

Power and the Idealists: Or, The Passion of Joschka Fischer and its Aftermath

by Paul Berman, Soft Skull Press, 2005, 311 pp.

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Paul Berman's latest book is remarkable. It is partly a collective biography, partly a work of contemporary history, and partly a political essay and argument about what has happened to the radical left over the past 30 years. It examines political and ethical issues of the utmost seriousness and challenges all of us on the left at the deepest level.

It is also, one has to say, an extraordinarily well-written book, and hard to put down once you have started. Some of this has to do with the cast of characters that Berman assembles, all of whom committed themselves in various ways to the radical cause in their youth, and who have largely never given up on these commitments, even as they have had to come to terms with disappointment, dismay and, let it be said, betrayal, not least by many of their erstwhile comrades. Berman describes – in prose worthy of a novelist – the political odyssey of many of the 68'ers 'from radical leftism to liberal anti-totalitarianism.' Yet Berman is not engaged in hagiography. He shows how each has made mistakes and had to learn (often the hard way). They have argued with each other and with themselves at almost every stage, sometimes losing friends in the process, exposing themselves to vilification and abuse, their motives as much as their judgements impugned.

And it is with the question of motive that Berman's account really commences. In his view, what propelled several of his characters along their journey from radical leftism to liberal anti-totalitarianism was what he identifies as a particular post-war *fear*. For Joschka Fischer, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Bernard Kouchner, all of whom came to prominence in the upheavals of 1968, growing up in the West after the war was both a comfortable and troubling experience. On the one hand, Nazism had been defeated and imperialism unravelled: Western states were now uniformly liberal democracies, relatively stable, unprecedentedly if unevenly affluent; national liberation struggles had been successful across the globe, not least because they had been able to exploit the glaring contradiction between the anti-fascist imperative of the struggle against Nazism in Europe and the continuation (which now became impossible to justify) of imperialism in the so-called 'Third World.' On

the other hand, the shadow of the past still lay heavy – many of those involved at various levels in Nazism had escaped more or less scot-free. Equally, the continuing prosperity of the West depended both on the accumulated wealth stolen in the past and continued exploitation in the present. The fear that motivated many, according to Berman, was the fear that beneath the surface fascism had not been defeated but had simply mutated. The struggle against it therefore was still far from finished. Or, to put it another way, the struggles of one generation had lain down a gauntlet to the next. What could match the heroism of those who had resisted, or make sense of the lives cut short? If liberation was to be meaningful, there had to be both a more fundamental settling of accounts with the perpetrators and architects of genocide and much greater social justice, not only in Europe but across the globe.

Thus was a political and a moral imperative posed: what was the equivalent today of resisting Nazism? The answer seemed clear enough. To be an authentic moral actor in the present meant calling for radical change – for revolution in the West and for the final defeat of imperialism in the Third World.

One way of reading the crises, moral and political, that have befallen the radical left in the last 20 or 30 years is to see that the link between revolution and anti-imperialism has become problematic. It is not that exploitation by the West has disappeared, very far from it. But anti-imperialism has turned out to be not the same thing as anti-fascism. Even more importantly, to the extent that anti-imperialism was accompanied by and eventually submerged in hostility to the West as such, it led not away from fascism but back to it.

Some of the radical left did sense that this might happen. In Britain for example, the predecessor of the Socialist Workers Party, the International Socialists, never romanticised third world revolutions, pointing out how many of them led to the rule of new elites that immediately tyrannised their supposedly liberated subjects. (It is a measure of the moral collapse of recent years that the SWP has entirely abandoned this position.) Others romanticised (variously) the FLN in Algeria, Castro in Cuba, and Maoist China as more or less ‘unconscious agents’ of a ‘world revolution’ conceived as a demi-urge.

None of this seemed to matter much initially. Solidarity with the Vietnamese resistance to America was wholly consistent with a host of campaigns for social justice, all led or disproportionately influenced by the radical left in the West –

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against capital, against patriarchy, against racism and against the re-emergence of the far Right.

