

# **The Left That Was**

**A Personal Reflection**

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I would like to recall a Left That Was—an idealistic, often theoretically coherent Left that militantly emphasized its internationalism, its rationality in its treatment of reality, its democratic spirit, and its vigorous revolutionary aspirations. From a retrospective viewpoint of a hundred years or so, it is easy to find many failings in the Left That Was: I have spent much of my own life criticizing the Left’s failings (as I saw them) and many of its premises, such as its emphasis on the historical primacy of economic factors (although this fault can be overstated by ignoring its social idealism), its fixation on the proletariat as a “hegemonic” class, and its failure to understand the problems raised by status hierarchy and domination.

But the Left That Was—the Left of the nineteenth and early twentieth century—did not have our devastating experiences with Bolshevism and particularly Stalinism to correct its weaknesses. It developed in a time of a rising mass movement of working people—a proletariat, in particular—that had not gained anything from the democratic revolutions of the past (as had the peasantry). The Left That Was, nonetheless, had features that should be regarded as imperishable for *any* movement that seeks to create a better world—a rich generosity of spirit, a commitment to a humane world, a rare degree of political independence, a vibrant revolutionary spirit, and an unwavering opposition to capitalism. These attributes were characteristics of the Left That Was, by which I mean not the Leninist “Old Left” or the Maoist “New Left” that followed, but traditional ideas underlying the Left as such. They *defined* the Left and distinguished it from liberalism, progressivism, reformism, and the like.

My concern, here, is that these attributes are fading rapidly from the present-day Left. The Left today has withdrawn into a strident form of nationalism and statism, presumably in the interests of “national liberation”; an inchoate nihilism, presumably under the aegis of postmodernism; and an ethnic parochialism, presumably in the name of fighting racial discrimination. New versions of nationalism, a lack of concern for democracy, and a fragmenting sectorialism and parochialism abound. Dogmatism and moral intimidation have turned this sectorialism and parochialism into a whiplash, one that silences all analyses that go beyond mere bumper-sticker slogans.

Too many careers and reputations are being made by many “leaders” in the present-day Left through shrill voices rather than clear insights. Their sloganeering has no content, and their verbiage offers little understanding of the fact that we are all ultimately one community of human beings, and that we can transcend the mere conditioned reflexes that undermine our commitment to mutual recognition and care for each other as well as the planet. I am not speaking of a New Age “oneness” that ignores basic class, status, and ethnic divisions in present-day society, divisions that must be resolved by radical social change. I am discussing the failure of today’s Left to establish any affinity with a humane Left That Was, one that celebrated our *potential* for creating a shared humanity and civilization.

I realize only too well that these remarks will be viewed by many contemporary leftists as unsatisfactory. But in the Left That Was, the working class was at least seen (however erroneously) as the “non-class class”—that is, as a particular class that was obliged by inherent tendencies in capitalism to express the *universal* interests of humanity as well as its potentiality to create a rational society. This notion at least assumed that there were universal human interests that could be substantiated and realized under socialism, communism, or anarchism. Today’s Left is “deconstructing” this appeal to universality to a point where it denies its validity and opposes reason itself on the basis that it is purely analytical and “unfeeling.” What has been carried over to our time from the sixties is a basically uncritical assortment of narrow interests—and, one is obliged to add, alluring university careers—that have reduced universalistic to particularistic con-

cerns. The great ideal of an emancipated *humanity*—hopefully one in harmony with nonhuman nature—has been steadily eroded by particularistic claims to hegemonic roles for gender-biased, ethnic-biased, and other like tendencies.

These tendencies threaten to turn the Left back to a more parochial, exclusionary, and ironically, more hierarchical past insofar as one group, whether alone or in concert with others, affirms its superior qualifications to lead society and guide movements for social change. What many Leftists today are destroying is a great tradition of human solidarity and a belief in the potentiality for humanness, one that transcends nationality, ethnicity, gender differences, and a politics of hegemonic superiority.

I cannot hope to deal here with all the details of the social idealism, humanism, and drive for theoretical coherence that made the Left That Was so different from the pap leftism that exists today. Instead, I should like to focus on the internationalist and confederalist tendencies, the democratic spirit, the antimilitarism, and the rational secularism that distinguished it from other political and social movements of our period.

