

The Nature of Political Arguments

When you can classify a significant movement as unworthy of your consideration due to your intellectual or political station, it is hard to then sit down and work out solutions to shared problems.

—John Mauldin¹

What are all the newspaper columnists, television talking heads, pajama-clad bloggers, Facebook sharers, and Twitterer pundits doing? An individual will make a point that seems totally convincing to the people who agree with him or her. And yet the point leaves those who disagree unaffected. How can that be?

Raise your hand if you think those people are engaged in a constructive process of conversation and deliberation. . . .

I don't see many hands going up.

Americans appreciate the value of cooperation, and we are skilled at it. However, when it comes to politics, politically aware Americans seem to split into tribes, and those tribes use the skills of cooperation not to work with each other, but instead to mobilize against each other.

As human beings, we have the gift of language. We can use that gift to engage in deliberation, as when we sit on a jury. But we can also use that gift to try to solidify coalitions in an attempt to conquer or destroy others.

I have sat on a jury. It was a difficult case, without an obvious verdict to be given. We deliberated for three days. We treated one another with respect. We listened to one another. Many of us changed our minds during the process.

Political discussion can be similarly deliberative. However, recently the trend is in the opposite direction, toward becoming more obstinate and less tolerant of other points of view.

My goal in this book is to encourage people to take the first step toward healthier political discussion. I believe that this first step is to recognize the language of coalition mobilization so that we can resist being seduced by that language. If we recognize when people who agree with us are trying to

close our minds and shut down discussion, then we have a chance to participate in a more deliberative process.

My politically interested friends tend to sort themselves into three tribal coalitions—progressive, conservative, and libertarian. Progressives (P) assert a moral superiority over conservatives and libertarians. Conservatives (C) assert a moral superiority over libertarians and progressives. And libertarians (L) assert a moral superiority over progressives and conservatives. They cannot all be correct. And when they think in those terms, it is unlikely that they will sit down and work out solutions to shared problems.

I would like to see political discussion conducted with less tribal animosity and instead with more mutual respect and reasoned deliberation. This book can help you recognize when someone is making a political argument that is divisive and serves no constructive purpose. That person could easily be someone who agrees with you or me on the issues. It might even be you or me.

Humans evolved to send and receive signals that enable us to recognize people we can trust. One of the most powerful signals is that the person speaks our language. If someone can speak like a native, then almost always he or she is a native, and natives tend to treat each other better than they treat strangers.

In politics, I claim that progressives, conservatives, and libertarians are like tribes speaking different languages. The language that resonates with one tribe does not connect with the others. As a result, political discussions do not lead to agreement. Instead, most political commentary serves to increase polarization. The points that people make do not open the minds of people on the other side. They serve to close the minds of the people on one's own side.

Which political language do you speak? Of course, your own views are carefully nuanced, and you would never limit yourself to speaking in a limited language. So think of one of your favorite political commentators, an insightful individual with whom you generally agree. Which of the following statements would that commentator most likely make?

(P): My heroes are people who have stood up for the underprivileged. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the oppression of women, minorities, and the poor.

(C): My heroes are people who have stood up for Western values. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the assault on the moral virtues and traditions that are the foundation for our civilization.

(L): My heroes are people who have stood up for individual rights. The people I cannot stand are the people who are

indifferent to government taking away people's ability to make their own choices.

The central claim of this book is that P is the language of progressives, C is the language of conservatives, and L is the language of libertarians. If the theory is correct, then someone who chooses P tends to identify with progressives, someone who chooses C tends to identify with conservatives, and someone who chooses L tends to identify with libertarians. I call this the three-axes model of political communication.

