

Understanding and Engaging in Political Discussion

Christopher Celaya – April 2021

Center on American Politics, University of Denver

Purpose

This handout is intended to provide nuance and context to many of the contemporary politicized terms permeating the media, social media, and the discussions of elites. For each term, I have provided a dictionary definition (Merriam Webster, unless otherwise indicated), followed by some contextual information, and then a discussion of how the term is used. This is not a comprehensive list but should serve to demonstrate that most political terms are replete with nuance, subtext, context, and history that makes their causal rhetorical use problematic for productive and earnest political discussion.

This handout also presents some best practices for how to deconstruct political terminology for optimal understanding and use. Also note, there is no universal agreement on the meaning of any term, and it is very often the case that when people disagree about terms, they are talking past each other. That is also true of the terms and correspondent information listed below. This handout is an attempt to synthesize a vast array of academic perspectives on what these terms mean, how they are used, and the meaning behind such use, but any assertions made here can be challenged because the nature of language is that it is malleable, ambiguous, and implicative, and the people who use language are diverse, innovative, and inconsistent. Thus, it is often more important to try to understand what someone specifically means when they use a particular term rather than to judge their accuracy and earnestness based on how well their understanding of a topic comports with your own.

Considerations

Definitions: While dictionary definitions are an important starting point for understanding political terminology, there are a few points to consider. *First*, dictionary definitions often have multiple meanings and so it might be unclear which dictionary definition someone is using when they talk about a term. However, simply asking for clarification can often resolve any misunderstandings. *Second*, definitions can be ambiguous, or in other words, the words making up a definition may or may not imply a certain meaning of a term. For example, one definition of “**democracy**” is “government by the people.” Does that mean a majority of the people? If so, then one could argue that the United States’ presidential elections in 2000 and 2016 were not democratic because the winner of the popular vote lost the election. But “the people” is left unspecified so it is not clear whether “**democracy**” demands majoritarian decision making. Does democracy mean all the people, or in other words, that everyone should have some share of political power? If so, the United States is again in a democratic deficit as many states prevent felons from voting, children aren’t allowed to vote, etc. Because the definition itself is ambiguous, it can lead to a lot of disagreement when people are attempting to categorize politicized terms (and see below for more on categorizing). *Third*, people often appropriate political terms to change or broaden the term’s definition, and often the social understanding of these terms changes as well. Dictionary definitions can fail to keep pace with these social changes, leading to unnecessary conflict over the meaning of a term.

What: When trying to understand a political term you might want to consider the intention behind the use of the term; *what* meaning is the person using the term trying to convey? Rather than to argue the semantics or whether a definition is appropriate to a term, it is often better to try to understand what someone means when they use that term. For example, the term “**aristocrat**” originally meant a most capable and most virtuous person. However, over time the term came to encompass ideas of nobility, royalty, wealth, snobbishness, etc. Merely relying on the dictionary definition of a term and ignoring other potential social meanings can lead to unnecessary semantic arguments more focused on the meaning of words than the actual substance of the intended discussion. This can often be tricky for the aforementioned reasons. If you are discussing politics directly, this can be achieved by asking your fellow interlocutor questions and repeating back to them your understanding of what they are saying until you are both in agreement that you share a common understanding. This can be harder to assess if you are hearing an elected official use a term or reading a news article that mentions a term. In those cases, there are further steps you can take to try to glean the meaning.

Who: You’ll want to know the character of the person or people *who* are using the term. Are they likely to have an agenda to convince you to act in a certain way, such as a political candidate that wants your vote? What are the incentives for people sharing the information in the first place? For example, the media, generally speaking, have several incentives motivating their behavior. Most media is profit-driven, meaning that they, to some degree, must at least provide enough content that people will consume, which usually means that it has to be entertaining, enticing, or riveting in some way. Media organizations are also incentivized to maintain a certain reputation. This can mean a reputation for being factually accurate, or it can mean a reputation for being ideologically consistent, such as in a liberal or conservative way. There are usually context cues you can use to determine such things. There are other helpful tools such as media fact-checkers and bias-checkers that can also provide insights into the meaning behind what is being said. Every information broker does so for a reason, and it is often important to understand why people are sharing information in the first place to understand their use of a term. Academia has a whole other range of incentive structures that are much more directed toward being accurate and producing reputable research and much less toward profits, for example. Elected officials are incentivized by acquiring votes in order to maintain office and to inform their policy positions.

How: You will also want to look specifically at *how* the information is being presented. For example, it would be very difficult to provide a thorough accounting of a political issue in the limited space of a Tweet. News media organizations have shortened the length of their segments to maintain the attention of audiences, because shorter catchy soundbites are compelling to people, but they are unlikely to give you anything close to a complete picture of an issue. You’ll also want to look at the format of the conversation itself. Are people lecturing, debating, deliberating, chastising, pontificating, etc.? If a person or persons are part of a debate, they are automatically incentivized to pay attention and present only the arguments that are beneficial to their agenda, and to ignore or dismiss the ones that are harmful. A candidate for office at a campaign rally is likely to ignore context or nuance that will not help them get votes.

