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## THE SEMANTIC PECULIARITIES OF THE ENTRANCE OF LEFTISM ON THE STAGE OF HISTORY

The emergence of leftism, or rather the bipolar union of the right and the left, on the stage of history is primarily associated with the political context even though it is not quite clear when this division started.

According to the generally acknowledged version, the origin of this pair of notions is rooted in the seating arrangements of the French National Assembly in 1789: the deputies advocating the radical ideals of the French Revolution based on the values of equality, fraternity, labour, non-compliance and progress sat to the left of the president's chair, while the members sharing more conservative ideals based on the values of authority, national identity, order and security – to the right. However, it was not a mere historical coincidence since in the relatively absolute European value space, the right-wing position has always been associated with a more “honourable” and “right” place, while the left-wing opposition – with a more marginal and unpredictable position, even if it has not been regarded as something worse.

Even nowadays, the power of this bias makes the politicians claiming this position modestly clothe their leftism in poeticisms disguising it [*Diccionario UNESCO de ciencias sociales* 1987:1182], as can be observed in the case of the Latvian “Concordance” party.

After the right-left division (*le clivage droit-gauche*) or the division into the Right – the right side (*Une Droite*) and the Left – the left side (*Une Gauche*) established at the National Assembly, these terms transformed after some time not only into a vast political field covering a broad range of diverse ideas with a considerable metaphorical potential, but also into an ambiguous political spectrum where the borders between the left and the right cannot be easily determined.

This broad political spectrum still feeds the belief that all the wisdom is hidden somewhere between these wings (*right-wing/left-wing politics*) or at least in some of these right-wing or left-wing groups, and, consequently, all contemporary issues can be resolved within this framework. Unfortunately, the fact that the left-

wing and right-wing politics tend to be a matter of belief and unsubstantiated hope rather than knowledge is bound to be understood at a later point in time. In other words, in contemporary politics, it is not easy to distinguish between the consistent left and the consistent right, which makes this old instrument of labelling the political spectrum rather ineffective. Due to this reason, it might be worth considering whether the left and the right are still useful umbrella terms, or whether it is time to consider a new modelling of the world.

However, since the politics and troubles of the 21st century are not the objective of this article, let us turn to the previous century, where ideas, philosophy and political positions were more focused, and where leftism and rightism were easily recognisable.

In the 20th century, *leftism* appeared in a verbally explicit way and in several political “thickenings”: at the beginning of the 20th century, in the period of the 1930s and 1940s, in the 1950s and 1960s, and later as well. At the beginning of the 20th century, the relatively affluent generation of educated European intellectuals tended to have leftist views and were overwhelmed by their ideals. When these were transformed into political realities, the loss of ideas considerably changed the features of leftism.

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, if we disregard “fighting on several avant-garde fronts”, like Lenin, or leftist martyrdom, like Antonio Gramsci, the leftists were more focused on the compensation for the material loss incurred by a certain part of the society as a result of social inequality. The leftists advocated the redistribution of economic benefits reaped from the industrial revolution and the accessibility of welfare for the working class. Considerable elements of populism could be traced in the orientation towards the “ill-treated” class, which, naturally, accelerated the spread of left-wing ideas in these social circles; in contrast, the left-wing ideas of the 1920s and 1930s circulated among intellectuals and lived at a much higher philosophical level. In the West, they were still popular in the second half of the 20th century despite the fact that embodied in “real communism”, the ideas of leftism had discredited themselves. Nevertheless, they retained an inexplicable force of attraction in the Western world.

Despite the diverse content and different ideational fillings of leftism, generally they share one emotional colouring: a focus on struggle, movement and unity. The *leftist* revolutionary activism has not disappeared in the 21st century as well, often endangering the established or an imagined European order.

What determines these somewhat unexpected connotations of *leftism*, and what is the “biography” of this actor of the stage of contemporary history? Finally, how does this kind of actor come about?

As it can be imagined, *leftism*, just like its counterpart *rightism*, did not appear in a semantically empty place, and the complex process of the formation of its meanings was neither unambiguous nor logically consistent. Clearly, at the early stages of their life, they could not be notions referring to the political field, which they so confidently inhabit today.

In the unconscious political language games, such security can only be guaranteed by stability in a particular theoretical construction which was once formed as a credible structure, thus undisputed in the legitimacy of its usage.

