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Hooked

Horseshoe theory suggests that the two extremes of political ideology, the far left and right, are not positioned at opposite ends of a straight line, but as two points closer to each other than either is to the centre. To many adherents of this theory, the horseshoe is in fact more of a circle, where left and right meet, collapsing political and ideological differences into ill-defined concepts like 'totalitarianism', 'extremism', or 'radicalism'.

On September 18, 2019, the European Parliament passed a resolution 'on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe'.

Rather than remembering the roles European nations played in exporting capitalism, empire, and disease across the globe, the resolution called for member states to remember very specific elements of the second World War. On its face, this is an admirable (if somewhat trite) gesture. Looking deeper into the motion, one can see that the only crimes to be remembered are those of the fascist and socialist nations, whose 'totalitarianism' was seemingly the only cause of the war and its atrocities. The USSR and Nazi Germany, Stalin and Hitler, are portrayed as having strode side by side across the continent, spreading demagoguery

wherever they went. Believing this story requires one to ignore the fact that Nazi Germany exterminated communists alongside Jews, Roma, and other 'undesirables', and put out of one's mind the 27 million Russians who died in the fight against Hitler and fascism.¹

This is horseshoe theory in action. Liberals and conservatives in the European parliament lining up to declare their 'radical' opponents indistinguishable from one another, according to a strange and inaccurate history of the 20th Century. It would be laughable, but for the fact that many far-right European parties voted for the motion, expressing their full support for the political maneuvering of the liberal centre against its vaguely drawn enemies.

For the ascendant nationalists in Hungary, Romania, and Poland, this motion provides fuel for the fight against a displaced communism (expressed through culture wars against shadowy 'cultural Marxists' attempting to bring down the structure of the family, the community, and the state), and a new acceptance by their respectable Western and Northern European colleagues. Unlike those in the West who believe that 'cultural Marxism' is behind everything from increasing acceptance of gender diversity to gun control legislation, non-white immigration to decreased speed limits, conservative nationalists in these countries have the power to implement their crazed agendas. In doing so they face little to no push-back from centrist ideologues as long as they 1) reject traditional Nazi symbology or overt anti-semitism and 2) project economic competence. 'Anti-communism' when unleashed as it has been in the former Soviet bloc is a rabid virus that doesn't only attack communists, but strikes at anyone fighting for progressive social change, or against the corruption of the ruling parties.

As we can see in this example, whereas the organic theory of the 'pragmatic' political centre has the left and right collapsing into one another, in practice the tendency for the right and centre to overlap to the point of indistinction is far stronger. History is full of such occurrences. Following the first World War and the Russian Revolution, Germany and many other

European nations were on the brink of their own revolutions. In 1919, the Communist Party of Germany, formed of those disillusioned with the governing Socialist Party of Germany, led an uprising in emulation of the Bolsheviks in Russia. Rather than encouraging conciliation with the revolutionaries, or acceding to any of their demands, the centre-left socialists engaged the services of ultra-nationalist paramilitary forces known as *Freikorps* to brutally put down the rebellion, murdering thousands, including the famous theorist and leader Rosa Luxemburg. The Freikorps would go on to form the base of the Nazi Party.

Somewhat less dramatically, we can think of the New Zealand Labour Party's behaviour when forming governments post-MMP. After the 1999 election, Labour were forced to rely on the support of both the Alliance and the Greens to form a government. Heading into 2002, the Alliance had split over the issue of sending troops to Afghanistan, and tensions with the Greens were running high over the debate around genetically modified organisms. In a memorable moment during the campaign, Prime Minister Helen Clark referred to the Greens as 'goths and anarcho-feminists'. Rather than form a similar coalition in 2002, Labour threw their erstwhile partners to the wind, doing everything in their power to marginalise the left and embrace the conservative-Christian United Future party. In 2005 Labour moved even further to the right, relying on both United Future and the xenophobic-nationalist New Zealand First party for support. Under the sixth Labour Government, headed by Jacinda Ardern, government policy appears to live or die at the whim of New Zealand First, which as recently as 2017 was seen as a proving ground for New Zealand's young alt-right.

FAR LEFT



The horseshoe is a falsehood. Not only do the far right and far left have very little in common, but the political centre has consistently aligned itself with the right rather than allow the left a taste of power. A more accurate visual metaphor for the political spectrum is

the fishhook, where the far-left is at one end of a straight line, the centre further along the line, and the far right hooking around close to the middle.

To merely assert this, even with the aid of historical examples like those given above, is to repeat the logic of the horseshoe theoreticians. Instead, we need to search for the reasons underlying the solidarity between the right and the centre.

