

What's Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way

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In January 2007, the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, played host to a day-long conference under the title 'A World Civilisation or a Clash of Civilisations.' It was a singular business. The allusion in the title betrayed a misunderstanding that the political scientist Samuel Huntington, author of the thesis of the clash of civilisations, was prescribing Western universalism. It gave, however, the patina of intellectual inquiry to an obviously exhortatory event. A set of prefabricated conclusions concerning the alleged moral imperialism of Western Enlightenment values – on whose behalf I was one of the fall guys invited to speak – was served at public expense to a self-selecting audience of political activists.

There was an irony here beyond mere absurdity. It was identified in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* by Nick Cohen: 'What made this vignette of ethnic politics in a European city worth noting is that commentators for the BBC and nearly every newspaper [in the UK] describe Mr. Livingstone as one of the most left-wing politicians in British public life. Hardly any of them notice the weirdness of an apparent socialist pandering to a reactionary strain of Islam, pushing its arguments and accepting its dictates.'

Few indeed notice; and the politics of Ken Livingstone are but one constituent of a notable current of political weirdness. This is the subject of Cohen's book *What's Left?*, a cogent and impassioned essay on how ostensibly progressive movements more than made their peace with political and even theocratic reaction. Among Cohen's strengths is his ability to make sense of this perverse phenomenon without doing violence to its eclecticism. This is worth bearing in mind when considering some of the defensive critical reactions to the book. There is a distinction – not an especially fine one, either – between a synoptic view and a monocausal one.

Another of Cohen's characteristics is that he has an acute wit remote from the sort of remorseless jocularly of a P.J. O'Rourke. This is just as well given the character of those he describes. There is nothing hilarious about, for example, the libels perpetrated by a far-Left magazine against honest journalists reporting on the Bosnian war. But there is a great deal that is ridiculous about the haplessness of

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John Major's government. Suddenly Cohen can deploy an arresting phrase that is also funny: 'Living through the Major administration was like being trapped in a railway carriage with a party of bent accountants. For seven years. The Tories in their decadence managed to be simultaneously sleazy and tedious.'

In foreign policy, especially its pitiful acquiescence to Slobodan Milosevic's murderous aggression, the Major government exemplified this combination of amorality compounded by imaginative torpor. A central part of Cohen's case – under the ironic chapter heading 'Tories Against the War' – is the coincidence of view produced by the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Bizarrely, parts of the Left, which ought to have recognised the atavistic forces driving xenophobic Serb nationalism, started parroting an ostentatiously unsentimental realism indistinguishable from the line of Douglas Hurd and Malcolm Rifkind, successive Conservative Foreign Secretaries.

The supposed radical sage Noam Chomsky, in *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many* (1994), considered whether the West should bomb Serb encampments to stop the dismemberment of Bosnia, and tortuously concluded 'it's not so simple.' Actually, it was. Nato's military intervention secured an end to the conflict and an admittedly messy agreement at Dayton. Realism turned out to have been a prisoner of the inflexibility of its own assumptions; it had not been realistic at all about the nature of the conflict and the utility of force. Its ally in quietism had been an Old Left with an instinctive aversion to US intervention, and in some cases a nostalgia for the myth of Yugoslav Communism. (The current chairman of CND, Kate Hudson., a member of the Communist Party of Britain, made an unintentionally revealing comment in her otherwise evasive purported history *CND: Now More than Ever*: 'Britain had a tradition of good relations with Yugoslavia, and particularly Serbia, resulting from its stand against Nazi Germany in World War II. Many regretted the break-up of what had been a progressive and open socialist society that had found a federal and peaceful solution to the complex diversity of communities in the south Slav state.')

The recrudescence of aggressive nationalism in the Balkans set parts of the Left alongside reaction. Cohen deals at length with similar forces when applied to the other great issue of international politics in the 1990s, the threat to Middle East peace arising from a bellicose despotism in Iraq. Kanan Makiya is a central figure in Cohen's account. His *Republic of Fear* did more than depict Saddam Hussein's depravities. It described a system of thoroughgoing totalitarianism under which a

‘new kind of fear drove through all private space.’ Cohen describes Makiya as an Iraqi Solzhenitsyn. The analogy is apt – for the reactions Makiya evoked as well as for the message he expounded.

On his expulsion from the land of his birth, Solzhenitsyn was famously and conspicuously not invited to the White House by President Ford. The exigencies of *realpolitik* – whose principal exponent, Henry Kissinger, was behind Ford’s decision – took precedence over honouring a heroic witness in the struggle against totalitarianism. Makiya was also spurned by those he had thought were on his side: the radical Left whose cause was his own, yet which would not countenance military intervention to rebuff Saddam’s annexation and plunder of Kuwait. (Indifference to the sovereignty of small nations was, not coincidentally, another characteristic of Kissingerian foreign policy: think of East Timor.) Iraq’s suffering in the 1990s was a direct result of the continuation in power of a tyrant who committed genocidal atrocities and enriched himself through the corruption of the oil-for-food programme. Recall, however, the most vocal campaigns on the Left to do with Iraq: not so much an uninterest in that nation’s suffering as an energetic attribution of it to that same porous sanctions regime. It is small wonder that by the end of the decade, as Cohen records: ‘The hideous choice for Makiya, Iraq and all those who professed to believe in human rights was this: either they would have to wait for [Saddam’s] death and the deaths of his sadistic sons Qusay and Uday, or they had to accept that the only way to remove the Baath was foreign invasion.’

