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Moral Consensus and Antiestablishment Politics

Johan Wennström

Moral Consensus and Antiestablishment Politics[‡]

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Abstract: This essay argues that mainstream Left and Right parties' convergence around the liberal moral foundations of care, fairness, and liberty most likely explains the popular discontent with establishment politicians and the ascendancy of insurgent political parties and movements in both Europe and the United States. It uses the moral consensus of two Swedish establishment parties, the Social Democratic Party and the right-wing Moderate Party, as its primary example. The convergence of those parties can be seen, for instance, in their approach to both education and immigration. The essay suggests that in order to win back wide public support, liberal Left and Right parties must become open to moral pluralism and acknowledge the legitimacy of conservative moral intuitions. Such pluralism would, in fact, be consistent with the traditions of liberalism.

Keywords: Hedgehog–fox metaphor, Moderate Party, Moral foundations theory, Policy convergence, Social Democratic Party

JEL codes: A13, D63, D70, D91, F60, J68

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As the year 2020 drew to a close, the tide of popular discontent with mainstream center-left and center-right political parties, which in the past four years had roiled politics around the world, finally began to recede—at least so it seems to governing elites. Most significantly, in the U.S. presidential election in November Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump, the most prominent symbol of that discontent. More broadly, the global nature of the coronavirus pandemic seemed to definitively illustrate the shortcomings of parochial nationalism, a force widely believed to have been at the heart of the political backlash. Surely it will be only a matter of time before the supporters of Brexit and of surging nationalist parties in the European Union will join once-errant voters in America who had delivered Trump’s election upset in 2016 yet in 2020 had returned to the establishment fold.

This view, although tempting, is likely to be a fatal mistake. Most of the voters who abandoned the once-dominant catchall parties of the Left and Right for new political movements, including Trumpism, will not be going back to those parties—at least not until mainstream politicians understand the underlying sources of those voters’ concerns and address their legitimate grievances. Crucially, these grievances do not stem from nationalism in the narrow sense or from economic anxiety in the face of globalization, as standard explanations have suggested. They are instead a foreseeable reaction against the limited moral conception of society offered by both traditional left and right parties.

This essay argues that traditional parties have effectively rendered many voters homeless by blindly and one-sidedly emphasizing liberal moral intuitions. I take the moral consensus of two Swedish establishment parties, the Social Democrats and the right-wing Moderate Party, as my primary example. The basis for my analysis is *moral foundations theory* (Haidt 2012), which demonstrates that liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral intuitions, both of which are fundamental to human selfhood and society. Whereas liberals tend to reason from within an individualistic, liberty- and rights-oriented framework, conservatives have a more communal moral sense. Mainstream party convergence around liberal values created a political niche that insurgent movements easily filled. If traditional parties were instead to become open to moral pluralism by acknowledging conservative moral

intuitions, they would have an opportunity to win back the public support they have recently lost.

The first section provides an overview of moral foundations theory. In the second section, I discuss how the Swedish establishment parties' moral convergence can be seen, for instance, in their approach to both education and immigration. The final section looks at comparative international examples and considers the implications of my argument for the future of mainstream left and right parties.

Moral Foundations Theory

Moral foundations theory—conceived by the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and popularized in his book *The Righteous Mind* (2012)—takes its point of departure from the now-accepted fact that humans are not born as moral “blank slates” but rather are equipped with pre-wired morality.¹ This pre-wired morality consists of a set of intuitions, evolved over eons, that Haidt describes as “moral foundations.” According to the theory, selection processes have favored the development of at least six of them: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty.

This theory posits that all six moral foundations are the result of longstanding challenges faced by our primitive ancestors: “caring for vulnerable children [*care*], forming partnerships with non-kin to reap the benefits of reciprocity [*fairness*], forming coalitions to compete with other coalitions [*loyalty*], negotiating status hierarchies [*authority*], and keeping oneself and one’s kin free from parasites and pathogens [*sanctity*]” (Haidt 2012, p. 125). These five foundations also include the “adaptive challenge of living in small groups with individuals who would, if given the chance, dominate, bully, and constrain others [*liberty*]” (Haidt 2012, p. 172). Although these moral foundations are ancient, they also help humans respond to challenges that exist in the modern world. For example, the moral foundation of sanctity can be broadened to encompass chastity, sobriety, the maintenance of moral taboos, and reverence for religious rituals or national symbols.