### ***Internationalism, Nationalism, and Confederation***

The nationalism that permeates much of the Left of the eighties and nineties (often in the name of “national liberation”) was largely alien to the far-seeing Leftists of the last century and the early part of the present one. In using the word Left, I am drawing from the language of the French Revolution of 1789–94 so that I can include various types of anarchist as well as socialist thought. The Left That Was not only established its pedigree in the French Revolution but defined itself in opposition to that revolution’s shortcomings, such as the Jacobin message of “patriotism” (although even this “nationalistic” notion had its roots in the belief that France belonged to its people rather than to the King of France—who was obliged to change his title to the King of the French after 1789 as a result).

Repelled by the references of the French revolutionaries to *la patrie*, the Left That Was generally came to regard nationalism as a regressive, indeed, as a divisive force that separated human from human by creating national boundaries. The Left That Was saw *all* national boundaries as the barbed wire that compartmentalized human beings by dividing them according to particularistic loyalties and commitments that obscured the domination of all oppressed people by ruling strata.

To Marx and Engels, the subjugated of the world had no country. They had only their international solidarity to sustain them, their unity as a class that was historically destined to remove class society as such. Hence the ringing conclusion of *The Communist Manifesto*: “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!” And in the body of that work (which the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin translated into Russian), we are told: “In the national struggles of the proletarians of different countries, [Communists] point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.”

Further, the *Manifesto* declares, “The working men have no country. We cannot take away from them what they have not got.” To the extent that Marx and Engels did give their support to some national liberation struggles, it was largely from their concerns about matters of geopolitics and economics or even for sentimental reasons, as in the case of Ireland, rather than principle. They supported the Polish national movement, for example, primarily because they wanted to weaken the Russian Empire, which in their day was the supreme counterrevolutionary power

on the European continent. And they wished to see a united Germany, arguing (very wrongly, in my view) that the nation-state was desirable in providing the best arena for the development of capitalism, which they regarded as historically progressive (again wrongly, in my view). But never did they impute any virtues to nationalism as an end in itself.

Specifically, it was Frederick Engels, a popularizer and also a vulgarizer of Marx's thought, who regarded the nation-state as "the normal political constitution of the European bourgeoisie" in a letter to Karl Kautsky, barely a month before the physically debilitated Marx died. Dealing as it did with Poland's struggle for independence from Russia, Engels's letter advanced what Paul Nettl has called a "narrow preoccupation" with the "resurrection" of the country. This letter later created a great deal of mischief in the Marxist movement: it provided self-proclaimed Marxist parties like the German Social-Democratic Party with an excuse to support their own country in August 1914, which subsequently destroyed proletarian internationalism during World War I.

But even within the Marxist movement, Engels's "narrow preoccupation" with nationalism did not go unchallenged in the pre-1914 era. Rosa Luxemburg's refusal to bow to nationalist tendencies in the Polish Socialist Party was of outstanding importance in perpetuating the internationalist legacy of socialism—she was no less a leading voice in that party than she was in the German Social-Democratic Party and the Second International generally. Her general views were consistently revolutionary: the socialist ideal of achieving a common humanity, she held, was incompatible with nationalist parochialism. As early as 1908, Luxemburg wrote:

Speaking of the right of nations to self-determination *we dispense with the idea of a nation as a whole*. It becomes merely a social and political unity [for the purposes of measurement]. But it was just this concept of nations as one of the categories of bourgeois ideology that Marxist theory attacked most fiercely, pointing out under slogans like "national self-determination" or "freedom of the citizen," "equality before the law"—there lurks all the time a twisted and limited meaning. In a society based on classes, the nation as a uniform social-political whole simply does not exist. Instead, there exists within each nation classes with antagonistic interests and "rights." There is literally no social arena—from the strongest material relationship to the most subtle moral one—in which the possessing classes and a self-conscious proletariat could take one and the same position and figure as one undifferentiated national whole. [emphasis added]

She expressed these views most sharply with reference to the Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and other empires of the day, and she gained a sizable number of supporters in the socialist movement as a whole. As it turned out, I may note, Luxemburg was bitterly opposed on this point by two of the most insipid vulgarizers of Marx's theories—Karl Kautsky of the German Social-Democratic Party and George Plekhanov of the Russian Social-Democratic Party, not to speak of activists like Josef Pilsudski, of the Polish Socialist Party, who was to become the notorious "strongman" of Poland during the interwar period. It was Lenin, in particular, who supported "national struggles" largely for opportunistic reasons and for notions that stem from Engels's view of the nation-state as historically "progressive."