What first began to change things (or should have) was Cambodia. After the Americans were driven out a horrific genocide took place which many on the radical left, sadly not for the last time, refused to acknowledge. (It was, as one comrade recently explained to me, 'just off the radar.') Worse, many began to slip into denial, to claim either that it was the fault of America (though it was not Americans slaughtering millions) or (like Noam Chomsky) that the estimates of the numbers killed were vastly exaggerated, in effect, American propaganda. Only when the Vietnamese invaded did the slaughter come to an end.

Genocide in Cambodia was a quite unexpected development and the silence from much of the left was deafening. How could a successful revolution, led by a communist party, result in mass slaughter and the deliberate starvation of whole sections of the population? In fact this was not the first such case and nor was it the last. A large part of the left has never been able to think about what genocide means. This was clear in the case of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and has been confirmed most recently by the failure of response to Darfur. Instead, parts of the left have taken refuge in the repetition of an anti-imperialist rhetoric in which the only enemy is the West, above all the United States. Against this traditional foe (and its supposed allies) all 'resistance' is to be supported as weakening 'the main enemy.'

The question of the relation between means and ends began to trouble Fischer and Cohn-Bendit in the 1970s. It was not only the use of violence by the Baader-Meinhof gang, but their collusion with Palestinian terrorists which began a painful process of rethinking. In the Entebbe hijacking, German 'radicals' separated Jews from other passengers and lined them up for execution, in the name of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against the Zionist 'enemy.' This astounding spectacle was a major wake-up call. A line now had to be drawn inside the radical movement itself, between those who were prepared to support or tolerate such atrocities and those who were not, between some anti-imperialist struggles and others. Not all means were compatible with radical ends; not all anti-imperialists were automatically progressive.

These distinctions were to become even more critical in the wake of events in Iran and Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s. Berman introduces two new emblematic characters, the Iraqi Trotskyist Kanan Makiya, and the Maoist-feminist Azar

Nafisi. Having returned with unbounded optimism from her time as a radicalised student on an American campus, Nafisi watched in horror as the Iranian revolution failed to follow the script laid down for it by her fellow-radicals. In their enthusiasm for the mass movement that toppled the Shah (another tyrant backed by the Americans), much of the left indulged in hopeless wish-fulfilment, fantasising that fundamentalist Islamist clerics were 'objectively' revolutionary, even though their rhetoric and their ideology suggested they had something quite different in mind. Once they had their hands on state power, the mullahs set about the construction of a vicious theocratic and patriarchal fascist regime, brooking no internal dissent, slaughtering thousands of leftists and violently revoking even those limited rights that (some) women had obtained under the Shah.

In Iraq meanwhile, the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein had also come to power, spouting an anti-imperialist rhetoric. The regime turned ferociously on the left (just as Khomeini did in Iran), murdering leftists en masse, constructing a terrifying repressive and (again) genocidal regime. This did arouse some opposition from the left, but only as long as the Americans were backing him. (It is often and conveniently forgotten that the French and the Germans supplied Saddam with the poison gas to massacre the Kurds, and support was forthcoming from the Russians, long before the collapse of 'communism.')

When the Americans (appallingly late) changed their minds, these crimes seemed to disappear from the collective memory of much of the left. The Kurdish case in particular seems to have become a complete embarrassment, from which it is only possible to escape by accusing Saddam's victims of the very crimes his regime committed. (This is the disgraceful argument advanced for example most recently by Tariq Ali, who has used the pages of the liberal *Guardian* on behalf the anti-war movement to charge the Kurds themselves with ethnic cleansing, a charge which went, shamefully, entirely unrefuted.)

Whilst Fischer and Cohn-Bendit had the freedom in the West to engage in the burgeoning Green movement in their efforts to develop a coherent and ethical radical politics, Makiya and Nafisi were faced with a much more dangerous and difficult situation. If Green politics (as was to become clear in the 1990s) was not without its own stresses and contradictions, these paled into insignificance in comparison to the perils facing radicals in Iran and Iraq, where any visible opposition ran immense risks. Both Afisi and Makiya were forced not only into hiding and anonymity but also into a more sustained and agonising political reappraisal. Afisi was not only profoundly traumatised by violence of the mullahs; she asked herself too whether the left might not, if it had come to power, behaved

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any differently. Makiya for his part saw in the Ba'athist regime a reincarnation not only of Nazi Germany but also of Stalinist Russia. Where Afisi saw the roots of the problem in intolerance and fanaticism, a desire on the part of both the mullahs and the left to impose their own doctrines on the rest of the population, Makiya turned to Hannah Arendt's diagnosis of a new kind of politics and the concept of totalitarianism.

