

**OUT OF DOSSIER****Afonso Maia Silva\*** The ideological delimitation  
of the political left-right  
dichotomy in historical research**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I aim to reflect upon and offer insights for the delimitation of the political concepts of 'left' and 'right' for the purposes of historical research. The guiding motive of this exercise is to highlight the need for prior historiographical and conceptual work before incorporating either of these concepts into historical investigation as objects of study. In this article, I present the fundamental criteria and identity markers that allow us to define the two concepts and, briefly, the importance of Conceptual History as a methodological approach for clarifying the object of study. I conclude the article by putting forward a proposal for the delimitation of the two political fields in contemporary Portugal.

**KEYWORDS**

Left  
Right  
Political Ideas  
Political Thought  
Conceptual History  
Contextualism

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## Introduction

The 'left-right' dichotomy constitutes a defining feature of contemporary politics on a global scale. Several authors<sup>1</sup> have suggested that the anthropological significance of binary, Manichaean logic accounts for the widespread adoption of this particular dyad—what Norberto Bobbio<sup>2</sup>, one of the most incisive theorists of these concepts, described as:

*“a most banal spatial metaphor, whose origin is entirely accidental and whose function has been merely to name, for the past two centuries, the persistent—and persistent because essential—dichotomous composition of the political universe.”*

The origins of this dichotomy are well known and frequently cited<sup>3</sup>. In August 1789, at the dawn of the French Revolution, opponents of the royal veto over the newly formed Constituent Assembly seated themselves to the left of the Assembly president, while defenders of royal prerogatives sat to the right—a spatial distribution that was repeated in subsequent sessions. Throughout the revolutionary process, the left thus came to be associated with the radical wing of the Revolution, advocating a popular, democratic, and republican form of radical liberalism. The right, conversely, came to represent moderate liberalism, conservatism, and monarchism—political orientations opposed to democratisation along radical lines.

Much reflection and debate have addressed the contemporary relevance of this dichotomy as a classificatory framework for the political universe. That is not the discussion pursued here. Our principal concern lies instead in the historiographical treatment of the dichotomy itself. Regardless of its continuing validity as an analytical tool, the concepts it encompasses—jointly or separately—have become objects of historical inquiry in their own right. 'Left' and 'right' designate two broad political fields within which coexist, in varying degrees of affinity, political parties, movements, figures, ideas, and proposals that share certain commonalities. Because of their significance, these two fields merit sustained historical investigation. Yet rigorous research requires clarity as to 'who' and 'what' belong to each of them; otherwise, they risk becoming, in Sartre's phrase, "two empty boxes"<sup>4</sup>. It thus falls to the historian to delimit these fields at the exploratory stage—a challenge that this article seeks to confront.

The categories of 'left' and 'right' acquire historiographical significance only through the content they encompass—the substantive elements of the "two boxes." One might, for instance, investigate how the left conceived and implemented opposition to the Estado Novo dictatorship, or how the right reorganised itself in the aftermath of the

eighteen months of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75. Yet such inquiries presuppose an understanding of which agents—individual or collective—fall within each category.

Despite the ubiquity of these concepts, however, there exists no

consensus regarding their precise boundaries. Numerous criteria have been proposed to distinguish them, though with overlapping features. Herein lies the difficulty: the historian must adopt a position amid the profusion of 'ready-made' criteria, justifying their choices in defining the object of study.

Why, then, is it so complex to define a pair of concepts so deeply embedded in everyday political discourse? The answer may lie in their origin: as Bobbio reminds us, a "coincidence," born of a spatial arrangement. Referentiality is the defining mark of this dichotomy—the left exists only in relation to the right, and vice versa. As Bobbio<sup>5</sup> notes,

*“The two terms of the dyad are governed by one another: where there is no right, there ceases to be a left, and vice versa. In other words, there is a right insofar as there is a left, and a left insofar as there is a right.”*

For this reason, it is often difficult to identify a common thread—beyond mere spatial coexistence—among the diverse political agents that have historically occupied positions on the left (radical liberals, republicans, socialists, social democrats, Marxists, progressives, etc.) or on the right (absolutist monarchists, conservatives, fascists, Christian democrats, neoliberals, etc.).

