Douglas Giles, *What Left and Right Mean: Clarifying the Political Spectrum.* Boston: Game Over Books, 2022. 39 pp., $5.49, ISBN: 978-1-7358808-2-2

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Douglas Giles has produced a very clear text, written in a language free of jargon and, above all, able to get straight to the point. The schematic and essential division allows one to address issues which, as the author claims, have often generated confusion and prejudices that are not confirmed by the facts. At the beginning of the introduction, Giles specifies his intention by writing: "In this book, I want to clarify the meaning of the terms 'Left' and 'Right' and the left–right political spectrum in a way that helps us better understand political and social conflicts."[1]

In the first chapter "What 'Left' and 'Right' Mean" Mean, after explaining the etymology of the word "politics" with reference to the ancient Greek polis, the author explains the historical origin of the concepts of right and left by speaking of the French Revolution. The historical clarification is illustrative. In 1789, in the French National Assembly, supporters of the king chose to sit to the right of the assembly president, and opponents of the king sat opposite them on his left. Within this basic framework there should be no doubt about the meaning of "conservative or reactionary" and "revolutionary or progressive." Yet this historical clarification risks oversimplifying, even trivializing the concepts of right and left. The correct interpretive key to the concepts of left and right is not any underlying ideology but, according to the author, a completely different concept: the structure of power.

To understand Giles' approach, two conundrums associated with the traditionally defined left–right divide need to be mentioned. The proclamations of Stalin and Hitler, read through the lens of pure ideology, leave no doubt about what left and right are. However, if, as the author suggests,

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[1] Douglas Giles, *What Left and Right Mean: Clarifying the Political Spectrum* (Boston: Game Over Books, 2022), 4.

we analyze the way power flows and is shared and implemented, we perceive that the basic structure of the Soviet communist and Nazi governments are similar. Indeed, Giles says, there is little or nothing to distinguish between the policies and actions of Stalin and Hitler. Both Hitler and Stalin persecuted Jews, quashed dissent, invaded neighboring countries, and ran totalitarian governments that suppressed freedoms. Any meaningful conception of the political left and right would have to show Hitler and Stalin on the same side of the political spectrum.[2]

Another example that demonstrates the inconsistency of the ideological approach is abortion. The received dogma in the United States is that the right wants less government interference in individuals' lives and the left wants the government to run people's lives. Yet, in the stark concreteness of reality, the right believes that laws are needed to prohibit a woman from having an abortion, and the left seeks laws establishing a woman's right to abortion. In other words, practice disavows ideology and therefore clarifies what happens in reality, disproving the ideological presuppositions. It follows that the approach generally considered leftist, i.e. that the overarching state plans the lives of citizens, is actually the approach applied by the right in handling the abortion issue. On the contrary, the idea that the state should not intervene – the supposedly right-wing approach – is instead precisely exemplified by the left, which would like women to decide for themselves. Ideological assumptions are often the filters or lenses through which we evaluate various problems and situations. It almost seems that deliberate blindness to the concrete work performed by a part of the right or left is a shield against the "pain" of discovering the inconsistency between what is proclaimed and what is really done.

A further example taken from the history of the French Revolution, though not specifically described in Giles' text, can help clarify the discrepancy between ideals and reality, between ideology and practice. The establishment of the famous Committee of Public Health, made up of only twelve members, strongly contradicts the democratic Constitution of 1793, which provided for popular sovereignty and universal male suffrage. Not only was the Constitution suppressed (although it was claimed that such suppression would be temporary) but the Committee

[2] Ibid., 7.

assumes and combines two powers: the legislative and the executive.[3] Giles' theses are supported by this historical example which clearly shows how the power structure of the Committee was narrow and elitist, contradicting the democratic principles professed by the Jacobins, the co-protagonists of the French Revolution. Furthermore, the concentration of legislative and executive power in the hands of only twelve people demonstrates the dictatorial character of those who, paradoxically, inspired not only the democratic Constitution of 1793 but also the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*) of 1789.[4] The declaration proclaimed, among other things, that the purpose of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. Instead, the Committee of Public Health violated people's freedom by instituting trials and arbitrarily passing sentences, paradoxically playing the role of the oppressor.

