

What world do they want?

The ideological structure of the contemporary Western Left

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Abstract

Contemporary left-wing political movements in Europe and the United States exhibit a pattern of contradictions that resist explanation through the conceptual vocabulary of twentieth-century socialism: stated commitments to democracy, secularism, and gender equality coexist with observable alliances with forces antithetical to each of those commitments. This article attempts a structural account of that pattern. Three complementary explanatory frameworks are proposed, identitarian coalitionism, the post-Marxist substitution of the revolutionary subject, and the psychosocial function of collective guilt, and integrated into a synthetic description of the positive project, such as it is, that underlies contemporary left-wing activism. The analysis concludes that the observable incoherence is not accidental but follows from a coherent internal logic, and that the most serious risk it generates is not for its declared adversaries but for the movement itself.

1 Introduction

For an observer who came of age politically in the twentieth century, the behaviour of a substantial portion of today's Western left presents a genuine puzzle. The same political actors who invoke democracy align themselves with movements that are openly hostile to democratic procedure. Those who assert the primacy of the secular state extend systematic indulgence to a religious fundamentalism they would condemn without hesitation if it were Christian. Those who most loudly advocate gender equality adopt a studied silence, or, worse, an active apologetics, in the face of practices within certain immigrant or postcolonial communities that they would characterise as patriarchal oppression in any other context.

The temptation is to attribute this pattern to hypocrisy, to tactical opportunism, or simply to a collective failure of reasoning. That temptation should be resisted. The pattern is too consistent and too widespread to be explained by individual bad faith. A more productive approach is to ask whether there is an internal logic that makes these positions coherent from within the framework that generates them, even if that framework itself rests on contestable premises.

This article argues that there is such a logic, and that it derives from three interlocking structural features of contemporary left-wing thought: a shift in the primary axis of political analysis from class to identity; a relativism about cultural values that is asymmetrically applied; and a psychosocial dynamic in which collective guilt functions as the constitutive identity of a political community. Together these features produce what

might be called a negative utopia, a political project defined far more precisely by what it opposes than by what it would construct.

It should be noted at the outset that the phenomenon described here does not encompass the whole of the left. There exist left-leaning individuals and traditions who identify these contradictions clearly, denounce them, and are for that reason marginalised or accused of having defected to the right. The analysis that follows pertains to the identitarian and postcolonial current that has achieved institutional hegemony in Western universities, major media organisations, and large NGOs over the past two to three decades.

2 From Class to Identity

The historical left, whether social-democratic or Marxist, organised its worldview around an economic axis. Society was divided between those who owned the means of production and those who sold their labour; political conflict was ultimately a conflict over the distribution of the surplus generated by that relationship. The primary categories were class categories, and the primary subject of emancipation was the working class, defined by its position in the productive process regardless of ethnicity, religion, or culture.

The contemporary left has replaced this axis with a different one. Shaped by post-structuralist theory from the 1970s onward, and more recently by the framework of intersectionality, it reads social reality through the lens of power and identity. The fundamental division is no longer between bourgeoisie and proletariat but between those who hold systemic power and those who are subject to it. On the side of power: Western civilisation, whiteness, Christianity, heterosexuality, capitalism, and the male sex. On the side of subjection: ethnic minorities, the global South, Islam in Western contexts, LGBTQ+ communities, and women, understood not as individuals but as members of identity groups.

The crucial feature of this framework is that the axis of oppression is determined structurally, not by the content of the values held by any given group. A religious fundamentalist who belongs to a minority community in a Western country or to a formerly colonised nation is categorised, first and foremost, as occupying a position of structural subjection relative to Western hegemony. The values he holds regarding women, homosexuals, or apostates are secondary to his structural position. The coalition is organised not around shared positive values but around a shared structural relationship to the dominant order.

This is why the contradictions described in the introduction are not, from within the framework, contradictions at all. The ordering criterion is position in the power hierarchy, not content of belief. Anyone who is an Other relative to the Western mainstream is a potential ally; the specific content of that alterity is not the primary variable. The apparent incoherence resolves, within the framework, into a rigorous if contestable consistency.

3 The architecture of guilt

A second structural feature concerns the treatment of historical responsibility. For the contemporary left, the colonial history of the West is not a concluded chapter that can be weighed against other chapters in a balanced historical account. It is, instead, a permanent structure: the current wealth, stability, and global influence of Western nations

are understood as having been extracted from the colonised world and as being actively maintained at that world's expense. Historical injustice does not recede; it reproduces itself in the present through the institutions, cultural norms, and relative prosperity of Western societies.

This framing has a direct consequence for the application of normative standards across cultural boundaries. To hold non-Western communities to Western normative standards, to criticise patriarchal practices, theocratic governance, or the treatment of religious minorities in majority-Muslim societies, is, in this framework, an act of cultural imperialism: the imposition of norms that are themselves products of a hegemonic and guilty civilisation. The same standards that apply universally within the West cannot be applied universally across cultural boundaries without reproducing the logic of colonial domination.

The result is an asymmetric application of principles that appears, from the outside, as hypocrisy. Sexism is condemned without qualification when it occurs within Western societies, but contextualised, explained, and ultimately excused when it occurs within communities framed as postcolonial. This is not inconsistency; it is the application of a coherent, if disputable, normative hierarchy in which anti-colonialism ranks above secularism and anti-racism ranks above gender equality.

The guilt is, as a consequence, structurally interminable. It cannot be discharged by any finite act of reparation, because it is not located in discrete historical events but in the ongoing structure of Western power. The only conceivable terminus is the dismantling of that structure, which is, precisely, the political objective.