¹ See, for example, the references in Graham et al. (2013). For the original reference to moral foundations theory, see Haidt and Joseph (2004).

Because genes, culture, and experience interact differently within each person, some people give greater preference to certain moral foundations than to others. The particular mix of intuitions on which each person relies, moreover, shapes his or her political views. Liberals and conservatives tend to rely on different sets of foundations, or, as Haidt calls them, different “moral matrices.” Liberals tend to emphasize the importance of care, fairness, and liberty—and can struggle to recognize the other three foundations (loyalty, authority, and sanctity) as valid—whereas conservatives endorse all six foundations more or less equally and view them as mutually interdependent. The difference has been proven in responses to the *moral foundations questionnaire* (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009)² and in other contexts, including experiments looking at brainwaves.

Like most American theorists, Haidt equates liberal and conservative with left and right, suggesting that “[r]eaders from outside the United States may want to swap in the words *progressive* or *left-wing* whenever I say *liberal*” (2012, p. xvi). Yet his distinction between liberal and conservative moral matrices is not analogous to left versus right. In the modern American *and* European political tradition, liberals are most concerned about the rights, liberties, and well-being of individuals (Rosenblatt 2018). In contrast, conservatives are concerned about those values as well but also place limits on individual autonomy, endorse authority-based relationships, and embrace the virtue of sanctity—for example, by regarding the nation in sacred or quasi-sacred terms (Scruton [1980] 2001). This is not a traditional left or right issue; there are liberals and conservatives on both sides of the establishment political divide.³

The two moral matrices may therefore be employed as analytic tools for examining arguments and policies of the Left and Right and discovering unexpected relationships between them. The next section suggests that the establishment Left and Right have converged morally. In particular, the Swedish establishment parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Moderate Party, have converged primarily on the moral foundations of care, fairness, and liberty.

² See the questionnaire at <https://moralfoundations.org/questionnaires/> (accessed December 11, 2020).

³ Consider, for example, the socially conservative “Blue Labour” movement led by British Labour Party thinker Maurice Glasman. For more on this movement, see Glasman et al. (2011).

Care, Fairness, and Liberty

The Social Democrats and the Moderates have traditionally regarded each other as political adversaries. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that in reality there has not been much daylight between the two parties.

Consider education policy. Both the Left and the Right long argued that schoolteachers had selfishly taken power over education away from students. As part of a major attempt to reverse this allegedly sinister trend, the Left and the Right paved the way for the market-oriented *new public management* (NPM) model of control and accountability in the Swedish school system.⁴ A necessary precondition was to undermine the professional ethos of teachers and their commitment to an ideal of service above self and to make teachers view their work as a regular job rather than as a morally charged vocation. After this fundamental change in the self-image of Swedish teachers had been achieved in tandem by both the Left and the right, then NPM—with its restrictions on what teachers may and may not do in the classroom—could enter the school system in the early 1990s (Wennström 2016). The long-term consequence of the joint effort to weaken teachers' pride of craft and to introduce NPM into schools is a proletarianized teaching force with low status in society.

The establishment Left and Right's rejection of traditional pedagogy—based on the value of authority—also led both parties to embrace a postmodern, social-constructivist view of knowledge. The implications of such a view of knowledge are that there are no objectively existing facts and that the hierarchy of knowledge that has long been established within disciplines lacks legitimacy. Therefore, exposure to an education with a knowledge-based core curriculum is not seen to be in the best interests of young children. Schools should instead give students the freedom to choose, explore, and develop on their own.

At the same time as this view of knowledge was institutionalized in the governing structures of the Swedish school system—also in the early 1990s—a succession of

⁴ For a discussion of the characteristics of NPM, see, for example, Hood (1991).

Social Democratic and Moderate-led governments implemented a policy of decentralized and marketized schooling under the banner of freedom of choice (Wennström 2020). This combination of market forces and social constructivist ideas would, in the long-run, adversely affect the quality of Sweden's education and arguably debase its fundamental purpose. Public schools and for-profit schools were set loose to compete for student vouchers, but without having to abide by national standards for what knowledge students must acquire, which ultimately resulted in widespread grade inflation and a significant decline in academic performance (Henrekson and Wennström 2019).

