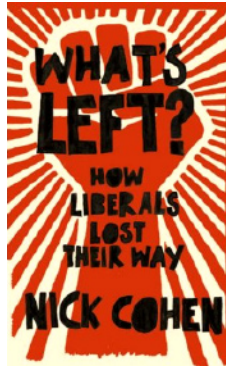


Against group-think

Andrew McIntyre reviews

What's Left? How liberals lost their way

by Nick Cohen
(Fourth Estate, 2007
400 pages)



Whatever else one can say about the left over the last century or so, it is clear that it has always taken its fantasies for reality. The great value of Nick Cohen's *What's Left: How Liberals lost their way* is that the author, as one of the left's own, is saying what the rest of us already know. Impervious to criticism, the best way to stir up the worker bees is to have a good old apostate spilling the beans.

In this limited sense, the book does have the satisfaction of displaying the 'Christopher Hitchens' effect—authors and intellectuals of the left who question the confused moral priorities of their ideological siblings. Unfortunately, these critics are briefly listened to, but quickly dismissed.

Cohen's message is blunt: the left, through its uncompromising hatred of America and self-loathing for Western democracies, has managed to back and support Islamic clerical fascism and other vile regimes around the world that would have been anathema to the left in earlier times.

Some critics have suggested that Cohen's book is simply about the Iraq war, and that his zealous support for it ignores the legitimate concerns about destabilisation in the Middle East and the rising influence of Iran. Cohen pre-emptively counters these attacks.

This book isn't all about Iraq or

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mainly about Iraq. It raises questions about morbid symptoms on the liberal-left which were there before George W. Bush and Tony Blair came to power.

Throughout the book he asks why the left supports fascists 'who believe in the subjugation of women, the killing of Jews, homosexuals, freemasons, socialists and trade unionists'. He asks why men and women of the left were denying the existence of Serb concentration camps and why Palestine is a cause for the liberal-left but not China, Sudan, Zimbabwe, the Congo or North Korea. In short, 'why is the world upside down?'

But Cohen displays a considerable amount of naivety if not disingenuousness. Any number of people could have told him at any time that the left has *always* been attracted to monsters such as Lenin, Pol Pot, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. Is it surprising that they now sympathise with Mugabe, Rafsanjani, Kim Jung Il, and even Saddam Hussein in white Y fronts? Should we celebrate this partial conversion of a man who proudly confesses that:

Like the fellow travellers with the Hitler-Stalin pact, I couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time; criticize the faults of democratic governments while supporting democracy against its enemies.

Notwithstanding these irritations, particularly enjoyable is Cohen's sustained criticism of the left's outrageous heroes Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore, and George Galloway, along with other familiar fools, Tariz Ali, Robert Fisk, Ken Livingstone, Richard Dawkins and Arundhati Roy. But although he chastises Chomsky's attacks on Western 'hegemonic' capitalist media as conjuring up, as Cohen puts it, 'the old notion of false consciousness that Friedrich Engels invented in 1893 after Karl Marx's death', he supports, perhaps predictably, Chomsky's list of Western 'felonies', including its involvement with Vietnam, and the overthrow of Allende's 'democratic' regime in Chile.

Overall, Cohen is attempting to make amends for the chronic dishonesty of the left. Anthony Daniels (aka Theodore Dalrymple of *Spectator* fame) observes that, at heart, Cohen is an idealist for whom intractable reality does not really exist. But that, in the end, he 'veers strongly towards honesty'. Whether the book really does wake many on the left is yet to be seen.

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