

INTRODUCTION ON TIME

THIS IS, I HOPE, an untimely book. Though I began thinking about it in the darkest days of the Bush-Cheney administration, 2002–03, I write these prefatory words in the opening moments of 2009, when those days now seem to many a hideous, aberrant period best forgotten. For after the historic events of 2008, all that is solid has seemed to melt into air: against all odds, the United States has elected its first black president, an exceptionally talented centrist-liberal with the unlikely name of Barack Hussein Obama, and much of the rest of the world has hailed his election as a hopeful sign that the Bush-Cheney regime will now be decisively repudiated, along with its corrosive lawlessness at home and abroad. And one of the reasons for Obama's election, perhaps, was the dramatic (if long-delayed) implosion of the housing and credit markets in the United States, which has sparked a truly global crisis in capitalism and bespeaks what Michael Lewis and David Einhorn call "the end of the financial world as we know it."

Why, then, bother with a book on the problems that continue to ail the U.S. left? However few leftists the Democratic Party may include, it seems undeniable that Democrats have finally broken the forty-year Republican stranglehold on the presidency (save for the electoral flukes known as Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, no darlings of the left they) and have at long last rendered the Deep South irrelevant to national politics; indeed, a map of U.S. counties that voted more heavily Republican in 2008 than in 2004 reveals a GOP that is strongest in the aging, overwhelmingly white districts of the lower Allegheny Mountains and the Ozarks—not a hopeful demographic sign for conservative strategists (Carter et al., "Shifts in the Map"). Still further south, the replacement of brutal fascist dictatorships in South America with democratically elected leftist leaders suggests that the tide has finally turned throughout the hemisphere, and the right is now on the defensive. Around the world, the collapse of the global financial system demonstrates the profound instability of unregulated

capitalism. In such times, surely, a book on the left's troubles is out of step, out of place.

But I believe the argument of this book might be valuable precisely for its untimeliness; for it is a response not merely to an electoral cycle or to the world after 9/11 but to hard-left habits that have festered unaddressed for decades. Most of the books in the "what's wrong with the left" subgenre have, perhaps understandably, focused on world events since 2001, when al-Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—and the Bush-Cheney response to the attacks, culminating in the invasion of Iraq—shocked the world and induced crises for the left, both in the United States and throughout Western Europe. The phenomena I take up in *The Left at War*, however, predate and provide the conditions for the left's response to the Bush-Cheney Global War on Terror; they testify to the existence of a kind of cold war within the left itself, a cold war that turns hot—and becomes broadly legible—only when an actual U.S. war breaks out, whether in the Balkans in the 1990s or in Iraq after 2003. For example, it is now clear that there are severe divisions in the left over the concept of "humanitarian intervention," especially (but not exclusively) when the intervention in question is led by the United States and involves the U.S. military; but it is notable that most anti-interventionists, who opposed war in the Balkans (wrongly, I believe) and in Iraq (rightly, I believe), have had nothing compelling or cogent to say about massacres in Rwanda, Sudan, or the Congo, largely because no U.S. military force was involved one way or the other in those massacres.

My diagnosis of the left does not confine itself to its responses to U.S. foreign policy or to the world since 9/11; rather, I call attention to three important strands of recent leftist thought that underlie those responses.

The first, upon which I am hardly the first to remark, involves a kind of postcolonial bad conscience about criticizing such things as the Iranian persecution of gay men or the Taliban's treatment of women, on the grounds that such criticism (a) serves U.S. propaganda purposes and (b) replays the imperialist script of (in Gayatri Spivak's memorable phrase) white men saving brown women from brown men—or saving brown gay men, as the case may be. This strand of leftist thought goes back before 9/11 to intense debates about the relation of Western feminism to non-Western cultures, particularly with regard to controversial practices such as clitoridectomy or *sati*; it affected Western leftists' response to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran (dramatically, in the case of Michel Foucault; Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*) as well as to the

fatwa pronounced against Salman Rushdie a decade later.¹ At least two factors are in play here, and at critical times they exacerbate each other: a pernicious and opportunistic form of cultural relativism, according to which even those nations that are signatories to the U.N. Declaration of Universal Human Rights are held to be so radically different from “us” that “we” cannot ethically assess their policies with regard to universal human rights; and a blinkered sense that the enemy of my enemy may turn out to be my friend, even if “my enemy” is the American right and their enemies include radical Islamists.