Without a distinctive criterion and a clear methodology, any delimitation remains merely referential. If we study the left, we select political agents who positioned themselves to the left of a central axis—repeating the same exercise for the right. While positional reference may constitute one possible criterion, we consider it insufficient. It is, first, a 'blind' criterion: one only relative position matters, in political contexts where one side is clearly dominant (as in the 'rightism' of post-Warsaw Pact Eastern Europe or the 'leftism' of revolutionary Portugal), the demarcation is inevitably distorted. Second, it empties the concepts of intrinsic meaning, since nothing in the identity of political agents would determine them as left or right—only their relative placement within the political field.

We therefore adopt an essentialist stance, seeking a common characteristic or property uniting political agents within each respective 'family'. Even if little appears to be shared between absolute monarchists and neoliberals, or between radical liberals and Marxists, there must exist some element that allows us to recognise them as belonging to the same category within a dichotomously structured political universe.

This does not, of course, diminish the importance of contextual or referential analysis. To describe a nineteenth-century political actor as 'anti-egalitarian' using a twenty-first century conception of equality would be an act of anachronism. We must first apprehend the political universe of the period and, guided by an orienting criterion, delineate the fields of left and right accordingly. For this purpose, we turn to political theory and its various hypotheses to identify the criterion best suited to our research objectives.

1 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 27–28; Cunha, P. F. Repensar a política: Ciência e ideologia. Almedina, 2007, p. 312.

2 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 54.

3 Lipset, S. M. Esquerda e direita: O conflito ideológico no século XXI. In J. C. Espada, M. F. Plattner e A. Wolfson (Coords.), Direita e esquerda? Divisões ideológicas no século XXI. UCP Editora, 2007 p. 11; Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 26–28.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre apud Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 28.

5 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 37.

Finally, we undertake a brief theoretical excursion into Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (History of Concepts)<sup>6</sup>, as a methodological proposition capable of enriching our conclusions.

### Left and Right: Toward a Delimitation

Several authors have sought to identify the defining features of "left" and "right," with varying degrees of success. Within the scope of this article, we focus on those whose formulations appear most pertinent to our inquiry—António José Saraiva<sup>7</sup>, Rui Tavares<sup>8</sup>, Jaime Nogueira Pinto<sup>9</sup>, and Norberto Bobbio<sup>10</sup>, the latter of whom also synthesises insights from other theorists.

Saraiva<sup>11</sup> distinguishes left and right by reference to their relationship with the State. According to him,

*"...when the State is employed to realise individual freedom and social and economic equality, ultimately tending toward its own negation, a policy of the 'left'—or, if one prefers, a progressive policy—is in operation."*

Conversely,

*"...when the State serves as an instrument for the preservation of hierarchy and privilege, tending toward its unlimited reinforcement and conceived as something transcendent to individuals—when authority asserts itself as the necessary and immutable antithesis of freedom—then a policy of the 'right,' or a conservative policy, is in effect."*

The concepts of 'freedom' and 'equality' frequently arise in this debate. As we shall see, Bobbio also identifies the notion of equality as the decisive dividing line between the two camps, while rejecting the same centrality for freedom. For Bobbio, the latter merely distinguishes moderates from extremists within each camp—a conclusion that is consistent with the divergent understandings of freedom among, for example, Stalinists and the 'New Left', or between fascists and liberals.

Tavares<sup>12</sup> emphasises the "positional, relative, and therefore evolutionary" character of the dichotomy. Among the authors considered, Tavares is the least essentialist and thus most skeptical of any definitive orienting criterion. Nonetheless, he associates the distinction between the two political families with their respective *tempovisions*—their relation to time. For the right, the present represents the fruit and emanation of the past, the normal state of affairs; for the left, the present is a potential turning point toward an as yet undefined and rewritable future<sup>13</sup>.