Range: When considering the issues themselves, be aware that most political terms have a range of meanings. Every item listed below describes a range of ideas, actions, behaviors, or systems rather than representing a binary. Often times when people disagree about a term they are actually disagreeing about the degree to which the term comports with an “**ideal type**”. In other words, people hold a

specific notion of the meaning of a term in their heads, and when people deviate from that notion it can lead to disagreement. For example, people will often say that the United States is not a democracy, but rather a Constitutional Republic, or any other permutation of political terms. But many people hold “**majoritarianism**,” the idea that the most popular votes wins the decision-making power, as the ideal type of democracy and conclude that since the United States is not strictly majoritarian, then it is not a democracy. But the United States is very much a democracy, it just happens to be a constitutional and representative democracy. More nuance about this issue can be found below which better illustrates the range between democracy and authoritarianism. It suffices to say that being aware that political concepts are often multidimensional can go a long way toward preventing communication breakdowns.

Categorizations: The very act of *categorizing* is an act of convenience to try to help us navigate the world, but it is also often a coarsening of reality. The United States *is* a democracy, but it is not *only* a democracy. And to some degree, every term on the list below applies to the United States. More importantly, again to some degree, every term on this list applies to every human civilization that has ever existed. There are virtually no pure ideal types in the social world because of the complexity of humans themselves, and the institutions they design are the result of that complexity. This isn’t to say that categorizations aren’t useful; in fact, categorization is the primary way the human brain organizes information and it is essential to our understanding of the world. But it is also very easy for the brain to too strongly associate a concept with a specific category and to ignore all the other categories it could belong to. And often, nefarious political actors will take advantage of this facet of human cognition to prime and frame information to spread a specific meaning of that information that might lack critical nuance or context for adequate understanding. It is important to realize that the universe does not create categories, people do. Instead of trying to engage in political discussion about categories (e.g. democracy, autocracy, etc.), instead demand that your fellow discussant be more specific so you can discuss concrete issues, not coarse categories. A simple “what do you mean by that” can go a long way.

Limitations: There are some instances where agreement can be essentially impossible. One instance is simply when people’s values differ. Even when two discussants can agree on the meaning of all the terms they are using, they still might come to different conclusions on the value or something. Sometimes this happens because one or both discussants are relying on a “**principle**,” or in other words, something they believe to be fundamentally true. This can be seen in discussions around the right to vote for felons. Some people simply think that it is proper to deny the right to vote to those who have violated certain serious laws, regardless of the consequences of that denial. Others simply believe that the right to vote should be guaranteed to every citizen, not necessarily because they think convicted felons will make better democratic decisions, but again on principle. There is no objective way to assess whether one principle is superior to another, and so it is very difficult to dissuade people from their principles. People are generally defensive of their principles, because they constitute a person’s understanding of the world, and human psychology is highly motivated to acquire and maintain an understanding of the world as it provides self-esteem. Instead, it is often better to try to understand *why* someone believes in the principles that they do to better understand their position. People are also more receptive to genuine inquisitiveness and when you show an interest in their beliefs it often leads to them being more receptive to your position as well. Alternatively, when you push to prove that your position is superior, this curtails interest and openness.

Another instance where agreement can become impossible is when an issue has good arguments on both sides. Again, this can happen even when all the discussants agree on the basic understanding of

the terms they are discussing. Consider a federal United States minimum wage increase. Academic research on the subject is not conclusive, generally finding that some people will benefit from an increase in the federal minimum wage, and others will be harmed. A raise in the minimum wage can help reverse economic inequality trends, and it can also be an unfair burden on states with very low costs of living. It can represent a dynamic change for the better, and at the same time a disruption that might make for painful short-term adjustments. Some people find the arguments for raising the minimum wage compelling, and other find that those arguments are not. Because it is often difficult or even impossible to objectively compare these kinds of costs and benefits, these types of instances are very similar to differences in principles; no objective conclusions can be made. This is not to say that honest discussion about terms, policies, institutions, people, principles, etc. are impossible. But it is important to realize that many of these types of conversations are subject more to individual judgment rather than some kind of objective truth, and signaling to your fellow discussant that you recognize the importance of their judgment can make for a more productive discussion, even if the discussion does not change anyone's mind.

