

Classifying & Analyzing Politico-Economic Systems

by David F. Nolan

Words, contrary to what is often asserted, do not have intrinsic meanings. Rather, they are simply symbols—referents, if you prefer—and their meanings are determined solely by mutual agreement among the people who use them.

If everyone were to agree to call the four-legged animal that goes “woof, woof” a *snake*, then that animal would be a “snake”. Of course, this wouldn’t alter any of the animal’s characteristics, but the referent symbol would nonetheless have changed. And, if you wanted to talk to someone about that animal, you’d have to refer to it as a “snake” if you wanted to communicate effectively.

Furthermore, if everyone in the world agreed tomorrow to start calling that particular animal a “snake”, there would be relatively few problems. However—and this is the key point—if only *some* people started calling it a “snake”, while others continued calling it a “dog”, and yet others called it a “pig”, the result would be chaos. Unless everyone uses the *same* referents (whatever they may be), rational discourse is impossible.

All this may seem rather trivial—but there is reason to point it out. The reason is that referent-confusion is one of the major barriers facing the libertarian movement today. We are unable to communicate effectively with “outsiders”—and, to some extent, even within our own ranks—because of a lack of commonly-accepted referents. One person will mean one thing when he uses a word; to others, that word will mean something entirely different. Conversely, two people may use two *different* words to express the *same* concept. This lack of uniformity in word-usage is particularly prevalent in discussions of politico-

economic philosophies and systems; one man’s “anarchy” is another man’s “autarchy”; one man’s “left” may be another man’s “right”. And as long as this situation prevails, we cannot hope to effectively spread our views.

For this reason, I would like to briefly discuss some of the factors contributing to this situation and propose a system which we can use to eliminate some of our referent-confusion problems. I will then explore some of the analytical implications of the proposed system, and will also discuss some current political and social trends in light of these implications. The results, I hope, will be to stimulate and facilitate thinking on the part of **Individualist** readers, and to open up new channels of communication both inside and outside the libertarian movement.

Of all the words in politico-economic terminology, the ones whose meanings are probably *least* uniformly accepted are “left” and “right”. Originally, these two words referred to the seating arrangement in some of the European parliaments. Traditionally, representatives favoring a “liberal” or “radical” approach to government have sat on the left side of the assembly, while those favoring a “conservative” or “status quo” arrangement have sat on the right.

Thus, the words “left” and “right” have come to mean, respectively, “liberal” and “conservative.” Unfortunately, these terms have meaning only in some sort of context; depending on what the status quo is, they can mean widely varying things. And, even within a given context, these meanings may change with time. (The Nazi—or National Socialist—movement in Germany was referred to as a “leftist” movement in the

1930's; today, the Nazis are usually referred to as "rightists".)

To further complicate matters, the introduction of such terms as "radical right" and "conservative Communist" have clouded the meaning of these terms to the point where they are practically useless for the purpose of communication (although they are now admirably suited to the purposes of confusing people and stirring up crowds).

This confusion is not entirely accidental; those whose interests are served by the destruction of clear thinking have done their best to hasten the obfuscation of all referents. Their task has been simplified, however, by the fact that the meanings of the terms "left" and "right" have never really been defined in any clear and consistent manner (i.e., in relation to any absolutes), but rather have always been defined in a relativist fashion.

As far as present usage of these terms is concerned, the average American today would probably define them in terms of the contemporary philosophies of "liberalism" and "conservatism". Thus, he would identify the Kennedys and Senator Eugene McCarthy as "leftists", while he would classify such people as Senators Goldwater and Thurmond as "rightists".

Similarly, he would class the ADA as "leftist" and the John Birch Society as "rightist". If asked to explain these labels, he would probably say that "leftists" tend to favor more government and "rightists" less government, and that "leftists" would tend to be more concerned with "social" issues and "civil rights", while "rightists" would tend to be more concerned with **economic** freedom.

