# The concept of the Left and right

Chris Cutrone, Nikos Malliaris, and Samir Gandesha

"We are the 99%"—Occupy Wall Street (2011)

"The Left must define itself on the level of ideas, conceding that in many instances it will find itself in the minority."—Leszek Kolakowski, The Concept of the Left (1968)

*The distinction of the Left and the right was never clear. But following the failure of the old left, the relevance of these categories has increasingly ceased to be self-evident. In its place there has been a recurring declaration of the "end of ideology," by 1960s intellectuals like Daniel Bell, 1980s postmodernists, and the 1990s post-left anarchism.*

*Yet in spite of the recurring death of ideology, the terms "Left" and "right" seem to persist, albeit in a spectral manner. With the politics that attended the uprisings of 2011—from the Arab Spring to Occupy—there seemed a sense that the left ideology has simultaneously become irrelevant and inescapable. While the call for democracy by the "99%" has its roots in the historical demands of the Left, these movements were notable to the extent that they were not led by left organizations. To many who participated in these movements, left politics seemed "purely ideological" and not a viable avenue to advance discontents. Now that this moment has passed there is a sense that the right has prevailed, and even a sense of resignation, a sense that the Left was not really expected to be competitive.*

*This ambiance seems in contrast to the past. At the height of the new left's struggle to overcome the old left, the Polish Marxist Leszek Kolakowski declared that the concept of the Left "remained unclear." In contrast to the ambivalence of the present, the act of clarifying the ambiguity of the Left seemed to have political stakes. The Left, he declared, could not be asserted by sociological divisions in society, but only by defining itself ever more precisely at the level of ideas. He was aware that the ideas generated by the Left, such as "freedom" and "equality," could readily be appropriated by the right, but they would only do so if they failed to be ruthlessly clarified. For Kolakowski the Old Communist Left had ceased to be Left and had become the right precisely on the basis of its ideological inertia.*

*What does it mean today when the challenges to the status quo are no longer clearly identifiable as originating from the Left? While it seems implausible that Left ideology has been transcended because people still explain social currents in terms of Left and right, there is a sense in the present that to end exploitation will demand a measure of realpolitik—a better tactical response—rather than ideological clarification. One has the uneasy feeling that existence of the Left and the right only persist by virtue of the fact the concept of the Left has somehow become settled, static, and trapped in history. But wouldn't this be antithetical to any concept of the Left?*

**Chris Cutrone**: "The concept of the Left" was published in English translation in 1968. Actually, the essay dates from the late fifties, and it was a response to the crackdown that came with the Khrushchev revelations. Most famously, there was an uprising in Hungary in 1956 after Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin, but in fact there were attempts at liberalization in other parts of Eastern Europe, including Poland. Kolakowski participated in that, but also suffered the consequences of the reaction against it, and that's what prompted him to write the essay. Much later, Kolakowski became a very virulent anti-Marxist. But in the late fifties, he's still writing within the tradition of Marxism and drawing from the history of its controversies, specifically the revisionist dispute and the split with the Second International into the Third International.

Kolakowski wrote that the Left needs to be defined at the level of ideas rather than at the level of sociological groups. In other words, Left and right don't correspond to "workers" and "capitalists." Rather, the Left is defined by its vision of the future, its utopianism, whereas the right is defined by the absence of that, by opportunism. Very succinctly, Kolakowski said, "The right doesn't need ideas, it only needs tactics." So what is the status of the ideas that would define the Left?

He says that the Left is characterized by an obscure and mysterious consciousness of history. The Left is concerned with the opening and furthering of possibilities, whereas the right is about the foreclosure of those possibilities. The consciousness of those possibilities would be the ideology of the Left. Kolakowski's use of the term "utopia," when he says the Left is defined by utopia, is a rather peculiar and eccentric use of the term. It's not a definite image of the future; it's rather a sense of possibility—a consciousness of change. This might involve certain images of the future, but it's not defined, for Kolakowski, by those images of the future. Left and right are relative; there's a spectrum that goes from a sense of possibility for change and ranges off to the right with a foreclosure of those possibilities, which is what justifies opportunism and politics of pure tactics.

`Another useful category that Kolakowski introduced is "crime." He says politics cannot be fully extricated from crime, but the Left should be willing to call crime "crime," whereas the right needs to pretend that crimes are exigent necessities. In other words, the Left is concerned with distinguishing between true necessities and failures to meet those necessities, which is what political crime amounts to. So Kolakowski says that the Left cannot avoid committing crimes, but it can avoid failure to recognize them as crimes. In this respect, crimes would be compromises that foreclose possibilities—political failure is a crime. This is important, again, because the context in which he was writing was Stalinism, and Khrushchev's revelation of Stalin's crimes. In other words, Khrushchev's concern was, "Okay, Stalin is dead and there's been a struggle for power in his wake. How are we going to make sense of the past twenty or thirty years of history. What were the crimes that were committed?" The crimes that were committed in this respect were crimes against the revolution—crimes against freedom, crimes against the possibility of opening further possibilities for change. In this respect, the Left is concerned with freedom, and the right is concerned with the disenchantment of freedom—the foreclosing of possibilities for freedom. Whereas the Left must believe in freedom, the right does not. Hannah Arendt in the 1960s in *On Revolution* points out how remarkable it was that the language of freedom had dropped out of the Left already at that point.

Today, one of the reasons why Platypus says, "The Left is dead! Long live the Left!" is that the concept of freedom, and therefore the concept of the Left itself, has given way rather to concerns with social justice. Social justice can't be about freedom because justice is about restoring the status quo ante, not advancing further possibilities. While we might say there can be no freedom without justice, we can say that there can be justice without freedom. When the avowed Left concerns itself not with freedom but with justice, it ceases to be a Left. That's because pursuing a politics of justice would stand on different justifications than pursuing a politics of freedom—in the name of justice, crimes against freedom can be committed.

Georgii Krutikov's proposal for Flying City, 1928.

**Nikos Malliaris**: I have a mostly unorthodox approach since I come from a political tradition that considers the distinction between Left and right to be obsolete and politically irrelevant since, let's say, the sixties. Indeed, part of the critique that thinkers such as Lasch and Castoriadis, or even Hannah Arendt, address, from the sixties on, has been articulated around this basic idea. A distinction between Left and right seems obsolete not only because the old left, the Left that was, has lost many of its properly left-wing traits, moving more and more to the right. Christopher Lasch's critique of the notion of progress has shown that the real problem lies in the fact that many fundamental left-wing beliefs—such as the belief in progress, technophilia, and the primacy of material economic factors—were in reality,

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## Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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# Tony Cliff's legacy today

## International Socialism and the tradition of Trotsky and Lenin

James Heartfield

"I became a Trotskyist in 1933. The theory of state capitalism is a development of Trotsky's position.... But at the end of the Second World War, the perspectives that Trotsky had put forward were not realized. Trotsky wrote that one thing was certain: the Stalinist bureaucracy would not survive the war. It would either be overthrown by revolution or by counterrevolution.... The assumption was that the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy would be a fantastic opening for the Trotskyist movement, for the Fourth International. The Stalinist bureaucracy not only didn't collapse but it expanded.... Therefore, at that time, Stalinism had a fantastic strength. And we had to come to terms with it."