Turning to the earliest available ideas concerning the notions *the right side*, *the left side*, *to the right*, *to the left*, *the left* and *the right*, they can be observed in such conceptualisations of man and the world where at first glance “right” and “left” primarily refer to hands and the functionality of the body.

The physically similar two arms and hands and two legs belonging to one body first suggest the idea of a closed corporeal whole – both arms and both legs – or the right hand and the left hand, or the right leg and the left leg which are expressed as a comparison of differences and the uniting conjunction at the same time.

However, any movement of the body shows their contrastive functionality:<sup>3</sup> the extremities are not only attached to the body, but also carry the body transferring its weight and maintaining its balance. In other words, arms and legs, leading their different “lives”, keep the body in balance and create the illusion of an effortlessly moving point. They are autonomous to a certain extent – each arm and each leg is asymmetrical in time-space. Apparently, they originally had different semantic motivatability as well.

Usually, the right hand is stronger; thus, it is the privileged one, while the left hand is weaker, somehow bent to the body. Simplistically, it can be linked with the predominance of right-handers in the world and the prioritisation of this side. On the other hand, the heart – the most valuable and also the most vulnerable part of the body, which has always been especially protected – is located in the left side of the body [Shipley 1945:115]. This is a simplistic explanation of the reason why, as we will see later, the notion *left* has been associated with weakness and a certain bentness.

However, the ancient modelling of the human being and the world has been constructed using more complicated analogies based on a more complex metaphorical schematicism than that in the aforementioned examples! Sometimes, there can even be observed certain contradictions. What are the terms used to describe the sides of the body, and are their meanings always unambiguous?

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<sup>3</sup> Arms and legs perform complimentary functions; for instance, in order to move forward, one leg stands, supports, while the other one makes a step forward; in contrast, in order to write, one hand holds a writing instrument, while the other one draws a line, etc.

Two aspects are worth mentioning here:

- In the Latin language, the right hand has two mutually exclusive explanations – it brings both good and bad luck;
- The right hand, however, is described as being distinctly straight, aiming at something, while the left hand – as bent.

The aforementioned circumstances indicate that the functionality of the sides of the body is apparently determined not only by their relations to the body, but also by other external factors.

In other words, in the ancient conceptions of the world or in the elementary conceptual ordering practices in the cultural space of the Western world, focused on organisation, there existed two interconnected types of modelling: the human being as an entirety and the world as a contra-positioned entirety, or the world as a system of images.

These are two separate identities that are articulated against each other. The human being claims to be part of the entity bigger than themselves or, to be more exact, to have a structural similarity with it and, at the same time, to be an independent entity contrasted with the world – an independent world in some respect. Later, this will easily lead to the inflation of the notion *world* and the appearance of metaphors like *my inner world*, *the whole world vanishes along with each human being*, *the Western world*, *the criminal world*, *the woman's world*, *the world of art and science*, etc.

In the conceptions mentioned above, the world is modelled as a spatial entity visible in its unity or as an abstraction condensed in a geometric figure, and it is conceivable, i.e., that can be put in front, that is located in the front.<sup>4</sup> What exactly was in the front gave new meanings to the right side and the left side.

What is in the front is built on a horizontal axis whose centre is the human eye representing the body, which makes it possible to see the world, organised symmetrically against it. The horizontal axis makes it possible to fix the movement of other bodies and attribute it to abstract phenomena, too.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, the Greeks also associated the left side with something “beloved” or “pleasant”, but these were euphemisms which implied something not to be shown or told publicly.

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<sup>4</sup> Which was later articulated in the German philosophical tradition as *vorstellbar* – conceivable or literally: what can be put in front, *Vorstellung* – conception or literally: putting in the front.

<sup>5</sup> For example, a copy of the vision of movement can be seen in the direction of reading and writing from the left to the right side, a similar conception of the succession of time, causality, etc.