Here I think that Berman's own revulsion against the antics and follies of some of the left leads him astray. Arendt's thesis – that the extreme left and the extreme right can converge, that Nazism and Stalinism share more than divides them – is flawed in certain crucial respects. She was not wrong in drawing attention to the extreme violence of these regimes (though there were distinctions she minimised, not least the fact that there were no death camps in the Soviet Union). But Arendt conceded too much to the *self-presentation* of the Stalinist regime, treating the Soviet Union as if it were, in some lingering sense, still a socialist state. In fact, Stalinism was not an extreme left wing movement but a counter-revolutionary one, whose brutal exploitation of the Soviet people (including the working class) had nothing whatever to do with socialism. It took a counter-revolution in the Soviet Union to bring Stalin to power, and the system he built was in every fundamental respect the opposite of a socialist one, as Victor Serge long ago pointed out. The fact that many on the left, in their prioritisation of anti-imperialism, have lost all their bearings on this question, and have allowed Stalinism to return as it were by the back door, should not blind us.

What is puzzling is that Berman himself draws attention to the consistent anti-Stalinism of people like Cohn-Bendit – a man never attracted by the idea that the Soviet Union represented a credible alternative to the capitalist West. On the contrary, he and many others radicalised in the 1960s insisted that the Soviet Union was a brutal dictatorship. In fact they were altogether more consistent in their opposition to Stalinism than many liberals, just as they were more consistent in their opposition to fascism than many social democrats. Berman's previous book (*Terror and Liberalism*) in fact made much of the latter point, showing how sections of the left colluded with fascism at times (notably in France in the 1930s). He might equally in this context have noted that liberals and social democrats have also at times colluded with Stalinism – allied with Stalinists in the Popular Fronts, making excuses for what was happening in the Soviet Union, and joining with the Stalinists in turning on those like Trotsky and his small group of followers (though not only them) who tried to raise the alarm. George Orwell tells some of this story

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in *Homage to Catalonia*, reminding us that there has always been a coherent radical tradition which has been resolutely and consistently anti-Stalinist as well as anti-Fascist.

That this tradition remains important, indeed invaluable, was made clear by events in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Once again, it became essential to draw a line inside the left and for the democrats to separate themselves from those who were prepared to collude with tyranny, even to engage in genocide-denial, as long as it came wrapped up in some kind of anti-imperialist rhetoric. The wars waged by Milošević's regime finally led some western states to take action, much as the British, the French and (eventually) the Americans had finally decided (very late in the day) to fight the Nazis. But NATO's decision to intervene against Serbian nationalists threatening genocide in Kosovo was impossible for many on the left to swallow. NATO, many argued, was an imperialist force; if it was the only force available to stop genocide, then genocide could not be happening.

Fischer and Cohn-Bendit could not accept such perverse reasoning and were again forced to rethink their position and to admit that when mass murder threatened, it might be necessary to ally with the Americans to stop it. Bernard Kouchner – who emerges from Berman's account as perhaps the most consistent, most ethically driven and clearest thinker – had already come to this conclusion. The spectacle of large numbers of people being murdered or starved to death by tyrannical regimes, first in Biafra, then in Cambodia, had led him from the streets of Paris (he was heavily involved in May '68) first to set up *Medecins sans Frontieres*, then to lobby for other states to intervene. (The setting up of this organisation incidentally owed more to his radical leftist inspiration than perhaps Berman gives him credit for. It was an initiative from below, an attempt by quite ordinary people, doctors and nurses in this instance, to intervene, to take matters into their own hands, challenging the failure of states and institutions to act.)