Finally, some conversations will never find agreement because one or more of the participants is not interested in an earnest discussion to begin with. There are numerous reasons why this might be the case. Some people just want to stir up controversy or to be provocative, some people just want to win an argument and do not really care about the substance, and some people just do not think that people who disagree with them are worth listening to or engaging with. These types of behaviors are also often related to people's need for self-esteem. Sometimes demonstrating that you are a good-faith discussant that is genuinely interested in what they have to say can create an interest in earnest discussion for them, but mimicking their behavior will usually lead to them entrenching into their counterproductive strategies. Be aware of the amount of effort you are putting into a conversation, and if you find that it is not rewarding you can always move on. It is also important to be aware that we are all subject to these impulses to use conversation to bolster our self-esteem, and it can be very difficult, especially in real-time during a discussion, to realize why we are doing what we are doing. Sometimes it can be useful to take a cognitive step back, to assess what you are trying to get out of a conversation, and to determine whether the path you are on is likely to get you there.

LIST OF SELECTED TERMS

Socialism

Dictionary Definition:

Socialism: Any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods

Socialism in Context:

Generally speaking, socialism means that ownership and management of the economy are done collectively. One helpful way to think about this is that every citizen would own an equal share of every business, instead of the current system where each business has different, and typically wealthier than the average citizen, shareholders. Socialist theory is largely derived from the works of Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, who were concerned that market-based systems led to the commoditization of laborers, or in other words, that workers would be treated like any other tools used in production to be

exploited then discarded when no longer useful. Two infamous attempts at socialism have given Americans a negative perception of the system: The USSR under Joseph Stalin and China under Mao Zedong. Both of these attempts had little in common with actual socialist theory as they attempted to proxy collective ownership with state ownership, and ultimately became frequently oppressive one-party states more akin to authoritarianism (see below) than anything representing Marx-Engels socialism. These systems are often used as example of “**Communism**,” a kind of corrupted socialism that proxies for collective ownership with authoritarian centralization, but it is important to note that Karl Marx also wrote the Communist Manifesto, and that was not his conceptualization of communism.

Political leaders and pundits frequently attempt to capitalize on the association between socialism and the oppressive one-party rule of Stalin and Mao to frighten voters away from efforts to manage social needs at the collective level, such as social security, universal health care, and efforts regulate businesses such as through increased minimum wages and other worker protections. Recently, advocates for collective management have taken on the mantle of socialism as a badge of pride, and terms like “**Democratic Socialism**” are used to try to distinguish Red-Scare types of socialism from more successful attempts at collective management, such as in other advanced Democratic nations. Among advanced democracies, the United States is on the very low end of what most people consider socialist. Every advanced democracy is characterized by market competition and private ownership, and while they all manage and regulate some parts of their economies, they are nothing like what Marx envisioned.

Range of Uses:

Socialism is an exceptionally flexible term because it is largely a theory about an end, rather than a means, and as such there are essentially limitless ways to try to implement a socialist system. Socialism is contrasted with a broad range of systems that fall under the umbrella of “**Capitalism**”. Capitalism is defined as “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.” Pundits and politicians tend to treat the terms “**socialism**” and “**capitalism**” as binary and mutually exclusive types of systems, but in actuality almost every government on Earth has some mix of socialistic and capitalistic elements.

Those intending to use the term “**socialism**” in a negative way want to link it to one-party rule, authoritarianism, social and economic oppression, and the elimination of economic markets. Those intending to use the term in a positive way want to link it to social and economic welfare, democratic decision-making, and as a correction to market inefficiencies. While there are some few genuine believers in the collective ownership and management of the means of production, the vast majority of people who use the term are not usually addressing socialism but elements that may or may not be found in a socialist system. For example, socialism does not require strong state rule (and in fact Marx was skeptical of the need for governments at all), though the most famous examples of socialism did tend in that direction. Socialism also needn’t provide any kind of welfare, though countries most often deemed socialist do tend to have a greater emphasis on welfare. But because socialism is such a broad term, and because use of the term is being broadened further as it is politicized, one would do well to get more specific information about what someone means when they claim there is a problem or a benefit from socialism before determining whether their concerns are justified, or whether they are just using the term to prime support or opposition without critical thinking.

Authoritarianism

Dictionary Definition:

Authoritarian: of, relating to, or favoring a concentration of power in a leader or an elite not constitutionally responsible to the people.

Authoritarianism in Context:

As with most of the terms on this list, authoritarianism exists on one end of a scale of things, rather than as a binary. This range is defined on one end by how much power is vested in a central body independent of public will, and on the other end by how much power is distributed to the population as a whole. As such, authoritarianism lies across the scale from democracy, but it is important to note that there are a vast range of potential political systems that lie between these two ideal types, and no system has perfected either democratic or authoritarian rule. Some authoritarian systems nevertheless pose as democracies without actually allocating political power to their citizens. One example of this is when some countries hold elections but prevent any competing parties from having any real chance of winning, either through intimidation, institutional blocks, misinformation, or especially by blocking essential liberties that are generally considered necessary for democracy such as the ability to organize, speak freely, and to have access to a free press. These types of systems are called “**illiberal Democracies**”.