— Tony Cliff, interview with Ahmed Shawki (1997)

*Tony Cliff's recognition in his own moment of a certain kind of impasse within Trotskyism and his attempt to overcome it require full consideration and appreciation both in terms of the merits of its potential and a consciousness of its limits.*

*A panel on the legacy of Tony Cliff opened the discussion at the Sixth Annual Platypus International Convention held in Chicago on April 4th, 2014. What follows are the opening remarks by English journalist and author James Heartfield.*

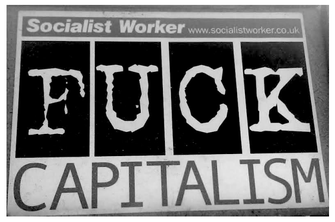
**LET ME START BY SAYING** how grateful I am to be invited here today. I've been a keen watcher and reader of Platypus. It is really useful that we look critically at the thinking and reasoning of the Left because if the Left doesn't become self-reflective, it won't have any importance whatsoever. In my comments on the International Socialist Group, which was founded by Tony Cliff and a few others, I want to say roughly this: the best way to understand the intellectual development of Tony Cliff and of the International Socialist Group is to see it in context.

Tony Cliff was very interested in an argument about socialist organization derived from something Lenin said in the early 20th century. In the pamphlet *What is to Be Done?* Lenin "bent the stick," as Tony Cliff used to say, and very forcefully made the point that the spontaneous consciousness of the working class would not go beyond trade-union consciousness and that political, theoretical reflection upon that would necessarily be, as Lenin wrote in the pamplet, "introduced from the outside." That argument of Lenin's was anathema to Tony Cliff and a point he criticized; he criticized it in a 1959 book he wrote about Rosa Luxembourg and in a 1960 pamphlet on Trotsky called *Party and Class*.

Now this is the core of the argument. What Lenin is doing is very old-fashioned in philosophical terms in that his argument is derived from an Enlightenment view. He's saying that in essence there is a distinction to be made between higher thought and opinion, between rational or reflective thought and immediate or natural thinking. That distinction would be commonplace amongst Enlightenment thinkers like Hegel or Locke; it would be easily understood by them. Did it have the sectarian implication that Cliff saw in it? I suggest not. Lenin, like Hegel, understood that when he talked about higher thought or reflective thought or theoretical reflection, and distinguished it from the merely spontaneous reflections of people in their activity, he understood that essentially they were the same—they were the same stuff, the same substance. That reflection, that theoretical thinking, was not separate and apart wholly—it was not an absolute distinction—but it was of the same material. It was a distillation of experience, but that distillation was not something that could happen unbidden. That was the very point: it could only come about through organization; it would have to be reflected through organization.

Hegel's distinction between rational thought and experience is a point of view that has been largely rejected in the 20th century. In the 20th century, philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Husserl resisted the idea that there is a differentiation between rational thought and experience and they've tried to bracket the question to one side. They've insisted on the commonality of spontaneous thinking and reasoning and resisted the differentiation—and that was very much in the mood of the 20th century. In all its cultural aspects, the 20th century has looked for spontaneity. That is why we like Charlie Parker rather than a written score. It is why, as I remember as a child, the hippies had painted in big letters the slogan on a gable end in Ladbroke Grove, that *"the tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction."* The words are William Blake's, against Jonathan Swift. It is a very sixties mentality to say that spontaneity and emotion are what you can trust whereas reason and reflection are a trap—something that is cold, distant, and that loses sight of the truth. In essence, that was the core of Cliff's particular contribution to theoretical development.

Many people at the time understood that the whole point about Cliff's work was that it was very activist—it was around activism, like the very successful Anti-Nazi-League campaign—whereas the theoretical stuff was a bit less important. More recently, the Socialist Workers Party (what the International Socialist Group became) was very successful, again, in the Stop the War campaign because it inserted itself very pointedly within a rising tide of movement and reflected those feelings that were being expressed in the largely spontaneous rejection of the war campaign that George Bush and Tony Blair were implicated in. Now that's all very good,




and if we understand that, we can understand why the tendency was relatively lively. It had a big impact.

That said, I want to be a little bit cautious because, to be realistic, I don't think the Socialist Workers Party in Britain ever had any weight in terms of a real determinative character. It never actually changed the course of history at any point. It was mostly influential amongst intellectuals and it has had an impact on the life of letters. It did rather elegantly summate moods at certain points because that was the *raison d'être*. The downside, the limitation, was that there was a fairly profound anti-theoretical trajectory in the way that they worked.
This is not to say that there weren't theories. Theories were worked up, like the "Permanent Arms Economy" or that Russia was state capitalist or that the Permanent Revolution had been deflected in the Third World and that this was the foundation of Third World nationalist movements. I think these are all essentially pragmatic, *post-festum* constructions to describe a *problem*.

The problem was one that the Trotskyists had inherited from Trotsky: a catastrophist understanding of the economy, which told them that the economy would be getting worse and worse in the 1950's and 1960's—which simply wasn't true. So, *post-festum*, the theory that arms spending—the Permanent Arms Economy—had overcome the crisis was worked up. It's eccentric, really, to say that the arms expenditure was the cause of the restoration of capitalism and to say, 20 years later, that arms expenditure was the cause of the collapse of the economy in the 1980's. The people who coined this theory weren't really thinking about the fact that they were overthrowing a basic proposition of Marx's—in whose theoretical work they were situating themselves—which is that "the barrier to capital accumulation is capital itself." It's not something outside, like arms expenditure; that could only be an epiphenomenal effect.

Similarly, the Trotskyists were saddled with the unpopularity of the Soviet Union. To call the USSR "capitalist" was a way of side-stepping the problem: "Yes, we hate the Soviet Union too, because it is capitalist." Third World nationalist revolutions were a problem for the Trotskyists because they seemed to disprove the argument that this was an era of permanent revolution, not one of national liberation. To say that the permanent revolution had been 'deflected' into a national revolution was just a way of squaring the circle, not a theory as such.

To insist upon the *situatatedness* of the development of the International Socialist group and the Socialist Workers Party afterwards, I would like to say that at key points they were lifted by events (like the trade union militancy of the 1970s) and then, when those movements moved on, they fell. This was a kind of classic problem that they were in. In the 1970s, the structure or the rhythm of the class conflict that was emerging and becoming quite intense was that full-time trade union officials were clashing with their rank-and-file because the rank-and-file members were basically frustrated with the slow rate of progress and angry at the fixation of the full-time officials on securing their own position as over and above the rights of workers. The Trotskyists in the International Socialist group competed with the members of the Communist Party in Britain for authority amongst the rank-and-file. It was a good pitch; it was a way of presenting what their particular aims were.

*"Tony Cliff" continues on page 4*

## The concept of the Left and right, continued from page 1

right from the start, shared by both right and Left. The same goes of course for Castoriadis's critique of Marxism as an ideology that perverted the revolutionary project by trying to articulate it using basic elements of the bourgeois worldview, such as the belief in progress, economism, scientism, technophilia, or even the distinction between revolutionary experts and uneducated masses. There is nothing absolutely new in all this, as non-orthodox Marxists such as Karl Korsch attacked the pseudo-scientific Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals. The first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers were the first to undertake an attempt to renovate revolutionary theory. We can say that Lasch and Castoriadis just made a step forward by historically and philosophically expanding—and politically in the latter's case—such a critique.

In any case, the main conclusion of this philosophical and sociological point of view is that the Left actively participated in the gradual crystallization of the contemporary social paradigm—what we would call consumer society. This is a society constituted by the historical revolution that gave birth to the old industrial and capitalist societies, based on productivism and technophilia, and whose inherent ideology we would sum up as cultural liberalism—the celebration of the all-important individual. What is the point of stressing the importance of all these issues? They form a context for raising the issue of defining such concepts as Left and right.

