealing detail of all. Before about age twenty, the similarity of twins' political attitudes is explained mostly by the family they share. Genetic influence appears when young adults leave home, and it persists from then on.[7] The natural reading is that parents impose their politics while children live under their roof, and that once children are free to choose their own company, reading and way of life, their own temperaments begin to pull them toward the side that suits them. This fits one part of the hypothesis that politics is "a battle of types of people." There are types, in the sense of stable, partly inherited dispositions that make some people more comfortable with order, tradition

and boundaries and others more comfortable with novelty, openness and change. Chapter 3 examines those dispositions in detail. But the same evidence sets limits on the hypothesis. A heritability of 40 percent leaves 60 percent to everything else. The disposition is inherited; the side it attaches to is not. As later chapters show, the same disposition toward order that makes an American a conservative made a Soviet citizen of 1985 a defender of communism, and the trait most associated with liberalism in the West, openness to experience, predicted support for free markets in the formerly communist states.[8] What is fixed is a temperament. What it fights for depends on what the society around it presents as order and what it presents as change.

The thinker who first framed this was the economist Thomas Sowell, who called the deep division "a conflict of visions," two incompatible pictures of human nature, one constrained and one unconstrained. The working notes behind this book press harder: Sowell, they say, "blushes at going all the way" by calling it a conflict of visions "instead of a conflict of types," as if visions could be swapped between people the way one changes clothes. The evidence lands between the two. Visions are not freely transferable; they rest on dispositions that people do not choose. But the types are not political types. They are temperamental types that politics recruits, and the recruiting is done by the society and its parties, which is why the same type can serve opposite causes in different places and centuries.

After the family and the genes comes the period of life in which the world first breaks in. The best-supported finding about political change across the life span is what researchers call the impressionable-years hypothesis: people are most open to political influence in late adolescence and early adulthood, after which their views settle and change far more slowly.[9] The strongest modern evidence comes from a 2023 study by Yair Ghitza, Andrew Gelman and Jonathan Auerbach, who pooled more than three hundred thousand survey responses covering every presidential election from 1960 to 2016 and asked how much each year of a person's life shaped the party he later voted for.[10] Events in childhood counted for almost nothing. Their weight rose steeply in the teenage years, peaked at about age eighteen, and then declined, approaching zero by about sixty. An event at eighteen was nearly three times as consequential as the same event later in life. The model, built on nothing more than the popularity of the sitting president in each year, explained about four-fifths of the

variation in voting trends over half a century. It identified distinct political generations: New Deal Democrats, Eisenhower Republicans, the liberals of the 1960s, the Reagan conservatives and the Millennials, each stamped by whichever party looked successful or disastrous when they came of age. In the authors' phrase, a generation's preferred party is "essentially locked-in by 40," and partisanship is "the cumulative impression left by a lifetime of events."

A natural experiment shows how strong one formative event can be. In 1969 the United States held a lottery to decide which young men would be drafted for Vietnam. Because the numbers were drawn at random, men with low numbers (likely to be drafted) and high numbers (safe) were alike in every other way. Robert Erikson and Laura Stoker followed men from the Jennings study who had been through that lottery. Those who drew vulnerable numbers became more opposed to the war, more liberal and more Democratic, and the difference was still visible when they were re-interviewed in the 1990s. Their draft numbers mattered more to their adult politics than the party identification they had held as teenagers.[11] A single experience, with high personal stakes, arriving in the formative years, outweighed a childhood's worth of family influence.

The German sociologist Karl Mannheim saw the outline of this a century ago, when he argued that a generation is formed by the shared experiences of its youth.[12] The working notes behind this book add a sharper point about what that youth now consists of. Modern children, the notes observe, "spend the first 18 years basically living in the map," learning about the world from books, screens and classrooms "apart from (prior to) lived experience," so that they are "completely formed in anti-realism" before they have ever had to meet a payroll, raise a child or suffer the consequences of a bad decision. The empirical literature supports the first half of this claim strongly: the first two decades are when political orientation is formed, and for most people it is formed before they have much experience of the adult world. It does not yet support the second half, that schooling as such pushes people leftward. As the next section shows, the best studies find that even college, the institution most often accused of this, has little measurable effect on overall political orientation once family background is taken into account. What forms the young is mostly family, temperament and the events of their teenage years. Whether a childhood spent more in representations than in consequences makes a

whole generation more inclined to believe that the world can be rearranged by will is a plausible hypothesis that no one has yet tested directly.

Once formed, political orientation is held less as a set of opinions than as a membership. This is the third great finding of the field, and the one with the largest consequences. In 1964 the political scientist Philip Converse showed that only a small minority of American voters, perhaps one in ten, organized their opinions with abstract ideas like "liberal" and "conservative."[13] Most people's views on different issues were only loosely connected, and many people gave different answers to the same question two years apart, as if they had no settled opinion at all. Party identification, by contrast, was remarkably stable. Sixty years of later research has refined this picture without overturning it. Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler showed that party identification behaves like a religious affiliation, a social identity that people adopt because a party's image matches their sense of "people like me," and that it changes only slowly.[14] Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe found that even in today's polarized America most voters remain "ideologically innocent": their sense of being liberal or conservative is better explained by their group attachments than by any coherent philosophy.[15] Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels concluded that the standard picture of democracy, in which voters hold policy views and choose parties to match, has it largely backward: people choose sides on the basis of group loyalties and then adopt the views their side holds.[16]

The most direct evidence comes from studies of what happens when a party changes its position. Gabriel Lenz followed voters through campaigns in which an issue suddenly became prominent and found that, far more often than voters switched to the candidate who agreed with them, they changed their opinion to agree with the candidate they already supported.[17] Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope ran an experiment in 2017 in which Republicans were told that Donald Trump held a given policy position; when he was described as taking a liberal position, many self-described conservatives moved to the liberal position with him.[18] Patrick Egan found that the arrow even runs from politics to identity: over a four-year panel, small but real numbers of Americans changed how they reported their religion, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, and the changes were predicted by their prior politics.[19]

This body of evidence confirms, with more precision than the notes could have had, one of their central observations: that "the left and all

people don't so much believe in the contents of their morality so much as the structure of it," that what most people are committed to is their group rather than its doctrines, and that "it has changed over the years for the left and the right and is clearly adaptable." It confirms the notes' claim that "people are mimetic," that "people adopt worldviews not through argument but through the elites they respect," and that the masses "copy the elites." John Zaller's influential account of mass opinion rests on exactly this mechanism: ordinary citizens take their cues from the elites of the side they already trust, and public opinion moves when elite messages move.[20] It also explains why the notes' observation that "identity sticks regardless of origin" is sound. A family converted to a religion by force can, generations later, defend that religion as its own. Membership, once formed, generates its own loyalty, and the reasons come afterward.

There is one important qualification, and it cuts against the harshest version of the hypothesis. The evidence does not show that most people are empty vessels "to be programmed." It shows that most people hold their politics as a loyalty rather than a theory, which is a different thing. A loyalty can rest on real interests, real experiences and real moral intuitions that a person cannot articulate philosophically. The same research that finds ideological innocence finds that ordinary voters reward and punish governments for results they can see, such as the state of the economy, a war, crime in their neighborhood.[21] Most people are not ideologues. That is not the same as being fools.

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What Moves Them

If people do become more conservative with age, the change should show up when the same people are followed for decades. The best American evidence comes, again, from the Jennings panel. Johnathan Peterson, Kevin Smith and John Hibbing tracked members of the high-school class of 1965 from their early twenties to about age fifty.[22] Over those twenty-four years, the group's average position moved to the right by a little over half a point on a seven-point scale, most of it in their twenties and early thirties. Looked at person by person, about half did not move at all. Of those who did, many more moved right than left: 28 percent became more conservative and 10 percent more liberal. Among those who had called

themselves liberals in 1973, a third called themselves conservatives by 1997; among the conservatives, only a fifth had become liberals. Statistical models that sort people into paths found about three-quarters following a stable path, a fifth drifting right and fewer than one in twenty drifting left. The authors summed up both halves of the finding: "political attitudes are remarkably stable over the long term," and "liberals are more likely to become conservatives than conservatives are to become liberals." British evidence, combining election surveys with seven long-running panels, points the same way: aging adds about a third of a percentage point per year to the Conservative vote, enough to produce a gap of almost twenty points between twenty-year-olds and eighty-year-olds.[23]

So the folk theory has, in the authors' words, "a glimmer of truth," and the notes' claim that people move right as they grow older is supported in direction. It is not supported in size or universality. Most adults never move. Those who move do so mostly in early adulthood. And some of what looks like aging in the American data is the class of 1965 returning from an unusually liberal starting point, set in the 1960s, toward the national average. The leading model of generations attributes much of the gap between old and young voters to the different years in which each generation came of age, not to aging itself.[24]

What might cause the drift, where it happens? Personality offers one mechanism. With age, people on average become more conscientious and agreeable and less open to new experience, and their traits become more stable; rank-order consistency rises from about 0.3 in childhood to about 0.7 between ages fifty and seventy.[25] Lower openness is the trait most consistently associated with conservatism, so a slow decline in openness is a plausible engine for a slow drift right. But the causal arrow runs both ways. Preregistered panel studies in three countries have found that political views also shape how people describe their own personalities, so cross-sectional links between personality and ideology overstate how much personality drives politics.[26]

Property offers a second mechanism, and this is where the notes' hypothesis that "the more you have, the more you want to protect" can be tested most cleanly. The cleanest tests come from lotteries, which hand out money at random. Among American lottery winners, larger prizes made people more opposed to the estate tax and slightly more opposed to redistribution, but had little effect on their broader views of how society is organized.[27] In a British panel of more than four thousand lottery players,

winners shifted toward the Conservative party in proportion to the size of the win and became more likely to say that ordinary people already get their fair share; "money apparently makes people more right-wing," the authors concluded.[28] The political scientist Ben Ansell found that rising house prices reduce homeowners' support for redistribution and social insurance, because a valuable house serves as private insurance against bad times.[29] The reverse holds for losses: in a four-year panel during the Great Recession, Americans who lost their jobs became substantially more supportive of welfare spending, Republicans especially, though the effect faded as they found work again.[30] Self-interest is real. It moves the opinions closest to a person's own pocket, it moves them in the direction the hypothesis predicts, and it moves them modestly. It does not, on the evidence, remake a worldview. The notes' further observation, that "we fear to lose more than we desire to gain," restates one of the best-established findings in behavioral economics, loss aversion, and it gives a sound reason why accumulating assets should incline people toward caution.[31]

Self-interest also explains part of the hypothesis that "those too weak to compete" turn to government, and that people who cannot improve their own lives "want the government to do it for them." Within every American state, poorer voters are more Democratic and richer voters more Republican, and, as Chapter 2 showed, self-interest is one of the three motives that best predict support for redistribution across countries.[32] But a second strand of evidence complicates the hypothesis. What best predicts support for redistribution, across rich and poor alike, is not income but a belief about the causes of success: whether people think that the poor are poor mainly through bad luck and circumstance or mainly through lack of effort. Economists have found that Americans and Europeans differ sharply on this belief, and that within each country people who think success comes from effort oppose redistribution even when they are poor, while people who think it comes from luck support it even when they are rich.[33] This is the same structure that the notes describe from the other side when they observe that the left "blames the system, never individuals," and that it is "never the person's fault … always the system's fault." The data confirm that the attribution of blame, to the system or to the person, is near the center of the left-right divide on economics. They do not confirm that this attribution is held mainly by those who have failed. It is held at least as firmly by many who have succeeded.

The most striking test of the notes' claims about prosperity is a paradox first mapped by Andrew Gelman. Within every American state, richer individuals vote more Republican. Yet richer states vote more Democratic. And the gap between rich and poor voters is steep in poor states like Mississippi and almost flat in rich states like Connecticut; the culture war, Gelman found, is fought mostly among the affluent, where religion predicts the vote far better than income does.[34] Both halves of the notes' hypothesis appear in this paradox. At the level of the individual, money pushes people to the right on economics, as the lottery studies show. At the level of the place, wealth is associated with liberalism, and the notes' remark about a rich state, that "it didn't become rich because it was liberal, but rather it became liberal because it was rich," is a fair description of the correlation, though the direction of cause has not been established and Chapter 4 takes up the larger theory behind it. The resolution of the paradox is that affluence changes what politics is about. Where people are secure, economic interest recedes and cultural and moral questions decide the vote. Prosperity does not make the prosperous individual more left-wing. It frees whole communities to vote on other things.

Marriage and children are where the folk theory places its strongest bets, and where the notes place theirs: people move right "particularly when they have kids," and a society that "no longer has its own children" will "drift to care about other people's children." The correlations are large. Married Americans have voted more Republican than unmarried Americans in every election since the gap was first measured in the 1980s, and it is now among the widest demographic divides in American politics.[35] Across American counties, the rates of marriage and childbearing and the age at which women have their first child predict the Republican share of the vote with startling precision; demographers have shown that the places furthest along the shift to later marriage, fewer children and more cohabitation are the places that vote most Democratic.[36] An experiment and two cross-cultural studies covering many countries found that parenthood, and the motive to protect and care for children, is associated with greater social conservatism, especially on sexual and family questions, though not with economic conservatism.[37] A careful American panel published in 2025 found the same narrow pattern: becoming a parent produced a detectable shift to the right on social issues and no change in overall ideology.[38] So the hypothesis is supported where it is most specific. Raising children nudges

people toward the protective, family-centered side of the social questions. It does not, on present evidence, convert them wholesale.

The large correlations are mostly a matter of who marries and has children in the first place. Religious and socially conservative people marry earlier and have more children, and church attendance predicts marriage and a Republican vote at the same time. Some of the effect does appear to run through economic dependence, however, and here the evidence connects to one of the more pointed claims in the notes: that "women want a provider government as they want provider husbands." Two economists, Lena Edlund and Rohini Pande, argued in 2002 that the decline of marriage explains much of why women in the United States moved from voting to the right of men to voting to the left of them: as divorce and single motherhood became common, women's economic security came to depend less on a husband and more on the state, and their politics followed.[39] Other work has found that unmarried women's greater exposure to economic risk explains much of the partisan gender gap.[40] The notes' claim, stated in sociological rather than moral terms, has real support: the welfare state and the husband are, for many women, substitute forms of security, and when one declines the demand for the other rises. What the evidence does not support is that this is a fixed feature of the female mind. Across the democracies, women were more conservative than men through the middle of the twentieth century, largely because they were more religious, and moved to the left of men only as they entered the workforce and secularized.[41] The direction of the gender gap is historical, not natural.

One famous finding about children has collapsed. A series of studies in the 2000s reported that having daughters made parents, especially fathers, more liberal. It held up for members of Congress voting on reproductive rights, but in the mass public it has failed replication: a study of thirty-six countries found no effect of a first child's sex on parents' party or ideology, and a reanalysis of the "first-daughter effect" found it shrank to insignificance under reasonable choices.[42] It is a useful reminder that small, surprising findings about life events are the ones most likely to be wrong.

Education is now the line along which Western electorates divide most sharply, and here too the notes offer a hypothesis worth testing: that "academics are socialist because they gain social status while being insulated from the effects," and that it is "never the creators of wealth who are the champagne socialists but only their unproductive children," people who have "the ontology of the weak and the means of the strong." The

comparative evidence describes a striking reversal. In the 1950s and 1960s the parties of the left in the Western democracies drew the less educated and the poorer. Over the following decades they became the parties of the highly educated, while voters with high incomes stayed on the right. Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty, studying more than three hundred elections in twenty-one democracies, called the result a contest between a "Brahmin left" of the educated and a "merchant right" of the wealthy.[43] In the United States in 2024, voters without a college degree chose Donald Trump by 56 to 42 percent, college graduates chose Kamala Harris by 57 to 41, and those with graduate degrees chose her by about two to one.[44]

Two findings bear directly on the hypothesis. First, the political scientist Herbert Kitschelt argued decades ago that what divides the educated left from the propertied right is less income than the kind of work people do: those whose work consists of handling symbols, ideas and people, in schools, universities, media, law and the caring professions, lean left, while those whose work consists of making, selling and owning things lean right.[45] This is a more precise version of the notes' distinction between the producers of wealth and those who live near it without producing it, and it has substantial support. Second, the evidence that college itself makes people more liberal is weak. When researchers compared siblings, one of whom went to college and one of whom did not, the college graduate was no more liberal overall; college raised support for civil liberties and for equality between the sexes, but not left-right identity.[46] A panel of nearly thirty thousand affluent students found that college can also make people more conservative: affluent students at affluent, money-minded campuses became more economically conservative as they went through.[47] What separates the educated from the uneducated politically is mostly who goes to college and what work they do afterward, along with parties that now sort themselves around education, rather than what is taught in the classroom. The notes' hypothesis about insulation, that people whose living is made at a remove from markets and physical consequences are freer to hold the left's views, is consistent with the occupational evidence and has not been refuted, but it has not been directly tested either.

Religion is the most durable anchor of all. In the United States, Americans who attend religious services at least monthly voted for Trump by roughly two to one in 2024, while those who attend less often voted for Harris; white evangelical Protestants are the most reliably Republican large

group in the country, and remained so even in the Democratic wave of 2026.[48] The one great exception is Black Protestants, who are both devout and overwhelmingly Democratic. But here, too, the arrow runs both ways. The sharp rise in Americans with no religion since the 1990s was concentrated among liberals and moderates reacting against the alliance of churches with conservative politics, and people who form their partisanship in early adulthood, when many have drifted from church, use it to decide whether and where to return to religion when they have children.[49] For older generations, religion shaped politics. For younger ones, politics increasingly shapes religion.

Place matters, though less through choice than people imagine. Americans live in strikingly segregated political neighborhoods; an analysis of the home addresses of 180 million voters found many with almost no neighbors from the other party.[50] Yet when partisans move, politics ranks far below cost, schools, crime and commute among their reasons, and their moves show almost no deliberate political sorting.[51] The segregation arises because people of different temperaments prefer different kinds of places, dense and diverse or spacious and settled, and because the parties have realigned around the line between city and countryside, a line whose roots, the political scientist Jonathan Rodden has shown, go back to the industrial geography of the nineteenth century.[52] The notes' observation that people new to a place "vote radically differently than those who have lived there a long time" is consistent with this: those who move to great cities are, in temperament and occupation, a selected group.

What of the dramatic personal events that conversion stories feature? "A neoconservative," Irving Kristol is supposed to have said, "is a liberal who has been mugged by reality." The tests of the literal version are mixed. In an American survey, victims of crime were no more conservative or punitive than others once background was controlled.[53] In Italy, victimization pushed people right only in areas of high unemployment, and in Latin America victims became more supportive of harsh policing and less attached to democracy.[54] The effect, where it appears, is on preferences about order and punishment, not on ideology as a whole. Sudden exposure to strangers has a clearer effect. When refugees arrived suddenly on Greek islands near Turkey in 2015, residents of those islands became durably more hostile to refugees, immigrants and Muslims, and more supportive of restriction, without any economic contact with the newcomers at all.[55] This supports one of the notes' observations: "Groups group when threatened.

Individualism emerges amidst security." Visible, rapid change in who lives among us makes people more protective of the group. Gradual integration over longer periods tends to have the opposite effect, which is why both sides of the immigration debate can find studies to cite.

Last, there is argument itself. The notes are skeptical that it matters: "Few are converted by mind; most by will to power. The idea that you convert people by 'changing their mind' is a naive mistaken belief in others' intellectuality and honesty." Ideologies collapse, on this view, "not because you convince them but because the cave collapses around them, when lies become too costly to maintain." The evidence is more mixed than either the skeptic or the optimist expects. The widely reported "backfire effect," in which correcting a false belief makes people hold it more firmly, has largely failed to replicate; in large experiments, factual corrections move people modestly in the right direction, including people whose side the correction embarrasses.[56] Alexander Coppock, reviewing dozens of persuasion experiments, found that arguments move people of all political types by small amounts and in the same direction, and that the effects partly last.[57] Patient, personal conversation can produce durable change even on emotionally charged questions.[58] But the effects are small, and the large movements of opinion in history have come from elsewhere: from events, from changes in what the trusted leaders of one's own side say, and from the replacement of one generation by another. The notes' proposal for how to convert someone, "offer more. Validate their intentions and show a better way, a fuller truth, not a competing truth," fits what persuasion research finds works better than direct attack. Their claim that argument rarely converts is largely right as a description of what moves masses. It is wrong if read as saying that evidence never moves individuals at all.

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How Whole Societies Change Sides

If most individuals barely change, how does a society change its mind? The answer that emerges from the evidence is that societies change mostly by replacing people and rearranging parties, not by converting adults.

The physicist Max Planck once observed that a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents but because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up familiar with it. Economists

who tested the remark on the life sciences found it largely true: when a star scientist dies unexpectedly, outsiders enter his field and its direction changes.[59] The working notes behind this book make the same point about politics: "Death is the best way to remove bias," because "dying lets the next generation reevaluate our premises." Public opinion bears this out on the questions where it has changed most. In 1996, about a quarter of Americans supported same-sex marriage; by the mid-2020s, about two-thirds did.[60] Part of that change came from adults changing their minds, but a large share came from older cohorts dying and younger cohorts, formed in a different climate, taking their place. The same mechanism lies behind most of the long movement of Western opinion on sex, race, religion and authority over the last seventy years.

This supports, for the cultural dimension of politics, an observation the notes make repeatedly: that "we drift to the Left because we're playing in their game," and that the left "has had this morality for so long that it feels like part of reality to all those born in it — which is most people." On questions of personal morality and social inclusion, the long-run movement in the democracies has been overwhelmingly in one direction, and each new generation has started from the previous generation's endpoint. But the drift is not general. On economics, public opinion shows no comparable long-run leftward trend. It behaves instead like a thermostat: when governments move left, the public's mood moves right, and when they move right, it moves left.[61] The ratchet the notes describe is real on the moral and cultural questions, where generational replacement drives it. It is not a law of politics as a whole.

The second engine of collective change is the movement of the parties themselves. The largest shifts in who is left and who is right in modern democracies came not from individuals converting but from parties re-sorting their coalitions. The white South moved from the Democratic to the Republican party over half a century, largely in response to the parties' positions on race. Across the West, as already described, the educated moved left and the less educated moved right as politics came to turn on cultural rather than economic questions. In each case, millions of people found themselves on the other side of the line without having changed their values, because the line had moved.

People who do change sides in adulthood usually describe the experience this way. "I didn't leave the Democratic Party," Ronald Reagan said. "The party left me." The great conversions of the twentieth century fit

the pattern. The ex-communists of the 1930s and 1940s, among them Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, broke with the left after direct experience of Stalinism. The neoconservatives of the 1960s and 1970s, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer and others, were liberals who moved right in reaction to urban crime, the perceived failures of the Great Society, the New Left and Soviet expansion.[62] Converts in the other direction exist too: writers who began on the right and moved left as the right turned toward religion and populism, and, after 2016, many Republican officeholders and intellectuals who abandoned their party while insisting that their principles had not changed. In both directions, converts tend to be unusually political people, the minority with coherent ideologies, who notice when their party drifts away from what they believe. Their conversions confirm the identity model rather than refuting it: the more ideological a person is, the more likely a change in the party is to push him out of it.

The notes offer a sharper version of this pattern as a description of American history. "The Left moves the country and then goes too far, shedding some of their more conservative members, who become the new, more progressive Republican Party," so that "the Republican party is the Democrat party from 20 years ago" and "the Right is the footnotes, leftovers, of the Left." There is real support for this on the questions of personal morality and the scope of government. American conservatives today defend Social Security, Medicare, the civil rights laws and, increasingly, same-sex marriage, all of which the right once opposed; the right has typically come to defend the settlement the left won a generation earlier, which is exactly what a positional theory of conservatism, examined in Chapter 1, would predict. Many of the right's leading figures in each era began on the left. But the pattern is not one-way across all questions. The Democratic party of the 1990s adopted free trade and balanced budgets, which had been Republican positions, and the populist right of the 2020s returned to the protective tariffs and immigration restriction of the Republican party of a century earlier. Positions migrate in both directions. What the evidence supports is a narrower claim: that on the moral and cultural axis, over the last century, the borrowing has run mostly from left to right, because that is the axis on which generational replacement has moved the whole society.

The elections of the mid-2020s showed every one of these mechanisms at work in a few short years. In 2024, the Republican candidate made

unusual gains among young men, Hispanic voters and voters without degrees across racial lines. Hispanic voters, who had backed Joe Biden by 61 to 36 percent in 2020, split almost evenly, and men under fifty, who had backed Biden by ten points, narrowly backed Trump.[63] Commentators spoke of a realignment. Two years later, early surveys of the 2026 midterm electorate found much of that movement reversed: Democrats won large majorities among voters under thirty and among Hispanic voters, and in early projections won both houses of Congress.[64] These figures were preliminary when this book was written, and midterm and presidential electorates differ. But the direction is clear enough to teach a lesson that the research predicts: the voters who swing most are the young and the weakly attached, whose partisanship is not yet fixed and who respond to the performance of whoever holds power. Their swings are large in votes and small in ideology. What did not reverse was the divide by education; college graduates voted more Democratic in 2026 than in 2024, while voters without degrees stayed close to even.[65] The one shift that has lasted is the structural one.

One divergence among the young appears to be deeper than a swing. Gallup found that the share of American women aged eighteen to twenty-nine who call themselves liberal held steady at under 30 percent from 1999 to 2013 and then rose to around 40 percent or more by the early 2020s, while the share of young men calling themselves liberal stayed at about a quarter.[66] The gap between young men and young women grew from a few points to more than fifteen. Young men moved toward the Republican party in 2024 more than they moved toward conservatism as an identity; young women moved toward liberalism as an identity.[67] Similar divergences have been reported in several other rich countries. The causes are disputed: women now earn most college degrees, and education predicts liberalism; the movements around sexual harassment and the 2022 overturning of the constitutional right to abortion struck young women in their formative years, as the imprinting model would predict; young men's relative decline in education and earnings, and the different online worlds in which young men and women now live, are also offered as explanations. None has been firmly established. What is established is that the new divide is driven more by the women than by the men.

When all the evidence is gathered, it supports a fairly clear ranking of what makes a person left or right and what changes him. First comes the family, through both what it teaches and what it passes on in temperament:

parents transmit the team, and genes transmit dispositions that, from early adulthood, pull people toward the side whose spirit suits them. Second come the formative years, roughly fourteen to twenty-four, in which the events of the world stamp each generation with a lasting preference. Third comes group identity, anchored in religion, education, race and place, which holds most people on their side for life and through which they take their opinions from the leaders they trust. Fourth comes the movement of the parties, which carries millions across the line without any change in their convictions. Fifth come the swings of the moment, which move the young and the unattached in large numbers and are often undone by the next election. Sixth comes material self-interest, which moves people on the questions that touch their own money, in the direction the folk theory predicts, but modestly and narrowly. Aging as such adds a small drift to the right among a minority, mostly in early adulthood. Specific life events, being robbed, losing a job, having children, seeing strangers arrive, move the attitudes nearest to them and rarely the whole outlook.

Measured against this, the hypothesis with which the chapter began holds up in parts. It is right that most people do not reason their way to their politics, that they take their views from the elites of their side, and that what they hold is more a loyalty than a doctrine. It is right that politics rests in part on stable, partly inherited types of temperament that no argument will change. It is right in direction, though not in size, that people move rightward with age, property and parenthood, and that the protective instincts of raising children push toward the conservative side of family and moral questions. It is right that prosperity changes what a society argues about, and that on the moral and cultural questions Western societies have drifted steadily leftward, generation by generation. It is wrong in its strongest forms: the types are temperaments rather than political sides, and the same temperament has served opposite causes; the left today draws the most educated as much as the weakest; most adults do not move at all; and when whole societies change sides, it is mostly because generations pass and parties move, not because individuals are mugged by reality. The folk wisdom contains, as one of its testers put it, a glimmer of truth. The rest of the truth is that people are formed early, held by belonging, and replaced rather than converted.

PART THREE

The Shared Roots



CHAPTER 6

One Tree, Two Branches: From Christianity to Marx

The words "left" and "right" entered philosophy before they settled into ordinary politics, and they entered it as names for two ways of reading one man. In 1837 the young theologian David Friedrich Strauss, defending his scandalous life of Jesus, sorted the followers of the recently dead Hegel into a right, a center and a left, borrowing the seating plan of the French Assembly.[1] The right Hegelians read their master as a defender of the Prussian state and the Protestant church. The left Hegelians read the same pages as a charter for criticizing both. The point is worth holding on to, because it is the point of this chapter. Left and right are not strangers who met on a battlefield. They are siblings, raised in the same house, quarreling over the same inheritance.

This chapter traces that house from its foundations to the moment, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Karl Marx turned one branch of the family into a movement that would govern a third of the world. It follows three layers of inheritance. The first is Christian: a set of moral ideas about the equal worth of souls, the inner life of the will, and the coming end of history, which both sides still carry even when they no longer believe the creed that produced them. The second is the great split of the eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment tried to rebuild morality and politics on reason alone and a counter-movement, beginning with Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, answered that men do not live by abstract reason. The third is the German philosophy of history, from Hegel through his quarreling students to Marx, which gave the left its theory of progress and the right some of its deepest fears.

Two hypotheses run through the chapter and should be stated at the start. The first is this book's own: that the deepest axis under left and right is a dispute between the primacy of reality and the primacy of the will, which the medieval schools called the question of veritas and voluntas,

truth and will, and that the modern left is the branch of the Western family that has steadily moved authority from what is given to what is willed. The genealogy laid out here is the long history of that move. The second hypothesis is a warning against taking any genealogy too seriously. Chapters 3 through 5 show that most people come to their politics through temperament, family and group, not through books. Elsewhere this book puts the point in its own words: "the psychology precedes the philosophy." If that is right, then the history of ideas explains the vocabulary in which each side speaks, and the shape of its arguments, far better than it explains why any particular person stands where he does. Both hypotheses can be true at once, and the chapter tries to keep both in view.

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The Christian Inheritance

Begin with the most consequential sentence in the moral history of the West. Writing to the churches of Galatia around the year 50, the apostle Paul told them: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."[2] Paul did not mean that slavery should be abolished or that the sexes should have the same roles; the same letters tell slaves to obey their masters and wives their husbands. What he meant was narrower and in the long run more powerful. Before God, the distinctions that ordered the ancient world, of nation, rank and sex, did not reach the soul. Every soul stood equally before the same judge and could be saved by the same grace.

Alexis de Tocqueville, surveying democracy in America eighteen centuries later, thought this was where the modern passion for equality had come from. The greatest minds of Rome and Greece, he observed, never arrived at the idea that all men are alike and equal by nature: "It was necessary that Jesus Christ come to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal."[3] Friedrich Nietzsche made the same historical claim with the opposite feeling. "The democratic movement," he wrote, "is the inheritance of the Christian movement," and he called "the poisonous doctrine, 'equal rights for all'" a Christian principle propagated across Europe.[4] In our own century the historian Larry Siedentop has argued at length that liberal individualism and the idea of moral equality grew not from the Renaissance recovery of

Greece and Rome but from Paul, the church fathers and the canon lawyers of the Middle Ages, and Brian Tierney has traced the language of natural rights to those same canonists.[5] Tom Holland's widely read history makes the claim for the whole of modern moral sensibility, including its concern for victims and its suspicion of the powerful: the West's secular humanism, in his telling, is Christian through and through, even when it believes itself to be anti-Christian.[6]

This lineage is now accepted by a broad range of scholars, from Charles Taylor on the left of the Catholic tradition to many on the right, and it supports one of the central hypotheses of this book: that the moral premise of the modern left, the equal moral standing of every person regardless of what he can do, is a Christian premise that outlived the Christian metaphysics that once gave it a reason. Chapter 2 takes up the moral content of that claim. Here the historical point is enough. Equality of souls is not an obvious fact of nature, and most cultures in history did not believe it. It entered the West through a particular faith.

Three qualifications keep the claim honest. First, Christianity was not the only source. Three centuries before Paul, the Stoics had already taught that all men share in one reason and belong to one cosmic city, and in the same decades that Paul was writing, the pagan Seneca insisted of slaves that they were not slaves but "men" and "humble friends."[7] The Hebrew teaching that every human being is made in the image of God came first and was taken up by the church. Second, there is a serious scholarly dissent from the whole family of arguments that call modern ideas "secularized" religion. The German philosopher Hans Blumenberg argued that modern ideas of progress and human self-assertion are not stolen Christian property but a legitimate new answer to problems medieval theology could not solve; on his view the modern age merely "reoccupied" positions that Christianity had left empty.[8] The debate between Blumenberg and the secularization theorists has never been settled, and probably cannot be, because it turns on what counts as the same idea in a new form.

Third, and most important for a book about left and right, Christianity handed the West hierarchy as well as equality. The same Paul who said there was neither bond nor free also wrote that "the powers that be are ordained of God."[9] For a thousand years the church taught that the universe was a Great Chain of Being, an ordered ladder from God through angels, kings, nobles and commoners down to beasts and stones, and that each creature had its place.[10] Thomas Aquinas built from Aristotle and scripture

a natural law in which reason discovers an order that it does not make. Kings ruled by divine right; the doctrine of original sin taught that human nature was fallen and needed restraint; providence taught that history was in God's hands, not man's. When the European right was born in reaction to the French Revolution, its first great defenders, Burke in England and de Maistre in Savoy, were Christians defending exactly this inheritance. The right took from Christianity order, sin, providence and natural law. The left took equality of souls, the cause of the poor and the hope of a new world. Both branches grow from the same trunk.

The Christian inheritance includes a second idea that this book treats as nearly as important as equality: the turn inward, toward the will and its intentions. Classical ethics, in Aristotle above all, judged a man by his character and his deeds, by the excellence he achieved in action. The great-souled man of Aristotle's Ethics was great because he was in fact great and knew it. Augustine of Hippo, writing at the fall of the Western empire, moved the center of moral life into the interior of the soul: to the will, its loves and its intentions. The classicist Albrecht Dihle argued that Augustine was the first thinker to frame a full concept of the will in the modern sense. [11] In the twelfth century Peter Abelard built an ethics in which the moral worth of an act lies in the intention behind it, not in the act itself or its consequences.[12] At the Reformation Martin Luther taught that salvation comes by faith alone, not by works, and put the principle in a sentence that could serve as the motto of an entire moral outlook: "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works."[13]

This book's hypothesis is that here lies the root of what it calls "intention-based morality," or "input-based morality," as against "results-based morality." In the Christian picture salvation, the final outcome, belongs to God. Man is responsible for his faith, his intentions and his acts, but not for the results, which are out of his hands. The book's sharpest statement of the point is that this teaching "is specifically telling you that you are not responsible for results… results are the domain of God," and that "the split of faith vs works is this split." The consequence, on this view, is a conscience in which results are "not even seen, observed, counted," and so "the hobo can be just as moral as others." Carry that conscience into a world that no longer believes God will settle the accounts, and you get a politics that judges policies by their motives and people by their standing rather than by what they produce.

The evidence for this hypothesis is mixed, and the mixture is instructive. The lineage of intention-based ethics from Augustine through Abelard to Kant is real and well documented. Immanuel Kant, the greatest moral philosopher of the Enlightenment, gave it its secular form: "A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes," he wrote, "but only because of its volition."[14] Yet two facts complicate the story. Max Weber's famous study argued that the Protestant doctrine of grace produced the most results-driven civilization in history, because believers anxious about their salvation came to see worldly success as a sign of election and threw themselves into disciplined work.[15] And the most explicitly results-based moral theory in modern philosophy, utilitarianism, which judges every act and law by its consequences for human welfare, was from Jeremy Bentham through John Stuart Mill to Peter Singer a doctrine of the reforming left. Singer's "expanding circle," which this book treats as a signature of the left's moral outlook, is a consequentialist argument. The fairest reading is therefore that the left does not lack an interest in results, but that it counts different results: the welfare and standing of persons, especially of the weak, rather than the excellence, wealth or power a society produces. The divide the book is pointing to is better described as a difference over what goes into the ledger than as a difference between caring about intentions and caring about outcomes. Chapter 2 develops this.