- A progressive will communicate along the oppressor-oppressed axis, framing issues in terms of the P dichotomy.
- A conservative will communicate along the civilization-barbarism axis, framing issues in terms of the C dichotomy.
- A libertarian will communicate along the liberty-coercion axis, framing issues in terms of the L dichotomy.²

Note that the progressive is not using the phenomenon of oppression per se as a means of expressing a political viewpoint. Rather, the progressive believes that certain groups or classes of people intrinsically fall into categories of oppressor or oppressed. For example, a progressive might readily concede that Fidel Castro committed oppression, but the progressive might be much more reluctant to view Castro

as belonging to the category or class of oppressors. On the contrary, some progressives would say that Castro took the side of the oppressed against their oppressors. (If this seems confusing, it is because I am confused about why progressives have sympathized with the Cuban Revolution.)

To use another example, conservatives have complained about their treatment on college campuses, including having conservative speakers "disinvited" from college events or shouted down when they do appear. Conservatives might seek to label such treatment "oppression," but progressives would never agree to categorizing conservatives as belonging to an oppressed class.

Let me quickly add that I do *not* believe that the three-axes model serves to explain or to describe the different political ideologies. I am not trying to say that political beliefs are caused by one's choice of axis. Nor am I saying that people think exclusively in terms of their preferred axis.

What I am saying is that when we *communicate* about issues, we tend to fall back on one of the three axes. By doing so, we engage in political tribalism. We signal to members of our tribe that we agree with them, and we enhance our status in the tribe. However, even though it appears that we are arguing against people from other tribes, those people pay no heed to what we say. It is as if we are speaking a foreign language.

Recently, anthropologist John Tooby summarized coalition behavior as deeply programmed into human conduct.³

These programs enable us and induce us to form, maintain, join, support, recognize, defend, defect from, factionalize, exploit, resist, subordinate, distrust, dislike, oppose, and attack coalitions. Coalitions are sets of individuals interpreted by their members and/or by others as sharing a common abstract identity.

Moreover, to earn membership in a group you must send signals that clearly indicate that you differentially support it compared to rival groups. Hence, optimal weighting of beliefs and communications in the individual mind will make it feel good to think and express content conforming to and flattering to one's group's shared beliefs, and feel good attacking and misrepresenting rival groups.

One might also think of the three axes as axes of demonization. For example, when a progressive labels someone a racist, the progressive is putting that person on the oppressor end of the oppressor-oppressed axis. When a conservative labels someone a nihilist, the conservative is putting that person on

the barbarism end of the civilization-barbarism axis. When a libertarian labels someone a statist, the libertarian is putting that person on the coercion end of the liberty-coercion axis.

The three axes allow each tribe to assert moral superiority. The progressive asserts moral superiority by denouncing oppression and accusing others of failing to do so. The conservative asserts moral superiority by denouncing barbarism and accusing others of failing to do so. The libertarian asserts moral superiority by denouncing coercion and accusing others of failing to do so.

You will be surprised by how many political issues and news events can be framed in terms of the three axes. You might think that different events would require different frameworks of interpretation. However, it turns out that nearly any event can be interpreted from the perspective of each of the axes. If you stick to your own axis, then every event appears to confirm your point of view while making others' views seem less reasonable.

For example, consider the issue of police conduct in dealing with African Americans that has spawned the movement known as Black Lives Matter. This movement emerged after the first edition of this book was issued. Yet I found that progressives, conservatives, and libertarians tend to interpret Black Lives Matter in terms of their preferred axes.

The progressive framing of the issue emphasizes racism, among police and in society as a whole. Progressives put white police, or white society at large, in the role of oppressors, with African Americans in the role of the oppressed.

The conservative framing of the issue emphasizes the need for order. Conservatives put criminal suspects and unruly demonstrators in the role of barbarian threats and put police in the role of defenders of civilization.

The libertarian framing of the issue emphasizes the need for citizens to be free of police harassment. Libertarians put in the role of coercive agents those lawmakers who criminalize harmless activities, such as recreational drug use, as well as police who employ excessive force, while putting those who are accosted and physically harmed by police in the role of citizens who are denied their rights.

