

# THE RISE OF LIFESTYLE ACTIVISM

From New Left to Occupy

NIKOS SOTIRAKOPOULOS



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Nikos Sotirakopoulos  
Loughborough University  
United Kingdom

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Loughborough, Spring 2016

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# 1

## Introduction

### **Capitalism, Anti-Capitalism and the Battle of Ideas**

In the future, the historian of ideas will have a hard time in assessing the period in which we live. It has been only a couple of decades since the ‘end of history’ was declared: that is, the triumph of liberal democracy, signalled by the fall of its opponent, state socialism in the Eastern bloc in 1989–91. Supposedly, we are living in the times of TINA (There Is No Alternative) and the ‘neo-liberal’ consensus, though never defined, casts a heavy shadow. Yet, a reality test some years after the financial crisis of 2008 shows that these assumptions, while popular (especially in academia and in leftist circles), are neither self-evident nor necessarily correct.

Therein lies an intellectual mystery: to a significant extent, the left has managed to popularize a narrative on the supposed causes of the crisis, while at the same time it has a hard time bringing about any positive change in the sphere of politics. An interesting fact is that the steady victorious advance of the left in the realm of ideas is hardly ever recognized. Yet someone trying to think of the most popular explanation for the social and economic problems of our times, would find that—from the

President of the USA Barack Obama to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and from Pope Francis to several Nobel Prize laureates—the answer was almost unanimous: what brought us here was the free-market system and greedy bankers, running amok after deregulation and taking advantage of a retreat in state control. Few pause to think that this narrative, while appealing to large numbers of people across political divisions, is problematic. After all, the banking sector has been one of the most strictly regulated fields of the US (and the European) economy, supervised by more than 115 regulatory agencies (Yadav 2010, p. 323). Also, it is fairly doubtful that the de-regulation that actually took place in the last decades in the banking sector had anything to do with the 2008 crash (Calabria 2009; Gramm 2009). Strong evidence for the roots of the crisis that go against the narrative of the left, such as the politically motivated encouragement of subprime mortgages by consecutive US governments, practically forcing banks to provide loans with questionable security to poorer families, and with the mortgages secured by the quasi-governmental enterprises of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, are hardly mentioned in mainstream debates on what went wrong in the period leading to 2008. The success of the leftist narrative in explaining the 2008 meltdown is also evident in the attention that the 2011 Occupy movement has attracted from the media, despite its relatively small size. It is also telling that Occupy's message was addressed with sympathy, even among the establishment, including unlikely figures such as the 2012 Republican Candidate Mitt Romney (Geiger and Reston 2011), the US Federal Reserve's Chairman Ben Bernanke (Coscarelli 2011) and the UK Business Secretary Vince Cable (*the Guardian* 2011).

But the success of the leftist ideology in the public sphere goes beyond outlining a convincing narrative for the 2008 crisis. Issues such as environmentalism and the construction of income inequality as a social problem, which used to be predominantly on the agenda of the left, are now almost unanimously adopted by the political establishment. In July 2015, Pope Francis issued the 'Encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the Care of our Common Home', a document that could be read as a manifesto for sustainable development and global justice, effectively condemning some of the core elements of capitalism, such as individualism and consumerism (Holy Father Francis 2015). The US President Obama has named climate

change as the biggest challenge humanity is facing and income inequality the biggest domestic challenge for the US economy (Harwood 2015; Park 2015). The UK's Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, in his first months after assuming leadership of the Tories, and perhaps in an attempt to distance himself from the Thatcherite image of rigid materialism and individualism, declared that 'it's time we admitted that there's more to life than money and it's time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB—general wellbeing' (BBC 2006a). He also characterized consumer culture as problematic, for failing to 'meet the deep human need for commitment and belonging' (BBC 2006a). The Conservative Party even changed its logo to a tree, with Cameron launching the slogan 'vote blue, go green', and not hesitating to use a motto of the Global Justice Movement, calling people to 'think global, act local' (BBC 2006b). Granted, these are more elements of political posturing than policy, but the mere fact that for PR reasons he had to adopt this image is quite telling about what the ideological *zeitgeist* of our times demands.

