

Chapter 2 – Coercivists and Voluntarists

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Coercivists and Voluntarists

by Donald J. Boudreaux

Categorizing a political position according to some simple left-right scale of values leaves something to be desired. Political views cover such a wide variety of issues that it is impossible to describe adequately any one person merely by identifying where he sits on a lone horizontal line.

Use of the single left-right scale makes impossible a satisfactory description of libertarian (and classical-liberal) attitudes toward government. Libertarians oppose not only government direction of economic affairs, but also government meddling in the personal lives of peaceful people. Does this opposition make libertarians “rightists” (because they promote free enterprise) or “leftists” (because they oppose government meddling in people’s private affairs)? As a communications tool, the left-right distinction suffers acute anemia.

Nevertheless, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the familiar left-right – “liberal-conservative” – lingo, such use continues. One reason for its durability is convenience. Never mind that all-important nuances are ignored when describing someone as being, say, “to the right of Richard Nixon” or “to the left of Lyndon Johnson.” The description takes only seconds and doesn’t tax the attention of nightly news audiences.

Therefore, no practical good is done by lamenting the mass media’s insistence on using a one-dimensional tool for describing political views.

A better strategy for helping to improve political discussion is to devise a set of more descriptive terms.

There is much to be said for a suggestion offered by Professor Richard Gamble, who teaches history at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Gamble proposes that instead of describing someone as either “left” or “right,” or “liberal” or “conservative,” we describe him as being either a *centralist* or a *decentralist*. This “centralist-decentralist” language would be a vast improvement over the muddled “left-right” language.

Unfortunately, “centralist-decentralist” language contains its own potential confusion—namely, “decentralist” might be taken to mean someone who is indifferent to what Clint Bolick calls “grassroots tyranny.” Is there an even better set of labels for a one-

dimensional political spectrum? I think so: “coercivist-voluntarist.”

At one end of this spectrum are coercivists. Coercivists believe that all order in society must be consciously designed and implemented by a sovereign government power. Coercivists cannot fathom how individuals without mandates from above can ever pattern their actions in a way that is not only orderly, but also peaceful and productive. For the coercivist, direction by sovereign government is as necessary for the creation of social order as the meticulous craftsmanship of a watchmaker is necessary for the creation of a watch.

At the other end of the spectrum are voluntarists. Voluntarists understand two important facts about society that coercivists miss. First, voluntarists understand that social order is inevitable without coercive direction from the state *as long as* the basic rules of private property and voluntary contracting are respected. This inevitability of social order when such rules are observed is the great lesson taught by Adam Smith, Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, and all of the truly great economists through the ages.

Second, voluntarists understand that coercive social engineering by government – far from promoting social harmony – is fated to ruin existing social order. Voluntarists grasp the truth that genuine and productive social order is possible only when each person is free to pursue his own goals in his own way, constrained by no *political* power. Coercive political power is the enemy of social order because it is unavoidably arbitrary – bestowing favors for reasons wholly unrelated to the values the recipients provide to their fellow human beings. And even if by some miracle the exercise of political power could be shorn of its arbitrariness, it can never escape being an exercise conducted in gross ignorance. It is a simpleton’s fantasy to imagine that all the immense and detailed knowledge necessary for the successful central direction of human affairs can ever be possessed by government.

Society emerges from the cooperation of hundreds of millions of people, each acting on the basis of his own unique knowledge of individual wants, talents, occupations, and circumstances. No bureaucrat can know enough about software design to outperform Bill Gates, or enough about retailing to successfully second-guess the folks at Walmart, or enough about any of the millions of different industries to outdo people who are highly specialized in their various trades.

The coercivist-voluntarist vocabulary is superior to the left-right, or liberal-conservative, vocabulary at distinguishing liberty’s friends from its foes. Support for high taxes and intrusive government commercial regulation is a “liberal” trait. A supporter of high taxes and regulation is also, however, properly labeled a coercivist. But note: no less of a coercivist is the conservative who applauds government regulation of what adults voluntarily read, view, or ingest. Both parties believe that social order will deteriorate into chaos unless government coercion overrides the myriad private choices made by

individuals.

Voluntarists are typically accused of endorsing complete freedom of each individual from all restraints. This accusation is nonsense. While they oppose heavy reliance upon *coercively* imposed restraints, sensible voluntarists do not oppose restraints *per se*. Voluntarists, in contrast to coercivists, recognize that superior restraints on individual behavior emerge decentrally and peaceably. Parents restrain their children. Neighbors use both formal and informal means to restrain each other from unneighborly behaviors. The ability of buyers to choose where to spend their money restrains businesses from abusing customers.

A free society is chock-full of such decentrally and noncoercively imposed restraints. Indeed, it is the voluntary origins of such restraints that make them more trustworthy than coercively imposed restraints. A voluntary restraint grows decentrally from the give and take of everyday life and is sensitive to all the costs and benefits of both the restraint itself and of the restrained behavior. But a coercive restraint too often is the product not of that give and take of all affected parties but, instead, of political deals. And political deals are notoriously biased toward the wishes of the politically well-organized while ignoring the wishes of those unable to form effective political coalitions. What's more, members of the political class often free themselves from the very restraints they foist upon others. Coercively imposed restraints are not social restraints at all; rather, they are arbitrary commands issued by the politically privileged.

The true voluntarist fears nothing as much as he fears coercive power – whether exercised by those on the “left” or the “right.”

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