

Can There Be a Decent Left?

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LEFTIST OPPOSITION to the war in Afghanistan faded in November and December of last year, not only because of the success of the war but also because of the enthusiasm with which so many Afghans greeted that success. The pictures of women showing their smiling faces to the world, of men shaving their beards, of girls in school, of boys playing soccer: all this was no doubt a slap in the face to leftist theories of American imperialism, but also politically disarming. There was (and is) still a lot to worry about: refugees, hunger, minimal law and order. But it was suddenly clear, even to many opponents of the war, that the Taliban regime had been the biggest obstacle to any serious effort to address the looming humanitarian crisis, and it was the American war that removed the obstacle. It looked (almost) like a war of liberation, a humanitarian intervention.

But the war was primarily neither of these things; it was a preventive war, designed to make it impossible to train terrorists in Afghanistan and to plan and organize attacks like that of September 11. And that war was never really accepted, in wide sections of the left, as either just or necessary. Recall the standard arguments against it: that we should have turned to the United Nations; that we had to prove the guilt of al-Qaeda and the Taliban and then organize international trials; and that the war, if it was fought at all, had to be fought without endangering civilians. The last point was intended to make fighting impossible. I haven't come across any arguments that seriously tried to describe how this (or any) war could be fought without putting civilians at risk, or to ask what degree of risk might be permissible, or to specify the risks that American

soldiers should accept in order to reduce the risk of civilian deaths. All these were legitimate issues in Afghanistan, as they were in the Kosovo and Gulf wars. But among last fall's antiwar demonstrators, "Stop the bombing" wasn't a slogan that summarized a coherent view of the bombing—or of the alternatives to it. The truth is that most leftists were not committed to having a coherent view about things like that; they were committed to opposing the war, and they were prepared to oppose it without regard to its causes or character and without any visible concern about preventing future terrorist attacks.

A few left academics have tried to figure out how many civilians actually died in Afghanistan, aiming at as high a figure as possible, on the assumption, apparently, that if the number is greater than the number of people killed in the attacks on the Twin Towers, the war is unjust. At the moment, most of the numbers are propaganda; there is no reliable accounting. But the claim that the numbers matter in just this way—that the 3,120th death determines the injustice of the war—is wrong. It denies one of the most basic and best understood moral distinctions: between premeditated murder and unintended killing. And the denial isn't accidental, as if the people making it just forgot about, or didn't know about, the everyday moral world. The denial is willful: unintended killing by Americans in Afghanistan counts as murder. This can't be true anywhere else, for anybody else.

The radical failure of the left's response to the events of last fall raises a disturbing question: can there be a decent left in a superpower? Or more accurately, in the only superpower? Maybe the guilt produced by living in such a country and enjoying its privileges makes it impossible to sustain a decent (intelligent, responsible, morally nuanced) politics. Maybe festering resentment, ingrown anger,

and self-hate are the inevitable result of the long years spent in fruitless opposition to the global reach of American power. Certainly, all those emotions were plain to see in the left's reaction to September 11, in the failure to register the horror of the attack or to acknowledge the human pain it caused, in the *schadenfreude* of so many of the first responses, the barely concealed glee that the imperial state had finally gotten what it deserved. Many people on the left recovered their moral balance in the weeks that followed; there is at least the beginning of what should be a long process of self-examination. But many more have still not brought themselves to think about what really happened.

Is there any way of escaping the politics of guilt and resentment on the home ground of a superpower? We might begin to worry about this question by looking at oppositional politics in older imperial states. I can't do that in any sustained way (historians take note), only very sketchily. The Boer War is a good place to begin, because of the fierce opposition it aroused in England—which wasn't marked, despite the cruelty of the war, by the kind of self-hate that we have seen on the American left. Nor were the "little Englanders" hostile to English politics and culture; they managed to take a stand against the empire without alienating themselves from its home country. Indeed, they were more likely to regard England as the home country of liberalism and parliamentary democracy. After all, the values of parliamentarianism (self-government, free speech, the right of opposition) did not support imperial rule. George Orwell's defense of patriotism seems to me an actual description of the feelings of many English liberals and leftists before his time and after (even of the Marxists, some of the best of whom were historians, like E. P. Thompson, who wrote sympathetically, indeed romantically, about the English people). Later on, during Margaret Thatcher's terms, and particularly during the Falklands War, the tone of the opposition was more bitter, but by then there was no empire, only sour memories.