Both terms originate in the debates that shook revolutionary France back in the 1790s. They express the mounting current of political republicanism and constitute its two main forms: the Left a radical one, and the right its more moderate counterpart. That means it is wrong to confuse right-wing with reactionary or conservative ideologies. The latter are forms of defending the pre-revolutionary monarchical, or even feudal, political and social edifices, whereas the former is a moderate way to support the post-revolutionary order. The right believes social equality is already achieved and that a moderate, parliamentary regime—even based on a sense of suffrage, as was the case in the 19th century—is a sufficient guarantee of real equality. Left-wing movements and theories, on the other hand, believe that such equality isn't enough, or that it was nothing more than a form of new inequality that should be reversed.

An additional difference between right and Left—that is, between political liberalism and Marxism or anarchism—lies in the way that each of these political traditions perceives the coming of liberty and social equality. The former believes it should be gained gradually while the latter believe only a revolution can really transform existing society. In any case, what we should underline is that Marxism and liberalism are not as radically opposed as it is commonly believed, since they are part of the same political and theoretical family; they may not be brothers, but they should surely be considered as first cousins. So we see that such terms as Left and right are far more problematic than we are used to believing. An interesting example: Ayn Rand. Was she right-wing or left-wing? The same goes for various anarcho-capitalist sects that are fiercely capitalist as far as economy and politics are concerned, but are generally liberal and anti-authoritarian with regards to ethics or cultural issues. Jean-Claude Michel, a contemporary French philosopher, reminds us that when parts of Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* were translated for the first time in French, they were thought to be a kind of left-wing critique of traditional bourgeois mentality, as Rand celebrated the creating of an individual and his determination to oppose every obstacle that attempts to hinder the realization of his inner vision.

Capitalism's inner logic lies in an unending destruction of every form of social and cultural tie that limits the pursuit of the all-important individual. That means that capitalists' inherent ideology, if there is one, is what I'd call cultural liberalism: the idea that the individual should act as it wishes without being restrained by any form of social convention, belief, or control. Beginning with the attack on feudal, aristocratic, and religious archaism, this ideology raised the attack on such archaism to an end in itself. When real archaism ceased to exist, the need to justify our theoretical conception leads to an absurd attack on every social form or institution, without the least coherence. Coherence itself is being seen as fascist or oppressing, and with poststructuralism and postmodernism, we saw similar attacks on language and even anatomical differences between the sexes (take for example Foucault, Butler, or even Edward Said). All this was done in the name of the Left, historically amounting to nothing more than the further consolidation of consumer society with this inherent cultural and philosophical relativism. And it is precisely this fertile ground where the poisonous plant of far right movements grows nowadays, especially in Europe.

So I would raise the questions: Is contemporary capitalism really right-wing? And can the invocation of the Left, at least at its present form, help us articulate a radical form of democratic and emancipatory critique, and an analysis of the total social collapse that we are facing?

**Samir Gandesha**: Since 1956, with the invasion of Hungary and the formation of the new left in what's been called a democratic, anti-imperialist form of socialism, there has been a tremendous degree of confusion concerning Left and right.

A further series of confusions date back to 1989, with the transformation of the Soviet bloc, the appearance of Alexander Dubček on the podium, with Václav Havel, which really put paid to the moment of 1968 in the former Czechoslovakia—there was no possibility of "socialism with a human face." Obviously the nineties, with the implosion of Yugoslavia and the different kinds of positions that were taken by various Leftists vis-à-vis the Serbian side in particular, and Milosevic, betrayed a certain kind of unclarity and confusion. The wars in the Gulf also led to a kind of paralysis and confusion about the commitments the Left would make, the sides it would take up in these conflicts. More recently, though not as monumental as the previous examples, the controversy over Judith Butler receiving the Adorno prize is quite revealing, given the fact that she had declared Hamas and Hezbollah as part of the global anti-imperialist left. Not to defend Butler's critics, but rather what one would want to do in that situation is to say here is a form of historical amnesia, that Hezbollah was created by the Revolutionary Guards, who played an absolutely violent role in suppressing the Left in the Iranian Revolution and actually helped to turn it, when it had a secular and genuinely Left complexion, to the Islamist revolution that we know. There's an amnesia about these categories and an unfortunate kind of participation in identity politics, and this exemplifies that.

Today we have to understand social struggles as manifesting a distinction between Left and right, in terms of whether they can be understood as anti-capitalist struggles. As to whether the Left makes typically collective demands whereas the right makes typically individualistic types of demands, this is a complicated question. You'd have to answer it dialectically, insofar as the Left could be understood, at least historically, in terms of making collective demands in the interest of liberation of the individual and individuality, which would be understood in relation to the collective—the freedom of the individual is conditional on the freedom of all and vice versa. The right tends to make demands on part of the individual, but those demands are often at the same time couched in terms of some notion of the larger whole, some attachment to nationality, to an imperial project, and so on.

In Marx you have one account of taking hold of capitalism in the *Manifesto*, and a very gripping account of "all that is solid melts into air," but only a few years later we see in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* a much more complicated relationship between the forces of capital in transforming the landscape—wresting the whole of tradition from social subjects to social actors only for those traditions to come back and to "weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living." This is a complex dialectic in Marx. It is not necessarily the case that we can say that capitalism is merely liberating the individual: it's a much more complicated sort of relationship.

A great example would be Narendra Modi, who has ruled with an iron fist in the state of Gujarat. Gujarat is being put forward in India as a viable model of economic development. It has experienced a sort of hyperprocess of development, but at the same time the worst excesses of Hindu fundamentalism have been unfolding there. This is what Perry Anderson calls the "Indian ideology"—free market emphasis on the individual, but at the same time, appeal to the most reactionary kinds of traditions and interpretations.

Getting back to the realm of ideas, Left and right are defined by their relationship to the French revolution. The Left seeks to realize the universalist ideas of the Enlightenment, whereas the right—going all the way back to 1790 and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—takes up a much more complicated relationship, trying to defend the standpoint of particularity. This is the key thing about the right: unmediated particularity. Language, tradition, culture, family. The way this plays itself out of course in Germany and in the aftermath of Napoleon is in terms of Hegel's, "the real is the rational and the rational is the real." The right of course sees the institutions of modern society and state as always already rational—no more work to be done—whereas the Left takes this up as the rallying cry—that the world must be made philosophical. This is the opening of hitherto unrealized and also unrecognized possibilities. We don't even know what the possibilities will be like in the future.

Ultimately what's at stake and why ideas matter is because we really have to look at forms of reason. What does it mean to make the world philosophical? That goes to the contemporary possibility of reason, because the questions of reason and freedom in the tradition we're talking about are inextricable. Freedom isn't simply your ability to do what you want willy-nilly but is rather some notion of rational self-determination as autonomy. So when we talk about freedom, we are also talking about reason and rationality.

I'll just finish on the fact that in Canada today, you have a government that's absolutely hostile to the tradition of the Enlightenment insofar as it is clearly anti-science. It has essentially destroyed national scientific libraries, it has closed the experimental lakes area, and it has said we are not going to fund any more basic research. This is quite extraordinary—reactionary and anti-Enlightenment—whereas the Left has to take up a dialectical relation, a critique of techno-science but in an era of global climate change. We have to articulate a particular relationship to that tradition of reason. It's very embarrassing for the so-called postmodern left today, because the positions it has taken up over the last couple of decades are exactly the positions of the conservative government today in its anti-science rhetoric and practice. It has simply thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

**CC**: One thing I'd like to say, rather provocatively, is that I'm a member of a generation that has come up through a return of this "end of ideology" concept. The argument of needing to get "beyond left and right" is just a right-wing argument. You see it in many figures from the last generation. Foucault would be one for example—the Iranian Revolution was raised with respect to this.

