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Capitalism, Anti-Capitalism and the Battle of Ideas

In the future, the historian of ideas will have a hard time in assessing the period in which we live. It has been only a couple of decades since the ‘end of history’ was declared: that is, the triumph of liberal democracy, signalled by the fall of its opponent, state socialism in the Eastern bloc in 1989–91. Supposedly, we are living in the times of TINA (There Is No Alternative) and the ‘neo-liberal’ consensus, though never defined, casts a heavy shadow. Yet, a reality test some years after the financial crisis of 2008 shows that these assumptions, while popular (especially in academia and in leftist circles), are neither self-evident nor necessarily correct.

Therein lies an intellectual mystery: to a significant extent, the left has managed to popularize a narrative on the supposed causes of the crisis, while at the same time it has a hard time bringing about any positive change in the sphere of politics. An interesting fact is that the steady vic- torious advance of the left in the realm of ideas is hardly ever recognized. Yet someone trying to think of the most popular explanation for the social and economic problems of our times, would find that—from the President of the USA Barack Obama to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and from Pope Francis to several Nobel Prize laureates—the answer was almost unanimous: what brought us here was the free-market sys- tem and greedy bankers, running amok after deregulation and taking advantage of a retreat in state control. Few pause to think that this nar- rative, while appealing to large numbers of people across political divi- sions, is problematic. After all, the banking sector has been one of the most strictly regulated fields of the US (and the European) economy, supervised by more than 115 regulatory agencies (Yadav 2010, p. 323). Also, it is fairly doubtful that the de-regulation that actually took place in the last decades in the banking sector had anything to do with the 2008 crash (Calabria 2009; Gramm 2009). Strong evidence for the roots of the crisis that go against the narrative of the left, such as the politi- cally motivated encouragement of subprime mortgages by consecutive US governments, practically forcing banks to provide loans with ques- tionable security to poorer families, and with the mortgages secured by the quasi-governmental enterprises of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, are hardly mentioned in mainstream debates on what went wrong in the period leading to 2008. The success of the leftist narrative in explaining the 2008 meltdown is also evident in the attention that the 2011 Occupy movement has attracted from the media, despite its relatively small size. It is also telling that Occupy’s message was addressed with sympathy, even among the establishment, including unlikely figures such as the 2012 Republican Candidate Mitt Romney (Geiger and Reston 2011), the US Federal Reserve’s Chairman Ben Bernanke (Coscarelli 2011) and the UK Business Secretary Vince Cable (*the Guardian* 2011).

But the success of the leftist ideology in the public sphere goes beyond outlining a convincing narrative for the 2008 crisis. Issues such as envi- ronmentalism and the construction of income inequality as a social problem, which used to be predominantly on the agenda of the left, are now almost unanimously adopted by the political establishment. In July 2015, Pope Francis issued the ‘Encyclical *Laudato Si’* on the Care of our Common Home’, a document that could be read as a manifesto for sus- tainable development and global justice, effectively condemning some of the core elements of capitalism, such as individualism and consumerism (Holy Father Francis 2015). The US President Obama has named climate

change as the biggest challenge humanity is facing and income inequal- ity the biggest domestic challenge for the US economy (Harwood 2015; Park 2015). The UK's Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, in his first months after assuming leadership of the Tories, and perhaps in an attempt to distance himself from the Thatcherite image of rigid material- ism and individualism, declared that 'it's time we admitted that there's more to life than money and it's time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB—general wellbeing' (BBC 2006a). He also characterized con- sumer culture as problematic, for failing to 'meet the deep human need for commitment and belonging' (BBC 2006a). The Conservative Party even changed its logo to a tree, with Cameron launching the slogan 'vote blue, go green', and not hesitating to use a motto of the Global Justice Movement, calling people to 'think global, act local' (BBC 2006b). Granted, these are more elements of political posturing than policy, but the mere fact that for PR reasons he had to adopt this image is quite tell- ing about what the ideological *zeitgeist* of our times demands.