Furedi is right to mention that, despite a wave of support for the ideology of free-market liberalism (or so-called 'neo-liberalism') in the 1980s, and despite the fact that the market economy seems to be the only viable game in town today, capitalism has lost the battle of ideas (Furedi 2013). There might be a growing movement of radicals for capitalism, as evidenced by the lively Ron Paul presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012, a surge in sales of Ayn Rand books and rapid growth of the Students for Liberty movement, but the fact remains that such voices are still considered marginal outsiders. But then, if capitalism is (falsely or correctly) blamed for the 2008 financial crisis and the slow and timid recovery in subsequent years, then why is the left not grasping the chance to fill the void, ride the tide and dominate politically? Why is it that, when it manages to gain power, as in the case of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece, it, ironically, confirms that indeed there is no alternative and has to capitulate to the continuation of so-called austerity programmes? And if the left has succeeded in seeing some of its ideas, or at least its rhetoric, accepted by the powers that be, and if it has throughout recent decades de-legitimized some of the fundamental principles of free-market capitalism (individualism, rigid economic growth, materialism) among considerable sections of the population, but then fails to provide a

better alternative, does it have any practical political significance, beyond being ‘a voice of conscience’ or ‘the Party of complaint’? These are the questions that were the initial inspiration for writing the current book.

## **The Left Then and Now**

In order to solve an intellectual mystery, its nature first needs to be properly understood. If one wishes to understand the conundrum of the apparent popularity of leftist ideas in the cultural sphere today with the concurrent inability of the political left to pose a viable alternative to capitalism (or, more properly, to the mixed economy that is dominant today), what needs to be clarified is: (a) what are the ideas that characterize the left today, (b) where do they come from, (c) why are they more mainstream *now* and (d) why can’t they materialize in a successful political, social and economic programme?

This book is about the changes in the philosophical orientation, the values and the ethics of the left in recent decades. Such changes have been apparent since the 1960s and that is why the term ‘New Left’ has been used: so as to distinguish the ideas, forms of action and cultural values of some new political and social movements from those of the so-called ‘old-left’, that is, the labour and socialist movements and the strong communist parties of the past that focused their struggle on class interests and were oriented mostly towards conquering political power and transforming society as a whole, based on their ideology. In this work the term ‘New Left’ refers to the relevant movements and ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, while the term ‘new left’ (lower case) will be used to refer to the broader set of movements which share common ideological roots with the New Left but have developed in different directions. Yet, the old left is in such decline (with exceptions that only prove the rule, such as the ‘orthodox’ Communist Party of Greece), that sometimes the terms ‘left’ and ‘new left’ might be used interchangeably.

I intend to focus in two topics that appeared with the New Left and that I consider crucial for shaping the character of the wider left in the upcoming decades: (a) a questioning of ‘materialist’ values, leading to a problematization of economic growth and (b) an uneasiness with ‘instru-

mental reason' as a tool for understanding (and changing) the world and the promotion, in its place, of an appeal to emotionalism. These themes are key if one wants to understand the intellectual journey of the left in the last few decades: from the adoption of environmentalism as one of its more central narratives to the fellow-travelling with the so-called post-modernist school and other related philosophical/epistemological movements, to the switch from the anti-authoritarian 'it is forbidden to forbid' of the 1960s to a 'cosying up' with the welfare state and the constant calls for more intervention and regulation (from speech codes to calls for higher taxes) in the past few decades. Additionally, a third topic in the background, coming to existence as a result of the two main topics, will be the construction of a weak human subjectivity by the New Left and its heirs, often undermining individual agency and seeing a vulnerable human subject as being under constant threat from environmental, physical and emotional forces.

The themes underlying the examination of these topics are the following: (a) these changes in the left in recent decades will be seen from a critical perspective and a hypothesis will be that they might have something to do with the left's inability to form a persuasive and successful political and economic model, (b) these changes are in a dialectical relationship with the *zeitgeist* and the popular philosophical trends of each era; they bear the marks of dominant contemporary ideas and at the same time they influence and shape these ideas.

If one had to fit on a single page an overview of the historical journey of the left, the starting point would have to be the ideas of the Enlightenment and of modernity, as expressed by figures such as Francis Bacon, John Locke and René Descartes. These were the beginning of the road that led to the rise to socialism and liberalism, two forces fighting for the overthrow of the old order of religious mysticism, political oppression and social and economic backwardness. But what does it mean to speak about modernity? What are the characteristics of an era, a set of values and a philosophical outlook that can bear the title 'modern'? Hicks gives a good account of the meaning of the modern: (a) an outlook having as a starting point the natural, as opposed to the pre-modern attachment to the supernatural, (b) reason and perception as the means through which the world can be known, as opposed to faith and mysticism, (c) moral

autonomy in making one's character, as opposed to ideas of pre-given order or original sin, (d) the individual as the unit of value, not to be subordinated to a higher tribal or feudal authority (Hicks 2004, pp. 7–8). It logically follows that if humans are capable of reason and of perceiving reality, and at the same time they are ends in themselves, rather than being born to serve the needs of a master or group, then they can be trusted with political and economic freedom, and this freedom will lead to a future that will be better and more prosperous.

