

The Nostalgic Left

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The nostalgic left is a bit of shorthand I've started using for those on the left who have reacted to the disintegration of the old left by wishing for idealised simpler times. And perhaps more strangely blaming the collapse on what they see as threatening new developments, like intersectionality. They hold such newfangled nonsense responsible for the current failure of the left to get an echo from the general population.

These were the wonderful days before the internet when left intellectuals could write without fear of participants in the movements they were writing about responding and challenging their right to represent them. A time when commentators who could be heard were calm, rational & polite. Those who were allowed to communicate with the masses first passed through a process that took away that hammer of spontaneous unfocused anger and replaced it with the stiletto of intellectual putdowns, phrased in the correct polite terms to leave a wound that was deep but also invisible to spectators. Not for them the ugly sight of the crushed skull, just the suddenly slumped body and trickle of blood. The right to have ones writing communicated had to be performed for, publication in the party press, the academic journal or the op-ed pages of the mainstream press was not a given, unlike that out-of-control blogosphere or worse still the twitterati of today.

These were the days when leaders of mass movement could operate without their problematic 'personal behaviours' being challenged because everyone knew to put the good of the movement first and the few who didn't were denied a voice. After all Gerry Healy never had to fear the 'dark side of the internet', it was only the massive accumulation of rape allegations that eventually brought him down.

The nostalgic left are often neo-social democrats, and in that guise, see the voice subalterns have today to be the problem that is holding back the possibility of social democracy. It seems more straightforward to see the end of that project in the ideological triumph of neoliberalism and the technical triumphs that have driven capitalist globalisation. Even in then imperialist heartlands social democracy on the national scale now seems almost impossible. Placing the problem instead at the feet of some people who make angry harsh posts on twitter about people that the nostalgic left would prefer to see left unchallenged seems odd to say the least. But this also reflects another aspect of the nostalgic left, a yearning to be back in the days when only those at the top of mass parties could say critical things about others and be heard. The role of the rest of us was simply to choose sides in such disputes and Go Team our chosen side to victory.

The nostalgic left can also be revolutionary marxists who dream of the days when appeals to party discipline could shut up internal dissent. They forget the chants of 'discipline, discipline' that drowned out the Soviet tanks as they rolled into Hungary in '56. Or sometimes they may even be anarchists, dreaming of syndicalist unions of muscular white guys wielding tools, forgetting that Mujeres Libres arose of necessity out of the machismo of the CNT.

What brings these fragments together is a common howl against the complexities of modern movements, against the many voices that are now heard. Like nostalgic movements of the right they have no meaningful program, the change after all has happened. The wish for a return to left wing victorian values, when bearded men polemicised by pamphlet, only serves to block the development of movements that might make a difference.

The nostalgic left has forgotten so quickly that the 20th century left was drowned in blood when the leaders who rose unchallenged to the top became paranoid psychopaths in power, murdering the former comrades by the tens of thousands. Like all nostalgia's the bad parts of the past are forgotten in the wish for a simpler times.

When times are hard its often simple to dream of the imaginary easy days of childhood, to those false memories of endless summer and carefree lives. But to change the world 'that is', the very complex world 'that is', it's the future and not the past we need to embrace. Nostalgia may be a comfort blanket but it is also the blindfold of the executioner.

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