Authoritarian systems are often broken up into different types, but generally scholars break them into either personalistic (dictator), one-party rule, or military regimes, but the common trait they all share is that the regime hoards power and minimizes how much is shared with the people. Scholars use several measures that categorize countries somewhere on a scale between democracy and authoritarianism such as the Polity IV Project (soon to be the Polity V Project), Freedom House, and the Democracy Index. These different organizations measure a variety of different characteristics of nations to determine where they might lie on such a scale, and while each organization measures different characteristics, they generally correlate well with each other which lends to their credibility. Polity IV focuses largely on political institutions, and has never given the US less than a perfect score. However, Freedom House, which focuses more on individual rights and protections, rates the US at 83/100 (where the UK ranks 93/100 and Sweden ranks 100/100) and the Democracy Index has now ranked the United States as a “flawed democracy” (7.92/10). This suggests that the US isn’t a perfect, or even among the best, democracy, but also that the US isn’t close to authoritarianism at this time. Because the United States has such strong democratic institutions, and because power is so decentralized, it is somewhat resilient to these types of pushes. That said, there are two characteristics of the American system that make it more vulnerable to an authoritarian move, all other things equal. First, rigorous social science has shown that presidential systems (systems with an independent executive office) are more likely to backslide into instability than parliamentary systems. Second, our federal system provides a fault line over which the federal and the state governments compete for power, and this has already once led to an egregious threat to our system in the form of a Civil War. And any time a government collapses, there is always the opportunity for those seeking power to capitalize on such openings. That said, scholarship also suggests that wealthier countries are more robust against this type of backsliding, again all things being equal.

Range of Uses:

Authoritarianism is primarily used to describe two separate phenomena in the United States, and in both situations it is used negatively. One use of the term is to describe an encroachment on individual liberties for the sake of collective liberties. This concern is very similar to those who use the term

“socialism” as a critique; it is an aversion to collective ownership and management of economic activity. A common target labeled authoritarian is taxation, especially when it is used for redistributive purposes. However, in the US context, because the American institutions are generally free and fair and democratic, this is somewhat a perversion of the term authoritarian because it does not represent a shift of the power from the people to the central body. Another way to think about it is that if the American people don’t like a particular tax, they can vote to replace the elected officials that voted for that tax to have them removed. As long as that democratic option exists, a movement toward collective liberties and away from individual ones is not actually authoritarianism in a literal sense. The other American phenomenon people describe as authoritarian is closer to the actual definition, and this is when it is used to describe efforts to limit, denude, or otherwise subvert the democratic system, especially as it might favor one political party. Activities such as gerrymandering, limiting or making more difficult the franchise, knowingly miseducating the public, coercing elected officials, or otherwise inciting violence to gain political power are attempts to hoard power into a central body away from the electorate, and as such, when successful, they represent a move toward authoritarianism.

Minoritarianism

Lexico Definition:

Minority Rule: A system of government in which the governing party of a country represents only a small proportion of the overall population.

Colloquial Definition:

Minoritarian: Minoritarian systems lie between authoritarian systems, which vest their power in a single body, and democratic systems, which vest their power in the public. Political power and influence in minoritarian systems typically belongs only to a specific class or to limited classes of people and is exerted over the rest of society. This can refer to a government that is intentionally designed to empower a minority of its citizens, or an ostensible democracy that in reality expands the power of the minority at the cost of the majority.

Minoritarianism in context:

When Aristotle wrote “Politics,” he theorized that governments can come in three different types: the rule of the one, the rule of the few, or the rule of the many. For Aristotle, government was just when it looked out for the best interests of its citizens, and he felt that each of these three types of government could do good or evil. A fully authoritarian leader with complete power could either be a benevolent ruler or a tyrant. A minoritarian system could consist of technocratic elites that know and do best for the people, or of a corrupt class that rules only for itself. A democratic system could either be constitutional and for the good of all, or a mob filled with populist majorities interested in personal spoils. Aristotle’s conception relates to another contemporary political science term: “**Responsive Authoritarianism**”. Despite not sharing political power with their citizens, some authoritarian systems do nevertheless look out for the interests of their citizens in a paternalistic sense. But since the citizens have no real power, the responsiveness of the authority in charge is not always guaranteed and can backslide.

As a democracy, Americans have mixed feelings about the power of the minority. On the one hand, most Americans feel comfortable with the political system laid out in the American Constitution, and that system gives a lot of power for minority groups to maintain the status quo by the various checks and balances inherent to the system. At the same time, Americans would likely not tolerate a system

that disproportionately allocates political power to a specific and consistent minority of citizens. A contemporary issue in American politics illustrate this point: the Electoral College. Despite general support of the constitutional design of the American system, many voters are now calling into question the validity of the Electoral College because it is consistently and measurably biased in favor of Republican candidates for president. In other words, in multiple recent elections, Democrats have had to win significantly more than a bare majority of the voters in order to secure a presidential win, and twice in as many decades Republicans have received less votes than Democrats and still won the presidency. While many political theorists and pundits think this is a major problem, the fact that presidential races in the United States are generally very close means that even when there is a minoritarian victory for the presidency, it is much less pronounced than other minoritarian systems. Conceptualizing a scale between authoritarianism on one end, and democracy on the other, minoritarian systems would fall somewhere between, and the more minoritarian they are (i.e. when less and less people wield power), they closer they come to the authoritarian end of the scale.