The other point that I was going to make, but that Samir made in his opening remarks, is that freedom would have to be understood as both collective and individual. This is because society is both a collective and individual affair. Really, going back to the era of classical liberalism—rather than liberalism in Ayn Rand's deranged definition—freedom of the individual would have been understood to be a moment of the freedom of the collective, and vice versa.

With respect to free market ideology, an old mentor of mine, Adolph Reed, recently said that what's interesting about the political right in the mainstream is that it has a dual agenda: It has an agenda of upward redistribution of resources, and it has a free market agenda. But guess which one is sacrificed in a pinch? Actually, the free market ideology is sacrificed. And that means perhaps the whole question of "free market ideology" would have to be addressed as a matter of ideology, not a simple manner of "free market equals right-wing," but rather that it is a necessary form of misrecognition of the potential for freedom in this form of society. One of the unfortunate characteristics of living in the neoliberal era is the idea that we've been moving to the right since the mid-20th century, and that rightward drift is to be characterized entirely in terms of the erosion of the welfare state and its replacement by the market.

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In my own political imagination I go back a lot further, and I would see in the state-centric capitalism of the 20th century the form of the counterrevolution. In other words, we are dealing with phases of the right, first in the form of statism and now in the form of post-statism, rather than non-statism. That's where my Adolph Reed quotation comes in—what really is the agenda of the right? It's not really that the state is being taken down in favor of the free market, but rather that the state remains as an upward redistribution mechanism, and that the free market ideology serves merely as an ideology. It's not really going on.

That raises the question of anti-capitalism. I would say that it's unfortunate for the Left to categorize its politics as "anti-capitalist." This is something that goes back to the new left. Rather we should be thinking about post-capitalism—what would it mean to get beyond capitalism rather than fighting against capitalism? How can we redeem the history of the past two hundred years, the history of capitalism, as a pathological form of freedom, but nonetheless as a form of freedom? Certainly, in respect to what came before. I do take to heart we have a distinction to be made between two kinds of right—a pro-capitalist right and an anti-capitalist right. Again, this is where Kolakowski is useful. What's interesting is that his conception was really not about ostensible capitalism, but rather, ostensible socialism, meaning what crimes were justified by the pursuit of socialism. But we could also talk about what crimes are committed in the pursuit of capitalism, which raises the question of what capitalism actually is. Capitalism requires a dialectical treatment, and the left has largely ceased to be a left in having an undialectical treatment of capitalism itself.

**NM**: I totally agree that discourse on free market is a lie. There is no capitalism without the state. A real free market would be something highly egalitarian and really democratic, a social space where there are no economic differences or hierarchical positions.

I would like to stress this: We cannot say that the right has nothing to do with freedom because free market ideology is only ideology. When we analyze left and right, we have to look at the philosophical and theoretical level on one hand, and at the concrete and historical on the other. As we cannot judge Marxism simply by what happened in the Stalinist regime, we cannot judge the right by saying we have no free market so the right has nothing to do with freedom. We are speaking of the really existing neoliberalism as we had really existing socialism, which had nothing to do with socialism. Kolakowski has a tendency to reduce left and right to abstract philosophical concepts, and then to identify the left as "Good" compared to the right as "Evil." I cannot comprehend how he can say the right is a dead force without openness to the future. For the first liberals, capitalism was the way to ensure real social equality and progress, so capitalism is highly open to the future.

American society, at the ideological and anthropological level, is profoundly egalitarian as opposed to European societies. That's why American capitalism is stronger; it is not hindered by precapitalist, archaic social and economic forms. So I would say capitalism does not have an inherent ideology—that's why it's compatible with almost any form of political regime.

I do not agree with the distinction between freedom and justice. I don't think social justice is an economic and social issue as opposed to freedom or equality, which are political issues, so that we could have justice without freedom or freedom without justice. That would be a Stalinist, and at the same time, a capitalist argument. The capitalist would say we could have freedom without social justice, and the Stalinist would and has said we had social justice without freedom.

Finally, you're right Samir; we have to clarify our position towards techno-science and the tradition of the Enlightenment in general. That is the core of the philosophical enterprise of the Frankfurt School—that the Enlightenment was not something monolithic. Capitalism is the product of the Enlightenment. We have to keep some things from the Enlightenment and criticize some others.

**SG**: Anti-capitalism versus post-capitalism brings into play whether we are looking at a form of abstract or determinate negation. Abstract negation would be simply mean being anti-capitalist in orientation, whereas determinate negation would really draw upon progressive elements within the present, and seek to deepen and extend them. In that sense, the work of the present is completing the historical tasks of the past. But how we imagine that is a very complex question. Liberalism, utilitarianism, these in their moment were extremely progressive and, in a sense, left-wing in terms of opening up new possibilities. When they become entrenched and reified, they turn into their opposite. There is a tendency of this within capitalism, and not just in the external ways I was describing—the Gujarat model and so on. You need external support for a certain kind of free market logic, which is going to be highly disruptive. For all of his faults, Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism is very interesting precisely because it was recognized that there had to be a strong, institutional framework for the unleashing of the market. That's insightful in terms of our own neoliberal present, where the state doesn't disappear. It is a form of class struggle that's happening—the redistribution upwards of wealth. But at the same time there's a transformation of the regulatory framework towards a very narrow understanding of freedom, which cancels the idea that there are certain resources and capacities people need to even exercise this negative conception of freedom. Hence the destruction of the welfare state.

That capitalism has no inherent ideology, that is problematic to me, Nikos, because the very commodity form—what Marx calls a "socially necessary illusion"—is ideology in that we cannot directly, immediately perceive the conditions of our existence. The work of critique and the work of reason are required to understand the social whole. The market will always rely, as Hegel shows very clearly, on law—the moment of ethical life is actually presupposed in those abstract market relations, which only then becomes clear once the dialectic has done its work.

**Q & A**

*Nikos, would you consider radical liberals, such as Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Kant as leftist, and how would you perhaps discern this radical liberalism from 20th century radical liberals like Hayek? Would you consider them right-wing? Would you consider them both left-wing and right-wing? How would you replace the obsolete left and right distinction?*

**NM**: We have two types of criteria for judging if someone is left-wing or right-wing. I would say, from a historical point of view, both of them—Kant, Mill, Locke, and on the other hand, Hayek, Rand, the Chicago School, etc. are the same mixture of left-wing and right-wing elements. The difference is the latter form degenerated from what great thinkers like Kant, Mill or Locke expressed. From a political point of view, I would say there is as huge difference between those two categories. I would categorize the former as democratic, whereas the latter would be nondemocratic liberals. For me, that is the categorization that has to replace left-wing and right-wing: democratic and non-democratic. Democratic for me also means egalitarian. In Kant, Mill, and Locke, and other liberals of the 18th and 19th centuries, you had a real democratic spirit that was expressed in a limited manner, whereas in Hayek, Rand, etc., you have no democratic spirit at all. What they keep of the left-wing elements of liberalism is just the justification of brutal individualism.