Furedi is right to mention that, despite a wave of support for the ideol- ogy of free-market liberalism (or so-called 'neo-liberalism') in the 1980s, and despite the fact that the market economy seems to be the only viable game in town today, capitalism has lost the battle of ideas (Furedi 2013). There might be a growing movement of radicals for capitalism, as evi- denced by the lively Ron Paul presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012, a surge in sales of Ayn Rand books and rapid growth of the Students for Liberty movement, but the fact remains that such voices are still consid- ered marginal outsiders. But then, if capitalism is (falsely or correctly) blamed for the 2008 financial crisis and the slow and timid recovery in subsequent years, then why is the left not grasping the chance to fill the void, ride the tide and dominate politically? Why is it that, when it manages to gain power, as in the case of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece, it, ironically, confirms that indeed there is no alterna- tive and has to capitulate to the continuation of so-called austerity pro- grammes? And if the left has succeeded in seeing some of its ideas, or at least its rhetoric, accepted by the powers that be, and if it has throughout recent decades de-legitimized some of the fundamental principles of free- market capitalism (individualism, rigid economic growth, materialism) among considerable sections of the population, but then fails to provide a better alternative, does it have any practical political significance, beyond being 'a voice of conscience' or 'the Party of complaint'? These are the questions that were the initial inspiration for writing the current book.

The Left Then and Now

In order to solve an intellectual mystery, its nature first needs to be prop- erly understood. If one wishes to understand the conundrum of the apparent popularity of leftist ideas in the cultural sphere today with the concurrent inability of the political left to pose a viable alternative to capitalism (or, more properly, to the mixed economy that is dominant today), what needs to be clarified is: (a) what are the ideas that character- ize the left today, (b) where do they come from, (c) why are they more mainstream *now* and (d) why can't they materialize in a successful politi- cal, social and economic programme?

This book is about the changes in the philosophical orientation, the values and the ethics of the left in recent decades. Such changes have been apparent since the 1960s and that is why the term ‘New Left’ has been used: so as to distinguish the ideas, forms of action and cultural values of some new political and social movements from those of the so-called ‘old-left’, that is, the labour and socialist movements and the strong communist parties of the past that focused their struggle on class interests and were oriented mostly towards conquering political power and transforming society as a whole, based on their ideology. In this work the term ‘New Left’ refers to the relevant movements and ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, while the term ‘new left’ (lower case) will be used to refer to the broader set of movements which share common ideologi- cal roots with the New Left but have developed in different directions. Yet, the old left is in such decline (with exceptions that only prove the rule, such as the ‘orthodox’ Communist Party of Greece), that some- times the terms ‘left’ and ‘new left’ might be used interchangeably.

I intend to focus in two topics that appeared with the New Left and that I consider crucial for shaping the character of the wider left in the upcoming decades: (a) a questioning of ‘materialist’ values, leading to a problematization of economic growth and (b) an uneasiness with ‘instrumental reason’ as a tool for understanding (and changing) the world and the promotion, in its place, of an appeal to emotionalism. These themes are key if one wants to understand the intellectual journey of the left in the last few decades: from the adoption of environmentalism as one of its more central narratives to the fellow-travelling with the so-called post-modernist school and other related philosophical/epistemological movements, to the switch from the anti-authoritarian ‘it is forbidden to forbid’ of the 1960s to a ‘cosying up’ with the welfare state and the constant calls for more intervention and regulation (from speech codes to calls for higher taxes) in the past few decades. Additionally, a third topic in the background, coming to existence as a result of the two main topics, will be the construction of a weak human subjectivity by the New Left and its heirs, often undermining individual agency and seeing a vulner- able human subject as being under constant threat from environmental, physical and emotional forces.

The themes underlying the examination of these topics are the follow- ing: (a) these changes in the left in recent decades will be seen from a crit- ical perspective and a hypothesis will be that they might have something to do with the left’s inability to form a persuadive and successful political and economic model, (b) these changes are in a dialectical relationship with the *zeitgeist* and the popular philosophical trends of each era; they bear the marks of dominant contemporary ideas and at the same time they influence and shape these ideas.