If the world was an image to a large extent, the human being looking at it was conceptualised as follows:

- 1) a self-sufficient, immobile initial point where the permitted bodily position is strong and stable; the bearing is on both legs, while the forbidden bodily positions are those of creeping characteristic of reptiles or being down on one's knees, which excludes the possibility of movement. Both positions described above still have a negative connotation;<sup>6</sup>
- 2) a position with two dominant axes – the sagittal axis (front/back) and the lateral axis (right/left). With regard to the sagittal plane, an essential position is the one a person sees, i.e., the front. It is the person who determines where the front is; and the movement forward starts from him – step by step.<sup>7</sup>

The lateral axis is responsible for two functionally different sides combined in one entity (right/left);

- 3) the whole or unity that divides or, in other words, encompasses the multitude which in all ancient conceptions was represented by the number represented today by “2”. It is the diversity incorporated in one whole. In case this diversity has to be “disconnected”, and unity needs to be seen again, it is encompassed in the notion “both”;<sup>8</sup>
- 4) the whole that is divided into functionally different sides with regard to the division of forces.<sup>9</sup> Each of them is a half of the body, without which it is a non-whole and generally a non-body. One side is constituted by the right, whose semantic fields encompass something strong, straight, unbent, pointing forward and towards the world order located in the front, while the other – by the left, whose semantic fields comprise something slanting, crooked, bent, weak and located in the back<sup>10</sup> (see Fig. 1a).

<sup>6</sup> Negative meanings have been preserved until nowadays; for instance, somebody *creeps* up to somebody or somebody is brought *on his knees*, or somebody *crawls* to somebody.

<sup>7</sup> In the Greek language, the corresponding equivalent is the word *prokopē*, which denotes the action of walking [Бейсман 1991 (1899): 1059], in the Latin language, the word *gradus* has a similar, but not identical meaning [Veitmane et al. 1955:383]; in the Latvian language, this activity is embodied in the expression *dari palēnām* (*do it slowly*), *pamazītiņām* (*little by little*) – *solī pa solīm* (*step by step*).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, look with both eyes, keep in both hands, in is acceptable in both ways, etc.

<sup>9</sup> A side refers both to the orientation of the body and the process of thinking connected with it – *on one side, on the other side*; (Latvian) *no vienas puses skatoties ir tā, no otras – pavisam otrādi* (*on the one hand... , while on the other hand...* ), (German) *einerseits/andererseits aber*.

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, the etymological relationships of the Latvian words *krievi* (*Russians*) and *kreisā* (*left*), *saliektā* (*bent*), *šķībā* (*slanting*) present interest. [Mīlenbahs 1925–1927:284–285, 270].

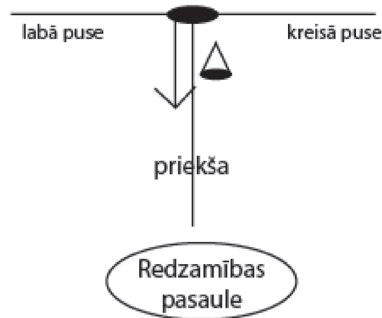


Figure 1a. Early modelling of the body and the world.

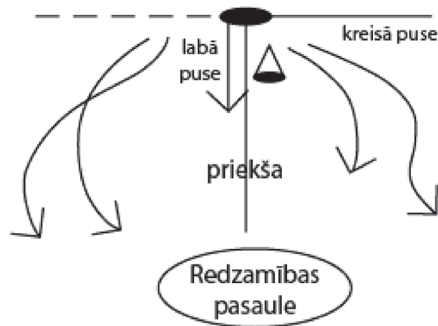


Figure 1b. The modifications of meanings in the early model of the body and the world.

Since the right side of the lateral plane thickens metaphorically, merging with the sagittal plane with regard to its meanings, the right flank of the body, as it were, turns into the front.<sup>11</sup>

The left is what is responsible for the flanks and not only for the left side, but also for the sideways and sides in general (see Fig. 1b);

- 5) the one that has ways in front of what makes everything straight and good – speech, language, thinking, day. This is the place where the truth is born; i.e., it possesses indexical qualities,<sup>12</sup> whereas the left side supervises

<sup>11</sup> Today it is verbalised as the Latvian *priekšroka* (preference), *priekšrocības* (advantages) and the German *Vorhand*, *Vorteil*.

