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A liberal Marxism?

Frederick Harry Pitts

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Abstract

This article surveys *The Norman Geras Reader: What's There is There*, a recent collection of the work of Norman Geras edited by Eve Garrard and Ben Cohen, in order to explore the relevance of Geras's attempted reconciliation between liberalism and Marxism to some of the key issues confronting the contemporary left: foreign policy and the failures of humanitarian intervention or the lack thereof; internationalism and the necessity for solidarity across borders in an age of nationalist populism; left approaches to totalitarianism and antisemitism; the possibilities and limitations of alternatives to and critiques of liberal capitalism; and the reinvigoration of utopian imaginaries and the futures they promise. It suggests that important lessons for the left can be unpicked from the contested legacy of the 'decent leftism' Geras represents, where reapplied in the wake of new political and diplomatic challenges.

Keywords

Marxism – liberalism – the left – foreign policy – utopia

Introduction: Articles of conciliation

> [T]o be a member of the Marxist left today is to be part of something, a body of opinion, a political current, that is accursed […]. Today, in the light of what has happened in the first decade of the 21st century, it is not so easy, if you believe in human rights and the importance of the fundamental civic and political freedoms that we owe to historical liberalism, to find a Marxist left that is worth belonging to or being broadly identified with. [T]he Marxist left is a place of the most disgraceful apologetics and ambiguous or worse than ambiguous alignments […] from within which after 9/11 there came voices ready to make excuses for an act of mass murder that the whole left should have forthrightly condemned. And which, more generally, is always free with forms of 'understanding' of terrorism – by another name, murder of the innocent […]. And who have been so convinced that there was only one possible, one legitimate viewpoint on the left about the war in Iraq that they have reacted to others on the left who didn't share that viewpoint as if they could no longer *be* of the left. These are often the same people, incidentally – these unswervingly convinced-of-one-viewpoint ones – as opposed the US-led response to 9/11 that overthrew Taliban rule in Afghanistan, as opposed Nato's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and as opposed to eviction of Saddam Hussein's armies from Kuwait in 1991, and as opposed the eviction of Argentina from the Falklands in 1982 […]. And who, again some of them, treat the right of nations to self-determination as unproblematically to be recognized for many peoples but not, apparently, in the case of the Jews […]. To put it briefly and bluntly, I read. I read what goes on in the opinion pages of the national press, and so far from these tropes being confined to the far left […] they extend even beyond […] into broadly 'progressive' circles that would not willingly own to the name Marxist. This is, if you want, an ironic and distorted coming to fruition of the notion of Gramscian hegemony.[1]

This scathing indictment of the contemporary left was delivered by Norman Geras in January 2011. What would Geras, who passed away in 2013, have made of how the same hegemonic politics he skewers has now seized Her Majesty's Opposition? Geras had little tolerance for the injunction that 'there are no opponents on the left' (117). Whilst at the time of writing the left's proximity to power places an imperative upon its partisans to suspend judgement out of fear for the alternatives, the fallout from the General Election could well create demand on the left for intellectual alternatives to the political tradition with which Corbyn's leadership is associated. In the shadow of the so-called 'decent left', what resources for such a rethink does the recent edited collection of Geras's work, *The Norman Geras Reader: What's there is there*, reveal?

As Alan Johnson explains in his preface to the book, Geras was committed to the task - unfashionable then and more unfashionable now, as even someof liberalism's most dogged former supporters throw in their lot with populist nativism - of 'work[ing] out the shape of articles of conciliation (not surrender) between Marxism and liberalism' (11). For Geras, where the former lacks, the latter provides. Chiefly, for Geras, this lack lies in Marxism's incomplete delineation of a 'theory of political democracy that would be adequate to coping with so far-reaching a task' as the 'transformation of the world' (108). This lack, as Johnson points out, comes back to 'a series of disabling anti-democratic and illiberal tendencies' lurking within some Marxism, not least an 'insouciance about 'bourgeois' democratic rights' (10). Whilst a 'frankly, unashamedly *liberal* Marxism […] might look unfamiliar to many in the way of Marxist intellectual work', for Geras it is pressing upon Marxists to realise that

> Unless, today and tomorrow, Marxists show themselves willing to engage fully with the intellectual resources of liberalism […]; unless a Marxist political theory comes to terms with the truths of liberal political theory, acknowledging the normative force of human rights, the idea of judicial independence and separation of powers, exploring different forms of representation, insisting on free elections and an untrammelled freedom of speech and opinion, understanding the virtues of political pluralism; unless all of that, Marxism as a political movement might as well shut up shop. (108)