If you then asked our average American why Communism is generally considered "left-wing", while Naziism is considered "right-wing", even though both are forms of totalitarianism, he would probably fall back on the "circle" approach. According to this theory, the political spectrum is not a straight line, but a circle. "Democracy" is placed at the top with Communism and Naziism near the bottom, Communism being just to the left of the lowest point, and Naziism just to the right.

This arrangement, although in some respects more rational than a straight-line diagram, is still highly unsatisfactory, for several reasons. First, and most important, it is still a **relativist** diagram; the various positions on the circle are defined only in relation to one another, not by any objective criterion. Second, it brings one to the embarrassing conclusion that "democracy" (undefined) is simply a halfway-house between two forms of totalitarianism. And third, it does not allow for the positioning of any system further removed from totalitarianism than "democracy".

So much of the idiosyncracies and inadequacies of present "left-right" classification systems. Having shown that they are inadequate, what can we do to improve upon them?

The first step — and one which has been taken by a number of people already — is to start by setting up two extremes, and drawing a line connecting them. After considering **all possible** politico-economic systems, we can say that the two extremes are, respectively, a condition of **no government (anarchy)** and a condition of **absolute government**; this latter condition we can call **omnarchy** (my apologies to those who are offended by the mixing of Latin and Greek roots). Using these two extremes as our end-points, we can set up a "spectrum" as shown in figure 1.

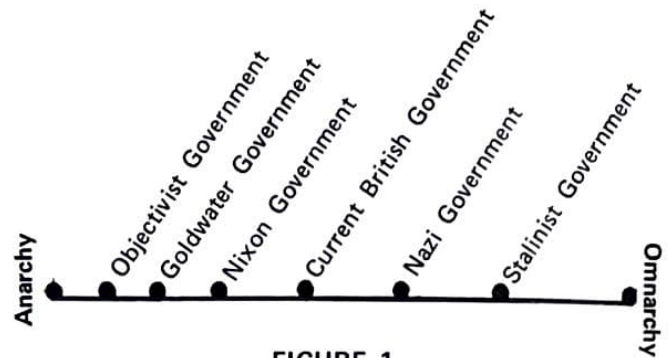


FIGURE 1

But, while such a spectrum is consistent, and therefore meaningful, it still has one serious shortcoming. And this is that it does not provide for distinction between differences in **orientation** between systems having the same **degree** of government. However, by **combining** this "degree" axis with one calibrated in terms of orientation, we can create a two-dimensional classification system which enables us to perform a number of quite revealing analyses.

In constructing our two-dimensional classification system, the first step is to take the "degree" axis (figure 1) and rotate it 90° clockwise. The result is a vertical line. Having done this we can then superimpose a second axis, running left-to-right. We then have the diagram shown in figure 2.

The vertical axis in this figure has already been defined; we will now define the horizontal axis. For the moment, let us simply say that the left side will correspond to systems which allow more social freedom than economic freedom, while the right side corresponds to systems where economic freedoms are less restricted than social freedoms.

To illustrate, let us list two groups of activities. In the first group, we will include dressing in a bizarre fashion, smoking marijuana, engaging freely in all kinds of sexual conduct, and publishing tracts critical of the government. In the second group, we will include charging whatever one can get for one's own productivity, selling one's services only to one's own ethnic group, making one's own coins, and joining or not joining a labor union according to one's own preference.