Giles makes us see that one cannot simplistically conceive the origin of any kind of political left as being of the Jacobin type if, as he himself writes, the left today requires greater circulation of power among people. We need to clarify the concept of the left by analyzing, as Giles suggests, the structure and circulation of power. Power concentrated in the hands of twelve people, the few who have the power to write and enforce laws, proves that the circulation of power is deliberately restricted.

In short, Giles specifies that whether power circulates in a small or large number of people is the real revealing factor of how power itself is structured. On this basis, to return to Hitler and Stalin, there is no fundamental difference between the two rulers in their use of power and there is no structural difference in their power. In both the Nazi and the Soviet states, only a very few people had power. Giles makes it clear that Hitler and Stalin were both autocrats who ruled by fiat over the civil and military sectors of their society. Moreover, their decisions were not open to debate or criticism.[5]

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[3] Alessandro Isoni, "Il Comitato di salute pubblica e la dittatura del terrore (1793–1794)," *Itinerari di ricerca storica* 1 (2014), 11–38.

[4] Robert Roswell Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[5] Giles, *What Left and Right Mean,* 9.

Another big misunderstanding concerns the concept of the rights of the person. Giles writes that nowadays the standard left–right political spectrum is based on the alleged dichotomy of the rights of individuals (the right) versus the force of the government (the left). It also tends to repeat the myth that the left is about state control of the economy, whereas the right is about economic freedom. On the basis of these assumptions, there is the risk of not understanding once again how the right and the left approach rights and freedom. Since no one would dream of denying rights and freedoms, it is necessary to understand in detail who rights and freedoms refer to. In their general and generic proclamations, both the left and the right agree on the concept of rights for people.

However, on the one hand, we find those who would deny the extension of rights to certain social groups; and, on the other, it is the legitimate role of government to protect the powerless from exploitation and abuse and provide for the general welfare. Suffice it to mention the rights denied to immigrants not only in the United States but also in Europe by right-wing parties, who see immigrants as a threat to social stability despite the favorable view of authoritative banking sources regarding immigration. According to the Bank of Italy, as reported in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, more immigrants are needed for the Italian economy.[6]

Giles therefore reveals the paradoxical aspect that the right-wing parties who voraciously defend the interests of the banks are the very ones that don't agree with their views on immigration. Indeed, Giles' reflections allow us to carefully read social reality and to understand its sometimes mystifying interpretations, tainted by an ideological prejudice that takes on an almost dogmatic character. Viewing matters in terms of power concentration also demythologizes the political spectrum. Notions of a titanic struggle between left and right may be romantic, making for good press, but they do not reflect the realities of human society. Rather, Giles states, understanding the conflict between left and right as one over the circulation or concentration of power puts the ques-

[6] "Pnrr, non si trova forza lavoro. Allarme di Bankitalia 'Servono più immigrati,'" *La Repubblica*, February 6, 2023, https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2023/02/06/news/bankitalia_pnrr_servono_piu_lavoratori_piu_immigrati-386241034/ (accessed October 12, 2023).

tion of power where it belongs, as the primary motive and goal of human political action.

Interpretive schemes sometimes risk confusing ideas and, in the second chapter of his book, "The Fake Political Dimension." Giles explains how the so-called Nolan Chart is deceptive. This chart is a diagram of the political spectrum created by the American libertarian activist David Nolan in 1969, representing political views along two axes: economic freedom and personal freedom.[7] Nolan's dual axis attempts to replace the traditional political spectrum by portraying political attitudes on a Cartesian graph. One axis stands for left–right and the other reflects some other sentiment, most commonly labeled as "authoritarian–libertarian" or "statist-libertarian."