I think that the French story is similar. For most of the imperial years, French leftists were as proud of their Frenchness as were people

on the right—and perhaps with more justification. For wasn't France the birthplace of enlightenment, universal values, and human rights? The Algerian war gave rise to a more familiar self-hatred, most clearly manifest in Jean-Paul Sartre's defense of National Liberation Front (FLN) terrorism (in his preface to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*): "To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remains a dead man and a free man." This suggests that it is actually a good thing to kill Europeans (they were mostly French), but Sartre did not volunteer to go himself and be killed so that one more Algerian would be a free man. His was a generalized, not a personal, self-hatred.

WHY SHOULDN'T the American story be like these two, with long years of healthy oppositionist politics, and only episodic resentment? Wasn't America a beacon of light to the Old World, a city on a hill, an unprecedented experiment in democratic politics? I grew up with the Americanism of the popular front in the 1930s and 1940s; I look back on it now and think that the Communist Party's effort to create a leftist pop culture, in an instant, as the party line turned, was kitschy and manipulative—and also politically very smart. Paul Robeson's "Ballad for Americans," whatever the quality of the music, provides at least a sense of what an unalienated American radicalism might be like. The days after September 11 would not have been a bad time for a popular front. What had happened that made something like that unthinkable?

The cold war, imperial adventures in Central America, Vietnam above all, and then the experience of globalization under American leadership: all these, for good reasons and bad, produced a pervasive leftist view of the United States as global bully—rich, privileged, selfish, hedonistic, and corrupt beyond remedy. The sense of a civilizing mission, which must have sustained parts of the British and French left in a more fully imperial setting (read John Stuart Mill on British India), never got off the ground here. Foreign aid, the Peace Corps, and nation building never took on the dimensions

of a “mission”; they were mostly sidelines of U.S. foreign policy: underfunded, frequently in the shade of military operations. Certainly, there has been much to criticize in the policies of every U.S. government since the Second World War (see almost any back issue of *Dissent*). And yet, the leftist critique—most clearly, I think, from the Vietnam years forward (from the time of “Amerika,” Viet Cong flags, and breathless trips to North Vietnam)—has been stupid, overwrought, grossly inaccurate. It is the product of what Philip Roth, in his novel *I Married a Communist*, aptly described as “the combination of embitterment and not thinking.” The left has lost its bearings. Why?

I WILL SUGGEST four reasons, without claiming that this is an exhaustive list. It is nothing more than a rough argument, an attempt to begin a debate.

(1) **Ideology:** the lingering effects of the Marxist theory of imperialism and of the third worldist doctrines of the 1960s and 1970s. We may think that we live in a postideological age, and maybe most of us do, but the traces of old ideologies can be found everywhere in the discourse of the left. Perhaps the most striking consequence is the inability of leftists to recognize or acknowledge the power of religion in the modern world. Whenever writers on the left say that the “root cause” of terror is global inequality or human poverty, the assertion is in fact a denial that religious motives really count. Theology, on this view, is just the temporary, colloquial idiom in which the legitimate rage of oppressed men and women is expressed.

A few brave leftists described the Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda movement as examples of “clerical fascism,” which at least gets the adjective right. And maybe “fascist” is close enough, even if this new politics doesn’t look like the product of late capitalist degeneration. It gives the left a reason for opposing Islamic terror, which is an important achievement. But it would be better to find a reason in the realities of terrorism itself, in the idea of a holy war against the infidels, which is not the same thing as a war against inferior races or alien nations. In fact, Islamic radicalism is not, as fascism is, a racist or ultranationalist doctrine. Some-

thing else is going on, which we need to understand.