The second strand is almost never remarked on in this context; I hope this book will help remedy that. It involves a mode of belief, a way of believing, rather than a set of beliefs; it is the work of a *countercultural* left that sees popular politics as a game rigged by corporations and the process of winning popular consent as a form of “selling out.” Of course, these are themselves beliefs, beliefs about the way public persuasion works in modern mass societies; but the countercultural left is marked more by its attitude toward public persuasion than by the specific content of any of its desires. It offers a dizzying range of ideas, mostly good ones, about everything from sustainable energy to fair labor and trade practices to alternative music and film; the only thing that constitutes it as a countercultural left is that it becomes uncomfortable whenever its ideas win the consent of more than a tiny fraction of the public. As long as its beliefs are shared by 2 or 3 percent of their fellow citizens, all is well; but the minute one of its ideas is adopted more widely, then the countercultural purists—call them the Two or Three Percenters—know that the field must necessarily be abandoned to the callow pragmatists and hangers-on who will compromise with anyone about anything in order to “cross over” to the masses.

The last strand entails a radical distrust of (amounting, in some circles, to an aversion to) modern ideas of liberal democracy and the Enlightenment tradition on which they rest. Only occasionally does this aspect of leftist thought emerge into public view, and then only when it is ignorantly condemned by the right as a form of Soviet apologetics. But there are no longer any serious U.S. leftists who hanker for the return of the Soviet Union; rather, the antiliberal left takes care to acknowledge the errors and atrocities of communism while insisting that the idea of liberal democracy’s triumph, whether touted by Francis Fukuyama or Richard Rorty, represents a drastic foreshortening and constriction of the human political imagination. Mere liberal democracy, in other words, is thin gruel, served up by tepid wimps who can’t imagine anything tastier or

more satisfying. This is a supple and versatile complaint: on the one hand, it can be launched from anywhere, because the complainant never has to specify just what kind of society should replace the boring, procedural liberal democracy that constrains us; on the other, it can be mobilized to any end, even—at an extreme—to provide cover for profoundly antiliberal forms of government in the Islamic states or in the developing world.

Because this form of leftist thought is so widely misunderstood, I will provide one notable contemporary exponent of it rather than simply summarizing it, as I have for strands one and two. For many on the academic/theory left in the United States, Slavoj Žižek has become the contemporary political-theoretical intellectual par excellence; he is indisputably brilliant and insanely prolific, and no one else can combine his dazzling readings of Hitchcock films with romantic-revolutionary denunciations of “liberal-democratic hegemony.” But more to the point, his dismissal of Hannah Arendt at the outset of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* offers some idea of his agenda for the left:

Until two decades ago, Leftist radicals dismissed her as the perpetrator of the notion of “totalitarianism,” the key weapon of the West in the Cold War ideological struggle: if, at a Cultural Studies colloquium in the 1970s, one was asked innocently, “Is your line of argumentation not similar to that of Arendt?” this was a sure sign that one was in deep trouble. Today, however, one is expected to treat her with respect. . . . This elevation of Arendt is perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left—of how the Left has accepted the basic co-ordinates of liberal democracy (“democracy” versus “totalitarianism,” etc.), and is now trying to redefine its (op)position within this space. The first thing to do, therefore, is fearlessly to violate these liberal taboos: *So what* if one is accused of being “anti-democratic,” “totalitarian” . . . (2–3; second ellipsis in original)

Underneath Žižek’s formidable theoretical sophistication there is a quite simple knee-jerk reflex at work: if the opposition between democracy and totalitarianism favors the liberal-democratic West, then it is the job of leftist radicals to deny it. The proper democratic left response to this, whether undertaken from the West, East, North, or South, is to suggest that if the elevation of a figure like Hannah Arendt is the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the left, then it was a well-deserved defeat, too long in coming—however much one might sympathize with the twinge of radical

nostalgia for the heady days when one could cow one's interlocutors in cultural studies symposia into an embarrassed silence by linking them to Arendt's work.

