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# Critical theory and memory politics: leftist autocritique after the Ukraine war

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## Abstract

In recent years, Western governments have invoked the values of universal human rights to justify large-scale military operations. Critical theorists have often responded that these campaigns serve not to promote peace, stability, or prosperity, but to entrench Western economic and political power, often in ways that have been devastating for local populations. However, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine casts doubt on whether assumptions about Western dominance will continue to furnish adequate accounts of global armed conflict. Critical theorists base many of their views on what is sometimes called 'memory politics', meaning that they cite histories of Western militarism, colonialism, racism and economic exploitation as backdrops to current policies. In this article it is argued that they will only be able to explain a conflict like the Ukraine war with credibility by incorporating into their memory politics the left's own histories of supporting autocratic regimes.

**Keywords:** critical theory; international relations; leftist politics; Russia; Ukraine war

'Yes, the liberal west is hypocritical, applying its high standards very selectively. But hypocrisy means you violate the standards you proclaim, and in this way you open yourself up to inherent criticism – when we criticize the liberal west, we use *its own standards*.' (Žižek 2022a, emphasis added)

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## 1 Introduction

The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and for a brief moment the world could almost believe in the ‘new world order’ promised by US President George Bush, Sr. (e.g. Ismael and Ismael, 1994). Yet a decade later on September 11, 2001 the optimism dimmed as airplanes crashed into New York’s World Trade Center and the Pentagon headquarters in Washington, DC. This crisis renewed age-old scepticisms about *pax Americana*, an American empire securing world peace and prosperity. Indeed, plenty of sceptics had long shunned the West’s self-styling as the premier civilising force in world history. (e.g. Césaire, 1955; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Mehta, 1999)

In 2003 the US-led ‘coalition of the willing’ answered the New York and Washington attacks by invading Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Voices within critical theory swiftly condemned the operation, blasting officials who seemed to invoke the values of human rights not to prevent armed conflict but to wage it (e.g. Douzinas, 2007). Since that time few new conflicts have disrupted and reconfigured worldwide political and economic networks as profoundly as Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine (e.g. von Fritsch, 2022) – although the ongoing Israel-Palestine hostilities reignited in 2023 with frightening intensity, and any future Chinese assault on Taiwan would prove seriously disruptive. As of this writing there has not yet been time for a substantial corpus of critical theory to crystallise around the Ukraine war. However, I shall argue that, as this corpus emerges, scholars will not always be able to rely on assumptions of Western global dominance. Insofar as critical theory has overlapped with leftist political outlooks, critical theorists will need to take leftist histories more rigorously into account.

In Section 2, I identify some background principles that have guided critical theorists’ analyses of global power. Given the current dearth of critical theory on Russia’s invasion, I turn in Section 3 to some activist responses on the left using the example of Britain’s Stop the War Coalition. Stop the War’s founder Lindsey German at first claims to condemn Kremlin wrongdoing but then lays all historical responsibility for Russian conduct on the West. In Sections 4 and 5, further probing Stop the War as well as like-minded activism in France and Germany, I acknowledge that critical theorists have justifiably responded to mass injustice committed by and within liberal democracies, yet in future they will need to place greater emphasis on histories of the left’s own commitments to repressive regimes if traditional promises of leftist autocritique are to be taken seriously.

In Section 6, I turn to some voices that have been influential within critical theory, such as Noam Chomsky, Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, to identify their failures to practice autocritique with regard to the kind of crisis that cries out for it even when, as in the case of Butler and Žižek, they voice support for Ukrainian resistance. In Section 7, I argue that this failure of leftist autocritique cannot be justified with reference to unequal power between the West and Russia. In Section 8, I draw on Derick Bell’s notion of interest convergence to argue that, contrary to widespread beliefs among critical theorists, leftist autocritique ordinarily surfaces only where it furthers leftist goals, which explains much of the amnesia about histories of leftist support for repressive dictatorships. In Section 9, I challenge utilitarian and subjectivist arguments that might be made to excuse the failure of leftist autocritique. I conclude that this failure must change through a renewal of autocritique.

## 2 Background: the Radical Critique of Western liberal democracy

No description of critical theory can capture its multiple and at times internally conflicted strands but some points relevant to international relations converge around a common theme. I will call it the ‘Radical Critique of Western Liberal Democracy’ and it can be summarised as follows: *Beginning with early modernity and continuing into the present, Western regimes have cumulatively damaged millions of lives through economic exploitation, militarism, colonialism, racism, and other forms of injustice, often on a global scale. Admittedly, some of these injustices have*

arisen at other points in history, both within and beyond the West's borders; however, their Western manifestations have proved to be systemic, pervasive, and exceptionally destructive (e.g. Lenin, 1934; Césaire, 1955; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Hardt and Negri, 2001) – and, moreover, have been untenably justified through recourse to post-Enlightenment norms of meritocracy, individual autonomy, formal legal equality, economic opportunity, and the rule of law (e.g. Marx, 1844; Marx, 1875; cf., e.g. Kennedy, 1979; Bell, 1980; Kelman, 1987, 114-85; Crenshaw, 1988; Crenshaw et al. 1995).