But ideologically primed leftists were likely to think that they already understood whatever needed to be understood. Any group that attacks the imperial power must be a representative of the oppressed, and its agenda must be the agenda of the left. It isn’t necessary to listen to its spokesmen. What else can they want except . . . the redistribution of resources across the globe, the withdrawal of American soldiers from wherever they are, the closing down of aid programs for repressive governments, the end of the blockade of Iraq, and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel? I don’t doubt that there is some overlap between this program and the dreams of al-Qaeda leaders—though al-Qaeda is not an egalitarian movement, and the idea that it supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is crazy. The overlap is circumstantial and convenient, nothing more. A holy war against infidels is not, even unintentionally, unconsciously, or “objectively,” a left politics. But how many leftists can even imagine a holy war against infidels?

(2) **Powerlessness and alienation:** leftists have no power in the United States, and most of us don’t expect to exercise power, ever. Many left intellectuals live in America like internal aliens, refusing to identify with their fellow citizens, regarding any hint of patriotic feeling as a surrender to jingoism. That’s why they had such difficulty responding emotionally to the attacks of September 11 or joining in the expressions of solidarity that followed. Equally important, that’s why their participation in the policy debate after the attacks was so odd; their proposals (turn to the UN, collect evidence against bin Laden, and so on) seem to have been developed with no concern for effectiveness and no sense of urgency. They talked and wrote as if they could not imagine themselves responsible for the lives of their fellow citizens. That was someone else’s business; the business of the left was . . . what? To oppose the authorities, whatever they did. The good result of this opposition was a spirited defense of civil liberties. But even this defense displayed a certain willful irresponsibility and ineffectiveness, because so many leftists rushed to the defense

of civil liberties while refusing to acknowledge that the country faced real dangers—as if there were no need at all to balance security and freedom. Maybe the right balance will emerge spontaneously from the clash of right-wing authoritarianism and left-wing absolutism, but it would be better practice for the left to figure out the right balance for itself, on its own; the effort would suggest a responsible politics and a real desire to exercise power, some day.

But what really marks the left, or a large part of it, is the bitterness that comes with abandoning any such desire. The alienation is radical. How else can one understand the unwillingness of people who, after all, live here, and whose children and grandchildren live here, to join in a serious debate about how to protect the country against future terrorist attacks? There is a pathology in this unwillingness, and it has already done us great damage.

(3) **The moral purism of blaming America first:** many leftists seem to believe that this is like blaming oneself, taking responsibility for the crimes of the imperial state. In fact, when we blame America, we also lift ourselves above the blameworthy (other) Americans. The left sets itself apart. Whatever America is doing in the world *isn't* our doing. In some sense, of course, that is true. The defeat of fascism in the middle years of the twentieth century and of communism in the last years were not our doing. Some of us, at least, thought that these efforts merited our support—or our “critical support.” But this is a complicated and difficult politics, and it doesn't allow for the favorite posture of many American leftists: standing as a righteous minority, brave and determined, among the timid, the corrupt, and the wicked. A posture like that ensures at once the moral superiority of the left and its political failure.

(4) **The sense of not being entitled to criticize anyone else:** how can we live in the United States, the richest, most powerful, and most privileged country in the world—and say anything critical about people who are poorer and weaker than we are? This was a major issue in the 1960s, when the New Left seemed to have discovered “oppression” for the first time, and we all enlisted on the side of oppressed men and women and failed, again and

again, to criticize the authoritarianism and brutality that often scar their politics. There is no deeper impulse in left politics than this enlistment; solidarity with people in trouble seems to me the most profound commitment that leftists make. But this solidarity includes, or should include, a readiness to tell these people when we think they are acting wrongly, violating the values we share. Even the oppressed have obligations, and surely the first among these is not to murder innocent people, not to make terrorism their politics. Leftists who cannot insist upon this point, even to people poorer and weaker than they are, have abandoned both politics and morality for something else. They are radical only in their abjection. That was Sartre's radicalism, face-to-face with FLN terror, and it has been imitated by thousands since, excusing and apologizing for acts that any decent left would begin by condemning.

