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Centrism in *Star Wars*: “Gray Jedi,” Political Apathy, and Misguided Force Deities

In the middle of the left-right political spectrum lies centrism, an ideology defined by neither left-wing class consciousness or right-wing ultranationalism, but an embrace of that which is moderate. We see this ideology manifest in a few ways in our daily life—think of a single-issue swing voter, or a coworker who “just doesn’t do politics”—and despite the apathy or disinterest often associated with centrists, they serve an important and potentially harmful role in our political landscape. I want to note that, in *Star Wars*, there’s an in-universe faction called the “Centerists” who are around during the New Republic era. This isn’t about them. The word “center” in that faction refers to centralized government, which is what they argue is best for the New Republic. They’re opposed by the “Populists”—of which Princess Leia is one—who argue for more planetary control over government. Very interesting stuff, but unfortunately not what this is about.¹ My use of “centerism” refers solely to the center of the out-of-universe right-left political spectrum.

The rejection of a strong partisan position lends itself to ineffective practices and policies. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that the white moderate is devoted to order over justice, that they prefer a negative peace characterized by an absence of tension rather than a positive peace that centers justice (1963). Feminist writer Rebecca Solnit furthers this critique of centrism and moderate politics, stating, “The notion of a neutral and moderate middle is a prejudice of people for whom the system is working, against those for whom it’s not” (2021). Reiterated, centrist bias for the status quo harms those who face structural violence *because* of the status quo. Solnit and Dr. King’s perspectives on moderate politics and negative peace illuminate a definition of centrism as privilege—white moderates and those who avoid structural marginalization cling to centrism rather than choosing a side because they don’t feel that anything needs to change.

This conception of centrism as privilege can be seen throughout *Star Wars*, namely when we look at elites and members of privileged groups. The scene that jumps to mind is in *The Mandalorian* Season 3, after Doctor Penn Pershing gives his speech to the Coruscanti elite. After the presentation, a wealthy citizen confuses the Galactic Empire and New Republic, saying, “Empire, Rebels, New Republic, I can’t keep track. That’s why I should just keep my mouth shut” (2023). These regimes don’t stand out to the rich because their lives aren’t materially impacted by them. The ability to ignore partisan politics is a privilege not afforded to those who are marginalized, such as the citizens of Ferrix or Mimban.² Dr. Chris Kempshall, in his

¹ For genuinely riveting in-universe politics, read *Bloodline* by Claudia Gray

² See *Andor* season 1 and *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, respectively (and in that order of urgency)

in-universe book *The Rise and Fall of the Galactic Empire*³ details how the human-centric policies of the Galactic Empire pacified potential rebellion from humans by placing them atop the hierarchy. He writes, “The answer therefore to the question of ‘what took humans so long to rise up?’ is sadly, ‘because they did not want to’” (2024). Racial and economic privileges foster centrism—why desire radical change when the system already works for you? Partisan politics, alternatively, arises out of a perceived need, whether it’s the need for economic reform or immigration control. If these needs are legitimate is beside my point; those in the center are there because they do not need radical political reform.

A centrism that rejects both sides of the left-right political spectrum often asserts the frequently criticized “Horseshoe Theory,” equating far-right and far-left ideologies. The proponents of this theory posit that both extremes are the same, wanting to control society and change it for the worse. In the *Star Wars* universe, this concept is exemplified by, among others, DJ and Bendu. DJ, the code-breaker from *The Last Jedi*, equated the Resistance and the First Order, which justified (to him) his betrayal of Finn and Rose Tico on their mission to save the Resistance fleet. Because he sees both sides as the same, he doesn’t feel bad about undermining the just cause—to him, there is no just cause. Similarly, Bendu refuses to take a side when the Empire attacks the rebels’ Chopper Base because he views any deviation from the center to be unjust. In refusing to recognize the moral conflict between the Rebellion and Empire, Bendu fails to achieve the harmonious balance he so seeks by promoting an unjust status quo. Failing to acknowledge the difference between both ends of the political spectrum leads to preservation of our political structure. In this preservation, centrism becomes a conservative ideology,⁴ opposed to reforms that would actually make life better for those facing structural discrimination.

Ineffective, moderate policies are bandages on deep wounds—they help only on the surface level without digging deeper to analyze why certain policies are bad. For example, a moderate might suggest new homes to deal with a housing crisis, ignoring the corporate greed causing the housing shortage in the first place. We can see this kind of ineffective problem-solving from Jedi Master Avar Kriss during the High Republic. In George Mann’s *The Eye of Darkness*, when Kriss delivers food to people trapped in the occlusion zone, they thank her, but emphasize that their situation will not improve until the Nihil occlusion zone is deconstructed (2023). For the galactic citizens under Nihil rule, the stormwall is a literal structure oppressing them. For us, the structures are a little less literal, be it the patriarchy, gender binarism, or encoded scientific racism.

The elephant in the room when it comes to centrism and *Star Wars* is the idea of “Gray Jedi.” If you’ve ever been on *Star Wars* Instagram, you probably know all about gray jedi.⁵ They

³ If you enjoy *Star Wars* and politics, please read this book; it is genuinely brilliant.

⁴ Note how “preservation” basically means the same thing as “conservation.” Keeping things the same rarely works in a broken system.

