

Waiting for the Etonians: Reports from the sickbed of Liberal England

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The political trajectory of Nick Cohen is well known, especially to the readers of this journal. Attaining prominence as a columnist for *the Observer* and the *New Statesman*, he moved from being an unrelenting critic of Blairism and New Labour to a leading light of the 'pro-war left' and the scourge of anyone in the 'liberal intelligentsia' who would not stand up for enlightenment values against the threat from Islamic and other fundamentalisms. His 2006 book, *What's Left* made quite an impact and more friends on the right than the left. That was unsurprising given that the answer to his question in those pages was 'not much,' other than himself and others who had alighted at the Euston and equivalent stations.

Considering the crash?

Two years later we have the follow up. So, what's new? From the title and the cover blurb we are given the impression that the new book is about life before, during and after the credit crunch and economic crisis; and, in particular, the Cameron-led Conservative project that looks set to emerge from the political ashes. These expectations are quickly dashed, for up-to-date, this book certainly ain't. There is, admittedly, a hastily written Introduction that addresses 'the Great Crash of 2008' but about these events we learn little that is new or insightful. There is a familiar cast of characters and events – city spivs, orgies of speculation, herd instincts and burst bubbles. The punch-line is the inevitable return of the business cycle (p. 25). Somewhat embarrassingly, in one of the few later pieces in the book that deals with economic issues, Cohen notes that the British have become far too dependent on the property market and that, 'from this perspective, a crash is what we need' (p. 328). That was 2007 and hindsight of course is easy. The more important point is that even after the events, little analysis of their origins is offered.

Cohen is too busy point-scoring to offer any explanations. He argues that there are two differences to this economic crisis and both are in the context rather than the content. First, it was taking place in a 'left wing era' (p. 31) and 'the longest period of left wing government this century' (book jacket). Cohen argues that, 'For all its virtuous intentions, the political left was living off the proceeds of loose financial

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morals. Prostituting itself to be blunt' (p. 24). For 'political left' read New Labour, which had made a bargain with the city and markets to take its money and leave them alone, using the proceeds for public investment. There is a degree of truth in the bargain argument, but the wider one is silly and inaccurate. This is neither a specifically British condition, nor the business cycle as usual, but a systemic crisis of financialised capitalism. Other than Cohen, perhaps only the Daily Mail believes that New Labour is a 'left-wing government' and even he couldn't stretch that label to fit the US and the Bush administration, where the crisis began.

But Cohen is determined to blame 'the left' for this problem and indeed pretty much every other political, social and cultural malaise in the contemporary world. As an aside he says that 'the anti-capitalist movement had nothing interesting to say about high finance,' confining itself to opposition to free trade (p. 25). I don't know who Cohen deems to include in the anti-capitalist movement, but on the left there were some substantial critiques and policy alternatives to financialised capitalism. Whatever their weaknesses, the writings of Naomi Klein, Noreena Hertz, Thomas Frank, Doug Henwood and others had plenty to say on high finance and other pathologies of unregulated markets. Closer to home, in 2006, Compass, the UK left-of-centre group, published *A New Political Economy*, which observed that, 'We are living in a speculative, destructive form of capitalism that is profoundly unhealthy for our global economy and our society, and which benefits only a minority' (p. 26).

The second contextual difference is that the crisis has emerged when Western nations are at war – in Iraq and Afghanistan, and on terror. I'm not sure whether these two circumstances are linked in any significant way, but it allows Cohen to attack the left again, or more specifically the dereliction of duty by the liberal intelligentsia' to oppose 'the most psychopathically anti-liberal ideology since Nazism' (p. 29). The reason for this dereliction? Like New Labour, that intelligentsia has made its own bargain – tolerating tyranny because 'it too wanted the quiet life' (p. 31).