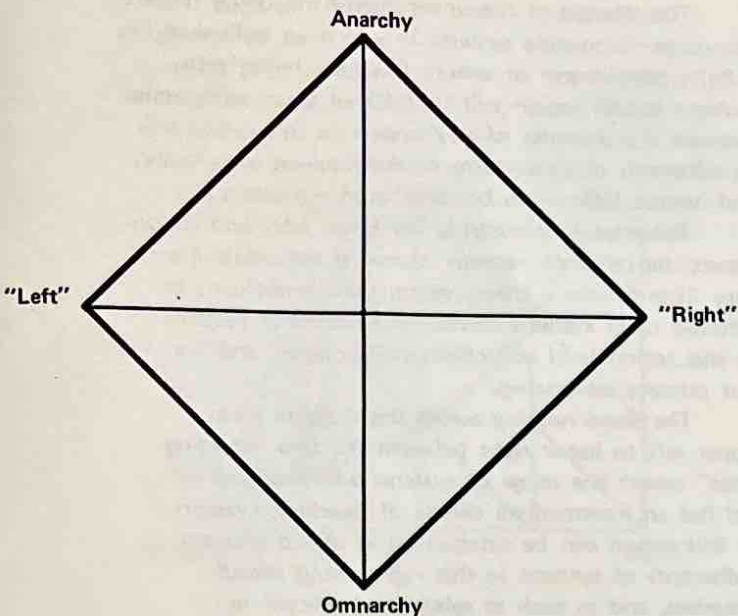


FIGURE 3

A government which would be more likely to allow people to engage in activities of the type in the first group than those of the second group we shall define as a "leftist" government; one which would be more likely to allow activities of the type listed in group two than those listed in group one will be defined as a "rightist" government.

Having so defined our horizontal axis, let us return to our diagram. By joining the ends of the two axes, we can form a diamond-shaped figure, as shown in figure 3.

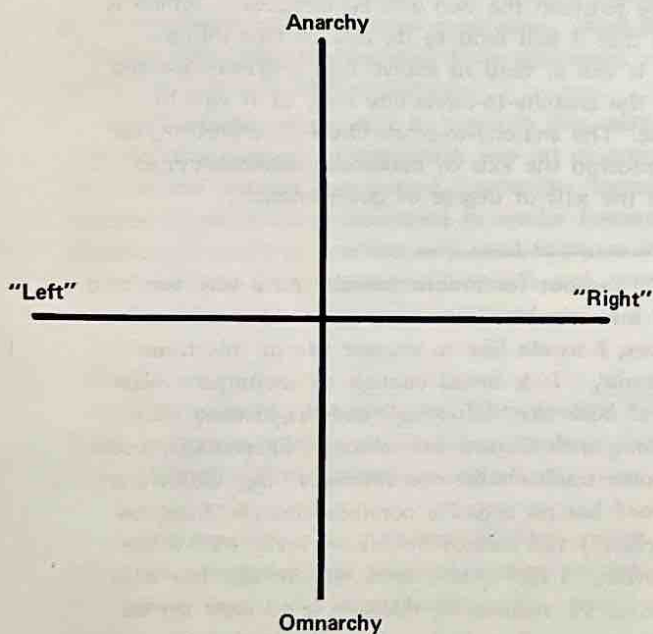


FIGURE 2

Having done this, we can now define the universe of all possible politico-economic systems as being represented by the area inside the diamond . . . and we can begin to look at various different systems to see how they relate to one another.

In the area comprising the upper corner of the diamond, we have systems where there is very little government — and hence very little difference between the "leftist" and "rightist" systems. For instance, a government which allowed the people under its rule to do everything but make and circulate their own coins would be just below the point, and slightly to the left of the center-line. A government which allowed the people to do everything but smoke marijuana would be just below the point and slightly to the right.

Conversely, a government which curtailed all economic freedoms and almost all social freedoms would be positioned very near the bottom, and to the left, while a government which regulated social conduct very strictly and economic activities only slightly less strictly would be near the bottom and to the right. A government which allowed a great deal of social freedom and very little economic freedom would be in the left-hand corner; one which allowed a great deal of economic freedom and very little social freedom would be in the right-hand corner.

Now, before going any further, it is worth making two points. First, it is important to note that the **most important** aspect of a system's position within the diamond is its **altitude**, not its "latitude" (left-right position). For it is the **total** amount of freedom under a system that is most significant in evaluating that system, not the system's "leftness" or "rightness" (as defined here, "left" and "right" have no meaning whatsoever insofar as the total amount of government is concerned).