⁵ And you’ve seen that picture of the jedi with the gas mask, duel-wielding orange lightsabers. Um, badass alert!

are force-users who use both the light and dark without becoming corrupted.⁶ People who parrot these edge-lord, gray jedi talking points often bring up the idea that too much of both the light and dark is corrupting, and that only a balance between the two—a person in the center—acts without undue influence from either side. This perspective applies the horseshoe theory to the Force, positing that both extreme light and extreme dark are equal. Applying Solnit’s critique of centrism to the force helps us understand that gray jedi don’t occupy an unbiased center because the moral good lies not in impartiality, but explicitly embracing the light. In Claudia Gray’s *Master and Apprentice*, Jedi Master Qui Gon Jinn states, “It matters what side we choose. Even if there will never be more light than darkness... I don’t turn toward the light because it means someday I’ll ‘win’ some cosmic game. I turn toward it because it is the light” (2019). This plays into the idea of the prophecy of the chosen one. Some people suggest that Anakin brought balance to the force by being a force for good in addition to bad, combining the light and dark and creating balance. This is incorrect. Anakin restored balance to the force by choosing the light in his last moments alive. Balance comes from shutting out the dark, and choosing to be good despite it. Now, gray jedi aren’t canon,⁷ and I’m not trying to legitimize any of that by talking about it here, but it does become relevant when we look at how people try to justify centrism and moderate politics by insisting on the moral high ground of nonpartisanship. It isn’t enough to not be a fascist, racist, or transphobe—you have to actively work against the powers that be to build a more equitable world.

I want to jump now to a related concept—quiescence, or inactivity. This is often the result of centrism—someone in the middle who isn’t facing institutional and structural discrimination tends toward political apathy and inaction because they don’t need to be active. One source of inaction is privilege, which is also one of the sources of centrism we talked about. When you have your needs met, there isn’t a reason to be politically active.

Quiescence can also come from being bogged down in rules, decorum, and ordinances. The legislative branch of government here in the United States is a good example—there’s very little radical change that can be had within a legislature that requires multiple proceedings and sessions to pass even bipartisan policies. Additionally, in a congressional system that allows corporations to enrich its members in exchange for favorable policy, there’s very little incentive for direct, radical action.⁸ The paralyzing effects of rules and regulations can be seen in *Star Wars* via the rebellion. The bourgeois-ification of the rebel alliance⁹ by the time we get to 0 BBY leads the Massassi group to nearly dissolve in *Rogue One*. Without a unanimous vote from the high council, Mon Mothma is all but ready to give up on the possibility of a chance to fight the

⁶ This directly goes against George Lucas’s conception of the force, by the way.

⁷ Except when some authors, writers, and artists decide they are, for whatever reason.

⁸ See Track AIPAC, for just one example.

⁹ I say this with a grain of salt; obviously the rebels aren’t the bourgeoisie in 0 BBY, but with growing involvement from rich backers (which I agree was probably needed and inevitable) comes increased concern about optics and the wealthy. Remember the rebels’ full title (and goal) is the Alliance to Restore the Republic; they strive not to build a new system, but to restore an old, flawed one.

Death Star. It's only the action of Jyn, Cassian, and the other rebels who go Scarif that push the rebellion past its decorum-induced quiescence. True change comes from direct action, not squabbling over methods. A further criticism of the Yavin rebels comes from Saw Gerrera in *Star Wars: Rebels* Season 4—to Chancellor Mon Mothma, he says, “I hope, Senator, after you’ve lost, and the Empire reigns over the galaxy unopposed, you will find some comfort in the knowledge that you fought according to the rules” (2017). There is a time and place for courtesy and niceties, but fighting fascism isn’t that time—we need to be brash, vulgar, *sucio*¹⁰ to make change in a world obsessed with being clean, proper, and pacified.

So far we’ve discussed how quiescence arises out of privilege and decorum, but I want to emphasize that inaction can be a facet of power held over disadvantaged groups and individuals. In *Power and Powerlessness*, John Gaventa explores how a lack of true consciousness among disadvantaged groups leads to either quiescence or a false consciousness (1982). I don’t want to get too in the mud here with Marxist theory, but here’s an example Gaventa uses in the book: Poor farmers in the southern United States are in an unbalanced power dynamic with conservative politicians. They’re poor, and the politicians are rich. Despite having the power to change circumstances for the farmers, southern politicians use their sociocultural domination to encourage both literal and intellectual pauperization, keeping the poor farmers pacified, uneducated, and distracted. The farmers will, instead of identifying the root cause of their problems, listen to the politicians who scapegoat other marginalized groups, often people of color or members of the queer community. The closest analogue to this I could think of in *Star Wars* is in *Andor* Season 2, when the Imperial Security Bureau (ISB) and Imperial Intelligence construct a narrative regarding the citizens of Ghorman—they craft a false consciousness in galactic citizens that redirects discontent from the regime in power to a marginalized group. This isn’t a perfect parallel, so let me know if you can think of a better one.

Inaction isn’t inseparable from centrism. Often centrists are very outspoken and politically active about their beliefs, but that doesn’t make their political action effective. In the same vein, those who are politically inactive aren’t necessarily centrists, they can be powerless, marginalized individuals, or they may be coming from a place of privilege. In any case, the point I wish to stress is that inaction, alongside centrism and moderatism, is regressive and ineffective. Our society’s status quo is not unbiased—our cultural, political, social, and economic norms and values are built off white supremacy, gender essentialism, and the cis-heteropatriarchy; it is not enough just to sit back and watch the world go by.¹¹ It takes direct, grassroots action to counter the powers that be, and said action necessitates radical ideology—love, empathy, and community at all costs.

¹⁰ See Vargas, “Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic” (2014).

¹¹ With respect to burnout, ability conditions, incarceration status, and a host of other barriers to direct action, of course.

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