If one had to fit on a single page an overview of the historical jour- ney of the left, the starting point would have to be the ideas of the Enlightenment and of modernity, as expressed by figures such as Francis Bacon, John Locke and René Descartes. These were the beginning of the road that led to the rise to socialism and liberalism, two forces fighting for the overthrow of the old order of religious mysticism, political oppression and social and economic backwardness. But what does it mean to speak about modernity? What are the characteristics of an era, a set of values and a philosophical outlook that can bear the title 'modern'? Hicks gives a good account of the meaning of the modern: (a) an outlook having as a starting point the natural, as opposed to the pre-modern attachment to the supernatural, (b) reason and perception as the means through which the world can be known, as opposed to faith and mysticism, (c) moral autonomy in making one's character, as opposed to ideas of pre-given order or original sin, (d) the individual as the unit of value, not to be sub- ordinated to a higher tribal or feudal authority (Hicks 2004, pp. 7–8). It logically follows that if humans are capable of reason and of perceiving reality, and at the same time they are ends in themselves, rather than being born to serve the needs of a master or group, then they can be trusted with political and economic freedom, and this freedom will lead to a future that will be better and more prosperous.

Bauman's poetic narration of the first steps of the communist ideal (irrespective of whether communism ever actually had anything to do with this image) as a materialization of modernity in all its glory is telling and worth of a lengthy quotation:

> Communism was made to the measure of modern hopes and promises. Socialism's younger, hotheaded and impatient brother, it wholeheartedly shared in the family trust in the wonderful promises and prospects of modernity, and was awe-struck by the breathtaking vistas of society doing away with historical and natural necessity and by the idea of the ultimate subordination of nature to human needs and desires. [...] Its war cry was: 'Kingdom of Reason—now!' Like socialism (and all other staunch believers in the modern values of technological progress, the transformation of nature and a society of plenty), communism was thoroughly modern in its conviction that a good society can only be a carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialized society. [...] Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; moder- nity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable. (1992, pp. 166–7)

Thus, socialism (sometimes used interchangeably with communism by its early advocates) had one *raison d'être*: to provide even more than capitalism, minus the latter's perceived injustices. This spirit is captured by the radical suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, who in (1923) stated what socialism stands for:

> Socialism means plenty for all. We do not preach a gospel of want and scarcity, but of abundance. Our desire is not to make poor those who today are rich, in order to put the poor in the place where the rich are now. Our desire is not to pull down the present rulers to put other rulers in their place. We wish to abolish poverty and to provide abundance for all. We do not call for limitation of births, for penurious thrift, and self-denial. We call for a great production that will supply all, and more than all the people can consume.

Or take the example of Trotsky, who, in 1936, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, criticizes the USSR state-controlled economy for not achieving the abundance of the USA: 'How many years are needed in order to make it possible for every Soviet citizen to use an automobile in any direction he chooses, refilling his gas tank without difficulty en route? In barbarian society the rider and the pedestrian constituted two classes. The automobile differentiates society no less than the saddle horse' (2013, loc. 595).

Thus, socialism and communism (at least as envisioned by Karl Marx and his early proponents), was built on three foundations: reason and scientific method, human agency and materialism. Humans were per- ceived as being at the centre of history and as capable of changing its course; God, fate or nature cannot dictate where history will go; it is only man who is in the driving seat, though limited by specific histori- cal conditions. For liberalism 'man' is the individual and for Marx 'man' could be a social class pursuing its interests, but the essence remains: we, as humanity, retain endless possibilities for a better world of plenty. This is why, for Marx, capitalism was the most revolutionary system up to that historical point: the productive forces it unleashed could promise material abundance and total domination over nature. As opposed to the romantic anti-capitalists of the nineteenth century, who were terri- fied by the processes of industrialization, urbanization and of the instru- mental use of nature, Marx's scientific socialism realized that these very procedures were essential for the realization of freedom as an escape from need and from scarcity. This Promethean view of man was captured in its purest form by the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, who, dazzled by the posi- tive vision that the Russian Revolution provided (at least in the minds of its advocates), declared that 'once the class struggle has been won, Soviet humankind will be free to engage its final enemy: nature' (cited in Westermann and Garrett 2011, p. 87). Here, the meaning of nature goes beyond the trees or the Russian winter; nature symbolizes limits and the victory over nature would mean victory over whatever is holding back human prosperity, the aim being a continuous progress towards overcoming finite human nature itself.

