

Interview:

## Marxism, the Holocaust and September 11: An Interview with Norman Geras

*Your first book was a study of the thought of Rosa Luxemburg. Do you believe that there is anything useful in Luxemburg's legacy today?*

A preliminary general point here is that Rosa Luxemburg's thought falls squarely within the tradition of classical Marxism and is therefore marked by both the strengths and the weaknesses of this tradition. But, that said, yes I do believe so. Luxemburg's writings embody a clear, lifelong commitment to the struggle against social relations of exploitation and injustice, and to the specific character of this struggle as having to involve the broadest possible participatory and democratic movement. There were limitations in the way she conceived the democratic movement. Her emphasis on its necessarily pluralist content and norms ran up against the linguistic habit she shared with others of her time of talking of *the* party of the working class, as well as against a tendency amongst Marxists to regard Marxism itself as *the* theory of socialism. In addition, the ethical universalism that was plainly at the core of Luxemburg's outlook was unduly cramped by a version of the proletarian class interests thesis which

– again, altogether typically of the Marxism of that era – she treated as an adequate substitute for the moral sources of socialism. I have tried to set out these limitations in essays written subsequent to *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*. All the same, her insistence on the struggle for socialism as not only participatory but also pluralist, her insistence that democracy had to be an open process, a process of self-education, of learning by doing, constituted as robust an expression of the principle of proletarian self-emancipation as is to be found in any major thinker of classical Marxism. Her criticisms of Bolshevik policy following the Russian Revolution are well known for that reason.

Luxemburg's political ideas also reflected an internalization of the formula 'socialism or barbarism' that made of this more than just a polemical slogan. It imparted to her vision of the world an aspect of looming menace commonly absent at that time from the perspectives on progress in the wider socialist movement and beyond it. Part of her understanding of the alternative possibility in question here – barbarism – was not, ever, convincing: I mean her idea of an irreparable breakdown of capitalism based on purely internal economic mechanisms to do with the difficulties of realizing surplus-value. Her perception nonetheless accentuated the shadow of human suffering and periodic catastrophe that has accompanied capitalist progress from the start, and loosely suggested the threat of some all but final global calamity. Neither of these ideas has lost its relevance, unfortunately.

Overall, Luxemburg combined an unwavering commitment to the goal of anti-capitalist social transformation, a transparent sense of humanity and a conception of democracy informed by vital liberal assumptions. This is a combination still to be commended, I believe, today.

*Much of your work has been concerned with the Marxist tradition. I'm thinking especially of important essays you wrote on commodity fetishism, on human nature and on Marx and justice. Do you still think of yourself as a Marxist? What, in your view, is the enduring value and importance of the Marxist canon?*

I am still a Marxist. There are different ways of explaining why. Karl Marx was, and he remains, the greatest single thinker of modern times. His writings (of all sorts: from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse to Capital*; from the *Communist Manifesto* to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) constitute a life's

work of towering genius. They weld the aspiration for equality and social justice to a powerful analysis and critique of the capitalist order, highlighting at once – through the notions of alienation and commodity fetishism – its opaque and brutal inner logic, the exploitative relations integral to it and the close lines of influence between economic and political power that constrain and impel every state. This is apart from many further incidental riches. And Marx, of course, inaugurates a tradition containing the works of other astute thinkers: original works of political analysis and social theory, of history, biography, aesthetics and more, from Luxemburg's *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions* to Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, from Trotsky's *Results and Prospects* or his *History of the Russian Revolution* to Deutscher's biographical trilogy on Trotsky, from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* to Althusser's *For Marx*, Timpanaro's *On Materialism* and Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*.

But let me focus on the 'still' in your question – not in the sense of the intention behind the question, but in the sense of the ways in which it can, willy-nilly, be read. It is most unlikely, I would say, that the same form of question would be put, today, to someone who had for many years been a liberal. One of the contexts of the 'still' is that there are far fewer Marxists about than there used to be. On this, all I will say is that I think it is regrettable. However, a second, and more substantive, context suggests an understanding of the question something like this: Still a Marxist given all that has turned out to be, or simply was, wrong with Marxism? Yes, still, given and despite that. It is a choice – as equally can be made by any liberal, communitarian, conservative, Catholic or what have you: to work within a flawed tradition, in the hope of strengthening and adding to it.