This reconciliation rests on the assumption that 'there are tenets of liberalism not indissolubly bound up with capitalism', namely its attempts to 'set limits to the accumulation and abuse of political power, […] protecting the physical and mental space of individuals from unwarranted invasion'. It has done so historically through 'evolving institutions and practices, political and juridical, to contribute to such ends.' As Geras permits, the protection of capitalist property has often been the imperative at play in these initiatives (56). And, as he points out, the formal equality and equivalent exchange on which liberal society is based are appearances of capitalist social relations that conceal a disequilibrium at their core – albeit through illusions that are objective and not simply 'false' (68-77). Moreover, and more pressingly,

> the principal economic formation historically associated with liberalism […] today as much as ever is one in which it has been the norm for the wealth and comfort of some to be obtained through the hardship and poverty of others, and to stand right alongside these. (171)

As such Marxism should in no way be uncritical of liberal political forms (108). But this does not mean we should discount them 'on the basis only of a present confidence in some future spontaneous harmony.' As the contemporary left preoccupies itself with such visions, the 'evils' that confront us are often precisely those 'against which liberal institutions have given some protection' (56). Paradigmatically, for Geras liberalism has concerned itself with 'negative duties only' based in non-interference. But another

liberalism is possible which allows for 'duties of active intervention and supportive material provision' (170).

Mutual care

For Geras it is socialism that holds the greatest capacity to embrace this spirit of mutual aid and care. A liberal socialism represents

> a rule-governed, normative system, constraining its members as well as benefitting them, curbing evils amongst them as well as encouraging and generating goods, requiring duties as well as upholding and protecting rights. Amongst these duties would be the duty of aid. A serious-minded view of socialism today […] is dependent for its consistency and realism on the centrality of the imperative of mutual care. (171-2)

This idea of a liberal socialism constructed around a duty of care is applied most notably by Geras to the question of humanitarian intervention - a topic the heated debate over which has not let up erupting on the left as the cycle of violence in the Middle East has spiralled out of control in past decades. Against the 'contract of mutual indifference' that characterises the impoverished liberalism of present society (58), Geras makes an appeal to the embedding within Marxism and socialism of an ethics many of its proponents have been loathe to embrace (NGR, 56). For Geras, the chief ethical commitment is a categorical imperative of 'multivious care' (58) insofar as

> If you do not come to the aid of others who are under grave assault, in acute danger or crying need, you cannot reasonably expect others to come to your aid in similar emergency; you cannot consider them so obligated to you. (57)

Contrary to the deep ambivalence and open hostility many contemporary socialists show towards any kind of concerted military or humanitarian intervention in conflict zones, for Geras 'a socialist ethic' worth its salt 'would have to incorporate – integrally – duties of aid and rescue' (59). The difficulty is that questions such as 'What does each of us owe to other people in the way of aid or rescue when their situation is […] life-threateningly dire?' or 'What is the *extent* of our duty to others under such circumstances […]?' have not traditionally fallen within the purview of Marxism, despite Geras's attempts in the late 1980s to persuade Marxists to take seriously issues of morality. But, as Geras asserts, 'they *should* be questions of interest to Marxists, since the notion of solidarity, including international solidarity, has been important to Marxists' (107).

It is strange, considering this preoccupation with solidarity, that many socialists seem consistently so unwilling to countenance of any kind of humanitarian action no matter what the human cost of inaction. For Geras this is because there is no ethics of guilt that can go along with the consequences of non-intervention. In delineating such an ethics of guilt capable of guiding the socialist construction of cross-national solidarities, Geras draws upon the work of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. Geras (168) quotes Jaspers' suggestion that

> There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty.
>
> […]
>
> Metaphysical guilt is the lack of absolute solidarity with the human being as such – an indelible claim beyond morally meaningful duty. This solidarity is violated by my presence at a wrong or

> a crime. It is not enough that I cautiously risk my life to prevent it; if it happens, and if I was there, and if I survive where the other is killed, I know from a voice within myself: I am guilty of still being alive.