Anarchists were even more hostile than many Marxist socialists in their opposition to nationalism. Anarchist theorists and activists opposed the formation of nation-states everywhere in the world, a view that placed them politically far in advance of the Marxists. Any approval of the nation-state, much less a centralized entity of any kind, ran contrary to anarchist anti-statism and its commitment to a universalized conception of humanity.

Bakunin's views on the subject of nationalism were very forthright. Without denying the right of every cultural group, indeed the "smallest folk-unit," to enjoy the freedom to exercise its own rights as a community, he warned:

We should place human, universal justice above all national interests. And we should abandon the false principle of nationality, invented of late by the despots of France, Russia, and Prussia for the purpose of crushing the sovereign principle of liberty... Everyone who sincerely wishes peace and international justice, should once and for all renounce the glory, the might, and the greatness of the Fatherland, should renounce all egoistic and vain interests of patriotism.

In sharp opposition to the state's pre-emption of societal functions of coordination, anarchist theorists advanced the fundamental notion of confederation, in which communes or municipalities in various regions could freely unite by means of recallable delegates. The functions of these confederal delegates were strictly administrative. Policy-making was to be left to the communes or municipalities themselves (although there was no clear agreement among anarchists on how the decision-making process was to function).

Nor was confederalism—as an alternative to nationalism and statism—a purely theoretical construct. Historically, confederalism and statism had been in conflict with each other for centuries. This conflict reached back to the distant past, but it erupted very sharply throughout the era of the democratic and proletarian revolutions, notably in the new United States during the 1780s, in France in 1793 and 1871, in Russia in 1921, and in the Mediterranean countries, notably Italy and Spain, in the nineteenth century—and again in Spain during the revolution of 1936.

In fact, Spanish anarchism, the largest of the anarchist movements in Europe, flatly opposed Catalan nationalism despite the fact that its largest following by the 1930s was recruited from the Catalan proletariat. So uncompromising were anarchist attempts to foster internationalism that clubs were formed everywhere among the Spanish anarchists to promote the use of Esperanto as a worldwide means of communication. Far more ethical than even Luxemburg, anarchists generally raised so-called "abstract rights" that were anchored in humanity's universality and solidarity, a vision that stood opposed to the institutional and ideological particularism that divided human from human.

## ***The Commitment to Democracy***

The Left That Was viewed any abridgment of free expression as abhorrent and reactionary. With few exceptions (Lenin's views are a case in point), the entire Left of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was nourished by the ideals of "popular rule" and the radicalization of democracy, often in sharp reaction to the authoritarian rule that had marked the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution. (The word *democracy*, I should note, varied greatly in its meaning, ranging from free expression and assembly under republican institutions—the common socialist view—to face-to-face democracy—the common anarchist view.) Even Marx and Engels, who were by no means *democrats* in the sense of being committed to face-to-face democracy, wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that "to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class [is] to win the battle for democracy"—a clear avowal that "bourgeois democracy" was flawed in its scope and ideals. Indeed, the elimination of classes and class rule by the proletariat was expected to yield "an association, in which the free development of each is the free development of all"—an avowal

that literally became a slogan comparable to “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!” and that persisted well into the Left of the 1930s.

As a Marxist, Luxemburg never strayed from this 1848 vision. In fact, her vision of revolution was integrally bound up with a proletariat that in her eyes was not only prepared to take power but was acutely knowledgeable of its humanistic task through experience and the give-and-take of free discussion. Hence her firm belief that revolution would be the work not of a party but of the proletariat itself. The role of the party, in effect, was to educate, not to command. In her critique of the Bolshevik Revolution, written only six months before she was murdered in the aftermath of the failed Spartacist uprising of January 1919, Luxemburg declared:

Freedom only for the supporters of the [Bolshevik] government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical conception of “justice” but because all that is instructive, wholesome, and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic and its effectiveness vanishes when “freedom” becomes a special privilege.

Despite her support of the Russian Revolution, Luxemburg lashed out at Lenin over this issue as early as 1918 in the harshest terms:

Lenin is completely mistaken in the means he employs. Decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconian penalties, rule by terror, all these things are but palliatives. The only way to rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes.

And with very rare prescience for that time in the revolutionary movement, she warned that the proletarian dictatorship reduced to a mere elite would result in a “brutalization of public life,” such as ultimately did occur under Stalinist rule.

With the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the Soviets must also become crippled... life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element.