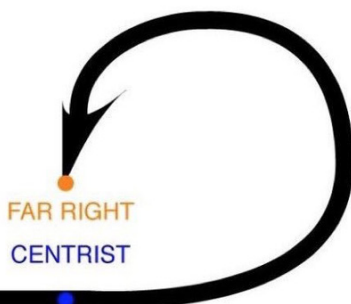
The traditional Marxist understanding of this tendency, still largely accurate, is that politics is an expression of class conflict; class war by other means. Allegiances in this war are of ultimate importance. The right's marriage to the bourgeoisie, and the socialist left's to the working class, is self evident. More of a challenge is figuring out the class allegiance of those that claim to be neutral in this conflict, generally liberal or conservative centrists. Though they will very rarely be open about it, clouding their politics with appeals to notions of cross-class unity or denunciations of the political altogether, the attachment of the centre to the status quo seals their status as tools of the ruling

Fascism doesn't occur in a vacuum. It's a strategic response from the ruling class to a crisis of capitalism. When the rate of profit begins to fall, or working class movements gain strength, fascism (propped up by the centre) is allowed to thrive in order to restore conditions of profitability. As with Capital's other means of restoring profitability, imperialism, this entails the violent imposition of a dictatorship and the crushing of organised resistance movements, while enforcing open markets and ensuring the privileges of the elite. It is no mistake that one leading theorist of fascism describes it as the application of the techniques of colonisation to the population of the imperial core. In the same way that they propped up the murderous colonial expeditions of history to save capitalism from crisis, conservatives and liberals enable fascism at home.

As well as considering the class allegiances of political actors, we also have to analyse the very nature of the state. The state as we know it emerged under very particular conditions in a very particular place, and still bears the marks of its birth. Marxists understand the state as an expression of class rule, an instrument to be wielded by whichever class controls it, but in more sophisticated accounts grant it a degree of autonomy. Thus, while recognising that the state as it currently exists is thoroughly bourgeois, there remains the possibility of genuinely progressive reforms being won through its channels, and further that the working class can eventually conquer and make use of it for our own ends. This analysis is correct, but its dry mechanical nature obscures what really lies behind the power of the state: nothing.

Or, more accurately, nothing but pure violence. Here the widely used liberal definition of the state as possessing 'the monopoly on the

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class. When a serious challenge to the power of the ruling class emerges, as in the failed German revolution of 1919, the centre will use any means at their disposal to combat this, including allegiances with the fascist right.

¹ None of this is to excuse Stalin or the Russian state for their numerous crimes. These abuses, however, were driven by an entirely different logic than that of Nazism. The Soviet state was not genocidal, and was rooted in universal values, as opposed to the particularism of Nazism (or fascism more broadly). The collapsing of the two categories doesn't just serve to demonise the Soviets, it also prevents an accurate accounting of the material and ideological causes of the atrocities they committed.

legitimate use of violence' is more instructive. The secret that we all know but refuse to speak is that at the heart of the law is not moral certitude, human rights, or even class rule, but the threat of violence.

Although the far left, the partisans of the working class, stand on our own against the right and the centre, we are still part of the fishhook that is politics within the form of the state. While the proletarian states of the 20th Century were nothing like Nazi Germany, Stalin nothing like Hitler, they were still monopolists on violence within their borders - and they were not afraid to dish it out. This applies equally to the capitalist states of the first world, whose violence against their own citizens (especially, as we've discussed, those fighting for the cause of the working class) knows no bounds. Though the horse shoe is a fiction, the hook is very real.

Not every human community (*Gemeinschaft*) has taken the form of a state. There have been nations without borders, tribes without chieftains, economies without coercion. Though the horizon of far-left politics generally ends somewhere around 'seizing state power', we shouldn't forget that the goal of communism is a society wherein the state withers away, the government of people being replaced by the administration of things. To avoid the horrors of the 20th Century, this is where we must set our sights.

This doesn't imply an idealism, or an abandonment of the state to forces that would gladly use it against us, but compels us to be more creative in imagining a future society predicated on something other than brute force. The history of Aotearoa is much longer than that of the New Zealand state, and provides us with an example of one form of life outside of the bonds of state sovereignty. Rather than *Geist*, this *Gemeinschaft* was animated by *wairua*. As Fanon said, 'let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies that draw their inspirations from it'. Rather than European remembrance, in its warped horseshoe form, or state socialism, we need to look to our own past to inform our future.

Māui, after fishing up the islands of Aotearoa (left handed, no less) discarded his hook. Perhaps we should do the same.

Ben Rosamond