Range of Uses:

Aside from biased electoral institutions like the Electoral College, Americans don't often use the specific term "**minoritarian**" but rather focus on the specific groups in society that have disproportional political power. In the American context, the most common minoritarian culprit is the wealthy class, which when in power is called the "**Oligarchy**". There are a number of reasons why scholars and citizens alike are concerned with the threat of an American Oligarchy. Most directly, money has influence in American politics, and as such wealthier Americans do have some increased political influence in certain contexts. Wealthier people can be more influential in elections. They can contribute more to the candidates that they want to win, they can advertise more for their preferred candidate, and they can use their resources to educate people about policies in ways that are beneficial to them. They can also be more influential through the use of interest groups. Wealthier people are both more able to organize and more likely to participate in interest groups, which perform a great number of lobbying activities in order to pressure/entice politicians to vote favorably such as raising campaign funds, organizing voters, educating voters, testifying before Congress, drafting bills, and litigating. Wealthier people can be more influential at the ballot box. Wealthier people generally have greater material resources which makes voting easier, such as a vehicle to transport them to their polling place, and they generally have greater educational resources to better enable them to understand and vote on policies and candidates that best serve them. This results in voting rates much higher for wealthier Americans than poor ones. Despite these biases, ultimately our head executive (the president) and our legislature (the House and the Senate) are elected by the people, and so while the wealthy currently have disproportionate influence, they do not necessarily have more political power because their votes do not count for more than those who are poorer than they are.

Another realm of minoritarian concerns come in the form of conspiracy theories. A major contemporary example of this comes from a conspiratorial personality known as "Q", who started a movement called QAnon, which believes that a secret deep-state organization of Satan-worshipping pedophiles actually runs the government. Other examples include concerns about the Freemasons, the Illuminati, the Zionists, and many more. However, for those willing to investigate, American governance is actually quite transparent and if one follows the paper trail from the ballot box to the legislation that gets passed to the implementation of that legislation one would find that there is little room for another

secret minoritarian organization to accomplish anything of significance from behind the scenes of American governance.

Nationalism

Dictionary Definition:

Nationalism: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.

Nationalism in Context:

To understand nationalism, it is first important to distinguish between a nation and a state. The state is the structure and institutions that make up rules of a society, or a governing structure. A nation, on the other hand, is a culturally homogenous people that live within a state. It is possible to have more than one nation in a state, and the term for this is “**multinational state**.” Canada is an example of a multinational state, largely comprised of English-speaking Canadians, French-speaking Canadians, and Indigenous Canadians. Nationalism therefore is the belief that one’s own nation should take primacy over other nations in a state or other political organization. A common and concerning example of a nationalist movement is the rise in “**White Supremacy**” in the United States, which describes political and social acts and beliefs that seek to restore past American racial orders where White Americans were dominant to the exclusion of other groups in America. However, it is important to note that despite the name White supremacist movements are not universally supported by White Americans, and in fact only a small majority of White Americans are active in these types of movements. Though according to law enforcement, White supremacy organizations are increasingly active. White supremacy is also referred to as White nationalism.

At its most extreme, nationalists will push for something called a “**nation-state**,” which is a state that has only one nation, or in other words an entirely homogenous population. Nationalism is distinct from but similar to the concept of “**Patriotism**,” which is defined as “love for or devotion to one’s country.”

Range of Uses:

Nationalism is generally perceived to be an anti-social belief system as it seeks for one group in society to dominate over others. Nationalism is not synonymous with mere in-group love, but rather is a preference for in-group dominance. Nationalism often primes people to think of the National Socialist Party of WWII Germany, also known as the Nazi Party. The Nazi Party is one of the most famous examples of the potential threats of nationalism. Nazi ideology centered on pan-Germanism and it considered Aryans to be a “master race.” This ideology led to multiple genocides in the process of attempting to create a pure German nation-state. A political system characterized by nationalism, strict social control, and centralized (authoritarian) power is also known as “**Fascism**.” The political left in the United States often uses the term fascism to describe nationalist movements on the political right, but the right also uses the term to refer to the desire for increased government control on the political left. While it is true that the left wants to place more responsibility in the hands of the central government, and it is true that there is growing nationalist sentiment on the right, neither of these have been implemented into the US system of governance to merit labeling the US government fascist at this time. Nationalism can also coincide with something called “**Populism**,” a broad term describing social movements driven by popular unrest, and often following a personalistic or charismatic leader.