Yet Tavares later advocates a more particularist, contextualist,

and anti-essentialist analysis grounded in Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance"<sup>14</sup>: the partial or total sharing of a set of features among members of a category. In this framework, identification with either concept becomes almost intuitive, based on the observation of particular traits and the actor's insertion within its 'family'. Although this approach resolves some difficulties, it also falls into the familiar pitfall of anti essentialism: if belonging to the left or right depends on resemblances with other members of the same 'family', one risks an infinite regress toward the 'first left' or 'first right'. This, in turn, may tempt us to revert to purely positional criteria—referring to a 'family resemblance' that links the radical wing of the French Revolution to Scandinavian social democrats or British Labourites, and the conservative wing to Italian Christian democrats or American neoliberals, solely on the basis of relative political positioning. Such reasoning reintroduces the very weaknesses of referential delimitation, unless one identifies common substantive elements within each 'family', which returns us to the central question: which elements?

Nogueira Pinto is among the authors most intent on identifying such elements. For him<sup>15</sup>, the right is characterised by anthropological pessimism (the rejection of Rousseau's idea of the natural goodness of humanity), anti-utopianism, anti-egalitarianism ('the right to difference'), defense of property, anti-economicism, nationalism, organicism (the primacy of the concrete historical community and natural societies over the individual), and elitism. The left, by contrast, is defined by anthropological optimism, utopianism, rationalism, evolutionary linearity, egalitarianism, economicism, socialism, and internationalism<sup>16</sup>.

It seems evident, however, that by enumerating such an extensive set of attributes, Nogueira Pinto effectively confines both concepts to specific ideological sectors. Contemporary political reality reveals right-wing movements that are anthropologically optimistic, individualistic, economicist, and even anti-nationalist (e.g., libertarian or anarcho-capitalist currents), as well as left-wing movements that are pragmatic, pro property, nationalist, and not necessarily socialist (e.g., radical liberalism, republicanism, social democracy). His typology thus equates the left with socialist internationalism and the right with conservatism—an association that appears both restrictive and historically outdated. Nonetheless, his contrast between egalitarianism and the "right to difference" is of particular analytical value.

In this respect, Bobbio's argument proves decisive. He reviews several possible distinguishing criteria: Jean Lapouze associates the right with religion, the sacred, hierarchy, and traditionalism, and the left with atheism, the profane, egalitarian order, and progressivism<sup>17</sup>; Dino Cofrancesco contrasts the right's defense of tradition with the left's aspiration to emancipation<sup>18</sup>; Elisabetta Galeotti links the right to 'hierarchy' and the left to

6 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 134-146; Koselleck, R. Futuro passado. Contraponto, 2006.

7 Saraiva, A. J. Dicionário crítico. Editorial Quercó, 1984.

8 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015.

9 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018.

10 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994.

11 Saraiva, A. J. Dicionário crítico. Editorial Quercó, 1984, p. 85-86.

12 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 44.

13 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 41-42.

14 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 46-49.

15 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018, p. 111-115.

16 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018, p.115-123.

17 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 59-61.

18 Dino Cofrancesco apud Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 63-68.

‘equality’<sup>19</sup>; and Marco Revelli, while acknowledging that ‘right’ and ‘left’ lack definitive intrinsic meaning, also underscores the inequality–equality axis<sup>20</sup>. Bobbio<sup>21</sup> ultimately privileges this last criterion as the most rigorous means of distinguishing the two political fields. The left, he argues, is egalitarian—regarding inequalities among human beings as socially constructed and therefore eliminable—whereas the right is inegalitarian, viewing such inequalities as natural, positive, and thus ineliminable.

Accordingly, political agents traditionally associated with the left have sought to mitigate or abolish political, social, and economic inequalities, though not always with equal emphasis on each dimension. Radical liberals prioritized political inequality; progressives of the ‘New Left’ focused on gender, sexual, and racial inequalities; orthodox Marxists targeted economic inequality. In general terms, however, the left has represented the field that most consistently values equality in each historical period, even when privileging distinct forms of it. Conversely, the right has tended to embody the anti-egalitarian camp. The relative weight assigned to political, social, and economic equality varies greatly: whereas political equality was the principal concern of absolutists, and social equality of conservatives more broadly, libertarian and ‘meritocratic’ liberal currents distinguish themselves from the left mainly with respect to economic equality. Taken together, the right remains, to varying degrees, the more inegalitarian field.