What appears to prohibit such a feeling of responsibility towards one's fellow humans among some members of the left is the prioritisation of a principle that is not altogether incompatible with solidarity but for various reasons stands in its way in the calculations made by socialists over whether to call for the states in which they live and vote to step in and help or not: state sovereignty. As Geras's much-maligned Euston Manifesto asserted, sovereignty should be 'lodg[ed] properly within the 'common life' of all peoples' (117) such that

> If in some minimal sense a state protects the common life of its people (if it does not torture, murder and slaughter its own civilians, and meets the most basic needs of life), then its sovereignty is to be respected. But if the state itself violates this common life in appalling ways, its claim to sovereignty is forfeited and there is a duty upon the international community of intervention and rescue. (117)

To this extent, the international legal notions of Responsibility to Protect and Crimes Against Humanity imply 'a limit to state sovereignty' (184). There is also implied, as the UK's Chief Prosecutor at Nuremburg asserted, 'a limit upon the omnipotence of the state vis-à-vis the individual human being', with the needs of the latter better served by an intervening force. But the left also rallies its own legalistic arguments to the contrary. This usually rests on the United Nations Charter article protecting the 'territorial integrity or political independence' of states against outside interference, which is placed above other purposes of the UN, such as 'the defence of human rights' (185), or indeed the pre-UN 'customary international law doctrine of humanitarian intervention'. Geras (186) quotes Michael Walzer, who highlights how situations arise whereby 'the violation of human rights within a set of boundaries is so terrible that it makes talk of community or self-determination […] seem cynical and irrelevant'.

These knotty issues expose a contradiction which has become only too clear in recent years, as Russia has successively wielded the UN Security Council veto preventing action against the Assad regime in Syria. This is that the UN both exists to oversee and protect human rights across the globe whilst also on occasion being the biggest obstacle to the achievement of this aim (186). For Geras, only a 'gravely deficient' 'system of international law' would respect 'the sovereignty of a regime that had just carried out a genocide […] but was no longer doing so', or that was 'murdering and torturing large numbers of people but never on a scale one could describe as either genocidal or such as to precipitate a general humanitarian crisis', or that 'presided over people starving to death through its own misrule' (188). Often the recourse of the socialist left is to the prospect of justice after the act, rather than prevention before or during it – all will be well, this says, should Assad and Putin be tried in the Hague. But for Geras what is important is *prevention*. He presents his own threshold for humanitarian intervention based in the socialist ethic of solidarity expressed above, reached 'in two sets of circumstances':

> a) when a state is on the point of committing (or permitting), or is actually committing (or permitting), or has recently committed (or permitted) massacres and other atrocities against its own population of genocidal, or tendentially genocidal, scope; or
> b) when, even short of this, a state commits, supports or overlooks murders, tortures and other extreme brutalities or deprivations such as to result in a regular flow of thousands of victims. (188)

Of course, provision for this approach already exists, in 'the international law on genocide in force since 1948; and the more recent doctrine of a responsibility to protect' affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2005 (189). But even in the latter the 'collective nature of the undertaking' can sometimes undermine 'the commitment to timeliness and decisiveness', as we see where the veto is wielded to prevent UNSC authorisation. Indeed, in recent years voices on the left have appealed to the need for this authorisation seemingly in full knowledge that the action proposed would fall before the veto for political and not juridical reasons – in the Syrian case, owing to an ally of the same brutal regime the action would target. 'In these circumstances', Geras suggests, 'a right of humanitarian intervention must devolve to the constituent nations of the UN'. The West's noughties incursions in the Middle East have weakened the political legitimacy of such 'unilateral intervention' (190), even, as in Syria, where the template of Iraq makes for an ill fit against the facts on the ground. But, as Geras writes

> The member nations of the body that has taken on the commitment to a responsibility to protect are severally and separately authors of this commitment and they cannot reasonably be considered bound by the delinquency – for that is what it is – of which the collective body, the UN, is guilty when it fails to respond effectively to genocide or crimes against humanity on a large scale. (190)

For Geras this is akin to a state of natural law such as that identified by Locke, the execution of which is, as Geras quotes (191), 'put into every man's hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors' and to 'hinder its violation', because that law depends upon a categorical imperative upon all to defend it otherwise it is meaningless. This places 'moral right' above the legality on which left appeals to non-intervention often rests (196). Where this 'legality' cannot ensure the prevention of what transgresses the prevention of and protection of humans from crimes against their common humanity, it does not 'carry moral weight' and as such is trumped (196). It sometimes jars to see leftists hiding behind a system of 'bourgeois' law they would in other spheres dismiss and see as merely a cloak for capital to exploit and accumulate, sometimes in favour of authoritarian states where the rule of law is suspended (127). But even still '[i]t is law that needs to be criticized, opposed, and changed. It needs to be moved forward – which happens in this domain by precedent and custom as well as by transnational treaty and convention' (197).