Populism can be targeted at any group in society, but it is most often focused on political elites. A recent historical example of populist sentiment was President Donald Trump's call to "drain the swamp." Nationalism and populism are often mutually reinforcing movements as they seek to undermine the status quo balance of power in favor of acquiring more power for their own groups. When nationalistic groups in the United States argue that their culture is the only true American culture, this is called "**Ascriptive Americanism.**" Ascriptive Americanism posits that those who do not adhere to the dominant culture in America are not truly Americans, and is often the basis of "**Racism**" (See below).

Racism

Dictionary Definition:

- 1) A belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race; behavior or attitudes that reflect and foster this belief.
- 2) The systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another.

Racism in Context:

As with many creatures on Earth, humans are biologically inclined to seek membership in groups. There are clear evolutionary and social advantages to group membership. Groups are often greater than the sums of their parts, meaning they can accomplish more collectively. Groups can benefit from economies of scale, better providing welfare than individual effort. Groups can overcome various types of collective action problems, especially when group members are especially passionate about their groups. And over time, humans have developed neurological reward systems both for individual success as well as for group success. For example, recent research has shown that dopamine shows a strong correlation with self-reported increases in social network connectivity. Thus when trying to understand the rationality of human behavior, it is often instructive to look to their group memberships in addition to their personal circumstances; people are divided between serving their individual welfare and their group welfare. How our group membership plays out is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. Social psychology research has identified a phenomenon called the Minimal Group Paradigm, which basically finds that it is quite easy to get people to identify with groups, even if those groups are arbitrarily chosen and members are randomly assigned. One study asked research participants to say which of two different paintings they preferred. Regardless of which painting they chose, they were randomly told that they were a fan of an artist named Klee or an artist named Kandinsky. They then looked at whether "Klee" subjects were willing to discriminate against "Kandinsky" subjects, and vice versa. The researchers found that these group members were more inclined to favor their own group and to derogate the out-group. Other research has shown that experimental subjects were actually willing to hurt their bottom line (the amount of money they could make from participating in the experiment) to get a relative advantage over contrasting arbitrary and random groups. Other research has shown that when groups are in competition (such as political or economic competition) and when they differ about moral issues (such as political or religious issues) groups can become hostile toward each other. These facets of human psychology make for an unfortunate breeding ground for racial discrimination, or "**racism.**" Because racism is often based on a perceived moral order (e.g. my race should be at the top of the social hierarchy), and because race is so heavily politicized in the United States, racism is one of the more pernicious forms of intergroup discrimination. Many of the White nationalist movements

discussed above can trace their origins all the way back to American slavery in the early 1600s, but of course intergroup discrimination is not limited to Black and White racial groups. Other racial groups discriminate against each other, as do non-racial groups. People discriminate on the basis of gender, ideology, sexual preference, religion, class, perceived beauty or popularity, etc. But the severity of these other forms of discrimination more often than not pale in comparison to the historical discrimination Black Americans have faced.

However, not all intergroup interaction has to be negative, and corroborated research has consistently shown support for what social scientists call the Contact Hypothesis. Academic work has identified the four conditions necessary for groups to coexist peacefully: the groups must have equal status in society; the groups must have common goals; the groups must operate cooperatively as opposed to competitively; and the groups must have the support of their organizational structure and society at large for group cooperation. Other work (including some of my own) shows that other factors, such as whether groups are integrated or segregated in geographic space, can also affect whether they are likely to peacefully coexist (segregation makes discrimination easier).

Range of Uses:

As with most of the terms on this list, racism refers to a vast range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, as opposed to a binary state. At one end of the spectrum people will claim that merely not actively fighting against racism is itself a form of racism, and at the other end you have people who think that as long as there is no legally mandated racism then there is no social problem. Scholars have employed several research methods to try to measure racism, from increasingly complex surveys to something called “**Implicit Association Tests (IATs)**.” IATs attempt to quantify discrimination by measuring how quickly people are likely to associate different groups with positive or negative terms. While there is much controversy about the limitations of such measures, researchers have shown that IATs are at least better predictors of discriminatory tendencies than self-reported measures such as on surveys.

There are also specific realms of racism that people discuss. One focus of academics and political leaders alike is something called “**Institutional Racism**,” also called “**Systemic Racism**.” Institutional racism is when racist attitudes and behaviors affect the institutions of our society, and also when institutions incentivize and facilitate racist attitudes and behaviors, notably in realms like criminal justice, housing, finance, education, welfare, and voting. Institutional racism leads to discrimination and unequal treatment across racial groups within these types of institutions, for example, overwhelming evidence shows that Black defendants receive harsher penalties than White defendants for the same crimes when convicted in court. Another infamous example of institutional racism was a process called “**redlining**,” which generally refers to the discriminatory denial of goods and services to particular communities. One of the more egregious practices of redlining occurred in the financial sector, where banks redlined Black applicants for home loans, limiting their ability to move out of poverty and to locations with better jobs. Those who are not negatively affected by institutional racism are often described as “**Privileged**,” and the differential sentencing between White and Black defendants is one example of what people call “**White privilege**.” This does not mean that every single White person will be treated better than every single Black person as institutions are populated by humans, and behaviors are idiosyncratic. Rather it means that on average, when it comes to sentencing, you will be more likely to get a favorable sentence if you are White than if you are Black. Not every institution is plagued with institutional racism, but many important ones in the United States are and thus it has become a politicized issue that elected officials offer different policies on.