Critical theory is no monolith, given that fields such as critical legal studies, critical race theory, post-colonial studies, feminism, and queer theory have developed in overlapping yet distinct directions. Accordingly, in this article I shall refer to critical theory only to the extent that it incorporates the Radical Critique. Similarly, I will not examine possible differences between terms such as 'critical', 'leftist', 'progressive', or 'radical', but will use them insofar as they reflect this Critique.

Several elements link to the Radical Critique. One is the element of *systemic injustice*, which proceeds from a quantitative to a qualitative conception of historical wrongdoing: mass injustice arises from more than the sum of its parts, more than random occurrences of discretely unjust actions. Repressive acts may look like random dots splashed on a page, yet the dots link up to form patterns that continue into our own time (e.g. Marks, 2011, pp. 58-59 (quoting Naomi Klein); Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, pp. 8, 31-39, 91). What follows is a second element of the Critique, which can be called *memory politics* (cf. Belavusau and Gliszczynska-Grabias, 2017; Heinze, 2017; Heinze, 2018). *Memory* denotes 'Step A', that is, the imperative of recording and preserving knowledge about exploitative histories. Yet this is not a solely academic exercise: *politics* denotes 'Step B', which is the need to bring such knowledge into public awareness.

Step B recalls Karl Marx's famous maxim: 'Philosophers have only ever *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' (Marx, 1845, p. 7, original emphasis). That passage was later echoed in credos such as 'Silence is complicity' (e.g. Levinson, 2020) or Jean-Paul Sartre's 'not to choose is still to choose'. (Sartre, 1945, p. 64) These slogans blur tidy distinctions between active perpetrators and passive onlookers. Meanwhile, public engagement takes many forms that range from primary through to higher education, as well as mass and social media messages, commemorative exhibitions and events, teach-ins, and other social and media channels. (e.g. Duncombe and Lambert, 2021) Memory politics is not just about reflecting but about acting. Sceptics may grumble that it does no good for societies to dwell on past grievances, yet from the standpoint of critical theory there can be no such thing as *no* memory politics. Amnesia too is a form of memory politics, indeed the preferred form for officials who aim to whitewash history through mythologies of collective heroism, innocence, benevolence, or victimisation. Critical theory fundamentally changes memory politics by rejecting sanitised histories, insisting that Western liberal democracies must engage in collective self-scrutiny.

A third element of the Radical Critique relates to the problem of *purity narratives*, which are sanitised or mythologised histories geared toward downplaying chronicles of militarism, colonialism, racism, or exploitation. The crucial point for critical theorists has been that purity narratives portray liberal democracy through its own declared values – again, meritocracy, individual autonomy, formal legal equality, economic opportunity, the rule of law. These values purport to render liberal democracy progressively self-correcting, yet for critical theorists memory politics challenge these narratives by showing how mass injustices have *not* been progressively corrected but have been systemic and continuous even when they change their surface appearances (e.g. Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

A fourth element of the Critique can be called *counter-subjectivism*, meaning that *perpetrators' benign intentions cannot compromise our assessments of their past wrongdoings*. Certainly, critical theorists reject suggestions that histories of colonialism, slave trading, or racial segregation lose their status as injustices on the grounds that, following the ethics of earlier days, some Western elites may have believed they were acting in the best interests of subjugated populations

(e.g. Césaire, 24–30; Fanon, 63–128) Far from eroding the Radical Critique, evidence of such beliefs bolsters it, prompting us to ask how such attitudes have operated to construct, reify, and naturalise exploitation by normalising colonial hierarchies. Admittedly, questions about material or financial reparations for past wrongdoings (e.g. United Nations, 2019) still spark controversy, but for critical theory the West remains ethically implicated in its past injustices regardless of moral outlooks that might have prevailed in the past. The point is not that individual intentions are never relevant, which is why I do not call this element *anti*-subjectivist, but only that individuals' benign intentions cannot excuse histories or patterns of systemic injustice.