In some of my work I have tried to address myself to problems which I perceived within Marxist thought. The essays on Marx and justice were an attempt to remedy a serious deficiency bequeathed to the tradition by Marx himself, that of denying (because failing to recognize) its own ethical impulses and principles. Along with others of similar mind, I wanted to bring this normative content fully into the open. Later I wrote an essay on revolutionary ethics which may be seen as an extension of the same concern. In this case, it was not merely a matter of bringing into the open a content already to some degree there, if confusedly, but of a real

gap in Marxist thinking; a gap to be repaired, so I argued, by drawing on the tradition of just war thinking. My work on Marx and human nature is a different story again. Here the weakness within the Marxist tradition was not original to it since, as I tried to show, Marx's thought rests solidly on a conception of human nature, rather than denying that there is one. But like so much other social, political and cultural theory right up to the present day, Marxist argument on this point had succumbed to historicist exaggeration and self-contradiction. Most recently, I have been critical of the effort to account for the Judeocide in Nazi Europe in the narrow terms of its being a product of capitalism and imperialism, however much Marxist categories may have – as I think they do – an important place in explaining Hitler's rise to power. And then, quite apart from any of my work, I could contribute a certain amount more towards increasing the force of that 'still', by saying that I was never satisfied with the Marxian argument for the falling rate of profit; and that during the 1970s I was persuaded by the work of Ian Steedman and others that Marx's theory of value was defective beyond repair; and that if I was ever tempted by the idea of a specifically dialectical logic – which I am obliged to confess that I was in the late 1960s – I got over the temptation pretty quickly.

Yet I remain a Marxist, as one may remain attached to anything if one sees enduring value in it, and its faults and weaknesses as remediable. You sometimes come across an assumption that this sort of simultaneous taking and leaving of various components of Marxist thought is not available to Marxists: as though either Marxism is a seamless whole or it is nothing. That is the very assumption, however, for which Marxists used to be criticized, as propounding a dogma. No one need accept it. I think of myself as being a liberal-minded kind of Marxist, in more than one sense of this qualifier.

Here, in any case, are the reasons that are decisive to my still thinking of myself as one. First, I believe historical materialism is true. The claim invites misunderstanding, but I put it thus, categorically, to counter the enormous, indeed all but smothering, weight of contemporary intellectual and cultural fashion, according to which historical materialism is – just obviously – outmoded and wrong. I will moderate the claim, though, by saying that I think the materialist conception of history is more true than not. For all of the one-sidedness in its original formulation, and the qualifications that are needed to it, and the ways in which Marxists have

historically neglected, understated or misconstrued other important bases of social identity or factors of historical causation, it is nevertheless true that one will understand an amount ranging between very little and next to nothing about the social and political world if one does not give central attention to the distribution of economic wealth and power and the class relations which flow from it. Second, there is Marxism's enduring commitment to the goal of an egalitarian, non-exploitative society, a commitment I see as being stronger and less qualified than it has been within any competing intellectual and political tradition. Third – and an index of that strength of commitment – I value Marxism's focus upon what is sometimes called the problem of agency: the problem of finding a route, the active social forces, between existing historical tendencies and the achievement of a substantially egalitarian society.

If one has been a Marxist for some 40 years, this is how the alternatives to continuing to be one can look. Either one gives up on utopian hope, or one cleaves to some other version of it. As to the first alternative, although I am not and have never been much of an optimist politically, I think there is a moral responsibility not to give up hope, so far at least as this remains personally possible. There may be features of an individual's life that make hope difficult or eventually crush it. But I should like to think that if I ever did give up on social hope I would fall silent rather than seeking to undermine the same hope in others. With regard to other versions of progressive hope, the most attractive one for me would have to be egalitarian liberalism. However, notwithstanding the common ground I recognize with this strand of the liberal tradition, the egalitarianism there seems to me to be always diluted or compromised by some large degree of indulgence towards the structures and relations of capitalism. Also available are various 'post-ist' versions of radical hope: post-Marxist, post-structuralist, post-modern. But these strike me as options – and spaces – of, at best, well-meaning incoherence and, at worst, intellectual obscurity tending towards out-and-out obscurantism.

*Do you see any relation between your work and analytical Marxism?*

I have occasionally found myself identified with analytical Marxism, and I do recognize a loose relationship to it, but it is no more than that. I have benefited from reading the work of some of the leading figures of analytical Marxism, in particular Jerry Cohen's, and I share a general

attachment to the 'analytical' standards that members of this intellectual current have aspired to: standards of clarity, precision, consistency and so forth. I share with them, too, an interest in the appropriate normative foundations of a left-wing critique of capitalist societies, a belief in universalist values and an openness to the intellectual resources of liberal political thought. On the other hand, I do not myself have the same interest in, much less attachment to, rational choice or methodological individualist models of social explanation as some of the analytical Marxists have had, and the questions which have most preoccupied me over the last decade are different from the principal questions associated with analytical Marxism.

*In the early 1990s you worked extensively on responding to Richard Rorty's pragmatism. Why did you direct your critical fire at Rorty and anti-realist themes?*

There is no single answer. At the time, I felt an inclination to respond to (broadly) post-modernist positions in social and political thought, in view of their wide dissemination and influence. Reading Rorty was a move in this direction and, to my surprise, I found his writings more engaging, and less rebarbative, than I had expected to; though I might add that going on actually to respond to them relieved me of the desire to do anything further in the same line.