*I would like to pose the question of the working class, because left-wing liberals refer to the Third Estate and the working class, and also Marxism had its reference to the proletariat. So the Left is an idea, but there was a reference to a social group. How do you navigate this relationship?*

**CC**: Left and right, because it dates back to the French Revolution, doesn't predate Hegel's notion of contradiction, but it does predate Marx's specification of contradiction in respect to capitalism. For Marx and Engels, capitalism is the developing self-contradiction of bourgeois society that points beyond it, in some way. Therefore, the working class had to negate itself, and what that means has been up for a great deal of interpretation, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation. It's actually quite different from the notion of the revolt of the Third Estate in the earlier period. To redefine society in terms of labor and its exchange as opposed to tradition and custom was the bourgeois, revolutionary project. But for Marx, after the Industrial Revolution the working class represents the self-contradiction of bourgeois society. The idea is that bourgeois society should, according to its ideals, not have a proletariat—an expropriated class of workers who are formally free to participate in society according to the principle of their labor but are actually alienated from the results of their activity in society. It brings up the question of self-contradiction, because capitalism is both freedom and the constraint of freedom at the same time. The bourgeois revolutionaries did not recognize feudalism as freedom and unfreedom. Bourgeois society is self-contradictory in capitalism in a way that feudalism was not.

**SG**: I largely agree with your analysis. Marx's idea of the proletariat, as you suggest, is one that is grounded in philosophical conceptuality in the early writings, and then of course becomes more concretized in his systematic working out of the logic of capital, in specific analysis of the extraction of surplus value. In chapter six of volume one of *Das Kapital*, you have this transformation and the appearance of the *dramatis personæ*, moving from the realm of the freedom of property in Bentham to the realm of production.

**NM**: I think that the Frankfurt School tried to generalize the idea of the contradictions of bourgeois society, projecting these contradictions into the history of Western modernity. This very important because we cannot understand what is going on with our difficulty of defining the Left and right otherwise. Both of them are products of Western modernity. Western modernity, from the 12th or 13th century on, is categorized by a fundamental, anthropological contradiction—trying to incarnate at the same time two contradictory world visions. On one hand, we have this project of social and individual emancipation, and on the other this paranoia with bureaucratic, scientific, and economic exploitation and domination. I would say that both the Left and the right incarnate parts of these contradictory worldviews. We could say capitalism is the Western creation that incarnates both of them in the most eloquent way.

The first society in history that destroyed every formal limit, be it reactionary, patriarchal, or not, is the modern West. The first to analyze that in a very profound manner was Oswald Spengler, who was a reactionary. You cannot have the idea that we have to liberate the market—liberate productive forces—if you are not formed in a society that knows no limits. That is why, for example, the world as we know it is a Western creation. The Westerners were the first to get out of the geographical and cosmological limits to colonize the whole of the planet. So globalization is not a fact of the 20th century—it lies at the core of Western civilization.

*I wanted to ask a question on the obsolescence or the uselessness of the idea of the Left today. How we might think about this as coming out of a legacy in two forms: what the Left has done, meaning the real elements of the Left in libertarianism or neoliberalism, and what has been done to the Left, the denigration of the emancipatory project of the Left in history?*

**NM**: If I rightly understood you, you are reproaching me for treating in the same manner Ayn Rand, and let's say, Marx. But I think that the Left itself calls for such a treatment, because what is the Left, historically and empirically? In Greece, for example, you have Leftists that are supportive of all anti-Western regimes—for Ahmandinejad, for Hezbollah, for Hitler, for Pol Pot, for Stalin. The Greek Left was pro-Hitler because they told us Great Britain was the main imperial force that attacked Germany. The Left has need of a really radical and vehement critique.

*One of the propositions of the panel was that the Left and right ought not to be defined in sociological groups—as in, "are working-class people Left or right?" I think more importantly, it should be said that no left party gets to hold the mantle of being Left indefinitely, despite whatever may come. It's quite easy for a left party to engage in right-wing actions, or develop a right-wing ideology like those ones you're describing. I'm not sure if that really cuts to the core of the saliency of the categories of Left and right.*

**NM**: But could we say the contrary? For me anti-totalitarianism is left-wing, because totalitarianism is the worst form of domination that ever appeared in human history. But Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Jeane Kirkpatrick—they were profoundly right-wing anti-totalitarianists. So then what are we going to say? That they took some left-wing elements?

*But the panel's description concedes this—that what is Left can be taken up by the right, in the Left's abdication of its own responsibilities. So if there's no left opposition to totalitarianism, that doesn't necessarily mean that we are forced to make an alliance with the right.*

**NM**: You are right that, according to the panel and Kolakowski, we should not reduce the Left and right to a sociological aspect, but I do not completely agree with this.

**CC**: This essay, "On the Concept of the Left," occupies an interesting moment in that it is part of the background for the new left as a global phenomenon. Therefore, it's not only of its moment, but it looks back and looks ahead. I am struck by the way it looks back. Even though, in a sense, Kolakowski was never really a Marxist, he does take Marxism a lot more seriously than the standard ideologues of the Polish Communist Party at the time would have done so. Just to give a little historiography, Khrushchev condemns Stalin as a "criminal against Leninism"—that was the form that the critique of Stalin took, even though Khrushchev himself clearly fell short in that respect. If I had to speculate on the mechanism of Kolakowski's essay, I think that's it—what is it about Marxism as a utopian ideology, what happened to that ideology? Essentially what he says is it compromised with reality too much. He starts off the essay by saying "every revolution is a compromise between utopia and reality." He's able to generalize a greater phenomenon out of the problem of Marxism—that the attempt to change the world seemed to have gone wrong at some point.

One could extrapolate that with respect to the bourgeois revolution and capitalism. What do we make of a freedom project that's gone wrong? Then the question is how do we specify that? Marx attempted to specify the freedom problem of his moment in terms of capitalism and what was very much of the 19th century, namely the Industrial Revolution and the creation of an unskilled wage-laboring proletariat. Marx was attempting to reflect on an attempt to change the world that had taken a certain trajectory and manifested in his own time. He could be considered a Left Hegelian in the sense that Samir raised earlier—not treating the world as already rational, but rather to be made rational. The problem of making the world rational in Marx's time was manifested in the working class struggle for socialism.

Is that happening now? Can we point to any attempt to change the world now that's manifesting the fundamental problem of freedom of our time? That's a complicated question because one could plausibly look to various social movements and say, this is the struggle for freedom now, this is how we could grasp the true nature of our society today. The problem is that we also live under the shadow of previous attempts to change the world. There is no attempt to change the world today that doesn't have looking over its shoulder the ghost of Marxism, even the right, although less acutely now. In the early 20th century the reason Hayek could be plausible is that he said, "Look, Marxism led to fascism, it's right there, it's right in front of us. The fascists imitated the Marxists, and therefore the Marxists were responsible for fascism." We don't have that kind of acute contradiction today. Maybe we could claim, in 1979, that Khomeini had Marx looking over his shoulder; at least other Islamists did (for instance Ali Shariati).

There is this radical notion to change the world, but it has failed in some way. That's what raises the question of opportunism. The Left might be defined by its own coherence and its demand for its own self-clarification. When Kolakowski says that the Left is unclear to this day, what he is saying is that the Left, almost by its definition, is tasked by its own self-clarification, whereas the right can remain incoherent. The world striving towards coherence—that you can't have reason without freedom or freedom without reason in the Hegelian framework that Marxism inherits. The right is not so tasked, and therefore is characterized not only by opportunism, tactics without ideas, and crimes, but it also doesn't leave the same kind of intellectual legacy.