While the ‘equality criterion’ appears most robustly supported by both specialised scholarship and historical-political reality, we must nevertheless recall the importance of contextual specificity and conceptual evolution. The meanings of ‘left’ and ‘right’ have not remained constant across time: they differed markedly in 1834, 1924, 1974, and 2024. In this respect, as previously indicated, Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*—the History of Concepts—offers an especially valuable methodological tool for delimiting and historicizing these categories.

### The Importance of Conceptual History

‘Left’ and ‘right’ are, above all, concepts—abstract, generalising, and at times difficult to operationalise. When we frame them within a broader perspective—namely, within the historical investigation of concepts, ideas, and political thought—we encounter a rich body of scholarship proposing methodological paths through which to interpret our object of study. In this article, I highlight the contribution of *Begriffsgeschichte* (the History of Concepts) to the analysis of this problem, particularly as developed in the intellectual project of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck.

In this methodological framework, the historian focuses on certain terms of the social and political lexicon—words which, due to their centrality, widespread (and often instrumental) use, and their need for theoretical elaboration, have acquired special complexity and density, forming a “polyphony of meanings” that must be deciphered for a totalising understanding. Among the examples cited by the author<sup>22</sup> are “State,” “class,” and “History.”

These words possess, even prior to the layers of reflection built around them, an etymological origin—a primary lexical sense anchored in language—that must be disentangled. This interdisciplinary work enables a holistic view of the historical trajectory of the term’s use, preceding even the contemporary meanings subsequently attributed to it.

Reflecting on the origins of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ allows us to better situate the political “re-signification” of these two words. This historical-linguistic trajectory may be traced through successive ‘generations’ of dictionaries and encyclopedias— indispensable sources for following semantic evolution—as well as through other materials not necessarily academic in nature, such as correspondence, the press, and literary works, which often best reveal the socially attributed meanings of the terms and the dynamics of their mutations. Through this diachronic process, it becomes possible to grasp the mechanisms of continuity, change, and innovation in meaning.

Evidently, it is impossible to engage with the History of Concepts without adopting a transnational perspective, while maintaining an umbilical connection to the linguistic and idiomatic reality under examination. It would be as impossible to trace a history of the concepts of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in Portugal without referring to their ‘re-signification’ during the implementation of Liberalism and their absorption into the Portuguese political vocabulary, as it would be to ignore the diverse etymological origins of the concept across distinct European linguistic contexts.

As Koselleck himself argues<sup>23</sup>, the concept assumes a dual function— simultaneously as a linguistic phenomenon and as an indicator of the surrounding reality. The word no longer exists merely as a linguistic fact but serves as a catalyst for new possibilities of interpretation and reconfiguration of that reality. The German historian illustrates this through the example of the term *Bund* (translated as “league” or “federation”), which, in its specific historical context, redefined the possibilities of political union, expanding the ‘horizons’ of thought by allowing for the formulation and naming of a new model of political organisation. Thus, concept and content coexist in a tense yet inseparable relationship.

The relationship between text and context also emerges as central to the historical interpretation of concepts. Koselleck<sup>24</sup> conceives it across multiple levels— the paragraph within the context of the page or chapter; these within the context of the work; the work within the author’s intellectual production; and that production within its broader intellectual milieu (itself comprising regional, national, and transnational layers). The interrelation between the text (the written sources through which the concept under analysis may be observed) and the context in which it was produced is therefore essential to discerning the true meaning of the word employed. Indeed, Koselleck<sup>25</sup> controversially asserts that no concept is ever conceived theoretically and abstractly in exactly the same way twice—each ‘re-signification’ occurs within a unique spatio-temporal situation, in a specific context that decisively

19 Elisabetta Galeotti apud Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 68-71.

20 Marco Revelli apud Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 71-75.

21 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 84.

22 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 135.

23 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 136.

24 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 137.

25 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 138.

alters the interpretation of what is recorded in written sources, even when those sources appear formally identical to others produced under different circumstances.

