

A sinister subject, so let's try to be even handed

For centuries they have been victimised by the "normal" majority, and today the marks of prejudice still abound. I am not one of them myself, but some of my best friends are, and more than one in ten of the population is inclined that way. Left-handedness is one of the last unacknowledged and baseless stigmas, while lefties remain a neglected minority we demean daily in our language without a second thought.

The word "left" derives from an Anglo-Saxon term meaning clumsy, and the words deriving from leftness are uniformly pejorative, at best "gauche", at worst "sinister"; more obscurely we find "cack-handed", "cow-pawed" and "gibble-fisted". The German word "Linkish" can mean both "left" and "awkward". The etymology of the right hand, by contrast, offers "adroit" and "dexterity". Right and left have always tended to be associated, quite simply, with right and wrong.

The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages regarded left-handedness as the Devil's mark, the Koran places the righteous on Allah's right hand, and God Himself is demonstrably right-handed, that being the side where Jesus sits. The discovery that a wife was left-handed was once sufficient ground for divorce in Japan.

Queen Victoria was left-handed, but that didn't stop Victorian schoolmasters from tying a pupil's left hand behind his back to ensure he used the right (and thus the correct) one, but more often ensuring he could barely write at all.

The little girl playing noughts and crosses on the old BBC test card was left-handed, but you can't tell because the picture was

other, from the left-handed proteins that make up our bodies, to mollusc shells, to testicles. Much of this asymmetry seems arbitrary. For example, on approximately three quarters of us, the hair on the back of the head whorls clockwise, or right to left, while one quarter have a tonsorial twist in the other direction.

Professor McManus speculates that part of the prejudice against lefties may be practical. If, say, you are in a long line of Russian kulaks scything the hay crop, you might well banish the left-handers to another corner of the field to avoid having your foot chopped off. But for the most part anti-sinistrism is the purest form of majority prejudice.

Since they have been victimised close to extinction, things are finally turning demographically for the lefties. In 1910 around 3 per cent of those born in Western societies were left-handed. Today about 13 per cent of men in Britain are left-handed, and about 11 per cent of women. This may reflect the weakening of the taboo which previously forced many to write right-handed against their natural inclinations, as well as the fact that lefties shunned in earlier societies found it harder to find a mate, and thus pass on the left-handed gene.

Chimps, it should be noted, are almost exactly divided between southpaws and northpaws, and perhaps a situation of perfect even-handedness may one day be the norm for our species too. (Incidentally, leaving sports aside, being ambidextrous may not be such an advantage in life: a study by zoologists in Miami found that primates using only one hand collected one third more termites than those us-



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"Left-footer" is used to denote a Roman Catholic or a homosexual; a "left-handed sugar bowl" was the old euphemism for a chamber pot; and in Islamic countries the unloved left hand was used before loo paper. New Labour assiduously avoids the word Left, whereas the Tory party openly defines itself as Right.

The only profession in which left-handedness is a consistent advantage is undertaking, because the screws on coffin-lids are traditionally left-handed. (It could also be argued that left-handed Jimi Hendrix's unique musical style came from learning to play a right-handed guitar upside down with his left hand, but such examples are few.)

Our world is constructed around the right-handed: scissors, the grapefruit knife, the computer mouse, and the fountain pen are designed for majority use. If a left-hander throws a boomerang, it plummets immediately. Even the act of writing is biased against the left, since the hand tends to pass over what has already been written, and smudge it. Fire an automatic rifle left-handed and you get hit in the face with spent rounds.

As psychology professor Chris McManus demonstrates in his delightful new book *Right Hand, Left Hand*, everything in existence is handed, one way or the

almost exactly divided between southpaws and northpaws, and perhaps a situation of perfect even-handedness may one day be the norm for our species too. (Incidentally, leaving sports aside, being ambidextrous may not be such an advantage in life: a study by zoologists in Miami found that primates using only one hand collected one third more termites than those using two. This suggests it may be better to concentrate on honing the skills of one hand or the other, at least if you want to keep your termite collection-rate up.)

Like many oppressed subgroups, left-handers have tended to beware of making a fuss or clubbing together. But there are signs of Left Pride emerging, and several hundred websites now exist catering for the non-dextrous, sinister minority.

These point out that there has never been any systematic attempt to focus on the health and safety, let alone the convenience, of the 10 per cent of the population who happen to be left-handed.

Left-handers can boast a disproportionate number of artists, scientists, intellectuals and sportsmen, but left-handedness also correlates to higher levels of autism, dyslexia and stuttering. Yet there has been no official attempt to assess the link between left-handedness and educational problems.

Tall people are warned to duck; urinals are lowered for short people; health warnings abound, but little allowance is made for left-handers, even when the results are potentially lethal. Try looking for a left-handed chainsaw.

Perhaps this Government might finally be able to prove its leftist credentials, by creating and preserving left rights.

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