The third Christian idea is the end of history. Since Albert Schweitzer's study of the historical Jesus in 1906, a majority of critical scholars have concluded that Jesus was a Jewish apocalyptic prophet who expected God to break into history soon, overturn the existing order and establish his kingdom.[16] Schweitzer called Jesus's ethic an "interim ethic": a way of living for the short time before the end, when property, family and worldly power would cease to matter. The recommendations that strike modern readers as most radical, to sell all one has and give to the poor, to turn the other cheek, to take no thought for tomorrow, make most sense on that assumption. The point is not settled. A minority of scholars, especially those associated with the Jesus Seminar, read Jesus as a wisdom teacher rather than an apocalyptic prophet. But the apocalyptic reading is the majority view among historians, from Schweitzer to E. P. Sanders and Bart Ehrman.[17]

This book draws a bold inference from it. If the core of Christian ethics was designed for a world about to end, then a civilization that kept the ethic after the end failed to arrive is running what the book calls "a legacy

program that was designed to be short-term." Such an ethic, on this view, has no interest in designing durable systems, in long-term incentives, or in what a policy will do over generations, because it was never meant to last. The historical premise of this argument has strong scholarly support. The step from it to modern politics is a philosophical interpretation, not a finding, but it has a respectable pedigree. Karl Löwith argued in 1949 that every modern philosophy of history, from Hegel and Comte to Marx, is Christian eschatology in secular dress: providence becomes progress, the Kingdom of God becomes the classless society, and the saved remnant becomes the proletariat.[18] Eric Voegelin called the modern mass movements "Gnostic" attempts to bring heaven to earth by political action, and condemned what he called the "immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton" as a theoretical fallacy; the slogan "Don't immanentize the eschaton" was William F. Buckley's popularization of his argument.[19] Strikingly, Friedrich Engels made the comparison himself, from the other side: "The history of early Christianity," he wrote in 1894, "has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement."[20]

One more strand belongs to this layer. In the late Middle Ages a long dispute broke out among theologians over whether God commands what is good because it is good, or whether it is good because God commands it. The first answer, held by Aquinas, put reason and the order of things first: God's will follows his wisdom, and the good can be known by studying the nature he made. The second, pressed by John Duns Scotus and above all by William of Ockham, put God's will first: God's freedom is absolute, and the order of nature is what it is only because he chose it. Ockham also denied that general natures, such as "man" or "horse," really exist outside the mind; only individual things are real. Michael Allen Gillespie and other historians have argued that this "nominalist" revolution was the hidden origin of modernity, because it severed the world from any built-in order and left will, first God's and then man's, as the only source of meaning.[21] This is the scholarly form of the genealogy this book proposes: that the drift from reality to will "begins in Christianity, radicalizes in early modern philosophy, becomes political in the Enlightenment, and is systematized by Karl Marx." The nominalist story is contested in its details; specialists warn that Scotus and Ockham did not mean what later readers made of them. But as a map of how the question of veritas and voluntas entered the West, it is the best one available.

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Reason, Revolution and Reaction

The second layer was laid in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the wars of religion had discredited the old foundations and thinkers set out to rebuild politics on grounds that every reasonable person could accept. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke replaced the organic hierarchy of the medieval world with a contract among free and equal individuals. Society was no longer a body in which each member had a place assigned by nature and God; it was an agreement that anyone could, in principle, enter on the same terms. The shift is easy to state and hard to overstate. In the old picture, inequality was the natural condition and equality the special case, true only of souls before God. In the new picture equality became the baseline, and every hierarchy had to justify itself before the bar of reason. This book describes the result as an inversion: natural difference came to look unnatural, a kind of guilt in need of explanation, as original sin had once been.

The Enlightenment that followed was not one movement but many, and its English, Scottish, French and German branches disagreed about almost everything. What its radical wing shared was a method: take a principle that reason can defend, and follow it to its conclusions whatever the cost to custom. The reformers who attacked slavery, the torture of prisoners, the subjection of women and the persecution of heretics were applying one such principle, that oppression is evil, with a consistency no earlier age had attempted. Much of what they achieved is now accepted by left and right alike. This book's hypothesis about them concerns what happened next. A principle applied with ruthless consistency does not stop when its proper work is done. The book puts it this way: "we are still running that protocol, 'all oppression is evil,' even though we have run out of legitimate oppression… we kept the word oppression without defining it, and it continued to evolve and drift." When the obvious oppressions of law and custom have been removed, the protocol turns to subtler targets and finally, on this view, to the constraints of reality itself: the body, sex, ability, nation and difference.

There is now striking evidence for one part of this claim. In 2016 the psychologist Nick Haslam documented what he called "concept creep": over the preceding decades, the core concepts by which psychologists and the

wider culture identify harm, including abuse, bullying, trauma, mental disorder and prejudice, had steadily expanded, both outward to cover milder cases and downward to cover new kinds of experience.[22] Haslam was careful not to judge whether this expansion was good or bad, and he noted that it reflects a real and in many ways admirable growth of sensitivity to suffering. But the pattern he found is exactly what the hypothesis predicts: concepts built to name severe wrongs do not hold still once those wrongs become rare; they stretch to fit what remains. Whether what remains deserves the old moral weight is a question the data cannot answer.

The figure in whom the Enlightenment's moral energy and its later critics meet is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. More than any other single writer he is the common ancestor of the modern left and of one branch of the modern right. His Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, published in 1755, told a story that has never lost its power. Man in the state of nature was solitary, peaceable and whole, moved by a simple self-love and by pity for the suffering of others. Society corrupted him. It gave birth to a new passion, amour-propre, the inflamed self-regard that lives by comparison and craves the recognition of others. And it gave birth to property: "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society."[23] Inequality, on this account, is not natural but historical, a product of property and society, and what history made, politics can unmake. The Social Contract of 1762 opened with the most quoted sentence in modern political writing: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."[24]

Rousseau's achievement was to move the source of evil from the human soul to human society. The Christian tradition had placed it in the fallen will of each person; Rousseau placed it in institutions, which meant that it could be cured by changing them. The philosopher Frederick Neuhouser has called Rousseau's account a theodicy, an explanation of evil that clears human nature of the charge.[25] This book's judgment on that move is direct. Rousseau's sentence about chains, it holds, expresses "the same type of liberal sympathies that have created the illusion that everything is a social construct or that everything can be blamed on society and that man is perfect in himself and only society is flawed, and you must never blame the person but only ever blame society." As intellectual history the claim is well supported: the habit of explaining individual failure by social causes runs

from Rousseau through the socialists to modern social science, and Rousseau is its first great source. Whether the habit is right in a given case is an empirical question, and the evidence of later chapters, on heritability and on the limits of social explanation, suggests it is right less often than its heirs assume.

Rousseau's remedy was the general will. A legitimate state, he argued, is one in which each citizen gives himself wholly to the community and obeys only laws that express the will of all, considered as one moral body. Whoever refuses to obey the general will "shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free."[26] After the Second World War the Israeli historian J. L. Talmon read this sentence as the birth certificate of "totalitarian democracy," a line running from Rousseau through the Jacobin Terror to Bolshevism.[27] Most Rousseau scholars now think Talmon read too much into it; the passage concerns the enforcement of laws a citizen has consented to, and Rousseau distrusted large states and revolutionary violence.[28] But the Jacobins did make Rousseau their prophet, and Robespierre's Republic of Virtue spoke his language.

The reason Rousseau belongs to both branches is that his politics had two faces. One face is egalitarian: inequality is a social crime, property is its root, and the people's will is the only legitimate sovereign. That face fed the socialists, the democrats and eventually the New Left of the 1960s, with its dream of participatory democracy. The other face is communal and patriotic: Rousseau loved the small, virtuous, homogeneous republic, despised cosmopolitan commerce and luxury, wanted a civil religion to bind citizens together, and advised the Poles to preserve their national customs against foreign influence.[29] That face fed romantic nationalism, and through it the national right. When populists of either side today speak of a single people whose true will has been betrayed by corrupt representatives, they are speaking Rousseau. Leo Strauss, in a celebrated essay, called Rousseau the leader of the "second wave" of modernity, the thinker who turned the early modern project against itself and opened the way to both the Kantian moral revolution and the Romantic cult of history and nation.[30]

Kant is the other hinge of the Enlightenment for this book's argument, because he moved the will to the center of both ethics and knowledge. In ethics he defined morality as autonomy, the rational will giving the law to itself, and the good will as good in itself, whatever it accomplishes. In the

theory of knowledge he made what he called a Copernican revolution: instead of assuming that the mind conforms to objects, he proposed that objects as we can know them conform to the structures of the mind, so that the world we experience is partly shaped by the knower. Kant himself was no relativist; he believed those structures were the same in every rational being, and that the moral law bound everyone. But his successors in German idealism took the next step and made mind, or spirit, the foundation of reality itself.

This book's hypothesis is that "idealism is the origin of existentialism, constructivism, critical theory, and postmodernism," and that the modern quarrel between "constructivism" and "realism," between the view that human categories are made and the view that they are found, is "the modern, secular descendant of the ancient idealism vs realism divide." It sums up the shared feature of those later movements as a shift of "the center of gravity from objective reality to the interpreting subject." As a description of the main line of continental philosophy this is defensible. The route from Kant through Hegel to the existentialists, the Frankfurt School and the French theorists is the standard one in histories of modern thought, and Chapter 8 follows it. Two cautions are needed. Constructivism has empiricist and pragmatist roots as well as idealist ones; the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's account of the social construction of reality owes more to American pragmatism and phenomenology than to Hegel. And the materialist Marx stood idealism on its head, as the last part of this chapter shows. The line from idealism to postmodernism is a real thread in a larger weave, not the whole cloth.

Against all of this rose the first voices of the right. Edmund Burke was an Irish Whig who had defended the American colonists, attacked the abuses of British rule in India and argued for the relief of Catholics. When the French Revolution broke out he saw in it something new and terrible: a revolution made not by a people defending its ancient liberties but by intellectuals applying abstract principles to a living society. His Reflections on the Revolution in France, published in 1790, predicted the Terror and the military dictatorship that followed it, and laid down the conservative creed in sentences still quoted today. Society, he wrote, "is indeed a contract," but not a contract of the living alone: it is "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."[31] Inherited institutions and habits, which he called "prejudice," hold a wisdom no single generation could work out by

reason, and a wise reformer changes them slowly, in order to preserve them.

The intellectual historian Jerry Muller has argued that conservatism, in this Burkean sense, is best defined not by any particular institution it defends but by a recurring set of arguments: that institutions which have survived embody knowledge we cannot fully state, that abstract reason is a poor guide to complex societies, that human beings need habits and customs to restrain them, and that bold reforms produce consequences no one intended.[32] Muller distinguished this conservatism from what he called orthodoxy, the defense of institutions because they are true or divinely ordained. Burke was a conservative in Muller's sense; Joseph de Maistre was an orthodox reactionary. Writing in exile from the Revolution, de Maistre defended throne and altar, called the Revolution a punishment sent by providence, made the executioner the cornerstone of social order, and mocked the abstract "man" of the rights of man: "I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians… But as for man, I declare that I have never in my life met him."[33] Isaiah Berlin saw in de Maistre a forerunner of fascism; specialists think Berlin overstated the case.[34] But de Maistre's sentence names a theme that runs through the whole history of the right: that real human beings are always particular, belonging to a people, a place, a faith and a family, and that a politics addressed to man in general addresses no one.

Berlin gave the name "Counter-Enlightenment" to this reaction, which he traced from the Italian Giambattista Vico and the Germans Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder through Burke and de Maistre.[35] The Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell went further and described a single "anti-Enlightenment tradition" running from these thinkers to the fascists of the twentieth century.[36] Most historians reject the strong form of Sternhell's thesis: Burke was a man of the Enlightenment in many ways, and Herder was a humane pluralist, not a proto-fascist. But the core of Berlin's insight stands. Out of the same eighteenth-century crisis came two answers. One said that human beings are rational individuals who can remake their institutions by the light of universal principles. The other said that human beings are embodied, historical, particular creatures who live by custom, sentiment and belonging, and that reason detached from those things is dangerous.

This book takes the second answer and gives it a sharper edge. Its hypothesis is that "the great error of the Enlightenment" was that it "overly privileges the mind over the physical reality," that its "hyper rationality…

dispossesses man of his body," and that much of what is now called progress is the result of "privileging the mind over matter and the map over the territory." Burke's objection to the Revolution, that it was the work of abstract theorists with no feel for the society they meant to remake, is read here as the founding instance of a larger truth: that "all good philosophy must be done in the real world, embedded in practice." As a description of what divided Burke from the revolutionaries this is accurate, and it captures something the evidence of later chapters supports: that the right, at the level of temperament, is more attached to the concrete, the local and the familiar, and the left more drawn to abstraction, novelty and universal principles. Whether the Enlightenment's turn to universal reason was on balance an error is not a question history can settle. The same universalism that this book criticizes abolished slavery, and the same embodied particularism that it defends has served nations well and badly. What history does show is that both answers were born together, in the same decade, in reply to the same event, and that neither has ever been able to do without the other's existence to define itself against.

Hegel, His Quarreling Heirs, and Marx

The third layer is German. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who died in 1831, attempted the most ambitious synthesis in the history of philosophy: an account of all of reality as the self-development of spirit through history toward full self-consciousness and freedom. History, for Hegel, was not one thing after another. It had a direction and a logic, driven by contradiction: each form of life generates tensions it cannot contain, and these are overcome in a higher form that preserves what was true in both. The modern constitutional state, with its rule of law, its free civil society and its monarch, was in his account the place where individual freedom and ethical community were finally reconciled.

Two passages in Hegel became seeds for everything that followed. The first is the sentence in the preface to his Philosophy of Right: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational."[37] Read one way, it blesses the existing order: what exists has its reasons, and the philosopher's task is to understand it, not to condemn it. Read the other way, it is a weapon: only what is rational deserves to count as truly actual, and whatever in the

present fails the test of reason is already doomed by history. The right Hegelians took the first reading, the left Hegelians the second. The second passage is the "lordship and bondage" section of the Phenomenology of Spirit, which Hegel's later readers called the master and slave dialectic.[38] Two self-conscious beings meet, and each demands recognition from the other. In the struggle, one is willing to risk death and becomes master; the other clings to life and becomes slave. But the victory reverses itself. The master, recognized only by someone he does not respect, stagnates; the slave, transforming the world through labor and disciplined by fear, comes to true self-consciousness and eventually surpasses his master.

It is difficult to exaggerate how much of modern politics lives inside that parable. Marx read it as the story of class struggle, with the worker as the slave who will inherit the earth. Nietzsche, as Chapter 7 shows, told a rival version in which the slaves win by inventing a morality that brands the masters' strength as evil. In the twentieth century the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève lectured on the master and slave in Paris to an audience that included many of the future leaders of French thought, and argued that history ends in a universal state of mutual recognition.[39] Kojève's reading flowed into the French left of the postwar years and, by way of Leo Strauss's students, into the American right, where Francis Fukuyama made it the basis of The End of History and the Last Man in 1992.[40] Fukuyama's later book on identity read both the identity politics of the left and the status anger of populist right movements as struggles for recognition, the Greek thymos, the part of the soul that demands to be respected.[41] Here is the clearest case in this chapter of a single idea feeding both branches: the demand for recognition, born in Rousseau's amour-propre and given its classic form by Hegel, now drives movements that see each other as mortal enemies.

The left Hegelians of the 1830s and 1840s turned their master's method against religion first. Strauss's Life of Jesus treated the gospels as myth. Ludwig Feuerbach's Essence of Christianity of 1841 argued that God is a projection of human nature, that "theology is anthropology," and that men had alienated their own best qualities by attributing them to an imaginary being.[42] Overcome that alienation, Feuerbach taught, and human beings would recognize their own divinity. This is one of the most important moves in the history of the left: the claim that the Christian God was really man, misunderstood, so that the energy once directed at heaven could be redirected at the perfection of humanity on earth. The young Karl Marx, a

member of this circle, took Feuerbach's critique of religion as settled and asked why human beings needed such projections in the first place. His answer was that they live in conditions that make real happiness impossible. Religion, he wrote in 1844, is "the sigh of the oppressed creature" and "the opium of the people," and to abolish it as illusory happiness is to demand real happiness.[43]

From there Marx built his system. He kept Hegel's dialectic of history but replaced spirit with material production: with Hegel, he wrote, the dialectic "is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again."[44] The way human beings produce their living, and the class relations that production creates, shape their laws, politics, religion and ideas. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."[45] Capitalism, Marx argued, was the most productive system ever devised and also doomed: it would concentrate wealth, impoverish the workers, produce repeated crises, and create in the proletariat the class that would overthrow it and abolish private ownership of the means of production. Philosophy's task was no longer to understand the world. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[46]

Here the secularization reading reaches its strongest form. Löwith and the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, whose three-volume history of Marxism remains the authoritative critical account, both read Marx's system as a transformation of Christian hope: a fall into alienation, a suffering class that redeems humanity by its suffering, a final judgment in revolution, and a kingdom of freedom in which the contradictions of history are resolved.[47] Kołakowski, who had been a Marxist in his youth, called it a Promethean faith. This is the scholarly form of this book's hypothesis that the modern left "emerged from Christianity through the Enlightenment." The book adds a characteristic image. The Enlightenment, it holds, tried "to keep the baby" of Christian morality while throwing out its metaphysics, but "its interpretation of the baby, of what is good, was still informed by the bathwater," and so it produced not the best of both worlds but "a gross chimera, which is leftism and communism." Nietzsche said something very close to this about the English moralists of his day: "They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality."[48]

In the second half of the twentieth century two of the most respected moral philosophers in the English-speaking world, neither of them on the political right in any ordinary sense, made a version of the same diagnosis.

Elizabeth Anscombe argued in 1958 that modern moral words like "ought" and "obligation" are "survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives," the conception of a divine lawgiver, and that without it they had lost their sense.[49] Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue opened with the image of a civilization that has kept fragments of a moral language whose context has been destroyed, and that uses those fragments with passion but without the framework that once made them coherent.[50] This book's strongest statement of the idea, that the modern left's morality is a morality cut off from the metaphysics that grounded it, is developed in Chapter 2. What matters here is that the idea is not a polemicist's invention. It is one of the most serious diagnoses of modern moral life on offer, held in different forms by Nietzsche, Anscombe, MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.

The book goes further about Marx himself. Its hypothesis is that Marxism "can be read as a rebellion against reality, against the need for capitalists and managers," that Marx "tried to force his a priori onto Reality and of course he created chaos, because the way things are is not evil," and that the communist mind is "caught in this appearance," mistaking capital, which in truth "represents life," the stored resources by which a society feeds and builds, for a mere instrument of theft. Underneath the economics, on this view, is a deeper wish: Marx "fundamentally wills for a simpler world where man is not alienated from the land and his life."

The evidence bears on this hypothesis more directly than on most claims in the history of ideas, because Marxism was tried. In 1920 the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises argued that a socialist economy without private property in the means of production could have no real prices for capital goods, and so no way to calculate what to produce or how.[51] Friedrich Hayek extended the point in 1945: the knowledge needed to run an economy is dispersed among millions of people and exists nowhere in a form a planner could gather; prices are how a free economy communicates it.[52] The Hungarian economist János Kornai, who lived inside a planned economy and studied it from within, documented its chronic shortages, its "soft budget constraints" that let failing enterprises survive, and its inability to innovate.[53] The record of the twentieth century confirmed these arguments with a consistency rare in social science: every economy organized on Marxist lines fell behind its market neighbors, and most of the communist states that survived did so by reintroducing markets. To that extent the hypothesis that Marxism collided with reality,

specifically with the reality of dispersed knowledge, incentives and the functions that managers and capital perform, has as strong support as any claim in this book.

Two qualifications are needed. The first is that Marx did not think of himself as a voluntarist. His whole system claimed to describe historical necessity, not to impose a wish; it was precisely the "utopian socialists" he scorned for designing ideal societies out of their heads. The voluntarist turn came with Lenin, who argued in 1902 that the workers left to themselves would never rise above trade-union demands and needed a disciplined vanguard of professional revolutionaries to make the revolution for them.[54] The gap between Marx's theory of necessity and Lenin's practice of will is itself evidence for the book's deeper claim: when history failed to deliver the outcome the theory required, the movement did not abandon the outcome; it supplied the missing force by will and, eventually, by terror. The second qualification is that Marx's analysis of capitalism is respected well beyond the left. Economists who reject his labor theory of value and his predictions of collapse still credit him with seeing, earlier than anyone, capitalism's power to transform every inherited institution. That theme was soon taken up by the right as well. Georges Sorel converted the Marxist myth of the general strike into a myth of heroic violence that fascinated the nationalist right, and Mussolini was a leading socialist editor before he founded fascism; Sternhell built his account of fascism's origins on that path, though most historians give more weight to nationalism than to revised Marxism.[55] Today some figures on the post-liberal right borrow Marx's critique of capitalism's corrosion of family, place and faith, while rejecting his remedy.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, then, both branches had their founding texts. The left had Rousseau's account of inequality as a social crime, Kant's sovereign will, the left Hegelians' redirection of religious hope toward humanity, and Marx's science of history. The right had Burke's partnership of the generations, de Maistre's providence and particular man, the right Hegelians' blessing of the actual, and the first romantic nationalists' love of a people's own ways. Both had drawn on Christianity, and both had defined themselves against the Revolution of 1789, one as its heir and the other as its opponent.

This book's reading of that history is that the two branches are two answers to one question, the question of whether the order of the world is given or made. In the words this book uses for its central theme, it is the

question of "whether the world is made or merely found," of veritas or voluntas. The classical and medieval tradition held, in the book's phrase, that "reality precedes the will." The line that runs from Ockham's sovereign God through Rousseau's general will, Kant's self-legislating reason and the left Hegelians' deified humanity to Marx's program of changing the world moved authority, step by step, from what is given to what is willed. The right, in its Burkean and natural-law forms, is the branch that kept faith with the given. The book's own position, stated elsewhere, is neither: it holds that "reality is given and we are free to reshape it however but must operate within its limits; we can change the content but not the structure." On that view each branch carries half the truth, the left its sense that much of the human world is made and can be remade, the right its sense that the making answers to an order it did not make.

That reading fits the history of ideas well. Whether it explains why ordinary people in Ohio or Lyon vote as they do is another matter. The empirical evidence of the next chapters suggests that most citizens never read Rousseau or Burke and arrive at their politics through dispositions, families and communities. What the genealogy explains is the form those dispositions take when they become articulate: the arguments that intellectuals on each side reach for, the hopes and fears that recur across two centuries, and the strange fact that the same thinkers, from Rousseau and Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger, keep turning up on both sides. The next chapter follows that strange fact into the twentieth century, after Nietzsche announced that God was dead and both branches had to decide what to do without him.

CHAPTER 7

After the Death of God: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt

The thinkers of the last chapter all wrote inside a world that still believed, or half believed, that history had a meaning given to it from above. Rousseau appealed to nature and conscience, Burke to Providence and inherited order, Hegel to the march of Spirit, Marx to the iron laws of history that would deliver the classless society as surely as the Church had promised the Kingdom. Even the atheists among them borrowed the shape of the Christian story: a fall, a long struggle, a redemption at the end. The three Germans of this chapter wrote after that shape had cracked. Friedrich Nietzsche announced the crack. Martin Heidegger tried to think beneath it, to the ground he believed the whole Western tradition had forgotten. Carl Schmitt drew its political conclusion: once no higher authority stands above the parties, politics comes down to who decides, and against whom.

All three are claimed by the left and by the right. That is the first fact to hold on to, because it cuts against the common picture of the left and right as two separate families with separate ancestors. Nietzsche has been read as the prophet of fascism and as the patron saint of the French radical left. Heidegger joined the Nazi party, and his most influential students and readers were Jews, Marxists and the founders of deconstruction. Schmitt was the "crown jurist" of the Third Reich, and his ideas now shape both the populist left in Europe and the postliberal right in America. If the left and the right share roots anywhere, they share them here.

This chapter has a contemporary hook. In an interview released in November 2026, Alex Karp, the chief executive of the software company Palantir, who earned a doctorate in social theory at the University of Frankfurt, said that "Heideggerian philosophy is the most important political philosophy, I think, for worse in the West now," and that regressive movements on the far right, and those on the far left that "pretend to be

Marxists," are "actually Heideggerian."[1] It is an arresting claim from an unlikely source. The chapter tests it. But it begins further back, with the event that all three men took as their starting point and that this book treats as the hinge of modern politics: what Nietzsche called the death of God.

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Nietzsche: The Death of God and the Revaluation of Values

The famous passage comes in The Gay Science of 1882. A madman runs into the marketplace in the morning with a lantern, crying that he seeks God. The unbelievers standing about laugh at him. He turns on them: "Whither is God? I will tell you. We have killed him, you and I. All of us are his murderers." And then the lines that matter most for this book: "Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." The madman ends by saying he has come too early: "This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men."[2]

Nietzsche was not making a claim about the existence of God. He was making a claim about a civilization. The belief that had held European morals, law, science and self-understanding together for fifteen centuries had become, among the educated, unbelievable. That was a fact about the mind of the West, and Nietzsche thought almost no one had grasped its consequences. Elsewhere in the same book he wrote that "the greatest recent event—that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe," and that "much less may one suppose that many people know as yet what this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality."[3] In another section he put it as a parable: after the Buddha died, his shadow was shown in a cave for centuries. "God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too."[4]

This is the root of one of this book's central images. The view taken here is that the West killed God but did not bury him: it gave up the belief while

keeping the morality that the belief had grounded, and so it lives among the remains. In the book's own strongest phrasing, "WOKE IS THE MOLD AND THE STENCH OF CHRIST UNBURIED": a morality cut off from its metaphysics, "a map floating without the territory." The moral content of that claim, the descent of modern egalitarianism from Christian teaching, is the subject of Chapter 2 and is not repeated here. What belongs to this chapter is its lineage. The metaphor of an unburied god whose decomposition can be smelled, and whose shadow lingers in caves after he is gone, is Nietzsche's own. The claim that secular egalitarians keep Christian morality while rejecting its ground is Nietzsche's too. In Twilight of the Idols he wrote of the English moralists of his day: "They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality." He called this a failure of nerve and of logic. "Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands."[5] The book's hypothesis that the political left is the heir of the Christian ethic stripped of its God, and that this explains both its moral confidence and its instability, therefore has a precise and respectable ancestor. It is, in substance, Nietzsche's thesis, applied to the century and a half since he wrote.

Nietzsche went further, and the further step is where the political left and right part ways over him. In Beyond Good and Evil (1886) he declared that "morality in Europe at present is herding-animal morality," and that "the democratic movement is the inheritance of the Christian movement." He sneered in the same passage at the socialists and anarchists roaming "the highways of European culture."[6] In The Antichrist (1888) he was blunter: "The poisonous doctrine, 'equal rights for all,' has been propagated as a Christian principle."[7] The explanation he offered for how this morality had come to rule is the one set out in On the Genealogy of Morality (1887). Noble peoples once called "good" what was strong, healthy, proud and beautiful, and "bad" what was low and weak. The weak, unable to win in the open, took revenge in the imagination. They renamed the strong "evil" and their own weakness "good": humility, meekness, patience, pity. "The slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values."[8] Ressentiment, the French word Nietzsche kept, means more than resentment. It is a lasting, half-hidden grudge of the powerless against the powerful that turns itself into a moral system, so that the grudge can be felt as virtue.

The book adopts Nietzsche's diagnosis in its sharpest form. "Equality is the will to power of the bottom half," in the formulation developed in Chapter 2, is Nietzsche's genealogy put in a sentence. So is the claim that the left's worldview "isn't eliminating hierarchy; it's attempting to invert it — the final victory of ressentiment morality," with the moral caste of the "oppressed" placed on top. So is the claim that the left is, at bottom, "in open rebellion against natural hierarchies (ressentiment), i.e. in open rebellion against god," where God means, as it does throughout this book, the given order of reality. And so is the idea that the long period between the death of the old god and the founding of a new order is an "interregnum," a time of drift in which no table of values commands belief. Nietzsche gave that period a length. "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries," he wrote in a draft preface. "I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism."[9] The book's hypothesis that "leftism is the codification of the interregnum, of not picking" reads the modern left as that nihilism made into a politics: a refusal to rank, dressed as a refusal to exclude. Nietzsche's image for its end state was the "last man," who has abolished every difference of rank and wants only comfort. "No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse."[10]

Three facts complicate the use of Nietzsche as a weapon for one side only, and an honest account has to state them.

The first is that Nietzsche's influence on the twentieth century was spread across the whole political spectrum. The standard history of his reception in Germany, Steven Aschheim's, shows that before 1914 his readers included anarchists, socialists, feminists, Zionists, expressionist artists and youth movements, alongside völkisch nationalists. Each took the Nietzsche it needed: the liberator from bourgeois convention, the prophet of the new man, the enemy of the herd, the herald of a coming aristocracy.[11] The Nazi reading was selective, and the Nietzsche archive run by his sister shaped it, but Aschheim's verdict is that it was not simply a forgery, because Nietzsche's contempt for equality and his language of breeding and rank were real. On the right, the line runs through Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West, Ernst Jünger and the "Conservative Revolution" of the Weimar years, and on to today's self-described vitalist right online, which takes its tone from a 2018 book called Bronze Age Mindset.[12] On the left, it runs through Georges Bataille, who tried in the 1930s to rescue Nietzsche from

fascism, through Gilles Deleuze's Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962), and above all through Michel Foucault, whose method of "genealogy," tracing an idea back to the power struggles that produced it, is borrowed from Nietzsche by name.[13]

The second complication follows from the first. The left did not miss Nietzsche's tool; it picked it up and turned it around. Nietzsche taught that moral claims are, in his phrase, "the sign-language of the affects," that behind every lofty principle stands a drive seeking power.[14] The left of the 1960s and after applied this to the morals of the powerful: to bourgeois respectability, to the "objectivity" of science, to the authority of the canon, to the neutrality of law. Where Nietzsche unmasked the priest, Foucault unmasked the doctor, the warden and the professor. The same suspicion that the book turns on the left, that its justice is a will to power wearing the mask of virtue, the left had already turned on everyone else. That is one reason the culture war so often sounds like two sides accusing each other of the same thing. Both have learned to read the other's morality as disguised interest, and both learned it from the same teacher. The psychological literature has a name for this symmetry: each side readily sees the other's resentment and its own grievances.[15]

The third complication bears on a specific hypothesis in this book. It holds that there are "two camps post-Nietzsche: The Strong, who see the death of God as liberation to create higher meaning, and The Weak, who see it as loss, anxiety, abandonment," and that "modern philosophy, academia, and even politics have been ruled mostly by the second camp." The existentialists, on this account, "responded with despair instead of power. While Nietzsche danced, they moped in a chair in the corner," and "the Overman would've leapt in." Hence the summary: "They are the existentialists. We are the Nietzscheans." As a description of a mood, there is something to this. The French existentialism of the 1940s did speak the language of anguish and abandonment. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that man is "condemned to be free" and, borrowing a term Heidegger had used, that he is "forlorn" because God does not exist and nothing guarantees his choices.[16] The postwar decades that followed two world wars and the death camps did breed a philosophy of suspicion rather than of creation, and the later academic left made critique, not construction, its highest act, a theme taken up in the next chapter. But as a map of left and right, the two-camp picture runs against the record. The most influential thinkers of the academic left after 1960, Foucault and Deleuze above all, were not

mourners of God. They were avowed Nietzscheans who read the death of God exactly as Nietzsche had, as an opening for the creation of new values and new forms of life. The left's leading theorists did not reject Nietzsche's challenge; they accepted it and answered it differently. The difference between left and right Nietzscheans is not that one camp has the strength to face the death of God and the other lacks it. It lies in what each thinks should be built afterward, and for whom: a society of self-creating equals, or a renewed order of rank.

The book's more precise version of the claim survives this test, and it is the better one. It holds that "the right is in denial about the death of God while the left has accepted it, but not buried God." On this reading, the right clings to the old religion as if nothing had happened, which leaves it defending inherited forms it can no longer justify in public, while the left has accepted that God is gone but kept his morality, cut loose from any account of why it should bind. The first is Nietzsche's charge against the pious; the second is his charge against the English moralists. Neither side, on this view, has done what Nietzsche demanded: think the event through to the end and found values on a new ground. That claim is a philosophical judgment rather than an empirical one, and evidence cannot settle it. But it is coherent, it is faithful to Nietzsche, and it explains a fact the two-camp picture cannot: that the left and right can both read Nietzsche as their own and both be partly right.

One last element of the book's reading of Nietzsche deserves notice, because it marks where the book departs from him. The book holds that "the Left misinterpreted what the death of God meant": "they thought the real died when it was only the appearance. The real God remains." The God who died, on this view, was the symbolic god of the priests; what remains is reality itself, with its fixed structure, its consequences and its ranks. Nietzsche sometimes wrote as if, with God gone, nothing stood above the will: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted," as Zarathustra's shadow puts it.[17] The book refuses that inference. It holds instead that reality is the god that did not die, and that the error of the modern left lies precisely in treating the death of the symbol as the death of the thing. That is the realist core of this book, set out in Chapter 1, and it puts the book closer in one respect to Nietzsche's critics than to Nietzsche. It was Heidegger who first argued, at length, that Nietzsche's will to power did not overcome the old metaphysics but completed it.

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Heidegger: Being, Rootedness and the Revolt Against the Modern World

Martin Heidegger is the hardest of the three to state plainly, and plain statement matters here, because his ideas reached politics in simplified form. He began as the assistant and chosen heir of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, the discipline of describing experience as it is actually lived rather than as theory says it must be. His Being and Time (1927) turned that method on human existence itself. Its starting point is that we do not first exist as detached minds and then acquire a world. We find ourselves already "thrown" into a world full of meanings we did not choose: a language, a history, a set of tools and practices, things that matter and things that do not. Most of the time we live in the anonymous mode Heidegger called das Man, "the they": we do what one does, think what one thinks, say what one says. Authentic existence, Eigentlichkeit, begins when a person faces his own death as his own and, in its light, takes hold of the possibilities his inheritance has handed him. In the book's account of history, this authenticity is not only individual. A person's fate is bound up with the "destiny" of the community and the people to which he belongs.[18]

Heidegger's later work turned from the individual to the whole of Western history. Western thought since Plato, he argued, had progressively forgotten "Being," the simple fact that things are and show themselves, and had reduced everything that is to what can be represented, measured and controlled. The end point of this history is modern technology, which he called Gestell, usually translated "enframing": a way of revealing the world in which rivers, forests, animals and finally human beings appear only as "standing-reserve," stock on call for use.[19] In his lectures on Nietzsche, delivered between 1936 and 1940, he made the claim that matters most for this book. Nietzsche, he argued, had not overcome metaphysics. His "will to power" was its last and most extreme form, in which the world appears as nothing but material for the will's self-assertion, a "will to will" that wants only more of its own power.[20] Liberal capitalism and Soviet communism, on this view, were not opposites. They were two versions of the same nihilism: the same planetary mobilization of everything for production and control.

Here a paradox appears that bears directly on this book's central axis. Chapter 1 proposed that the deepest substance of the left-right divide is a

stance toward the given, the difference between those who hold that reality governs the will and those who hold that the will may govern reality. Heidegger stands in a strange place on that axis. He was the twentieth century's most searching critic of the will to remake the world: of technology, of planning, of the treatment of nature and man as raw material. In that respect he is an enemy of the voluntarism the book attributes to the left. Yet he rejected the realist alternative just as firmly. He did not believe in a fixed natural order that reason could know and that would hold for all peoples alike; that, for him, was just the old metaphysics again. What he offered instead was a third answer. The measure is neither found in a universal nature nor made by the sovereign individual. It is given to a people by its history, its language, its soil and its fate, and it is binding only on that people. This third answer, meaning as rooted inheritance, is what Heidegger contributed to politics. It is why his influence can run in two directions at once.