WHAT OUGHT to be done? I have a modest agenda: *put decency first*, and then we will see. So, let's go back over my list of reasons for the current indecency.

Ideology: We certainly need something better than the rag-tag Marxism with which so much of the left operates today—a Marxism whose chief effect is to turn world politics into a cheap melodrama, with all the villains dressed to look the part and one villain larger than life. A tough materialist analysis would be fine, so long as it is sophisticated enough to acknowledge that material interests don't exhaust the possibilities of human motivation. The spectacle of European leftists straining to find some economic reason for the Kosovo War (oil in the Balkans? a possible pipeline? was NATO reaching for control of the Black Sea?) was entertaining at the time, but it doesn't bear repeating. For the moment we can make do with a little humility, an openness to heterodox ideas, a sharp eye for the real world, and a readiness to attend to moral as well as materialist arguments. This last point is especially important. The encounter with Islamic radicalism, and with other versions of politicized religion, should help us understand that high among our interests are our values: secular

enlightenment, human rights, and democratic government. Left politics starts with the defense of these three.

Alienation and powerlessness: It is a common idea on the left that political responsibility is something like temperance, moderation, and cleanliness—good bourgeois values that are incompatible with radical politics or incisive social criticism. You have to be a little wild to be a radical. That isn't a crazy idea, and alienated intellectuals may well have, more than anyone else, the anger necessary to begin the critical project and the lust for intellectual combat that sustains it. But they don't necessarily get things right, and the angrier they are and the more they are locked into their combative posture, the more likely they are to get things wrong. What was necessary after September 11, and what is necessary now, is an engagement with our fellow citizens that recognizes the fellowship. We can be as critical as we like, but these are people whose fate we share; we are responsible for their safety as they are for ours, and our politics has to reflect that mutual responsibility. When they are attacked, so are we; and we should join willingly and constructively in debates about how to defend the country. Once again: we should act as if we won't always be powerless.

Blaming America first: Not everything that goes badly in the world goes badly because of us. The United States is not omnipotent, and its leaders should not be taken as co-conspirators in every human disaster. The left has little difficulty understanding the need for distributive justice with regard to resources, but we have been practically clueless about the just distribution of praise and blame. To take the obvious example: in the second half of the twentieth century, the United States fought both just and unjust wars, undertook both just and unjust interventions. It would be a useful exercise to work through the lists and test our capacity to make distinctions—to recognize, say, that the United States was wrong in Guatemala in 1954 and right in Kosovo in 1999. Why can't we accept an ambivalent relation to American power, acknowledging that it has had good and bad effects in the world? But shouldn't an internationalist left demand a more egalitarian distribution of power? Well,

yes, in principle; but any actual redistribution will have to be judged by the quality of the states that would be empowered by it. Faced with states like, say, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, I don't think we have to support a global redistribution of political power.

Not blaming anyone else: The world (and this includes the third world) is too full of hatred, cruelty, and corruption for any left, even the American left, to suspend its judgment about what's going on. It's not the case that because we are privileged we should turn inward and focus our criticism only on ourselves. In fact, inwardness is one of our privileges; it is often a form of political self-indulgence. Yes, we are entitled to blame the others whenever they are blameworthy; in fact, it is only when we do that, when we denounce, say, the authoritarianism of third world governments, that we will find our true comrades—the local opponents of the maximal leaders and military juntas, who are often waiting for our recognition and support. If we value democracy, we have to be prepared to defend it, at home, of course, but not only there.

I would once have said that we were well along: the American left has an honorable history, and we have certainly gotten some things right, above all, our opposition to domestic and global inequalities. But what the aftermath of September 11 suggests is that we have not advanced very far—and not always in the right direction. The left needs to begin again. ●

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