Or consider immigration. In this area, the establishment Left and Right's concerns about asylum seekers—their personal well-being and freedom of movement—led them to jointly pursue a liberal immigration policy under which Sweden accepted an unprecedented number of refugees.⁵ In 2015, the top year for refugee admission, the number of asylum seekers who arrived in the country greatly exceeded the number of native births. In pursuing this policy, the Left and the Right did not weigh its potential negative impact on the central state institutions' ability to control the asylum seekers and on the social cohesion in the small towns and rural areas where most new arrivals were placed (Wennström and Öner 2020). Instead, not just the Social Democrats and the Moderates but the entire spectrum of mainstream Left and Right parties challenged the legitimacy of national borders and questioned whether Sweden had a national culture of its own that is worth preserving.

In both cases, the Left and the Right were consistently—but unintentionally—blind to the moral foundations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity. The same tendency may be observed, for example, in the establishment Left and Right's opposition to universal (male) military conscription and a national defense⁶ and in their transgressive attitudes toward gender norms and identity. But what has also united the Left and the Right is their cognitive approach to policy.

⁵ For further context, see Sanandaji (2020).

⁶ Mårten Lindberg (2019) shows that in the post-Cold War environment of the early 1990s the Left and the Right jointly abandoned a collectivist ethos in support of universal military service and a focus on national and territorial defense and converged toward creating a voluntary defense organization marked by internationalism.

In *Expert Political Judgment* (2005), the social psychologist Philip E. Tetlock classifies political experts in academia and government as ranging from “foxes” to “hedgehogs.” The framework derives from the Greek adage that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Foxes, Tetlock finds, produce far better political forecasts than hedgehogs because foxes have a more balanced style of thinking about the world. They are more tolerant of nuance and skeptical of claims that deep laws govern history, and they tend not to reject unpalatable truths in order to maintain “moral purity” (Tetlock 2005, p. 106). In contrast, hedgehogs believe in big ideas and governing principles and tend to stick to the same approach in all circumstances.

Both Swedish establishment parties have been hedgehogs rather than foxes. They have had only one view of the relationship between teachers and students and of traditional pedagogy. Likewise, as also pointed out in a recent study from the Swedish Ministry of Finance’s own “think tank,” the Left and the Right never considered the potential hazards associated with decentralizing and marketizing the Swedish school system.⁷ Therefore, they were not sensitive to the possibility that competition between schools—in combination with serious flaws in perhaps the single most important institution for the functioning and development of the school system, the stipulated view of knowledge—risked leading to grade inflation.⁸ Similarly, the establishment Left and Right have maintained only one view of immigration.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the Left and the Right have converged around the liberal moral matrix, which comprises fewer moral foundations and in this sense is more hedgehoglike. This point has, in fact, already been famously made by the political and legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin in *Justice for Hedgehogs* (2011), in which he, albeit using other terms, defends a liberal moral order based on the three foundations care, fairness, and liberty. Foxes would feel more comfortable in the conservative moral matrix, in which all six moral foundations are embedded and balance each other. However, while the establishment Left and Right are governed by

⁷ The Ministry of Finance study, which discusses the deregulation not only of schools but also of pharmacies, the postal system, telecommunications, and railways, notes that “it is incomprehensible in retrospect that certain consequences were not anticipated and mitigated” (Forsstedt 2018, p. 17).

⁸ For a discussion of the view of knowledge as a governing institution of the school system, see Henrekson and Wennström (2019).

a more limited “hedgehog morality,” foxlike voters have long lacked political representation.

It was arguably not until the nationalist Sweden Democrats entered Parliament for the first time in 2010 that a party in Sweden’s national politics challenged the liberal moral consensus not only on immigration but also on other issues relevant to a foxlike worldview.⁹ As the establishment Left and Right did not change their tune in response to that challenge but rather emphasized the liberal moral foundations even more strongly than before, the Sweden Democrats could continue to attract foxlike voters, who felt increasingly not at home in either of the mainstream parties. Precisely because the Sweden Democrats have managed to gain significant and roughly equal voter shares from both the Left and the Right, they have in recent years risen to become the third-largest party and a serious contender for first place in future elections.

Conclusion: A New Moral Pluralism

If foxes perceive that the establishment Left and Right parties no longer represent their morally underpinned views, then it is understandable and legitimate that they will seek out parties that appear to be immersed in a more conservative moral matrix. Most likely, this is what has occurred not only in Sweden but also in Europe more broadly and in the United States. In those places, too, hedgehog morality has ruled as if it were the only game in town—thereby creating space for new political movements that appeal to more than just three moral foundations.