An interesting thought experiment would be to look at how ideas popular among leftist circles in recent decades would be perceived by Trotsky, Pankhurst, Gorky or their comrades; ideas such as sustainabil- ity, or 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson 2011), or 'small is beautiful' (Schumacher 1993), or the pathologization of consumerism as a mental health threat in the form of 'affluenza' (James 2007), or the supposed threat to our planet's carrying capacity because of too many people living longer. Or, how would Marx himself—who celebrated in his *Communist Manifesto* the globalization brought about by the market and how 'to the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood' (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1848)—react to the rise of the 'anti-globalization movement' and the popularity it enjoyed among leftist circles in the years around the turn of the twenty-first century. Granted, the effects of rapid economic growth on nature were, up to a point, unknown during the period in which the pioneers of scientific socialism lived and wrote. Yet it seems evident from their philosophy that their faith in human reason and scientific method to come up with solutions to pressing problems would have them adopt- ing a more positive view, championing even better technologies and even more economic development to face challenges such as climate change, rather than viewing them as an existential threat, calling for a re-evalua- tion of the values of modernity.

Where This Book Comes from and Where It Goes

The fact that the new left is different from the old left, that it has adopted causes such as environmentalism and has been influenced by schools of thought that question 'modernity's' tradition of rationality, is no big news. Numerous scholars from various schools of thought have dealt with the changing nature of the left and of radical politics in general. Bookchin

(1995) spotted an ‘unbridgeable chasm’ between the ‘lifestyle anarchism’ of the 1970s and 1980s and the more focused and political movements of the 1960s. Lasch (1991) described the transition of the 1960s radicals to a defeatist and introspective ‘culture of narcissism’ and how this shift mirrored the dominant culture in USA at that time. Bauman (1992) described the transition to ‘post-modernity’ as a moving away from the ideals of faith in progress, reason and science. A similar line of thought has been shared by a number of scholars on the left, including, among others, Callinicos (1989) and Jameson (1990). Žižek (2002, 2009) and Furedi (1992, 2005) have also criticized the change in the nature and character of the left. Some useful insights could be drawn also from foes of the left. A more philosophical criticism of the new left from a pro-capitalist point of view came from Ayn Rand (1999), whereas some interesting insights were also offered by an occasional fellow-traveller of the New Left, the libertarian thinker Murray Rothbard (1961, 1965, 1970).

My research, though based on the criticisms of the various aforementioned scholars, will go further than their work: I am not merely reflecting on changes in the philosophy, values and ideas of the contemporary left; I also trace the genealogy of these changes. Where did they come from, when did they gain prominence and in what environments did they find fertile ground? I am also challenging part of the political theory and bibliography of social movements studies, which views the 1960s as a period when radical theory and action reached a peak, followed by a decline and a de-politicization in subsequent decades. As will become evident, factors that have been blamed for the decline of the political left in the ‘counter-revolution’ of the 1970s and 1980s, were already present in the ‘golden era’ of the 1960s. Most importantly, I claim that the moving away of the left from some of the core principles of ‘modernity’s’ tradition—such as rationality, faith in human agency as bearer of change and a trust in continuous economic growth bringing more and more affluence to more and more people—can help us understand some of the recent misfortunes of the left, such as the rapid disappearance of the Occupy Movement or the inability of Syriza in Greece to meet expectations and introduce an alternative economic model to ‘austerity’.