In order to make this point easier to bear in mind, let us re-orient our diagram, by rotating it another 45° clockwise. Having done this, we can then put scales on the horizontal and vertical edges, to indicate the degrees of economic and social freedom under various systems, and can also indicate on a diagonal scale the **total** amount of freedom (this latter figure will be one half of the sum of the percentages of economic and social freedom). This is illustrated in figure 4.

The second point worth noting is that since economic freedom and social freedom tend to go hand-in-hand, a system located in either the extreme upper left-hand corner or the extreme lower right-hand corner of our rotated diagram is very unlikely.

Bearing in mind these two points, let us now proceed to an analysis of the current political picture in America, and an attempt at predicting future developments. As a first step in this process, let us define some **regions** in our diagrammatic representation of the universe of possible politico-economic systems.

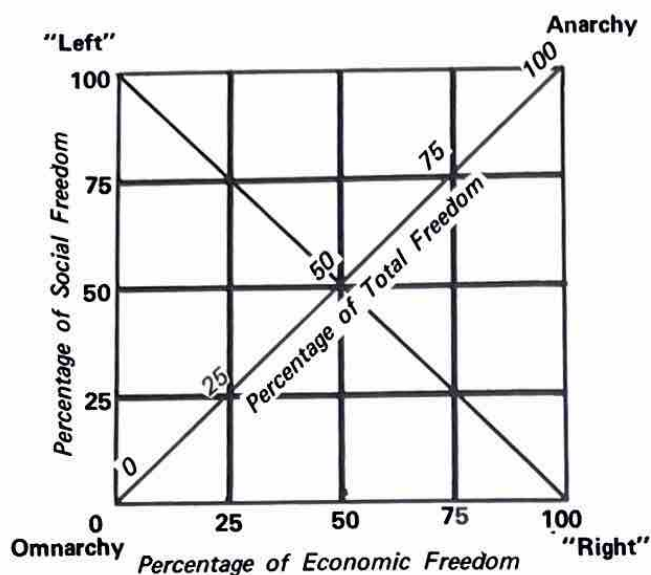


FIGURE 4

On the diagram we have evolved, let us draw two lines parallel to the left-right axis (now oriented diagonally from upper left corner to lower right corner). One line will be located approximately one-fourth of the way from the left-right axis to the anarchic pole (upper right-hand corner), and one will be located a corresponding distance on the other side of the left-right axis. These two lines divide our diagram into three regions of approximately equal area, as shown in figure 5.

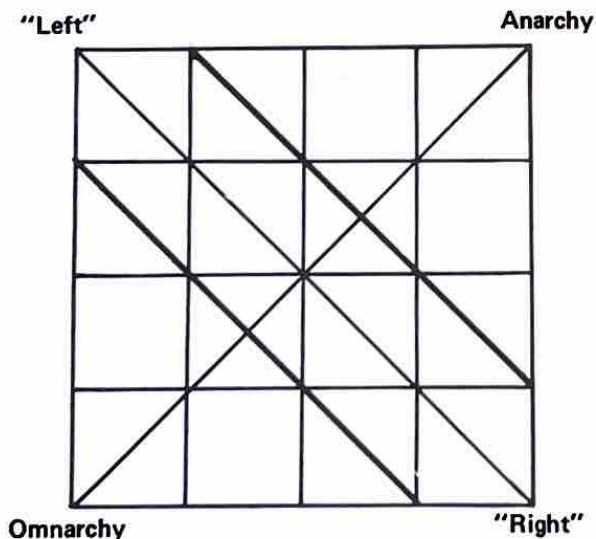


FIGURE 5'

The triangle in the upper right-hand corner covers the range of possible systems in which an individual has a fairly high degree of overall freedom; henceforth, systems in this region will be referred to as **autonomist systems**.^{*} Advocates of any system in this region will be adherents of some form of **individualist** philosophy, and, within limits, can be considered our allies.

