

What's Wrong with the Thrive/Survive Theory of Left and Right

A while back, Scott Alexander defended what he called the “Thrive/Survive Theory” of left and right. Digest version:

My hypothesis is that rightism is what happens when you're optimizing for surviving an unsafe environment, leftism is what happens when you're optimized for thriving in a safe environment.

Scott defends the theory vigorously, but seems most impressed by its ability to explain why “society does seem to be drifting gradually leftward.” The more the world thrives, the more the leftist approach genuinely makes sense.

Many people in my circles now seem to take Thrive/Survive Theory as the default position; if it's not true, it's still the story to beat. But to be blunt, I find essentially no value in it. It's not always wrong, but it's about as right as you'd expect from chance. My top criticisms:

1. Unless you cherry-pick the time and place, it is simply not true that society is drifting leftward. On the global level, leftism was mighty from roughly 1917 to 1975 – when the Soviet bloc was still strong and heartily attacked by even more radical leftists like Mao. The triumph of Deng Xiaoping in China started a gradual but massive decline of leftism. The fall of the Soviet bloc was an even sharper and far more rapid crash. These changes echoed throughout the developing world. And while pro-Communist parties never dominated any Western country, the collapse of Communism was a major blow to the ambition and morale of left-wing Western parties and intellectuals.
2. A standard leftist view is that free-market “neoliberal” policies now rule the world. I say they're grossly exaggerating, but there's a lot more evidence for a long-run neoliberal trend than a long-run leftist trend.
3. Radical left parties almost invariably ruled countries near the “survive” pole, not the “thrive” pole. And they generally had little or no sympathy for social liberalism, with brief exceptions (like the first year or so of the Soviet Union). In fact, they punished deviance and dissent far more brutally than the typical traditional monarchy. In the broad history of leftism, Bay Area-type identity politics is simply not very important.
4. You could deny that Communist regimes were “genuinely leftist,” but that's pretty

desperate. When Communism was a viable political movement, almost everyone – including moderate leftists – saw it as part of the left. An extreme, fanatical part of the left, yes. But very much a part of it.

5 Many big social issues that divide left and right in rich countries like the U.S. directly contradict Thrive/Survive. To take the most obvious case: unwanted pregnancies are much more burdensome – and legal abortion much more valuable – when life itself is insecure. The same goes for the traditional Christian teachings of unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness. If Scott were correct, rightists wouldn't just be pro-choice; they'd literally be pro-abortion for any fetus likely to burden society.

6. Major war provides an excellent natural experiment for Thrive/Survive. Material conditions suddenly get a lot worse; life itself is on the line. What really happens? Almost all countries lurch *toward* what General Ludendorff termed “War Socialism” – replacing private property and material rewards with state ownership and forced egalitarianism. When war ends, countries tend to back away from these policies – exactly the opposite of what Thrive/Survive Theory predicts. Furthermore, political support for the continuation of egalitarian policies after wars tends to rest on “compensatory” arguments for the masses’ wartime sacrifices.

If Thrive/Survive Theory is wrong, what's right? I stand by my Simplistic Theory of Left and Right:

1. Leftists are anti-market. On an emotional level, they're critical of market outcomes. No matter how good market outcomes are, they can't bear to say, "Markets have done a great job, who could ask for more?"

2. Rightists are anti-leftist. On an emotional level, they're critical of leftists. No matter how much they agree with leftists on an issue, they can't bear to say, "The left is totally right, it would be churlish to criticize them."

Note the asymmetry: While leftists are emotionally anti-market, rightists are not generally *pro*-market. Plenty are mercantilists, nationalists, populists, religious fundamentalists, and folks who find economics boring beyond belief. What these diverse right-wing flavors have in common is not love of laissez-faire, but antipathy for leftists.

My Simplistic Theory *intentionally* fails to predict lots of details. Why? Because many of

the features that Scott sees as quintessentially leftist – such as “freedom of religion, democratic-republican governments, weak gender norms, minimal family values, and a high emphasis on education and abstract ideas” – have been neglected or rejected by history’s most influential, dyed-in-the-wool leftists. The leftists Scott personally knows may cherish the items on his list. To be frank, though, the leftists Scott personally knows are just a trendy subset of a diverse and enduring movement.

But doesn’t prosperity push society in a predictable political direction? Yes, but the direction isn’t leftism. It’s *moderation*. In rich societies, left and right make milder demands, and impose milder punishments. Instead of expropriation, they push for taxation. Instead of threatening death, they threaten jail, deportation, fines, or strongly-worded letters. When society is on the brink of starvation, leftists and rightists slaughter each other. When society faces an obesity epidemic, leftists and rightists troll each other on Facebook.