Another realm of racism people express concern about is something called “**Reverse Racism.**” This is usually in response to efforts to address past and ongoing racism by advantaging the previously disadvantaged group, incurring a cost to everyone else, such as through taxation and redistribution or affirmative action. Many argue that it isn’t fair that they should be held responsible for injustices that they are not inflicting. Others counter-argue that without some form of redistributive justice some people will continue to unfairly benefit from their privilege to the continued disadvantage of those historically and currently discriminated against groups.

Yet another realm of concern about racism is in everyday interpersonal communication. While it is rare for individuals to make overtly racist statements, there is concern that people are “**Dog-Whistling**” racist speech. Racist dog-whistling is a type of speech where racist messaging is intended to be heard only by other people who share the same sentiment, and are tuned in to such messages. A recent example of this is Donald Trump’s continued insistence on calling SARS-Cov-2 (the current coronavirus) the “China virus,” ostensibly because it originated in China, but more likely as a signal to his supporters that they should consider China/Chinese people a problem. Whether or not that was the previous president’s intentions, we have seen across multiple measures that anti-Chinese and anti-Asian crimes have spiked in the last year. Dog whistling is not limited to race, of course, and another example from Donald Trump was his repeated calls for his supporters to protest the election results. Because he dog-whistled his orders instead of issuing them directly, Trump was able to maintain enough plausible deniability to claim he never actually incited violence, though potential litigation might eventually find otherwise.

Another contentious issue is the idea of being “**Colorblind**” as it applies to race. Proponents of colorblindness contend that so long as everyone doesn’t recognize or pay attention to racial differences, then society can be free of racism. Critics of this view argue that people have implicit biases (as roughly measured by the IAT) that mean that even if people are able to be consciously colorblind, it is impossible to be aware of all of the biases that we all are vulnerable to. They also argue that a colorblind approach ignores racism that has been institutionalized. How can we address institutional racism if we aren’t allowed to recognize race in the first place? There are also those who think that racial identity is important in its own right, and that colorblindness would diminish that racial identity.

But beyond these specific realms, many people use the term racism to describe individuals as having racist attitudes and conducting racist behaviors. Claims of racism are rising. Part of this is likely due to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has brought a spotlight to bear on issues of systematic and individual racism (much like the #MeToo movement led to an increase in women reporting sexual harassment) and has made it easier to discuss racism and for those discussions to be taken more seriously. The range of activities defined as racist are also increasing, in part because it is becoming more common and acceptable for victims to discuss these issues, but also as academic research sheds new light on how racism gets institutionalized and practiced in new ways.

It is important to note both that the United States has a painful and ongoing history of racism, but also that the United States has made steady, if frustratingly slow, progress for centuries. This by no means suggests that we have conquered racism in the United States; because of the neuroscientific and psychological components of racism, it is a particularly pernicious and stubborn thorn in America’s side. But politicians, activists, and scholars continue to work on these issues to continue to push the progress even further. It is also important to note that racism is not limited to the United States, and is prevalent, in some degree, in every single country on Earth.

Imperialism

Dictionary Definition:

The policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas.

Imperialism in Context:

Imperialism has existed since the first city states attempted to dominate their neighbors well over four thousand years ago, and it continues to this day. Early imperialism was characterized by wars between city-states culminating in moderately sized regional empires. Modern imperialist efforts have been stifled by “**Globalization**,” which refers to the increasing economic, cultural, technological, and population interconnectedness between states. Globalization has led to economic and military cooperation between regional blocks via treaties such as NATO, and worldwide through such organizations as the UN. By working together, collectives of nations are much more effective at disincentivizing imperial ambitions, and efforts at imperialism are largely limited to opportunistic limited expansions that the imperial nation hopes will fly under the international community’s radar. An example of this is Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Russia had long sought access to the shipping lanes of the Black Sea, which it lost when the Soviet Union broke apart and Ukraine splintered away. Russian President Vladimir Putin gambled that the international community would not risk escalation by attempting to resist Russian expansion, and so far his bet paid off. But those types of actions are now the exception, rather than the rule.