So the case for intervention in Yugoslavia was clear cut for Kouchner. It became so for Cohn-Bendit and Fischer, and for many others on the left. So far so admirable, one might say. But has not the Iraq War shown up the perils of going too far in such rethinking? It has certainly been the most painful issue for the key characters in this book, as for many of us, to think about. Berman freely admits that Iraq has split the 68ers. Some (Cohn-Bendit, Fischer) refused to support the Americans whilst others (Kouchner, Adam Michnik, Glucksmann, Makiya) have taken the view that Saddam's genocidal regime was even worse than Milošević's. Berman, as

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one might expect from his previous book (*Terror and Liberalism*) takes the latter view. He thinks that Fischer and Cohn-Bendit have been inconsistent, though he does not scorn their reasoning or motivation. Admirably, given the vitriolic abuse his own position has exposed him to, he accepts the decision was difficult, not least because of the incompetence, and worse, of the American administration, and its refusal until far too late in the day to make out a coherent, compelling case for the intervention. Berman's balanced and respectful account of these differences is both a model of journalism (scrupulously reporting what people actually said and did) and, in its own way, a model to follow. People on the left can arrive at different judgements about difficult complex issues without traducing each other.

But Berman goes astray slightly here too. As the book comes to a close, he describes in harrowing detail one of the many atrocities wrought by the so-called 'resistance,' the massacre of UN personnel, many of them close colleagues of Kouchner, in Baghdad in August 2003. These men and women had devoted their lives to human rights and social justice across the world. Their murder was certainly a demoralising blow to Kouchner and to all who – whatever their differences over the invasion – wanted to rebuild Iraq from the ruins of Saddam's genocidal regime. But Berman seems too to have been a bit demoralised by this bombing, seeing it as the end of this generation. He argues the bomb not only ended the lives of those on the UN mission but underlined how unhealable were the divisions on the left.

This seems too pessimistic a conclusion. For one thing, it confuses the possible outcome of the war with matters of principle. In the struggle to rebuild and democratise Iraq, there is a powerful, well-armed, murderous enemy that commands support, some of it (amazingly) from people who consider themselves on the left. But so too did the Nazis at some points; so too did Stalinism for a lot longer. A war against such an enemy can be lost (and not only in Iraq); it may well be lost under the present leadership. People may also have different views about how to fight it, where and when. But these are matters of judgement upon which it is perfectly possible to have differences of opinion.

Whatever their differences on the invasion, there is no fundamental disagreement between any of the characters portrayed here. They share a set of values derived from their long political journey. Their history needs telling when much of the left has lost both its moral bearings and its memory. Many of those recently drawn into politics, many for good motives, many (rightly) excited by the experience of political participation and direct action, do not know this history. Deprived of it,

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they are likely to be drawn far too easily and unthinkingly into a form of politics whose weaknesses, ambiguities and self-deceptions have cost the left dearly in the past and threaten to do so again.

Berman is mistaken, therefore, in arguing that a new generation will have to learn for itself. Indeed, this conclusion undermines the very point of this book itself. On the contrary, if a new generation is to join the struggle against a resurgent fascism, it needs to connect with the tradition laid down, as it were, by many of the characters he has written about.

It is a tradition which has, certainly, been gravely sullied in recent years too and it is no small part of Berman's book that he shows how and when and where this has occurred. But the book also tells us that some have refused to go along, however great the pressure to conform. From their rebellions we have much to learn. It was the shock of seeing German 'radicals' slating the Jews for execution that led Fischer to rebel, and reassert the importance for the left of the fight against anti-Semitism. The Green movement, in which Fischer and Cohn-Bendit played such an important role, owed some of its inspiration to a refusal to tolerate terrorism and amorality on the left, and a determination to reassert the connection between ends and means in radical politics. It was the far greater amorality and terrorism of the Ba'ath that led Kanan Makiya to provide what is still today the most penetrating analysis of Saddam's regime and to challenge the apologetics of so many on the Arab left. It was the violent suppression of the rights of women (amongst other things) that led Afisi to alert us to the fascist nature of the so-called Islamic republic of Iran. It was Milošević's genocidal assault on the Muslims of Bosnia that led Fischer, Cohn-Bendit and others to demand intervention, so that the failure to confront fascism in the 1930s was not repeated

Whatever their differences on the Iraq war, a commitment to these and other causes remains, it seems to me, intact on this part of the radical left. These are commitments which have saved the honour, one might say, of the left as a whole, much as Trotsky and his small group of followers, and far too few others, did in opposing both Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s. We face similar challenges today in the threat of Islamo-fascism and its allies. Berman's fine book retrieves and retells this critical history. It is an invaluable resource for those who want to rebuild an ethical and radical left today.

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