The direction it first ran was toward National Socialism. Heidegger joined the Nazi party on May 1, 1933, the same day as Carl Schmitt, and became rector of the University of Freiburg. His inaugural address, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," called on the university to serve the destiny of the German people.[21] He resigned the rectorship within a year, but he remained a party member until 1945, and the French occupation authorities barred him from teaching until 1951. In lectures given in 1935 and published in 1953, he described Germany as caught in a pincer between Russia and America, which he judged "metaphysically the same," two forms of unchained technology and the rootless organization of the average man, and he spoke of "the inner truth and greatness of this movement."[22] His former student Karl Löwith recalled meeting him in Rome in 1936, wearing the party badge on his lapel.[23] The publication from 2014 of his private Black Notebooks settled a long debate in the worst direction: they contain passages that cast "world Judaism" as an agent of the rootless calculation he saw destroying the West.[24] Scholars still disagree about how far the philosophy itself is implicated in the politics. Since the notebooks, the weight of opinion has moved from "a personal error" toward "entangled."[25] For this book the narrower point is enough: the third answer, meaning as a people's rooted destiny, was put to political use in its author's lifetime, by its author, in the service of the worst regime of the century.

After 1945 the same ideas ran in the other direction, and this is where Karp's claim finds its footing. Heidegger's most influential students and

readers were overwhelmingly on the left. Herbert Marcuse worked under him in Freiburg from 1928 to 1932 and tried to fuse Being and Time with Marx before breaking with him after 1933; Marcuse later became the leading theorist of the New Left, and his picture of a "one-dimensional" technological society echoes his teacher's critique of technology.[26] Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1943) was a creative misreading of Being and Time that became the existentialism of a generation of the left; Heidegger himself repudiated it.[27] Hannah Arendt, his student and lover in the 1920s, adapted his categories into a political theory of action and plurality. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction began as a radicalization of Heidegger's program of "destruction," the dismantling of the Western tradition's claims to stable meaning and presence.[28] And Michel Foucault, near the end of his life, said simply: "My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger."[29] Through these men, ideas first worked out in the German province of the 1920s became the common sense of the postwar humanities: suspicion of universal reason as a disguise for domination, the authority of situated and lived experience, hostility to technology and the market as forms of uprooting, and a story of the West as a fall from which liberation is needed.

On the right, the debt is open and explicit. Alain de Benoist, founder of the French Nouvelle Droite in 1968, took from Heidegger the idea that liberal universalism is an "ideology of the Same" that dissolves peoples into interchangeable individuals, and opposed to it an "ethnopluralism" in which every people has the right to remain itself on its own soil. Guillaume Faye's "archeofuturism" joined that rootedness to a cult of technology.[30] Ernst Nolte, who had attended Heidegger's seminars, became the historian whose sympathetic reading of fascism as a reaction to Bolshevism set off the German historians' quarrel of 1986.[31] And in Russia, Aleksandr Dugin's The Fourth Political Theory (2009) argued that the three political theories of modernity were exhausted, liberalism with its subject the individual, communism with its subject the class, fascism with its subject the nation or race, and proposed Heidegger's Dasein itself as the subject of a new politics, realized in a world of separate, rooted civilizations.[32] Dugin calls Heidegger the foundation of his theory. The American online right has absorbed the same template in popular form: the agrarian "trad" aesthetic, the cult of an origin to which one must return, the identification of technology and liberal universalism as the twin solvents of a people.

Is Karp right, then? His claim needs to be stated exactly before it is judged. He did not say that left and right as such are Heideggerian. He said that "regressive" movements on the far right, and those on the far left that "pretend to be Marxists," are "actually Heideggerian," and that Heideggerian thought is "the most important political philosophy… for worse in the West now." In an earlier interview he described the underpinnings of the more "nefarious" elements of the West as "Heidegger — both left and right."[33] The claim does not appear in his 2025 book, The Technological Republic; it is a remark made in conversation. Nor, contrary to common report, did he write his doctorate under Jürgen Habermas. His supervisor was the social psychologist Karola Brede, and the dissertation extended Theodor Adorno's attack on the "jargon of authenticity," itself a polemic against Heidegger's language, into a theory of how aggressive speech binds a community together.[34] So the remark comes from someone trained inside the Frankfurt School's long quarrel with Heidegger, and it compresses that quarrel into a sentence.

Judged as such, the claim has a distinguished pedigree. Adorno argued in 1964 that Heideggerian "authenticity" made domination look sacred.[35] Habermas, in a lecture of 1980, grouped the French post-Heideggerian left with conservatives as "young conservatives" who justify "an irreconcilable antimodernism," and traced their line "from Georges Bataille via Michel Foucault to Jacques Derrida"; he developed the case at length in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.[36] The French philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut read the thought of 1968 as Heidegger crossed with Nietzsche, Marx or Freud and called it "antihumanism."[37] And Richard Wolin's The Seduction of Unreason (2004) argued in the strongest form that the postmodern left had fallen in love with ideas, the critique of reason, of democracy and of "the West," that had first belonged to the radical right of Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Conservative Revolution, without recognizing where they came from.[38] Mark Lilla's study of intellectuals drawn to tyranny on both left and right, The Reckless Mind, makes a related case.[39]

Against these supports, three limits have to be set. First, Marxism is not Heideggerian. It descends from Hegel and the Enlightenment, and orthodox Marxists were among Heidegger's fiercest critics: György Lukács placed him in the line of German irrationalism that led to Hitler.[40] Most of today's socialist left, from social democrats to the democratic socialists who won in New York in 2025, is better explained by Marx, labor politics and the welfare state than by fundamental ontology, and Karp offered no evidence

about actual activists. Second, "Heideggerian" in Karp's usage stretches to cover any politics that is anti-Enlightenment, anti-technological, nostalgic or obsessed with authentic identity. Those themes are older than Heidegger by a century and a half. They belong to the Romantic and Counter-Enlightenment currents that Isaiah Berlin traced back to Herder and Hamann, which fed the left as well as the right from the start. Naming one philosopher overstates his causal role. Third, the specific claim that today's identity politics descends from Heidegger through French theory is disputed by specialists. Critical race theory's main roots, as the next chapter shows, lie in American legal scholarship and the civil-rights movement more than in Freiburg or Paris.

The fair verdict is this. Heidegger is the single most important shared philosophical source for anti-liberal thought on both ends of the spectrum since 1945, a judgment Habermas and Wolin would endorse in substance and many Heidegger scholars would resist. Karp's claim holds well for the intellectual far right, where Heidegger is cited by name. It is plausible but partial for the academic left of the postwar humanities. It is weak as a description of the mass left or of socialism as such. What it captures best is a structure rather than a lineage: on both ends, a turn from universal reason and a common measure toward group identity, lived experience and rooted authenticity as the sources of meaning and truth. The identitarian right calls it rootedness; the identitarian left calls it lived experience; the logic of "my group is its own measure" is the same. The companion paper Understanding the Right drew the conclusion that the deepest divide in modern politics may run not between left and right but between those who believe in a universal measure and those who hold that each people or group is its own.[41] This book adds that the divide maps onto its central axis with one refinement. Heidegger's third answer is a refusal of both realism and individual voluntarism in favor of collective inheritance, and both extremes have found it attractive for the same reason: it lets a group's will appear not as choice but as destiny.

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Schmitt: Friend, Enemy and the Return of the Political

If Nietzsche diagnosed the death of God and Heidegger searched beneath it, Carl Schmitt asked what politics becomes once it is gone. He was a

Catholic jurist, the sharpest critic of the Weimar Republic's parliamentary liberalism, and from 1933 a member of the Nazi party and its most prominent legal theorist. He defended the murders of the Night of the Long Knives in an article titled "The Führer Protects the Law," and was pushed aside by the SS in 1936 for being insufficiently reliable.[42] He lived until 1985 without ever recanting, and his books have never been more widely read than in the last thirty years.

Three ideas account for that. The first opens his Political Theology (1922): "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." Every legal order, Schmitt argued, rests on a moment that the rules cannot cover: the emergency, when someone must decide what the rules will be. Liberal constitutionalism pretends that law can govern itself, but behind every norm stands a decision, and behind every decision a decider.[43] The second, in the same book, is that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts": the omnipotent lawgiver is the omnipotent God made into a state, the exception is the miracle.[44] Schmitt thus joined Nietzsche, from the opposite side of the religious question, in holding that modern politics runs on borrowed theology. The third and most famous comes in The Concept of the Political (1927, revised 1932): "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[45] Morality concerns good and evil, aesthetics beautiful and ugly, economics profitable and unprofitable. Politics is defined by none of these. It is the most intense of all human groupings, the one in which a people decides who its enemy is, the enemy being not a private foe one hates but a public one, "the other, the stranger," with whom conflict up to the point of killing is a real possibility.

From these premises Schmitt drew his case against liberalism. Liberalism, he wrote, tries to evade the political. It "has attempted to dissolve the enemy, from the business side into a competitor and from the intellectual side into a debating adversary."[46] It hopes that every conflict can be turned into a market exchange or a parliamentary discussion, settled by procedure and compromise. But the political does not go away when it is denied; it returns in disguise, and often more brutally, as when wars fought in the name of humanity treat the enemy as an outlaw from the human race. A liberal order that cannot name its enemies, Schmitt thought, will be defeated by those who can.

The book's own understanding of politics in its present form is, in structure, Schmittian. It holds that modern politics is "existential and religious and truly war," that it is ultimately a contest over who defines the axioms, and that the side that sets the terms of morality wins before the argument begins. It holds that the left's real program is a struggle of one class of people against another, not a disinterested pursuit of principle, and that the right loses because it treats a war as a debate. Those are Schmitt's themes: the primacy of decision over discussion, the secular theology beneath political concepts, the enemy that liberal procedure cannot see. The book did not take them from Schmitt, but it arrives where he did, and the convergence is worth naming because it shows how the logic of a world without a shared god pulls even very different thinkers to the same place.

That logic is not the property of one side. Schmitt's reception, as the historian Jan-Werner Müller has shown, was as broad as Nietzsche's: Spanish Francoists, German conservatives, the French New Right and Italian Marxists all used him.[47] On the left, Walter Benjamin engaged his theory of sovereignty in the 1920s and sent him a letter of thanks; Giorgio Agamben built a theory of modern power on the "state of exception"; and the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe made Schmitt the starting point of a "left populism," arguing that politics is irreducibly a contest between "us" and "them" and that the liberal center's dream of consensus had handed the field to the populist right.[48] Her ideas shaped the new left parties of southern Europe in the 2010s. On the right, Leo Strauss wrote a famous commentary on The Concept of the Political in 1932 that judged Schmitt still trapped inside the liberalism he attacked.[49] In America, the Harvard legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, with Eric Posner, adopted Schmitt's critique of legalism in The Executive Unbound (2010), arguing that the modern administrative state is governed by executive decision rather than by the separation of powers, and the postliberal right since has argued for using state power openly in the service of a substantive good rather than a neutral procedure.[50] Debates over emergency powers and executive authority in the second Trump administration brought the word "Schmittian" into ordinary commentary.

The strongest reason to take Schmitt seriously in a book about left and right is not intellectual history at all. It is that mass publics in the United States have become more Schmittian over the last thirty years. Political scientists measure "affective polarization," the degree to which partisans dislike and distrust the other side, and find that it has risen sharply since

the 1990s even where disagreement on policy has grown much less.[51] A 2020 review in Science by fifteen scholars named the result "political sectarianism": a mix of seeing the other side as alien, disliking it and regarding it as morally contemptible, which together turn opponents from fellow citizens with mistaken views into enemies.[52] Schmitt would have recognized this as the political reasserting itself after a long liberal attempt to deny it. Whether one welcomes that, as some of his readers on both ends do, or fears it, as Strauss and the liberal tradition did, the description fits.

What, then, do these three men share, and what does their shared ground show about left and right?

All three begin from the same event: the loss of a common authority above the contending parties. Nietzsche named it and asked who would have the strength to create values without it. Heidegger looked beneath it for a meaning that neither the old metaphysics nor the modern will could give, and found it in the rooted destiny of a people. Schmitt drew the political conclusion: without a shared god, politics is decision, and decision means friend and enemy. Each of these answers was taken up by the right and by the left. Nietzsche gave the right its cult of rank and the left its method of unmasking. Heidegger gave the identitarian right its rootedness and the academic left its suspicion of universal reason. Schmitt gave the postliberal right its case for decisive power and the populist left its case for antagonism.

This suggests, first, that the book's hypothesis about the death of God is well founded as intellectual history. The decisive thinkers of the last century and a half did understand modern politics as what comes after God, and the left and the right both drink from that source. It does not follow, second, that either side's mass following was shaped by these men. Most voters on the left have never read Foucault and most on the right have never read Schmitt. The same thinker has served every side, which is strong evidence that philosophy often follows political commitment rather than causing it: intellectuals take from Nietzsche or Schmitt what their temperament and situation already incline them to want. Chapters 3 through 5 take up that more basic story. Third, the shared ground explains the uncanny mirroring of the extremes that the book has noted from the start. The left and the right each accuse the other of resentment, each treat the other as an enemy rather than an opponent, and each, at their far ends,

prefer the rooted authority of a group to a common measure, because both are improvising answers to the same vacancy.

Finally, the shared ground points to the alternative that runs against all three and that the book itself takes. Leo Strauss, who studied with Heidegger and commented on Schmitt, drew the opposite lesson from both. "The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism," he wrote, "nay, it is identical with nihilism."[53] His answer was not a new god, a rooted people or a sovereign decision, but a return to the idea that there is a nature of things, including human nature, that reason can know and that binds all peoples alike. That is the realist answer, the one the book calls the primacy of reality. Nietzsche's challenge stands: the old god is dead, and a morality that depends on him cannot last on borrowed credit. But the book's view is that what remains when the symbol is gone is not nothing, and not merely a people's inheritance or a leader's will. What remains is reality, with its fixed structure and its consequences, which no decision can repeal and which rules left and right alike.

CHAPTER 8

The Age of Critique: From Frankfurt to Paris to the Campus

In the spring of 1845 a twenty-six-year-old exile in Brussels wrote eleven short notes on a philosopher he had outgrown. The last of them became the most quoted sentence Karl Marx ever wrote: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[1] For two thousand years the highest work of the mind had been to see what is: to understand nature, the soul and the city as they are, and to fit human life to that understanding. Marx proposed a different job description. Thought would now be judged by what it could undo and remake. Within a century his heirs had added a second change, quieter but deeper. Thought would be judged by what it could unmask. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur later grouped Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the "school of suspicion": three masters who taught that what people say they believe is a cover for something else, whether class interest, the will to power or buried desire.[2] To read well, after them, was to read through the surface to the hidden motive beneath.

This chapter follows that habit of mind from a small institute in Frankfurt in the 1920s, through the cafés and lecture halls of postwar Paris, to the American university and, from there, to the human-resources office, the newsroom and the corporate training session. It is the chapter in which the left's modern vocabulary was made: hegemony, critique, the social construction of reality, power and knowledge, privilege, intersectionality. It is also the chapter in which the right, very late, found that it could use the same tools.

The book's working hypothesis about this history is a genealogy. Idealism, existentialism, critical theory, constructivism and postmodernism are taken here as members of one family. Each "shift[s] the center of gravity from objective reality to the interpreting subject," and they "differ only in how far they push that move and what they do with it." Idealism located

reality in mind; existentialism located meaning in the individual's choice; constructivism moved the act of making from the individual to the group; critical theory added an engine, holding that what a society calls knowledge is produced by power and serves it; postmodernism came last, as the stage at which no story about the world could claim to be truer than another. In one line: "Subjectivism went from creating meaning to creating reality." A second hypothesis rides on the first. In the universities of the late twentieth century, critique became "the highest intellectual act," and building anything positive came to look naive or complicit. The pages that follow test both claims against the actual history. The short verdict, given in advance, is that the genealogy is broadly right about the direction of travel, wrong in several of its links, and most right about the place where these ideas finally settled: not in philosophy departments, where strong anti-realism has always been a minority view, but in the humanities, law schools, schools of education and the institutions they staffed.

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The Turn to Culture: Lukács, Gramsci and Frankfurt

Marxism promised a revolution of the industrial working class in the most advanced capitalist countries. In 1917 it came instead in backward Russia, and in 1918 and 1919, when the risings in Germany and Hungary were crushed, the workers of the West did not follow. The question that shaped the next fifty years of left-wing thought was why not. If capitalism exploited the workers, and the workers were the majority, why did they keep consenting to it?

Two answers, given within a few years of each other, moved the battlefield from the factory to the mind. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács argued in 1923 that capitalism did not only rob the worker of his product; it shaped his consciousness. Under the rule of the commodity, human relations came to look like relations between things, natural and unchangeable. Lukács called this "reification," and he held that only the proletariat, as the class whose own life was turned into a thing, could see through it to the whole.[3] The Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, writing in a Fascist prison between 1929 and 1935, went further. Ruling classes, he wrote, govern less by force than by consent, and consent is manufactured in what he called civil society: churches, schools, newspapers, clubs, the

common sense of ordinary life. He named this rule by consent "hegemony." In the advanced countries a frontal assault on the state, a "war of manoeuvre," would fail, because the state was only "an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks." The left would first have to fight a long "war of position" for the culture itself.[4]

Gramsci also left a sentence that bears directly on this book's argument about our own moment: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[5] The book's own diagnosis of the present, developed in later chapters, uses Gramsci's word in a sense he would not have intended: the hypothesis that "leftism is the codification of the interregnum," the institutional form of a civilization that has lost one foundation and not yet found another.

A note of accuracy is needed here, because the history has been bent by both sides. The phrase "the long march through the institutions," which conservatives often attribute to Gramsci, is not his. It was coined around 1967 by the West German student leader Rudi Dutschke, echoing Mao's Long March, and Herbert Marcuse later endorsed the strategy in print.[6] The analogy to Gramsci's "war of position" is fair; the attribution is not.

The institution that turned these ideas into a school was the Institute for Social Research, founded in Frankfurt in 1923 with money from a grain merchant's son. Under Max Horkheimer, its director from 1930, it gathered philosophers, economists and psychoanalysts who fused Marx with Freud and Max Weber. In 1937, in exile in New York, Horkheimer gave the school its name and its charter in an essay called "Traditional and Critical Theory." Traditional theory, from Descartes to modern physics and sociology, tried to describe how the world works. Critical theory refused the role of neutral describer. Its aim was not to mirror society but to change it, and its standard was human emancipation: a theory was critical to the extent that it served to free people from the conditions that enslaved them.[7] The book's own compressed version of this distinction is exact: traditional theory "describes how society works"; critical theory "criticizes how society works in order to transform it."

Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno then wrote the school's darkest book. Dialectic of Enlightenment, finished in California in 1944 while the war was still being fought, argued that the Enlightenment's drive to master nature had turned into the mastery of human beings, and that reason, reduced to a tool for domination, had reverted into myth. It opens: "Enlightenment,

understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."[8] The book's chapter on "the culture industry" treated Hollywood and radio as factories of conformity. Here, for the first time in a major left text, the Enlightenment itself, the left's own parent, was put on trial. The structural kinship of this argument with the right's older critique of the Enlightenment, from Joseph de Maistre to Martin Heidegger's attack on technology, is a standard observation among historians of ideas.[9] Horkheimer and Adorno meant to save reason by making it reflect on itself. What their readers took from them, more often, was suspicion of reason as such.

In 1950 Adorno and colleagues at Berkeley published The Authoritarian Personality, which tried to measure a fascist disposition with a questionnaire, the "F-scale." It became the ancestor of seventy years of research on right-wing authoritarianism. It also drew, from the start, the objection that it looked for authoritarianism only on the right, a charge the sociologist Edward Shils made in 1954 and that recent work on left-wing authoritarianism has revived, as Chapter 3 recounts.[10] The choice of what to measure was itself an act of critical theory: the psychology of the incumbent order was put under the microscope, and the psychology of its critics was not.

The figure who carried the school into the streets was Herbert Marcuse, who had studied under Heidegger in Freiburg before joining the Institute. In One-Dimensional Man (1964) he conceded what orthodox Marxists could not: the Western working class had been bought off. Mass consumption, television and the welfare state had absorbed its discontent. Hope of revolution now lay elsewhere, with the people the affluent society had left outside: "underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable."[11] This sentence marks the hinge on which the left turned from class to identity. The revolutionary subject was no longer defined by its place in production but by its distance from the center.

The book's hypothesis about this turn is blunt: capitalism "succeeded so well that their initial complaint was hollowed out," so the left "pivoted to another class" it could present as oppressed. As a description of Marcuse's own reasoning this is close to his words. He did argue that the success of

advanced capitalism had removed the old revolutionary agent, and he did look for a new one among the excluded. Whether the wider left made the same move for the same reason is a separate question, and a harder one; the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism and gay liberation had their own histories and grievances, and few of their activists read Marcuse. But the intellectual justification for treating these movements as the new bearers of a single emancipatory project, heirs of the proletariat, came in large part from him.

A year later Marcuse published the essay that has become the most cited Frankfurt text in today's arguments about free speech. "Repressive Tolerance" (1965) argued that in an unequal society, equal tolerance for all views merely protects the powerful. True tolerance would therefore discriminate: "Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left."[12] He went on to propose withdrawing the toleration of speech and assembly from groups that promoted aggressive policies, discrimination, or opposition to the extension of public services. Historians disagree about how much direct influence the essay had on later campus speech codes and diversity bureaucracies; the causal chain is unproven.[13] What is not in doubt is that it states, with unusual candor, a principle that later practice often followed without stating it: the rules of open debate are themselves a form of power, and may be suspended in favor of the side defined as weaker.

Two cautions keep this story honest. First, the Frankfurt School was not one thing. Its second generation, led by Jürgen Habermas, turned decisively back toward the Enlightenment. Habermas defended modernity as an "incomplete project," built a theory of communicative reason in which claims to truth must be redeemed by argument open to all, and attacked the French post-structuralists as "young conservatives" who had borrowed the right's anti-modern mood.[14] Within critical theory itself, then, there was a pole that held to universal reason and truth, and the hypothesis that critical theory as such "rests on one foundational axiom," that "there is no stable truth, only power shaping what we call truth," fits its later, French-inflected forms far better than it fits Horkheimer, Adorno or Habermas, all of whom kept truth as a standard against which ideology could be measured.

Second, the story that the Frankfurt scholars deliberately engineered the cultural decline of the West, often told under the name "cultural

Marxism," is rejected by historians of the school as a conspiracy theory, and its lineage runs back to the Nazi slogan of "cultural Bolshevism."[15] The defensible claim is milder, and the working notes state it: today's identity politics "draws on a Marx-Gramsci-Marcuse toolkit, but is a distinct 20th–21st century American synthesis." The grammar of Marxism, history as the struggle of oppressor and oppressed groups, liberation as the goal, culture as a superstructure that hides domination, survived the loss of the proletariat and attached itself to new groups. That is a claim about ideas and their structure, and it can be tested. The other is a claim about a plot, and the evidence does not support it.

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Paris: Existence, Text and Power

On October 29, 1945, two months after the war in the Pacific ended, Jean-Paul Sartre gave a public lecture in Paris to a crowd so large that people fainted in the heat. Published as Existentialism Is a Humanism, it became the manifesto of a generation. Its core claim was that human beings have no given nature. A paper knife is made for a purpose its maker had in mind before he made it; its essence comes before its existence. Man is the reverse. "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards." Since "there is no God to have a conception of it," there is no human nature; "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." He is "condemned to be free."[16] Sartre cited Dostoevsky's line that if God does not exist, everything is permitted, and called it existentialism's starting point.

Four years later Simone de Beauvoir applied the same principle to sex: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[17] The sentence would carry more weight in the second half of the century than almost any other line of French philosophy. If woman is not born but made, then what has been made can be unmade, and the categories that ordered human life, man and woman, nature and custom, become questions of choice and power.

The book's hypothesis about existentialism has two parts. The first is that "Existentialism and Postmodernism are born from the trauma from the death of god," and from the wars that followed it. The existentialists, on this view, met the collapse of God and of European confidence "with despair

instead of power. While Nietzsche danced, they moped in a chair in the corner." Their "'authenticity' was the virtue of survivors, not creators. They philosophized from exhaustion; Nietzsche philosophized from excess." The second part is a judgment on what followed from Sartre's denial of human nature. Against it the book sets a plain realist reply: "A pot is a pot even if the clay could have been made for anything." Human beings are not only what they make of themselves; they are a definite kind of animal, with a nature that sets the terms on which any self-making can succeed.

The historical half of the first claim holds well. Sartre's thought took its public form under the German occupation and in its aftermath; its vocabulary of anguish, abandonment and despair is the vocabulary of a defeated and humiliated country, and Sartre himself drew the line from the absence of God to the absence of given values. Whether the existentialists were weaker spirits than Nietzsche is a judgment of character that evidence cannot settle, though it is worth noting that Nietzsche himself predicted that the death of God would first produce exactly this mood, a European nihilism of exhaustion, before anything stronger could grow from it.[18] The realist half of the claim, that human beings have a nature, is on firm scientific ground. Chapter 3 reviews the evidence: twin and adoption studies, the stability of personality, and the universals of human behavior all show that people are not blank slates, and that much of what Sartre called "what he makes of himself" is constrained by what he was born as.[19] Sartre's freedom is real at the margin of choice; it is false as an account of the whole.

The existentialists' moment was brief. By the 1960s a new generation of French thinkers had turned against Sartre's free, choosing subject almost as sharply as against God. Their master was Heidegger, who in his 1947 Letter on Humanism had rejected Sartre's humanism, and their method came from structuralism, the study of language, myth and kinship as systems that speak through individuals rather than being spoken by them. In their hands the "subject" itself, the knowing, willing human self that Sartre had exalted, became a product of language, discourse and power. This is the generation that English speakers would later call "postmodern," though most of its members rejected the label.

Jacques Derrida built his method, deconstruction, out of Heidegger's project of "destroying" the history of metaphysics. Western thought, he argued, rests on hierarchical pairs, speech over writing, presence over absence, nature over culture, man over woman, in which the first term

claims to be original and the second derivative. Deconstruction shows how each hierarchy depends on what it suppresses, and so cannot stand on its own. His most famous sentence, "there is nothing outside the text," has been read in two ways ever since: as a careful claim that we never meet the world except through some system of signs, and as a dizzy claim that there is no world beyond the signs.[20] Derrida himself insisted on the first reading. His followers and his critics often heard the second.

Michel Foucault, who said that his "entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger," and who called himself a Nietzschean, aimed not at texts but at institutions.[21] In a series of histories of madness, medicine, prisons and sexuality, he argued that the modern human sciences did not simply discover the truth about the insane, the sick, the criminal and the sexual; they helped produce these categories as objects of control. "Power and knowledge directly imply one another," he wrote in Discipline and Punish; "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."[22] Where Marx had seen power concentrated in a ruling class and the state, Foucault saw it spread everywhere, in schools, clinics, families and the very categories through which people understand themselves. It did not need a conspiracy; it worked through what everyone took to be normal.

The working notes put one line about this school starkly: "The Left is just Foucault, that everything is mere power." It is worth being exact about what Foucault claimed, because the exactness cuts both ways. Foucault's power/knowledge thesis does not say that truth does not exist; it says that what gets accepted as truth in a given society is shaped by power, and that power operates through what is accepted as truth. Read carefully, it is a claim about the conditions under which knowledge is produced, not a denial that some claims are better supported than others, and the working notes concede this point. But Foucault did deliberately refuse to say by what standard one regime of truth could be judged better than another, and that refusal, more than any explicit doctrine, is what passed into his American readers. If every regime of truth is an arrangement of power, then the only question left to ask of any claim is whom it serves. That is the move that turns a method of historical inquiry into a political weapon.

In 1979 Jean-François Lyotard gave the mood its name. "Simplifying to the extreme," he wrote, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives": the grand stories of progress, emancipation and scientific

truth that had justified modern knowledge.[23] Two decades later the American critic Fredric Jameson, himself a Marxist, described the culture that resulted as one marked by "the disappearance of a sense of history," a society that "has begun to live in a perpetual present."[24] The working notes record this passage with approval, because it names something the book's argument depends on: a culture that has lost confidence in any story about where it came from and where it is going cannot defend itself, and cannot build.

Here the book's genealogy can be checked against the record. The family resemblance it claims is real. Kant had argued that the mind does not passively receive the world but structures it; Hegel had made history the self-unfolding of mind; Nietzsche had declared that "there are no facts, only interpretations"; Heidegger had made human existence the clearing in which beings show up at all. Sartre made meaning a matter of choice. The sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in a widely read book of 1966, generalized the idea into The Social Construction of Reality.[25] Foucault and Derrida then made the constructed world an effect of power and language. In 1990 the American philosopher Judith Butler carried the line to its most consequential conclusion: gender is not the cultural expression of a natural sex but "performative," brought into being by repeated acts, and sex itself is as much a cultural product as gender.[26] At each step, more of what earlier ages took as given was moved into the column of the made. "Subjectivism went from creating meaning to creating reality" is a fair one-line summary of that movement.

But the line is not straight, and three of its links break. Marxism, the strongest current on the twentieth-century left, was materialist and determinist, the opposite of idealism and existentialism; Marx thought he had turned Hegel "right side up" by putting matter, not mind, at the base. Foucault and Derrida rejected Sartre's sovereign subject rather than extending it. And Habermas, the most influential critical theorist of the late century, defended universal reason against all of them. What unites the family is not a single doctrine but a direction: away from a world that sets the terms, toward a human activity, whether thought, choice, labor, language or power, that sets them. The book's genealogy is best read as a claim about that direction, and so read it holds.

It also has to be said where the strong form of this movement actually lived. In philosophy proper, the discipline that argues about these questions for a living, strong anti-realism has always been a minority position. In the

largest survey of professional philosophers, conducted in 2020, about four in five accepted or leaned toward realism about the external world, and about seven in ten toward scientific realism.[27] The most careful philosophical work on social construction drew lines that the popular version erased. John Searle distinguished "brute facts," such as the height of a mountain, which exist whatever anyone thinks, from "institutional facts," such as money, marriage and property, which exist only because people collectively treat them as existing.[28] Ian Hacking showed that most claims of "social construction" are really claims about ideas and classifications, not about the things classified, and that some human kinds change in response to being classified, which he called "looping effects."[29] Paul Boghossian argued that the global form of constructivism, the view that all facts are constructed, refutes itself.[30] On this question, then, the book's position, that "Language *mediates* but doesn't *create* reality" and that "Many things *are* socially constructed but reality and truth are not," is not a minority view but the considered judgment of most of the people who study it. The strong constructivism that the book attacks was a creature of literature departments, cultural studies, schools of education and activist writing more than of philosophy. That matters for understanding how it spread, which is the subject of the next section.

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From the Seminar to the Institution

French theory arrived in the United States through a single door. In October 1966 Johns Hopkins University held a conference on structuralism at which a thirty-six-year-old Derrida gave a paper that announced, in effect, structuralism's end. Within a decade his work and Foucault's had become the reigning vocabulary of the most prestigious English and comparative literature departments, beginning at Yale. The French historian François Cusset, who wrote the standard account of this migration, makes a point that matters for everything that follows: these thinkers had far more influence in American literature departments than in French philosophy, and in America they were read less as philosophers than as a toolkit for political reading.[31] A theory of texts became a theory of society, and a theory of society became a program.

Three channels carried the toolkit out of the seminar. The first was law. In 1977 a group of left-wing law professors launched Critical Legal Studies, which argued, drawing on Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, that legal doctrine is not neutral reasoning but a way of making existing hierarchies look natural and legitimate. From its edges, Black legal scholars who thought it too abstract about race built critical race theory. Derrick Bell, the first Black tenured professor at Harvard Law School, argued that civil-rights gains came only when they served white interests, and concluded that "racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society."[32] In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw coined "intersectionality," the idea that people who belong to more than one disadvantaged group, such as Black women, face forms of discrimination that are not the sum of the separate ones.[33] The specialist literature is clear that the roots of critical race theory lie mostly in legal realism, Critical Legal Studies, the experience of civil-rights litigation and Black feminism, not in Heidegger or Derrida; the popular genealogy that runs straight from Marcuse to every diversity training is overdrawn.[34]

The second channel was education. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, published in English in 1970, taught that education is never neutral: it either domesticates the oppressed or frees them, and the teacher's task is to raise their critical consciousness. It became one of the most assigned books in American schools of education.[35] In 1995 Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate carried critical race theory from law into education research.[36] A sentence written in 1989 by Peggy McIntosh, a women's studies scholar at Wellesley, gave the movement its most portable image: white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets," a knapsack of advantages its owner does not see.[37] The third channel was the humanities themselves, where gender studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies and, after Butler, queer theory grew into departments of their own, each built around a group and the forms of domination it had suffered.

By the 1990s the toolkit had become the ordinary method of a large part of the academy, and the people who taught it had become steadily more uniform in their politics. A 2016 study of voter registration among professors at forty leading American universities found 11.5 registered Democrats for every Republican, ranging from about four and a half to one in economics to more than thirty to one in history.[38] Surveys of faculty by the Higher Education Research Institute found the share describing

themselves as liberal or far left rising from about 42 percent in 1990 to about 60 percent by 2014.[39] The sociologist Neil Gross has argued that this imbalance comes mainly from self-selection, the academic career having been "typecast" as a liberal one in the same way nursing is typecast as female, rather than from discrimination; both explanations predict the same result, a professoriate that does not contain its own critics.[40]

In 1996 a physicist at New York University, Alan Sokal, submitted to the cultural-studies journal Social Text an article arguing that physical reality is "at bottom a social and linguistic construct" and that quantum gravity had progressive political implications. It was deliberate nonsense, written in the field's vocabulary, and the journal published it.[41] The hoax proved less than its admirers claimed; one paper slipping past one journal's editors is not a verdict on a discipline. But it caught something real: in parts of the academy, the claim that reality is constructed had become a sign of political virtue, to be welcomed rather than tested.

This is the setting for the book's hypothesis that critique became "the highest intellectual act" in the university, that "building anything positive is treated as naïve or complicit," and that the critic is "like a child who learned Santa wasn't real and from that inferred that no humans are real." The book frames the deeper change in its own terms: "The goal shifted from replacing false idols," as the historian Will Durant had urged, "to proving that all idols are false," a pure negative; "destruction requires no strength, only resentment and intellect," while "creation (being!) demands integration, risk, exposure. Deconstruction offers moral immunity." And it draws the consequence: "Once critique is endless, no new values can solidify. We become the blob (equality, Sameness)."

The descriptive half of this hypothesis has unexpected support from inside the humanities. In 2015 the literary scholar Rita Felski, one of the most respected figures in her field, published The Limits of Critique. Critique, she argued, had become not one method among others but the default "mood" of literary and cultural studies: a stance of suspicion and unmasking that treats any text, work of art or institution as guilty until proven innocent, and treats the critic's detachment as a mark of rigor and virtue. She called for "postcritique," a scholarship that could also attach, appreciate and build.[42] The queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick had made a similar complaint in the late 1990s, naming the dominant habit "paranoid reading."[43] When leading members of a discipline say that its reflex has

become suspicion and that it has lost the capacity to affirm, the outside observer who says the same thing is not imagining it.

The motive half of the hypothesis is harder to test, and here the evidence divides. The working notes hold that critical theory is "ressentiment institutionalized," that "the left consists almost exclusively in ontological revenge," and that postmodernism is "the will to power of contemporary intellectuals." The first two are claims about inner motive that no survey can confirm or refute directly, though Chapter 2 examines what the research on envy and compassion does and does not show. The third has a long and respectable pedigree in the sociology of intellectuals, and real evidence behind it. In 1979 the sociologist Alvin Gouldner, a man of the left, argued that the educated "New Class" had its own ideology, which he called "the culture of critical discourse": a style of argument that demands justification of every inherited authority and, not by accident, transfers authority to those best trained in demanding justifications.[44] In 2024 the sociologist Musa al-Gharbi extended the argument with survey and text data. What he calls "symbolic capitalists," the professionals who make their living from words, ideas and credentials, are the main carriers of the ideology popularly called "woke," and are also among the main beneficiaries of the inequalities it denounces; its moral language works in part as a weapon in competition among elites.[45] On this evidence the hypothesis that critique is, among other things, a status strategy of the educated class is well supported. Whether that is the whole of it, or whether the people who adopt it are also moved by sincere compassion, is a question the evidence leaves open, and probably the answer is both, in different proportions in different people.