A term that needs clarification and that plays a central role in my analysis is ‘lifestyle activism’. Why do I not just refer to the ‘new left’, but instead introduce another term? The notion of ‘lifestyle activism’ has its roots in the work of left-libertarian scholar Murray Bookchin—the inspiration for my PhD thesis that is the basis of this book. A couple of decades ago, Bookchin identified some trends in radical movements that he considered new and problematic. Under the umbrella-term of ‘lifestyle anarchism’, Bookchin anathematized what he considered as degrading trends developing since the 1970s, mainly in the anarchist milieu, but also in social movements in general (Bookchin 1995). These trends included:

- – a drift away from reason towards subjectivism, relativism and emotionalism (fused with spiritualism and what he characterized as a New Age-inspired enchantment with the self)
- – a drift away from serious organizational political commitment
- – an emphasis on episodic ‘happenings’ and protest events, rather

  than on a coherent programme

- – a priority of means over ends, where ‘the movement is the message’.
- – For Bookchin, lifestyle anarchism and the tradition of social anarchism were separate by ‘an unbridgeable chasm’. He identified three main characteristics in social anarchism that are absent from the newly arisen trend:

- – an organizational base
- – a theoretical coherence, resulting from a rational analysis
- – a universalist political vision.

The elements Bookchin attributes to social anarchism could also be used to describe the old left, whereas some of the characteristics of ‘lifestyle anarchism’ seem to mirror parts of today’s left. However, despite Bookchin’s insightful contribution, I consider his notion of ‘lifestyle anarchism’ as quite narrow and inadequate to analyse the trends that I wish to examine in this book. To begin with, Bookchin was mostly referring to the anarchist milieu, of which he was a part. Yet some of the tendencies he described have moved beyond the anarchist movement to wider parts of the left and of social move- ments. Also, although Bookchin’s analysis was important and pio- neering, his allegiance to ecology and his rigid anti-capitalism limited the extent to which materialism and a problematization of economic growth were part of his criticism’s frame. As anti-materi- alist values are important in my thesis, I had to go beyond Bookchin’s analysis. Thus I needed a term that would describe an ‘unbridgeable gap’ between the new left and the old left, as Bookchin did, but with a wider emphasis. Since this term had to signify some sort of intellectual allegiance to Bookchin’s work and signify that the focus of my case studies will be mostly protest movements, I chose the term ‘lifestyle activism’.

Thus, by now the structure and scope of this book should have become clearer. Initially, a more theoretical and philosophical gen- eral overview of how the new left has been different from the old left will be attempted. This will inevitably be wide in its scope. Later, this wide scope will be put to the test in specific cases of social and political movements, so as to see whether these changes in the phi- losophy of the left that were identified in the opening parts of the book are actually mirrored on the ground. What I will be searching for in my case studies is a set of ideas, values, cultural codes and forms of action that I have called ‘lifestyle activism’ and that incor- porate the ideological changes in the character of the left. At the same time, two underlying questions will be gradually addressed: how do these changes in the character of the left mirror changes in the dominant ideology and the *leitmotifs* of our times and do the ideas associated with ‘lifestyle activism’ play any role in the ‘only limited political success of the left’?

One criticism that such a work might attract has to do with the wideness of its scope. One might say that drawing conclusions and attributing characteristics to something as broad as ‘the left’, which could stretch from parts of the Democratic Party of the USA to radical anarchists in Greece, and from British trade unionists to the Podemos party in

Spain, is bad scholarship, especially since the case studies focus on several grassroots movements that do not necessar- ily represent such a large non-homogeneous political milieu. There are two answers to this objection. In each era, the ideas that domi- nate on the political level and on the ideological spectrum, have some common background and some references in the so-called *Leitkultur* of that society. These ideas become so dominant that they tend to be perceived and accepted automatically, with little questioning. An example of a *Leitkultur* becoming prevalent and having a huge influence on the biggest part of the political spectrum was the anti-liberalism of the period around the Second World War, where from fascism to the New Deal and from Stalinism to conser- vatism, the idea was shared that a *laissez-faire* approach to economic and social life is problematic and thus the state should play a central role. My point is that if ideas such as anti-materialism, environmen- talism, post-modernism and the critique of instrumental reason have indeed become influential at the cultural level, then one would expect them to be influential among 'the left' as well, even if the latter is not easily defined as an homogeneous bloc.

