

The Democratiya Project

Michael Walzer

Editors Note: We reproduce below Michael Walzer's preface to *Global Politics After 9/11: The Democratiya Interviews* (The Foreign Policy Centre, 2008).

Two commitments give shape to the Democratiya project. The first is to defend and promote a left politics that is liberal, democratic, egalitarian, and internationalist. Those four adjectives should routinely characterize left politics, but we all know that they don't. The second commitment is to defend and promote a form of political argument that is nuanced, probing, and concrete, principled but open to disagreement: no slogans, no jargon, no unexamined assumptions, no party line. This argumentative style, which is also a moral style, is exemplified in these interviews, where no-one is flattered or set up and where no hard questions go unasked. The men and women interviewed speak plainly, without concealment, and they take importantly different positions on a range of issues.

The focus is on internationalism. What does it mean for leftists today? And what does it require of us? The answers aren't easy – as they were when most people on the left thought that the workers of the world had no country, no local loyalties, so that proletarian internationalism was a kind of collective reflex, and the only problem was 'false consciousness.' Nor is internationalism as easy as it was when many leftists thought that the oppressed peoples of the Third World (as we called it) are actually represented by the authoritarian parties, maximal leaders, terrorist organizations, vanguard militants, and religious zealots who claim to speak in their name. Indeed, some leftists still believe this or act as if they do, but the belief doesn't make, has never made, for anything that resembles a democratic politics.

The most recent shortcut to internationalist virtue is anti-Americanism. All we have to do to be good internationalists, on this view, is to support the opponents of American power. Since these opponents include Serbian and Iraqi dictators and radical Muslim jihadists, this is internationalism with gritted teeth. But anti-Americanism is nonetheless a popular politics on the European left, and if it doesn't reach to full support for every enemy of the Americans, it still reaches pretty far. It takes the form of apology and excuse or of a simple refusal to oppose America's opponents, however awful their politics is. And in the case of America's ally, Israel,

it goes much further. English leftists marching in London in 2006 with banners saying, 'We are all Hezbollah,' probably thought that they were practising a left internationalist politics. That Hezbollah is in no sense a leftist movement made no difference to them so long as it was hostile to Israel and America.

It does make a difference to Democratiya, and so it should. For internationalism is not in fact the automatic support of any group of militants who claim to speak for the world's workers or the oppressed peoples of the old empires or the victims of American imperialism. It requires a political and moral choice; it requires what the Italian writer Ignazio Silone called 'the choice of comrades.' But isn't internationalism driven by a necessary sympathy with oppressed people everywhere and anywhere in the world? Yes it is, but figuring out the practical consequences of that sympathy is a complex matter; it requires exactly the kinds of arguments that Democratiya promotes. Oppression is no guarantee of political goodness or even of political decency. It can breed its own pathologies, and it can be, it often is, exploited by people who have no leftist commitments at all. This kind of exploitation is as bad as the economic kind, but it is less acknowledged on the left today.

The militants who act in the name of the oppressed are sometimes the agents of a new oppression – ideological or religious zealots with totalizing programs, who have a deep contempt for liberal values. And then they should be met with hostility by leftists the world over: because they don't serve the interests of the people they claim to represent and because they don't advance the cause of democracy or equality. The comrades we choose, by contrast, are the men and women who resist oppression in the name of leftist values. Left internationalism is a solidarity of leftists.

But this isn't a sectarian politics. It is open to a wide range of participants and arguments. It is meant to include liberals and radicals of many different sorts – trade unionists, human rights activists, feminists, and environmentalists. It includes people who disagree profoundly about the use of force in global politics today; it includes people with very different conceptions of the desirable shape of international society and the role of the UN. Most importantly right now, it includes people who disagreed in 2003 about the war in Iraq and who probably still disagree. How to deal with brutal and tyrannical regimes like Saddam Hussein's, how to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing, how to promote freedom and democracy – these are the hardest questions facing the left today.

WALZER | The Democratiya Project

Left internationalism does not permit us to do nothing, to stand and watch, or to wait for someone else to act. Doing nothing is, of course, a way to avoid doing something terrible or doing something that turns out terribly, and after the Iraq disaster, it may well look like the better part of wisdom. But it is in fact a kind of complicity in the terrible things that happen. We need to figure out how to act responsibly in the world, when to defend the use of force and when to oppose it, when to press our governments to intervene, when to act only through non-governmental organizations, and when to confine ourselves to ideological struggle.

Ideology is especially important on the left. Whatever our understanding of social and economic forces, the war of ideas has always figured in a big way in our politics. Grownup leftists all grew up with arguments about ends and means, strategy and tactics; fierce disagreements about movement programs; and passionate debates about the rights and wrongs of compromise. We searched for ‘the correct ideological position,’ our own orthodoxy. Today most of us have given up that search, recognizing the tyrannical politics into which it led many leftists. And this ought to strengthen our hand in criticism of other orthodoxies, old and new, and of every sort of dogmatic certainty, and of every defence, especially high theoretical defences, of tyranny and terror. That critical work is central to any left project. Sometimes it is done from within – as by communist dissidents only a few decades ago or by Muslim reformers right now (and right here, in this book). And certainly we have our own internal critical work to do, directed at inequality and illiberalism in the contemporary West (and at unilateral recklessness, secrecy, and brutality in my own country). But the critique of communism was also an internationalist task, and so is the critique of Third World authoritarianism, Muslim radicalism, and global inequality today. We have to be local and universal critics of all the forces that set themselves against democracy, even when they pretend to speak for the ‘people.’

Read these interviews: they help us understand what that local and universal criticism looks like and what its content should be.

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