

Matt Yglesias

Apr 6th, 2010 at 2:32 pm

Political Conflict Isn't About Free Markets



I've been waiting for about a week for an example to make this point, but couldn't think of one, and along rides [Tim Lee to the rescue](#):

To see why [right-of-center hostility to unlicensed spectrum] is wrong, it's worth thinking about the debate over carbon emissions. In a sense, this is also a debate over scarcity. **One side favors treating the atmosphere's ability to absorb carbon as a commons (Jerry [Brito] would probably call it an ["open access"](#) regime, but I use the "common" terminology), allowing anyone to emit carbon dioxide without legal restrictions. The other side believes that this will lead to a tragedy of the commons, and so they favor a property-rights-oriented approach. The weird thing is that the left and right in the carbon debate are on the opposite sides from the positions they occupy in the spectrum debate. In the spectrum debate, a commons is considered a "left-wing" position, while property rights are considered "right-wing."** In contrast, in the carbon debate you find right-wingers advocating a "carbon commons" while left-wingers advocate a property-like regime called cap and trade.

I think this is very insightful. Where it goes wrong, though, is in concluding that there's something "weird" about this inversion. I think if you look at political conflict you'll see that attitudes toward property rights are really all over the map. I like the idea of allowing people to build more densely, which would be a form of strengthening property rights, whereas Cato's Randal O'Toole [doesn't like this idea at all](#). The main difference between left and right with regard to property rights is simply that the right is invested in a lot of rhetoric about markets and

property rights and the left is invested in different historical and rhetorical tropes.

To borrow an idea from Robin Hanson, I think it's useful to think about political conflict in terms of valorized figures. On the right, you see a lot of valorization of businessmen. On the left, you see a lot of valorization of pushy activists who want to do something businessmen don't like. Formally, the right is committed to ideas about free markets and the left is committed to ideas about economic equality. But in practice, political conflict much more commonly breaks down around "some stuff some businessmen want to do" vs "some stuff businessmen hate" rather than anything about markets or property rights per se. Consequently, on the left people sometimes fall into the trap of being patsies for rent-seeking mom & pop operators when poor people would benefit more from [competition from a corporate behemoth](#).

Or iff you look at the energy sector, you'll see that businessmen want to push property rights for the stuff that's in the ground (coal, oil, whatever) and a commons model for the stuff (particulates, CO2) that's in the air. You can call that "inconsistent" if you like, but obviously it's perfectly consistent with what coal and oil executives want! And those industries are the most loyal supporters of "right" politics around.

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27 Responses to "Political Conflict Isn't About Free Markets"

1. *Anon* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:40 pm](#)

I think this is kind of right...but really, at this point what separates left and right in the US at the federal level is that left-wingers are mostly reality-based and right-wingers are not.

At the local level, the issues are much more NIMBYism which cuts across the political spectrum.

But it really seems to me that the right wing has gone whackadoodle at the federal level. We've had 30 years of stagnant middle class wages, we're in the middle of the worst recession we've seen since the 1930's and the world financial markets just nearly collapsed a year and a half ago. And yet they're staunchly opposed to regulatory reform, and even argue that the problems we have now were caused by TOO MUCH regulation and taxes!

They have a very simple "free market" story, and they want to use it for everything. But the world doesn't work that way. Yet they still don't care—they want the world to work that way, so they legislate as though it does. Incredibly destructive.

2. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:40 pm](#)

“Left” and “right” refer to the relationship of the politicians/activists/thinkers to established systems of power. Rightists work to defend and consolidate existing power relationships, while leftists work to change, soften, or eliminate them.

3. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:44 pm](#)

BTW, Ranall Toole will tell you that he doesn't oppose allowing people to build in a more dense, pedestrian-oriented manner – oh, heavens no! – it's just that, throughout his entire career as a critic of government restrictions, he has always had much, much more important things to do than turn his attention to the most far-reaching, most intrusive, most distorting regulatory code in our society.

Much, much more important things. For instance, he has to say mean things about those people who *do* criticize the most far-reaching, most intrusive, most distorting regulatory code in our society.

4. *JM* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:44 pm](#)

The reason it's an “inversion” is because the right refuses to price in negative externalities and the left insists on it. And the reason for this, in turn, is because the right had dug in for the longest time in denying the existence of the scarcities the author mentions.

The reason the right is for a free for all is because they've long been in denial of the problem. The reason the left is open to a property rights approach is because they're trying to find a compromise so we can address the problem now.

The author was either being cute or dense.

5. *Patrick* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:54 pm](#)

From a traditional liberal-conservative definition this makes sense. In both cases, conservatives are defending the status quo and liberals are promoting change.

If we ever get a tradable permits bill passed you can pretty much guarantee that a few years later conservatives will be defending the permits as if they're god-given and inalienable. I imagine that this complaining will probably crescendo each time the EPA tries to lower the cap.

6. *Morgan Warstler* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:56 pm](#)

Where you really see it break down is the left allowing trash collectors to extract **\$110K per year salaries** from the indigent poor who could have those tax funds spent on their interests instead.

