

BOOK REVIEW

Nick Cohen. *What's Left?: How Liberals Lost Their Way*.

London: Fourth Estate. 400 pages.

Published 5th Feb 2007.

This is the painful document of Cohen's estrangement from the political left, the left that he grew up in. It is thoughtful, often insightful, full of bleak ironic humour, detailed and deadly accurate.

I knew the activist left intimately, and later the academic left. I thus know Cohen is accurate both in his facts and his chronology. He makes valid and accurate criticisms. This is why many on the liberal-left will now do their best to erase his book from their blinkered worldview. He leaves gaps, perhaps too many, but that is probably because others have already written more fully in the missing areas.

What's Left? is a timely book and there is much to like in it. It is not without faults. The first of which is Cohen's reluctance to really savage those few remaining "heavy guns" of the left. He seems to 'pull his punches' in regards to the likes of Chomsky, Tariq Ali, and Ken Livingstone. But this is understandable; doing so would have made the book too long, and other books and academic articles have already started the job.

More annoyingly, Cohen also fails to fully lay out the details of the two academic books that underpin his text; Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason*. Cohen's book is particularly weak in detailing the influence that 'cultural relativism' — which was inspired by the ways that the academic 'armchair left' half-digested a tough continental theory and then spewed it up again to fit local conditions — had on the 'activist left' and its fellow-travellers. This transmutation is roughly outlined, but readers will need to delve into Wolin's excellent book to really see how obsessive anti-Americanism derives ultimately from the proto-fascist counter-Enlightenment, and French fascist grouplets of the 1920s which developed a sophisticated anti-Semitism cloaked in socially-acceptable attacks on 'big business'. If that sounds familiar, readers may like to pursue further reading, for background, such as the recent anthology *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, Heath and Potter's *The Rebel Sell*, and Russell Berman's *Radicalism as Reaction*.

Another failing is that the book fails to orient the reader by presenting a visual family-tree of the full tangled range of the left-liberals in the West. I know the structure of that tree, but it will be unknown and completely baffling to many others. Instead Cohen will give many readers the impression that the aging far-left is all that the liberal-left consists of, when its influence has spread far wider.

But, of course, Cohen *is* a journalist rather than a scholar able to add the five more volumes with strings of detailed footnotes. Future historians will easily write the needed and damning volumes on this compelling subject. And *what* a subject; the outright betrayal by both the armchair and activist left of their

key anti-fascist principles, to the extent that socialism now shuffles aimlessly around the stage of history with no real analysis, no examined program, fewer principles, and having attracted no young and weighty public intellectuals to carry on the fight. Worse; in its senile dotage, it defends and excuses new forms of fascism, authoritarianism and dictatorships. Although Cohen rightly points out that the seeds of such support have always been present.

Throughout, Cohen restates some of the fundamental Enlightenment principles that are now so alien to leftists. He calls for what socialist and anarchist leftists now so clearly lack, in their anti-American nihilism; a coherent and confident programme of solutions to the remaining issues of social justice. There are still ineffectual Brownite policy stabs at such, of course, but the once-mighty confidence and coherence of the left are gone — evaporated in the face of relatively successful free markets and the failure of socialist policies.

We had better hope that Thatcher's grandchildren — the new breed of young, sceptical and pragmatic small-c conservatives who are starting to espouse social justice concerns — really mean it. Since they will be almost the only ones left to guard our freedoms, as the old left simply retires or dies off, and the pseudo-leftists drift ever-deeper into support for a web of repression and compulsion.

Arising from the book's cogent analysis, Cohen also makes a telling psychological dissection of the left's underlying psycho-pathologies. There are numerous paragraphs which shine a welcome light into the shallow bottom of the leftist mindset — when it is confronted with the adoption of their human-rights agenda by progressive conservatives (p.82), their retreat into sterile academic obscurantism (p.96), their inability to dislike "the other" even when the other's bombs are exploding all around them (p.245); their striking lack of effective solidarity with the repressed, and their striking inability to refresh the cobwebbed techniques of activism that they have inherited. What he only lightly touches on is their simple-and-easy ability to state an outright lie and then to utterly believe the lie.

Cohen also usefully mentions, although fails to fully pin down, the ways that pseudo-leftist pieties have become simply a cloak under which the educated upper-middle classes can brutally advance their social position at the expense of the uneducated middle-class and the working class. He does at least acknowledge the primacy of social class, and this is a key strength of his book. This may be hard for Americans to understand, but social-class is something that deeply structures British society — *so* deeply that political books which ignore or sideline social class are crippled.

Doubtless Cohen will be subtly and not-so-subtly attacked for his timely insights, and especially by numerous varieties of 'progressive' anti-Semites. He will also be ignored. But then, he *is* right.

[w] www.d-log.info

950 words