<sup>12</sup> Which is widely used in the expressions such as *Jums ir taisnība*, *Sie haben recht*, *you are right*, *go straight ahead* (if the space is imagined in tandem, not in a mirror), *lai laba diena* (Have a nice day!) (which is “coming” since a person seems to see the future in front of himself/herself), *straight speech*, *a straight person*, *straight language*.

sideways, like in the Latvian song – *solis pa kreisi, atkal jau greizi (take a step to the left, and its wrong again)*.<sup>13</sup>

It can be said that the aforementioned entity is constructed asymmetrically: the right side on the lateral axis can be replaced by the front on the sagittal axis; it is responsible for some fixed norm, value and quality, justice, something good and straight, etc. In other words, the right hand, the right eye, the right side replaces the man and represents him as a whole,<sup>14,15</sup> thus making it possible to designate him by 1. Thus, a person can be replaced by one eye and one hand.

In spite of its inferior role in this structure,<sup>16</sup> the left is an integral part of the conceptualisation of the human being as a whole: the left accounts for our alternativity, versatility, for the strategies of finding a way out, which require lateral thinking, the ability of evasion, the ability to escape from a seeming deadlock. It can be said that the left is people's "spare battery".<sup>17</sup>

Starting from the Renaissance, the period of replacing notions or redefining them began in France, which is particularly interesting within the context of the theme of the present article. The bipolar pair left/right experienced replacement of notions, however, it did not happen simultaneously. Transformations started with the left: in the 15th/16th century, the Old French *senestre* (which had originated from the Latin *sinister* - unhappy, suggestive of evil, dreary) was replaced by *gauche*, which is used in the literary and political language today; its direct meaning is

<sup>13</sup> The expressions referring to illegal or immoral behaviour are Latvian *kreisie gājieni* (crooked moves), *kreisie darījumi* (dishonest dealings), *sānsoli* (infidelity) or *bailes izkāpt no rīta ar kreiso kāju no gultas* (the fear of getting out of bed on the wrong side), etc.

<sup>14</sup> In other words, right in both ways.

<sup>15</sup> But the benefit of the right should not be regarded as absolute; for instance, if a person has two right hands, he is ambidextrous, which increases his abilities; at the same time, it makes him double-faced – morally unstable.

<sup>16</sup> With the meanings bad news, weakness, feebleness, bentness, lack of straightness and unpermitted strategies related to it, which are widely represented in the metaphors mentioned above – *kreisie gājieni*, *sānsoli*, *kreisie darījumi*, etc.

<sup>17</sup> This concept concerning the left and the right dominating in the West is not an absolute initial position equally understandable to everyone at all times; the bipolarity of the left and the right is not self-evident.

For instance, the system that was once accepted in China was distinctly relative, where the right and the left were also related to the body, even in a more specific way than in the West; however, the right and the left were not characterised by their energy or power capacity (weak/strong), and their meanings were not determined by the body as an immobile initial point, but rather by its relationships in the world. It means that the right and the left changed their meanings depending on the point where the view was fixed, the point at which it was directed as well as the organization of the environment in relation to it. In other words, the hand and the side of the body was neither strong nor weak, neither straight nor bent; it acquired meaning depending on the relationships the body was involved in situationally [Eberhard 1983:162].

*slanting*, but since it had originated from the verb *guenchir* with the primary meaning “to choose a round-about way”, which was transformed into a more modern form *gauchir* – “to digress from the straight line”, also in a moral or intellectual way, movement, mobility, activity and the strategies of finding a way started dominating in leftism.

When the redefinition of the left was complete, it was followed by the redefinition of the right – the Old French *destre*, which had originated from the Latin *dexter* – skilful, nimble, was replaced by *droit* accepted today, choosing the Latin word *directus* – straight, direct.<sup>18</sup> As a result, in the designations concerning the right side and the right, there appeared connotations referring to a straight road, certain norms and rights. One of the related words that appeared in this context is *adresse* – a definite progression towards a definite aim. To a large extent, these changes account for the differences in the statements of the truth in various European languages. In Romanic languages, apparently under the influence of the Enlightenment, the truth is stated by means of “reason”,<sup>19</sup> while spatial semantic associations remain in other languages.<sup>20</sup>

The subsequent changes were brought about by a period where the social and political reality had changed, and it reconstructed both the world and the human being as well as relationships between them. It required an easily recognisable, familiar and yet a new conceptual apparatus.