4 Collective guilt as identity

The third structural feature operates at the psychosocial rather than the theoretical level. Pascal Bruckner, in *The Tyranny of Guilt*, and subsequent critics of what has come to be called woke ideology, have identified a dynamic in which the acknowledgement of collective guilt functions not merely as a moral position but as the constitutive identity of a political community.

The mechanism is as follows. The historical indictment of Western civilisation, for colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, and the various other crimes attributed to it, is not experienced by adherents primarily as an external factual claim subject to evidence and revision. It is experienced as a marker of moral seriousness, of intellectual sophistication, and of belonging to a community defined by its rejection of complacency about Western privilege. To question the indictment, or to apply it with nuance, or to note cases that do not fit the framework, is experienced not as a contribution to accuracy but as a betrayal of the community and a regression to comfortable ignorance.

This dynamic explains what might otherwise appear as an irrational impermeability to counterevidence. Evidence is not irrelevant because adherents are irrational; it is irrelevant because the primary function of the framework is not predictive or explanatory but identity-constitutive. Colonised countries in Asia that achieved rapid economic development without the pathologies attributed to Western colonialism do not falsify the framework; they are simply not assimilated into it, because the framework is not, at its core, an empirical hypothesis about the causes of underdevelopment. It is a story about who one is and who one opposes.

The guilt, in this reading, cannot be expiated because expiation would dissolve the identity. A community that had genuinely discharged its historical debt would lose the

central organising principle of its collective self-understanding. The interminability of the guilt is thus not incidental but functional.

5 The positive project: a radically egalitarian Utopia

Having described the internal logic of the framework, one can now address the central question more directly: what positive world, if any, do the holders of this framework want?

The aspiration, when it is made explicit, is a radically egalitarian utopia: a social order in which every hierarchy of power has been dismantled. This means a world without significant economic inequality, without the privileged position of any cultural tradition, without the nation-state as the primary unit of political organisation, and without the normative weight currently attached to the family structures and religious traditions of the Western mainstream. It is a world in which the historical debts of Western civilisation have been expiated through a comprehensive redistribution of power, wealth, and cultural authority.

The connection between this positive vision and the coalitional and guilt-based structures described above is direct. The existing foundations of Western society, capitalism, the Judeo-Christian cultural inheritance, the nation-state, the bourgeois family, are held to be intrinsically and irremediably corrupt. They cannot be reformed; they must be deconstructed. Any force that weakens or destabilises them is therefore, at least provisionally, an ally in the project of deconstruction, regardless of whether that force shares the positive vision of the egalitarian utopia that is supposed to follow.

This is the structural role played by alliances that appear, from the outside, to be self-defeating. Radical Islamism, in this framework, is not a value-based ally; it is a tactical instrument, consciously or unconsciously, whose value consists in its antagonism toward the existing order. It is an updated version of what Lenin called the fellow traveller: useful for the demolition phase, to be managed in the construction phase that comes after.

The obvious difficulty, which the historical record underlines with considerable force, is that the construction phase has a way of not arriving on schedule. The Iranian revolution of 1979 offers the canonical example: a coalition of secular leftists, liberals, and Islamists overthrew the Shah, whereupon the Islamist component, which had the clearest and most operationally concrete vision of the world it wanted, rapidly eliminated its former allies. The partners who had a precise positive project prevailed over those who had only a shared negation.

6 Consequences of not having a coherent positive vision

The most important conclusion that follows from this analysis is that, for a substantial portion of the contemporary Western left, there is no coherent and verifiable positive vision of the world they want to construct. What exists is a clear enemy, a coalition organised around opposition to that enemy, and a regulative ideal, the egalitarian utopia, that is sufficiently abstract to generate no operational commitments and therefore no internal disagreements.

Coalitions organised primarily around negation have a characteristic weakness: they are sustained by the existence of the enemy and tend to dissolve when the enemy is gone, because the divergent positive values of the coalition's components then become visible

and irreconcilable. In the case under analysis, the positive values of secular feminism and those of religious fundamentalism are not merely different; they are incompatible. The alliance holds as long as both parties can direct their energy toward the common adversary.

The deeper question, what the political landscape would look like in the aftermath of the egalitarian utopia's construction, is one that the framework does not address, and arguably cannot address without fracturing the coalition that is supposed to bring it about. The energy of the movement is overwhelmingly diagnostic and critical, not constructive. It is more skilled at identifying and denouncing hierarchies than at specifying what non-hierarchical arrangements would look like or how they would be sustained.

This is not, finally, a marginal or accidental feature. It is the structural consequence of building a political identity around guilt and opposition rather than around a positive account of justice. The world they want, to the extent that it exists at all, is most precisely described as the world that is left after the world they oppose has been dismantled. Whether what is left would be hospitable to the values, equality, freedom, secularism, in whose name the dismantling was undertaken is a question the framework is not equipped to answer.

7 Conclusion

The apparent incoherence of the contemporary Western left is not, this article has argued, the product of simple hypocrisy or collective irrationality. It is the product of a coherent internal logic that rests on three pillars: the replacement of class analysis with an identity-based power analysis that determines coalition membership by structural position rather than by shared values; a doctrine of collective guilt that frames Western civilisation as a permanent structure of injustice and renders the application of universal normative standards across cultural boundaries illegitimate; and a psychosocial dynamic in which the acknowledgement of that guilt functions as the constitutive identity of the political community, making it structurally interminable.

Together these features produce a movement with a clear enemy, a broad if internally contradictory coalition, and no robust positive vision of the social order it would construct. The most serious risk this configuration generates is not to the adversaries the movement names. It is the risk, well-documented in the historical record, of being consumed by partners in the coalition who have a clearer and more operationally concrete answer to the question of what world they want.