

Dominance: Material vs. Rhetorical

Do the rich dominate our society?

In one sense, they obviously do. Rich people run most of the business world, own most of the wealth, and are vastly more likely to be powerful politicians.

In another sense, however, the rich aren't dominant at all. If you get in public and loudly say, "Rich people are great. We owe them everything. They deserve every penny they've got - and more. People who criticize the rich are just jealous failures," almost everyone will recoil in horror.

Do males dominate our society?

In one sense, they obviously do. Males run most of the business world, hold most of the top political offices, hold a supermajority of the most prestigious jobs, and make a lot more money on average.

In another sense, however, males aren't dominant at all. If you get in public and loudly say, "Males are the superior sex. We owe them everything. We need to protect males from women's emotional abuse and financial exploitation, and show them the great deference they deserve," almost everyone will recoil in horror.

Do whites dominate our society?

In one sense, they obviously do. Whites run most of the business world, hold most of the top political offices, hold a clear majority of the most prestigious jobs, and earn above-average incomes.

In another sense, however, whites aren't dominant at all. If you get in public and loudly say, "Whites have built Western civilization, the glory of the modern world. Almost everything good in the modern world builds on white Europeans' efforts. The people of the world need to acknowledge how much they owe to the white race, and apologize for their many insults fueled by their own sense of inferiority," almost everyone will recoil in horror.

My point: There are two very distinct kinds of dominance.* There is material dominance - control of economic wealth and political power. And there is rhetorical dominance - control of words and ideas. Intuitively, you would expect the two to correlate highly. At least in the modern world, however, they don't. Indeed, the correlation is plausibly negative: The groups with high material dominance now tend to have *low* rhetorical dominance.

Isn't material dominance clearly more enviable than mere rhetorical dominance? On

balance, I suspect so. Still, *many* people who could have won material dominance invest their lives in acquiring rhetorical dominance instead: intellectuals, activists, and religious leaders are all prime examples. Why do they bother? Because man does not live by bread alone. Material dominance gives you luxuries, but rhetorical dominance makes you feel like you're on top of the world: "I can loudly praise what I like and blame what I dislike - and expect the people who demur to meekly keep their objections to themselves. Or even feign agreement!"

Conflation of material and rhetorical dominance helps explain why liberals and conservatives so often talk past each. Liberals feel like conservatives dominate the world, because conservatives run the government half the time, and conservative-leaning groups - the rich, males, whites - have disproportionate influence over the economy. Conservatives feel like liberals dominate the world, because liberals run the media, schools, and human resources departments. In a sense, both groups are right. Conservatives have the lion's share of material dominance; liberals have more than the lion's share of rhetorical dominance. In another sense, though, both groups are wrong. In the contest for *overall* dominance, both groups are roughly tied. Both groups feel like underdogs because both yearn from the kind of dominance they lack.

Due to the endowment effect, moreover, both sides get angry when the other intrudes on "their" territory. Thus, even though leftists have a near-stranglehold over research universities, the rare academic center that promotes free markets or social conservatism blinds them with rage. 99% rhetorical dominance? *We're supposed to have 100% rhetorical dominance!* Conservatives have a similar, though less hyperbolic, reaction when business adopts liberal causes. "Sensitivity training?! Give me a break."

The dream of both movements, naturally, is to hold all the dominances. The conservative dream is a world where they consolidate their lead in the world of business *and* take over the whole culture. The liberal dream is a world where they purge the last vestiges of conservative culture *and* bring business and the rich to their knees. (The latter rarely means outright expropriation; I think even America's far left would be satisfied if they could sharply increase regulation and regulation - and hear business and the rich repeatedly shout, "Thank you, may I have another?")

When you put it this way, of course, both dreams sound like nightmares. Neither liberals nor conservatives even dimly internalize Spiderman's principle that "With great power comes great responsibility." Both are epistemically vicious to the core, so habitually drunk with emotion they don't even know what sober rationality looks like. Frankly, I'd like to see both of these secular religions fade away like Norse mythology. Since that's unlikely to happen, however, I'm grateful to live in a world with an uneasy balance of power. Or to be more precise, an uneasy balance of dominance.

* I suspect Robin Hanson will say that I'm conflating dominance and prestige. Maybe a little, but when I picture "rhetorical dominance," I'm picturing words and ideas that intimidate more than they inspire. General point: You can have material prestige and rhetorical prestige as well as material dominance and rhetorical dominance.