The entire approach to government should be about productive through-put of tax dollars, how efficiently the government runs.

More than ANYTHING else the liberals could do, this would drive the Progressive agenda.

7. *Doug Says:*

[April 6th, 2010 at 2:58 pm](#)

Where it is not insightful is in treating the two “commons” are essentially similar. They are not. Principally physics and the FCC already constrain the ability to use the spectrum. So “open access” to this commons means something much less and different than “open access” to put unlimited amounts of carbon into the air.

Aside from that, the cross commons issue is not simplistically whether it is “open access” or not, but how private gain interrelates with the commons. The left position is that common resources should not be commandeered for predominantly private gain. This is consistent for wavelength and carbon. As is the right’s position that common resources are a way to defray costs and enhance private gain but otherwise should be controlled by private enterprise for profit and to make them better available.

There is a philosophical consistency for both sides that applies to a variety of common resources.

8. *Paulie Carbone Says:*

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:01 pm](#)

To borrow an idea from Robin Hanson, I think it’s useful to think about political conflict in terms of valorized figures. On the right, you see a lot of valorization of businessmen. On the left, you see a lot of valorization of pushy activists who want to do something businessmen don’t like.

OK, Matt’s caught on to the “valorize” meme and is writing with tongue firmly in cheek. The underlying point is also insightful and correct, so this post is win.

9. *Urgs Says:*

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:10 pm](#)

The real conclusion is more that

- the US political spectrum is just that right wing that there is no place for real left position
- The core conflict is about class, not markets/government solutions.

More broadly, the other conclusion is that people and countries are selfish. No one in the rich western world, including countries with a political spectrum far left of the US is willing to deal with global environmental externalities in a fair way towards poor countries.

Cap and trade at least the forms the were seriously debated just like do nothing are right wing solutions that favour the rich on a global level. In theory cap and trade could be constructed fair, but even fair cap and trade would still include some unnecessary mite to the finance industry – a very rich fraction.

10. *Crissa Says:*

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:21 pm](#)

The right wing wants a commons approach to anything that has to be paid for or is limiting, and a property approach to anything that has value. Like the coal example: They want to take all the coal as their own property, and then leave the filth for the commons. It’s all about cheapness.

Cap and trade is only a left-wing supported idea because it was a compromise. The right wing doesn’t

want anything right now. That's hardly a switch of positions.

And why do we have someone complaining about trash collector's salaries? Nothing is stopping them from applying for a job there. Sheesh. It's okay to pay CEOs thousands of times the median wage of their workers, but it's not okay for the average pay of a public service to be similar? WTF?

11. *WoofWoof* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:22 pm](#)

Another way to think about this is that the commons vs. property rights debate is very similar to the debate about "Federalism". One side pretends to care very much about the principle, when in fact the the presumed ends that really matter. Whenever we have liberal things at the state level, conservative support for federalism disappears (witness DOMA).

12. *Pete* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:30 pm](#)

The Jeffersonian ideal of a country of yeoman farmers and ma and pa stores is basically conservative. Also, the "New Economy" was overhyped.

21st Century America can't be like that and it's unrealistic to think so.

The rightwing doesn't care about externalities, b/c they're old fashioned and in the old days people didn't care about externalities.

My view is that the rightwing is having fits and has become very opportunistic and dishonest and inconsistent, b/c America is transforming into a multicultural society.

We have a black President. Women are better off (Pelosi!) as are gays. Etc. Bush and Rove played TO the hispanic community. Latinos put Obama over the top.

13. *Pete* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:33 pm](#)

The issue of scarcity does play havoc with politics.

The leftist ideal would be a communist society of unlimited plenty and nothing to do but explore the stars, a la Jean-Luc Picard's Federation of Planets.

The rightwing ideal is 1950s American small town life where everyone knew their place and white men ruled.

14. *kafka* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 3:50 pm](#)

A market based approach would use the price system to solve the problem – a carbon tax. Neither party favors this.

15. *Valorization, Demonization, and Political Confusion « The Regimen* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 4:01 pm](#)

[...] Demonization, and Political Confusion Tim Lee and Matthew Yglesias note that there is actually something very strange about the fight over carbon pricing. The left, [...]

16. *AWC* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 4:37 pm](#)

Terrific post, Matt.

17. *eb* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 5:10 pm](#)

Once upon a time, the “left” consisted of those who (broadly) thought the state should own the means of production, while the “right” was more-or-less theologically capitalistic.

Now that liberals comprise the left – how’d that happen, anyway, and who benefits? – the left consists almost exclusively of capitalists who, having a conscience, prefer to mitigate some of the harsher aspects of capitalism, and, having a brain, prefer to do through government those things that need to be done and are more efficiently done collectively.

The right, meanwhile, has remained theologically capitalist. But the more successful of them, having a brain with no conscience, prefer to mitigate some of the harsher aspects of capitalism for themselves, although not for others. So they’re totally cool with collective action, as long as it benefits them.