A primary interest was attempting to spell out the baleful consequences, as I see them, of epistemological or ontological anti-realism, consequences I thought to sum up in the formula 'If there is no truth, there is no injustice.' If, that is, truth is relativized to particular discourses, language games or social practices, there can only ever be competing *stories* as to what happened to the victims of some putative injustice, there being nothing that really happened to them, and then morally anything goes. I wanted to show too that if, as Rorty claims, there is no 'way the world is apart from our descriptions of it in language', then the possibility of language itself is rendered unintelligible. I had, however, two additional motivations. I found in Rorty's work an extraordinary *mélange* of assertions about human nature, deployed, predictably, in denial of the very idea, and not in comfortable logical relationship with one another. In fact, all of these assertions are contradicted by Rorty himself, sometimes in close proximity to the places in his writings where he puts them forward. It seemed to me still important to meet the

arguments, weak as they are, of people who continue to deny any common human nature. In the social sciences and humanities these people remain many and their denial of a human nature needlessly obfuscates things, including some of their own most cherished viewpoints. Also, other work I had already embarked on focused my attention on Rorty's claim that the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe were more likely to have been moved to what they did by parochial, communitarian-type identifications – like caring about a resident of the same city, or work-mate or 'fellow bocce player' – than by a universalist concern for the fate, simply, of human beings in danger. This claim (wonderfully lampooned by Terry Eagleton in the *Socialist Register*) interested me. I wanted to investigate what truth there might be in it. The balance of evidence, so far as I was able to explore this, is very much against Rorty, a source of modest encouragement against the bleakest of backgrounds.

*More recently, your work has centred on the political and moral problems raised by the Holocaust. What led you to this as a research project? What are the implications of those events for modern political thought?*

What led me to it was an idea that came to me, as one says, like a bolt from the blue. That will sound like an over-dramatization but it is true. I describe it in the opening pages of *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*. I was on my way to watch cricket and reading a book about the death camp Sobibor, when this unusual conjunction of activities crystallized in my mind to produce the phrase and core idea which I then felt driven to pursue.

I do not presume to know all the implications for modern political thought of a catastrophe of the order of the Holocaust. I will just mention three that I have drawn. The first is the idea of the contract of mutual indifference itself: that, to the extent that calamities of this genocidal scope, as well as other great and continuing brutalities – the widespread practice of torture, the enslavement of large numbers of young children in labour or prostitution, deep, life-reducing poverty – are countenanced, tolerated, lived with, by millions of people who know about them and do not do anything (much) to stop them, they testify to the reality of such a contract, as governing most of the inter-relationships between the earth's inhabitants. There is much else that needs to be said in explanation,

defence and qualification of this hypothesis, but I had better not repeat myself here. Second, I think the absence of extended interest in the Shoah within mainstream political thought has been symptomatic of a more general reluctance to confront the experience of great horror. Contemporary political philosophy needs to address itself more than it has to the cruel dimensions of human existence. And I mean reconstitutive political philosophy: that devoted, in other words, to envisioning a markedly better order of existence. It is unlikely that the latter is achievable without systematic attention to the periodic disasters of human interaction, without attention specifically to those features of the prevailing moral culture I sought to highlight through the idea of the contract of mutual indifference, without attention to the different kind of moral culture needed to sustain any better social order, its appropriate structures and practices of mutual obligation and care, and its appropriate international juridical framework. The road up, if there is one, has to be sought by looking at the road down. Third, I think that our utopian horizons ought to be, for the foreseeable future, minimalist. We should simply project a type of society from which the worst of the familiar horrors of human history, the great social evils, have been eliminated as far as they can be; a society, to put the same thing more positively, whose members enjoy the basic material necessities and political and civil rights requisite to a tolerably contented existence. Once again, I will not repeat myself by elaborating on this, other than to say that it is more ambitious than it will sound to some on the left, since I do not believe these minimal objectives are compatible with a world of vast interpersonal inequalities of wealth, advantage and opportunity. Such inequalities undermine the much-emphasized liberal value of equality of respect, never mind any stronger ideal of multivicious care.

*In The Contract of Mutual Indifference you attend to the phenomenon of the person who just stands by while great atrocities are perpetrated. Is there a positive duty of aid? And, if so, should it become a legal duty?*

There is a positive duty of aid. Or, at least, I hope there is, otherwise there would be no counteracting moral logic to that of the contract of mutual indifference. In any event, there are sentiments commonly felt by people when they do not come to the assistance of others in trouble, felt sometimes even when to offer assistance would be extremely risky; sentiments of shame or guilt, and which may be seen as the emotional

correlate of an obligation of aid. Primo Levi and Karl Jaspers both wrote about these sentiments, though in somewhat different terms, and they are expressed more widely in the experiential literature of the Shoah.