With careful consideration, one can see at least some merit in all three ways of framing the issue. Police have shot African American suspects who were unarmed and not apparently dangerous, and that legitimizes concerns about racism and the oppressor versus oppressed framing. However, some of the highly publicized cases of police shootings were more justified than protestors claimed,⁴ and some of the so-called protests have been associated with disorder, such as looting, rioting, and incitement to violence against police. These aspects seem

to fit more with civilization versus barbarism. The libertarian view also has merit, as certain laws, such as those against recreational drug use and vagrancy, are responsible for unnecessary confrontations with police, and one can make a case that U.S. police are too highly militarized in their equipment and training. There seems to be too much coercion and not enough respect for liberty.

I encourage readers to adopt slow political thinking, which means seeing an issue from a number of angles rather than along just one axis. In contrast, fast political thinking means settling on a single axis to frame an issue. Readers familiar with psychologist Daniel Kahneman's 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* will notice that I am borrowing from his terminology. I believe that once you notice the difference between fast political thinking and slow political thinking, you will prefer the latter.

You can use the three-axes model in two ways. First, you can predict how commentators of the three different political persuasions will seek to frame new events. Second, you can slow your own political thinking. You can catch yourself when you start to frame an issue in your preferred language, without considering other nuances. You can become more cautious about your own beliefs and less inclined to dismiss people with whom you disagree as malevolent. You can avoid

contributing to polarization and unproductive debates where people simply talk past one another.

Note that I apply the three-axes model to arguments made by politically aware contemporary Americans. The model is not designed to apply to other time periods or other countries.

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Applying the Three-Axes Model

Consider the following examples of phenomena for which I give three possible reactions. In each case, I use the three-axes model to frame the issues in terms I believe will resonate with conservatives, progressives, or libertarians, respectively. I am not saying that these hypothetical reactions are precisely what people with these different viewpoints would say. However, I predict that conservatives will tend to find my hypothetical conservative interpretations of the phenomena to be the most congenial. Similarly, I expect progressives and libertarians will be inclined to agree with the interpretations that are based on what I think of as their preferred axes.

1. Interpreting the Holocaust, in which Nazis murdered millions of Jews

Along the conservative civilization-barbarism axis, I would offer an explanation that sees the Holocaust as illustrating the evil that people will do when their institutions break down. The Germans were once a civilized people, and they have returned to being a civilized people. However, their defeat in World War I, the punitive Versailles treaty, and the economic traumas of hyperinflation and depression caused Germans to abandon their traditional institutions. Under the spell of the Nazis, the Germans engaged in genocide. To prevent such horrors, we need to make sure that traditional religion and government remain legitimate in the eyes of citizens. Traditional institutions represent civilization. Abandoning traditional institutions leads to barbarism.

Along the progressive oppressor-oppressed axis, I would offer an explanation that sees the Holocaust as an example of the dangers of ethnic prejudice. Genocide is an extreme example of behavior that stems from negative stereotyping of minority groups. Anti-Semitism festered in Germany for many decades, and the Nazis carried it to the extremes. The purveyors of anti-Semitism and other forms of ethnic bias are oppressors. The victims of their prejudice are the oppressed. To prevent such horrors, citizens need to be taught that we

are all human beings, in spite of superficial differences in race, gender, and religion.

Along the libertarian liberty-coercion axis, I would offer an explanation that sees the Holocaust as an example of the dangers of putting faith in an all-encompassing state. Totalitarian regimes are willing to commit mass murder to remain in power and to pursue ideological goals. Both Nazis and Communists murdered millions of citizens. To prevent such horrors, we need to preserve liberty and give less power to government.

2. Goals of tax reform

For a conservative along the civilization-barbarism axis, the main priority of tax reform should be to promote traditional values. The tax code should reward hard work, thrift, and married couples with children. Traditional families, hard work, and thrift are elements of civilization. If taxation penalizes civilized behavior and undermines civilized values, then this fosters an eventual return to barbarism.