According to Giles, the dual-axis chart deliberately obfuscates the discussion of political orientation by creating a false dimension. Nolan invented the chart as a marketing ploy to sell libertarian ideology and promote the U.S. Libertarian Party that he founded. It is no coincidence that Nolan placed the term "libertarian" in the center of the chart and at the top, in a way typical of marketing communication schemes. Without going into the details of the various versions of the chart, we can say that Nolan's original chart took a grain of truth and oversimplified it into the bromide of "freedom." He then artificially split personal and economic freedom into separate axes to obscure the central truth that the left–right axis is the circulation of power versus the concentration of power.

The Nolan chart tends to hide that libertarianism is inherently right-wing in its drive for the concentration, not circulation, of "liberty." On the pretext of demonstrating that the word "state" implies a violent and oppressive government, the Nolan chart wants to convey the message that "the state" is the worst and libertarianism the best social structure. In this way it hides that power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who are reluctant to comply with the rules and restrictions that would guarantee freedom for all and a greater circulation of power. Giles, in fact, says that eliminating the state would not lead to more freedom. Indeed, what libertarians want is to be free of responsibilities and accountability to others and thus immune from criticism.

In the third chapter, addressing the question of the "Fake Left and

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[7] Giles, *What Left and Right Mean*, 16.

the Reactionary Right," the author proposes the horseshoe theory: the political spectrum curves back on itself such that the far left and far right of the spectrum converge. The claim is that the far left and far right have far more in common with each other than with the political center. According to Giles, the far left and the far right are neither left nor right. This is because what they have in common is a relative lack of positive values, succumbing to fear and hatred of those they see as their enemies. Basically, both sides try to destroy the political positions of the other without proposing an alternative. That is, their ideological prejudices prelude a real political dialectic and exacerbate the dispute until it degenerates into a shouting match that is not at all constructive.[8]

In the fourth chapter "What Is Conservatism," Giles undertakes to define conservatism in depth, emphasizing that conservatism manifests itself in multiple areas: fiscal, religious, and social. The author specifies that the various expressions of conservative ideologies share a common goal: the restriction of power to a small group, creating a two-tiered society of haves and have-nots. In the context of conservatism, it is necessary to distinguish vested conservatives from resentful conservatives. The vested conservatives are very wealthy people who define themselves as an upper class, superior to the masses. They attempt to conserve current socioeconomic inequalities because those inequalities benefit them. They prefer that business not be constrained by state rules, that taxes are low, and that the government works to favor the rich.[9]

The resentful conservatives, while not as rich as the vested ones, demonstrate a sense of exclusivity, considering themselves the "right" ethnicity professing the right religion, and feel that they are oppressed. They feel threatened by this or that slice of the population. For example, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, threaten the purity of their ethnicity, preventing a return to a mythical past which, as Giles underlines, never existed. This is, in my opinion, the most interesting aspect in his description of resentful conservatives.

"Make America Great Again" is an expression that was fashionable in the Trump era. It had a very strong appeal precisely because it mythologized a past in which society had happily crystallized. This kind

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[8] Ibid., 23.
[9] Ibid., 29.

of conservative does not understand changing customs, the evolution of culture, the birth of new social needs, and confronts the emergence of the new with a paranoid attitude. A term deriving from ancient Greek defines them: misoneists. Simply put, they are fearful and intolerant of innovation or change, mythologizing the past. If Trumpism in America is the clearest example, Brexit in the United Kingdom represents a complementary aspect to Trumpism, with fear of immigrants and the specter of other nations within the European Union having equal rights with the United Kingdom.[10] Because conservatism is the desire to restrict power to a few, according to Giles, it necessarily sees the majority of people as the enemy. In other words, the conservative vision is simplistically dualistic: Us vs. Them. This helps us understand the xenophobia, racism, sexism, and homophobia that permeate both vested conservatives and resentful conservatives. The latter would be the labor of the former and therefore other-directed and manipulated.