I think some obligations of aid should be legal duties, but the issue needs a more fine-grained discussion than I can give it here. I offer merely a few considerations. The law has to move in reasonably close relation with the prevailing moral culture, or else there is a danger of it being a dead letter. Still, law can move ahead of, rather than move to fall into line with, the widely shared norms of a moral culture, and this is an area where it could begin to do that. A linked point is that legal duties of aid could accomplish only a small part of what is required. Needed in addition are pervasive social norms of other-regarding care, collective projects initiated at large-scale organisational level, and government policies that hold people to mutually supportive effort via taxation or other measures. Finally, in *The Contract of Mutual Indifference* I discuss, though only in the broadest terms, how extensive our duties of aid might be, and conclude that they are much more extensive than most of us now recognize or act upon, but that there are nevertheless limits to them, ruling out any coercive requirement for immense risk-taking or self-sacrifice. Legally binding duties of aid would have to be defined under that constraint. At the moment I am not in a position to go beyond these generalities.

*Is there something special about the Holocaust that, in your view, marks it out as uniquely significant? Or does it stand alongside other acts of genocide such as the Turkish massacre of the Armenians or the recent slaughter in Rwanda?*

The first thing to say is that the disjunctive implication in this pair of questions is one I would want to discourage. The Holocaust can stand alongside the Armenian, Rwandan and other genocides, even if it also stands apart in some significant way. I would go further. The universal significance of the Holocaust as an act of human barbarity and an experience of colossal suffering – and in these respects *just like* a very large number of other historical experiences – is of greater moment than is any special significance the event might possess. As terrible as was their fate, the destruction of the Jews of Europe belongs to a wider pattern of human violence and resulting pain and torment, and one should oppose

all attempts to single it out as having been somehow uniquely terrible for its victims. It was another ghastly chapter in the long book of mass human suffering – and that is terrible enough. Accordingly, I did not see it as in any way inappropriate to formulate a universalizing theoretical argument on the basis (mainly) of the Jewish tragedy.

On the other hand, I think that from the side of the perpetrators – that is, if one considers the Nazi genocide not as an experience of suffering but as a *crime* – there may well be something significantly singular about it. I reject the notion, of increasing currency these days though it would not have been acceptably utterable in any left or liberal milieu for several decades after the Second World War, that the claim that the Holocaust was unique is merely some sort of epiphenomenon of Zionism. The Holocaust-uniqueness thesis can be, and sometimes is, misused in apologetics for unjust and oppressive policies of the Israeli state, but it is not reducible to this; no more than is the denial that the Holocaust was unique necessarily a form of German historical apologia, though it can be that, and was during the German historians' debate of the 1980s, in the writings of Ernst Nolte and others. There have been both non-Jewish and Jewish proponents of the uniqueness thesis whose internationalist, or ethically universalist, credentials were beyond doubt; as there have been opponents of the same thesis without any interest in apologetics on behalf of the Third Reich. There is a legitimate and difficult question here and it should be tackled on assumptions of good faith rather than malign motivation. To summarize a complex argument in a few sentences – for this is the topic of a paper I completed recently – my own view is that the claimed uniqueness of the Holocaust, if it can be sustained, is not persuasively attributable to any one distinguishing feature of the disaster. It is the product of a combination of features. I draw on the Wittgensteinian argument about family-resemblance concepts. The features in question – comprehensiveness of genocidal intent; 'modernity'; the effort at a kind of moral, as well as physical, annihilation of the Jews; and the fact that the undertaking had no ulterior instrumental purpose but was, in a sense, for its own sake – combined to produce an ongoing, tendentially permanent, social sub-system specifically for the mass production of death outside warfare. This was an ominous precedent for humankind.

*What can such events tell us about human nature? Marxism seems to have inherited something of the Rousseauian contention that human*

*beings are good by nature but made evil in society. Do these events force us to consider the possibility of a radical evil within human psychology?*

I prefer not to put it like that. I think we do have to reject any idea of human nature as just intrinsically benign, but I would not express it in ways that conjure up some sort of metaphysical force, or that induce resignation about the prospects of containing the more negative impulses within human beings, of curbing the worst of their manifestations. With its theological overtones, 'radical evil' prompts this worry. Yet there are certainly negative human traits, destructive, malicious and cruel impulses. There are also universal features of the make-up of human beings that have both socially valuable and socially noxious forms. One might think here of self-interest, as both a source of individual protection against exorbitant demands by others and a source of those very demands; of aggression, as a necessary mechanism of self-defence and as a tool of oppressive violence; of simple identity, as a form of healthy self-expression and as a vehicle of hatred and exclusion. Dostoyevsky refers, in *Crime and Punishment*, to the sense of satisfaction that can be observed even amongst people who are close to one another in the event of a misfortune affecting one of them. Nobody, he says, is immune to it. Whether or not he was right that nobody is, only an innocent could be unfamiliar with the phenomenon. At the boundaries, and in the dark recesses, of civilized community, it expresses itself in the most extreme form of exclusion and inclusion there is: by murdering the other or inflicting unbearable agony on her, an assertion by those who do it of the contrasting conditions for themselves – of their own well-being, their being still alive. Too much experience vouches for this kind of thing for any bright tale of inner human goodness to be credible. Even so, it bears emphasizing precisely in this context that most human beings go through their entire lives without murdering, maiming or torturing others, to say nothing of the good they do. The question of questions remains, what are the circumstances in which the negative impulses thrive, and what the circumstances which could control them and let the more beneficent impulses express themselves and expand? It is still to be determined how far the balance could be changed for the better. But the chances of a realistic utopia will depend not only on achieving the social and economic

preconditions for a general human flourishing, but also on the maintenance and improvement of the rule of law.