For the anarchists, democracy had a less formal and more substantive meaning. Bakunin, who was presumably contrasting his views with Rousseau’s abstract conception of the citizen, declared:

No, I have in mind only liberty worthy of that name, liberty consisting in the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral powers latent in every man; a liberty which does not recognize any other restrictions but those which are traced by the laws of our own nature, which, properly speaking, is tantamount to saying that there are no restrictions at all, since these laws are not imposed upon us by some outside legislator standing above us or alongside us. Those laws are immanent, inherent in us; they constitute the very basis of our being, material as well as intellectual and moral; and instead of finding in them a limit to our liberty we should regard them as its real conditions and as its effective reason.

Bakunin’s “liberty,” in effect, is the fulfillment of humanity’s potentiality and immanent tendency to achieve realization in an anarchist society. Accordingly, this “liberty ... far from finding itself checked by the freedom of others, is, on the contrary confirmed by it.” Still further: “We understand by freedom from the positive point of view, the development, as complete as possible, of all faculties which man has within himself, and, from the negative point of view, the independence of the will of everyone from the will of others.”

## ***Antimilitarism and Revolution***

The Left That Was contained many pacifists, but its most radical tendencies eschewed nonviolence and committed themselves to *antimilitarism* rather than pacifism as a social as well as a combative issue. In their view, militarism implied a regimented society, a subordination of democratic rights in crisis situations such as war or, for that matter, revolution. Militarism inculcated obedience in the masses and conditioned them to the imperatives of a command society.

But what the Left That Was demanded was not the symbolic image of the “broken rifle”—so very much in vogue these days in pacifist boutiques—but the training and arming of the people for revolutionary ends, solely in the form of democratic militias. A resolution co-authored by Luxemburg and Lenin (a rare event) and adopted by the Second International in 1906 declared that it “sees in the democratic organization of the army, in the popular militia instead of the standing army, an essential guarantee for the prevention of aggressive wars, and for facilitating the removal of differences between nations.”

This was not simply an antiwar resolution, although opposition to the war that was fast approaching was the principal focus of the statement. The arming of the people was a basic tenet of the Left That Was, and pious demands for gun control among today’s leftists would have been totally alien to the thinking of the Left That Was. As recently as the 1930s, the concept of “the people in arms” remained a basic tenet of independent socialist, not to speak of anarchist, movements throughout the world, including those of the United States, as I myself so well remember. The notion of schooling the masses in reliance on the police and army for public safety, much less of turning the other cheek in the face of violence, would have been regarded as heinous.

Not surprisingly, revolutionary anarchists were even less ambiguous than socialists. In contrast to the state-controlled militia that the Second International was prepared to accept in the 1906 resolution cited above, the anarchists sought the direct arming of the masses. In Spain, weapons were supplied to anarchist militants from the very inception of the movement. The workers and peasants relied on themselves, not on the largesse of statist institutions, to obtain the means for insurrection. Just as their notion of democracy meant *direct* democracy, so their notion of antimilitarism meant that they had to countervail the state’s monopoly of violence with an armed popular movement—not merely a state-subsidized militia.

## ***Secularism and Rationalism***

It remains to add that anarchists and to a great extent the revolutionary socialists of the Left That Was not only tried to speak in the general interests of humanity but abjured any body of ideas and prejudices that denied humanity its naturalistic place in the scheme of things. They regarded the worship of deities as a form of subjugation to creations of human making, as the masking of reality by illusion, and as the manipulation of human fears, alienation, and anomie by calculated elites in behalf of an oppressive social order. Generally, the Left That Was boldly laid claim to the rationalist heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, however much this saddled the Marxists with mechanistic ideas. But also, organic forms of reason, borrowed from Hegel, competed with mechanism and conventional empiricism. Where intuitional notions competed with materialist ones among anarchists, they attracted a sizable body of artists to the anarchist movements of the past, or to anarchist ideas. Additionally, rationalism did not crowd



out emotive approaches that fostered a highly *moral* socialism that was often indistinguishable from libertarian outlooks. But almost every attempt apart from certain individual exceptions was made to place mechanistic, organic, and emotive approaches to reality in a rational framework—notably, to achieve a *coherent* approach to social analysis and change.

That this endeavor led to disparate tendencies in the Left That Was should not surprise us. But the notion of a rational society achieved by rational as well as moral means and idealistic sentiments formed a unifying outlook for the Left That Was. Few leftists would have accepted William Blake's notion of reason as "meddlesome" or current postmodern views of coherence as "totalitarian."