At the end of the 17th century and in the 18th century, on the one hand, the existing networks of Indo-European meanings were preserved; on the other hand, new metaphors were added to them, and the initial positions of the constructions were redefined. The former concerns the metaphor of an organism, which was actualised at the time; it was borrowed from the vocabulary of medieval medicine-natural science-theology-politics<sup>21</sup> and modernised in accordance with the mechanistic ideals of the early modern period. The most prominent representatives of the mechanistic metaphor were René Descartes and Isaac Newton, whose favourite version of it was the mechanism of a clock. Descartes offered the theory of the body of living nature whose movement is determined only by internal forces, i.e., it is self-moving, while Harvey mechanized the system of the movement of blood in the human organism.

<sup>18</sup> See the correstonding entries in Grandsaignes d’Hauterive 1947 and Gougenheim 2008:240–242.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, French *vous avez raison*, Spanish *tiene razón*, Catalan *tens raó*.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Latvian *Tev taisnība* (*You are right*), German *Du hast recht* (or another explanatory metaphor: *Du liegst richtig* – literally: *you are (lying) in the right position*).

<sup>21</sup> This can be observed in frozen metaphors, e. g., *corpus ecclesiae*, *corpus mysticum Christi* [I Kor. 12.4 (p. 1158), Eph. 1.22 (p. 1178)].



In the 18th century, the idea of an organism, used indirectly as a metaphor or an analogy, became very useful in the social and political vocabulary, where the idea of the body was universalised. Political formations began to be understood using the analogies of the body and organism: since then we have inherited the multitude of *organisations*, which is a process term and is literally understood as “corporeation”, with its constituent *members*, which in Latvian *locekļi* and in German *Glieder* also means “limbs”; since then we know who is the head, and that systems can be found everywhere; starting from the 17th century, when states began to consolidate in definite territories attached to them, the states were perceived as corporeal individualities, which were immediately anthropomorphised and now *act according to their interests, maintain friendly or hostile relationships*, are ruled by a *head of state*, etc. Nature also became dependent on political meanings: reason started to *rule* over blind drives.

What changes underpinned the creation of the new vocabulary?

The early modern period, particularly the 18th century – mainly around the time of the French Revolution – was characterised by the emergence of a new historical thinking, which required a new historical reality, which had to be visible again, and which was in the front again, now in a more specific form: the historical, political world is the modelling of “we”; it requires being-present. Consequently, the new modelling of the world is not the atemporal motionless picture favoured by the Greeks, but rather a performance showing a sequence of events with a lot of different characters and the world appropriate for this team of performers – the stage.

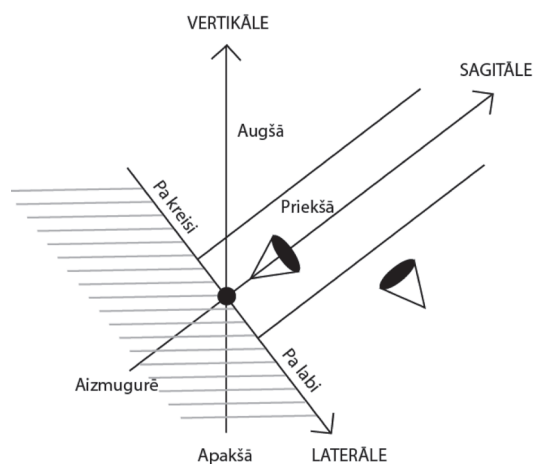


Figure 2. The world as the stage of history.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The aforementioned model was used and explained in detail in another context and article [Teters 2005:204].

After Christian unity had collapsed and the end of the world, the defining point for the interior of time, had disintegrated, the future remained empty. The 18th century, which worshipped reason, produced ideas about what ideals should be delegated to it, what subjects have the right to long for them, and how to get there (see Fig. 2).

Thus, the model of the world merged with the model of the human being; it was a place for this being to inhabit.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, this process could be observed from aside: in the modern world, which provides opportunities for self-distancing from it, one can be a spectator and a player simultaneously.