*You have attended particularly to representations of the Holocaust in literature and other media. Why have you done that and what special benefits do you derive from the focus?*

There is no special benefit I am aware of beyond whatever ordinary illumination there might be in the pieces I have written about this. In my research on the Holocaust the issue of appropriate and inappropriate modes of representation, pervasive in the literature, came to interest me. It is obliquely related to the Holocaust-uniqueness claim, since there is a version of the claim – one which I reject – linked to an idea of the incomprehensibility and unrepresentability of the catastrophe. More generally, I have read much survivor testimony and some of the novels and poetry that come out of this experience. In close succession Roberto Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful* and Benjamin Wilkomirski's fake memoir *Fragments* became topics of public discussion. I had a view about each which I wanted to express, that's all: in brief, that Benigni's film is an unbalanced and tasteless fantasy; and that Wilkomirski's book, whether dishonest, deluded or both, is to be criticized for having misled people on points of biographical and historical truth, but it nevertheless retains a value as fiction in the standard, non-mendacious, sense of this word.

*You are known to admire Michael Walzer's work on just and unjust wars. The left has been sharply divided on a number of recent conflicts, including the wars in former Yugoslavia and in Afghanistan. How has Walzer's work illuminated the issues in those conflicts for you? What do you think of as the deep sources of recent divisions on the left over these conflicts and is it possible (or even desirable) to overcome them?*

I read Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* in thinking again about questions of revolutionary ethics. Its main influence was in helping me to see the relevance of just war doctrine to these questions. Warfare is governed by its own specific norms – or at least it should be – by rules about just cause and right and wrong conduct in fighting. I thought these could be integrated into a reconstructed Marxian ethics of revolution, for by way of a normative code the tradition hitherto had nothing either as concrete and detailed or as compelling as was embodied in just war thinking, merely

generalities about means, ends and class interests, capable of answering no specific question as to what is permissible in revolutionary struggle.

Issues of war and peace are always difficult, and they are of great moral consequence. Divisions of opinion over them are not going to go away, nor in general is it desirable they should. On the other hand, if you believe, as I do, that in the particularity of recent such divisions, viewpoints have been widely supported which do the left no credit, then you are bound to hope that these may in due course erode. Existing disagreements might then be replaced by other, better ones. The signs are not propitious, however, so vehemently professed are the tropes I have in mind. I shall focus on the events of September 11 2001 and their sequel, the war in Afghanistan.

It is not hard to identify the main source of the reaction of much of the left. It is a thesis about America's role in the world: the thesis that, as the hegemon of global capitalism, the US government has pursued over many decades a foreign policy of assisting anti-democratic forces and opposing progressive change, and has often done so by lethal means, including terror, for which purpose it has supported proxies of one kind and another, like the Chilean military or the Contras in Nicaragua. If one discounts a tendency amongst those propagating it to lay the entirety of the world's ills at America's door, this thesis is substantially true. But can something which is itself a truth be the source of a wrong-headed reaction to the events in question? Yes, it can. It can if it is turned into the whole or the only truth, if it so dominates people's vision that nothing *else* relevant to the issues can be allowed its due place. That is what happened after September 11. Every other consideration was blocked out or marginalized by the thesis concerning American imperialist power. Half the world stood aghast, but in no time at all there was a great chorus of left and liberal opinion – the *Guardian* in Britain a prime representative site of this – saying, 'Yes, terrible, appalling, but...'; the 'but' following so close upon the 'yes' as to squeeze out any adequate registration of either the significance or the horror of what had occurred. By contrast, the matter following the 'but' was so extensive and one-sided as to read like an apologia.

What followed the 'but' was that the assault on New York and Washington had to be seen as a response to US imperialist policy and its effects: to America's wars; its support for despots; the distribution of

global wealth and power; 'social conditions' for which America was to blame; injustices likewise; Palestine; Iraq. The notion was of a comeuppance. However, except if you indulge the world-view of those who were responsible for the assault, there is an unacceptable slippage here. For it was not American imperialism or the US government that they struck at. It was a large number of (mostly) American citizens. It is no more a response to imperialism and its effects to massacre thousands of civilians at random than it would be a response to bad conditions in some inner-city for a person aggrieved about them to rape the child of a wealthy family or kill a few passers-by. It is an elementary principle, not merely of just war, but of ordinary morality, that the murder of the innocent is a crime. But to explain (it was said by some of those insisting on the need for context in this matter) is not to excuse or justify. The defence is not available just so, without more ado. To explain is not *necessarily* to excuse or justify. Yet it can be precisely that. It depends on the quality and substance of the purported explanation. I refer again to the German historians' dispute. The hypothesis proffered by Nolte that the Holocaust might be understood as a pre-emptive anticipation by Hitler of a like threat to Germany from the forces of Bolshevism, a 'copy' from the model of Eastern barbarism rather than an initiative original to the Nazis, this hypothesis was rightly condemned by Nolte's critics as an apologia, unsupported by serious historical evidence.