A second hypothesis about this period concerns why the critique had a fixed direction. "The Left became anti-incumbent via critical theory which could only critique what it sees, i.e. what exists, which is incumbents: white, straight, male, America, West. Thus, 'progress' became destroying what is." There is a structural truth here. A method whose task is to expose the hidden domination in what exists will always find its targets among the existing and the successful, never among the outsiders whose cause it serves; it has no tools for criticizing the weak. Critical theory was defined from the start, in Horkheimer's essay, by its partisanship for the dominated. But the anti-incumbent direction did not begin with critical theory. It is as old as the left itself, which took its name in 1789 from the side of the assembly opposed to the crown, and Chapter 1 argues that it is the dynamic

form of the left's deeper commitment to equality. Critical theory supplied the method and the vocabulary; it did not create the direction.

The same caution applies to the book's thesis that "Woke is not Marxism but is structurally Marxist in logic and moral framing," and that "Leftist ideology doesn't die but resurrects in a new form": "The content changes; the structure stays." In its structural form this is close to what serious scholars of the movement say. Yascha Mounk, a political scientist of the center-left, traces what he calls the "identity synthesis" from Foucault, postcolonial theory and critical race theory through social media into mainstream institutions, and describes it as keeping the grammar of group antagonism while abandoning class.[46] The strongest evidence against the claim of continuity comes from the class left itself. Marxist and socialist critics such as the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. and the literary scholar Walter Benn Michaels have argued for two decades that identity politics is not the heir of Marxism but its replacement: a politics of diversity that leaves the distribution of wealth untouched and so suits corporations and elite universities perfectly.[47] The philosopher Susan Neiman has argued from the universalist left that woke politics betrays the Enlightenment commitments that made the left a left.[48] What can fairly be said is that the oppressor-and-oppressed form of Marxist thought survived the death of its economic content, and that this form, not the economics, is what the identity left inherited.

Two further developments show how far the tools of critique had traveled by the end of the century, and in which direction. In 2004 the French sociologist Bruno Latour, whose work on the social construction of scientific facts had been a pillar of science studies, published a remarkable act of self-examination. He worried, he wrote, that "dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives." Conspiracy theories, with their "knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland," looked to him like "weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party"; but "these are our weapons nonetheless."[49] The tools of suspicion do not belong to one side. Once every authority is a mask for power, the same move that unmasked the church, the canon and the white male author can unmask the climate scientist, the public-health agency and the newspaper of record.

And the right picked the tools up. The French New Right of Alain de Benoist had called for a "Gramscism of the right" as early as the late 1970s, a fight for cultural hegemony before political power.[50] In America the online right of the 2010s borrowed the transgressive style of the 1960s counterculture, mockery of the pieties of the powerful and delight in breaking taboos, and turned it against the progressive establishment, as the writer Angela Nagle documented.[51] The blogger Curtis Yarvin described the American establishment of universities, foundations and the prestige press as "the Cathedral," a decentralized structure that produces official truth to serve its own power, a theory with more than a family resemblance to Foucault's.[52] By the 2020s conservative activists such as Christopher Rufo were openly modeling their campaigns on the left's long march through the institutions.[53] The age of critique ended, in this sense, not with the defeat of its methods but with their universal adoption. Each side now unmasks the other's truths as the other's power.

The most penetrating early diagnosis of where this road leads came from the right, from Leo Strauss, who had sat in Heidegger's lectures in the 1920s. In Natural Right and History (1953) Strauss argued that historicism, the doctrine that all thought is the product of its time and that no standard stands above history, ends in the denial that anything is right by nature, and that "the contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is identical with nihilism."[54] He also saw why the denial of universal standards had become attractive to conservatives as well as radicals. The early historical school, he wrote, had seemed to realize "that the acceptance of any universal or abstract principles has necessarily a revolutionary, disturbing, unsettling effect."[55] Strauss's point cuts against both sides of the modern quarrel. Universal principles, such as equal rights, can be used to unsettle every inherited order, which is how the left has used them; the denial of universal principles, which conservatives once used to defend inherited orders against abstract reformers, can be used to dissolve every standard, including the ones the right needs. The book's own position, that there is an objective reality that sets the terms of human life and that truth is "asymptotic, not absolute or unknowable," approached more closely by better methods without being finally possessed, is in this respect closer to Strauss's natural right than to either the critical left or the relativist right.

How does the age of critique end? The working notes offer two answers. One is that its central project has exhausted itself: "Postmodernism

dissolved boundaries… reality persisted. The experiment is over," and "Critical-theory 'wokeness' is already in late-stage collapse," with elites still performing loyalty while belief erodes. Chapter 13 weighs the evidence on the retreat of institutional progressivism after 2023, which is real but whose depth is disputed. The other answer is a change of mood: "We are transitioning from the pouty, pessimistic and doubtful self-sorrow of postmodernism to the strong, mature, life-affirming vitality of metamodernism." Cultural theorists have indeed used the word "metamodernism" since 2010 to describe a sensibility that oscillates between modern hope and postmodern irony, sincere again without being naive.[56] Felski's postcritique, Latour's late turn toward "matters of concern," and the revival of realism in parts of philosophy all point the same way. Whether this is a turn or only a pause is not yet knowable.

What can be said with confidence is what the age of critique did. It taught several generations of educated people to read every institution, tradition and text for the domination hidden in it. It was right that domination often hides in what seems natural; much of the history of slavery, of the treatment of women and of the persecution of minorities is the history of injustice dressed as nature. It was wrong to conclude that nothing is natural, and it never developed, because its method forbade it, a way of telling the inequalities that come from oppression apart from the inequalities that come from reality. The book's hypothesis is that this missing distinction is the heart of the matter. A method that "could only critique what exists" cannot build, because building requires a standard of better and worse that the world, not the critic, supplies. The left of the critical age had, in the book's phrase, "right spirit, wrong domain": a real hunger to break limits, aimed at other people and inherited forms rather than at the hard limits of nature that only discovery and making can move. The thinkers who stand behind both of these possibilities, the critique of what exists and the will to overcome it, are the subject of the previous chapter. The story of how all of this played out in American party politics is the subject of the next four.

PART FOUR

America



CHAPTER 9

The Founding Quarrel, 1787–1860

Americans tend to read their present quarrel back into their past. Conservatives find their ancestors among the framers who feared majorities and protected property; progressives find theirs among the democrats who widened the vote and the reformers who attacked slavery. Both are partly right, and both run into the same problem the moment they look closely. The parties of early America do not line up with the parties of today. The party of Jefferson and Jackson, which called itself the party of the common man, was also the party of slaveholders and of Indian removal. The party of Hamilton and later of the Whigs, which spoke for banks, tariffs and deference to the educated, was also the party more open to moral reform and, in the North, more hostile to slavery. The Republicans who freed the slaves used the national government to build railroads, colleges and banks; the Democrats who opposed them stood for states' rights and a government that did little. Over the next century and a half the two parties would trade places on federal power, on race, on tariffs, on immigration and on war. Anyone who projects today's labels backward will misread nearly everything.[1]

Scholars have three ways of handling this. One holds that the deep American quarrel is permanent and positional: from 1790 to now there has been a party of national power, finance and commerce and a party of local power and the producing classes, the heirs of Hamilton and the heirs of Jefferson. Another holds that what persists is not a set of positions but a pair of coalitions: in every era a party of the established order faces a party of the outsiders, though what each believes changes. The third holds that there is no continuity worth the name, that "liberal" and "conservative" became the stable vocabulary of national politics only in the 1930s, and that the parties did not sort cleanly into a left and a right until the 1990s.[2] Each view captures something. The approach taken in this book is the one set out in the first chapters: left and right are a substance that takes different forms. The forms are parties and platforms, and they change. The

substance is a stance toward what is given, toward the inherited order of things and the inequalities within it, and that stance shows up in every era even when the parties that carry it trade places. The American story is the clearest case in the world of this distinction, because almost everyone in it claimed the same founding creed and fought over what that creed demanded.

This chapter follows the quarrel from the Constitution to the eve of the Civil War. It has three parts. The first describes the founding settlement, which joined a claim of equal rights to an open acceptance of unequal faculties, and the first argument over it. The second follows the first parties, from Hamilton and Jefferson to Jackson and the Whigs, and asks whether the party of the "outs" was the left. The third follows the proposition that all men are created equal through its greatest test, the fight over slavery, where the defenders of hierarchy and the advocates of equality both understood exactly what the Declaration said.

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A *Republic of Equal Rights and Unequal Faculties*

The founding generation did not believe that men were equal in ability. It believed they were equal in rights. The two claims sat side by side in the minds of the same men, and much of American political history is the working out of which one should rule when they collide.

The Declaration of Independence of 1776 put the first claim in its most famous form: that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The scholarship on what the drafters meant is vast, but on one point it is close to unanimous. They meant that no man is by nature the ruler of another, that political authority rests on consent, and that every person holds certain rights that government exists to secure. They did not mean that men are equal in talent, virtue, strength or wealth.[3] Abraham Lincoln, who thought harder about the sentence than anyone, said so plainly in 1857: the authors "did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity." They meant equality "in certain inalienable rights."[4]

The second claim, the open acceptance of natural inequality, is just as clear in the founding texts. James Madison's Tenth Federalist, the most studied essay of the ratification debate, traces faction to "the various and unequal distribution of property," and traces that in turn to nature: "The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to an uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government."[5] Read carefully, the sentence states a whole political philosophy. Men differ in their faculties; unequal faculties produce unequal property; and the first job of government is not to correct those differences but to protect the faculties that produce them. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the equality clause, agreed. In a long exchange of letters with John Adams in their old age he wrote, "I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents," and he called that natural aristocracy "the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society." What both men opposed was the "artificial aristocracy" of birth and wealth without merit.[6]

This distinction between natural and artificial inequality is the key to the founding settlement and, this book argues, to a great deal of what came after. The founders' republic was meant to abolish artificial privilege, the titles, monopolies, established churches and hereditary offices of the old world, and to let natural differences show themselves freely. Andrew Jackson, no friend of the Federalists, said the same thing in his message vetoing the national bank in 1832, in a passage that is usually quoted only in half. The famous half attacks the rich and powerful who "bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes" to "make the rich richer and the potent more powerful." The forgotten half reads: "Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth can not be produced by human institutions."[7] On this view, the task of a just government is to remove the barriers that men have made while leaving alone the differences that nature makes. The question that would divide Americans for the next two centuries is where that line falls, and who gets to draw it. When an inequality persists after the obvious artificial barriers are gone, is it natural, and therefore to be respected, or is it the work of some hidden barrier that has not yet been found? This book's hypothesis is that this question, more than any particular policy, is the American form of the deeper left-right substance:

the right tends to read remaining inequality as the given order showing through, and the left tends to read it as an injustice not yet removed.

The framers also believed that their republic required a certain kind of people. This was not a later addition to their thought; it was central to it. Madison, in the fifty-fifth Federalist, wrote that "republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form," meaning the qualities in human nature that justify "esteem and confidence."[8] Adams was blunter. "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People," he told a Massachusetts militia brigade in 1798. "It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."[9] Benjamin Franklin's reply to a woman who asked what the convention had produced, "a republic, if you can keep it," survives only in a delegate's notes, but it captures the general view.[10] Self-government was a demanding form. It worked only among people able to govern themselves.

This book's hypothesis on this point is that the founders took the qualities of their own class of self-reliant, self-governing men and wrote them into principles that they then stated as universal, and that liberty is valuable and usable only by people who have the agency to use it, a point the founders understood and later generations forgot. The founders' own words support the first half of this better than is usually admitted: they said repeatedly that their system depended on virtue and would fail without it. Where the record is more complicated is the claim that they mistook a local psychology for a universal one. Many of them knew exactly what they were doing. They built the Constitution on the assumption that men would often lack virtue. "If men were angels, no government would be necessary," Madison wrote in the fifty-first Federalist, and the remedy he proposed was not to depend on good men but to arrange institutions so that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition."[11] The American Constitution is a machine designed to work tolerably even when the people running it are not very good. It disperses power so that no faction can easily seize the whole, and it builds compromise and delay into its structure. One way to describe the result is as a mutual hostage arrangement among the branches of government, the states, economic elites and the population, in which no one can take over and therefore everyone must bargain. That arrangement has kept the country from catastrophe for a long time. It was also designed, as its critics on both left and right have noticed, to make bold collective action slow and hard: it is built to avoid disaster rather than to pursue greatness.

The ratification debate of 1787 and 1788 is often treated as the first American left and right, with the Federalists as the right and the Anti-Federalists as the left, or the reverse. It fits neither way. The Anti-Federalists, writing under names like Brutus and the Federal Farmer, were localists who feared a distant consolidated government, which today sounds like the right. They were also more democratic than the Federalists. They wanted representation close enough to the people to reflect the "middling" classes, and they suspected the new Constitution of being a project of the wealthy and educated to restrain the popular state legislatures, which today sounds like the left.[12] Gordon Wood, the leading historian of the period, reads the Federalists as an elite that used the language of popular sovereignty to rein in the democratic excesses of the 1780s, and the Anti-Federalists as the voice of new, middling men with interests of their own.[13] Herbert Storing, who edited the Anti-Federalist writings, argued that they had a coherent theory: civic virtue requires a small republic of similar people, and a large republic of diverse interests would breed a government remote from its citizens.[14] Brutus put it in a sentence: "In a republic, the manners, sentiments, and interests of the people should be similar."[15] Madison's answer in the Tenth Federalist was the opposite: "Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests," so that no single majority can easily oppress the rest. [16] The quarrel between Brutus and Madison, between a republic resting on a shared people and a republic resting on a balance of many interests, has never ended. It returns in every American fight over immigration, national identity and the reach of the federal government, and both modern parties have stood on both sides of it.

The same tension appears in the question of who the American people were. This book's hypothesis is that the true Americans in the founding sense are the settlers and founders who built the country, and that settlers are a different category from the immigrants who came later to a society already made. The distinction has serious scholarly defenders. Samuel Huntington, in his last major book, argued that settlers and immigrants differ in kind: settlers leave one society in a group to found a new one, while immigrants move from one existing society to another, and America's core culture is the culture of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestant settlers.[17] But the founding era itself contained both views. Benjamin Franklin complained in 1751 that "Palatine Boors" were swarming into Pennsylvania and "herding together" to keep their own language and

manners, a nativist complaint that would be repeated about every later wave.[18] Thirty years later the French-born farmer Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, asking "What then is the American, this new man?", answered that "here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men."[19] The melting pot and the settler nation were both present at the birth.

There is one more feature of the founding that matters for understanding the left and the right. The American Revolution, unlike the French one, was a revolution to keep something as well as to change it: the colonists believed they were defending the rights of Englishmen against a corrupt ministry. The historian Bernard Bailyn showed that the pamphlets of the Revolution were steeped in the English "country" opposition's fear of power and corruption.[20] It was a revolution for self-rule, for the individual and the local community against a distant and collective authority. That is why American conservatism has always been a strange thing by European standards. A European conservative defended throne, altar and inherited rank against the revolution; an American conservative defends a revolution, and a liberal one at that. The political scientist Louis Hartz drew the conclusion in 1955: because America had no feudal past, it never developed either a true aristocratic right or a true socialist left, and its whole political spectrum was a quarrel among Lockean liberals.[21] Hartz's thesis has been heavily criticized, above all for ignoring slavery and the long tradition of excluding people by race, sex and religion, which Rogers Smith called "ascriptive Americanism" and showed to be as old and as popular as liberalism itself.[22] But Hartz's basic point holds for the founding: both sides appealed to the same principles, and the fight was over what those principles required and to whom they applied.

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Hamilton, Jefferson and Jackson: The Party of the Order and the Party of the Outs

The first American parties formed within a few years of the Constitution, against the wishes of nearly everyone who formed them. The founders regarded parties as factions, dangers to be contained, and the idea that a loyal opposition could legitimately organize to win power had to be learned.[23] The lesson began with Alexander Hamilton's program as Treasury

Secretary: federal assumption of the states' war debts in 1790, a national bank in 1791, and a report on manufactures the same year that proposed using the national government to build an industrial economy. Jefferson and Madison organized against it. Jefferson argued that the bank was unconstitutional because the Constitution did not explicitly grant the power to charter one; Hamilton replied that the power was implied. The disagreement over strict and broad construction of the Constitution, over whether the federal government could do only what was listed or whatever was necessary to the listed ends, began here.

The substance of the quarrel went deeper than the bank. Hamilton wanted a commercial, financial and eventually industrial nation, tied by trade to Britain and governed by a strong executive and an educated elite. Jefferson wanted an agrarian republic of independent farmers. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people," he wrote, and he feared that cities, banks and manufacturing would breed dependence and corruption.[24] The Federalists valued order, deference and public credit; the Jeffersonian Republicans valued local self-government, agrarian virtue and suspicion of money men and "monocrats." Then the French Revolution sharpened everything. Jefferson and his followers sympathized with France well into the Terror; the Federalists came to see in the Jacobins the face of anarchy and atheism and drew closer to Britain. In 1798, during an undeclared naval war with France, the Federalist Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which allowed the deportation of foreigners and the prosecution of critics of the government. Jefferson and Madison answered with the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which claimed for the states a right to judge federal laws unconstitutional.[25]

In European terms, which were being invented at exactly this moment in the French Assembly, this was the first American left and right. The Federalists were the party of order, property, religion and hierarchy, reacting against a revolution abroad that seemed to threaten all four; the Republicans were the party of the people, sympathetic to the revolution and confident that ordinary men could govern themselves. Jefferson had written in 1787, reacting to the farmers' revolt in Massachusetts known as Shays' Rebellion, that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."[26] The Federalists had seen the same revolt as proof that the country needed a stronger government. This book's hypothesis that much of modern liberalism began as a reaction to

the trauma of revolution and war has a mirror image here: the first American conservatism was a reaction to revolution too, to Shays' Rebellion and to the Terror, and so was Burke's in England. Revolutions produce both a party that wants more and a party that has seen enough.

Yet the fit with later left and right is poor in a decisive respect. Jefferson's party was the party of the slaveholding South, and the three-fifths clause, which counted three of every five enslaved people toward a state's representation, gave Jefferson his margin of victory in the election of 1800.[27] The party of the common man was also the party of the plantation. The Federalists, the party of hierarchy, were strongest in New England, where slavery was being abolished. After Jefferson's victory, which he later called "the revolution of 1800," the Federalists declined, discredited by their opposition to the War of 1812, and by the 1820s the country had for a time only one national party.[28]

The second party system, which took shape around Andrew Jackson in the late 1820s and 1830s, repeated the pattern with greater force. Jackson's Democrats, organized by Martin Van Buren into the first modern mass party, were the party of the outsiders: Western farmers, Southern planters, urban workingmen and, increasingly, Irish and German Catholic immigrants. They attacked the "money power," above all the Second Bank of the United States, and championed the expansion of the vote to all white men regardless of property, which was nearly complete by the 1840s. Turnout in the presidential election of 1840 reached about 80 percent of eligible voters.[29] The Whigs, who organized in 1833 and 1834 against "King Andrew," were the party of Henry Clay's "American System" of tariffs, a national bank and federally funded roads and canals. They were also the party of evangelical moral reform. The historian Daniel Walker Howe showed that Whiggery was a culture as much as a program: it believed in improvement, both of the nation through commerce and infrastructure and of the individual through education, temperance and self-discipline, and it was willing to use government to shape character.[30]

Which of these was the left? Historians have fought over the question for eighty years, and the fight is itself instructive. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing in 1945, made the Jacksonians the ancestors of the New Deal, a farmer-labor coalition against concentrated wealth. Sean Wilentz has renewed that view, treating Jacksonian democracy as a real democratic advance won from below, with grave racial limits. Lee Benson and the ethnocultural historians replied that voters in the 1830s divided more by

religion and ethnicity than by class: pietist Protestants tended to be Whigs, and liturgical Protestants and Catholics tended to be Democrats. Howe, in his Pulitzer Prize–winning history of the period, treats the Jacksonians as champions of white supremacy and Indian removal, hostile to the market and to improvement, and the Whigs as the more modern and humane party.[31] The truth is that each party carried part of what would later be the left and part of what would later be the right. The Jacksonians were anti-elite, majoritarian and hostile to concentrated money, all marks of the later left; they were also racially exclusive, expansionist and opposed to an activist central government, marks of the later right. The Whigs were the party of the activist state and moral reform, later marks of the left, and also of business, hierarchy and the educated, later marks of the right.

This is the clearest test in American history of this book's hypothesis that anti-incumbency, the cause of the "outs" against the "ins," is the dynamic form of the left. The pattern of an established-order party facing an outsiders' party holds up well across the whole of American history: Federalists against Jeffersonians, Whigs against Jacksonians, Gilded Age Republicans against Bryan's Democrats, and later the New Deal coalition of the outsiders against the party of business.[32] But the case of the Jacksonians shows that being the party of the outs does not by itself carry egalitarianism with it. The Jacksonians were egalitarian within a circle and fiercely hierarchical at its edge. The sociologist Pierre van den Berghe and the historian George Fredrickson called this pattern "herrenvolk democracy": a democracy of equals for the members of the ruling race, joined to the subjection of everyone outside it.[33] The Indian Removal Act of 1830, which led to the forced expulsion of the Cherokee and other nations, was a Jacksonian measure. So was the defense of slavery. Jacksonian anti-incumbency was aimed at bankers and the old elite, not at the racial order. What the American case shows, then, is that the outs-against-ins dynamic is real and recurrent, but the content it carries depends on who the outs are and where they draw the circle of equals. Equality inside the circle and hierarchy at its boundary can coexist for a long time.

The same period brought the most explicit statement of American expansion. In 1845 the Democratic editor John L. O'Sullivan wrote of "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[34] Within three years the United States had annexed Texas, divided Oregon with Britain and taken the Southwest from Mexico in a war that the Whigs, including a

young congressman named Abraham Lincoln, opposed. This book's hypothesis is that expansion is central to what America has meant: that the country was at its core a project of expansion and of selection, of pushing outward and choosing who would build. As a description of the nineteenth century, the first half is hard to dispute. Westward expansion was the great fact of American life from the founding to the end of the century, and in 1893 the historian Frederick Jackson Turner made it the key to the national character, arguing that the frontier had produced American individualism, self-reliance and democracy, and announcing that with the closing of the frontier "the first period of American history" had ended.[35] What the history adds is that expansion was not a project of one side. In the 1840s it was the cause of the Jacksonian Democrats, the party of the outs, against the Whigs, the party of order and improvement, who feared that new territory would spread slavery and strain the republic. Expansion and the party of the established order were on opposite sides.

One more force of this period belongs to the story of left and right, because it fed both: the evangelical Protestantism of the Second Great Awakening. The revivals of the 1820s and 1830s produced a surge of reform movements, against drink, for Sabbath observance, for public schools, for prison and asylum reform, and above all against slavery. Many reformers expected that a purified America would prepare the way for the millennial reign of Christ. This religious energy flowed mainly into the Whigs and later the Republicans, and it is the American ancestor of the reforming, morally urgent left that would reappear in the Social Gospel and the Progressive movement. This book argues in earlier chapters that the left's egalitarian morality is in large part secularized Christianity. The antebellum record supports this for American reform: the movement to abolish slavery was overwhelmingly a Christian movement. But the same record shows that Christianity fed the other side too. Southern churches defended slavery from scripture, and the largest Protestant denominations, the Methodists in 1844 and the Baptists in 1845, split over it.[36] Christianity in America was not the property of one side. It was the common soil from which both drew.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who toured the country in 1831 and 1832, saw a deeper fact beneath all these quarrels. "Nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people," he wrote, and the more he studied the country, "the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived."[37] Americans, he said, were "born equal, instead of becoming so."[38]

Tocqueville also warned what this would mean. Democratic peoples, he thought, love equality more than liberty; their passion for it is "ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible," and they will accept equality even in servitude rather than inequality in freedom.[39] Whether he was right about Americans in general is debatable. He was certainly right that the idea of equality had become the country's master idea, and that its next great test was coming.

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The Proposition and Its Enemies

Slavery was the deepest quarrel of the American founding, and it is the place where the American versions of left and right first appear in nearly pure form. The reason is that both sides came to understand the Declaration's equality clause in the same way and drew opposite conclusions.

The founders had mostly treated slavery as an evil they could not yet remove. They kept the word out of the Constitution, banned the slave trade after 1808, and kept slavery out of the Northwest Territory, while protecting it where it existed through the three-fifths clause and the fugitive slave clause. By the 1830s a new generation of Southern leaders had abandoned the founders' apology. In 1837 John C. Calhoun of South Carolina told the Senate that slavery was not an evil but "a good—a positive good."[40] In 1848, in a speech on the organization of the Oregon Territory, he went to the root. The proposition "that all men are born free and equal," he said, "has become an axiom in the minds of a vast majority on both sides of the Atlantic." Yet "taking the proposition literally… there is not a word of truth in it." It was "the most false and dangerous of all political errors," and its danger had grown with time: "For a long time it lay dormant; but in the process of time it began to germinate, and produce its poisonous fruits."[41]

Calhoun's speech is worth dwelling on because it states, from the side of hierarchy, the same thesis this book advances about the equality premise: that the clause was a seed whose consequences were contained in it from the beginning and would unfold over time. This book's hypothesis is that "all men are created equal" became the moral engine of most later Western reform, that it "became progress itself," and that the extension of equality from equal rights to equal outcomes and finally to the equal standing of

every identity was implicit in the premise once it was accepted: "Even if we didn't realize or intend it, all this was contained in it." Calhoun agreed that the premise was a seed of this kind; he simply wanted it rejected before it grew. The most radical Southern thinkers went further. The Virginia writer George Fitzhugh, in books with titles like *Sociology for the South* and *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*, attacked the whole liberal order of free labor and free markets as a war of all against all that left Northern workers worse off than slaves, and he borrowed freely from European socialist critiques of capitalism to do it.[42] Here the American right's most uncompromising defenders of hierarchy and Europe's socialist left met in their rejection of liberal individualism, an early instance of a pattern this book traces in later chapters, where the extremes of left and right share more with each other than either does with the liberal center.

The clearest statement came at the very end. In March 1861, weeks after the formation of the Confederacy, its vice president, Alexander Stephens, explained in Savannah what the new government stood for. The men of the founding generation, he said, had believed that "the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle." Those ideas "were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races." The Confederacy, by contrast, was "founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition."[43] Stephens understood perfectly well what the Declaration had said, and he repudiated it. The Confederacy was the most complete attempt in American history to found a polity on the denial of the equality premise.

On the other side, the opponents of slavery claimed the founding. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison at first rejected the Constitution as "a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell" for its protections of slavery.[44] Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery, took a different and in the end more powerful course. In his speech of July 5, 1852, in Rochester, he asked, "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" and answered that it was a day that revealed "the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim." Yet in the same speech he argued that the Constitution, "interpreted as it ought to be interpreted," was "a glorious liberty document."[45] The strategy that would carry American reform for the next century and a half was already visible: not to reject the founding but to

hold the country to its own premise. Four years earlier, at Seneca Falls, the first women's rights convention had done the same thing, issuing a Declaration of Sentiments that began, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."[46] Each new claimant to equality copied the original sentence and added a word.

Lincoln stood between the abolitionists and the defenders of slavery, and his position shows both the power and the limits of the equality premise in its own time. He hated slavery and argued, against Stephen Douglas, that the Declaration's principle included Black Americans. Douglas answered in their debate at Ottawa, Illinois, in 1858: "I believe this government was made on the white basis… by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever."[47] Lincoln rejected that, but he also said, at Charleston, Illinois, that he was not "in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races," and for years he supported schemes to resettle freed slaves abroad.[48] Those schemes, promoted since 1816 by the American Colonization Society and backed at various times by Jefferson, Clay and Lincoln himself, assumed that the two races could not live together as equals. They failed above all because Black Americans rejected them. As early as January 1817, a mass meeting of free Black Philadelphians at Bethel Church, led by the sailmaker James Forten, resolved against colonization: they regarded themselves as Americans and refused to leave.[49] Lincoln gave up the idea after 1862.

What Lincoln said in 1857 about the equality clause is the single best account of how the American premise actually worked in history. The authors of the Declaration, he argued, "meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence."[50] This is a precise description of a ratchet. A maxim that is never perfectly attained but always approximated will always have a next step. Every achieved level of equality reveals a remaining gap, and the remaining gap becomes the new injustice. Tocqueville had predicted that the passion for equality grows more insatiable the more equality is achieved; Lincoln, approving, described the same process as the gradual fulfillment of the nation's creed.

This brings the chapter to an honest test of the hypothesis that the equality premise contained its own unfolding. The evidence for it is strong in one sense. The Declaration's sentence was the textual engine of every

major extension of rights in the nineteenth century: abolitionists, women's rights advocates and, later, labor and civil rights movements all argued from it, and its most clear-sighted enemies, from Calhoun to Stephens, attacked it for exactly that reason. The sentence did function as a seed. But the evidence against the stronger form of the claim, that the unfolding was automatic or inevitable, is also strong. The extension of equality was not a smooth logical process. It required political victories that might have gone the other way, and above all a civil war that killed some 750,000 Americans.[51] It was also reversible. Rogers Smith's study of American citizenship laws found that for most of the country's history most of its people were legally excluded from full citizenship on grounds of race, sex or national origin, and that the exclusions were defended by popular, intellectually serious traditions, not merely tolerated as lapses.[52] The franchise itself expanded and contracted: Northern states that had let free Black men vote in the early republic took the vote away from them in the 1820s and 1830s even as they gave it to all white men.[53] The record therefore supports a qualified version of the hypothesis. The equality premise created a standing pressure in one direction, which its defenders could always invoke and its enemies had to defeat explicitly. It did not determine the outcome. Whether the pressure won in a given era depended on power, war, economics and the strength of the rival traditions that the premise had to overcome.

The fight over slavery also bears on another of this book's hypotheses: that left and right differ most deeply in whether they take the given order as binding or as something to be overridden by will. In the 1850s that test cuts in an unexpected direction. The defenders of slavery claimed to stand for nature and the given: they argued that the natural and normal condition of one race was subordination to another, and that the abolitionists were utopian fanatics who wanted to remake society according to an abstract principle. The abolitionists claimed to stand for a higher law, the moral order of God and nature, against a man-made institution that violated it. Each side said that it was the party of reality and the other the party of willful abstraction. This is a reminder, and one that later chapters return to, that "the given" is not self-identifying. Every serious political camp claims that reality is on its side. What separated the two camps here was a factual and moral question, whether Black Americans were the kind of beings to whom the founding's natural rights applied, and on that question the abolitionists were right and the slaveholders were wrong. Appeals to nature are only as good as the claims about nature they rest on.

By the late 1850s the old parties had broken under the strain. The Whigs collapsed after 1852. A nativist movement, the American or Know-Nothing Party, rose suddenly in 1854 against the mass immigration of Irish and German Catholics that followed the Irish famine, won control of several state governments, and collapsed within two years.[54] The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which reopened the western territories to slavery, set off the anti-Nebraska meetings that founded the Republican Party. The new party's creed, as the historian Eric Foner showed, was "free labor": the belief that a man should be able to rise by his own work from wage earner to independent owner, that slavery degraded labor and threatened free white men in the territories, and that the "Slave Power" had captured the national government.[55] It was anti-slavery mainly as a matter of stopping slavery's expansion, and many of its Western voters wanted the territories free of Black people altogether. But it was the party of the equality premise, and in 1860 it elected Lincoln with less than 40 percent of the popular vote and no electoral votes from the South.[56] Within weeks the Deep South began to secede.

The first seventy years of the republic thus leave a clear pattern. The founding joined equal rights to an acceptance of unequal faculties and drew a line between artificial privilege, which government should remove, and natural difference, which it should protect. The parties that formed around this settlement did not carry a consistent left and right; the party of the common man defended slavery and the party of order opposed its spread. But beneath the shifting parties, two stances were already clear. One read the equality clause as a standard to be constantly approximated, and set out to remove each remaining inequality as an injustice. The other read the clause as a statement about rights alone, or rejected it outright, and defended inherited hierarchy as natural. On the greatest question of the age the second stance had rested on a false claim about human beings, and the war that followed settled the question by force.

CHAPTER 10

Union, Industry and Reform, 1860–1945

The Civil War settled the question of slavery and wrote the equality premise into the Constitution. It did not settle what equality would mean in practice, and within a generation the country had largely abandoned the freedpeople it had freed. Meanwhile a new quarrel took center stage. The industrial revolution, the rise of national corporations and the arrival of tens of millions of immigrants turned American politics toward economics: toward the power of capital, the claims of labor and farmers, and the role of government in an industrial society. Between 1865 and 1945 the two parties traded places on the most basic question of all, how much the national government should do. The Democrats, the party of states' rights and limited government in 1880, became the party of the welfare state by 1940. The Republicans, the party of national power and public works in 1865, became the party of limited government. By the end of the period Americans had adopted the words "liberal" and "conservative" in their modern senses. But the two dimensions that define today's left and right, economics and race, did not yet line up. For most of these eighty years, the party of business was also the party more friendly to Black civil rights, and the party of the common man was also the party of white supremacy in the South.

This chapter follows that history in three parts: the end of Reconstruction and the economic quarrels of the Gilded Age; the Progressive era, when a reforming, expert, morally urgent politics arose in both parties; and the New Deal, which created modern American liberalism and, in reaction, modern American conservatism.

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Reconstruction, Redemption and the Gilded Age

In the five years after the war, the Republican Party carried out the most radical program in American history. The Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 abolished slavery. The Fourteenth, ratified in 1868, made everyone born in the country a citizen and forbade the states to deny any person the equal protection of the laws. The Fifteenth, ratified in 1870, forbade denying the vote on account of race. Federal troops supervised the South, and for a few years Black men voted, held office and served in Congress. The historian W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in 1935, described Reconstruction as a democratic experiment destroyed by counterrevolution, and that judgment, once a minority view, is now the standard one.[1]

The counterrevolution came quickly. White Southern Democrats, calling themselves Redeemers, used terror, fraud and economic pressure to retake the state governments. Northern support faded. The disputed election of 1876 was resolved the next year by a bargain that ended federal supervision of the South. Between 1890 and 1908 every Southern state rewrote its constitution or laws to strip Black citizens of the vote through poll taxes, literacy tests and white primaries, and in 1896 the Supreme Court, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, upheld segregation under the doctrine of "separate but equal."[2] The historian Heather Cox Richardson has shown that Northern Republicans abandoned the freedpeople partly for economic reasons: many came to see Black Southerners' demands for land and fair wages as a kind of labor radicalism, of a piece with the strikes and socialist agitation they feared in the North.[3] Here, for the first time, economic conservatism and indifference to racial equality began to reinforce each other, but the alignment was loose and would take another eighty years to harden.

The Gilded Age that followed was the high point of American laissez-faire, and it is worth noticing which party held that view. The Republicans became the party of business, the protective tariff and the gold standard; their program used national power to promote industry. The Democrats of the North and the South, led by men like Grover Cleveland, were the party of low tariffs and minimal government. When Congress in 1887 passed a small appropriation to buy seed for drought-stricken Texas farmers, Cleveland vetoed it with a line that could have been written by a twentieth-

century conservative: "though the people support the Government, the Government should not support the people."[4]

The era also produced the first serious American philosophy of what would later be called the right's economic morality. The Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner argued in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883) that they owe one another nothing but respect for rights, and that every reform scheme to help one class at another's expense falls on a figure he called "the Forgotten Man": the ordinary, self-supporting citizen who is never consulted, who minds his own business, and who pays for everyone else's projects.[5] Sumner is often grouped with the "Social Darwinists," though the label was mostly applied by critics, and the historian Richard Hofstadter's famous account of the movement has been criticized for exaggerating how many people held the view.[6] Andrew Carnegie offered a different version in his 1889 essay on wealth: great fortunes were the natural result of the law of competition and were good for the race, but the rich man held them in trust and should give them away, since "the man who dies thus rich dies disgraced."[7] These writers expressed, in the language of their day, a stance that this book places on the right: that unequal outcomes in a free market reflect real differences in ability and effort, that the market is part of the given order of things, and that government attempts to override it do more harm than good. The phrase "the Forgotten Man" would itself change sides. In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt borrowed it to mean "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid," the person the New Deal would help, at the expense of exactly the taxpayer Sumner had meant.[8] The same words, applied to a different person, carried the opposite politics.