For a progressive along the oppressor-oppressed axis, the main priority of tax reform should be to reduce inequality. The tax code should extract unwarranted wealth from the rich to provide more public services and assistance to the poor.

For a libertarian along the liberty-coercion axis, the main priority of tax reform should be to limit the size of government. Taxes ought to be minimal. The freedom to dispose of your own wealth as you wish is liberty. Taxes are obtained by coercion.

3. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Along the conservative civilization-barbarism axis, the focus is on the way that Israeli values align with American values. Conservatives emphasize the nihilism of Palestinian terrorism. To support Israel is to defend civilization. To support the Palestinians is to promote barbarism.

Along the progressive oppressor-oppressed axis, the focus is on the political and economic adversities faced by the Palestinians. Progressives see Israeli policy as responsible for much of the Palestinian suffering. To support the Palestinians is to stand up for an oppressed people. To support the current policies of Israel is to back the oppressors.

Along the libertarian liberty-coercion axis, the focus is on the corruption of Palestinian government and the militarism of Israel. For the United States, the policy that is most consistent with liberty is one of nonintervention in foreign affairs. Providing diplomatic and financial assistance to Israel requires coercive taxation at home to support a coercive government abroad.

4. A 1992 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, which found a high rejection rate for mortgage applications by African Americans⁵

From the perspective of the conservative civilization-barbarism axis, mortgage credit should go to people who work hard, save, and handle credit responsibly. Regardless of race, it is appropriate to deny mortgage credit to households unless they have shown an ability to handle credit responsibly. Rewarding virtuous behavior and denying credit to the profligate helps in the contest between civilization and barbarism.

From the perspective of the progressive oppressor-oppressed axis, the Boston Fed study shows that African Americans face discrimination in the mortgage market. It shows a need for government to protect minorities with tougher enforcement of banking regulations. Otherwise, minority families who wish to own homes will be handicapped by the oppressive practices of bankers.

From the perspective of the libertarian liberty-coercion axis, banks should be allowed to make their own lending decisions. Libertarians might suspect that the results of the study were distorted to make it appear that government involvement is warranted.

5. Abortion and unwed motherhood

Conservatives would look at abortion and unwed motherhood from the perspective of the civilization-barbarism axis and

say that those phenomena are symptoms of cultural decay. Young people are not learning sexual restraint and the value of marriage the way that they did many decades ago. We need to try to reverse this.

Progressives would look at abortion and unwed motherhood from the perspective of the oppressor-oppressed axis and say that we need to ensure that poor people are given economic opportunity, education, and access to birth control. Unwed mothers are oppressed and deserve our sympathy. Those who would heap blame on unwed mothers or try to limit the availability of abortion are oppressors.

Libertarians would look at abortion and unwed motherhood from the perspective of the liberty-coercion axis and say that government should not be trying to regulate personal behavior. Individual choices about sex, marriage, childbearing, and abortion represent liberty. Government regulation represents coercion.

6. The “war on terror”

Conservatives would say that the threat of Muslim extremism is sufficiently difficult and dangerous to justify the use of surveillance and military power. Conservatives see barbarism both in theocratic Muslim states and in the means used by Muslim extremists. They see a need for our civilization to stand up and defend itself.

Progressives would say that our response to terrorism is based too much on prejudice and that it alienates the people with whom we need to get along. The “war on terror” serves to oppress the vast majority of Muslims who are innocent. Those who exaggerate fears of Muslim terrorism are oppressors.

Libertarians are opposed to government surveillance and targeted killing. Libertarians are skeptical whenever government declares a “war,” because this can provide a pretext for curtailing liberty. The “war on terror” involves an unjustified expansion of government coercion.

7. A baker, citing his or her religious views, who refuses to bake a wedding cake for a gay marriage

Conservatives would say that religion is important for civilization. They would argue that the baker’s freedom to exercise his or her religion should be protected.