The arguments concerning America's global record, for all the truth they have, do not explain the crimes of September 11. If they did, it would be a mystery why so many other movements against injustice and oppression have not felt impelled to fly aircraft full of civilians into skyscrapers full of civilians, or carried out atrocities of comparable scope. Not only the Chilean movement in response to that other September 11 – of 1973 – but also the PAIGC and FRELIMO fighting Portuguese colonialism in Africa, and the ANC fighting apartheid, and the guerrillas of Fretilin in East Timor, waged long struggles without recourse to the mass murder of civilians. If one is sincerely interested in explanation, explanation which does not condone, the most that can be said is that in conditions of oppression and injustice hatreds are more likely to take root and vicious ideologies to feed off them. This is why people of progressive outlook have always argued that removing injustices and alleviating suffering are the best route to pacifying conflict. It has never spared us the necessity, however, of calling the more poisonous and deadly political

tendencies which can emerge in circumstances of social crisis and despair by their proper names, and recognizing that they have to be fought. A clear parallel is fascism. It has been noted often enough that fascist movements prosper most in conditions of economic dislocation, insecurity, unemployment, loss of hope. But outside the disastrous example of Third-Period Comintern policy, socialists and democrats have not generally allowed this fact to obscure the character of fascism as a dangerous enemy of their own values and ideals.

The purported explanation of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida after September 11 was, as we used to say, reductionist. Focused overwhelmingly on establishing them as a product of social conditions for which America could be held responsible, it reduced the weight and specificity of their religious outlook, of their political project, of the social values they represent, reduced the discursive space for the causal effects of all this, to near vanishing point. The exercise became one of presenting al-Qaida as a reflex of wretched circumstances, rather than – as what it is – a particularly egregious historical option within these. So reduced, its members could even be regarded as a sort of expression, albeit a distorted expression, of protest and struggle against conditions of oppression – would-be liberators, if misguided ones. Only this can account for the dismaying phenomenon of certain well-known writers of the left deeming it timely to argue that we oppose terrorism because it is counter-productive, ineffective as a tactic. Surely we are beyond this by now: beyond a form of reasoning which might be taken to imply that mass murder is no good because, you know, it doesn't work. But anyway, wittingly or otherwise, the argument reveals a complicit line of communication, for thus to debate tactics is generally a conversation between participants in a common project. The effort of explaining-without-excusing supposedly offered a modal shift: from issues of responsibility to the discussion of causes. But this appearance was deceptive. What we got in fact was a horizontal shift in the same mode. The discussion of causes pitched us into another responsibility, that of America and its government, thereby diverting attention from those actually guilty of the assault. In sheer column inches the US state and US imperialism appeared to carry more blame for the massacre of American citizens than the perpetrators of the massacre themselves. It read like an apologia, and it was one.

The attacks of September 11 were a moral crime without qualification or mitigation. Both technically and substantively, they were a crime against humanity. Their immediate and promiscuous contextualization by left and liberal voices had the effect of shrinking their significance in two ways. First, the attacks were made to seem like nothing special. The temptation so to represent them was perhaps a reaction to the opposing view, that the whole world had been irreversibly changed by them. However, between treating that day as one of epochal transformation and its being merely of minor historical interest, there was another possibility – assessing it at its appropriate weight. As is well known, the final figure for the dead turned out to be much smaller than was at first feared. But that it could have been much larger was obvious. If the planes had hit the World Trade Centre towers half an hour later, and hit them somewhat lower than they did, so trapping more people on the floors above; and if the buildings had fallen sooner after being struck or fallen differently, the dead might have been counted in the tens of thousands. Let us hypothesize just twenty thousand. While the random targeting of civilians by terrorist organizations is nothing new, on this scale it certainly is. That was the significance – unexaggerated, proportionate – of the event, evident at a moment's reflection as the calamity unfolded. An intention was announced, announced in human lives, and there is henceforth no guessable upper limit for terrorism of this stripe. If tens of thousands can be countenanced, why not seventy, eighty, a hundred thousand? This from an organization sitting comfortably, at the time, in a country in which it could freely plan more of the same, and in a symbiotic relationship with the ruling regime there. It is worrying how many on the left failed to register in such blatant moral criminality, fuelled by religious certainty, a menace far beyond the cities of America, and – emergent out of whatever conditions – one antithetical to every ideal of its own. The US had a clear and urgent case, all the same, in both international law and the ethics of warfare, to move defensively and preventatively against the threat. Any democratic government, even the government of an imperialist democracy, has a right and obligation to protect its citizens against massacre – unless, that is, imperialism is taken as the only relevant consideration.