The left of the Gilded Age took several forms. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879) asked why poverty deepened as wealth grew and answered that private ownership of land let landowners capture the gains of progress; his proposed single tax on land values made him a world figure. Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* (1888), which imagined a Boston of the year 2000 in which industry had been nationalized and competition abolished, sold hundreds of thousands of copies and inspired clubs across the country. Labor organized in the Knights of Labor and later the American Federation of Labor, and fought pitched battles with employers and state militias.[9]

The most important left movement of the period came from the countryside. In the 1880s Southern and Western farmers, squeezed by

falling crop prices, debt and railroad rates, built the Farmers' Alliances and in 1892 founded the People's Party. Its Omaha Platform called for a graduated income tax, government ownership of the railroads and telegraph, the free coinage of silver to inflate the currency, and the direct election of senators. Its preamble, written by Ignatius Donnelly, began: "We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin."[10] In 1896 the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan, who won the convention with a speech defending free silver that ended, "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."[11] Bryan lost decisively to William McKinley, whose campaign was organized and funded by the industrialist Mark Hanna, and the "system of 1896" gave the Republicans control of national politics outside the South for most of the next thirty-six years.[12]

The Populists have been read in three ways, and each reading bears on this book's argument. Hofstadter saw them as backward-looking, nostalgic for a lost agrarian world, prone to conspiracy theories and tinged with nativism and antisemitism. Lawrence Goodwyn saw them as a genuine democratic movement built on farmers' cooperatives. Charles Postel, more recently, has shown that they were modernizers who believed in science, organization and the active state.[13] Michael Kazin's history of the "populist persuasion" makes the point most relevant here: the rhetoric of the virtuous people against a corrupt elite belongs to neither side. From the 1890s to the 1930s it was mainly a language of the left; from the 1940s on it migrated to the right, through McCarthy, George Wallace and the Reagan Democrats to Donald Trump.[14] This fits the book's hypothesis that the cause of the outs against the ins is a recurrent form of political conflict, while showing again that the form does not fix the content. The outs can be farmers against bankers or workers against professionals; their enemy can be Wall Street or the universities.

The same decades brought the largest wave of immigration in the country's history. Between 1880 and 1924 more than twenty million people arrived, increasingly from southern and eastern Europe; by 1910 nearly 15 percent of the population was foreign-born.[15] The reaction against them did not follow later party lines. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law to bar a group by national origin, passed with support from both parties, and the loudest demand for it came from the labor left of the West, whose slogan in California was "The Chinese must go!"[16]

It was in this setting that the meaning of the country's most famous symbol changed. The statue that France gave the United States, dedicated in 1886, was called *Liberty Enlightening the World*. Its French sponsors, liberal republicans and opponents of slavery, meant it as a tribute to American liberty as an example to other nations: a torch held outward, broken chains at its feet. In 1883 the poet Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet to help raise money for the pedestal. "The New Colossus" renamed the figure "Mother of Exiles" and gave her the lines every American schoolchild later learned: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Lazarus, who had been working with Jewish refugees from the Russian pogroms, was a friend and admirer of Henry George and a reformer of his single-tax persuasion, not a communist. The poem was little noticed for years; a plaque bearing it was placed inside the pedestal in 1903 through the efforts of a private admirer, and only in the 1930s and 1940s, as refugees from Europe sought entry, did the statue come to be understood chiefly as a welcome to immigrants.[17]

This book's hypothesis is that this change was an inversion of what America stood for: that the statue's original meaning, liberty as an ideal radiating outward, was replaced by a maternal meaning, liberty as a refuge pulling the world's poor inward, and that the shift recast the country from a nation built by settlers into a shelter owed to whoever arrives. As a description of the change in the symbol's meaning, this is well supported by the historical scholarship. The historian John Higham, in an essay on the statue's transformation, documented exactly this shift from a monument to an abstract ideal of liberty to a monument to immigration.[18] The maternal reading is not imposed on the poem; Lazarus wrote it in, with "Mother of Exiles." Two qualifications belong beside the hypothesis. The change was made not by one poem but by later generations who chose that reading, largely in the twentieth century. And the question of whether the new meaning betrayed the founding or extended it is the old quarrel between Brutus's republic of a shared people and Madison's extended republic of many, which the founders themselves had not settled.

A related hypothesis holds that America's first immigrants were the strong, self-selected people who could cross an ocean and build a country, and that later arrivals were weaker, so that each marginal addition lowered the average. The historical record shows that this same judgment was made about almost every wave as it arrived: about the Germans in the 1750s, the Irish in the 1850s, and the Italians, Slavs and Jews in the 1900s, with

confident predictions that they would never rise. The most thorough modern study of immigrant outcomes, by the economists Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, linked millions of census and tax records across more than a century and found that the children of immigrants from nearly every origin country, in the era of mass migration and again today, rose further up the income ladder than the children of native-born parents who started at the same level.[19] Those findings do not settle every question about selection, which varies with who migrates and why, but they contradict the claim of a steady decline across the waves. One more recent finding is worth noting here because it ties this history to the psychology of left and right. Americans whose families experienced upward mobility across the generations, including the descendants of the mass-migration era, are measurably less likely today to see economic life as zero-sum, as a contest in which one group's gain must be another's loss. Since zero-sum thinking predicts both left-wing support for redistribution and right-wing support for immigration restriction, the experience of a growing economy that rewards effort appears to be one of the things that keeps people out of both kinds of zero-sum politics.[20]

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The Progressive Turn

Around 1900 a new kind of politics took shape in both parties. The Progressives, as they came to be called, were mostly urban, educated, middle-class and Protestant. They believed that industrial society had outgrown the founders' institutions, that the concentrated power of corporations and urban political machines threatened democracy, and that trained experts using the tools of science and administration could manage society for the common good. Their causes included antitrust laws, railroad and food regulation, the income tax, the direct election of senators, women's suffrage, the prohibition of alcohol, conservation of forests and water, and the professionalization of government.[21]

The movement drew much of its moral energy from Protestant Christianity. The Social Gospel, led by ministers such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, taught that Christianity required not only personal salvation but the reform of society, and that the task of Christians was to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Rauschenbusch's

Christianity and the Social Crisis (1907) and A *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) argued that sin was social as well as individual, embodied in institutions and economic systems that had to be redeemed.[22] This book argues that the left's egalitarian morality is in large part secularized Christianity, with the content of Christian ethics, care for the weak and the equal worth of souls, carried forward after belief in its metaphysics faded. The Social Gospel is about as direct a piece of evidence for that thesis as American history offers. It is the visible moment when the Christian hope of redemption was turned toward the reform of social structures, and when the idea that sin resides in systems rather than only in persons entered American reform. That idea would later reappear, stripped of its theology, in the left's tendency to blame systems rather than individuals.

Progressivism was not a single movement, and it was not the property of one party. Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, built its national wing; Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, carried much of its program into law. In the election of 1912 the four main candidates, Wilson, Roosevelt running as a Progressive, the Republican William Howard Taft and the Socialist Eugene Debs, together gave voters a spectrum from moderate reform to socialism, and the reformers and the Socialist together won about three quarters of the vote.[23] The intellectual statement of the movement was Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909), which argued that the Jeffersonian promise of equal opportunity could now be realized only by Hamiltonian means, a strong national state directing the economy. Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" speech of 1910 drew on Croly, insisting that property must be subject to the community's right to regulate it for the public good.[24]

Wilson went further, criticizing the founders' design itself. The Constitution's separation of powers, he argued, treated government as a machine on the model of Newtonian physics, when in fact government "is not a machine, but a living thing… It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton."[25] The idea of a living Constitution that grows with the times, interpreted in the light of present needs rather than the framers' meaning, begins here. A school of conservative scholars, led by Ronald Pestritto, has read Progressivism as a deliberate rejection of the founders' natural-rights philosophy in favor of a historicism borrowed from Hegel, and much of today's American right accepts this account as the story of where the country went wrong.[26] Many historians reply that the Progressives were too various to have a single philosophy, that they drew on many sources, including American pragmatism and Christian ethics, and that most of them

saw themselves as restoring the founders' aims under new conditions.[27] Both readings agree on the core fact. The Progressives replaced the founders' idea of fixed natural rights, which government exists to protect, with an idea of government as an evolving instrument for achieving social goals. This is the American form of the shift this book describes elsewhere as the move from the primacy of the given order to the primacy of collective will.

The Progressive era also complicates any simple assignment of causes to left and right, because some of its central causes are ones the left now rejects and the right is now accused of. Prohibition, written into the Constitution in 1919, was a cause of evangelical reformers and of many Progressives. The 1924 Immigration Act, which set quotas by national origin to cut immigration from southern and eastern Europe and nearly ended it from Asia, was backed by reformers, labor and nativists alike. Wilson's administration segregated the federal civil service. And eugenics, the effort to improve the hereditary quality of the population by discouraging or preventing reproduction by those judged unfit, was in America a cause of Progressive scientists, physicians, social reformers and economists. The economist Thomas Leonard's study of the period shows that leading Progressive reformers routinely invoked eugenic arguments for minimum wages, immigration restriction and the exclusion of the "unfit" from the labor market.[28] By the 1930s about thirty states had sterilization laws, and in 1927 the Supreme Court upheld them in *Buck v. Bell*, with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes writing that "three generations of imbeciles are enough." More than sixty thousand Americans were eventually sterilized under such laws.[29]

This history bears on one of the book's hypotheses: that expansion and eugenics, "the two E's," are what America at its height represented, and that the deepest divide is between a politics of quality, of selection and standards, and a politics of equality. The historical record shows that the American eugenics movement was real, mainstream and largely Progressive, which complicates any account in which concern for hereditary quality belongs only to the right. It also shows two things that any honest use of the history must keep in view. The movement's science was badly wrong: it treated complex conditions like "feeblemindedness" as simple inherited traits, and the very woman whose case reached the Supreme Court, Carrie Buck, was later shown by the historian Paul Lombardo to have been of ordinary intelligence, committed to an

institution after being raped by a relative of her foster family.[30] And it worked through state coercion of people who had no say. The repudiation of eugenics after the Second World War, when the Nazi program showed where coercive selection could lead, was a reaction not only to its moral premise but to its record of false science and abuse. Modern genetics has established that many human traits are substantially heritable, a finding discussed in earlier chapters, but that is a different claim from the Progressive eugenicists' confident and mistaken certainties.

The same cross-cutting pattern appears in American expansion abroad. When the United States took the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam after the war with Spain in 1898, the imperialists were mainly Republicans like Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge. The Anti-Imperialist League that opposed them united Bryan Democrats, the industrialist Carnegie, Mark Twain, Jane Addams and William Graham Sumner, who argued that conquest would corrupt the republic.[31] The champion of laissez-faire and the champion of the farmers stood together against the party of national greatness.

The First World War brought the Progressive state to its height and exposed its darker side. The Espionage and Sedition Acts were used to imprison war critics, including Debs, who received ten years for a speech; the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920 saw mass arrests and deportations of radicals.[32] In the 1920s, under Harding and Coolidge, the country turned back toward business and limited government, but the decade's most revealing quarrel was religious. American Protestantism split between modernists, who reconciled their faith with evolution and historical criticism of the Bible, and fundamentalists, who defended its literal authority. The trial of John Scopes in 1925 for teaching evolution in Tennessee made the split national.[33] The same years saw the revival of the Ku Klux Klan as a mass movement of several million members across the North and West as well as the South, nativist, anti-Catholic, anti-Black and prohibitionist, and often presenting itself in the language of moral reform.[34] The religious division between modernists and fundamentalists is one of the deepest roots of the later culture war. It sorted Americans by their stance toward inherited authority and revealed truth long before it sorted them into parties.

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The New Deal and the Birth of Modern Liberalism and Conservatism

The Great Depression broke the system of 1896. Herbert Hoover had campaigned in 1928 on what he called "rugged individualism," and when the economy collapsed his limited response discredited it.[35] Franklin Roosevelt won in 1932 and built a coalition of the outsiders that would dominate American politics for a generation: urban workers and immigrants, Catholics and Jews, organized labor, farmers, intellectuals, the white South and, from 1936, most Black voters who could vote.

Roosevelt's Commonwealth Club address in San Francisco in September 1932 is the founding statement of American liberalism in its modern sense, and it bears directly on one of this book's central hypotheses. Roosevelt argued that the age of expansion was over. "Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land," he said. "Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods. It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of underconsumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably." The day of the great promoter and financier was done; "the day of enlightened administration has come."[36]

This book's hypothesis is that the West, and America in particular, shifted from a frontier civilization to a maintenance civilization, from expansion to contraction, and that the moral politics of the modern left, focused on distribution and inclusion within a fixed space, grew from that shift. The Commonwealth Club address is about as explicit a confirmation of the first half of this as could be asked for: the founder of modern American liberalism announced in so many words that the era of discovery and production was over and the era of administration and redistribution had begun. The economist Alvin Hansen gave the view academic form in 1938 with his theory of "secular stagnation," which held that a mature economy with a closing frontier and slowing population growth would no longer generate enough investment on its own.[37] What the economic record adds is that the diagnosis was wrong. The economic historian

Alexander Field has shown that the 1930s were, in total factor productivity, the most technologically progressive decade of the century, and the decades after 1940 brought the fastest sustained growth in American history.[38] The frontier had closed on the map, but the frontier of production had not. The stagnationist view was an ideological frame of a frightened decade, not a fact about the economy, and its persistence as a frame matters more for understanding the left than its accuracy did. A politics built on the premise that the pie has stopped growing will naturally become a politics of how to divide it, which links the hypothesis to the evidence that zero-sum beliefs are stronger among those who came of age in slow-growth times.[39]

The New Deal's program, enacted between 1933 and 1938, included relief and public works, the regulation of banks and securities, federal protection for labor unions, a minimum wage and, most lasting of all, Social Security. Roosevelt and his allies took the word "liberal" for themselves and gave it a new American meaning: no longer the nineteenth-century creed of free markets and limited government, but the belief that government must act to secure economic security and opportunity. Their opponents, defending the older creed, found themselves called "conservatives," a word most of them had not used.[40] In January 1944 Roosevelt proposed a "second Bill of Rights": rights to a useful job, to adequate earnings, to a decent home, to medical care, to protection in old age and sickness, and to a good education. "Necessitous men are not free men," he said.[41] This marked a change in the meaning of rights. The founders' rights were protections against government and against other men, rights to be left alone in one's life, liberty and property; government's job, in that view, was to protect citizens from force and fraud, not to provide for them. Roosevelt's new rights were claims on others for provision. The idea that freedom requires not only the absence of coercion but the presence of security moved the American equality premise one more step along Lincoln's line of constant approximation: from equal rights to a guaranteed floor.

The opposition to the New Deal produced the first organized American conservatism in the modern sense. Wealthy businessmen and anti-Roosevelt Democrats founded the American Liberty League in 1934 to defend the Constitution and free enterprise. Hoover, out of office, wrote *The Challenge to Liberty*, arguing that the New Deal threatened the American system of ordered freedom.[42] A loose group of writers later called the Old Right, among them Albert Jay Nock, H. L. Mencken, John T. Flynn

and Senator Robert Taft, opposed both the expansion of the federal government and, after 1939, entry into another European war. The America First Committee, founded in 1940, gathered hundreds of thousands of members against intervention before Pearl Harbor ended it.[43] In Congress, from 1937 on, a "conservative coalition" of Republicans and Southern Democrats blocked most new liberal legislation.

That coalition points to the New Deal's central contradiction. The historian Ira Katznelson has shown that the New Deal was built with the votes of Southern Democrats who held half the party's seats and most committee chairs, and who supported federal economic intervention only as long as it did not threaten the racial order of the South. The exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers, most Black Southerners among them, from Social Security and the minimum wage, and the local administration of many programs, bore their mark.[44] Some scholars argue that these particular exclusions had administrative rather than racial motives, and the debate continues, but the larger point stands: the liberalism of the 1930s was a coalition of economic egalitarians with defenders of racial hierarchy.[45] At the same time, as the political scientist Eric Schickler has shown, a change was beginning from below. Black voters in the North moved to Roosevelt in 1936, the new industrial unions of the CIO brought Black and white workers into the same organizations, and by the 1940s ordinary Northern Democrats were measurably more supportive of civil rights than Republicans, decades before the parties' leaders switched sides.[46] For the first time in American history, the economic left and the cause of racial equality began to move into the same coalition.

By 1945, then, modern American liberalism and conservatism had their names, their founding texts and their core constituencies, but not yet their final shape. The parties were still internally divided: there were liberal Republicans in the Northeast and conservative Democrats across the South. The dimensions of economics and race still cut across each other. In 1944 an Austrian economist in London, Friedrich Hayek, published *The Road to Serfdom*, arguing that central economic planning, however well meant, leads step by step to the loss of freedom; condensed in *Reader's Digest* the next year, it reached millions of Americans and became one of the founding texts of the postwar right.[47] The pieces were in place for the great sorting that the next chapter describes.

What does this eighty-year history show about the substance of left and right? Three things. First, the parties traded places almost completely on

the role of the national government: the party of Cleveland's seed-bill veto became the party of the Second Bill of Rights, and the party of Lincoln's railroads and land-grant colleges became the party of Hoover and Taft. Party positions are not the substance. Second, the deeper stance this book identifies as the left's, the reading of remaining inequality as injustice to be removed by collective action, appeared in every generation and kept advancing a step: from abolition to the Reconstruction amendments, from the Populists' attack on concentrated wealth to the Progressive state, from equal rights to economic security. Each step was resisted by a stance that read the existing order, whether the market, the racial hierarchy or the founders' Constitution, as natural or legitimate. Third, the two great American inequalities, of wealth and of race, were for most of this period fought over by different coalitions. The economic left of the 1890s and 1930s included the white South; the party of business and the gold standard was for decades the more friendly to Black civil rights. Only when those two quarrels fused, a process that began in the 1930s and was completed in the 1960s, did the American left and right take the form they have today.

CHAPTER 11

The Long Realignment, 1945–2008

In 1945 the United States stood at the top of the world, and the political argument at home had a settled shape. The New Deal had made the national government responsible for the economy and for a floor of security under ordinary families. The Democratic Party that built it held together an odd coalition: Northern industrial workers, Catholic and Jewish immigrants and their children, Black voters who had left the party of Lincoln in 1936, farmers, intellectuals, and the white South, which still voted Democratic out of a memory of the Civil War and a determination to keep its racial order. The Republican Party was the party of business, small towns, the Protestant North, and the older idea of limited government. Each party contained a liberal and a conservative wing. On the deepest questions of the age, the parties overlapped.

Sixty years later almost every part of this picture had changed. The white South had become the base of the Republican Party. The Democrats had become the party of civil rights, of the college-educated professional, and of a new moral program built around the claims of groups. Conservatism, which in 1945 hardly existed as a self-conscious movement, had become the governing creed of one party and had won the central economic argument of the age. The two parties no longer overlapped at all in Congress. This chapter tells how that happened. It is the story of the long realignment: the slow sorting of Americans into two camps whose division is moral and cultural as much as economic, and whose content, by the end, matched the substance this book has been describing far more closely than the parties of 1945 ever did.

The chapter also tests several of this book's hypotheses against the record. The first is that the moral order of the postwar West was built, above all, as a reaction against fascism, so that the defeat of Hitler became the template for good and evil. The second is that the civil rights revolution achieved equality of rights and that the left then moved from equal inputs to equal outcomes. The third is that around 1969 the culture turned from

outward expansion to inward care, from Apollo to Woodstock. The fourth is that the right spent these decades on defense, losing the cultural argument one position at a time. The record supports some of these strongly, some in part, and one less than its framing suggests.

The Order Built Against Fascism

Every political order is built against something. The order built after 1945 was built against the catastrophe that had just ended. The men who wrote the postwar constitutions of Western Europe, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the founding documents of the new international institutions had watched a modern, educated nation turn its state into an instrument of racial murder. They drew conclusions that shaped everything after. Unchecked popular passion was dangerous; constitutions should restrain majorities; racial and national hierarchy was the root of the evil; the individual's dignity must be placed beyond the reach of any government. The historian Tony Judt described postwar Europe as a continent rebuilt on the memory of its own near-suicide, and the political theorist Jan-Werner Müller has shown how deliberately its founders designed institutions to distrust the very mass politics that had produced fascism.[1]

In America the lesson arrived more slowly and in a different form, but it arrived. Nazi racial doctrine had discredited the open racial thinking that American law and science had taken for granted only a generation earlier. The immigration act of 1924, with its national-origins quotas designed to favor northern Europeans, now looked like a cousin of the enemy's ideology. And the Cold War gave the lesson force. The historian Mary Dudziak has shown that the Justice Department told the Supreme Court in the school segregation cases that Jim Crow was damaging the country's standing in the contest with the Soviet Union, which used American racism in its propaganda across Asia and Africa.[2] When the Court struck down school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, it acted in a world where racial hierarchy had become the mark of the defeated enemy and an embarrassment before the undecided nations.

This book's hypothesis is that much of the modern liberal order is a long reaction to this trauma: that the world order "became liberal following

fascism, hence fascism is seen as the most evil," a kind of "civilizational recency bias," and that the West, having lost its older positive models, came to define the good negatively, as whatever is furthest from Hitler. On this reading, order, strength, national identity, discrimination of any kind and pride in one's own people all became suspect because the Nazis had prized them, and a morality of "do no harm, don't be Hitler" took the place of a morality of excellence. The same hypothesis reads the hostility many on the left feel toward strong leaders on the right, including the intensity of the reaction to Donald Trump, as an "aversion to Hitler," an echo of the same wound.

The evidence supports the core of this more than many readers will expect. The postwar human rights order was explicitly framed against fascism, and so was the West German constitution that became a model for others. The repeal of national-origins quotas in the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 was argued in the language of anti-discrimination that the war had made respectable; its sponsors described the old system as an ugly relic of racial thinking.[3] The moral weight of the Holocaust in American culture is also real and enormous. But the timing qualifies the story. The historian Peter Novick showed that the Holocaust occupied a modest place in American public life in the first two decades after the war and became a central moral reference only from the late 1960s and the 1970s onward, when it was taken up by a generation shaped by the civil rights movement and Vietnam.[4] So the anti-fascist template did not simply flow from the trauma of 1945. It was built up later, in a period when the left was already moving toward a politics of victims and groups, and it then served that politics. The trauma was real; the use made of it was partly a choice.

The same qualification applies to the claim that this trauma led the West to give up growth and expansion. The postwar decades were the greatest era of growth in American history, with output per worker rising faster in the quarter century after 1945 than in any comparable stretch since, and with the interstate highways, the suburbs, nuclear power and the moon landing all built by the generation that had fought the war.[5] Whatever the war taught Americans about the dangers of strength, it did not teach them to stop building. The turn, if there was one, came later.

At home the New Deal order held. Its decisive test came when the Republicans won the presidency in 1952 and did not try to undo it. Dwight Eisenhower called his program "Modern Republicanism," expanded Social Security, and built the interstate highways with federal money. The

historian Gary Gerstle has argued that a political order is truly established when the opposition party comes to accept its core premises, and Eisenhower's acceptance of the New Deal is his first example.[6] In 1955 the political scientist Louis Hartz published *The Liberal Tradition in America*, arguing that Americans had never had a real left or a real right in the European sense because they had never had feudalism: all of them were heirs of John Locke, quarreling within a single liberal creed.[7] For a time that description seemed to fit.

Against this consensus a small group of writers set out to build something that had not existed: a conservative movement. Its intellectual sources were three, and they did not obviously belong together. The first was the free-market liberalism of Friedrich Hayek, whose *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) warned that economic planning led step by step to tyranny, and which reached millions of Americans in a *Reader's Digest* condensation. The second was the traditionalism of Russell Kirk, whose *The Conservative Mind* (1953) traced a line from Edmund Burke through John Adams and argued for a moral order rooted in religion, custom and inherited hierarchy. The third was anticommunism, carried with special intensity by former communists such as Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham and Frank Meyer, who had seen the enemy from the inside.[8]

William F. Buckley Jr. gathered these strands in a magazine. The founding statement of *National Review* in 1955 declared that it "stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it."[9] The line has been quoted ever since, by friends as an emblem of courage and by critics as a confession that conservatism was purely defensive. Meyer supplied the theory that held the coalition together. He called it the defense of freedom; its critics called it "fusionism." Freedom was the end of politics, he argued, and virtue was the end of the person, and since virtue that is coerced is not virtue at all, the libertarian and the traditionalist could stand together: the state should leave men free so that they could choose the good.[10] The historian George Nash, whose account of the movement remains standard, stresses that American conservatism was from the beginning a coalition rather than a single doctrine, held together less by a positive vision than by a shared enemy, the Soviet Union and the liberal establishment that, in conservative eyes, had failed to resist it.[11]

This matters for the book's larger argument. The hypothesis advanced in later chapters is that the American right has long lacked a shared positive

metaphysics and has been unified mainly by opposition to the left, so that it plays "perpetual defense." The founding of the conservative movement fits that description closely. Its unifying principle was not a picture of the good society that all its members shared, but a common refusal. Buckley's own words made the refusal its banner. This was a strength in the short run, because a coalition of refusals can include people who would quarrel over any positive program. It was a weakness in the long run, because when the common enemy disappeared, as the Soviet Union did in 1991, the coalition had to find a new glue or come apart.

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The Great Break, 1964–1980

The postwar consensus broke in the 1960s along a line it had never been designed to bear: race, and soon after it the whole cluster of questions about family, sex, religion and authority that later came to be called the culture war.

The parties had not always differed on race in the modern way. For nearly a century after the Civil War the Republican Party was the party of emancipation and the Democrats the party of the white South. The political scientist Eric Schickler has shown that the modern alignment began earlier than most people think, from the bottom up: from the mid-1930s, Black voters, the new industrial unions and Democratic activists outside the South pushed civil rights into Northern liberalism, so that by the 1940s Democratic voters outside the South were more racially liberal than Republicans.[12] But the national break came in the early 1960s. When John Kennedy proposed a civil rights bill in June 1963, and when Lyndon Johnson pushed through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the national Democratic Party committed itself to ending legal segregation. That same year the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, voted against the Civil Rights Act on constitutional grounds and carried five states of the Deep South, along with his home state of Arizona, while losing everywhere else.

What happened next has been studied with unusual care. The economists Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington used Gallup surveys going back to 1958, which asked white Southerners whether they would vote for a qualified Black presidential candidate. Before 1963, white

Southerners who answered no were, if anything, more likely to call themselves Democrats. After Kennedy's proposal that link vanished, and racially conservative whites began leaving the party. Their departure accounts for all of the decline in white Southern Democratic identification relative to the rest of the country between 1958 and 1980, and about three quarters of it through 2000.[13] Other scholars give more weight to economic growth, suburbanization and the rise of evangelical politics in the later stages of the shift, and the transformation took decades to complete: the South voted Republican for president long before it elected Republican legislatures.[14] But on the central question the evidence is now strong. The realignment of the South was driven above all by race. It was the largest movement of voters in modern American history, and it changed what the word "right" meant in American politics. From the 1960s onward, the party of small government and business was also the party of the white South and, increasingly, of resistance to the moral claims the civil rights revolution had made.

The same years produced a new left. In June 1962 students meeting at Port Huron, Michigan, adopted a statement that began: "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit."[15] The sentence is a small portrait of the movement it launched. The Old Left had been made of workers and organizers who wanted bread and wages. The New Left was made of the children of affluence, who wanted meaning, authenticity and "participatory democracy," and who found both Cold War liberalism and the Old Left wanting. It grew through the civil rights movement, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 and the campaign against the war in Vietnam, and it reached its crisis in 1968: the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, riots in American cities, and street battles outside the Democratic convention in Chicago. That November Richard Nixon won the presidency with 43.4 percent of the vote, and George Wallace, running on open resistance to desegregation and to the disorder of the cities, took 13.5 percent.[16] Together they won a clear majority against the party of the New Deal.

Here the book's second hypothesis comes into view. It holds that "unjustified oppression and advantage" was in large part successfully removed by the postwar justice movements, which "did good work in removing artificial barriers," and that once equality of rights was won the left did not stop. Instead it "migrated from inputs (rights) to outputs

(outcomes)": having achieved equality of input, it moved to "equality" of output, which it later called equity, and so equality was transformed into a demand that the state "put its finger on the scale" or "treat everyone as Same."

The historical record supports the description of the shift with unusual clarity, because its authors announced it. On June 4, 1965, two months before he signed the Voting Rights Act, Lyndon Johnson gave the commencement address at Howard University. "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair," he said. "We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result."[17] That is the move from inputs to outputs, stated by a president as policy. The institutions followed. In 1971 the Supreme Court held in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* that employment tests with a disproportionate effect on Black applicants could violate civil rights law even without any intent to discriminate, which made unequal results themselves evidence of a legal wrong.[18] Federal affirmative action for contractors moved from a general command not to discriminate to numerical "goals and timetables," a shift carried out, as the sociologist John Skrentny has documented, partly by the Nixon administration, which saw political and administrative advantages in it.[19] In 1978 the Court in *Bakke* allowed universities to consider race as one factor in admissions in the name of diversity. Within fifteen years of Johnson's speech, the measure of justice in American law and administration had moved a long way from equal treatment toward equal results.

The other half of the hypothesis, that unjustified discrimination had largely been removed by the time this shift took place, meets harder evidence. The legal barriers were removed: segregation, the exclusion of Black voters in the South, open discrimination in hiring and housing all became illegal between 1964 and 1968. But field experiments, in which researchers send matched job applications that differ only by a name or a stated race, have found persistent differences in treatment. A meta-analysis of every such study of American hiring since 1989 found that white applicants received on average about 36 percent more callbacks than equally qualified Black applicants, with no decline over twenty-five years.[20] That does not show that all remaining disparities come from

discrimination; much of the gap in outcomes between groups reflects differences in family structure, schooling, skills and the long shadow of history, and how much each matters is fiercely debated. But it does show that the claim that unjustified treatment had been "successfully removed" is too strong as a statement about conduct, even if it is true as a statement about law. The honest verdict is that the book's account of the move from rights to results is correct and well documented, and that the premise that the earlier task was finished is only partly correct.

The third hypothesis concerns a cultural turn. In July 1969 Americans landed on the moon. Four weeks later several hundred thousand young people gathered at Woodstock. This book's notes take the pairing, which the investor Peter Thiel has used in his account of technological stagnation, as "the exact moment for the shift from expansionism to contractionism," the point at which the culture turned from mastering the outer world to exploring "inner space," and from risk and conquest to safety, feeling and care. Thiel's own line was that Americans were promised flying cars and got 140 characters instead.[21]

The pairing is a symbol, not a mechanism, but the data it points to are real. American productivity growth slowed sharply around 1970 and has never recovered its earlier pace. The economist Robert Gordon estimates that total factor productivity, the part of growth that comes from better ways of doing things, grew about three times as fast from 1920 to 1970 as in the decades after.[22] Energy use per person in the United States, which had risen steadily for two centuries, flattened in the 1970s. The National Environmental Policy Act, signed on the first day of 1970, began an era in which major projects needed years of review and could be stopped by litigation, and nuclear power, the great hope of the 1950s, stalled. So the hypothesis is pointing at something that happened. The question is why. Economists offer several explanations that do not depend on culture: the easy gains of electricity, the engine and chemistry had been used up; new ideas, as one influential study put it, are "getting harder to find," requiring ever more researchers for the same progress; the oil shocks of the 1970s raised the price of energy.[23] Other scholars, including some on the left, now argue that the procedural rules created in the early 1970s, meant to protect citizens and nature from the excesses of the builders, became a machine for preventing building, which is close to the book's claim in a different vocabulary.[24] The verdict is that the turn is real and that a cultural and

moral change toward caution is one plausible cause among several; the evidence cannot yet weigh them precisely.

The 1970s produced two further movements that would shape the right for decades. The first came from the left itself. A group of liberal intellectuals, many of them New York Jews who had grown up on the anticommunist left, turned against the Great Society, the New Left and what they saw as the naïve belief that social programs could remake human beings. Their journal, *The Public Interest*, founded in 1965, specialized in the study of unintended consequences. Irving Kristol, its founder, defined a neoconservative as "a liberal who has been mugged by reality."[25] The phrase is worth pausing on, because it fits the substance this book proposes. The neoconservatives were people who had held the left's view of human malleability and had changed their minds when they saw the results. They did not become traditionalists; they became, in their own description, empiricists about human nature.

What mugged them was, in large part, crime and the breakdown of order in the cities. The American homicide rate roughly doubled between the early 1960s and 1980 and stayed near that peak until the early 1990s; riots burned through Watts, Newark and Detroit; and the urban neighborhoods where the New Deal coalition had lived became, for many of its members, places to flee.[26] At the same time the sexual revolution and the new freedom to divorce reshaped the family. In 1965 the young Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a Labor Department official in a Democratic administration, warned in a report on the Black family that the rising share of children born outside marriage threatened everything the civil rights laws were meant to achieve. He was denounced as blaming the victim, and the subject became nearly untouchable on the left for a generation. The share of all American births outside marriage, about one in twenty in 1960, passed four in ten by the 2000s.[27] The historian Robert Self describes the politics of these years as a contest between a liberalism that came to measure justice by the expansion of individual rights, including rights over sex and the body, and a conservatism that answered with "family values."[28] This episode illustrates a pattern this book returns to often: the left judged policies by their intentions and by the rights they extended, while its critics, including the neoconservatives who came from inside it, judged them by their results. Neither side had a monopoly on evidence. But on crime and the family, the critics' warnings about results were, by the measures they named, borne out.

The second movement came from the churches. White evangelical Protestants, many of them in the South and many of them Democrats, had largely stayed out of national politics. In the 1970s a series of shocks drew them in: the ban on organized prayer in public schools, the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the fight over the Equal Rights Amendment, and federal action against the tax exemptions of private Christian schools, many of which had been founded as segregation academies. Historians disagree about which of these mattered most; one account stresses race and the schools, another the longer history of evangelical politics and the moral issues of sex and family.[29] Either way, by 1979 Jerry Falwell had founded the Moral Majority, and from then on religious practice became one of the strongest predictors of how Americans vote. A party that had been the vehicle of business and of fiscal restraint now also carried the defense of traditional morality, and a party that had been the vehicle of the Catholic and Protestant working class became, step by step, the party of the secular.

These shifts were not only the work of voters. The political scientist Sam Rosenfeld has shown that polarization was a goal before it was a fact. As early as 1950 a committee of the American Political Science Association called for "a more responsible two-party system," meaning parties that offered clear and opposed programs, and liberal reformers spent the next two decades trying to drive Southern conservatives out of the Democratic Party; on the other side, conservative activists wanted Republicans to offer "a choice, not an echo."[30] Both sides got what they asked for. By 1980 the parties were far more ideologically distinct than they had been in 1950, and the process had only begun.

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The Reagan Order and the Ratchet, 1980–2008

Ronald Reagan's life traced the realignment. He had been a New Deal Democrat and the president of a labor union; by 1964 he was the most effective speaker for Goldwater, and in 1980 he won the presidency, carrying forty-four states. "Government is not the solution to our problem," he said in his first inaugural address; "government is the problem."[31] He cut the top income tax rate from 70 percent to 28 percent over his two terms, broke the air traffic controllers' strike, built up the military, and confronted

the Soviet Union in language his predecessors had avoided. Within three years of his leaving office the Soviet Union was gone.