At the end of the Introduction, the measure of this double failure is the rise of the old Etonians. Unconvincing as that causal connection is, I did think it would open up an analysis of Cameron's blue and now apparently red Tories. Wrong – we have to wait until towards the end of the book before these themes reappear. And when it does, like the discussion of the crash, what we get is superficial and lacking insight. In a few short pieces we get the standard analysis of Cameron as an opportunistic Blair clone. By this time, the reader realises just what an inopportune

time it was to publish this book. The world has just been turned upside down by the economic crisis and the election of Obama. On the former, we get a few tagged on commentaries, on the latter virtually nothing. This is, in part, inevitable when a book consists of newspaper and magazine journalism from previous years (in this case 2005-8). But 'Reports from the Sickbed of liberal England' also reveal an author's choices and in this case, obsessions.

Sins of the left revisited

So, what is the book about? Well, across the numerous pieces (again mostly reprints from the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*), Cohen takes post-shots at a variety of targets. These include homeopathic hoaxers, crackpot therapists, clueless criminal profilers and avant-garde artists and curators. These are all efficiently and rightly skewered in the name of science, reason and progress. I enjoyed these pieces first time around and the pleasure has not diminished. But by and large, the themes are the same as the last one – notably how worthless and wayward the left is.

As we've already learned, for Cohen, the left covers a multitude of sins. The most effective and sustained critique is of New Labour because it's specific and accurate. Cohen details its sad and sordid love affair with wealthy and powerful, observing that 'the business with which Gordon Brown can't do business has yet to be founded' (p. 345). For this reason, it is very hard to take seriously the current outrage being expressed by Alistair Darling and chums over City greed and banker's misdeeds. That particular New Labour generation, burnt by their years in the political wilderness genuinely did believe in the virtues of money and markets. In contrast, what Cohen describes as 'Labour's contemptible election trade-off' is even more troubling because Labour's sucking-up to Islamists was a deeply cynical and conscious attempt to win back votes lost on the back of the Iraq war. These casualties were a new set of freedoms of speech and other liberties.

The scope widens when Cohen deals with the left, radical Islam, terror and totalitarianism. And there is certainly something in his case. There are a number of familiar and fair targets from George Galloway, Respect and assorted Trots to Ken Livingstone. The latter's tortuous and ultimately futile courting of dodgy Islamic preachers in search of re-election as London Mayor, is set-out in compelling detail. However, with increasingly indiscriminate fire, Cohen lines up Index on Censorship, CND, Oxfam and various liberal intellectuals for crimes of hypocrisy, victim blaming and cowardice.

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Cohen's most persuasive point concerns the confused attitudes that some liberals and leftists have towards their own societies. Detailing examples of where people did not affirm liberal-democratic values, or refuse to condemn those that violate them, he argues that, 'If liberal secularists... did not have pride and confidence in their principles, why should they expect anyone else to take them seriously' (p. 148). Cohen attributes this trend to a combination of the failure of actually existing socialism and the rise of postmodern relativism. There is truth in both observations. The far left and their ideological fellow travellers only know what they are against, not what kind of society they are for or think is feasible. Most Marxists detest postmodernism, so clearly they are not the same. The latter has acted to reinforce the relativistic streak in liberal discourses and the two strands come together on some common targets, notably a knee-jerk anti-Americanism.

However, Cohen's case is seriously blunted by flawed logic, lazy argumentation and a haphazard relationship to evidence. Everyone and everything is continually thrown into one big, incoherent and unconvincing pot – variously described as 'the left,' 'the political left,' 'the pseudo-left,' 'liberal society,' 'the liberal intelligentsia,' 'the postmodern liberal establishment' and so on. Left and liberal theory, organisation and practice are considerably more varied and in better shape than Cohen gives any hint of. I opposed the war in Iraq, supported the intervention in Afghanistan and hate postmodernists. Which box would Cohen put me in? The new Campaign on Liberty is evidence that liberal 'England' (what happened to the rest of the UK?) is not as sick as the physician's diagnosis infers. Cohen's leftist monster has become an all-purpose bogeyman responsible for pretty much every available thought and other crimes. His methods too often consist of guilt by association; 'random dips' into the pages of offending magazines; using the words and deeds of particular individuals to condemn whole organisations; or un-attributed accusations such as the 'fawning reviews from critics who are nominally of the left' of Damien Hirst's Skull (p. 330).