The “History of Concepts” thus allows us to consider the common usage of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ in defining political fields beyond purely theoretical or politological criteria. In the absence of a universal and objective standard by which to clarify their boundaries, historical-conceptual investigation may assist us in understanding what “the left” and “the right” have represented in each specific epoch and geography.

### Left and Right in Portugal

Having proceeded in broad terms thus far, we now turn to a concrete case: whom do we include in our study when we define, as an object of historical investigation, the left or the right in Portugal? We follow the clues provided by the equality criterion and by Conceptual History to reach a conclusion.

The dichotomy entered the political lexicon mainly during the 1830s, in the context of the Portuguese Civil War. As early as 1834, a report from the Ministry of Finance identified the political leanings of Treasury officials as “left,” “right” (the latter divided between “Miguelists” or “fierce Miguelists”, among other curious designations referring to supporters of royal absolutism), and “doubtful”<sup>26</sup>. By 1835, references to a parliamentary division between “left” and “right” also began to appear more systematically. We may therefore assume that both absolutist monarchists and moderate liberals (“Chartists”) coexisted within the Portuguese right. The heterogeneity of these political fields was thus present from their very origins.

On the right, we may include the intellectual traditions rooted in absolutism and Chartism—whether among the conservatives or “Regenerators” of the Constitutional Monarchy, or among the ultramontane sectors. With the advent of the Republic and the ascendancy of the republican left, the right came to encompass conservative republicans, constitutional monarchists, integralist monarchists, and Catholic traditionalists—forming, in part, the political and social base of the military dictatorship of 1926–1933 and the subsequent *Estado Novo* regime.

Under this anti-parliamentary and authoritarian period, the left was relegated to an oppositional role, while the regime itself revolved around a constellation of right-wing currents—from the national-syndicalist *Camisas Azuis* to the liberal right of the regime’s final years, passing through fascist, *maurassian*, and conservative factions, as well as constitutional and integralist monarchists. With the fall of the *Estado Novo* and the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75, the right assumed a politically and socially minor position, concentrated mainly among the liberals of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) and the Christian democrats of the *Centro Democrático Social* (CDS), alongside marginal far-right circles of *caetanist* or *spínolist* inspiration.

As for the left, its roots lie in the *Vintista* tradition (radical liberals), precursors to the ‘Setembrists’, already imbued with democratic and social tendencies. Within this ‘dynastic left’ we find progressive sectors, including the ‘professorial socialists’

of *Vida Nova* at the end of the nineteenth century. Politically, the left also brought together republicans and socialists—the heirs of early nineteenth-century liberal radicalism—as well as anarcho-communists. After 1910, the republican left of the *Partido Democrático* became virtually hegemonic within the republican political system, despite the more collaborative opposition of the socialists and the more confrontational stance of anarcho-syndicalists and maximalist-communists.

During the 1926–1974 dictatorship, the left—largely forced into illegality—was represented by *revirahista* militants, members of the *Seara Nova* circle, followers of Delgado, socialists, and progressive Catholics, though the leading role in opposition activity was occupied by the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP). In the regime’s final phase, distinct circles of radical left activism began to emerge, primarily influenced by Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, and Trotskyist currents, which expanded further after the April 25th Revolution of 1974. In this post-1974 left, alongside these derivative movements, we find the main currents represented by socialists, social democrats, and communists.

### Conclusion

This delimitation is, above all, a working hypothesis that requires confirmation through broader historical-conceptual research. In writing this article, I have encountered a notable absence of theoretical discussion of this question in the Portuguese context. Scholars have studied ‘the left’ and ‘the lefts,’ ‘the right’ and ‘the rights’; yet what does each of these political fields represent? There exists no critical debate, grounded in Political Theory’s conceptualisation of left and right, concerning who and what has belonged to each of these two greats political ‘families’.

This article has sought to outline some initial principles of response. If its conclusions provoke debate, reflection, or even disagreement, its objective will have been achieved—at least by fostering a clearer delimitation of the left and the right in Portugal, capable of guiding political and intellectual historians in their future research ■

26 Sousa, F. A esquerda e a direita em 1834: Os empregados do Tesouro Público. Separata da Revista Bracara Augusta, 32(73–74/85–86), 1978, p. 9–12.