In addition, the fact that I have examined a period of almost five decades and a variety of different campaigns to explore and illus- trate the arguments of this book will hopefully prove that my theory has been tested in depth. The case studies I have chosen as examples illustrating my arguments are quite diverse in political, geographical and temporal terms. In the 1960s, I will take the case study of stu- dent radicalism and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organization in the USA. The ideas of the New Left and the scholars behind them had a greater influence in the USA than in, say, France, where 1960s radicalism was more of a fusion of New Left ideals with the old left (partly due to explained by the prominent role of various Maoist and Trotskyist groups, but also that of the Communist Party). Thus, if the ideas and the counter-cultural values that formed the New Left as a phenomenon play a key role in understanding subsequent developments (post 1960s) in the left, then the SDS is a useful case study. Chapter 3 will deal with the supposed de-radi- calization of the 1970s and 1980s. I consider the fusion of leftist ideas with the environmental movement as a key moment in grasp- ing the change in the DNA and core philosophical premises of the wider left. Thus, the case of the German Greens, materializing the fusion of the ideas of the New Left and of counter-culture with the rising environmentalist concerns, can shed light on the ideological processes of the time. I will also examine the phenomenon of the protest camps of that period, as a materialization of the influence of lifestyle activism. Then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s some of the core narratives of the New Left were mobilized and acquired an international scope against the process of globalization. The anti- globalization movement is an important case study, not only because of its scope and size but also because of the legacy it left and how it influenced later movements. Finally, the case study from the wave of contention that followed the financial crisis of 2008 will be the Occupy the London Stock Exchange protest, as it is a movement that I have studied in depth through ethnographic research for my PhD. Yet reference will also be made to the re-emergence of the political left, with Syriza in Greece being the best example, and whether it signifies a retreat from the limitations of lifestyle activ- ism. The case studies will only solidify my more general arguments, which are based not only on these movements but also on the wider political ideas and mobilizations of each period.

Another potential misunderstanding of this book is that it repre- sents a nostalgic longing for a return to the good old left or to a twentieth- (or nineteenth-) century socialist ideal. Nothing could be further from the truth. The old left, as expressed through the Marxist-Leninist communist movements of the previous century, was, beyond any reasonable doubt, a political, economic and moral failure (and the term 'failure' might be a huge understatement). Also, the old left's social-democratic Keynesian expression gradually came to feel dated as the market became more globalized, capital achieved more mobility and technology revolutionized human relations more and more extensively. This partially explains why the heirs of the social-democratic wing of the old left have for some decades now tried to distance themselves from their political prede- cessors (New Labour being an obvious example of that tendency). What is the point, then, in setting the old left as a point of refer- ence? To begin with, the old left had a philosophical starting point that, as shown earlier, was linked to the spirit of the Enlightenment, of the Industrial Revolution and of modernity. It will be shown that this is not the case with the New Left; therefore, the old left can operate as a yardstick to measure the extent to which the New Left has moved away from the roots of radical movements of the past.

In addition, the old left goes beyond Stalinism and the state- bureaucratic complex of social democracy: there is a rich tradition on the left of freedom, humanism, liberalism and individual agency, from workers' mutual aid communities to the libertarian free school of the *Escuela Moderna* in Spain, and from aspects of the work of Marx himself, such as his fierce criticism of the state apparatus in *The Civil War in France* (1871) to the autonomist tradition that ele- ments of the New Left reinvented in the 1960s. The book claims that this tradition is the one from which the New Left is mostly deviating, and it is only this tradition that could revitalize the left.

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