*How does democracy relate to the era of liberalism? I'd suggest it was the radical ideology of capitalism that first posed the need for democracy, and it was in that historical period that the whole issue arises. In what way does history mediate the demand for democracy?*

**NM**: I sense a certain Marxist-progressivist account of history in your question. For me the Western emancipatory project, at the political level, begins with the first attempts of medieval cities to become self-organized and self-governed. The first members of the bourgeois were the merchants who managed to escape feudal bonds. That's why at the time we had the famous German formulation, the era of the free city, because if you managed to stay free in the city for one year, then the feudal lord could not touch you. These cities were highly opportunistic and tried to safeguard their newly acquired autonomy by aligning themselves with priests against the emperor, then with the emperor against the feudal lords, etc. Sometimes they had directly democratic forms of government that didn't last for long, but they did exist. The people who were most inspired by this were merchants who were also fighting for their economic liberty. So democracy was mixed up with liberalism in a more general sense, meaning the creation of a worldview of democracy at the cultural and anthropological level.

*Marx says that one is only capable of understanding the world insofar as one is capable of changing it. What happens to the idea of freedom if there is no Left capable of changing the world?*

**SG**: I want to end on a note of the relationship between theory and practice, and this idea of not being able to understand the world unless you're in a position to change it. That's exactly the starting point of *Negative Dialectics*, to get back to a reflection on the history of failure within the Left. It opens with this invocation of the moment to realize the philosophy that is missed, which then throws us back to a certain kind of reflection on this tradition, and in particular, a reflection on the freedom project that was defeated or failed to come to fruition. You get out of that an attempt to rethink fundamentally, in a dialectical way, the conception of autonomy. You arrive at the idea that autonomy without the moment of heteronomy is ultimately self-destructive. It can't sustain itself because this logic of self-preservation gone wild leads to the exact opposite. Those are the stakes of our current age: rethinking freedom that can be brought in line with democracy and self-determination, but within the context of the recognition of the real limits that we face. |**P**

*Transcribed by Ashley Weger.*

## Tony Cliff, continued from page 3

Because the rank-and-file revolt of the 1970s, astonishing as it was, merely rose to a crescendo and then fell back, the situation of the most militant groups amongst British organized labor changed with it. As they became on the defensive, they rallied to the trade union officers like the great hero of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill. It was quite astonishing to be in that conflict. Arthur Scargill had failed to win his members across the mines to a position of taking action against pit closures. Scargill was in a peculiar position: he knew his most militant activists were strongly in favor of strike action, but they were deeply divided from the grassroots membership who were pulling away from the militancy of the 1970s. The militants wanted action but they could not carry the mass of the membership forward. That was why, when the strike did break out in the pits, it was not done through trade union democracy but through picket action. One pit took action—it picketed out the other pits. Miners are keenly opposed, in principle, to crossing a picket line, which meant that it was very effective system for bringing the miners out, pit by pit. The problem was that, throughout the entire dispute—and the dispute lasted a year, and was one of the bitterest of all—the union itself was divided. It was essentially divided between the militant activists and the less militant members—particularly the less militant members in Nottingham—who were not convinced of the need to go ahead. The Yorkshire area committee pushed the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers to say, in effect, "We're not going to have a ballot because the conservative government is trying to twist our arm to have a ballot. If we have a ballot, we'll lose the ballot and then we'll lose—and the whole thing will be a disaster."

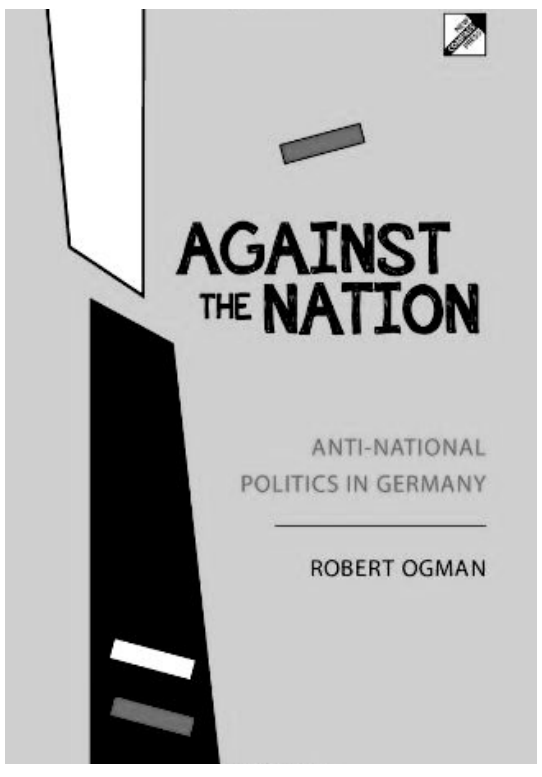
That was a tragic position to be in, and a reverse of the position that the IS expressed in the 1970s. It was a reverse because the IS had adopted the position of the most militant section within the union but the most militant section were themselves running scared of the rank-and-file. The rank-and-file were the very people who were not trusted in the organization of the strike. The strike failed because they could not secure their own members to fight for strike action. Throughout this long year, when they should have been going out and getting other people to support them, they were instead defending their position.Throughout that whole period, the Socialist Workers Party supported the position that there should be no ballot. Think about that! That was a singular reversion of the position that the Socialist Workers Party adopted throughout the 1970s, which was for the rank-and-file. "Let the rank-and-file decide," they said. But they had redefined the rank-and-file because they had drifted with the militants. They reflected the militant perspective, which by that time was defensive—so they merely echoed their defensiveness. I'm not saying, by the way, that the Socialist Workers Party was responsible for defeating the strike. The strike failed because of the strategy that the militant Yorkshire committee adopted and that Arthur Scargill—and, tragically, the Socialist Workers Party—echoed.

The SWP's support for the defensive strategy shows the problem that the SWP had as a Cliff-ist organization: they only ever reflected the opinions of the rank-and-file or the opinions of the most militant, but they would never lead, because they felt that leadership was fundamentally an error, a problem. As they adapted to each individual mood, those moods would be reflected in the organization itself. You can see that tension in the most recent events, where there is one generation who are essentially traditional welfare socialists and there is a younger generation who are militant anti-war activists and you cannot reconcile them within the organization because they are not actually responding to the same points. The basic problem is this: Cliff was right when he said, "I'll build an organization that will reject the Leninist proposition of leadership," but then, his subsequent problem was that you had to organize an organization; you had to control it. Because he had not secured its coherence theoretically—politically, through the process of theoretical clarification—it was only really possible to do it bureaucratically. That meant that factions would be banned and that people would be expelled if they couldn't toe the party line. It was a very limited understanding of party discipline because it wasn't a discipline that was owned by the organization itself. It was operated—tragically, since this was the very thing they wished to avoid—by the leadership against the membership. |**P**

# Something better than the nation?

Robert Ogman, *Against the Nation: Anti-National Politics in Germany* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2013).

Blair Taylor




**IN THE WAKE** of the fall of the Wall and reunification the German left confronted a resurgent nationalism. One section of the Left's response was an "anti-national" tendency whose answer to questions posed by historical developments challenged received political categories by rejecting not only nationalism but, ultimately, traditional left attitudes towards both the nation-state and "the people." In *Against the Nation,* Rob Ogman charts the emergence of this "anti-national" tendency by examining two activist campaigns of the 1990s, "Never Again Germany" and "Something Better than the Nation," to show how "the encounter with nationalism resulted in a fundamental reorientation of a broad set of political assumptions, and produced a deep restructuring in the content and contours of left politics and practice" (11). However, more than an interesting window into radical movements in Germany, the book's real strength is that it uses these cases to reflect upon left discourse on nationalism and nation-states everywhere, but with particular emphasis on the post-9/11 United States.