Second, the plain horror of what happened, squashed in between the 'yes' and the 'but' and then lined up in a long list of other horrors, was diminished. This is, as often as not, the effect intended by contextualizing



the unpardonable. It was as though one were to observe first thing, or even second thing, on hearing about the brutal murder of an acquaintance, that such deaths are not altogether uncommon, indeed are merely part and parcel of the dark picture of the world. In the days after September 11 one could read – in the reactions of eyewitnesses, journalists, contributors to letters columns, novelists, others – expressions of horrified incredulity, sorrow, grief and anger apposite to the scale of the carnage. Not, however, from the yes-butters. ‘Terrible’ or ‘appalling’ some of them could manage, yet for everything else they were willing to say, there was no sign of their being in fact appalled. I anticipate the predictable response. The background was immediately one of such generalized outrage that it was necessary to provide some balance, perspective. The plea is doubly unsatisfactory. For when you speak publicly on a matter of this seriousness, you are not only speaking to *them* – to those who do not know or do not care about the other victims. You are speaking also to those who do know: of the sufferings of the Vietnamese people, the National Stadium in Santiago, tortures, disappearances and killings across the breadth of Latin America, the murderous oppression in East Timor; and of Auschwitz, Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda – and who are listening to what you think about *this*. And you are speaking, as well, of who you are, what you stand for. Half the world aghast, and half the left or more could not bring themselves to respond at the level of the tragedy before them, saying only, in effect, this is bad but it is not special. It was, though – special in the way that all such things are as they happen, wantonly destroying lives, cutting off irreplaceable relationships, bereaving people. In face of it, and of a colossal piece of cultural vandalism (for want of a better word), palpably wounding one of the world’s great cities, a swathe of left and liberal opinion, including even some with a bit of a speciality in public indignation, could only give out this thin, calculating, morally depleted discourse of ‘contextualization’.

Complementing the horizontal shift by which attention was drawn away from al-Qaida’s responsibility for the crimes of September 11 to America’s responsibility for them, there was also a vertical shift, to denature the war that followed. Facing west, opponents of military action would look up and see the US government. But facing east, they looked down and saw the people of Afghanistan. They were on *their* side and against the US government. It is a transparent game – become all too

grimly familiar as a way of bracketing off certain unsavoury political ‘mediations’ – and it can be played in reverse: one can be on the side of the American people and against Bin Laden, al-Qaida and their Taliban hosts. It can be played this way with more justice, since a war against the American people is exactly what was declared on September 11, whereas the US military response was not directed against the people of Afghanistan but released them from a vile political and social tyranny, even if only as a by-product of America’s own objectives.

For the rest, the clear tendency of the proffered contextualization and these convenient shifts was to set up a rough moral equivalence between the US government and those it was – actually – at war with. We were supposed to think that George W. Bush and what he represented, on one side, were on a level with Bin Laden, al-Qaida, the Taliban and what they represented, on the other. But to propose even a rough equivalence here is to overlook or make light of the circumstance that George Bush – despised as may be, and all observations or jokes about Florida notwithstanding – is an elected politician in a democracy, with everything that this entails. He is answerable before a democratic electorate, and constrained by a legal and political culture and institutions which, whatever their limits, are as good, broadly speaking, in the way of democracy as humankind has succeeded in establishing so far. This culture and these institutions are the indispensable historical and ethical starting point for any left-wing or other genuinely progressive opposition to existing relations of oppression, exploitation, injustice. Al-Qaida and their hosts, on the other hand, represent a strain of theocratic fundamentalism of the most intolerant, illiberal and cruel kind, their standards and practices regressive relative to those even of a plutocratic democracy. That anyone of any experience and seniority on the left should still make light of this distinction is hard to believe, although unhappily one has no choice but to believe it. One or two such, speaking to an analogy between these fundamentalist forces – dubbed by some ‘Islamofascist’ – and Nazism, pedantically reminded their readers of European fascism’s specific sociological base and of obvious differences between the Third Reich and the Taliban regime. They thereby carefully missed the point of the analogy (as you always can, every analogy encompassing disanalogous aspects of the things it relates): the point that the Western democracies, *even* America, are not morally or politically equivalent,

even approximately, to these political forces which are, to put it succinctly, worse.