Cohen needs to get real. Whatever baleful influence some in its ranks have, the left does not run the world. In various places he says things such as 'being a leftist is a lifestyle choice. It carries no costs and obligations' (p. 189). Whilst I have honest and sometimes sharp disagreements with some liberals and leftists, Cohen's persistent attribution of the worst of motives for their actions says more about the poverty of his prejudices. For every idiot action that Cohen highlights, it wouldn't be hard to find left activists (yes, even far left) underpinning difficult and often unfashionable campaigns in the workplace and community.

Class action

If there is a substantive, second theme in the book it is class, which appears and reappears in a variety of contexts. There is even a piece entitled 'In Defence of Class Hatred.' I was looking forward to that, but it turned out to be mainly a critique of David Blunkett's predilection for posh totty. It doesn't get any better or politically clearer. Cohen attacks New Labour for its partiality to the rich, but mainly on the grounds that it leads to neglect of the solid, aspirational middle class, who, Cohen predicts, will make it pay at a forthcoming election (p. 62). In a review of a Julian Baggini book about life amongst the population of Rotherham, Cohen switches attention to a celebration of a kind of working class everyman: '...what he had taken to be idiotic views came from a comprehensible working-class philosophy.... The majority of the English still live within five miles of where they were born, and the attachment to locality keeps England a country where a sense of community underpins national values. The English want local jobs for local people, local radio, local papers and raffles for local good causes' (pp. 66-7). He hits rock bottom in a piece describing his own neighbourhood, which turns into a rant about the evil nature of local government and its passion for parking tickets that seems to have been generated from an incident where his own car had been towed away. This is then linked to a general argument about 'miscarriages of justice' based on 'stories like my neighbour's' (p. 102). Elsewhere, sympathies shift to forgotten parts of the white working class whose support for the BNP apparently shows that they have learnt to play a form of identity politics in protest against society's indulgence of ethnic particularism. Not wanting to leave anyone out, Cohen also criticises the hunting ban as a dictatorial attack on lives of freedom loving country dwellers.

Actually, with Cohen, it can't be everyone. Other than the super rich, the only group that gets it in the neck are 'the bleeding heart middle class' (p. 99) – that must be the *Guardian*-reading bit, rather than the *Daily Mail/Telegraph* section seemingly sympathised with elsewhere. In a piece early in the book, Cohen is belabouring the Government for not doing enough about social mobility. A fair point, but as with many other instances, it turns silly. According to Cohen, the reason for limited mobility is not just economic, but social: 'the left won the cultural war; and it is in the confusions of liberal-dominated cultural life that the second set of explanations for middle-class dominance can be found' (p. 53). The evidence for this turns out to be Michael Young's *Rise of the Meritocracy*, which, in turn, leads to banning of grammar schools, which is then linked to the tendency of liberal cultural elites to turn out faddish nonsense and Big Brother and Ant and Dec, depriving the working

class of self-improvement and high culture. These bizarre and implausible leaps of logic all take place in two short pages.

The price of polemic

Admitting in the book that he is happier when being miserable and firing critical missives, the piece in which Cohen's personal ethos is most likely to be found is the final one – The Reasonableness of Ranters. Likening his outlook to that of Christopher Hitchens, he offers his own broad back for receiving lashes of hate and affirms the highest status in intellectual life for the polemicist.

Such a person 'Produces a respect for argument that those who dismiss all polemic as mere ranting fail to see. If you can feel a need to make an unpopular case, and there is no point in being a political writer if you cannot, you must use your talent to win over a sceptical audience. You must acknowledge doubts and counter-arguments, and above all, you must write clearly' (p. 371). It is a pity that this book does not back up those wise words. The barbs of a polemic have to be sharp and accurate to sting. Too many of these pieces are ill-considered, illogical and repetitive rants that will convince only those already converted.

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