The Left That Was was divided over the question of whether there could be a peaceful, indeed reformistic, evolution of capitalism into socialism or whether an insurrectionary break with the capitalist system was unavoidable. The wariness of the Left That Was toward reforms can perhaps best be seen in the fact that years ago, serious debates occurred among Western leftists of all kinds on whether they should fight for the eight-hour day, which many thought would make capitalism more palatable to the working class. In Tsarist Russia, the Left seriously debated whether their organizations should try to alleviate famine conditions among the peasantry lest their charitable efforts deflect the anger of the peasantry away from Tsarism.

But however serious those differences were, attempts at reform *for its own sake* were never part of leftist ideology. The *revolutionary* Left—which truly defined socialist and anarchist movements as a Left—certainly did not want to improve the capitalist system, much less give it a "human face." "Capitalism with a human face" was an expression they would have regarded as a contradiction in terms. The Left That Was hoped to overthrow capitalism and initiate a radically new social system, not to rationalize the existing order and make it acceptable to the masses.

To participate in struggles for reforms was seen as a means to *educate* the masses, not a way to dole out charity or improve their material lot. Demands for reforms were always permeated by the broader message that fundamental social reconstruction was needed. The fight for the eight-hour day, years ago, and strikes for better living conditions, not to speak of legislative improvements for working people, were seen as means for mobilizing the oppressed, for engaging them in struggles, and for disclosing the limits—and basic irrationalism—of capitalism, not simply or even significantly as a means for bettering life under capitalism. It was not until a later day that reforms were advocated by so-called leftist parties, candidates, deputies, and humane devotees of the working class, the poor, and the elderly as techniques for "humanizing" capitalism or rendering leftist candidates more popular—and electable for public office.

To ask for improved working and living conditions was seen as a way of directly challenging the "wage system" and the sovereignty of capital. Even so-called "evolutionary" or "reformist" socialists who hoped to ease from capitalism into socialism were revolutionary in the sense that they believed capitalism had to be replaced by a radically new social order. Their conflicts with the revolutionary socialists and anarchists in the Left That Was centered on whether capitalism *could* be replaced by piecemeal changes, not on whether it could be given a "human face." The First World War and particularly the revolutions that followed it left reformist socialism in debris—but it also produced a Left that radically departed in many of its basic tenets from the Left That Was.

## ***The First World War and Bolshevism***

The outbreak of the First World War, the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in the Spartacus League uprising of January 1919 (a drawing of socialist blood that occurred with the indirect assent of the official German Social Democrats) opened a major breach in the history of the Left generally.

At the outbreak of the war, nearly all the socialist parties of warring Europe succumbed to nationalism, and their parliamentary fractions voted to give war credits to their respective capitalist states. Nor did the attitudes of certain leading anarchists, including Kropotkin, prove to be more honorable than those of the “social patriots,” to use Lenin’s epithet for the German and French socialist leaders who supported one or another camp in the war.

To analyze the reasons why this breach was opened in the Left That Was would require a study in itself. But the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 did not close the breach. Quite to the contrary—it widened it, not only because of the unavoidable polarization of Bolshevism against Social Democracy but because of the authoritarian elements that had always formed a part of the highly conspiratorial Russian revolutionary movement. The Bolshevik party had little commitment to popular democracy. Lenin had never viewed “bourgeois democracy” as anything more than an instrument that could be used or discarded as expediency required. Many demands were placed on the largely Bolshevik regime that was formed in November (it initially included Left Social Revolutionaries as well): the advancing German army on the eastern front, the incredibly savage civil war that followed the Revolution, the isolation of the Bolsheviks from the workers and peasants in the early 1920s, and the attempt by the Kronstadt sailors to recover a soviet democracy that had been effaced by the bureaucratic Bolshevik party. These demands combined to bring out the worst features of Lenin’s centralist views and his opportunistic views of democracy. Beginning in the early twenties, all affiliates of the Communist International were “Bolshevized” by Zinoviev and his Stalinist successors, until the commitment of socialism to democracy was marginalized and largely faded in the Communist parties of the world.

No less important in undermining the Left That Was were the various myths, popularized by Lenin, that capitalism had entered a unique, indeed “final” stage of its development, a stage marked by “imperialism” and worldwide “struggles for national liberation.” Here, again, Lenin’s position is too complex to be dealt with cursorily; but what is important is that the traditional internationalism that had marked the Left That Was increasingly gave way to an emphasis on “national liberation” struggles, partly for the purpose of weakening Western imperialism, and partly to foster economic development in colonized countries, thereby bringing the domestic class conflict within these countries to the top of their national agendas.