Planetary consciousness

On what social or political basis can these notions of moral or natural right be reconciled with Marx? In his major 1987 intervention in the debate about Marx and morality, Geras identifies in Marx a denied affinity with natural right based upon a conception of intergenerational solidarity between members of shared humanity (90). For Geras, it is this shared humanity to which the rights above are addressed, 'a global human community in which an obligation to come to the assistance of others in danger or distress was widely felt as amongst the most powerful of imperatives, moving people to action […]; making of shame, and the foretaste of it, an effective, mobilizing norm of social life' (169-170). But the 'political' problem confronts us of how we can, in a world divided by nations and classes, found the 'social constituency, the means and the strategies, that might succeed in moving us towards the alternative moral universe in view' (180). This is a political imperative because, to encourage the 'planetary consciousness' (217) of a global human subject prepared to step in and act out of solidarity with others 'is scarcely thinkable without the robust democratic political

institutions and the egalitarian economic and social relations that would be apt to those more caring dispositions and promote them' (180).

The foundations for Geras's politics of global humanity were set in his engagement with the question of human nature in Marx, of which he argued there was a persuasive and transhistorical conceptualisation that had an 'explanatory and normative significance for a self-emancipatory politics', as Johnson puts it (11). The significance here pertains not so much to the question of human nature itself but the notion of human limits that, in the Marxist literature, gets chucked out with it (11). For Geras, this runs against the grain of '[t]he influential thinkers of Marxism', who 'were serious people, not fools. They did not believe […] in the possibility of a world free of all limitation and difficulty' (51). The ability of some quarters of the Marxist left to have overcome this radically pessimistic recognition of the intractability of contradiction owes, for Geras, to the rejection of a transhistorical human nature around which other political realities and communities can be constituted. And this is linked in turn to the reduction of all questions to a 'roots-cause sociology' (110) that emphasises class and capitalism above all other considerations:

> Marxism is as familiar as any other intellectual tradition with the realities of human violence and oppression and the more negative traits and potentialities in the makeup of human beings. At the same time […] there has always been a tendency within this tradition to minimize, or sometimes just deny, the independent force of such negative characteristics. They come to be treated, generically, as the product of class societies and, today, as the product of capitalism. The affinity between this overall intellectual tendency within Marxist and other left thinking, and the practical reductionism […] in which America is identifies as the source of all worldly wrongs […] should be transparent. (126)

This conflict between, on one hand, an understanding of human nature and human limits, and, on the other, a class or capital reductionism, plays out for Geras in the explanations offered by Marxists of the horrors of the Holocaust. He critiques Ernest Mandel in particular for the position that 'the destruction of the Jews of Europe is *rationally explicable* as the *product of imperialist capitalism*' (142), as well as the vulgarised version of the Frankfurt School position that explains 'the catastrophe as a product of modernity' (145). At the same time, Geras does not support 'any radical incomprehensibility thesis' (145). But the Marxist project of comprehending, as Geras (143) quotes Mandel as saying, 'all aspects of social activity as connected with and structurally coordinated to one another', does not quite capture how 'there is a residue within this historical experience beyond the regular forms of social, political or ideological explanation' (145). What reductionist accounts of the Shoah present is

> a picture of rule-governed, bureaucratic murder in which some of the other aspects […], symbolic, emotional and to do with the unfettered 'play' of destructive human capacity and imagination, are all but marginalized. There is something here that is not about modernity; something that is not about capitalism either. It is about humanity. (154)

To demonstrate what that something is, Geras returns to the work of a figure foundational to his own thought, as well as some of the same reductionist strands of Marxism he seeks to critique: Trotsky. The latter's account of a pogrom details, lengthily and sickeningly, a mob 'drunk on the smell of blood'. Trotsky 'had seen the spirit of limitless excess, the exaltation people can feel in exercising a merciless power over others and the 'total-ness' there can be in a humiliation'. And, in this, 'he had seen part of what there would subsequently be in Shoah, including the element of an irreducible choice. The preconditions and the surrounding context of this kind of choice

can and always must be explored and described. But it remains in the end what it is: undetermined, a choice' (151).

The failure of the Marxist search for a 'materialist' explanation of this and other expressions of fascist and racist loathing and violence – often in the process eliding the material force of ideas – lies in a lack of any conception of human nature around which an understanding of limits and imperfections can be harboured. Marxism has framed its 'projection of possible futures in terms that exclude the less benign, the more troublesome, features of the human make-up as it has revealed itself historically' in 'ordinary and extraordinary experience' spanning 'the most familiar situations of daily life to the torture chambers and the killing fields'. It is the sum of this history that suggests 'enduring human limitations such as could continue to blemish and unsettle even the best-placed social order' (53). And this is why the well-worn proposal of socialism, pure and simple, as a solution to all humanity's ills cannot escape its own 'shortcomings', according to Geras (157). Something more - or perhaps less - is needed.