The triangle occupying the lower left-hand region covers the range of systems where an individual has very little freedom; these systems will henceforth be referred to as **statist** systems. Advocates of systems in this region hold **collectivist** philosophies, and are our primary adversaries.

The band running across the diagram from upper left to lower right between the two "dividing lines" covers the range of systems where an individual has an intermediate degree of freedom; systems in this region can be categorized as mixed systems. Adherents of systems in this region hold **mixed premises**, and as such as relatively impotent in intellectually defending their positions when challenged by advocates of systems located in either of the two triangular regions. And it is within this central region that most political figures in the United States today are located.

Before actually placing any points on the diagram, however, there is one more fact that should be noted. And this is that although it is **theoretically possible** for a system to be located at any point in the diagram, some locations are more probable than others. Specifically, historical evidence has shown that practically all real-world systems which have been able to exist for any length of time have been located in a football-shaped region lying along the anarchy-to-omnarchy axis, as shown in figure 6.

The reason for this phenomenon is that (as noted earlier) economic freedom and social freedom tend to go hand-in-hand. A system where there is great inconsistency between the two will be unstable — which is to say that it will tend to do one of two things. Either it will a) tend to evolve into a system located nearer the anarchy-to-omnarchy axis, or it will b) collapse. The anarchy-to-omnarchy axis, therefore, can be considered the axis of **maximum consistency**, as well as the axis of **degree** of government.

^{*}Time out for a commercial. As a way out of the interminable hassle over what we should call ourselves, I would like to suggest use of this term, autonomist. It is broad enough to encompass anarchists of both the "left-wing" and "right-wing" varieties, along with Objectivists, classical libertarians, and even some traditionalist conservatives (e.g., Goldwater). The word has no negative connotations (as does, say, "autarchist") and cannot be easily corrupted by the collectivists. I feel it is a term we can all "live with", and I urge all readers of this article to look up the word "autonomy" in Webster's unabridged dictionary. I think you'll find little to quarrel with.

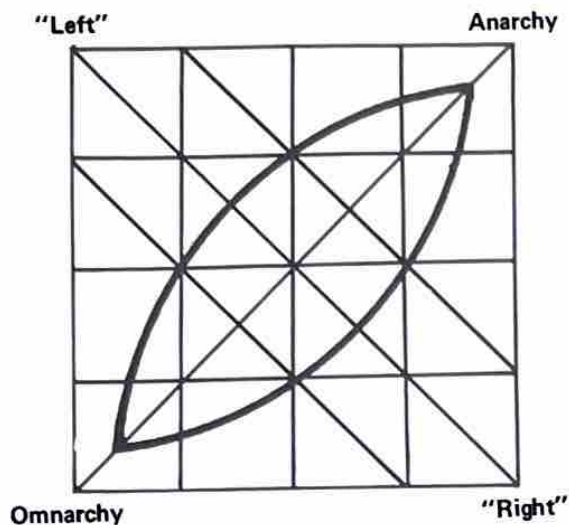


FIGURE 6

Advocates of systems located on or near this axis will tend to be more "rational", "scientific", and internally consistent in their arguments than advocates of systems located a great distance from the axis.** The distance "up" or "down" this axis (i.e., the proximity to the anarchic or omnarchic pole, respectively) of the system they advocate will of course depend on their basic philosophical premises, and on their concept of man's nature — but any system located on or near the axis will be more consistent (although not necessarily more correct) in its philosophical basis than one located further away.

This fact, taken in combination with the fact that systems near the anarchic and omnarchic poles are more consistent than those in the middle, leads to an interesting and important conclusion. And this is that in the long run, the only truly consistent systems are anarchy and omnarchy.***

Perhaps the easiest way to visualize this relationship is to imagine a square surface with one set of opposite corners bent upward into curved, funnel-like "petals", and the other set bent downward in similar fashion. A particle placed on this surface will tend to move towards the axis joining the downward "funnels", and, more specifically, toward the "funnels" themselves.