Toward the end of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, a series of essays by and exchanges between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Žižek, Laclau offers a simple challenge:

In his previous essay, Žižek had told us that he wanted to overthrow capitalism; now we are served notice that he also wants to do away with liberal democratic regimes—to be replaced, it is true, by a thoroughly different regime which he does not have the courtesy of letting us know anything about. One can only guess. . . . Does he want to replace liberal democracy by a one-party political system, to undermine the division of powers, to impose the censorship of the press? (288)

Žižek's reply is remarkable for its inability to describe that "different regime": refusing "today's liberal blackmail that courting any prospect of radical change paves the way for totalitarianism," Žižek writes, "It is my firm conviction, my politico-existential premiss, that the old '68 motto *Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible!* still holds" (326). As a political platform, surely this leaves much to be desired—and surely that is precisely its point, to leave everything to desire.

FOR A DEMOCRATIC LEFT

The crimes of the Bush-Cheney regime beggar description. After 9/11, Cheney's authoritarianism and obsession with secrecy took a grotesque turn, with the development of the "one percent doctrine," (Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*)² the conviction (buttressed by a reliance on conspiracy theorist Laurie Mylroie) that Saddam Hussein had some connection to the attacks, and, most grievously, with the development of a worldwide archipelago of torture sites from Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib and beyond. Bush-Cheney will—or, at least, *should*—be remembered as the worst president and vice president in U.S. history, with all of Richard Nixon's love of clandestine foreign operations and domestic spying programs but with none of Nixon's concessions to Keynesian economics or the social welfare state; they will also be remembered as the only administration to suspend habeas corpus *and* institute indefinite detention and torture as

(unacknowledged) U.S. policy. Indeed, the atrocities committed by the Bush-Cheney administration around the globe, directly and through proxies (via “extraordinary rendition”), are so vile as to obscure many of the other travesties Bush and Cheney have visited on us—from their denials and evasions with regard to global climate change, to their totalitarian theory of the “unitary executive” that overrides the constitutional separation of powers, to their use of that theory to issue “signing statements” that undermine acts of Congress, to their payoffs to journalists and filming of faux “news” stories shipped to media outlets and run as free ads for administration policies, to their wholesale corruption of the Department of Justice.

Why, then, should such an analysis of the U.S. left be cogent now, after the post-Katrina public repudiation of Bush-Cheney, after the election of Obama and the repudiation of the revanchist right, after the onset of the global financial crisis? Because the left of which I write is indifferent to what it calls the “corporate duopoly” of electoral politics in the United States, believing the process to be at once hopelessly corrupted and peripheral to the larger, deeper movements of culture and society; it is not merely indifferent but actively hostile to Obama himself, casting him as a double-talking Republican and insisting—not without reason—that he will simply be a better manager of the American Empire. And because this left, welcoming the financial crisis as final confirmation of its long-held beliefs, has no effective answer to the global economic crisis, no investment—if you will pardon the phrase—in creating national and international regulatory systems that will prevent capitalism from eating itself and scorching the earth.

I have wondered for many years just what to call this left. “Far left” is clearly inadequate, for it suggests—to all too many leftists—that the user of the term is one of those pusillanimous “moderate” leftists (perhaps even a noxious “liberal”) who shrinks from grappling with the hard truths of imperialism and exploitation; it leaves in place the idea that this left’s evasiveness with regard to tyranny and genocide belong “on the left” in any sense whatsoever; and it cedes rhetorical ground to lefter-than-thou partisans who assume that “further left” simply means “more better.” “Radical left” won’t do, either, for some of the same reasons; it also plays into the left’s long romance with radicalism, which runs from Ché Guevara t-shirts to solemn etymological assurances that radicalism gets “to the root” of the problem. More importantly, I have no desire to criticize radicalism *tout court*, since there are times—and the histories of the labor movement, the