Minimum utopia

In Geras's conceptualisation of 'minimum utopia', several strands of the above come together: the political project of building a social constituency for the notion of rights attached to a global humanity, working through and within the limits set upon us by human nature, and the escape from Marxist determinism to embrace instead 'articles of conciliation' with liberalism. Minimum utopia, in short, represents

> a condition in which people had enough to eat, adequate water, shelter, health care, and the fundamental rights of expression, belief and assembly; and in which they were free from arbitrary imprisonment, torture, 'disappearance', threat of genocide. (53)

The idea of 'minimum utopia' begins from, rather than seeks to liquidate, 'that most complex being' (32), the human subject, and 'comes to terms with the likely persistence of some of the less pleasant tendencies and potentialities that are lodged within the characteristic make-up of human beings' (11), a reckoning many forms of Marxism seem incapable of, opting for abstract utopias that 'invent in place of what they lack' (49). Rather minimum utopia works within the limits that define human nature. The attempt to escape a world of limits and contrasts is what makes 'pure utopias […] seem so flat and dull' (54). They 'lack the necessary contrasts that in any actual world make the goods of life what they are, to be valued and strived for against the basis'. Moreover, 'happiness is scarcely conceivable except by way of its juxtaposition'. Geras turns to Primo Levi to root this in an inescapable human condition that places limits on joy as well as grief: 'Perfect happiness and perfect unhappiness are equally unattainable […] the obstacles to them deriving from the human condition itself, 'which is opposed to everything infinite' owing to the 'certainty of death' (Geras 54). This runs against the grain of contemporary forms of left utopianism which root themselves in an imaginary of technologically-enabled abundance and infinitude capable of challenging human limits.

One of the main prospects heralded by the new left utopians is a workless land of automated plenty, for which the textual authority of Marx himself is cited as incontrovertible theoretical support. But as Geras points out, Marx never proposes, as some appear to think, the elimination, with labour, of a 'realm of necessity', but rather

implies the continued imperative of work 'that is not free creation or self-realization but 'determined by necessity and external expediency'' (96). This being our lot in this world, the best we can ask is the small mercy of 'a simple *sufficiency* of the means and conveniences of life' (51). This also has the effect of legitimating distributive struggles as themselves struggles over whose hands the conditions of producing the world lie (72).

Conclusion

Even amidst election exuberance, the left now reckons with a vast generational experience of defeat centring on a bad run Geras was not around to witness: the rise of a globe-spanning and electorally dynamic 'nationalist international', Russian intervention in Syria, the breakdown of international codes of conduct on the use of chemical weapons, the Brexit referendum and the election of Trump in the US. This context suggests that before we can even begin to plan for minimum utopias - let alone maximum ones - the imperative falls upon us to defend what is already in place:

> [F]lawed as they may be, the capitalist democracies are democracies, whereas none of the would-be anti-capitalist countries, anywhere, has managed to sustain comparably good or better democratic institutions over any length of time. [T]he democratic institutions we are familiar with have yet to be improved on in any of those places that some leftists are given to casting an indulgent eye upon even while they seek to distance themselves critically from the political institutions of their own countries, institutions from which they benefit and which are superior. Unwilling to profess a clear allegiance towards what is democratically better, a certain type of leftist is always ready to make allowances for what is democratically worse. (112-3)

Today this liberalism is on the backfoot everywhere, the whipping boy of left and right alike. The irony is that the contemporary left, for whom 'liberal' is a byword for complicity and complacency, carries over many of the worst aspects of liberalism – a dogged belief in progress at all costs, the assumption that a unified social and political constituency is possible in a society founded in riven by the class relation – whilst only intermittently having the confidence to defend and superintend its best – international institutional order, global human rights, the incomplete working through of contradictions via open debate and deliberation, the expansion of civil society as a protective barrier between individuals and overweening states. All too often lumped in with 'neoliberalism' and 'capitalism', with Marx called as a witness against it, Geras shows that liberalism is much more than a mere political and ethical cloak for exploitation and accumulation, and has vital lessons from which the left is slowly learning in an age of authoritarian populism – in the case of Corbynism, at home if not always abroad.

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Notes

[1] Norman Geras, *The Norman Geras Reader: What's there is there*. editors Ben Cohen and Eve Garrard. Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 109-111. Subsequent references indicated in-text by page numbers in brackets.