The book's opening chapter, "The Left and the Nation," begins by tracing the evolution of left positions on nation-states and nationalism in the U.S. since the 1990s, examining discursive continuities and breaks between the alter-globalization movement, the anti-war and anti-imperialist movements of the Bush years, up to Occupy Wall Street in the recent past. This overview describes how a "binary worldview" in the alter-globalization movement often pitted presumably benign nation-states and cultures against the ravages of global capital, which later during the War on Terror morphed easily into a similarly uncritical understanding of "oppressed nations" dominated by imperialist states, the latter primarily represented by the United States and Israel. The result was a simplistic and flawed conceptualization of both global capitalism and state power which demonized foreign capital and imperialist states while ignoring or downplaying domestic forms of exploitation and oppression. Valorizing the people, nation, or "culture" as sources of resistance, the discourse of anti-imperialism turned a blind eye to local state and capitalist elites, as well as popular forms of domination in traditional societies. It also made for strange political bedfellows, translating into tolerance and support for reactionary movements and parties, especially Islamist ones like Hamas and Hezbollah, in some cases even defending oppressive theocratic regimes like Iran. Ogman describes how this political frame obscured a more complicated political reality shaped by the deeper structural logic of state and capitalist power relations, one that undermines simple inside/outside distinctions. It also reinforced the nation-state and "the people" as the logical alternatives and unproblematic bases of resistance to the ills of capitalism and empire. By tracing "the failure of the Left to develop an emancipatory perspective opposed to nationalism, the nation, and the nation-state" (33) within the U.S. left, Ogman provides a political context for understanding the German case that follows.

The following chapter, "German Nationalism after Reunification," lays out the specific historical context the anti-national left emerged from. Primarily, this meant German reunification, a process that saw an immediate spike in nationalist sentiment as postwar Germany's discourse of postnational citizenship was eroded by a revived ethno-nationalist one, accompanied by a wave of right-wing extremism that often received tacit popular and governmental support. The Left was not immune to this nationalist turn. Even the main East German opposition group subtly shifted their previously democratic slogan, "we are the people," into the nationalist articulation, "we are *one* people" (40). German identity was increasingly being defined in opposition to outsiders. At precisely the moment the German state was reconstituting itself, "foreigners" became the number one stated concern in opinion polls. As Ogman notes, "as soon as the division separating East and West Germany came down, new boundaries were drawn" (44). Reunification exposed the brutal underbelly of nation-state formation, with chilling historical continuities. It was followed by an explosive rise in violent racist attacks, culminating in what the anti-nationalists did not shrink from terming "pogroms" in Hoyerswerda and Rostock in 1991 and 1992. In what became watershed events for the anti-national left, neo-Nazis in these East German towns violently evicted local guest workers and asylum seekers, setting fire to their residence house and running them out of town. The neo-Nazis had been unhindered by police and local officials, and were cheered on by crowds of locals.

**Contesting nationalism: "Never Again Deutschland" and "Something Better than the Nation"**

These developments prompted the formation of an oppositional coalition called The Radical Left, which organized the "Never Again Germany!" mobilization to protest reunification and draw attention to its negative effects, such as the "Aliens Act" that restricted immigration and asylum. Aware that political reunification was basically inescapable, they mounted a principled symbolic opposition that sought to problematize and disrupt tendencies toward consensus and integration through "the power of negation." This included militant protests and interventions into both public and left debates, developing and pushing an anti-national position. After reunification, the "Never Again Germany" coalition was superseded by the campaign "Something Better than the Nation." This network of musicians, artists, and intellectuals organized concerts, public fora, and blockades aimed at hindering the spread of both right-wing and centrist forms of nationalism. Their major campaign was a traveling caravan through the country, especially the East where neo-Nazism had taken root most virulently. The campaign aimed at fighting extreme right and nationalist sentiment by articulating an anti-racist and anti-national alternative culture embedded in music and youth subculture.

Ogman devotes a chapter to each of these early anti-national campaigns, drawing extensively on movement documents and media coverage to capture the aims and motivations of the mobilizations. In his narrative, their importance was less their direct impact on political events, which was marginal, but rather their articulation of a novel left approach to nationalism. Drawing on Frankfurt School critical theory, this milieu understood nationalism as structural rather than simply ideological. It was not an aberration derived from outmoded or irrational notions of communal identification, but was instead a radical expression of basic features of the dominant society: a competitive and hierarchical social order with clear winners and losers. Therefore solely attacking the extreme nationalism and explicit racism of neo-Nazis was insufficient: One had to address racism's much deeper social roots. Indeed, the anti-national turn was in part a realization that traditional anti-fascist and anti-racist politics were too limited, and that nationalism must be fought on a broader scale. In particular, nationalism was another expression of the competitive logic of capitalism, wherein the winners and losers of class struggle within states are in turn reproduced between them in the international arena. The result of this recognition was a specifically anti-national critique that addressed an expanded range of concerns including Germany's geopolitical normalization and return to the global stage; the complex relationship between capitalism, nationalism, and nation states; as well as racist and essentialist notions of identity and citizenship.

While also deploying more familiar concepts like "negative patriotism" that describe how "national unity" ideologically conceals underlying class cleavages and obscured the self-interest of workers, anti-national politics also understood nationalism as simultaneously an elite and a popular phenomenon. Unlike traditional left theories which primarily understand nationalism as an ideological ruse by elites to preserve their power by obscuring class interest, anti-national discourse viewed it as a populist impulse wherein the working class also appealed to "the nation" to gain material and symbolic benefits by excluding those at the bottom of national and international hierarchies. Thus nationalism was not simply a top-down project, but also an endeavor from below, part and parcel of an interlocking social totality. The result was a form of leftism deeply skeptical of its traditional target audience: "the people."

By looking at the early historical emergence of a broad anti-national left in Germany, "Against the Nation" is a useful corrective to caricatures that reduce this milieu to its most visible and controversial tendency, the "anti-Germans" who only later emerge as a distinct and differentiated political tendency. Clustered around journals like *Bahamas* and *Konkret*, the anti-Germans are communists who espouse steadfast support of Israel and, in some cases, support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This is often the only form of anti-national critique known outside Germany, often causing bewildered leftists abroad to over-generalize and dismiss it as a case of extreme national guilt. Yet this pop-psychologization misses the concrete historical conditions that fostered the initial emergence of the anti-national left in Germany. Rather than a guilt-induced obsession with National Socialism, anti-Semitism, and Israel, Ogman shows how German anti-nationalism developed out of specific anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles against racial violence and its tacit popular support. Although later in the specifically anti-German milieu, fear of the potentially fascist nature of populism translated into distrust of social movements generally, the early anti-national movement was a strongly activist as well as theoretical endeavor addressing concrete political problems confronting the German left. As a rather small tendency, this manifested primarily in provocative texts and symbolic demonstrations. Yet rather than an abdication of politics, this intervention was, at least initially, an attempt to force a certain conversation within the Left and build an alternative political base.