This new formation – the newly created stage of history – had its own consistencies too:

Various actors of history dressed in metaphors of the collective body appeared on the stage of history – new units capable of self-organisation which acted as the subjects of history: the common arena unified the political, scientific and artistic avant-garde [Teters 2014:197–227] as well as its other independent agents – such transpersonal subjects of activity condensed in collective singulars as *revolution*, *progress*, *history*, *people*, etc. All political subjects marched forward as one body where some pure ideal of the future constructed by rational means awaited them; namely, the movement was not determined by the starting position, as we observed it before, but by some promise of the realm of happiness on the horizon of the future.

The stage of history has its own complex architecture: it is vertically oriented; there are the most qualified upper layers as well as the middle and the lower layers on it, such human categories as *Man*, *super-man*, *sub-man* and *non-man*, into which anyone can freely classify any human being. However, the only bodily movement permitted along the sagittal axis is marching forward, which this time is determined by the aim rather than a starting position. As to the lateral axis, where the political bi-polarisation appeared starting from the period of the French Revolution with the right – left division, the omnipresent moment of conflict has remained with increasing emphases like *ultra-*, *extra-* and *far-* right or left. It has several new aspects:

- apart from walking, there appears a new bodily position – sitting. Let us remember that being right or left was first determined by the position of sitting in relation to the president of the National Assembly;<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In the German language this thought is reflected in the metaphors *Weltgebäude*, *Weltbühne*.

<sup>24</sup> Which lives in the notions familiar to us: in Latvian *priekšgājējs* (*predecessor*), *priekštecis* (*forefather*) or *priekšstāvis* (*representative*) are supplemented with *priekšsēdētājs* (*chairperson*) and *priekšnieks* (*boss*), in German *Vorsitzende*, etc.

- unstable shaking is felt on the stage of history: the demand for the balance of forces appears soon.<sup>25</sup> The scales – the symbol of antique justice – also appeared in political relations starting from the 15th century, they played a particular role in the Age of Enlightenment and the period of the formation of modern states;<sup>26</sup>
- the demand for balance refers both to rightists and leftists: although the right and the left cover several semantic fields, in the political lexis, the right side dominated as the reasonable one, while the left side still remained as a conflicting, oppositional and defensive flank. Marxism gave new lustre to leftism – as a way out of alienation towards new ideals of the future along newly built roads and a new actor – class – on the stage of history. The new humanism opposed to Christian humanism was one of the most exciting and inspiring ideas in the first half of the 20th century.

Finally, as could be expected, in the modern world the right and the left gained new temporal designations which can be regarded as imitations of the definitive past in order to begin new modern semantic definitions of leftism and rightism. Once again, the development of both notions was not symmetrical, and once again it was dominated by leftism: the New Left appeared sooner than the New Right, namely, at the end of the 1950s, while the New Right, trying to synchronise with the New Left – approximately in the 1980s [Outhwaite 2003:434–435].

Admittedly, nowadays both the New Left and the New Right tend to be descriptive terms that can be easily applied to political doctrines and social movements; they encompass a broad spectrum of ideas, and very often it is not possible to draw clear boundaries between them.

Nevertheless, both the right and the left have not lost the imprints of meanings obtained in the course of their long life – they accompany us every day.

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<sup>25</sup> It is interesting that the word “balance” has been chosen for it, from Vulgar Latin *ballāre* – to dance, which is a more defiant technique of balancing; the body compared to walking step by step practiced in the ancient world. (Latin *ballāre* borrowed from, or related to, Ancient Greek βαλλίζω (*ballízō*), from Proto-Indo-European \*bal- “to shake, to dance” [Indo-European Lexicon.]

<sup>26</sup> The ideals of balance manifest themselves in new metaphors, such as the *balance of power* in politics, *equality*, *equal rights*, *equal worth*, etc.

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### THE SEMANTIC PECULIARITIES OF THE ENTRANCE OF LEFTISM ON THE STAGE OF HISTORY

#### Abstract

The notions “the right side”, “on the right”, “the Right” and “the left side”, “on the left”, “the Left”, as well as the variations associated with them in the thinking spaces of all cultures initially indicate links to the functioning of the body and hands, establishing an aspect of their orientation and system of values. In one instance these systems may demonstrate absolute features, in another – relative; however, their common trend is assumed semantic stability. The paper outlines the formation of a new historical reality and presents modifications in the meanings of the ancient notions, which are required in its staging.

**Keywords:** *leftism, right-left division, politics, new left, political bi-polarisation.*