The longest-lived empires lasted for over two thousand years and the shortest a mere two years, with an average, across human history and across the globe, of about two hundred fifty years. The largest contiguous empire was the Mongol Empire from in late 13th and early 14th centuries and the largest total empire was the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The history of American imperialism is complicated. On the one hand, the United States has shown remarkable restraint in not giving in to potential imperialist impulses when it had great opportunities to do so, such as after each of the two World Wars. The official doctrine of the United States was one of non-intervention in international disputes for over a century, which became known as the Monroe doctrine. At the same time, Americans supported the notion of Manifest Destiny, or the idea that the United States should extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. This expansion represented a specific kind of imperialism called “**Colonialism**.” Unlike imperial nations in antiquity which mostly sought to bring other nations under their rule, colonialism fed American imperial ambitions by sending its own citizens out to occupy the targeted territory. There are two main types of colonialism (and several other less common types). The first is called “**exploitation colonialism**” or “**extractive colonialism**.” The primary goal of such an endeavor is to set up just enough infrastructure and institutions to extract and transport resources away from the colony and to the home nation (the home nation in this type of arrangement is also called a “**metropole**”). The other main type of colonialism, and the one practiced in pursuit of Manifest Destiny, is called “**settler colonialism**.” Settler colonialism involves mass-immigration to a colonized area in an effort to displace the existing population with the population of the metropole, thereby permanently expanding the borders of the home nation. In the American context, the indigenous tribal nations were displaced and their territory was incorporated into the United States. The United States officially endorsed this expansion with government programs such

as the various Homestead Acts, which promised land to Americans that moved west to work it, and was a remarkably effective colonization strategy.

Adding to the colonial imperialism across the continental United States, the US government also reversed course on the Monroe Doctrine, to some degree, by taking territory after the Spanish-American War, including Puerto Rico which is now a territory and Hawaii which is now a state. Still, the remnants of the policy of non-intervention resulted in a delayed US entry into WWII, and the United States even refused to join the League of Nations due to fears of involvement. WWI was largely seen as a failure of alliances to keep the peace, the alliances specifically were assessed to have escalated the conflict by bringing in additional parties to the fight. This stance on non-intervention once again reversed itself after WWII. Upon seeing Germany nearly successful in its nationalist imperialist agenda, the United States came to realize that it could not safely ignore the rest of the world, and it once again stepped on to the international scene. But US internationalism didn't look much like the imperialism of the past. Rather than colonize the spoils of WWII as had other imperialist powers, the US attempted to set up a stable system of state self-rule, rather than domination. Rather than classical imperialism or colonialism, the US instead bridged into a new frontier of expansion; diplomatic, economic and influence-based. The United States spearheaded the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to entice nations to act with good faith for their own economic well-being, rather than coercing them to do so. The United States was also instrumental in the formation of the UN, an international organization that incentivizes cooperation, development, and human welfare. The United States seated itself, along with four other nations, on the Security Council giving it amplified power, but membership in the UN is completely voluntary. The US, while harboring the strongest military on Earth by far, opted instead for a sort of economic empire rather than a military one, and it continues in this vein today. It is true that the United States occupies military bases around the world, but almost always at the pleasure of the host nation and to mutual benefit, rather than to coerce or otherwise intimidate the host nations. In all, the United States has not always managed to avoid the temptation of imperialism, but it has always existed with a strong thread of non-interventionism that has often restrained imperial actions when other nations would likely have taken advantage.

Range of Uses:

As imperialism has evolved to describe new phenomena, such as economic imperialism, so too has the use of the term evolved. A good example of this can be seen with what is known as the “**Washington Consensus.**” In order for nations to receive a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), they are obliged to commit to a set of principles laid out by the United States in order to qualify. These principles include items such as privatization (as opposed to more socialist policies), trade liberalization (eliminate tariffs, etc.), deregulation (also weakening collective management of the economy) etc. Nations in dire need of IMF funding often find these requirements coercive, disruptive, and antidemocratic (in that they constrain policy options that the people might prefer). This type of economic domination serves as a modern form of imperialism. The same could be said of international sanctions to elicit certain behaviors from some nations. But aside from these burgeoning uses of the term, imperialism also still refers to the kinds of activities that Russia has conducted in Crimea, Georgia, and other areas it has annexed.

Colonialism has also seen an evolution in the use of the term, mostly with regard to the racist undertones of colonization. While early attempts at colonization were often rationalized as a process to bring civilization to uncivilized parts of the world, recent critiques point out the hubris and the irony of trying to justify an uncivil process like colonization as civilized. They note that colonization almost

invariably follows the pattern of White colonizers oppressing and extracting from people of color. This had led to the use of the term “**colonizer**” to proxy for “White racist.”

Much like other classical forms of imperialism, colonization has been greatly constrained by globalization. But much like Russia’s prodding attempts to get away with classical forms of violent annexation, other nations try to get away with settler colonialism when they can. The most obvious example of this is the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Golan Heights. These efforts represent a clear and overt land-grab through displacement and the building of infrastructure as a form of local imperialism. But these efforts are few and far between, and are limited to victims without much power and without much support from the international community. But as global interconnections become ever closer, it becomes rarer and rarer to find those types of vulnerable victims.