

To appear in French in February 2021

on the liberal blog *Liber-Thé*

An Interview with Liber-Thé:

Where Are the Classical Liberals Along the Spectrum?

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February 9, 2021

Liber-Thé: We sometimes associate liberalism and conservatism, what are the differences?

Deirdre: The “we” who associate the two are being misled by the one-dimensional “spectrum” left and right, deriving of course from the seating of the French Assembly. The spectrum made sense when the leading question was whether or not we should support the liberal values of the Revolution – whether we loved liberty, equality, and fraternity or king, country, and church. But now we are all children of 1789, whether liberals floating above the spectrum, or socialists or conservatives or middle of the road sitting comfortably on it. People want simplicity, and therefore want to locate *everybody* somewhere along the old spectrum. They are puzzled when the rare French liberal says that she favors unregulated economic permissions (right) but also unregulated social permissions (left). If the puzzled people are leftists they see the economic permissions, which they hate, and therefore place the liberal on the right. If they are rightists they see the social permissions, which they hate, and therefore place the liberal on the left. They do not pause to listen to her when she replies, “My dears, understand that liberty is liberty is liberty. I favor a society of non-slaves, whether they be slaves to husbands or slaves to the state. I favor the regime of liberated *permissions*, or the sort that the armies of the Revolution imposed on German and Italian conquests, outlawing for example the guilds that restricted permissions to work.”

Liber-Thé: How are socialists and conservatives similar?

Deirdre: Both are statist, the opposite of the liberal. Both favor using the state’s monopoly of coercion to interfere with permissions. The socialist favors interfering with your liberty to buy and sell where you wish. She wants trade unions, protections, strikes, the struggle against Capital. The conservative also favors interfering with your liberty to buy and sell where you wish. He wants prohibitions, church control of the schools, and the struggle against Aliens.

Liber-Thé: Politically, libertarians often work side by side with conservatives (against socialism for example), why?

Deirdre: Because we liberals share enemies with our friends on the right and on the left. We share with the right a distaste for the “opium of the intellectuals,” Marxism and its coercive cousins. We share with the left a distaste, too, for anti-Dreyfusardism and its own coercive cousins. Unlike our friends and enemies living along the spectrum, we detest the coercions of the spectrum. We are not anarchists, and agree that at the outset of an invasion or a forest fire or a plague some quick coercion may be efficacious, and no great intrusion on liberty. But left and right and middle acquire the habit of coercion, reconstructing a new hierarchy like the hierarchy of the ancient regime, which liberalism first overturned. The liberal says: “Agreement, trade, conversation, sweet talk, yes. Coercion, protection, dogma, shouting, no.”