**The further one gets from the axis, the more likely one is to resort to mysticism, conspiracy theories, etc. to defend one's position.

***Rand comes to a similar conclusion in a different way; she simply notes that it is impossible for a mixed-system advocate to rationally oppose a statist-system advocate.

And now that the diagram has been fully explained, let us chart some points on it. On the large diagram shown in figure 7, I have indicated the locations of various governments, organizations, and individuals according to my evaluation of them. Also indicated, by a solid line running across the "football", is a rough approximation of the spectrum of positions advocated by major elements in the American political establishment today. As could be expected, this line does not extend significantly into the autonomist region.

By studying this diagram, it is easy to understand the interactions between various elements in the United States today: why autonomists could support Goldwater, but not Wallace (and Nixon only barely); why Birchers were torn between Nixon and Wallace; why Wallace hates "anarchists"; why Goldwater was "out of the mainstream"; why ADA-type "liberals" find the John Birch Society as repugnant as they find the Communists; and, above all, why the "old" American Right is only slightly more appealing to autonomists than the "old" Left.

Turning to world affairs, it is equally easy to see why the Nazis and Communists could get along (until Germany attacked Russia), and why many Americans of the "old" Right felt that of the two, Communist Russia was the worst threat. Likewise, it is easy to see why Birchers greatly admire the government of South Africa, and why "liberals" revere it — although on balance, South Africa's systems is neither significantly more nor less autonomist than that of the United States. Similarly, it is easy to see why "liberals" love Sweden while "conservatives" hate it — although, again, there is not much overall difference in the total amount of freedom the individual has under the Swedish and American systems.

What is even more important, however, is the fact that by studying this diagram, we can make some educated guesses regarding future developments. And the most likely development is one that is **completely incomprehensible** in terms of the single-axis method of political analysis.

Looking at the line representing the "mainstream" of politico-economic viewpoints in the U.S. today, we can see that it occupies a slanting position running across the middle of our diagram from the upper left-hand corner towards the lower right-hand corner (although it does not extend to either extreme). This orientation, which is very nearly that of a "true" left-to-right axis (as defined earlier) represents the "real" political norm as perceived by the average American. Since the average American thinks in terms of a one-dimensional spectrum, he perceives all systems as being at the points where they would fall if you placed a drafting compass on the center of the "mainstream line", and drew an arc through the real location of the systems and brought this arc around until it intersected the "mainstream line". This, of course, is the "circle theory" in action, and it ex-

plains why some Americans classify Naziism as "left-wing" and some as "right-wing" (it depends on which way you swing the arc, and in cases where the system in question is located fairly far off the "maenstream line", people get confused).

Looking at the world in this one-dimensional fashion, it is impossible to predict developments accurately, because all possibilities have to be conceived of in terms of shifts along this line — and, in all likelihood, the primary political development of the next few decades is going to be a shift in the position of the "mainstream line" itself!

On our large diagram (figure 7) you will note a long dotted line connecting the points marked "Objectivists" (upper right-hand corner) and "Weathermen/Black Panthers" (lower left-hand corner). In this writer's

opinion, this line represents the "mainstream line" of, say 15 or 20 years from now. My reasoning is as follows . . .

The majority of "middle Americans" (particularly those born before 1940) will probably continue to hold largely the same views as they do now, for some time to come. Younger Americans, however, particularly those of a more "radical" nature, are increasingly rejecting the views of the "silent majority" — and of the "old" Left and Right as well. Having spotted the flaws in contemporary "democracy" and the inconsistencies in both contemporary "liberalism" and "conservatism", post-1940 Americans are increasingly staking out new positions on the map.