The Bolsheviks did not abandon the rhetoric of internationalism, to be sure, any more than the Social Democrats did. But “national liberation” struggles (which the Bolsheviks largely honored in the breach at home, after they took power in the newly formed Soviet Union) uncritically fostered a commitment by the Left to the formation of new nation-states. Nationalism increasingly came to the foreground of socialist theory and practice. It is not surprising that the first “People’s Commissar of Nationalities” in the new Soviet Union was Joseph Stalin, who later fostered this nationalistic trend in Marxism-Leninism and who during and after the Second World War gave it a distinctly “patriotic” quality in the USSR. Expressions claiming that the Soviet Union was the “fatherland of the working class” were ubiquitous among Communists of the interwar period,

and their parties were modeled on the centralized Bolshevik Party to allow for Stalin's blatant interference in their affairs.

By 1936, the politics of the Communist International (or what remained of it) had veered sharply away from the ideals that had once guided the Left That Was. Luxemburg, honored more as a martyr than as a theorist, was discredited by the Stalinist cabal or totally ignored. The Second International was essentially moribund. Idealism began to give way to a crudely amoral opportunism and to an antimilitarism that was variously emphasized, rejected, or modified to suit the foreign policy of the Stalinist regime.

Yet opposition there was—as late as 1939—to this degeneration of the ideas that had defined the Left That Was—opposition from left-wing tendencies in certain socialist parties, from anarchists, and from dissident Communist groups. The Left That Was did not disappear without furious debates over these ideals or without attempts to retain its historic premises. Its ideals remained at the top of the revolutionary agenda during the entire interwar period, not only as a source of polemics but as part of an armed confrontation in the Spanish Revolution of 1936. Leftist parties and groups still agonized over issues like internationalism, democracy, antimilitarism, revolution, and their relationship to the state—agonies that led to furious intramural and interparty conflicts. These issues were branded on the entire era before they began to fade—and their fading altered the very definition of leftism itself.

### *The Left and the “Cold War”*

The “Cold War” invaded the humanistic agenda of the Left That Was by turning most leftist organizations into partisans of the West or the East and by introducing a dubious “anti-imperialism” into what became Cold War politics. “National liberation” became the virtual centerpiece of the “New Left” and of the aging “Old Left,” at least their various Stalinist, Maoist, and Castroist versions.

It should be understood—as this Left did not—that imperialism is not unique to capitalism. As a means of exploitation and cultural homogenization, and as a source of tribute, it existed throughout the ancient, medieval, and early modern eras. In ancient times the imperial hegemony of Babylon was followed by that of Rome and the medieval Holy Roman Empire. Indeed, throughout history there have been African, Indian, Asian, and in modern times, expansionist and exploitative “sub-imperialist” states that were more precapitalist than capitalist in character. If “war is the health of the state,” war has usually meant expansionism (read: imperialism) among the more commanding states of the world and even among their client states.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the various writings on imperialism by J. A. Hobson, Rudolf Hilferding, and Lenin, among others, did not discover the concept of imperialism. They simply added new, uniquely capitalist features to earlier characterizations of imperialism, such as the “export of capital” and the impact of capitalism on the economic development of colonized countries. But what capitalism has also exported with a vengeance, in addition to capital itself, has been nationalism (not only demands for cultural autonomy) and nationalism in the form of centralized nation-states. Indeed, the centralized nation-state has been exported to peoples who might more reasonably have turned to confederal forms of struggle and social reconstruction in asserting their cultural uniqueness and right to self-management. Let me emphasize that my criticisms of nationalism and statism are not meant to reject the genuine aspirations of cultural

groups for full expression and self-governance. This is particularly the case where attempts are made to subvert their cultural uniqueness and their rights to autonomy. The issue with which I am concerned is *how* their cultural autonomy is expressed and the *institutional structures* they establish to manage themselves as unique cultural entities. The cultural integrity of a people does not have to be embodied in the form of a nation-state. It should, in my view, be expressed in forms that retain valuable cultural traditions and practices in confederal institutions of self-management. It was goals such as these in particular that were raised and prized by the great majority of anarchists and libertarian socialists, even certain Marxists, in the Left That Was.