The fact that Cohen accepted the logic of this position and supported the US-led overthrow of Saddam in 2003 is taken by some critics as undermining his argument. In a notably incompetent *Guardian* review (in which the *Times* columnist Matthew Parris – an opponent of intervention in Afghanistan, never mind Iraq – was cited as one who had formerly supported the Iraq War and repented), Peter Wilby crowed: ‘Far from accepting the war’s aftermath as the left’s vindication, [Cohen] sees the post-invasion period as the most damning proof yet of its wrong-headedness.’

Well, yes it is, because it illustrates Cohen’s thesis without his having to point it out. Having likewise supported the Iraq intervention, I considered then and do now that there was only one reputable form of the anti-war argument. This was what the philosopher Michael Walzer, an opponent of military action, argued at the time and in retrospect: ‘[T]he campaign against the war should never have been only an antiwar campaign. It should have been a campaign for a strong international system, designed and organized to defeat aggression, control weapons of mass destruction,

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stop massacres and ethnic cleansing, and assist in the politics of transition after brutal regimes are overthrown.’ (Michael Walzer, ‘Can there be a moral foreign policy?’ in E. J. Dionne, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Kayla Drogosz (eds), *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and US Foreign Policy in an Unjust World*, (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2004), p. 50.)

This was not the message of any anti-war campaign. It was not the message of the Left. It is not, either, a description of how the international order works, and it might have become a cause that an internationalist Left could have agreed to work for. Instead the dominant message on the Left is of a different tenor. It is a tragedy of the botched and culpably insouciant policy of the Bush administration that Iraq’s population has not been protected from terrorist fanaticism, and that this appalling experience has made it much less likely that necessary interventions – as were mounted in Kosovo and Sierra Leone – will be mounted in future. Yet there is scant support in most left-wing discussions for the emerging civil society of Iraq, or recognition of the urgency of inflicting a decisive defeat on the combined forces of the Baath and al-Qaeda. Likewise, comment among liberals about the theocratic tyranny of Iran is almost invariably couched in language assuming the bellicosity of the Bush administration, rather than of support for Iranian dissidents and condemnation of the mullahs’ serial nuclear deceptions. That we are in this position is genuinely a mark of dishonour for the Left, which in important respects did get the principal foreign policy issues of the 1990s right. (No institution was more right and timely in assessing Milosevic than *The Guardian*; or in perceiving the brutality of Saddam Hussein than *The Observer*.)

Cohen is strong in dissecting this malaise. He is also thorough in presenting historical antecedents. There are memorable vignettes and even important historical finds. Cohen has located and resurrected the notorious pamphlet by Eric Hobsbawm and Raymond Williams as student Communists supporting the Soviet invasion of Finland. He acidly cites Williams’s much later admission that: ‘We were given the job [by the Party] as people who could write quickly, from historical materials supplied for us. You were often in there writing about topics you did not know very much about, as a professional with words.’ (To get the measure of how scandalous this remark is, consider that Hobsbawm was made a Companion of Honour in 1998. He has made important scholarly contributions to 19th century history, but he has never to my knowledge denounced his own early work in the cause of historical falsification.) Cohen, as you would expect, finds much material for comment in the venomously ludicrous George Galloway and – for connoisseurs

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of British far-Left politics – the late Gerry Healy, of the long defunct Workers' Revolutionary Party.

The cast of characters is in fact so exotic that it has provoked a persistent – or perhaps coagulated – theme of Cohen's critics. This takes the form of a shrill cry of 'not me – but someone else.' And this is only trivially true. Of course Gerry Healy, a corrupt and stupid rapist, is not the face of the mainstream Left. Nor is the Respect Coalition – a heterogeneous movement in the sense only that it comprises, in the phrase of Christopher Hitchens, worshippers of the One God lined up with worshippers of the One Party State – an organisation representative of anyone bar the parliamentarian whose vanity is its foundation. But Cohen is pointing to something else, more fundamental and insidious.

Over the past century, the Left's demands have made extraordinary gains. Material advancement, universal education, civil rights, sexual equality, and rights for homosexuals (not yet, unfortunately, extending to marriage and adoption rights) are features of modern Western democracies that have been secured by social pressure and legislative reform. Almost in a fit of pique, liberals seem determined on obliviousness. It is as if there were – as the literary critic Lionel Trilling termed it – an adversary culture. When the most virulent opponents of Western societies express their demands in the language not of a common humanity but of superstition and bigotry, the first instinct of the upholders of the Enlightenment ought to be a statement of militant opposition. In what passes for modern liberalism, the first instinct is commonly instead to inquire of – in the uncelebrated cliché – the root causes of that hatred. The late Paul Foot, of whom Cohen himself wrote an admiring obituary, was so far steeped in this form of thinking that he surmised in his *Guardian* column in October 2001 that the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia had been one of the contributory factors in provoking 9/11. Those who pursue, on their own account, holy war against Jews and other infidels in fact object to sexual oppression only in the sense that they believe there isn't anything like enough of it going on.

Unsophisticated though it may be to say so, a Left worth its name and honouring its traditions ought to be defending the principles of secularism, science and liberty rather than worrying about the offence they might cause. Yet the principle of a common citizenship under law is – from my experience at least, and recalling that Livingstonian conference in January – a sectarian and even fringe position on the Left. When the declared leaders of religious and other groups assert a claim to be

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heeded in public debate, they speak as sectional interests. Every time you hear the word 'community' in a BBC report try replacing it with 'lobby,' and you'll get some idea of the prominence of these demands. A democratic society does not elevate group identities; it aims to supersede them. *What's Left?* is a spirited and elegant exposition of what ought to be axiomatic on the Left, and extraordinarily is not.

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