In the fifth chapter "What Is Liberalism?" Giles' own perspective emerges clearly, although it was already implied from the very beginning. The difference between this chapter and the those preceding lies in the explicit statement that "Liberals' overall goal is a society that works for all people."[11] However, at the beginning of the chapter, the author states that we need to distinguish between two quite different uses of the word "liberal."[12] This difference can be partly explained by Isaiah Berlin's negative and positive liberties.[13] Negative liberties refer to what we are free from – restrictions and coercive forces like bullying and intimidation. Positive liberties include what we are free to do – having the ability to act of our own free will.

Having made this clarification, Giles briefly summarizes the historical origins of the negative liberties by tracing their origin in the 1600s, when the aristocracy wanted to free itself from the power of the king, his influence and his restrictions. It is no coincidence that parliamentary monarchy was born thanks to the English revolution of 1649, which eventually led to the birth of a strong parliament capable of con-

[10] Ibid., 32.
[11] Ibid., 37.
[12] Ibid., 35.
[13] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

taining the power of the king. The problem, as Giles points out, is that the aristocrats wanted to increase the circulation of power, but only to their class, not to the "lower" classes.

In contrast, the term "liberal" refers to economic liberalism, libertarianism, neoliberalism, and anarchism. This view shifts the concentration of power from government to individuals and corporations and is self-centered and exclusionary. From this it follows that "liberal" has a right-wing political connotation. Other uses of "liberal" came not from the aristocracy but from other elements of society. These people strove to increase positive liberties for the majority, not just for the aristocracy. In this regard we must distinguish two further meanings. One meaning is based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's view that what matters is the concept of the greater common good. According to this perspective, positive liberty is what is good for society as a whole. The second version focuses on positive liberties that cultivate the ability of individuals to make their own choices. In contrast to the right, the latter view considers the state as a means to guarantee everyone's freedom as well as to promote collective well-being.[14]

At this point in the book, the author's ideological alignment is clear, although it is fair to emphasize that this alignment is technically explained by the concept of the distribution and circulation of power. Giles believes that sharing power in a stratified way, spread over several social levels, would avoid the concentration of power in the hands of a few. In this way, the fundamental liberties for all would be guaranteed. As Giles writes, the people who use "liberal" to mean increasing positive liberties for all members of society, regardless of class, are properly liberals or left-wing. In this last part, the author warns that the aforementioned freedoms cannot be conquered without struggle. Indeed, he forcefully states that liberals are on the left side of the political spectrum, struggling to increase the circulation of power in society. And he adds: that means fighting existing unjust power structures. This is why Giles can state the hard reality: the historical norm is that excessive concentrations of power lead to injustice. This norm explains some right-wingers' belief that structural inequalities are natural and not to be changed.[15]

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[14] Giles, *What Left and Right Mean,* 36.
[15] Ibid., 37.

Giles' position is reaffirmed in the conclusion of the text when he writes that every improvement to society has come from the diligent efforts of those who believe in the basic principle of the left or liberalism – that power should be more widely circulated across society and that all of us should have liberties and opportunities. We owe a lot to the many brave people who have fought for liberal causes and have increased power for more people.[16] The best way to build a society in which power is distributed on multiple levels is, according to the author, through a dialogue capable of dealing with the complexities of society and power relations. Believing in dialogue means having an optimistic vision of human nature, and, to support this view, we cannot fail to mention the perspective of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas puts his faith in communicative action and believes that there can be positive interaction thanks to authentic communication between people. In such communication the other is not treated as a tool, as Harbermas says, since there is a real interest in the other and in the other's proposals. Finally, Giles would seem to be in tune with another optimistic vision of man proposed by the visionary economist Jeremy Rifkin, who bases his idea on the research of the great evolutionary scientists. They have studied the human nervous system and discovered that we are hardcoded to be empathetic, to be cooperative. If this is the true nature of humanity, we could say that Giles' trust in dialogue is well placed.

[16] Ibid., 38.