Reagan's coalition was Meyer's fusion made real and enlarged: free-market conservatives, traditionalists, anticommunists, neoconservatives and the new religious right, together with the white South and many Northern working-class Democrats who had come to see their old party as the party of welfare, busing and the counterculture. It won the central economic argument of the age so completely that the other party accepted its terms. Gerstle's second example of an opposition acquiescing to an order is Bill Clinton, who won in 1992 as a "New Democrat," signed the North American Free Trade Agreement over the opposition of most House Democrats, declared in 1996 that "the era of big government is over," and signed a welfare reform that ended the federal guarantee of cash aid.[32] Deregulation, free trade, the mobility of capital and a market-centered idea of freedom became the common ground of both parties until the financial crisis of 2008. In economic policy, the right did not play defense in these years. It won.

The end of the Cold War tested the fusion and nearly broke it. With the Soviet Union gone, the anticommunism that had held libertarians, traditionalists and hawks together lost its object. In 1992 Patrick Buchanan challenged a sitting Republican president in the primaries under the old slogan "America First," attacking free trade, immigration and foreign wars and announcing from the convention podium that the country was in a "culture war" for its soul; he won more than a third of the vote in New Hampshire. That November the independent Ross Perot, running against free trade and the federal deficit, took nearly 19 percent of the national vote, the best showing by a candidate outside the two parties since 1912.[33] Neither man came close to power. But between them they sketched almost every theme of the national populism that would capture the Republican Party a quarter century later: economic nationalism, hostility to mass immigration, suspicion of foreign wars and contempt for the bipartisan establishment that had made the post-Cold War consensus. For the moment the establishment held. Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" won Republicans their first House majority in forty years in 1994 on a program of budget-cutting, welfare reform and congressional reform, the fusionist program in a new form, and the populist strand went underground.[34]

Conservatives also built institutions. The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973 to supply ready-made policy to conservative politicians; the Federalist Society was founded in 1982 by law students who wanted to change the legal culture that trained judges; the end of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 opened the way for national conservative talk radio, led by Rush Limbaugh from 1988; and Fox News began broadcasting in 1996.[35] Economists have since estimated that Fox's spread across cable systems measurably increased Republican vote shares.[36] So the claim sometimes heard on the right, that the left "played a long institutional game and the right opted out," is only half true. The right built a counter-establishment of think tanks, legal networks and media that by the 2000s could shape a party and, in time, a Supreme Court.

Yet in the institutions that shape belief, as opposed to those that shape policy, the left's dominance grew through these same decades. Studies of faculty voter registration at leading American universities have found Democrats outnumbering Republicans by roughly ten to one or more in most fields of the humanities and social sciences, with the gap widening over time.[37] A 2022 national survey of American journalists found that about 36 percent identified as Democrats and about 3 percent as Republicans, with most of the rest calling themselves independents.[38] The professions that teach, report, entertain and certify moved steadily left as the century ended, and with them the moral vocabulary of the educated classes. The result was a strange division of the spoils. The right won the economy and much of the electoral map; the left won the culture.

This division gives the best test of the book's fourth hypothesis: that the right has spent decades on defense, that "the rules of the game are liberal," that the Republican Party is in effect the Democratic Party of ten or twenty years earlier, and that conservatives have played "not to lose small" for fifty years. As a description of economic policy between 1980 and 2008, the hypothesis is wrong; in that domain the right set the rules and the left adapted. As a description of moral and cultural questions, it is largely right, and the clearest evidence is the history of same-sex marriage. In 1996 Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act with large bipartisan majorities and Bill Clinton signed it; Gallup found that only about a quarter of Americans then supported legal recognition of same-sex marriage. In 2004 Republicans placed state constitutional bans on eleven ballots and won all of them. By 2015 the Supreme Court had established a national right to same-sex marriage, and by the early 2020s a majority of Republicans told

Gallup they supported it.[39] Positions that had been held by most Democrats in the 1990s became minority positions within the Republican Party a generation later. The same pattern, a cultural ratchet in which the right resists a change, loses, and then comes to treat the change as normal, can be traced in attitudes toward women's work, divorce, premarital sex and interracial marriage.

Two qualifications keep this from being the whole story. First, many of the changes the right resisted and later accepted were ones its own principles could absorb: the end of legal segregation, women's equality before the law, interracial marriage. Conservatives who now accept them have not simply surrendered; many have concluded that the older position was wrong, which is what a tradition that learns from experience is supposed to do. Second, the ratchet is not a law of nature. Since the early 2020s Republican support for same-sex marriage has fallen back sharply, to about four in ten in Gallup's 2025 survey, while Democratic support approached nine in ten, the widest partisan gap Gallup had recorded on the question.[40] On abortion, the movement went the other way entirely: a fifty-year conservative campaign ended with the overturning of *Roe* in 2022. A better description is that the cultural current has run left for most of the period since the 1960s, carried by the institutions that form the educated classes, and that the right has resisted it with mixed success, winning where it built its own institutions and losing where it did not.

By the 1990s the sorting was nearly complete. The conservative Southern Democrats were gone, replaced by Republicans; the liberal Northeastern Republicans were going. Political scientists who place every member of Congress on a single left-right scale based on their votes found that the parties stopped overlapping at all in the House in 2002 and in the Senate in 2004, and that Republicans had moved further from the center than Democrats.[41] Others caution that these measures capture conflict on the issues the majority chooses to bring to a vote, not belief as such, and surveys of ordinary voters show Democrats moving left about as fast as Republicans moved right in the 2010s.[42] What is not in doubt is the change in feeling. Pew found that between 1994 and 2014 the share of Americans with consistently liberal or consistently conservative views doubled, and the share of each party with a very unfavorable view of the other more than doubled.[43] The phrase "culture war," which the sociologist James Davison Hunter made current in 1991 and Patrick Buchanan proclaimed from the

podium of the 1992 Republican convention, had become an accurate description.

The political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins have described the two parties that emerged as different kinds of things. The Republican Party became the vehicle of an ideological movement: its voters and officeholders describe their politics in terms of principles, limited government, traditional values, national strength, and far more of them call themselves conservatives than Democrats call themselves liberals. The Democratic Party became a coalition of social groups, labor, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, feminists, environmentalists, gay Americans, teachers and others, each seeking concrete benefits and recognition.[44] This asymmetry bears on a hypothesis in the working notes: that the Democrats are "the party of the underclass" while the Republicans are not so much the party of the overclass as the party of "anyone who isn't expressly *for*" the coalition of groups the left champions. The structural part of this is well supported by Grossmann and Hopkins: the Democratic Party is organized around group claims in a way the Republican Party is not, and much of the right's unity really does come from opposition to that coalition. The class part is not supported. By 2008 the Democratic coalition included the poorest Americans and the most educated, and the professionals who led it were among the most advantaged people in the country. The full argument that the left functions as a lobby for those it deems unjustly marginalized is made in this book's companion paper, *The Lower Lobby*; here it is enough to say that the party structure of the late twentieth century fits its claim about whom the left's program speaks for better than any claim about who its voters are.[45]

The order Reagan founded ended in two blows. The first was the war in Iraq, launched in 2003 on intelligence about weapons that did not exist and pursued by a Republican administration under neoconservative influence; its costs discredited the interventionism that had been one strand of the fusion. The second was the financial crisis of 2008, which brought the banking system near collapse, led a Republican president to rescue the banks with public money, and destroyed the claim that markets left to themselves were self-correcting. In November 2008 the country elected Barack Obama. The long realignment had produced two parties that were each, at last, internally consistent, divided on economics, on race, on religion, on sex and family, and on the meaning of the nation. It had also produced an electorate whose deepest loyalties were no longer to its

leaders' economic programs but to its tribes. What happened when that electorate turned against the leaders of both parties is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 12

Populism and the Great Sorting, 2008–2026

In the autumn of 2008 the American financial system came close to failing, and with it the confidence of the generation that had run the country since the end of the Cold War. A Republican administration that believed in markets spent hundreds of billions of public dollars to save the banks. A Democratic administration that came in promising change kept most of the same people and the same policies in place. Ordinary Americans saw the people who had caused the crisis rescued and their own homes and jobs lost. Out of that experience came two revolts against the leaders of both parties, one on the right and one on the left, and the most turbulent stretch of American politics since the 1960s.

The historian Gary Gerstle describes the years after 2008 as the fall of the neoliberal order: the free-market consensus that Reagan had built and Clinton had accepted lost its authority, and nothing with equal authority replaced it.[1] This book's notes call such a time an interregnum, a period between orders in which the old premises no longer command belief and the new ones have not yet been settled. The phrase fits. The years from 2008 to 2026 saw the education of the voters replace their income as the main dividing line between the parties, the rise of a new moral language on the left and a new national populism on the right, the return of political violence, and swings between the parties so large that each side, at different moments, believed it had won a permanent majority. None did. What did become permanent, or close to it, was the sorting: Americans now divide into two camps whose disagreements run from economics to religion to the meaning of the nation, and whose members increasingly dislike and fear each other.

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The Breakdown, 2008–2016

Barack Obama won in 2008 with nearly 53 percent of the vote, the largest Democratic share since 1964. Many on the left read his victory as the arrival of a new majority. Six years earlier the political analysts John Judis and Ruy Teixeira had argued that the growth of the nonwhite population, of single and professional women, and of the college-educated would give Democrats a lasting edge, and in 2008 and 2012 the "coalition of the ascendant" seemed to have arrived.[2] The thesis rested on an assumption that group identity would fix partisanship: that as the country became more diverse it would become more Democratic. The following decade showed the assumption to be wrong. Teixeira himself later warned that the party's cultural turn was driving away working-class voters of every race, and by 2024 Hispanic voters, the group whose growth was supposed to guarantee the majority, had split almost evenly.[3] Demography was not destiny. This matters for the questions of this book because it shows that the substance of left and right, the moral stance people take toward equality, order and the given, can pull against inherited group loyalties and in time overcome them.

The first revolt came from the right. In February 2009 a television commentator on the floor of the Chicago exchange denounced the administration's plan to help homeowners who had borrowed more than they could repay, and within weeks Tea Party rallies were gathering across the country. The sociologists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, who studied the movement's local groups, found its activists to be mostly older, white, middle-class and churchgoing, and found that their politics turned on a moral line between the deserving and the undeserving. Social Security and Medicare, which they had paid for by working, were earned; benefits for the young, the poor and recent immigrants were not.[4] This was not the libertarianism its slogans suggested. It was a politics of desert, and of membership, and it anticipated the national populism that followed more closely than the economists and party strategists of the time understood. The Tea Party helped Republicans gain sixty-three House seats in 2010.

The second revolt came from the left. In September 2011 protesters occupied a park in lower Manhattan under the slogan "We are the 99 percent." Occupy Wall Street had no program and faded within months, but

it changed the vocabulary of American politics: inequality between the top one percent and everyone else became a central theme of the left, and five years later Bernie Sanders, a senator who called himself a democratic socialist, won about 43 percent of the votes in the Democratic presidential primaries.[5]

Beneath both revolts a quieter change was taking place in the moral outlook of educated liberals. Beginning around 2012, and accelerating after the deaths of Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the attitudes of white liberals on race shifted sharply. The researcher Zach Goldberg, analyzing the long-running national surveys, found that within a few years white liberals had become more likely than Black or Hispanic Americans to say that discrimination was the main reason for Black disadvantage, and more favorable to immigration than Hispanic Americans themselves; text analysis of major newspapers shows that terms such as "racism," "white privilege" and "systemic racism" multiplied several times over in the same period, beginning before the shift in public opinion.[6] The journalist's name for this, the Great Awokening, stuck. Its causes are debated. Goldberg reads it as led by the media; others find that white Democrats' views moved in response to the partisan conflict of the period; the sociologist Musa al-Gharbi argues that it was one of several waves, in the 1930s, the late 1960s, the early 1990s and the 2010s, each driven by status competition among a growing class of credentialed professionals, and each eventually subsiding.[7] Chapter 13 takes up these explanations. Here the point is historical. In the same years that the Supreme Court established a national right to same-sex marriage in 2015, the moral program of the educated left became more ambitious, more focused on group identity and more insistent that disparities between groups were themselves proof of injustice. The move from equal rights to equal results described in the previous chapter reached its fullest expression.

A related change was transforming the electorate. For most of the twentieth century, college graduates had leaned Republican. In 2012 Mitt Romney still won white college graduates. In 2016 Donald Trump lost them, while winning white voters without degrees by a margin no Republican had approached in decades. The political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins have since argued that the "diploma divide" now drives the culture war: the institutions that form the educated classes have moved left, and the right has become in large part a reaction against them.[8] The economist Thomas Piketty and his colleagues found the same pattern across twenty-

one Western democracies over seventy years: parties of the left, once the parties of the less educated and lower paid, have become the parties of the highly educated, while the highly paid remain more often on the right. They call the result a "multi-elite" system of a "Brahmin left" and a "merchant right."[9]

Trump's victory in 2016, with 304 electoral votes and a minority of the popular vote, set off the most intense scholarly argument about a single election in living memory. One school held that economic hardship and the loss of manufacturing jobs explained it, and there is evidence that counties hit hardest by Chinese import competition moved toward Trump.[10] Another held that the decisive force was status threat: the fear among white, Christian and male Americans that their place in the national hierarchy was slipping. The political scientist Diana Mutz found that change in such attitudes predicted movement toward Trump better than change in personal finances, though critics argue that her data cannot cleanly separate status from material interest.[11] A third school, led by John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck, found that attitudes toward race, immigration and Islam predicted the switch from Romney to Trump far better than economic distress, and concluded that the campaign had "activated" questions of national identity that had been present but quiet.[12] The historian Walter Russell Mead described the result as the return of a recurrent American tradition, the Jacksonian, a populist culture of honor, folk loyalty and suspicion of elites that both parties had served at different times.[13] These explanations are not exclusive. Taken together they point to the conclusion that Trump's appeal was first about who belongs and who rules, and only second about money.

This book's notes offer a psychological reading of the same event: that "Trump represented the return of 'the father,'" and that the left, by contrast, "substitutes the state for the father and makes it act like a mother," performing "a father's job" with "a mother's psychology." The first half of this reading has unusually good support. The political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler measure what they call authoritarian disposition with four questions about what children should be taught: respect for elders or independence, obedience or self-reliance, good manners or curiosity, being well-behaved or considerate. People who choose the first answers, the values of a traditional father, have sorted steadily into the Republican Party since the 1990s.[14] In a national survey taken during the 2016 primaries, this measure was the single strongest

predictor of support for Trump among Republican voters, stronger than income, education or age.[15] The political psychologist Karen Stenner's work adds that such dispositions are activated by what she calls normative threat, the sense that the moral order and shared identity of the community are dissolving, which is exactly what Trump's campaign described.[16] So the image of the strong father returning to a household that had lost its order describes the psychology of Trump's base closely. The second half of the reading, the left as a mother, has weaker direct evidence. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff proposed a matching model in which liberals are guided by a "nurturant parent" ideal, but his framework was built from the analysis of language rather than tested in surveys, and the nurturant half has found much less support than the strict-father half.[17] What the evidence does show is that Democrats score higher on the moral concern for care and harm and that women have become steadily more Democratic than men, which is consistent with the reading but does not establish it. The verdict is that the father half of the hypothesis is well supported and the mother half is plausible but not yet demonstrated.

The same notes read the intensity of the left's reaction to Trump as an "aversion to Hitler," an echo of the postwar trauma described in the previous chapter. That is a claim about inner motive, and surveys can only approach it indirectly. What they show is that dislike of the other party had been rising for decades before Trump and was by then symmetrical in size. The political scientist Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues have documented that partisans of each side now rate the other party far more coldly than they did a generation ago and avoid its members in dating, hiring and friendship.[18] Trump intensified a hatred that both sides already felt. Whether the left's form of it draws on the memory of fascism, and the right's form of it on the memory of the 1960s, is a reasonable interpretation that the available data can neither confirm nor refute.

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Revolt and Reaction, 2016–2024

Trump's first term was more conventional in its policy than in its style. He signed a large tax cut in 2017 and appointed three Supreme Court justices, who would later supply the votes to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and to end race-conscious university admissions in 2023. He broke with the

Republican free-trade consensus by imposing tariffs on China, steel and aluminum, and the Democrats who followed him kept most of them. He made immigration enforcement the center of his presidency. In each of these the movement conservatism of the previous forty years and the new national populism worked together; the conflicts between them lay mostly ahead.

Trump's victory also loosened the intellectual hold of the old fusion on the right. In 2018 the political theorist Patrick Deneen published *Why Liberalism Failed*, arguing that the liberal project, left and right alike, had succeeded on its own terms and in doing so had dissolved the families, communities, religious bonds and inherited cultures that liberty depends on; free-market conservatives, in his account, were simply the other wing of the same liberalism.[19] The next year the first National Conservatism conference gathered writers and politicians who wanted the right to be about the nation rather than the market, and Catholic integralists and "common-good" constitutional theorists argued openly that conservatives should use the power of the state to promote a substantive vision of the good rather than merely to restrain it.[20] These were minority positions in an intellectual elite, but they mattered because they offered the populist voters a theory, and because they marked the first serious challenge since the 1950s to the idea that American conservatism was a defense of classical liberalism. The left had its own revival of an older tradition. Membership in the Democratic Socialists of America, a few thousand before 2016, rose to the tens of thousands within two years, and in 2018 Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a 28-year-old member, unseated one of the most senior Democrats in the House.[21] On both sides, in other words, the post-2008 years revived traditions that the Cold War consensus had pushed to the margins: an illiberal or postliberal right and a socialist left. Each defined itself against the liberal center of its own party as much as against the other side.

The left responded with a mobilization that peaked in 2020. In the spring the coronavirus pandemic closed schools and businesses and became, within weeks, a partisan question: Democrats were more willing to accept restrictions and Republicans more suspicious of them, a gap that grew rather than shrank as the pandemic went on. On May 25 a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, a Black man under arrest, by kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes, an act recorded on video. The protests that followed were among the largest in American history; one careful estimate put total participation at fifteen to twenty-six million

people.[22] Institutions moved with remarkable speed. Universities required statements of commitment to diversity from job applicants; newsrooms forced out editors who published dissenting views; companies created diversity offices and made public pledges. A McKinsey tally found that American companies committed roughly $200 billion to racial equity in the year after Floyd's death and about $340 billion by late 2022. A *Washington Post* investigation of the fifty largest companies found that more than 90 percent of their $49.5 billion in pledges took the form of loans and investments, many of them mortgages from which the companies could profit, and about $4.2 billion took the form of grants.[23]

This book's notes react to those figures with the strongest language in its material on the period: that the sums generated by a single death show the whole movement to be a "narrative," and that the narrative is a lie. Two separate claims are bundled here, and they deserve separate verdicts. The first is that the institutional response was out of proportion to any change in knowledge and was in large part costless or even profitable for the institutions making it. The evidence supports this. The pledges came in a burst, before any new evidence about policing had been gathered, and most of the money was capital the companies would have lent anyway, relabeled. Within three years, many of the same companies were quietly dismantling the programs they had announced. The second claim is that the story the movement told, of police systematically killing Black Americans because of their race, is false. Here the evidence is genuinely contested. Black Americans are killed by police at more than twice their share of the population.[24] But whether that disparity reflects bias or differences in rates of contact with police is a hard question. The economist Roland Fryer, studying detailed records from several cities, found racial differences in the lower-level use of force but none in police shootings once the circumstances of the encounter were taken into account; other scholars have shown that such records can hide bias in the decision to stop someone in the first place.[25] The honest verdict is that the strong version of the movement's narrative, a racially motivated epidemic of police killings, is not established by the evidence, and the strong version of the counter-claim, that racial bias plays no part in policing, is not established either. The scale and speed of the institutional reaction were driven by moral conviction and social pressure far more than by evidence, which is the point the hypothesis is reaching for.

The year's other events had consequences that reached into the following decade. The movement's most radical slogan, "defund the police," was adopted by some city councils and repudiated by most Democratic candidates, and in 2020 homicides in the United States rose by about 30 percent, the largest one-year increase in the national record.[26] The rise fell hardest on poor Black neighborhoods, and it reversed only in 2023 and 2024. And in November Trump lost to Joe Biden, refused to accept the result, and pressed claims of a stolen election that were rejected in more than sixty court cases, including by judges he had appointed. On January 6, 2021, a crowd of his supporters stormed the Capitol to stop the counting of electoral votes.[27] Both sides of American politics, in the same year, organized mass action around narratives that failed tests of fact: one about the nature of police violence, the other about the counting of votes. Neither side's narrative was simply invented; each grew from real grievances and real anomalies. But each outran its evidence, and in each case the institutions and leaders who should have checked it amplified it instead.

The Biden years produced a turn in the left's economic program that is easy to miss beside the cultural conflict. His administration abandoned much of the neoliberal consensus his party had shared since Clinton, spending heavily on infrastructure, domestic semiconductor manufacturing and clean energy, keeping Trump's China tariffs, and describing the result as a "new Washington consensus" in which the state would again direct investment.[28] The overturning of *Roe* in June 2022 was the most consequential victory of the conservative legal movement and, in the short run, a political gift to the left: the predicted Republican wave in that November's midterm elections did not arrive, and in state after state, including conservative ones such as Kansas and Ohio, voters approved measures protecting abortion rights.[29] At the same time the cultural program of the left met its first serious defeats. The Supreme Court ended race-conscious admissions in 2023, with Chief Justice John Roberts writing that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it."[30] Companies under pressure from conservative activists began dropping diversity targets, and universities that had made public statements on every controversy began adopting policies of institutional neutrality. This book's notes had predicted that the critical-theory form of the left was entering a "late-stage collapse." By 2024 the institutional part of that prediction was coming true.

The violence of the period ran in both directions and should be described accurately. A left-wing gunman wounded Congressman Steve Scalise at a baseball practice in 2017; a man inspired by right-wing conspiracy theories attacked the Speaker's husband with a hammer in 2022; Trump was shot and wounded at a rally in Pennsylvania in July 2024 and targeted again two months later; in June 2025 a gunman killed the Minnesota legislator Melissa Hortman and her husband; and in September 2025 the conservative organizer Charlie Kirk was assassinated while speaking on a Utah college campus. Many on the right read Kirk's murder as the expression of a hatred long cultivated in the left's rhetoric. The best available data give a mixed picture. A study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that in the first half of 2025, for the first time in the three decades of its records, left-wing terrorist attacks and plots outnumbered right-wing ones, after a steady rise since 2016. Over the preceding decade, however, right-wing attacks had killed far more people, 112 against 13.[31] The trend that alarmed the right was real; the claim that either side is the violent one is not supported by the longer record.

Two further changes of these years shaped the electorate of the 2020s. The first was a divergence between young men and young women. For decades women had voted somewhat more Democratic than men, but the young of both sexes had held similar views. From the mid-2010s that changed. Gallup found that the share of women aged eighteen to twenty-nine who called themselves liberal rose from under 30 percent to over 40 percent, while the share among young men stayed flat, and in 2024 young men moved toward Trump much more than young women did.[32] The causes are not settled. Young women's growing lead in education, the movements around sexual harassment and the overturning of *Roe* in 2022 fall in the formative years of their political lives, and young men's relative stagnation in school and work, and the different information worlds they inhabit online, plausibly pushed them the other way. What the evidence does show is that the gap is international, appearing in surveys from South Korea to Germany to Britain, which suggests causes deeper than any American campaign.

The second change was in the information environment. Cable news and talk radio had already divided the national audience; social media divided it further and sped it up. Whether social media caused the rise in polarization is doubtful: polarization began rising long before it existed and rose fastest among older Americans who used it least, and large experiments that

altered the feeds of tens of thousands of Facebook and Instagram users during the 2020 election found little effect on their political attitudes over three months.[33] What social media plainly did was change the speed and the incentives of political conflict. It rewarded the most emotional and moralized content, gave a megaphone to activists in every institution, and made every local outrage national within hours. The cultural mobilizations of 2014 to 2021 on the left, and the counter-mobilizations of the right that followed, moved at the speed of these platforms. By 2022, after Elon Musk bought Twitter and loosened its rules, the platforms themselves had become prizes in the conflict.

In 2024 Biden withdrew from the race in July, and Trump defeated Vice President Kamala Harris with 312 electoral votes and a narrow plurality of the popular vote, the first Republican popular-vote win in twenty years. The shape of his coalition confirmed the realignment by education. Validated voter records show Trump winning voters without a college degree by 56 to 42 percent and losing college graduates by 41 to 57; Hispanic voters split almost evenly after giving Biden a margin of twenty-five points in 2020; and men under fifty, whom Biden had won, went narrowly to Trump.[34] The education gap was now opening inside every racial group: non-college Hispanic and Black men, in particular, moved toward the right. The working notes observe that many of the right's new leaders were former Democrats, Trump himself among them, and that "the Republican Party" had become in part a refuge for people who felt, in Reagan's old phrase, that their party had left them. The 2024 coalition, which included Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Tulsi Gabbard and Elon Musk, all former Democrats, fits that description well.

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The Second Term and the Thermostat, 2025–2026

Trump's second term began with an assertion of executive power without modern precedent: a record number of executive orders in the first hundred days, many of them closely matching proposals in a plan prepared under the Heritage Foundation, Project 2025; a "Department of Government Efficiency" led by Elon Musk that cut federal agencies and dismantled the foreign aid agency; orders ending diversity programs across the federal government and its contractors; a campaign of mass

deportation; confrontations with elite universities over federal funding; and, in April 2025, sweeping tariffs on nearly every trading partner, announced as "Liberation Day."[35] In July Congress passed a large bill that made the 2017 tax cuts permanent and cut Medicaid. That autumn the government was shut down for six weeks, the longest shutdown in American history.

The second term also exposed, for the first time in years, the fault line inside the right between its constitutionalist and national-populist wings. The conservative legal movement had spent forty years building doctrines that limited the power of the executive branch, aimed originally at the regulatory state of the left. In February 2026 the Supreme Court, with a majority appointed by Republican presidents, used those doctrines to rule six to three that the emergency statute Trump had relied on did not authorize his tariffs.[36] The decision showed that the fusion of legal conservatism and national populism, which had worked smoothly when the enemy was the progressive state, could break when the populist leader wielded the state himself.

On the left the defeats of 2024 opened a struggle over the party's direction. One side, associated with the writers Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, argued for "abundance": a liberalism that would clear away the procedural rules, many of them its own, that made it slow and costly to build housing, energy and transit.[37] Another side argued for an economic populism aimed at the rich and the corporations. In November 2025 Zohran Mamdani, a 34-year-old member of the Democratic Socialists of America, won the mayoralty of New York with about 50 percent of the vote on a program of rent freezes, free buses and higher taxes on the wealthy, carried by young voters.[38] The same night Democrats won the governorships of Virginia and New Jersey by large margins. In the 2026 primaries, democratic socialist candidates won some notable races but fewer than half of their contests for statewide and congressional office, and in swing districts mainstream candidates of both parties outperformed their parties' flanks.[39]

The year 2026 brought a war with Iran that began at the end of February and drove gasoline prices sharply higher, continued conflict over immigration enforcement that included the killing of two people by federal agents in Minneapolis in January and mass protests across the country, and a steady decline in the president's approval. In the midterm elections of November 3, 2026, Democrats won control of both houses of Congress.

Early counts showed them gaining more than forty House seats and seven Senate seats, including seats in North Carolina, Maine, Ohio and Texas. About six in ten voters disapproved of the president, voters under thirty chose Democrats by roughly seven in ten, and Hispanic voters, who had split evenly in 2024, chose Democrats by about two to one.[40]

What these swings mean is the hardest question this chapter faces, because it bears on the claim, central to this book, that left and right are a lasting substance rather than a passing alignment. The answer the evidence gives is that two kinds of change are happening at once. The first is the thermostat. The political scientist Christopher Wlezien showed decades ago that the public moves against whatever the government is doing, wanting less spending when spending rises and more when it falls; the party out of power has gained House seats in nearly every midterm election since the Civil War.[41] The voters who swung most between 2020, 2024 and 2026, young men, Hispanic voters, those who seldom vote, are those with the weakest attachments, and they swung against the party in power each time. The second kind of change is the sorting, and it has not reversed. In the 2026 wave, early surveys showed college graduates voting Democratic by a larger margin than in 2024, while the gap among voters without degrees narrowed but remained; white evangelical Protestants voted Republican by more than sixty points, as they have for a generation.[42] The education divide and the religious divide, the two deepest structural features of the modern alignment, survived the swing. The political scientist David Mayhew has warned against reading any single election as a permanent realignment, and the warning applies equally to 2024 and to 2026.[43]

The working notes make one more claim about the period that can be tested against these results: that "Democrats win because they more closely aligned to the prevailing liberal world order and higher ethic," because the moral background of the culture favors the left. The evidence divides by level. Among the people who run the institutions of culture, education and media, the claim is plainly true, as the previous chapter showed. Among voters it is not. Conservatives still outnumber liberals in Gallup's annual surveys, 35 percent to 28 percent in 2025, and Republicans won the popular vote in 2024.[44] Americans have long been, in the political scientists' phrase, symbolically conservative and operationally liberal: they call themselves conservatives and like the idea of limited government, but support most specific government programs.[45] What the left's cultural

dominance gives it is not a majority of voters but control of the moral vocabulary in which arguments are made, which is a different and in some ways larger form of power, and one whose limits the election of 2024 exposed and the election of 2026 did not restore.

By 2026, then, the long realignment that began in the 1960s was complete in its structure and unstable in its results. The two parties had become, in the political scientist Lilliana Mason's phrase, "mega-identities," in which race, religion, education, region and ideology all line up together, so that a political defeat feels like a threat to one's whole kind of person.[46] Their positions on particular issues had moved, as American parties' positions always have: on trade, on executive power, on foreign war, on free speech, on big business, each party in this period held views the other had held a generation earlier. What did not move was the deeper alignment beneath the issues. One camp gathered those who see inherited hierarchies, groups and differences as mainly products of injustice to be corrected, and who trust the state, the university and the expert to correct them. The other gathered those who see such hierarchies and differences as at least partly natural, earned or necessary, and who distrust the institutions that claim the right to override them. That is the substance this book has been describing. The American story shows it taking one form after another, in parties that switched sides on almost every particular question, and arriving in the twenty-first century more nearly unmixed than at any time since the founding. Part Five turns from its history to its present forms.

PART FIVE

Left and Right Today



CHAPTER 13

The Left Today

In November 2026 the American left is both stronger and weaker than it looked two years earlier. It lost the presidency, both chambers of Congress and much of its standing with working-class and Hispanic voters in 2024. Its institutional project of the previous decade, the language and offices of diversity, equity and inclusion, was rolled back by courts, corporations and a hostile administration. Yet in the off-year elections of 2025 it won the governorships of Virginia and New Jersey by wide margins and elected a democratic socialist as mayor of New York, and in the midterm elections of November 3, 2026 it won both houses of Congress in what most observers read as a rebuke of the president.[1] Such swings say more about the voters in the middle, and about how the party in power performs, than about the left itself. The question this chapter asks is the deeper one. What is the American left now, beneath its factions and its swings? Who belongs to it, what holds it together, and does the account of its substance given in the earlier parts of this book describe it as it actually is?

One fact frames everything else. The two sides are not built the same way. The political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins showed that the Republican Party is mainly the vehicle of an ideological movement, while the Democratic Party is mainly a coalition of social groups, each seeking concrete benefits: unions, teachers, Black voters, Hispanic voters, environmentalists, gay and transgender advocates, abortion-rights supporters, the professional classes.[2] Democratic voters are less likely than Republican voters to call themselves ideologues, and more likely to describe politics in terms of what it does for groups like them. This has two consequences for understanding the left. First, the left is wider than any single doctrine, and much of its electorate does not share the beliefs of its intellectual vanguard. Second, the thing that holds a group coalition together is not a philosophy so much as a moral claim: that the party stands for those who have less, or who have been shut out, against those who have

more and have done the shutting. That moral claim is where this book locates the left's substance, and it is also what the factions now fight over.

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The Factions of the Left

The most careful map of the American public is the Political Typology of the Pew Research Center, which sorts a large national sample into groups by their values and policy views. Its 2026 edition, fielded at the end of 2025, divides the left-leaning public into four groups.[3] The largest single group in the country, at 18 percent of adults, is what Pew calls the Order and Opportunity Left: economically liberal, racially diverse, more worried about crime than other Democrats, and firm on borders, with three in four calling secure borders very important. A quarter of its members lean Republican. Next comes the Left-Out Left, at 12 percent: financially stressed, cynical about politics, and doubtful that the Democratic Party cares about people like them. The Loyal Liberals, at 11 percent, are highly educated, largely White and trusting of institutions; three in four view the Democratic Party favorably, and almost none support a national deportation effort. The smallest and youngest group, the Leftward Progressives, at 7 percent, are the most radical and the most alienated from the party: two in three like politicians who call themselves democratic socialists, and only a third believe the party cares about them. The 2021 edition of the same survey found a similar shape under different names, with a small, highly educated Progressive Left, a large and heavily Black group of older Democratic Mainstays, a professional group of Establishment Liberals and a young, alienated Outsider Left.[4] An earlier study by the research group More in Common found the same structure from another angle: a small group of Progressive Activists, about 8 percent of the public, who were more White, more educated and more affluent than the average American, and who differed from the rest of the country far more than any other group of the left did. Eighty percent of Americans, including three-quarters of Black respondents and four in five Hispanic respondents, told that study that political correctness was a problem in the country; among Progressive Activists only 30 percent agreed.[5]

Two lessons follow from these maps. The ideological core of the left is small, about a fifth of adults at most, and it is the most educated and most

White part of the coalition. The largest blocs of left-leaning voters are less educated, more religious, more racially diverse, and more moderate on crime, immigration and questions of sex and gender. The left's internal divide, in other words, runs less between ideologies than between classes and degrees of trust: an educated, institution-trusting liberal layer; a young, educated and radical layer; and a broad base that is economically left, culturally closer to the center, and often alienated from both.

Behind this shape lies the largest change in the social base of left-wing politics in the past century. In the 1950s and 1960s, parties of the left in Western democracies drew their votes from people with less education and lower incomes. Over the following half-century, the economists Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty showed across twenty-one democracies, the left became the party of the highly educated, while the highly paid and the wealthy stayed on the right. They named the result a contest between a "Brahmin left" and a "merchant right."[6] In the United States the reversal is now nearly complete. In 2024, voters without a college degree chose the Republican candidate by fourteen points, college graduates chose the Democrat by sixteen, and those with graduate degrees by thirty-two.[7] Political scientists who have traced the shift in detail find that it was driven by what they call the second dimension of politics, the cultural questions of race, immigration, religion, sex and national identity, rather than by economics.[8] The party that once spoke for the factory floor now speaks most fluently for the seminar room, the newsroom, the nonprofit and the human-resources department, while still claiming to speak for the factory floor. This tension, between a moral vanguard of the educated and a clientele of the less advantaged, runs through every faction that follows.

The ideological sorting of the party has been just as steep. In 1994, a quarter of Democrats called themselves liberal; by 2025 the figure was 59 percent. Republicans who call themselves conservative rose over the same period from 58 to 77 percent.[9] Elite measures of polarization show Republicans in Congress moving further from the center than Democrats; measures of how ordinary partisans describe themselves show Democrats sorting faster. Both are true; they measure different things. What matters here is that the Democratic electorate, for the first time in modern history, is mostly made up of people who describe themselves by an ideology, and that this ideological wing is the most educated part of it.