The lessons have evidently still not been learned of earlier, sometimes calamitous, misjudgements – which produced the Third Period of the Comintern, when social democracy, not Nazism, was said to be the main enemy; and which landed the world communist movement, along with much fellow-travelling liberal opinion, in denial and excuse towards the criminality of Stalinism despite a flood of evidence about this; and which have led, time and again, to a complaisant attitude towards terror and murder for alleged purposes of liberation, so putting in question the claim of those with that attitude to represent a movement for democratic, egalitarian and humane objectives. There is no reason intrinsic to the central values and principles of socialism for these misjudgements or their continuation. But there are clearly, as always and everywhere, simplifying tendencies of thought – in the present case, seeing in imperialism, not merely a crucial feature of the world, but the answer to every question. A thing held too close to the eye obstructs the vision.

*You have published two books on cricket. Do you see any intimate connection between your interests in sport and your political and philosophical concerns?*

I see no deep connection. If anything the opposite: as a spectator at sport, I prefer to forget about politics, even if this is not always possible. But I have never shared in the kind of belittling of sport that used to be common amongst would-be serious intellectuals, although it is less common now. Sport is one form of recreation, enjoyment and creative cultural expression among others. Like music. It gives many people pleasure, and it can be a vehicle of communal identity in benign if also ugly ways. Once or twice in earlier work I have thrown in an allusion to my love of cricket in particular, and more lately, in what I have written both about utopia and about cricket, I have allowed myself some passing observations on the relation between utopia and sport. That is the extent of it.

*You are a Jewish, Zimbabwean, Mancunian philosopher. How do those identities compete in shaping your attachments and concerns?*

I have lived in Manchester more than half my life and am very much at home here. But if it has influenced my political or philosophical concerns

I am not aware of its having done so. Applied to me, 'Zimbabwean' is an anachronism. I grew up in what was Southern Rhodesia, and by the time it became Zimbabwe I had been a naturalized UK citizen for more than a decade, with no remaining familial or other personal links to the country. By origin, therefore, what I am is a white Rhodesian. From my early teens, however, this affected my political identity only by reaction. Racial discrimination and oppression was the first form of social injustice I became aware of, owing principally, I would say, to the enlightened values of my family home and – once I began to think about politics – to the influence of my father, who has always been of the left. I have retained a loose emotional link with Africa and, partly as a result of this, have been immunized against the disposition one sometimes encounters in political argument to gauge the present state and prospects of humankind by reference to levels of well-being achieved only in the rich countries.

Being Jewish has always mattered to me, though I have never been religious. I think of myself in the category of the 'non-Jewish Jew' discussed by Isaac Deutscher. It is an identification reinforced by the consciousness, acquired at an early age, of the Jewish tragedy in Europe and, more generally, of anti-Semitism. These things have had something to do with my attachment to a Marxist universalism in ways I am aware of, that is, by a familiar, generalizing route. They may also have influenced me towards it in ways I was unaware of, since the association of Jews with the left has been a common one. In any event, my secular Jewish identity informs a more particularist concern too, a concern for the future of the Jews.

This concern is today focused, unsurprisingly, on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It is a tragedy of its own kind that from the people which had suffered so much in Nazi Europe, and during a long history of persecution before that, should have emerged what is today an oppressor state. To guard against misunderstanding: I am not talking of the separate tragedy of the Palestinians which is a consequence of this fact (though not exclusively of it, since some part of the Palestinians' tragedy has been due to the mistakes of those who have represented them, and of Arab governments acting on their behalf). I am referring specifically to the Jewish dimension: that out of this people, with all its own historical experience of injustice, should have come so grave an injustice towards another people. The tragedy will deepen the longer it is allowed to persist, and it may yet turn into a further great catastrophe for

the Jews, one way or another. The absolute, and principal, precondition for a just solution of the conflict is the abandonment of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the dismantling of Jewish settlements there. And the major responsibility for an initiative towards finding a solution lies with Israel. I have already said enough, in my answer to the previous question but one, to indicate why this legitimates neither the indiscriminate murder of Israeli civilians by suicide bombers nor a rhetoric of struggle aimed, not against the Israeli occupation and the policies by which it is enforced, but against 'Jews'. Nor does it excuse the shameful silences and evasions on this score of a segment of left and liberal opinion that, here again, is big on 'understanding' the morally indefensible. Israeli Jews and Palestinians alike have a right to national self-determination. The random killing of non-combatants is not directed to this just cause of the Palestinians. It is directed against the existence of Israel as such and, like the aforesaid rhetoric, against Jews.

Article:

## Marxism and Communitarianism<sup>1</sup>

Philip Ross

### Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of a convergence between Marxism and communitarianism as distinctive traditions in political theory. Is 'left-communitarianism' a coherent position?

### Marxism and morality

Raymond Plant notes that the communitarian approach in political philosophy has 'come to be associated with Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor' arising, 'to some extent', as a reaction to the liberal political philosophizing of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin (1991: 325). Yet, as Plant goes on to note, the 'idea of community has frequently been invoked over the past two hundred years as an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> The above is based on a conference paper, 'Marxism and Communitarianism: Anti-Individualistic Political Theory at the Millennium' presented at the *Political Studies Association* Annual Conference, 1999, at the University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK. I am grateful for comments made by conference participants on this paper.