Both the "New Left" and the "New Right" are geared far more closely toward elemental issues

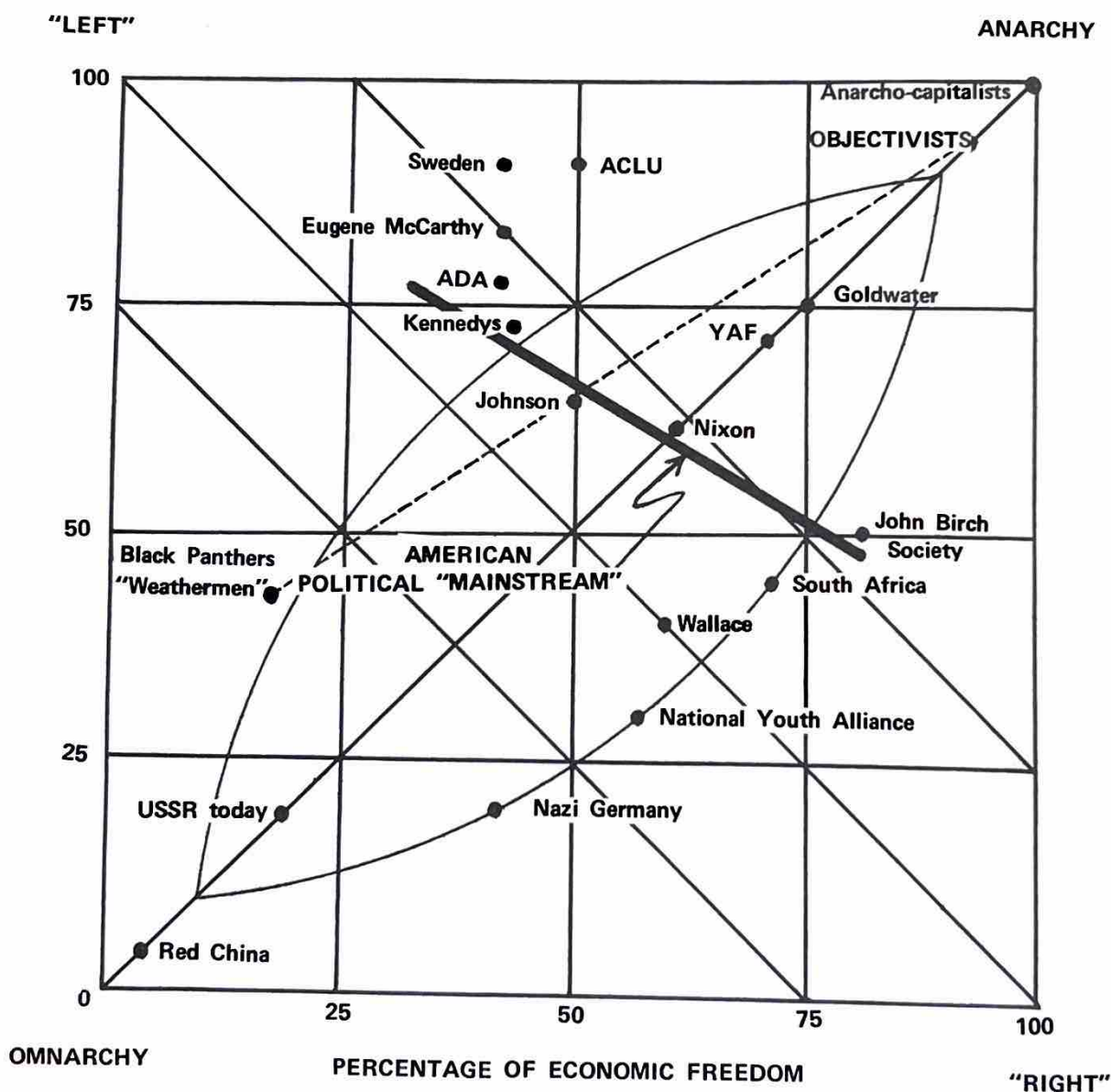


FIGURE 7

than is the present compromise-oriented "political establishment". Thus, younger Americans are increasingly rejected the "gray area" in the center of the diagram, and are adopting "black and white" positions. (This is the process commonly called "polarization" by the Establishment Press.) And, in addition to the "New Left" and the "New Right", a third group of younger Americans has emerged — the "hippie" type, who has "dropped out" of the political process entirely, and has retreated to the upper left-hand region of the diagram ("true" left — a position which we have already noted is not really practicable in the long run).