civil rights movement, and the “new” social movements of the 1960s furnish many examples of those times—when radicalism makes perfect political sense, even in pragmatic terms. Likewise, I do not designate this left as “anti-imperialist,” because, as an anti-imperialist, I have no desire to undermine anti-imperialism; rather, I believe that much of this left uses the rhetoric of anti-imperialism as a cloak for something much less admirable, and I hope to bear out this charge in the course of this book. Is it then a *conservative* left, responding to every new global crisis by chanting forty-year-old mantras about being reasonable and demanding the impossible? A *reactionary* left, equivocating about the stoning of women rather than asserting universal human rights? An *academic* left, confined to a string of college campuses? None of these seems right; the last is especially problematic, since much of the radical left in the United States has nothing but contempt for the kind of poststructuralist theorizing common to the properly “academic” left.

Instead, I adopt the term “Manichean left.” For the Manichean left, as for the Manicheans of the early Christian era, there are two forces in the world, those of good and evil, and everyone and everything that is not on one side is on the other. The opening chapter of this book furnishes a few examples of the phenomenon: if Israel is in the wrong, then Hezbollah must be in the right (and, as the Manichean-left slogan of the 2006 war in Lebanon had it, “we are all Hezbollah now”); to criticize the U.S. war in Afghanistan, one must defend the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and to oppose the U.S. war in Iraq, one has no choice but to support the Iraqi resistance. The term “Manichean,” in such cases, is self-explanatory—though the reasons behind the Manicheanism are not, and will require some explanation as well as repudiation.

And yet I will not repudiate the entire left of the past forty years; far from it. Instead, I want this book to lead readers to go back and investigate some overlooked paths on the democratic left—primarily those of Ellen Willis, in the United States, and (more complexly) Stuart Hall, in the United Kingdom. I devote chapter 4 exclusively to Hall’s work on Thatcherism, in the belief that it is not sufficiently recognized or understood by American leftists outside the small academic circles in which the history of British cultural studies is well known and oft-rehearsed; but I weave Willis’s arguments on culture and society throughout the book as well, noting whenever possible the surprising and illuminating concordances between her thought and that of Hall. For Hall and Willis are not only writers in a democratic-socialist tradition that is itself deserving of greater public

recognition; even within that tradition, they stand out for the original and brilliant way they discerned—and forged—the connections between cultural politics and global politics. And if I manage to convince my readers of nothing more than the proposition that the work of Stuart Hall and Ellen Willis deserves closer attention from liberals, leftists, and even some conservatives, I will consider this extended exercise in left self-criticism to have been worth the effort.

I would nevertheless like to convince my readers of a bit more than this, if I can. I would like to convince them that international or supranational forms of governance are going to be indispensable in the twenty-first century; and I would like to convince them that, when members of the Manichean left attacked the International Criminal Court as a “kangaroo court” for putting Slobodan Milošević in the dock, the defenders of Milošević worked to undermine an important, emergent form of internationalism. I would like to convince them that the United Nations was right, in 2005, to approve the idea that state sovereignty entails a “responsibility to protect” vulnerable people within state borders and that sovereigns who violate that responsibility by massacring their peoples forfeit their sovereignty; and I would like to convince them that members of the Manichean left who invoked Serbian sovereignty in the Balkans, and who opposed even U.N. weapons inspections and no-fly zones as violations of Iraqi sovereignty, worked to undermine another important, emergent form of internationalism. The nativist right wing tries to undermine such things all the time; it is horrified at the prospect that great powers might be constrained by international law, just as Margaret Thatcher was horrified at the 1998 arrest of Augusto Pinochet in the United Kingdom. But that’s the nativist right’s job—to use “sovereignty” as a rationale for anything and everything from preemptive war to indefinite detention and torture camps; the left’s job should be to find ways of persuading people—even people who believe in the rightness of their nation—that there are better ways of governing the world. And that, most of all, is what I would like to convince you.