The first faction, and the one with the most energy in 2025 and 2026, is the democratic-socialist and progressive left. Its founding events were Bernie Sanders's campaigns of 2016 and 2020, and its leading figures are Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and now Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America who won the New York mayoralty in November 2025 with about half the vote after defeating a former governor in the party primary.[10] Its diagnosis is that concentrated wealth and corporate power are the root of America's problems, that the party establishment is captured by donors, and that universal public programs, from government health insurance to free buses and public groceries, are both just and popular. The Democratic Socialists of America, which had about 6,000 members in 2016, claimed more than 120,000 after the 2026 midterms, and several of its candidates won House seats.[11] Mamdani's first year is the first serious test of whether such a program can govern a great city. The levers he controls directly, such as the board that sets rents on about a million stabilized apartments, he has used: the board froze those rents in June 2026. The plans that depend on the state, such as free buses and a tax on millionaires, have stalled, and the city's budget has revealed large costs that earlier administrations had not recorded.[12] The record so far is mixed, which is what one would expect at ten months. What the faction shows about the left's substance is plain enough. Its moral center is economic equality, it treats the gap between the top and the bottom as itself a wrong, and it increasingly speaks the language of class rather than of identity, in part because its leaders saw that identity-first politics had cost the left the working class.

The second faction is the one its opponents call "woke" and its members call social justice, anti-racism or equity. Scholars use more neutral names: the "Great Awokening," the "successor ideology," or, in Yascha Mounk's phrase, the "identity synthesis."[13] Its core belief is that differences between groups in income, wealth, health, education and punishment are mainly products of structural oppression, that language, institutions and norms carry that oppression, and that remedies must therefore be conscious of identity. Its intellectual sources run back through critical race theory and queer theory to the thinkers treated in Chapter 8, and its popular texts in the 2010s were books such as Ibram X. Kendi's How to Be an Antiracist and Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility. Its rise can be dated with some precision. Using national surveys, the political scientist Zach Goldberg showed that between about 2012 and 2016 the racial attitudes of White liberals moved

sharply left, so that White liberals became more likely than Black or Hispanic Americans to say that discrimination is the main cause of Black disadvantage, and more favorable toward immigration than Hispanic Americans.[14] He also found that White liberals had become the only group in the country to rate other racial groups more warmly than their own.[15] Text analysis of major newspapers shows that words such as "racism," "white privilege" and "systemic racism" surged several-fold beginning around 2011 to 2014, before the shift in public attitudes.[16] Whether the media led the shift or followed a partisan reaction to the politics of those years is disputed; one careful study finds that White Democrats' racial attitudes moved partly in response to the 2016 election.[17]

After the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 the faction's ideas spread rapidly through universities, corporations, foundations, newsrooms and government, in the form of diversity offices, diversity statements in hiring, racial-equity pledges and new speech norms. Then, beginning around 2022, came a retreat. In June 2023 the Supreme Court ruled race-conscious admissions at Harvard and the University of North Carolina unlawful, with the Chief Justice writing that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it."[18] Activist campaigns pushed a series of companies to drop diversity targets in 2023 and 2024. After the congressional hearings on campus antisemitism and the resignations of the presidents of Pennsylvania and Harvard, many universities adopted institutional neutrality and dropped diversity statements. In January 2025 the new administration issued executive orders ending federal diversity programs and revoking the 1965 order on affirmative action by federal contractors, followed by funding confrontations with leading universities and a wave of corporate rollbacks. [19] How deep the retreat goes is an open question. The sociologist Musa al-Gharbi argues that America has seen at least four such "awokenings," in the 1930s, the 1960s and 1970s, the early 1990s and the 2010s, each rising when the educated aspirants he calls "symbolic capitalists" faced status threats and each subsiding afterward; on several indicators he found the most recent one already fading by 2022.[20] The political scientist Eric Kaufmann argues instead that the "sacralization" of historically marginalized groups has become entrenched and will not recede without active rollback.[21] The evidence so far fits both accounts, because much of the retreat has been imposed by courts and state power rather than chosen, and because attitudes appear to have moved back only partway toward where they stood before 2012.

The third faction is the establishment liberals: the party's congressional leaders, its governors, its large unions and think tanks, and the 11 percent of the public Pew calls Loyal Liberals. They believe in the institutions of the postwar order, the gradual expansion of the welfare state, civil rights, and, since 2016, the defense of democratic norms and the rule of law against Donald Trump. Their weakness, in the eyes of the rest of the left, is passivity: the base erupted when the Senate leader allowed a Republican spending bill to advance in March 2025, and again when eight Senate Democrats ended the forty-three-day shutdown of the autumn of 2025.[22] Fourth are the centrists, organized in the House's Blue Dog and New Democrat caucuses and in groups such as Third Way, who argue that Democrats lose by being out of step with the median voter on immigration, crime, transgender questions and the vocabulary of the educated left. The comfortable victories of moderate Democrats in Virginia and New Jersey in 2025 were their evidence, just as Mamdani's victory on the same night was the progressives' evidence; most analysts concluded that the common thread was a message about the cost of living.[23] Fifth, and smaller, are two groups of heterodox reformers. The "abundance" liberals, named for the 2025 book by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, argue that America's binding problem is its inability to build housing, transit and energy, and that procedures created by liberals themselves, from environmental review to zoning to litigation, are a main cause.[24] The liberal critics of identity politics, among them Mark Lilla, Yascha Mounk, Francis Fukuyama, John McWhorter and the philosopher Susan Neiman, argue that the identity synthesis betrays the universalism of the liberal and socialist traditions.[25]

Two further facts complete the picture. The first is the political divergence of young women and young men. Gallup finds that about 40 percent of American women aged eighteen to twenty-nine now call themselves liberal, up from about 28 percent around 2000, while the share of young men who do so has stayed flat; similar gaps have opened in Britain, Germany and South Korea.[26] No cause is settled. Candidate explanations include women's lead in college education, the formative effect of the #MeToo period and the end of Roe v. Wade on young women, men's relative economic stagnation, and the separation of young men's and young women's media worlds. The question of whether the left's moral style is in some sense feminine, and the right's masculine, is taken up in Chapter 3. The second fact is that the left's fault lines are now as visible as its unity: class against identity, confrontation against restraint, moderation against

mobilization as theories of winning, supply against redistribution, and, sharpest of all and divided by generation, Israel and Gaza.[27]

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What Holds the Left Together

Beneath the factions there is a shared moral core, and it is best stated first in terms the left itself would accept. Every faction of the left believes that most of the inequalities it sees are social rather than natural, and therefore unjust and removable; that the measure of a society is how it treats those with the least power; and that the circle of moral concern should keep widening, from one's own people to all people, from citizens to migrants, from humans to animals and the earth. The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio argued that this attitude toward equality is the most durable difference between left and right across two centuries: the left treats most inequalities as products of society that can and should be removed, while the right treats more of them as natural, inevitable or even good.[28] The psychological research reviewed in Part Two finds the same core from the inside. Liberals weight care and fairness, understood as equality, above loyalty, authority and sanctity; their circle of moral concern reaches further out, to strangers, foreigners and animals, while conservatives concentrate concern on family, community and nation; and support for redistribution rests above all on compassion for the poor, with self-interest second and envy of the rich a smaller but real third.[29] The socialist left applies this core to class, the social-justice left to race, sex and sexuality, establishment liberals to rights and programs, and the abundance liberals, in their own way, to the material results that the poor actually experience. On this self-understanding, the left is simply what the moral progress of the last three centuries looks like from the inside: the end of slavery, the vote for women, civil rights, the welfare state, the acceptance of gay men and lesbians, each opposed at the time by the right and later accepted by it.

This book's hypothesis accepts that description of the left's moral core and then asks what drives it. The answer it proposes, developed in Chapters 1 and 2, is that the deepest difference between left and right is a stance toward the given: whether reality, with its built-in structures, sets the terms to which human will must conform, or whether human will is entitled to remake those terms. The left, on this view, stands for the

primacy of the will. Applied to the left of today, the hypothesis makes a specific and testable claim. As the legal and social exclusions of earlier centuries were removed, "progress" came to consist more and more in "attempts to abolish built-in structures of reality (sex differences, tradeoffs, merit) through language, law, or moral pressure." The left's quarrel, on this account, was never mainly with the right, with capitalism or with the rich, which are only reality's representatives. Its "beef is with reality": with human nature, constraints, tradeoffs, scarcity, hierarchy, differences in ability, and cause and effect. "The great oppressor they wailed against was mostly reality itself."

The hypothesis comes with a story about how the left arrived where it is. The great movements of the past two centuries, against slavery, for women's suffrage, for civil rights, for equal treatment of gay men and lesbians, attacked exclusions imposed by men and enforced by law. Those exclusions have largely been removed: the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, the end of legal barriers to women in work and education, and the Supreme Court's recognition of same-sex marriage in 2015 mark the completion of a long arc. The remaining disparities, the hypothesis holds, increasingly "come not from men but reality": from differences in aptitude, temperament, interest, family, culture and choice that law did not create and cannot abolish. The justice movements "didn't know when to stop." They kept moving until they "reached the floor," the point "where culture ends and biology, psychology, and physics begin." In this light the left has "run out of real progress to make," and its movement continues without the results that once justified it: "a treadmill: movement without progress," a ritual, since "rituals never have results," and finally "an ouroboros," a snake eating its own tail, as when new causes collide with old ones, gender identity with women's sports and spaces, mass immigration with the interests of the working class it once spoke for. "After one moral crusade loses prestige, a new one forms around the same emotional needs."

The limit case is transgender identity, and the hypothesis treats it as the key to the whole. Earlier causes concerned social facts that grew out of natural differences: how a society treated people of different race, sex or sexual orientation. The transgender cause, in this reading, moves from equal treatment of a given nature to the claim that nature itself yields to the will: from "inclusion" to "TRANSUBSTANTIATION." Race, sex and sexuality were "waves on the surface" of a deeper voluntarism, and in transgender identity the deep itself comes into view. The book's working

image for this is an order-of-operations problem, a "PEMDAS problem," in which the left puts self before God, will before truth, while the right puts God before self, truth before will. "THIS ORGANIZES EVERYTHING." On this account, the move against the boundaries of sex is not the left's exhaustion point but "the true beginning of their goal: final separation from tyrannical territory." The left's own understanding is different, and it deserves to be stated at its strongest. For the transgender movement and its allies, gender identity is a deep and stable feature of some people's inner lives; the suffering of those whose bodies and social roles do not match it is real and sometimes severe; recognizing a person's identity is a basic act of respect that costs others little; and medical treatment, endorsed in the United States by the major professional associations, relieves distress.[30] On their view, nothing is being denied; a previously hidden kind of human variation is being recognized, as left-handedness and homosexuality once were.

A second element of the hypothesis concerns how the left judges actions. The right, in this account, practices a results-based morality: a policy is good if it works, and a person is good by what he achieves. The left practices an intention-based or input-based morality: an act is good if it is well meant and expresses the right attitudes, and a person is good by conforming to the right map of the world. The difference shows in how each responds to failure. "My framework: results → adjust belief. Theirs: moral narrative → reinterpret results." When a welfare program fails, compassion was insufficient; when a diversity program fails, racism is even deeper than thought. "Whenever reality contradicts the system, the system interprets this as reality's fault, not its own." Hence, in this reading, the old saying that socialism "has never been tried." The point is not that the left rejects results-based morality after weighing it, but that "they don't even see it: it's out of frame." In the idealist frame "the moral act happens in the mind": feeling compassion is compassion, wishing justice is justice. The book's most pointed form of this claim, marked in its sources as "very important," is that "the left doesn't actually care about helping them. They only really care fundamentally about discharging the guilt that they feel and satisfying their psychological discomfort… if they did actually care about them, they would care about results." The same pattern, on this view, explains why problems are "solved" by redefining them: failing schools by inflating grades, crime by not prosecuting it, group gaps in test scores by calling the tests biased, and distress about one's sex by changing one's

body. "They 'solve' problems by abolishing the concepts that create discomfort."

A third element concerns who is held responsible. "The Left believes systems, not individuals, are the real moral agents," and this, the hypothesis holds, is "the spine of the entire ideological structure." It is never the person's fault; it is always the system's fault. Disadvantage is explained by structures, so those who are disadvantaged are innocent of their condition and those who are advantaged are guilty of theirs, whatever either has done. The left's own case for structural explanation is not merely a moral preference, and it is strong. Field experiments that send matched applications to employers, identical except for a name signaling race, have found substantial discrimination against Black applicants, and a meta-analysis of such experiments found no decline in hiring discrimination against Black Americans between 1989 and 2015.[31] People do not choose their parents, their neighborhoods, their schools or the century of their birth, and a large body of evidence shows that these shape life outcomes. The disagreement is about weight, and about what follows. The book's own view on that question, which it shares with The Lower Lobby, rejects the framing of advantage as a "natural lottery," as in the work of John Rawls: advantage has causes, often the choices and sacrifices of parents and ancestors, and to call it luck is to deny those causes.

A fourth element concerns which equality the left seeks. Equality of rights and dignity, the hypothesis holds, has given way to a demand for something stronger. "Equality → Sameness → equity": first equal treatment, then the claim that groups are the same in every relevant respect, then the demand that outcomes be made equal, which in practice means "systematic oppression of those above the line." Under this demand difference itself becomes suspect. The term "racist," on this reading, is not misapplied when it is stretched to cover any preference; its stretching "reveals the true principle at play," which is that "'Racist' really means discriminating based on difference." The result is the logic of Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron," in which the gifted are handicapped so that no one is better than anyone else: "They can't bring the low high so they bring the high low," and "those who are better are guiltier." The left, in this account, is also selectively anti-incumbent. Its moral priority runs to those it regards as outsiders and against those it regards as insiders: the established, the successful, the majority, the historically dominant. "It's not left vs right but in vs out." The incumbents, in this reading, are not targeted out of hatred so

much as treated as the price of the project: "They're not intentionally anti-incumbent — we're just the necessary victims." A companion paper, The Lower Lobby, develops the most radical form of this element, the claim that the left functions as a special interest group for those it deems unjustly marginalized, and introduces the terms "moral gerrymandering" and "ontological class war"; this book does not restate that argument.[32]

A fifth element concerns the left's power. The hypothesis holds that "the Left has had a moral monopoly for decades": it owns the vocabulary of goodness and progress, so that its positions feel like plain decency to everyone raised inside them, and "morality is the ultimate coordination mechanism," which is why the left coordinates so well outside politics, through universities, media, professions and corporations, and why "it never loses." The monopoly is protected by a belief about history. "The left believes in objective morality hence why they think that progress can never go backwards," whereas the right, on this view, should treat social reforms as experiments, to be kept if they work and undone if they fail. A reform once won becomes, for the left, a permanent moral fact, and the only direction is forward: a one-way ratchet.

The final element is the deepest and the most contested, and it ties the present to the roots traced in Part Three. The left's morality of equality, the hypothesis holds, is the moral content of Christianity, the equal worth of every soul before God, which survived the loss of belief in the God who grounded it. In the book's most emphatic formulation, "WOKE IS THE MOLD AND THE STENCH OF CHRIST UNBURIED": a morality "detached from its metaphysics," and therefore "a map floating without the territory," self-referential and free to drift until, in the transgender cause, "the map completely separat[es] from the territory." On this account it is wrong to say that the social-justice left "filled the vacuum" left by God, since it offers no positive vision of human excellence or of a life worth living; rather, it "is the vacuum," the "codification of the interregnum" between a dead order and one not yet born, and a symptom of decline rather than its cause. Chapter 2 examines the Christian origin of modern egalitarianism, and Chapter 6 the secularization of Christian ideas in modern politics; here the point is only that the hypothesis reads today's left as the last stage of a long story, not as a novelty.

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Testing the Picture

A portrait like this can be tested, element by element, against what is known. Some parts hold up well; some hold only for part of the left; some are philosophical claims that evidence cannot settle; and some are contradicted. It is worth being exact about which is which.

The moral core holds up best. That the left treats most inequality as social and removable, that it gives moral priority to those with less, that its circle of concern is wider and flatter, and that compassion is the main engine of its support for redistribution, are among the most solid findings in the study of ideology, replicated across countries and methods.[33] So is the claim that the left's priority is selective in a particular direction. Experiments by the psychologists Bo Winegard, Cory Clark and their colleagues find that liberals are more protective than conservatives of groups they perceive as disadvantaged, and react more negatively to findings or statements that compare those groups unfavorably with others; the researchers call this tendency "equalitarianism."[34] Goldberg's finding that White liberals alone rate other racial groups more warmly than their own points the same way.[35] This is the mirror image of what the psychologist John Jost calls system justification, the tendency, stronger on the right, to see existing hierarchies as legitimate.[36] On this evidence the left's priority runs not toward equality in the abstract but toward those it sees as below and against those it sees as above, which is what the anti-incumbency element of the hypothesis claims. What the evidence does not show is the motive. Studies of support for redistribution find that compassion for the poor predicts it more strongly than envy of the rich, and that envy, though real, drives a minority: in the most careful study, about one person in six would tax the rich even if the poor received less as a result, and only envy predicted that choice.[37] The data are compatible with the claim that some on the left are moved by resentment of those above them; they are not compatible with the claim that this is the left's main motive.

The claim that the left has "run out of real progress to make" is partly supported. It is true that the great legal exclusions have been removed, and true that much of the remaining difference between groups has causes other than present discrimination. The gap between men's and women's

pay in the United States, to take the clearest case, is now mostly accounted for by differences in occupation, industry and hours, and by the drop in mothers' earnings after the birth of a first child, a drop that fathers do not experience; a residual share remains unexplained.[38] Differences between the sexes in vocational interests, especially in interest in things as against people, are large and stable across cultures.[39] But present discrimination has not vanished: the field experiments cited above show it persisting in hiring, and other studies find it in housing and lending. The accurate statement is that the share of group differences that law and moral pressure can remove has shrunk, while the left's attention to group differences has grown. That mismatch is real, and it is the strongest evidence for this part of the hypothesis. It does not show that all remaining disparity is "reality" in the sense of nature; much of it reflects family, culture, neighborhood and history, which are neither discrimination nor biology.

The claim that the left's deep principle is the primacy of the will over nature needs refining in light of the evidence. Surveys of how Americans explain human differences find that liberals are less likely than conservatives to attribute differences between races or social classes to genes, but more likely to attribute sexual orientation to genes: "born this way" was a liberal slogan.[40] The left, in other words, does not reject nature as such. It rejects any given, natural or social, that ranks people, and embraces any given that protects a group it sees as vulnerable. The transgender cause fits this refinement. Its official doctrine holds that gender identity is not chosen but discovered, an inner given; what it asks is that this inner given, declared by the person, take authority over the outer given of the body in law, sport and language. That is a claim about which given governs, not a claim that nothing is given. The hypothesis is right that this cause brings the question of reality's authority into the open, and right that the evidence has moved against the left on its most concrete form. The independent review of youth gender services commissioned by England's National Health Service, published in 2024, found the evidence for puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones in minors to be weak, and Sweden, Finland and England had already restricted their use; a 2025 review by the United States Department of Health and Human Services reached similar conclusions.[41] Public opinion has moved as well: by 2025 two-thirds of Americans favored requiring transgender athletes to compete on teams matching their sex at birth.[42] Whether the cause reveals "the true

beginning" of a project of separating will from reality is a philosophical reading of its meaning, which evidence can make more or less plausible but cannot settle.

The claim that the left judges by intentions while the right judges by results is the part of the portrait that most needs care, because the evidence supports a narrower version and contradicts a broader one. On the issues the left treats as sacred, the narrower version holds. The psychologist Philip Tetlock has shown that people treat some values as sacred and regard trading them off against costs as taboo; once an issue is sacralized, evidence about costs feels like an insult rather than information.[43] On race, sex and gender identity, immigration and policing, the left's activist core has often behaved this way. A clear case is homelessness in California, where the state's own auditor found in 2024 that the state had spent about 24 billion dollars on homelessness programs over five years without consistently tracking whether they worked.[44] The divergence between the left's vanguard and the people it speaks for, which the intention hypothesis predicts, is also well documented: the gap on "political correctness" between Progressive Activists and the Black and Hispanic Americans in whose name they often speak, and al-Gharbi's evidence that the educated classes who champion social justice are among the main beneficiaries of the inequalities they condemn.[45] But the broader version, that the left as such ignores results while the right attends to them, is not supported. The left has its own strong results tradition, from the randomized trials of development economics to studies showing that the expansion of Medicaid reduced deaths among poor adults.[46] Its fastest-growing intellectual faction, the abundance liberals, is in substance a results-based critique of the left's own procedures. And the meta-analytic evidence finds partisan bias in judging evidence about equal on both sides; the right has its own sacred values and its own evidence it will not see.[47] The most defensible statement is that the left's moral vanguard is prone to an intention-based morality on the issues it has sacralized, that these happen to be the issues of group difference, and that this is where its record is weakest. The stronger claim, that the left "doesn't actually care about helping" and only seeks to discharge guilt, describes a recognizable type but not the evidence about the left's motives in general, where compassion is the strongest and most consistent finding.

The claim that the left treats systems rather than individuals as the real moral agents is supported as a description. Studies of how people explain

poverty and other social problems find that liberals favor situational and structural explanations and conservatives personal ones.[48] Whether the structural view is true is a different question, and the honest answer is that both kinds of cause are at work and their weights vary by case. The best large-scale evidence on race and economic mobility, from the economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues, finds that Black boys raised in families at the same income as White boys end up with lower incomes as adults, a gap that is smaller in neighborhoods with low poverty, less racial bias and more fathers present at home: a finding that supports neither a purely structural nor a purely individual account.[49]

The most radical form of the hypothesis, that the left is at bottom "a battle of types of people" and represents, in the book's own term, the "dysgenic," can be tested on two levels. As a claim about who the left's members and leaders are, it is contradicted by the evidence. The left's activist and intellectual core is the most highly educated part of the American public; across the West, as Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty showed, the left has become the party of the educated; and measured cognitive ability, in childhood and adulthood, predicts socially liberal and anti-authoritarian views, though not economic leftism.[50] Nor does the biological sense of the term fit the left's own members: fertility is lower among liberals and the secular than among conservatives and the religious, so that whatever the left's policies do, its own adherents are not where differential reproduction is concentrated.[51] As a claim about whom the left's moral system favors, the functional version, the hypothesis is close to Bobbio's description of the left and to the equalitarianism findings: the left gives moral priority to those that competition, markets and tests rank lower, and it has at times lowered or removed standards, as in the detracking of advanced mathematics or the dropping of admissions tests, in order to equalize results. That functional claim is supported. The further claim that these policies degrade the population's heritable traits over generations is not something present evidence can establish, and the book records it as a hypothesis rather than a finding. The accurate synthesis of the evidence is the one the Brahmin-left research already suggests: the left is a coalition in which a highly educated, high-status moral vanguard speaks for, and claims to protect, those who have less.

The claims about the left's moral monopoly and its one-way ratchet are partly supported and partly contradicted by recent history. The left's dominance of the institutions that shape belief is well documented: in a

study of faculty voter registration in five social-science and humanities fields at forty leading universities, registered Democrats outnumbered Republicans by about eleven to one, and surveys of American journalists show a similar imbalance.[52] Some gains have proved durable, such as support for same-sex marriage, which has held near 70 percent.[53] But the claim that the left "never loses," and that its reforms can only move forward, is contradicted by the period since 2022. Race-conscious admissions were abolished; diversity offices and statements were dropped across universities and corporations; restrictions on medical transition for minors spread across more than half the states and much of Europe; and public opinion on several transgender questions moved toward the right. Moral monopolies, the record suggests, can be broken, though in this case mostly by courts, elections and state power rather than by persuasion, which leaves open whether the beliefs beneath them have changed. Al-Gharbi's cycle of rising and falling "awokenings" fits the record at least as well as a ratchet.

The claim about Christianity is a historical and philosophical interpretation, and the scholarship gives it substantial support. Historians and philosophers from very different camps hold that modern egalitarian universalism grew out of Christian ideas. Jürgen Habermas, the leading philosopher of the German left, wrote that egalitarian universalism, the source of the ideals of freedom, solidarity and human rights, "is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love"; historians such as Larry Siedentop and Tom Holland have made the same case at length; and Nietzsche made it first, with hostile intent.[54] The social pattern fits: Americans with no religion are now the most reliably left-leaning large group in the electorate, and observers across the spectrum, the linguist John McWhorter among them, have described the social-justice left in the language of religion, with original sin, confession, heresy and excommunication.[55] Whether this is best described as a Christian morality cut off from its foundation, a "map floating without the territory," or as the natural maturing of moral ideas that no longer need a theological foundation, is precisely what divides the book's hypothesis from the left's self-understanding. The evidence shows the lineage; it cannot by itself say whether the descendant is a fulfillment or a corpse.

Taken together, the tests yield a more exact portrait than either the left's self-image or the book's starting hypothesis alone. The American left of 2026 is a coalition of groups seeking benefits, led and given its voice by a

highly educated moral vanguard. Its shared core is the belief that most inequality is social and unjust and that moral priority belongs to those with less. In its vanguard, and on the issues of human difference that the vanguard has made sacred, it shows the features the hypothesis predicts: the reach past social exclusion toward the givens of nature, the sacralization that makes results hard to see, the location of guilt and innocence in groups and systems, and a priority that runs downward and against incumbents. In its electoral base, and in its class-first and abundance factions, it shows these features least; the base is more religious, more concerned with order, and more interested in results than the vanguard, and the coalition's recovery in 2025 and 2026 came from talking about prices, not identities. The hypothesis also makes a prediction worth recording. If the left's substance is the primacy of the will, then its moral vanguard will resist any turn to results that would require accepting differences between people as given, and the coalition's internal conflict between its vanguard and its base will continue whatever its electoral fortunes. If instead the left becomes, in its leading ideas and not only in its campaigns, a politics of measured results that accepts natural differences while helping those with less, that would count against the hypothesis, and would mean that what this book calls the left's substance was a phase rather than its essence.

CHAPTER 14

The Right Today

In November 2024 the American right won the presidency, both houses of Congress and the popular vote, the last for the first time in twenty years. It then carried out the most ambitious program any administration had attempted in decades: mass deportations, the dismantling of whole federal agencies, a sweeping assertion of presidential power over the civil service, tariffs on nearly every trading partner, and a campaign against the diversity bureaucracies of universities and corporations. Two years later, on preliminary returns from the midterm elections of November 2026, it lost control of both houses of Congress, with the president's approval near the lowest point of his career.[1] Victory and repudiation came within twenty-four months of each other. No account of the right can begin anywhere else, because the swing shows the two facts this chapter is about: the right is strong enough to win and govern, and it is not one thing.

At the level of the voters, the right is a coalition of four distinct groups. At the level of its thinkers and institutions it is a coalition of at least eight. What holds them together is partly a shared belief, partly a shared enemy, and for the past decade very largely one man. What divides them runs deeper than policy: it concerns where the order the right exists to defend actually comes from. This chapter maps the factions first, then the deep divide beneath them, and then tests the hypotheses this book advances about why the right, for most of the modern era, has played what its own members call "perpetual defense."

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A *Coalition of Many Rights*

The best picture of the right's voters comes from the Pew Research Center's political typology, a survey of more than ten thousand Americans, sorted into groups by their values and views rather than by party label.

Pew's 2026 edition, fielded in late 2025, finds four groups on the right that together make up a little under half of adults.[2] The first, which Pew calls the No Apologies Right, is about nine percent of adults: the hard core of the movement Donald Trump built. Nine in ten of its members approve of him, nearly two-thirds call him the best president of the last forty years, eight in ten support a national deportation effort, and, most strikingly, a majority say they like it when politicians they agree with humiliate their opponents. The second group, Faith First Conservatives, about twelve percent, is the religious and socially traditional right: more than four in five say a Christian-based culture is very important to the country and that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. The third, the Unconventional Right, also about twelve percent, is younger, less engaged, more moderate on abortion and the safety net, and by 2026 noticeably cooler on Trump. The fourth, the Pragmatic and Polite Right, about eleven percent, is the oldest group: economically conservative, moderate on race and immigration, attached to civility. Only a third of its members approved of Trump in 2026, and more than a third leaned toward the Democrats. Only one in twenty of them enjoys seeing opponents humiliated.[3]

Those last figures carry a lesson that recurs throughout this chapter. What most separates the factions of the right from one another is not, mainly, what government should do. It is temperament and norms: how much the right should fight, how far it should break with the manners of the old order, and whether politics is a contest among fellow citizens or something closer to war. The same pattern appeared in Pew's 2021 typology, which divided the right into Faith and Flag Conservatives, Committed Conservatives, a Populist Right and an Ambivalent Right, and in the More in Common study of 2018, which found that the "Devoted Conservatives" at the right's intense edge were only about six percent of Americans, while a much larger group of "Traditional Conservatives" held conservative views with less heat.[4] The intense core of each party is about a fifth of the country. The rest of each coalition is cross-pressured, less attentive and more movable, and that movable part decided both 2024 and 2026.

The right's voters also have a social shape, and that shape has changed more in the past thirty years than in the century before. Through the 1990s, college graduates leaned Republican. Since then the parties have sorted by education, so that by 2024 voters without a four-year degree backed Trump by fourteen points while graduates backed his opponent by sixteen, and

those with graduate degrees by more than thirty.[5] The economist Thomas Piketty and his colleagues found the same pattern across the Western democracies and gave it a name: the "Brahmin left" against the "merchant right," a left led by the highly educated and a right that still draws the higher-income but less credentialed, joined now by much of the working class.[6] The second great anchor is religion. White evangelical Protestants voted for Trump by about four to one in 2024, and Americans who attend religious services at least monthly voted for him by roughly two to one; among those who attend less often, the margin ran the other way.[7] In the 2026 midterms, when Catholics, Latino voters and non-college voters who had moved right in 2024 swung sharply back, white evangelicals hardly moved at all.[8] The right's most durable foundation, in other words, is still its religious core. Its newest recruits, young men and Hispanic workers drawn in 2024, proved the least attached.

Above the voters stands the right's leadership class: its intellectuals, institutions and donors. Here the factions are sharper, and each has its own ancestors, its own texts and its own answer to the question of what the right is for. The political scientist Laura Field, in the most complete scholarly map of this world, argues that several of these factions, despite their quarrels, have converged on one judgment: that American liberal democracy as it now exists is lost, and must be replaced, refounded or seized.[9] That judgment is new in the history of American conservatism, which for most of the twentieth century understood itself as the defender of the existing constitutional order.

The largest faction is the national-populist movement led by Trump, with Vice President J. D. Vance as its most articulate intellectual bridge. In the language political scientists use for such movements, its core belief is that a virtuous "real" people has been betrayed by a corrupt elite: the "swamp," the "deep state," the managerial establishment.[10] Its priorities are immigration restriction and deportation, protection of domestic industry, an "America First" foreign policy wary of alliances and foreign wars, and presidential control over the administrative state. In government after January 2025 it pursued all four, and it also showed the limits of its doctrine: the Supreme Court struck down its emergency tariffs in February 2026, and the war with Iran that began later that month divided the movement's own commentators, several of whom had built their careers opposing foreign wars.[11] Its deepest feature is personal loyalty. In May 2026, Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky, who had opposed the

president on spending, on the war and on the release of the Epstein files, lost his primary to a candidate the president endorsed.[12] Whatever the general electorate thought of Trump, the Republican primary electorate followed him.

The second faction, national conservatism, supplies much of the populist movement's ideas. Its founding texts are the Israeli-American philosopher Yoram Hazony's The Virtue of Nationalism (2018) and Conservatism: A Rediscovery (2022). Hazony argues that the best order for mankind is a world of independent nations, each governing itself by its own inherited traditions and bound together by shared religion, as against both a universal liberal empire and the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which he traces to Locke.[13] Its conferences have drawn senators, administration officials and the vice president. Its program is economic nationalism, restriction of immigration, public religion and the family.

The third faction, the postliberals, goes further. The political theorist Patrick Deneen's Why Liberalism Failed (2018) opens with the claim that "liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded": by freeing the individual from family, church, place and nature, liberalism produced the isolated, managed and unhappy people it now governs.[14] His Regime Change (2023) calls for a new elite allied with ordinary people against the existing one. The Harvard legal scholar Adrian Vermeule proposes a "common good constitutionalism" that would read the Constitution through the classical and Christian natural-law tradition rather than through individual rights; with a co-author he had earlier adopted Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal legalism in arguing that the modern executive has escaped the constraints of the Madisonian Constitution.[15] The postliberals are few, mostly Catholic, and concentrated among young staffers and writers, but they gave the movement a vocabulary for what it was against.

The fourth faction is the Claremont Institute and the "West Coast" students of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Their tradition, built by Harry Jaffa, centered the American founding on the natural-rights teaching of the Declaration of Independence, with Lincoln as its great statesman. In September 2016, writing under a pseudonym, the Claremont-affiliated writer Michael Anton published the essay that reconciled many conservative intellectuals to Trump: "2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway."[16] The essay recast conservatism as a last-ditch counter-revolution against a progressive

regime. Five years later another Claremont writer wrote that "most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term."[17] Claremont now trains much of the administration's staff.

The fifth faction is the technology right. Its texts are the investor Peter Thiel's 2009 essay "The Education of a Libertarian," with its line "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," and the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" of 2023, which holds that "there is no material problem—whether created by nature or by technology—that cannot be solved with more technology" and names as enemies "stagnation," the "precautionary principle" and the professional caution of "trust and safety."[18] Elon Musk, the most prominent figure of this faction, spent more than a quarter of a billion dollars to elect Trump in 2024 and led the administration's government-cutting effort in early 2025 before a public split with the president over spending. The technology right's alliance with the populists is real but conditional. It broke into the open in December 2024 over visas for skilled foreign workers, when Musk and the entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy defended them and the restrictionist right attacked them as a betrayal of "heritage Americans."[19]

The sixth faction, the libertarians, once a pillar of the conservative coalition, is now its most marginal major element. It shares the coalition's hostility to the administrative state and to progressive cultural programs, but it lost every large argument of the second Trump term: on tariffs, on deficits, on executive power and on war. The seventh, the religious right, remains the coalition's most reliable voting bloc and its most successful institutional builder; the legal network that overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022 came from it. Within it a self-described Christian nationalism has emerged, and sociologists have argued over how widespread it is. Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, using national surveys, found that agreement with statements such as "the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation" predicted support for Trump and restrictive views on immigration even after accounting for how religious people were; critics answer that many respondents read such statements as patriotism rather than as a wish for theocracy, and a 2023 survey found about one American in ten firmly adhering to Christian nationalist views.[20] After the assassination of the activist Charlie Kirk in September 2025, the youth organization he founded fused campus politics with Christian revivalism more openly than before.

The eighth group is a cluster: the remnants of Reagan conservatism and of the neoconservatives, still present in some think tanks and in the Senate but defeated within the party's leadership; and, at the other end, the paleoconservatives and the "dissident" or online right. The paleoconservatives, from Patrick Buchanan to the writer Samuel Francis, had in the 1990s proposed nearly the whole program Trump later adopted: restriction of immigration, protection of industry and withdrawal from foreign wars, joined in Francis's case to an explicitly racial politics.[21] The online right includes the blogger Curtis Yarvin, who argues that American democracy is in fact an oligarchy of universities and media he calls "the Cathedral" and should be replaced by something like a chief executive with a monarch's powers; the pseudonymous author of Bronze Age Mindset (2018), identified by journalists as a Yale-trained political theorist, whose Nietzschean celebration of strength, beauty and the heroic male body against the modern "bugman" found readers among young conservative staffers; and, at the far edge, the white-nationalist streamer Nick Fuentes.[22] In late 2025 a sympathetic interview of Fuentes by the broadcaster Tucker Carlson, and the Heritage Foundation president's defense of Carlson, set off the sharpest fight on the right in years: resignations from Heritage's own task force on antisemitism, a departure of much of its legal and economic staff to a rival organization, and a public quarrel over who belonged in the coalition at all.[23]

The Heritage Foundation's own path shows how far the center of gravity has moved. Under Ronald Reagan, Heritage was the think tank of fusionism: free markets, traditional values, strong defense. In 2023 its Project 2025 published a nine-hundred-page plan for the next Republican administration whose foreword announced that "the long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions has come to pass," and which proposed to reclassify much of the civil service so that its members could be dismissed at will.[24] Trump disavowed the plan during the 2024 campaign and then staffed his administration heavily with its authors.