However, in attempting to describe and rehabilitate a broader anti-national milieu the book overcorrects. Strangely, it omits the anti-Germans altogether, declining to so much as mention them by name. Ogman's narrative focuses exclusively on the early "anti-national" phase tightly bound to activist campaigns directed at specific historical events, leaving readers to wonder how this was eclipsed by a more hardline anti-German position marked by a penchant for quoting Adorno and waving Israeli, American, and Soviet flags. This evolution into a new orthodoxy is only alluded to by a remark in the introduction, "Where they challenged Left dogmas, they were at their strongest; yet where they established new ones, they failed to hold onto their original critical intentions" (16). This may well be the case, but the book would have benefitted by more explicitly making this argument and addressing the relationship between the two. Instead, it leaves the eventual emergence of the anti-Germans ignored and unexplained.[1] The book's close attention to the specific historical context and debates that launched the anti-national milieu during the early nineties makes for a rich empirical account, but allows relatively little space to explore the deeper roots of anti-nationalism or its relationship to earlier left debates on nationalism. Ogman argues that prior to 1989 "the dominant left orientation relied on a positive affirmation of the 'nation'" that resulted in the Old Left's "proletarian *inter*nationalism," which in turn "sought to build solidarity between different national working-classes" (92). Thus, even the Communist Manifesto's plea "Workers of the World Unite!" only "targeted the antagonisms between workers of different countries… but not nations as such" (92). Broadly true, this sweeping claim dispenses with a over a century of left theorization of nationalism in a few short sentences. Later, the German new left's confrontation with the legacy of National Socialism made the rejection of German national identification a central component of its politics. In spite of this fact, Ogman documents how nationalist arguments surfaced in a variety of forms, from student leader Rudi Dutschke's calls for "national consciousness," to what Ogman calls the "substitute nationalism" whereby new left anti-imperialism "meant supporting 'national self-determination' in the Global South" (93, 9).

By contrast, the anti-national left that emerged after 1989 "represented a clear break with the Left's inherited positions on nationalism… Not only did these movements reject national*ism*…but also foundation, 'the nation' and the nation state as such" (9, 8). The result was not simply "an amended leftist worldview," but "a fundamental reorientation of a broad set of political assumptions [that] produced a deep restructuring in the content and contours of left politics and practice" (11). In Ogman's narrative, the arrival of the anti-national left appears as a sharp rupture, leaving the reader with little sense of what specific intellectual and organizational traditions it grew out of or drew inspiration from, only briefly mentioning that early on the movement was primarily comprised of Greens, autonomen, feminists, and communists dissatisfied with integrative appeals to nationalism by the traditional left.[2] In this sense, the book falls victim to the anti-nationalists' own self-conception, even as it exoticizes the German left by claiming, in effect, that in Germany a break from trends prevailing elsewhere in the world had been effected.

*Against the Nation* provides a persuasive analysis of the U.S. left's shifting views on nationalism in the 1990s but ignores another important political development unfolding at the time which also had implications on how the Left addressed nations and states. At the same time that primarily Marxist radicals were articulating an anti-national perspective in Germany, anarchism was consolidating a dominant position on the U.S. radical left. Given anarchism's historical critique of the state and, at least until the 1960s national liberation movements as well, a comparison between anarchist and anti-national arguments might have revealed deeper insight into both positions. Comparing the historical context of the U.S. and Germany in the 1990s reveals other interesting parallels: Both the anarchist and anti-national movements arose in an era of relative economic prosperity, and both were strongly shaped by opposing projects of national reunification and historical sanitization. The first Gulf War was widely lauded as the conclusive defeat of the "Vietnam Syndrome" that had tarnished American national identification since the late 1960s. In both cases, attempts to forge a new national consensus created a strong left impulse to dissensus and a highly disidentificatory politics skeptical of or even hostile to "the people." It was during this decade that the first flag burning case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, and hardcore punk became an increasingly important avenue of politicization into the radical left. Indeed, this subculture was an important site for both the expansion of anarchism in the U.S. and that of anti-nationalism in Germany.

The symbolic and moral power of such disidentificatory gestures made bold interventions into the political debates of the day and forced discussions that might not have otherwise taken place. But, in order to make a greater impact in a specific national context, explicitly anti-German and anti-American positions have tended to reinforce the very national frames they sought to undermine. Perhaps nowhere is this failure to see beyond one's specific national context so evident than in contemporary left debates around Israel/Palestine, where anti-imperialists solely fixated on the sins of American empire champion reactionary anti-Semites like Hamas, while anti-Germans uncritically defend Israel as the state necessitated by the crimes of their fascist predecessors and in the process become apologists for ongoing state violence. Such deadlocks ultimately reflect the powerlessness of the contemporary left, reduced to cheering or denouncing one player or the other from the sidelines in a political drama it has no meaningful role in.

**No right state in the wrong one?**

*Against the Nation* makes an important argument against common left assumptions regarding nationalism and nation-states. However, the book would be stronger if it at least briefly addressed some common objections to such a position. In addition to a variety of familiar traditional left and Marxist arguments, there is the Habermasian hope that states might develop in more "postnational" directions. Focusing solely on the repressive narrative of "Fortress Europe" misses the progressive and radical aspects of a partially denationalized European Union wherein citizens are free to travel, work, and access social benefits within 27 member states—an ambition and reality now being increasingly restricted and renationalized in the face of the economic crisis. The anti-national critique of nation-states is compelling, but like its anarchist counterpart, offers no clear political alternative. Given both the weakness and inaccessibility of global governance institutions, and the absence of any postnational leftist alternative, it is unsurprising that people continue to think within given national, provincial, and municipal frameworks.

However, just as 9/11 and the concomitant "War on Terror" revived a leftist anti-imperialism which reinforced a national frame (even as both political Islam and Western liberalism transcended them), the current global economic crisis might possibly undermine that frame by highlighting the functional political limits of nation-states. The rootless cosmopolitanism of finance and the neoliberal redesignation of state capacity to that of armed accountant have emphatically underscored their non-neutrality and structural inability to exert democratic control over capital. This basic anti-statist insight is an article of faith uniting resistance movements today from the Indignados to Occupy Wall Street, although typically manifest in problematically anarchist form. In lieu of abolition or even robust regulation of capital we see the continued direct subordination of once-nominally democratic institutions to market imperatives, carried out by actors as diverse as Tea Party Republicans to Greek social democrats. With troika-led austerity in Europe, and budget deadlocks, fiscal cliffs, sequestration, and entire cities being put into "political receivership" in the U.S., the state has perhaps never so faithfully approximated Marx's concise description as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie.[3] The current situation only strengthens Ogman's claim in the book's final pages that "emancipation from capitalist society could not be achieved without combating nationalism and abolishing the nation-state" (109).

In this sense, while the twinned crisis of global capitalism and national democracy conceivably present an opportunity for articulating anti-national critiques, the book concludes by examining how contemporary responses to the economic crisis redeploy nationalist tropes. In the U.S., the Tea Party has challenged the president's identity as an American by "othering" him via association with both Kenya and European socialism, while Obama himself calls for national unity and sacrificial belt-tightening in order to better compete with the rest of the world. *Against the Nation* argues for an alternative left perspective to both familiar nationalist and neoliberal approaches to the economic crisis, as well as left nostalgia for nationalist social democracy now in its death throes.

Despite its limitations, *Against the Nation* packs a disproportionate heft of empirical, theoretical, and political insights into its slim 130 pages. If it stopped only at describing an understudied and misunderstood political tendency, it would mark an important contribution. Yet *Against the Nation* has broader aspirations. By extracting political implications from the German case to explore their relevance in a broader international context, Ogman makes a provocative intervention in current debates while fostering an engaged internationalism sorely absent within most contemporary left discussions. *Against the Nation* delivers a timely examination of the nature of nationalism and nation-states at a moment when capital's disregard for such quaint loyalties has become uncharacteristically frank, while the Left largely still remains trapped within a narrowly national political frame. |**P**

1. Raphael Schlembach's article "Towards a critique of anti-German 'communism' addresses this later history and is the most comprehensive English-language overview of the subject. Raphael Schlembach, "Towards a critique of anti-German 'communism.'" Interface vol. 2: 2 (November 2010).

2. For a more detailed description of the intellectual and organizational genealogy of the anti-national milieu, see Schlembach (204-206, 214-15).

3. Several American cities facing bankruptcy have been put into "political receivership" where fiscal decisions are no longer made democratically by city councils, but by appointed "emergency managers."