Bauman's poetic narration of the first steps of the communist ideal (irrespective of whether communism ever actually had anything to do with this image) as a materialization of modernity in all its glory is telling and worth of a lengthy quotation:

Communism was made to the measure of modern hopes and promises. Socialism's younger, hotheaded and impatient brother, it wholeheartedly shared in the family trust in the wonderful promises and prospects of modernity, and was awe-struck by the breathtaking vistas of society doing away with historical and natural necessity and by the idea of the ultimate subordination of nature to human needs and desires. [...] Its war cry was: 'Kingdom of Reason—now!' Like socialism (and all other staunch believers in the modern values of technological progress, the transformation of nature and a society of plenty), communism was thoroughly modern in its conviction that a good society can only be a carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialized society. [...] Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable. (1992, pp. 166–7)

Thus, socialism (sometimes used interchangeably with communism by its early advocates) had one *raison d'être*: to provide even more than capitalism, minus the latter's perceived injustices. This spirit is captured by the radical suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, who in (1923) stated what socialism stands for:

Socialism means plenty for all. We do not preach a gospel of want and scarcity, but of abundance. Our desire is not to make poor those who today are rich, in order to put the poor in the place where the rich are now. Our

desire is not to pull down the present rulers to put other rulers in their place. We wish to abolish poverty and to provide abundance for all. We do not call for limitation of births, for penurious thrift, and self-denial. We call for a great production that will supply all, and more than all the people can consume.

Or take the example of Trotsky, who, in 1936, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, criticizes the USSR state-controlled economy for not achieving the abundance of the USA: ‘How many years are needed in order to make it possible for every Soviet citizen to use an automobile in any direction he chooses, refilling his gas tank without difficulty en route? In barbarian society the rider and the pedestrian constituted two classes. The automobile differentiates society no less than the saddle horse’ (2013, loc. 595).

Thus, socialism and communism (at least as envisioned by Karl Marx and his early proponents), was built on three foundations: reason and scientific method, human agency and materialism. Humans were perceived as being at the centre of history and as capable of changing its course; God, fate or nature cannot dictate where history will go; it is only man who is in the driving seat, though limited by specific historical conditions. For liberalism ‘man’ is the individual and for Marx ‘man’ could be a social class pursuing its interests, but the essence remains: we, as humanity, retain endless possibilities for a better world of plenty. This is why, for Marx, capitalism was the most revolutionary system up to that historical point: the productive forces it unleashed could promise material abundance and total domination over nature. As opposed to the romantic anti-capitalists of the nineteenth century, who were terrified by the processes of industrialization, urbanization and of the instrumental use of nature, Marx’s scientific socialism realized that these very procedures were essential for the realization of freedom as an escape from need and from scarcity. This Promethean view of man was captured in its purest form by the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, who, dazzled by the positive vision that the Russian Revolution provided (at least in the minds of its advocates), declared that ‘once the class struggle has been won, Soviet humankind will be free to engage its final enemy: nature’ (cited in Westermann and Garrett 2011, p. 87). Here, the meaning of nature goes



beyond the trees or the Russian winter; nature symbolizes limits and the victory over nature would mean victory over whatever is holding back human prosperity, the aim being a continuous progress towards overcoming finite human nature itself.

An interesting thought experiment would be to look at how ideas popular among leftist circles in recent decades would be perceived by Trotsky, Pankhurst, Gorky or their comrades; ideas such as sustainability, or ‘prosperity without growth’ (Jackson 2011), or ‘small is beautiful’ (Schumacher 1993), or the pathologization of consumerism as a mental health threat in the form of ‘influenza’ (James 2007), or the supposed threat to our planet’s carrying capacity because of too many people living longer. Or, how would Marx himself—who celebrated in his *Communist Manifesto* the globalization brought about by the market and how ‘to the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood’ (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1848)—react to the rise of the ‘anti-globalization movement’ and the popularity it enjoyed among leftist circles in the years around the turn of the twenty-first century. Granted, the effects of rapid economic growth on nature were, up to a point, unknown during the period in which the pioneers of scientific socialism lived and wrote. Yet it seems evident from their philosophy that their faith in human reason and scientific method to come up with solutions to pressing problems would have them adopting a more positive view, championing even better technologies and even more economic development to face challenges such as climate change, rather than viewing them as an existential threat, calling for a re-evaluation of the values of modernity.