What has happened instead is that the export of the nation-state has poisoned not only the modern Left but the human condition itself. In recent years, “Balkanization” and parochialism have become vicious phenomena of disastrous proportions. The recent and much-described breakup of the Russian empire has resulted in bloody national struggles and aspirations for state-formation that are pitting culturally disparate communities against each other in ways that threaten to regress to barbarism. The internationalist ideals that the Left That Was advanced, particularly in the former “socialist bloc,” have been replaced by an ugly parochialism—directed against Jews generally and in much of Europe against “foreign workers” from all parts of the world. In the Near East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, colonized or formerly colonized peoples have developed imperial appetites of their own, so that many of what now pass for former colonies that have been liberated from Euro-American imperialist powers are now pursuing brutally imperialist aspirations of their own.

For the emergence of an authentic Left what is disastrous here is that leftists in the United States and Europe often condone appalling behavior on the part of former colonies, in the name of “socialism,” “anti-imperialism,” and of course “national liberation.” The present-day Left is no less a victim of the “Cold War” than colonized peoples who were pawns in it. Leftists have all but jettisoned the ideals of the Left That Was, and in so doing, they have come to accept a kind of client status of their own—first, in the 1930s, as supporters of the “workers’ fatherland” in the East, and more recently as supporters of former colonies bent on their own imperialist adventures.

What matters is not whether such leftists in Europe or the United States do or do not support “liberated” nation-states that are either newly emerging, subimperialist, or imperialist. Whether Western leftists “support” these nation-states and their endeavors means as much to those states as seagull-droppings on an ocean shore. Rather, what really matters—and what is the more serious tragedy—is that these leftists rarely ask whether peoples they support accept statist regimes or confederal associations, whether they oppress other cultures, or whether they oppress their own or other populations—let alone whether they themselves should be supporting a nation-state at all.

Indeed, many leftists fell into the habit of opposing the imperialism of the superpowers in a mere *reaction* to the sides that were lined up in the “Cold War.” This “Cold War” mentality persists even after the “Cold War” has come to an end. More than ever, leftists today are obliged to ask if their “anti-imperialist” and “national liberation” concerns help to foster the emergence of *more* nation-states and *more* ethnic and “sub-imperialist” rivalries. They must ask, what character is anti-imperialism taking today? Is it validating ethnic rivalries, the emergence of domestic tyrannies, sub-imperialist ambitions, and a rapacious collection of militaristic regimes?

Clearly, parochialism is one product of the new “anti-imperialist” nationalism and statism that have been nourished by the “Cold War” and the reduction of specious leftists to minions of old Stalinist and Maoist-type conflicts dressed in the garb of “national liberation.” Parochialism can

also function internally, partly as an extension of the “Cold War” into domestic spheres of life. Self-styled spokespeople for ethnic groups who literally pit one racial group against another, dehumanizing (for whatever reason) one to enhance the other; spokespeople for gender groups that parallel such exclusionary ethnic groups in opposition to their sexual counterparts; spokespeople for religious groups that do the same with respect to other religious groups—all reflect atavistic developments that would have had no place in the Left That Was. That the *rights* of ethnic, gender, and like strata of a given population must be cherished and that cultural distinctions must be prized is not in question here. But apart from the justified claims of all these groups, their aims should be sought within a human-oriented framework, not within an exclusionary or parochial folk-oriented one. If an authentic Left is once again to emerge, the myth of a “hegemonic” group of oppressed people, which seeks to rearrange human relations in a new hierarchical pyramid, must be replaced by the goal of achieving an ethics of complementarity in which differences enrich the whole. In ancient times, the slaves of Sicily who revolted and forced all free men to fight as gladiators in the island’s amphitheaters behaved no differently from their masters. They reproduced what was still a slave culture, replacing one kind of slave by another.

Moreover, if there is to be a Left that in any sense resembles the Left That Was, it cannot be merely “left of center.” Liberalism—with its menu of small reforms that obscure the irrationality of the prevailing society and make it more socially acceptable—is an arena in its own right. Liberalism has no “left” that can be regarded as its kin or its critical neighbor. The Left must stake out its *own* arena, one that stands in revolutionary opposition to the prevailing society, not one that participates as a “leftist” partner in its workings.

### ***Will There Be a Left Today?***

Certainly the Left That Was fought against innumerable irrationalities in the existing social order, such as long debilitating working hours, desperate hunger, and abject poverty. It did so because the perpetuation of these irrationalities would have completely demoralized the forces fighting for basic social change. It often raised seemingly “reformist” demands, but it did so to reveal the *failure* of the existing social order to meet the most elementary needs of denied people. In fighting for these “reforms,” however, the concern of the Left That Was was explicitly and unwaveringly focused on the need to change the whole social order, not on making it less irrational and more palatable. Today, the Left That Was would have also fought with desperation against the forces that are depleting the ozone layer, destroying the forests, and proliferating the nuclear power plants in order *to preserve life itself* on this planet.