At the present time, the vast majority of Americans of voting age are distributed along the present "mainstream line" (or very close to it). However, as time progresses, the proportion of the voting population born after 1940 will increase, and the proportion born before 1940 will decrease. This means that at some time in the fairly near future — probably in the 1980's — the majority of the voting population will be distributed along the "new" axis — or will be located in areas not associated with either axis. **And at that time, the "old" axis will simply cease to be relevant.**

The key question, of course, is what will happen when this "shift" (or "tilt" if you prefer) occurs? And the answer, as I see it, can only be one of two things ... either a near-anarchic or a near-omnarchic state of affairs will result.

I say this because of the nature of the new polarization, not simply because of the fact that a polarization will exist; after all, polarization of a sort **already** exists, and our present-day system is neither anarchic nor omnarchic. This is because the present-day "mainstream line" is oriented **across** the axis of maximum stability, and hence the result of the two forces (contemporary "liberalism" and "conservatism") pulling on our society tends to be a system located somewhere between the two forces, and near the axis of maximum stability. (Imagine two magnets located on our warped square, and a ball-bearing lying between them.)

With the two forces located near the anarchic and omnarchic poles, however, the situation changes. The society becomes bi-stable, rather than mono-stable, and cannot remain "balanced" between the two forces, as they are now located on **opposite sides** of the saddle-curve in the center of the surface. This means that within a relatively short time (15-20 years, at most) America will have to go one way or the other — either towards a free society, or towards a statist one.

Which course our society takes will depend largely on how effective we, as autonomists, are in presenting our views. In particular, it will depend on how well we can "sell" the autonomist viewpoint to "middle America" and to the "alienated" younger Americans currently located in the upper left-hand corner of our diagram. Hopefully, our effectiveness will be enhanced by having a consistent set of referents with which to communicate our views.

POSTSCRIPT

Upon re-reading my manuscript, I note that I have introduced a new word (**omnarchy**, meaning government without limit or restriction), and have also urged adoption of the word **autonomist** as the antithesis of **statist**. Having gone this far, I would like to make one more suggestion.

For several years now, I have been troubled by the fact that those of us of autonomist persuasions have had no graphic symbol to signify our cause. The Nazis had the swastika, the Communists have the hammer-and-sickle, YAF has its torch, the "peace" movement has the inverted chicken-track in a circle . . . but we have nothing, except a slogan — "Laissez Faire". (I do not count the dollar sign, as it is not **uniquely** ours, and because it is associated too closely with one particular school of autonomist thinking, namely Objectivism.)

Therefore, I would like at this time to suggest a symbol based on the political-classification diagram discussed in this article — namely, an arrow pointing upward and to the right (toward anarchy). To give it orientation, I have added a cross-bar, producing the following emblem:



This rising-arrow symbol is simple enough to be easily marked anywhere, and it is different enough to pique peoples' attention. Used in conjunction with the slogan "Laissez Faire", its meaning (**toward anarchy**) should rapidly become known. (A note on the concept "toward anarchy" . . . I, personally, am not an anarchist — and neither are many other people of generally autonomist views. However, since **anarchy** literally means a condition of no government, I, and any other individual who advocates less government than we have now, would nonetheless have to agree that we want to move **toward anarchy**.)

Editors

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Nolan's contention that "words . . . are simply referents" is entirely his own and does not express the opinion of myself or of the **INDIVIDUALIST** staff in general. My own concept of the nature of words will be presented in a forthcoming essay in this magazine entitled "Introduction to the Theory of Meaning."

Jarret B. Wollstein