## **Where This Book Comes from and Where It Goes**

The fact that the new left is different from the old left, that it has adopted causes such as environmentalism and has been influenced by schools of thought that question ‘modernity’s’ tradition of rationality, is no big news. Numerous scholars from various schools of thought have dealt with the changing nature of the left and of radical politics in general. Bookchin

(1995) spotted an ‘unbridgeable chasm’ between the ‘lifestyle anarchism’ of the 1970s and 1980s and the more focused and political movements of the 1960s. Lasch (1991) described the transition of the 1960s radicals to a defeatist and introspective ‘culture of narcissism’ and how this shift mirrored the dominant culture in USA at that time. Bauman (1992) described the transition to ‘post-modernity’ as a moving away from the ideals of faith in progress, reason and science. A similar line of thought has been shared by a number of scholars on the left, including, among others, Callinicos (1989) and Jameson (1990). Žižek (2002, 2009) and Furedi (1992, 2005) have also criticized the change in the nature and character of the left. Some useful insights could be drawn also from foes of the left. A more philosophical criticism of the new left from a pro-capitalist point of view came from Ayn Rand (1999), whereas some interesting insights were also offered by an occasional fellow-traveller of the New Left, the libertarian thinker Murray Rothbard (1961, 1965, 1970).

My research, though based on the criticisms of the various aforementioned scholars, will go further than their work: I am not merely reflecting on changes in the philosophy, values and ideas of the contemporary left; I also trace the genealogy of these changes. Where did they come from, when did they gain prominence and in what environments did they find fertile ground? I am also challenging part of the political theory and bibliography of social movements studies, which views the 1960s as a period when radical theory and action reached a peak, followed by a decline and a de-politicization in subsequent decades. As will become evident, factors that have been blamed for the decline of the political left in the ‘counter-revolution’ of the 1970s and 1980s, were already present in the ‘golden era’ of the 1960s. Most importantly, I claim that the moving away of the left from some of the core principles of ‘modernity’s’ tradition—such as rationality, faith in human agency as bearer of change and a trust in continuous economic growth bringing more and more affluence to more and more people—can help us understand some of the recent misfortunes of the left, such as the rapid disappearance of the Occupy Movement or the inability of Syriza in Greece to meet expectations and introduce an alternative economic model to ‘austerity’.

A term that needs clarification and that plays a central role in my analysis is ‘lifestyle activism’. Why do I not just refer to the ‘new left’,

but instead introduce another term? The notion of ‘lifestyle activism’ has its roots in the work of left-libertarian scholar Murray Bookchin—the inspiration for my PhD thesis that is the basis of this book. A couple of decades ago, Bookchin identified some trends in radical movements that he considered new and problematic. Under the umbrella-term of ‘lifestyle anarchism’, Bookchin anathematized what he considered as degrading trends developing since the 1970s, mainly in the anarchist milieu, but also in social movements in general (Bookchin 1995). These trends included:

- a drift away from reason towards subjectivism, relativism and emotionalism (fused with spiritualism and what he characterized as a New Age-inspired enchantment with the self)
- a drift away from serious organizational political commitment
- an emphasis on episodic ‘happenings’ and protest events, rather than on a coherent programme
- a priority of means over ends, where ‘the movement is the message’.
- For Bookchin, lifestyle anarchism and the tradition of social anarchism were separate by ‘an unbridgeable chasm’. He identified three main characteristics in social anarchism that are absent from the newly arisen trend:
  - an organizational base
  - a theoretical coherence, resulting from a rational analysis
  - a universalist political vision.

The elements Bookchin attributes to social anarchism could also be used to describe the old left, whereas some of the characteristics of ‘lifestyle anarchism’ seem to mirror parts of today’s left. However, despite Bookchin’s insightful contribution, I consider his notion of ‘lifestyle anarchism’ as quite narrow and inadequate to analyse the trends that I wish to examine in this book. To begin with, Bookchin was mostly referring to the anarchist milieu, of which he was a part. Yet some of the tendencies he described have moved beyond the anarchist movement to wider parts of the left and of social movements. Also, although Bookchin’s analysis was important and pioneering, his allegiance to ecology and his rigid anti-capitalism limited the extent to which materialism and a problematization of