Consider, for example, the philosopher Michael J. Sandel’s recent critique of the European and American mainstream parties in *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020). There he

⁹ It can be argued as a counterpoint that the Sweden Democrats and similar-minded parties are not foxes but another kind of hedgehog whose focus is almost exclusively on restricting immigration. However, large-scale immigration can be interpreted as a multifoundation issue. Indeed, the Sweden Democrats and their voters likely view it as a challenge to not just one or a few of the moral foundations but to all of them: care (the quality and availability of tax-financed welfare services); fairness (the citizen-based access to welfare services and fairness in redistribution of wealth through transfers); loyalty (the nation-state’s primary responsibility to care for its own citizens); authority (the strength and authority of the central state); sanctity (the maintenance of the cultural and religious inheritance); and liberty (freedom from crime and violence). In fact, the Sweden Democrats were the first party in Sweden to discuss immigration in this multifaceted way, while the establishment Left and Right treated it as an isolated issue.

argues that both the Left and the Right have since the 1980s come to single-mindedly embrace a “market-driven version of globalization,” which valorizes the unrestricted flow of goods, capital, and people across national borders (p. 20). In line with this convergence around the project of globalization, the mainstream Left and Right have offered the same response to the loss of many traditional jobs brought by free-trade agreements and outsourcing, a response Sandel calls “the rhetoric of rising.” This rhetoric gives the optimistic impression that through dedication and hard work everyone can retrain themselves to become an upwardly mobile winner in the new global economy.

However, in Sandel’s view the mainstream parties of the Left and the Right have failed to understand that most workers are not necessarily interested in individualistic striving and competition but are content instead to flourish in place. In other words, he argues that both the Left and the Right miss that human labor is not merely about money in one’s pocket but also and more importantly about being rewarded with the social recognition and sense of dignity that comes from contributing to the common good of one’s own country and community.¹⁰

This way of thinking about work, Sandel maintains, has been undermined by “the rhetoric of rising” as well as by the mainstream Left and Right’s policies of “distributive justice,” aimed at materially compensating those who have lost out to global trade yet not been able to rise. Ultimately, Sandel claims, this rhetoric and its resulting policies prompted a resentment that played a significant role both in Brexit and in the elevation of Donald Trump to the White House.

Sandel’s critique suggests that the proclivity of establishment Left and Right parties to emphasize the liberal moral foundations of care, fairness, and liberty at the expense of the remaining moral foundations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity is, indeed, an international trend. Another supporting example is offered in the journalist Christopher Caldwell’s book *The Age of Entitlement* (2020), where he argues that “civil rights law became the template for much of American policy making after the 1960s, including on matters far removed from race” (p. 12). Both the American Left

¹⁰ This example mirrors in an interesting way my earlier discussion of the establishment Left and Right’s effort to change the self-image of Swedish teachers.

and Right came to view almost every issue in terms of rights and of whether the freedom and well-being of individuals risked being circumscribed. This led them, for instance, to institutionalize new social and sexual norms that, from a conservative moral viewpoint, weakened the traditional family structure and to admit more than 59 million immigrants in the decades after 1965. Like Sandel, Caldwell argues that voter frustration with establishment Left–Right convergence was the driving force behind Trump’s election win in 2016.

This essay has argued that the pervasiveness of hedgehog morality—a convergence around the liberal “three-foundation morality” (Haidt 2012, p. 208)—in Western mainstream politics explains the ascendancy of insurgent political parties and movements. Before liberal Left and Right parties can hope to win back wide public support, they must replace hedgehog morality with a new moral pluralism, which acknowledges the legitimacy of conservative moral intuitions. Such pluralism would, in fact, be consistent with the traditions of liberalism. As the historian Helena Rosenblatt shows in *The Lost History of Liberalism* (2018), early liberals “had nothing to do with the atomistic individualism we hear of today” and “rejected the idea that a viable community could be constructed on the basis of self-interestedness alone” (p. 4). It was not until what Rosenblatt calls liberalism’s “turn to rights” (pp. 271–74) in the mid–twentieth century that it came to be about individual rights and interests, particularly in the Anglo-American context.

It is now time for establishment Left and Right parties to turn to a wider definition of human good. Sandel lists a number of “large moral and civic questions that should be at the center of political debate: What should we do about rising inequality? What is the moral significance of national borders? What makes for the dignity of work? What do we owe each other as citizens?” (2020, p. 28). Answering those questions is a good place to start.

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