Progressives would view gays as a historically oppressed class. The gay couple’s ability to obtain a wedding cake is limited by prejudice. Government must combat this prejudice and ensure that bakers do not refuse to sell wedding cakes to gay couples.

Libertarians would say that government should not become involved in either marriage decisions or cake-baking decisions.⁶ People should have a choice in whom they marry.

Cake bakers should not be coerced into baking cakes that they do not wish to bake.

8. Soda taxes

From a conservative point of view, civilized people need to control obesity through self-restraint. It is not the soda itself that is barbaric; it is the people who consume too many calories from all sources.

From a progressive point of view, corporations that market sugary sodas can be thought of as oppressors, and people who become obese in part from drinking soda can be thought of as oppressed. Progressives might view soda taxes as a blow against the oppressors and a benefit to the oppressed.

From a libertarian point of view, it is not the government's job to police calorie intake. Soda taxes represent coercion.

Concerning soda taxes, columnist Catherine Rampell wrote as follows:

Why not just target the output, rather than some random subset of inputs? We could tax obesity if we wanted to. Or if we want to seem less punitive, we could award tax credits to obese people who lose weight. A tax directly pegged to reduced obesity would certainly be a much more efficient way to achieve the stated policy goal of reducing obesity.⁷

Her droll suggestion is what showed me that the three-axes model applies to this example. Taxing obesity itself would be more in line with the conservative axis. Taxing only soda appeals more to the progressive axis. Neither approach would appeal to the libertarian axis.

In review

These examples illustrate that each of the three languages can be used to frame a wide variety of issues. As a result, you are likely to observe conservatives making arguments and approving of arguments along the civilization versus barbarism axis, and similarly for progressives and libertarians along their respective axes.

As you were reading the examples in this chapter, you might have seen them as simplistic. If so, that is a good sign. It indicates that you are not so steeped in any one viewpoint that you cannot listen to other points of view. Your views are more nuanced than the knee-jerk responses based on the three-axes model. You employed slow political thinking rather than slipping into fast political thinking.

I believe that the three languages of politics are used as part of fast political thinking. The main prescriptive theme of this book is that you should hesitate when you find yourself inclined to frame an issue in terms of your preferred

political language. Instead, try to switch over to slow political thinking.

Before proceeding, let me reiterate some key points.

1. I propose that the three dominant moral frames (oppressor-oppressed, civilization-barbarism, and liberty-coercion) are useful in a descriptive sense. I call this the three-axes model. Those moral frames do not necessarily describe how people arrive at their opinions. However, the frames do predict the language that people are likely to use in political communications.

2. I am *not* saying that the ideologies of progressivism, conservatism, and libertarianism can be boiled down to just these three moral frames. Each of those ideological tendencies is in fact complex and multifaceted.

3. Turning from the descriptive to the prescriptive, I believe that linguistic differences and negative stereotypes are dangerous. Politically aware Americans use those frames to assert moral superiority. They take it for granted that once an issue has been framed in their preferred way, it is settled. I believe that each of us can reason more constructively and deliberate more effectively across political tribes if we recognize that we tend to be overly attuned to our preferred language. We can reduce

our level of political anger by better understanding the other languages. While listening to another language, you can still carry the belief that you are right, and you do not need to split differences or compromise. However, you should be less inclined to demonize people who speak different political languages.

For politically engaged Americans today, ideology has become a powerful marker of identity. It is useful to think of progressives, conservatives, and libertarians as rivalrous, hostile tribes. As such, they have developed linguistic differences and negative stereotypes of one another, which the three-axes model can help to articulate. In a tribe, political language is used to assert the moral superiority of one's tribe. Communicating using the preferred axis of the tribe is good for reassuring others of one's loyalty to the tribe, for lifting a person's status in the tribe by pleasing those who agree with him or her, and for whipping up hostility against other tribes. What political language is not good for is persuading people outside one's tribe or improving relations with them.