By the same token, however, the Left That Was recognized that there are many problems that *cannot* be solved within the framework of capitalism. It held, however “unrealistically” it may seem, to its revolutionary position rather than curry public favor or surrender its identity to opportunistic programs. At any given moment, history does not always present the Left with clear-cut alternatives or immediately “effective” courses of action. In August 1914, for example, no forces existed that could have prevented the outbreak of World War I, not even the Social Democracy that had committed itself to opposition to the war. The Left had to live an ineffectual, often hidden, frustrating life amidst the effluvium of popular jingoism that engulfed so much of Europe, including most of the workers in the socialist movement itself. Similarly, in 1938, there was no longer any possibility that the Spanish Revolution could be rescued from fascist military

attacks and insidious Stalinist counterrevolution, despite the valiant struggles that continued for the greater part of a year thereafter.

Regrettably, there are some impossible situations in which an authentic Left can only take a *moral* stance, with no hope of intervening successfully. In such cases, the Left can only patiently try to educate those who are willing to listen, to advance its ideas to rational individuals, however small their numbers may be, and to act as an ethical force in opposition to the “art of the possible,” to use a famous liberal definition of politics. A recent case in point was an admirable slogan that was raised at the inception of the Gulf war, namely “Neither Side Is Right”—a slogan that obviously did not resonate with the nationalistic attitude of the great majority of American people, nor one that was likely to be politically effective. Indeed, to choose sides in the Gulf war would have been to confuse American national chauvinism with democracy, on the one hand, or to confuse an indifference to Saddam Hussein’s totalitarianism with “anti-imperialism,” on the other. This eminently moral position tries to advance a humanistic viewpoint in the face of the repellent political and economic reality that marked both camps in the conflict.

To pretend that an authentic Left can *always* offer a practical solution to every problem in society is chimerical. Offering “lesser evils” as a solution to every evil that this society generates will lead to the worst of all possible evils—the dissolution of the Left into a liberal morass of endless compromises and humiliations. Amid all its fights in support of concrete issues, an authentic Left advances the message that the present society must be demolished and replaced by one that is rational. Such was the case with socialists like Eugene V. Debs and anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in the Left That Was. Put bluntly: What this society usually does should not deter Leftists from probing the logic of events from a rational standpoint or from calling for what society *should* do. Any attempt to adapt the rational “should” to the irrational “is” vacates that space on the political spectrum that should be occupied by a Left premised on reason, freedom, and ecological humanism. The need to steadfastly maintain the principal commitments that minimally define a Left may not always be popular, but the alternative to the monstrous irrationalities that permeate present-day society must always be kept open, fostered, and developed if we are ever to achieve a free society.

It may well be that in the foreseeable future an authentic Left has little, if any, prospects of gaining a large following. But if it surrenders the most basic principles that define it—internationalism, democracy, antimilitarism, revolution, secularism, and rationalism—as well as others, like confederalism, the word *Left* will no longer have any meaning in our political vocabulary. One may call oneself a liberal, a social democrat, a “realo” Green, or a reformist. That is a choice that each individual is free to make, according to his or her social and political convictions. But for those who call themselves *leftists*, there should be a clear understanding that the use of the term Left involves the acceptance of the fundamental principles that literally define and justify the use of the word. This means that certain ideas like nationalism, parochialism, authoritarianism—and certainly, for anarchists of all kinds, any commitment to a nation-state—and symbols like the broken rifle of pacifism are totally alien to the principles that define the Left. Such ideas, introduced into politics, have no place in any politics that can authentically be characterized as leftist. If no such politics exists, the term *Left* should be permitted to perish with honor.

But if the Left were to finally disappear because of the melding of reformist, liberal, nationalist, and parochial views, not only would modern society lose the “principle of hope,” to use Ernst Bloch’s expression, an abiding principle that has guided all revolutionary movements of the past; the Left would cease to be the conscience of society. Nor could it advance the belief that the

present society is totally irrational and must be replaced by one that is guided by reason, an ecological ethics, and a genuine concern for human welfare. For my part, that is not a world in which I would want to live.

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Murray Bookchin  
The Left That Was  
A Personal Reflection  
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