18. *Martin* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 6:00 pm](#)

I don’t see what this is about. The concept of a “commons” is well defined in economics and completely independent of left-wing or right-wing political convictions. The problem of the commons is equally independent of political persuasion. In fact Tim Lee acknowledges this. The main difference is between people who think the atmosphere is “over-exploited” and those who think there is no problem of the commons. And who exactly favours a “property rights approach” to atmospheric pollution?

19. *Fritz* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 6:32 pm](#)

It’s all about money. By restricting access to bandwidth, it creates barriers to entry into the communications business and enforces bandwidth scarcity, which allows for increased pricing power for those with licenses. On the other hand, cleaning up CO2 is expensive, which reduces profits without any offsetting revenue opportunities for producers. In both cases, the right is on the side of increasing private profits at the expense of the public good.

20. *Paula Product* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 6:40 pm](#)

Matt – Your last paragraph sounds like a rather generous way of expressing the notion that the right prefers to internalize the benefits (in the energy: coal, oil) and externalize the costs (CO2 emissions, pollution). I don’t actually mean that to sound like a liberal’s snotty oversimplification of conservative views. And basically, that’s what everyone wants when they’re being selfish — what’s mine is mine, but

when I get into a jam, I'd like others to help me out.

21. *bmorejoe* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 7:08 pm](#)

It seems to me that this pretty much reduces to the “how can I make a buck” crowd and the “life is about more than making a buck” crowd. Coal owners want to socialize costs and privatize profits. People like me want to live a life filled with people and relationship and somewhat meaningful work. There is an inescapable conflict here. Not sure there is much point in making nice about it. Not sure there is any point in taking the rhetoric seriously. Just a distraction so you don't notice the fingers in your wallet.

22. *Robert Waldmann* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 8:00 pm](#)

Howsabout u try writing in English ? Valorized is not an English word. Valued is the correct English translation of whatever French word is miss translated “valorized” (the Italian word is valorizzato).

Valorizzato is a terrible word. It has three English translations “praised,” “valued,” and “improved,” that is the verb does not distinguish between making something better, saying it is good and convincing people that it is good. I don't have links to prove these claims (besides the linked pages would be in Italian) but, I assure you, after 20 years in Italy I know that there is authentic confusion of praising and improving.

“Valorized” is like “social construction of truth.” In English it is obvious nonsense. In other languages it is not obvious nonsense. The correct translation from the German is “social construction of beliefs.” Oh that's all Mannheim meant. Why it is obvious that beliefs are socially constructed. I mean didn't your momma ever explain that to you ? But wait are you suggesting that if a group of people convince each other of something then they have created a new truth, their truth ? If one mistranslated truth to “verita” this would be a platitude in Italian (the correct translation is sometimes verita and sometimes realta).

The horrible thing is that, since mistranslated French and German sounds strange in English, silly people think that French Clichés and German vatevver dey call dem are original insights.

The problem is much worse going from English to Italian.

Who the hell convinced you to value “valorize” (note that I will not write who convinced you to valorize “valorize” except oops I just did).

23. *Robert Waldmann* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 8:17 pm](#)

OK I was hasty. The correct English translation of “valorizzato” is not just valued but also “esteemed”, “respected” and “admired.” Or sometimes it is “praised.” The problem with the word valorized, as you use it, is that you assert that all esteem is due to praise — that beliefs are not influenced by evidence.

In this case, you use the word because you believe that conservatives have incoherent beliefs, because they are brainwashed by hacks who sold out to big business. I am claiming ESP, but come on, everyone here knows I'm right.

You also are being fair and balanced and note similar confusion on the left with lefties falling for little

business's propaganda. The post is excellent, but using the word valorize to assume that propaganda is all that matters is cheating. You can say that people sincerely esteem something because it is praised by hacks. I think you can make a case. In fact I believe that claim. However saying something is valorized because it has been valorized is cheating. It is attempting to prove a valid assertion using an equivocation.

In relatively primitive languages, such as Italian, this equivocation is natural as the same word is genuinely used for two different things (see also "force" and "strength"). There is no reason to reduce English to Italian (or I assume French). It is a rich language and we shouldn't throw those riches away.

24. *JonF* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 8:24 pm](#)

Re: In relatively primitive languages, such as Italian

What in the world are you talking about? In what sense is Italian (a lineal descendent of Latin, and the bearer of a rich literature of its own!) primitive?

25. *Jeffrey Davis* Says:

[April 6th, 2010 at 10:07 pm](#)

Yglesias has been "Alorized".

26. *Adirondacker12800* Says:

[April 7th, 2010 at 3:40 am](#)

Where you really see it break down is the left allowing trash collectors to extract \$110K per year salaries

Do the math Morgan. If the contract is accepted they will be making 26.29 an hour. 40 hour week for 52 weeks comes out to just under 55K a year.

27. [Overcoming Bias : Left-Right Isn't About Markets](#) Says:

[April 7th, 2010 at 9:01 am](#)

[...] Matt Yglesias: [...]

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