Seen together, the fights of 2024 to 2026 reveal four fault lines likely to outlast Trump. On immigration, the technology right's interest in skilled workers runs against the nationalist conviction that the country belongs to its historic people. On foreign policy, the restrainers who want no more wars run against the hawks, with Israel at the center of the quarrel. On economics, free-market conservatives run against economic nationalists. And on boundaries, the coalition disagrees about where it ends on its far

edge: whether antisemites and white nationalists are allies, embarrassments or enemies. Europe shows the same structure in different institutions. There the national-populist right, from Marine Le Pen's National Rally to Germany's Alternative for Germany and Britain's Reform UK, competes as separate parties; in America's two-party system the same forces had to capture an existing party from inside, which is why the transformation of the Republican Party is the most consequential case of its kind in the West.[25] Europe also supplied a warning. In April 2026 Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the postliberal right's favorite example of a government that had defeated liberalism, lost power to a center-right challenger.[26]

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Where the Order Lives

Beneath the quarrels, almost every faction of the right shares one belief. It holds that there is an order prior to human will, which politics must respect rather than remake. The left, at its root, holds that the order of society is made by people and can therefore be remade by them. This is the distinction Chapter 1 called the deepest form of the divide: whether the world is made or merely found, whether reality governs us or we govern reality. From the right's side of that line follow three commitments that nearly all its factions accept: that limits are real and cannot be wished away; that some hierarchy is legitimate, whether of excellence, of authority or of the sacred; and that what is inherited has a claim on us before we have chosen it. The slogan made famous by the commentator Ben Shapiro, "facts don't care about your feelings," is a popular expression of the same stance.[27] In this book's terms it is a statement of veritas against voluntas, of truth over will.

The right agrees that the given order exists. It disagrees, often bitterly, about where that order lives. Five answers recur across its history. For the classical and natural-law tradition, from Aristotle and Aquinas to the Catholic postliberals, the order lives in nature and in reason, and can be known by anyone who reasons well. For the tradition of Edmund Burke, it lives in custom and history, in the slow accumulation of practices that no single generation could reason its way to. For the romantic and nationalist tradition, it lives in a people: its language, its history, its soil or its blood. For the tradition that descends from Nietzsche, it lives in life itself, in

strength, health and the will to grow. For the religious traditionalist, it lives in God and in what God has revealed. The factions described above map onto these answers closely. The postliberals place the order in natural law and God; national conservatives in a nation's history and covenant; the online vitalists in strength and life; the technology right in what works, in results that anyone can measure; the white-nationalist fringe in race.

These answers are not equivalent, and the difference between them decides more than any policy dispute. If the order lives in nature, reason, natural law or results, it is universal: one measure applies to every person and every people, and any person or people can be judged by it. If the order lives in a particular people or tradition, it is particular: each people becomes its own measure, and there is no standpoint from which one people's way of life can be judged against another's. The first kind of right can argue with anyone, because it appeals to a standard its opponent can in principle check. The second can only assert itself. Crossing this line with the right's attitude to technology gives four positions. A right with a universal measure that embraces technology produces classical liberals and the technology right at its most principled. A right with a universal measure that distrusts technology produces natural-law localists and much of the postliberal movement. A right with a particular measure that distrusts technology produces the rooted, "return to the land" right of the European New Right and its American online imitators. And a right with a particular measure that embraces technology produces what the historian Jeffrey Herf called "reactionary modernism," the fusion of machines and national will that defined the Weimar radicals and then fascism, the most destructive combination of the twentieth century.[28]

This is where the charge made by Alex Karp, the chief executive of Palantir, lands on the right. As Chapter 7 shows, Karp said in a 2026 interview that Heidegger's philosophy is, "for worse," the most important political philosophy in the West today, because the regressive movements of the far right, and the movements of the far left that "pretend to be Marxists," are in fact Heideggerian.[29] The template Heidegger's thought supplies to politics has five features: meaning comes from rootedness in a particular people, language and history rather than from universal reason; the highest life is authentic belonging to a community of fate; liberal individualism, the market and technology are forms of uprooting; history is a story of decline from an origin that calls for return or a new beginning; and there is no common measure above the peoples. The right's European

heirs of this template are explicit about the debt. The French writer Alain de Benoist built the doctrine of "ethnopluralism," the right of every people to remain itself on its own soil, partly from Heidegger's reading of Western history; the Russian theorist Aleksandr Dugin made Heidegger's concept of human existence, Dasein, the subject of what he calls a "fourth political theory" beyond liberalism, communism and fascism.[30] Karp's charge fits this strand, the particular and rooted right, exactly. It does not fit the whole right. The tradition of Strauss, whose Natural Right and History (1953) was in large part an answer to Heidegger's historicism, the natural-law tradition, the classical liberals and much of the technology right are built against the template.[31] The American right in particular was founded philosophically on a universal answer: as the political scientist Louis Hartz observed, a country with no feudal past had no conservatism in the European sense, so its conservatives conserved a liberal founding of natural rights.[32]

The same map shows where this book's own hypothesis about the right's future sits. It distinguishes an old right and a new one by how each submits to the given order: "the old Right does it with God and submitting to Reality that way, and the new Right does it by submitting to Reality" directly, without the mediation of revelation. On this view the old right accepted limits because God had ordained them, and the new right accepts them because they are simply what is, discovered by science, tested by results and enforced by consequences. It is a Promethean right with a universal measure, the upper-left cell of the map: one that would rather build the future than restore the past, that describes itself as vitalist rather than conservative, and that points to figures such as Musk as the type of a man "giving man a vision and path to the future." Pieces of this right exist. The technology right's faith in growth and results, the frontier imagery of space and energy, and the impatience of young writers with what they call the tired defensiveness of the older movement all belong to it. But it is not yet a faction with institutions and voters of its own. The technology right's founding texts show the danger the map predicts for it: Andreessen's manifesto names the Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti, whose movement became one of fascism's first allies, among its patron saints, and Thiel doubts democracy outright. A Promethean right keeps a universal measure only if what it builds remains answerable to standards anyone can check, and to the people who must live with it; without that, the same energy slides toward the fourth cell.

What the past decade has added is a shift on the American right from the universal answer toward the particular one. The visa fight of December 2024 put the question in plain words. Ramaswamy blamed American culture for venerating "mediocrity over excellence" and defended recruitment of the world's best engineers; his opponents answered that America is not an idea or an economy but a people with a history, and that its citizens come first. Behind that quarrel stands an old division in American national identity. The sociologists Bart Bonikowski and Paul DiMaggio, studying survey data on what Americans think it takes to be "truly American," found distinct groups of creedal nationalists, who define the nation by its principles, and restrictive and ardent nationalists, who also define it by birth, ancestry, language and religion.[33] The political scientist Rogers Smith had earlier shown that for most of American history the law itself defined membership partly by race, sex, religion and descent, a tradition he called "ascriptive Americanism," running alongside the liberal creed rather than being a mere lapse from it.[34] This book's hypothesis states the right's version of the divide in its own terms: that "the right has been captured by the left by thinking that Americans are just a set of ideas," and that the creedal answer, while strong, is "necessary but insufficient," because "the true Americans are settlers, founders." The evidence supports the claim that this is a real and growing fault line on the right, and that the creedal definition has been losing ground within it. Whether the particular answer can be held without sliding into the fourth cell of the map above is the question that the right's own history poses most sharply.

There is a further layer to this divide, and it concerns the right's relation to Christianity. The book's hypothesis here is that the right carries inside it the same premise of universal equality that drives the left, inherited from the same source. In this view, "the Right holds a metaphysical position that everyone is equal," and the right is "suffering for our wrong metaphysical Christian premise of equality. The Left is just playing it out correctly." The universality of the soul, taught by Christianity, became the equal dignity of persons taught by liberalism; the left extended it, and the right, still holding the premise, can resist the extensions only half-heartedly. On this account the right is "fragmented (not diverse)": it lacks a shared worldview because it has neither kept its old metaphysics alive nor replaced it. The phrase "cultural Christian," which several prominent figures on the right adopted in 2024, is read in the same light: it "really just means: woke is too insane for me; Christianity is at least stable; clearly we need an alternative." People

on the right, the hypothesis continues, "support Christianity less because they believe in it and more because they know that it is them/theirs": it is an assertion of the right of a people to exist.

Part of this is well supported. The historical claim that modern egalitarianism grew from Christian roots is held by serious historians, and Chapter 6 traces it. The claim that the American right shares the premise is supported by its own founding documents: the Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal, and the conservative movement of the twentieth century defended that statement as natural law. The claim that much of the right's Christianity has become an identity rather than a practice also has evidence behind it. Whitehead and Perry found that Christian nationalist views predict political attitudes independently of, and sometimes against, personal religious practice, which is what one would expect if the religion functions as a marker of belonging.[35] The scholar of religion Ryan Burge has documented the growth of Americans who call themselves evangelical while rarely attending church, a group that leans strongly Republican.[36] The book's companion phrase for the broader condition, that the modern West's morality is "the mold and the stench of Christ unburied," a moral code that has outlived the beliefs that gave it its reasons, is a philosophical claim rather than an empirical one; Chapter 2 examines it.

Part of it is not supported, or not yet. The religious right is not a dead force. It is the right's most stable voting bloc, the one group that did not move in the 2026 midterms, and its institutions won the largest legal victory of the conservative movement's history when Roe v. Wade was overturned. The Christian share of the American population, which fell for decades, appears to have stopped falling: the Pew Research Center's 2025 survey of the religious landscape put it at about sixty-two percent, roughly where it had been five years earlier, with the unaffiliated at about twenty-nine percent.[37] And the "secular nationalism" the hypothesis sets against Christian nationalism, the idea that the right could ground the nation and its morality without Christianity, has so far found its readers mostly among intellectuals and young online writers, not among the right's voters, for whom faith and nation remain fused. The fairest summary is that the hypothesis describes the right's elite intellectual condition better than its mass condition. Among its writers, the old metaphysics is contested and a search for a new grounding, in nature, in strength, in results, is visible in

every faction from the technology right to the vitalists. Among its voters, the old metaphysics still does most of the work.

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Why the Right Plays Defense

The members of the right have a recurring complaint about their own side, and this book takes the complaint seriously as a hypothesis about the right's condition. In its strongest form it runs as follows. The right plays "perpetual defense," because "the Left owns the concept of the good and thus progress and thus they lead (attack) which means the Right always follows (defends)." The very rules are not neutral: "the entire world order and the framework itself is liberal, the very rules of the game are liberal, the structure and shape of the board is liberal," so that the left can pursue its aims to their fullest while "the right has to disavow its fullest expressions." The right "can't lead because their metaphysics is dead": it defends an inherited Christian order whose foundation its own members no longer fully believe, and so it guards the body while the life has gone out of it. It is naive, treating its opponents as reasonable partners in a shared search for truth, playing "by the Right's rules (reason, truth) while the Left plays by power," and arguing inside its opponent's moral framework instead of rejecting the framework. And when it does fight, it fights on the left's terms, as a rival victim: "Both camps define themselves not by excellence or creation but by who wronged them." Each of these claims can be tested, at least in part.

Begin with perpetual defense. Here the hypothesis has distinguished company. In 1957 the political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that conservatism is not a fixed doctrine at all but a "positional" ideology: it arises whenever an established order is challenged, and its content is whatever that order happens to be.[38] On this view conservatism is defensive by definition, and its arguments change with what is being defended; a conservative of 1790 defends monarchy, one of 1950 defends the market. From the left, the political theorist Corey Robin argued that the right is best understood as a series of reactions against movements of emancipation from below, which would make it reactive by nature.[39] From neither side, Hyrum and Verlan Lewis argued that "left" and "right" have no fixed essence and that the right's positions are largely defined by

opposition to whatever the left currently holds.[40] All three accounts imply that the right follows and the left leads.

The long record of public opinion supports the hypothesis in one domain and contradicts it in another. In the moral and cultural domain, especially on questions of equality between groups, the movement has run one way for seventy years. In 1958 four percent of Americans approved of marriage between Black and white people; by 2021, ninety-four percent did.[41] In 1996 about a quarter of Americans supported same-sex marriage; by 2025 about two-thirds did.[42] On these questions each generation of the right has come to accept what the previous generation of the left proposed, which is what the hypothesis means by its sharpest line: "the Reps are the Dems from 10 years ago." But the same record also shows reversals the hypothesis does not predict. Republican support for same-sex marriage, which had climbed to about half, fell back to about four in ten by 2025, so the right's "drift" can stop and turn.[43] And in other domains the right has led rather than followed. It won the long argument over taxes and regulation that began with Reagan, reshaped the federal courts over four decades, established an individual right to bear arms in 2008 and widened it in 2022, ended the constitutional right to abortion in 2022, and ended race-conscious university admissions in 2023, when the Chief Justice wrote that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it."[44] In 2025 it forced the largest retreat of diversity programs in their history. The fair verdict is that the hypothesis is right about the domain of moral definition, where for most of a century the left has set the terms of what counts as progress and the right has accepted those terms a decade late, and wrong as a description of the right's whole record. In economics, in law and in the exercise of power, the right has often led.

The claim that "the very rules of the game are liberal" fares better. In the American case it is close to a textbook finding. Hartz's thesis was that both American parties are quarrels within Lockean liberalism, so that the American right conserves a liberal order and has no pre-liberal tradition of its own to fall back on.[45] The postliberals' own complaint is the same thesis stated with regret: Deneen's argument is precisely that conservatives who defend the free market and individual rights are defending the engine of the dissolution they deplore. The institutions that produce the culture's moral definitions also lean heavily one way. Studies of faculty voter registration have found Democrats outnumbering Republicans by roughly ten to one or more in many fields at leading universities, and a 2022

national survey of American journalists found about a third identifying as Democrats and about three percent as Republicans, with most of the rest independents.[46] The sociologist Neil Gross has offered the strongest competing explanation for the academic imbalance: not discrimination but self-selection, as academic work came to be seen as a liberal occupation, the way nursing came to be seen as a female one, so that conservatives sorted themselves into other careers.[47] Gross's explanation, if correct, does not weaken the hypothesis's central point; it strengthens it. Whatever the cause, the people who write the textbooks, the news and the professional codes are drawn overwhelmingly from one side, and the board on which the right plays was built largely by its opponents. The book's companion paper, The Lower Lobby, develops a related argument about whose interests that board serves; it is not restated here.

The claim that the right "can't lead because their metaphysics is dead" was tested in part in the previous section. As a description of the right's intellectual class, it captures something its own writers say openly. Field's survey of the new right finds a movement divided over whether its grounding is Christian, classical, national or vitalist, and Matthew Rose's study of the radical right's philosophers shows several of them, from Julius Evola to Alain de Benoist, rejecting Christianity as part of the decadence they oppose.[48] The technology right grounds its hopes not in revelation but in engineering. As a description of the right's mass base and its most effective institutions, the claim overreaches: the religious right is the part of the coalition that has shown the most discipline and achieved its central goal. A narrower version is well supported. A right whose arguments rest on a religious foundation that a large and growing share of the young no longer accepts must either persuade them of the foundation, find another, or rely on voters who already share it. The right's turn after 2016 from argument toward mobilization of its existing base is consistent with that predicament.

The claim that the right is naive, that it treats people as reasonable and plays by the rules of truth while its opponents play by the rules of power, describes one era of the right better than another. Political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins found that through the early twenty-first century the two parties were built differently: the Republican Party was the vehicle of an ideological movement whose voters and leaders described their side in terms of principles, while the Democratic Party was a coalition of social groups seeking concrete benefits for their members.[49] A party of

principles is more likely to argue about what is true, and a party of groups more likely to bargain about who gets what; in that sense the hypothesis's picture of a right that fights with arguments and a left that fights for constituencies has empirical support. The book's description of the right's "over-intellectualism," the belief "that if they win in the abstract realm of logic and argument, then they will actually win," is a fair characterization of the movement that William F. Buckley built around a magazine. But it no longer describes the right that rose after 2016. The Flight 93 essay was explicitly a rejection of argument in favor of combat. Pew's finding that a majority of the No Apologies Right enjoys seeing opponents humiliated, and a 2023 study of the "need for chaos" among people who share hostile political rumors, point to a right whose most energetic wing understands politics as a contest of power and feeling at least as much as its opponents do.[50] Nor does the right, today, regard the left merely as mistaken. In 2022 about seven in ten Republicans told Pew that Democrats were more immoral than other Americans, a higher share than the reverse.[51] The naive right of the hypothesis, the gentleman who "acts like the Left and Right are still married," is real, and it is the Pragmatic and Polite Right of Pew's typology: the oldest faction, the most civil, and the one that left the coalition in the largest numbers in 2026.

The last claim, that the right fights as a rival victim, that "both camps define themselves not by excellence or creation but by who wronged them," is the one the evidence supports most directly. The political scientist Diana Mutz, studying the 2016 election, argued that support for Trump was driven less by economic hardship than by "status threat," the sense among white, Christian and male Americans that their standing in the country was slipping; her analysis was contested on technical grounds, and economists found that trade shocks also pushed affected regions toward the extremes, but most scholars now hold that economic loss and cultural standing worked together.[52] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, studying the populist right across the Western democracies, described a "cultural backlash" by older, less educated and more religious voters against the rapid spread of the values of their more secular and educated juniors.[53] The psychologists Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers found as early as 2011 that white Americans had come to see racism as a zero-sum game, believing that as bias against Black Americans fell, bias against whites rose, and that by the 2000s they rated anti-white bias as the larger problem.[54] This is the same zero-sum thinking that Chapter 2 found on the left in the form of

resentment of the rich, turned toward the right's own grievances. A movement that understands itself as the injured party has adopted the moral grammar of its opponent, in which suffering confers standing. The hypothesis's warning that "their game is inherently destructive, so you lose the minute you start playing" is a judgment rather than a finding; the description it rests on is accurate.

Two further observations follow from the evidence and complete the picture. First, the right is held together less by doctrine than by opposition, a pattern older than Trump. The historian George Nash showed that the postwar conservative movement was a fusion of three distinct streams, libertarians, traditionalists and anticommunists, held together by the common enemy of communism abroad and the New Deal at home, and that it fractured when the Soviet Union fell.[55] Today the glue is opposition to the progressive left and loyalty to Trump. The hypothesis states this as the right "losing its identity into becoming mostly anti-Left, derivative." At the level of its voters, the right is actually more unified by label than the left: about three-quarters of Republicans call themselves conservative, against a little under three-fifths of Democrats who call themselves liberal.[56] At the level of its leaders, it agrees on what it opposes far more than on what it would build.

Second, the right has begun to describe itself in terms that confirm the hypothesis's broadest claim, that "the right is the old paradigm, the left is the current, the new right is the next." The national conservatives, the postliberals, the technology right and the vitalists all call themselves something other than conservatives in the old sense, and all reject the fusionist settlement as exhausted. What none of them has yet produced is a shared account of where the order they defend comes from, which is the question this chapter has found beneath all the others. The evidence of 2026 suggests that a right without such an account can still win elections, by mobilizing opposition and by the force of one leader, but that it struggles to hold the voters it wins, and that its factions turn on one another as soon as the common enemy recedes or the leader falters. The right's condition, in short, matches the book's description of a movement that knows what it is against far better than what it is for. Whether the order it defends is found in God, in nature, in a people or in results is not a question the evidence can answer. It is the question the right must answer before it can lead, and the one to which Chapter 15 returns.

CHAPTER 15

What Lies Beneath

This book began with a puzzle. Left and right have changed their positions so often, on free trade and nationalism, on science and immigration, on federal power and free speech, that a careful skeptic can argue they are only names for two shifting tribes. Yet the names have lasted for more than two centuries, they travel across dozens of countries, and people who have never read a word of political philosophy recognize at once which side they are on. The question was whether something lies beneath the forms: a substance that takes many political shapes without being any one of them. Having followed that question through moral psychology, temperament and genes, evolution and life history, philosophy from Rousseau to Foucault, and two and a half centuries of American politics, it is time to say what has been found.

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The Substance and Its Grounds

The first finding is that the skeptics are right about the surface and wrong about the depths. Most citizens do not hold their political views as a system. They inherit a side, usually from their parents, fix it in the years between about fourteen and twenty-four, and then take most of their positions from the leaders and groups they trust. When a trusted leader changes position, many of them change with him. Ideology for most people follows identity rather than the reverse, and the bundles of positions that each side carries are assembled by elites, by writers, activists and politicians, and then sold to the public as packages. If the question were only “What do ordinary voters believe, and why?”, the tribal answer would be close to the whole truth.

But the bundles have a logic, and the logic has a stable core. On the left, that core is the reduction of inequalities that are taken to be socially caused

and therefore removable. On the right, it is the defense of inherited moral, religious and family order and of distinctions taken to be natural or earned. Norberto Bobbio's criterion, equality, survives more of the historical reversals than any rival, and the moral psychology of the last two decades refines it rather than replacing it. The right does not reject fairness; it holds a different theory of fairness, proportionality, in which rewards should match contributions, while the left's fairness is equality. The two sides do not differ in how much they care; they differ in where they place their care, the left spreading it toward humanity and the most vulnerable, the right concentrating it on family, community and nation.

Beneath the core, this book has proposed, lies a stance toward the given. "Does reality govern us, or do we govern reality?" The right holds to what the book has called the primacy of reality: there is an order in the world and in human nature that precedes human choice and binds it. The left holds to the primacy of the will: what appears fixed is largely made, and what is made can be remade in the name of justice. In medieval terms, veritas against voluntas. Tested against the evidence, this hypothesis survives only in a refined form, and the refinement matters. Both sides claim the facts of physics and medicine and accuse each other of denying them; much of the right is voluntarist about markets and contracts, and the most extreme right has been the most voluntarist of all about the destiny of the nation. The defensible claim is narrower and deeper: the two sides disagree about whether unchosen human differences, and the inherited forms built upon them, carry moral authority. The left answers no, or not much, and so it reads most inequality as injustice and most inherited order as revisable. The right answers yes, or more than the left allows, and so it reads much inequality as the result of real differences and much inherited order as the condensed wisdom of what has worked. Equality is the content of the quarrel; the stance toward the given is the reason the content takes the form it does.

The grounding of this stance is real but more modest than either popular science or partisan rhetoric suggests. Political orientation is about forty percent heritable, the genetic influence appears in early adulthood rather than childhood, and it shapes what people believe rather than which label they wear. Openness to experience leans left; conscientiousness and a taste for order lean right; self-reported sensitivity to disgust and threat predicts cultural conservatism, though not economic conservatism. But the dramatic biological findings that once made headlines, the startle reflexes,

the larger amygdalae, the special conservative sensitivity to negative images, have failed in larger and better studies. The two sides are roughly equal in motivated reasoning and in rigidity, and an authoritarian temperament exists on the left as well as the right. The hypothesis that "political issues are, at bottom, psychological issues" is supported at the level of temperament and moral ranking; the stronger claim that left and right are "different nervous systems" is not. What differs most reliably is not the capacity to see reality but the ranking of what matters when truths collide with sacred values: the left ranks protection of the vulnerable first, the right ranks order, loyalty and desert, and each side refuses inconvenient truth where it threatens what it holds sacred.

The evolutionary record tells the same story from further back. Both of the moral systems that divide the modern world are ancient. Human foragers lived for most of our history in bands that leveled their own would-be dominators through ridicule, exile and occasionally death; the egalitarian impulse is as old as the species, and so is the resentment of the man who takes too much. But hierarchy is equally old, and so are coalitions, the defense of kin and in-group, the intuition that the idle should not live on the industrious, and the zero-sum suspicion that another's gain is one's own loss. The left and the right each stretch instincts built for the band to the scale of the modern state. They differ in where they draw the new boundary of moral concern, at the nation or at humanity, and in which ancient intuition they place first, the leveling of the overmighty or the protection of what has been earned. The hypothesis that the left runs "an older operating system," a residue of herd survival, is half right: both sides run ancient software, and neither is simply the newer version of the other.

Two findings about motive deserve to be held onto, because they cut against the comfortable stories of both sides. The first comes from the large cross-national studies of the psychologist Daniel Sznycer and his colleagues: support for redistribution is driven chiefly by compassion for the poor, secondarily by self-interest, and only in a minority by envy of the rich, though that envy is real and is the only thing that predicts the willingness to tax the rich even when the poor would end up with less.[1] The left's own story of its motives, compassion, is truer than the right's suspicion, envy; but the right's suspicion is not invented. The second comes from the economists Sahil Chinoy, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira and Stefanie Stantcheva: a zero-sum view of the world, the belief that one group's gain must be another's loss, predicts both the left's support for

redistribution and the right's support for restricting immigration, and it is weaker in families that have experienced upward mobility.[2] The deepest psychological fault line in American politics may be less between left and right than between those who believe the pie can grow and those who believe it cannot.

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Roots, History and the Present

The shared roots of left and right turn out to be shared in the strictest sense. Both are branches of one tree, and the tree is the secularized moral inheritance of Christianity. The left took from it the equal worth of every soul, the special claim of the poor and the weak, and the hope that history moves toward a redemption; the right took hierarchy, original sin, providence and natural law. Nietzsche saw this first and most sharply, and the historians and philosophers who have followed him, Karl Löwith, Brian Tierney, Larry Siedentop, Charles Taylor, have largely confirmed his genealogy, while disputing his verdict.[3] This book's hypothesis that egalitarian morality is a Christian premise outliving its metaphysics, "the mold and the stench of Christ unburied," is strongly supported as intellectual history. Whether a morality cut off from the beliefs that grounded it must decay is a philosophical question that serious thinkers have answered both ways, and evidence cannot settle it.

The same thinkers fed both branches. Rousseau gave the left its suspicion of society as the corrupter of natural man and gave romantic nationalism its general will. Hegel's heirs split into a left and a right within a decade of his death, and the very names, Left Hegelians and Right Hegelians, were coined for the occasion. Nietzsche has been claimed by fascists and by French radicals alike. Heidegger joined the Nazi party, and his most important students and readers included Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as well as Alexander Dugin and the European New Right. Alex Karp's claim that the far left and far right of today are both Heideggerian is, on the evidence, strong for the intellectual far right, partial for the academic left, and weak for the mass or Marxist left. Carl Schmitt's friend and enemy is now read with sympathy on both sides, and mass politics in America has become measurably more Schmittian, more a contest of identities than of

arguments. That the same philosophers served opposite causes suggests something important: philosophy often follows commitment rather than creating it. The genealogy explains the vocabularies of elites far better than it explains why ordinary people vote as they do.

What the age of critique added was a change in the job of thought. After Marx declared that the point of philosophy was to change the world rather than interpret it, and after the failed Western revolutions of 1918 and 1919 moved the struggle from the factory to culture, the critical theorists and their French successors made the unmasking of power the highest intellectual task. The working hypothesis that "critique is the highest intellectual act" in the modern university is supported, as is the thesis that subjectivism moved from creating meaning to claiming to create reality, though the line from German idealism to postmodernism has more breaks in it than a single lineage suggests. The age of critique was right that domination often hides in what looks natural. It never built a reliable way to tell an inequality caused by oppression from an inequality caused by reality, and that missing instrument is the gap through which most of today's disputes pour. Its tools, moreover, belong to no one side: the online right now uses the methods of unmasking, genealogy and narrative warfare as fluently as the campus left ever did.

The American story shows the substance working through changing forms. The founders joined equal rights to an open acceptance of unequal faculties, drawing a line between artificial privilege, which a republic should abolish, and natural difference, which it should protect; the American form of the left and right quarrel has always been the question of where that line falls. The parties swapped sides on federal power, on race, on tariffs twice, on immigration, on foreign war and on which voters the college-educated support. Yet across the swaps a pattern holds. Lincoln described the principle of equality as a standard "constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated," and the history that followed is in large part the history of that approximation, interrupted, reversed and resumed.[4] The shift from equal rights to equal results is documented in the words and acts of its authors, from Lyndon Johnson's Howard University speech of 1965 to the administrative and judicial doctrines of the following decade. And since about 2012 the substance has sorted more cleanly into the two parties than at any time since the founding, with education replacing income as the main dividing line, a "Brahmin left" facing a "merchant right."

The present can be described briefly. The left is a coalition of group interests whose voice comes from a small, highly educated, largely white moral vanguard, roughly a fifth of adults, while its largest voting blocs are more religious, more diverse and more order-minded than its spokesmen. What every faction of the left shares is the belief that most inequality is social and unjust and that moral priority belongs to those ranked lower. The social-justice wave that rose after 2012 peaked around 2020 and has been in retreat since 2022 in institutions, though not clearly in beliefs. The right is held together by opposition to the left and, since 2016, by the person of Donald Trump. Nearly all its factions share the belief in a given order prior to will, but they split on where that order lives: in nature and reason, in custom and history, in a people, in strength and life, or in God. That split, between those who judge by a universal measure and those who make a particular people its own measure, is the right's master divide, and the American right, founded on the universal answer, has in recent years been drifting toward the particular. The swings of 2024 and the reversal of 2026 were movements among weakly attached voters; the deep divides of education and religion held through both.

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The Verdicts

The book has tested a set of working hypotheses drawn from the notes on which it was built. The verdicts can be gathered in one place.

Hypothesis	**Verdict**	**Where**
Left and right are a substance taking many forms, not the forms themselves	Supported, in a layered form: a stable core under a changing periphery, held together in the mass public by identity	Ch. 1
The substance is primacy of reality against primacy of will (veritas vs voluntas)	Partly supported; holds in the refined form, as a dispute over whether unchosen differences and inherited forms carry moral authority	Ch. 1, 15
"Victory goes to whoever defines the axioms"; the fight is over which facts matter	Supported as a description of how moral disputes work	Ch. 1, 7
Left and right mirror each other mimetically	Supported at the surface (cue-taking, mutual definition); not the whole truth	Ch. 1, 5

Hypothesis	Verdict	Where
The left's morality is intention-based, the right's results-based	Supported for distribution (need vs proportion) and for where blame is placed (systems vs persons); not supported for individual moral reasoning, where bias is symmetric	Ch. 2, 13
"Equality is the will to power of the bottom half"; envy drives the left	Partly supported: envy is real and drives a minority, but compassion is the main engine and envy does not differ by party	Ch. 2, 13
Zero-sum equality against positive-sum ascent	Supported as a distinction; zero-sum thinking is shared by left and right	Ch. 2, 4
Egalitarian morality is a Christian premise outliving its metaphysics ("Christ unburied")	Strongly supported as genealogy; whether it must decay is a philosophical question	Ch. 2, 6, 7
"Equality is the luxury-morality of people who have forgotten how the world works"	Strongly supported for cultural individualism (security breeds emancipative values); not for economic leveling, which is ancient	Ch. 4
Political issues are at bottom psychological; "different nervous systems"	Partly: temperament and moral ranking differ; the physiological and brain-structure claims failed replication	Ch. 3
Left as maternal, right as paternal ("the state as mother")	Supported as a moral style and metaphor; not as a fixed essence, given the historical reversal of the gender gap	Ch. 3, 5, 12
People become more conservative with age and children	Right direction, small effect; parenthood moves social views only	Ch. 5
A "battle of types of people," determined ontologically	Partly: temperaments are real and stable, but the same temperament has served opposite causes	Ch. 5
"Dysgenic" as a description of the left	The compositional and genetic versions are contradicted by data on education, ability and fertility; the functional version, about whom the left's priorities favor, is supported	Ch. 3, 13
Idealism is the origin of existentialism, constructivism, critical theory and postmodernism	A real thread with breaks; constructivism also has pragmatist and materialist roots	Ch. 6, 8
Far left and far right are both Heideggerian (Karp)	Strong for the intellectual far right, partial for the academic left, weak for the mass left	Ch. 7
Critique became the highest intellectual act	Supported	Ch. 8

Hypothesis	Verdict	Where
The left's "beef is with reality"; it "ran out of real progress"	A philosophical interpretation with real support: the share of group gaps that law can remove has shrunk, but measured discrimination persists	Ch. 1, 13
The left holds a moral monopoly and turns a one-way ratchet	The institutional monopoly is supported; the ratchet has been reversed in several domains since 2021	Ch. 11, 13
The right plays perpetual defense; "the rules of the game are liberal"	Strongly supported for moral and cultural definition; contradicted for economics, courts and power	Ch. 11, 14
"The right can't lead because their metaphysics is dead"	Fits the elite intellectual right; overreaches for the mass base, where the religious right is the most stable bloc	Ch. 14

Two patterns stand out in these verdicts. The first is that the hypotheses fare best as descriptions of elites and of the deep logic of the traditions, and worst as descriptions of ordinary voters. This is not a weakness peculiar to these hypotheses; it is the general condition of every theory of ideology. The coherent belief systems that give left and right their substance live among the minority who think about first principles, and they reach everyone else as identities. A theory of the substance and a theory of the mass are different theories, and both are needed.

The second pattern is that the hypotheses fare best when they are stated symmetrically. Where a claim is made about the left alone, that it reasons from intention rather than results, or refuses inconvenient truth, or acts from resentment, the evidence usually shows the same tendency on the right in a different domain. Where the claim is made about the structure of the disagreement, about what each side treats as given and what it treats as made, the evidence is much kinder. The most powerful parts of this book's account are its accounts of structure.

❦

Beneath Left and Right

If the substance of the quarrel is a stance toward the given, then left and right are not, in the end, two programs. They are two answers to a question that every human being must face: how much of the world must I accept,

and how much may I change? Both answers have a long record of wisdom and a long record of catastrophe. The primacy of the will has abolished slavery and enfranchised women, and it has also produced the planned economies that starved millions and the utopian projects that broke against human nature. The primacy of the given has preserved the hard-won institutions of free societies, and it has also dressed up the convenience of the powerful as the order of nature. Neither side has a monopoly on the truth about where the line falls, because the line is not fixed in advance. It is found case by case, by testing claims about what is possible against what actually happens.

This book's notes put the deepest version of the question in a single sentence: the real choice is between "man against man or man against reality and himself." Most of the energy of politics, on both sides, runs horizontally, between groups of people who blame each other for the limits they suffer. The hypothesis that runs beneath this whole book is that most of those limits are not imposed by the other side at all. They are features of the world: scarcity, difference, trade-offs, the link between conduct and its consequences, the slow growth of what works. On this view, the left's characteristic error is to mistake reality for oppression, to see in every unequal outcome the hand of an oppressor; and the right's characteristic error is to mistake its own inheritance for reality, to treat whatever happens to be customary as if it were written into nature. Each side sees the other's error clearly and its own dimly.

There is a version of the left's deepest aspiration that this view does not reject. The wish to overcome the limits that cause suffering, to rise above disease, poverty, ignorance and even the constraints of the body, is the oldest human project, and it is the right goal. The engineers who flew to the moon did not deny gravity; they mastered it. The difference between mastering a limit and denying it is the difference between a vertical and a horizontal politics: between turning against reality's constraints by learning how they work, and turning against other people as if they were the constraints. "Does reality govern us, or do we govern reality?" may have a third answer, the one every successful science and every successful civilization has given in practice: we govern reality only by first obeying it.

Whether that third answer can become a politics is not a question this book has tried to settle; that belongs to other work. What this book has tried to do is to see the two great traditions of modern politics clearly, as they are, in their best self-understanding and in the light of the evidence.

Left and right are not two tribes with nothing beneath them, nor two species with different brains, nor a party of truth and a party of error. They are two enduring answers to the question of the given, carried by temperaments that are partly inherited, shaped by moral intuitions older than civilization, given their vocabularies by a shared philosophical inheritance, and held, by most people, as loyalties rather than as arguments. To understand them is to understand much of what has happened in the modern world, and much of what is likely to happen next.

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Chapter 5. How People Become Left or Right, and Why They Change

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Chapter 6. One Tree, Two Branches: From Christianity to Marx

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Chapter 7. After the Death of God: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt

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Chapter 8. The Age of Critique: From Frankfurt to Paris to the Campus

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Chapter 9. The Founding Quarrel, 1787–1860

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Chapter 11. The Long Realignment, 1945–2008

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Chapter 12. Populism and the Great Sorting, 2008–2026

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Chapter 13. The Left Today

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