A fifth element can be called *counter-utilitarian*, meaning that *no utilitarian calculus can diminish the ethical weight of historical injustices by citing overall benefits that these may have produced*. Consider a 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstration where some marchers tore down a statue of Edward Colston, an eighteenth-century philanthropist from Bristol whose wealth derived in part from the trans-Atlantic slave trade (e.g. Heinze, 2022). The Radical Critique bars us from citing charitable deeds of people like Colston as a ploy to downplay the injustices of slavery. I do not call this element *anti*-utilitarian since critical theorists do not reject utilitarianism under all circumstances: governments, including those on the left, must inevitably set priorities, for example, spending less on roads to spend more on primary education. Yet for critical theory profit-maximising calculations cannot always be assumed to yield just outcomes. Indeed, this counter-utilitarian element of the Critique is not unique to critical theory given that it also arises within classical and contemporary liberalism (e.g. Kant, 1785, p. 428; Rawls, 1999, pp. 19–24).

### 3 Memory politics within the Radical Critique: the example from Ukraine

With these background elements in mind, my next task will be to ask what they teach about the Ukraine war. As far back as 1994, with the old Soviet constitution only recently abrogated, Moscow moved to deploy forces into Chechnya followed by incursions into Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015 and again Ukraine in February 2022. With each of these events some voices in the West demanded a hard line while others pushed for appeasement, although these schisms never divided tidily along right-left lines (e.g. German T, 2022). Shortly after the 2022 Ukraine invasion the veteran writer and activist Lindsey German published a *Guardian* op-ed warning the British government against any steps that risked escalating hostilities in Ukraine (German, 2022). Two decades earlier German had spearheaded London's Stop the War Coalition to protest against the invasion of Iraq. The organisation subsequently agitated with the aim of 'preventing and ending the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Israel-Palestine, and elsewhere' (Stop the War, n.d.). Whilst we await critical theory on the Ukraine war it will help to take activist as well as scholarly opinion into account – indeed many, like German, have worn both hats (e.g. German, 1999).

Many factors drive armed conflicts. There are times when nations fight merely to survive, yet they are also driven by economic interest, military pragmatics, popular sentiment, or diplomatic manoeuvring. Sometimes governments wage war directly, and sometimes indirectly by supporting foreign governments or factions (e.g. Levy and Thompson, 2010). As the Ukraine war has shown, whether support counts as direct or indirect may depend as much on political perspectives as on factual reports (Krüger, 2023). People can rationally disagree about whether and how their government should engage in armed conflict. Some can conscientiously oppose war without being in league with their country's enemies, be these real or fabricated (e.g. Adenire, 2020). This was German's first claim and she was right to make it. She insisted that dissidents who opposed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were not necessarily 'fifth columnists', 'traitors', 'friends of the Taliban', or 'allies of Saddam'. She rebuffed such slurs being hurled at Stop the War when the group warned against feeding the Ukraine conflict, particularly given the risks of nuclear war.

Far from cosying up to Putin, Stop the War viewed his invasion with ‘horror and sickness’ and the group has openly supported Russian anti-war protesters (German, 2022).

German also rightly chided a commentariat that played guessing games about Putin’s state of mind. Certainly, the West needs to anticipate Kremlin movements, yet critical theorists have long rejected armchair psychologising that would reduce mass brutality to the whims of national leaders. German summons an old leftist tradition that has always cried out for us to gaze at the machines chugging away behind politicians’ surface words and deeds. Its cogs and wheels include aspiring cadres, yes-man bureaucrats, opportunist legislators, compliant lawyers and judges, complacent businesspeople, obedient media, co-opted intellectuals, self-serving religious leaders and even millions of ordinary citizens. These actors collectively fuel the engines of atrocities, yet individually they may feel no ethical qualms. The extermination of millions can be organised with the technological precision and moral indifference of the conveyor-belt.

Hannah Arendt famously dubbed this gliding of everyday routine into mass injustice as ‘the banality of evil’ (Arendt, 1964). Arendt explained how networks of violence emerge through something greater than the personality quirks of individual officials (Arendt, 1951). She was often accused of dismissing injustice itself as banal, yet her point was the opposite. She never denied the importance of power at the top but was looking beyond traditional ‘great men of history’ accounts that would reduce human cataclysms to the eye-winking and horse-trading of cigar-chomping grandees (Arendt and Fest, 2013). Michel Foucault later analysed patterns of subordination and control that work less through cops wielding batons and more through erudite vocabularies and associated praxes disseminated by technocratic establishments (Foucault, 1961; Foucault, 1975; Foucault, 1976).

German, too, looks beyond this or that personality toward broad socio-political processes. She wagers that the West cannot approach Ukraine with clean hands – as witnessed when innocent civilians were sacrificed by Western interventions in Serbia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, or Libya in 2011 – adding: ‘There was no referral to the international criminal court for the US following its use of depleted uranium in the Iraqi city of Falluja; no sanctions when Trump ordered the dropping of the “mother of all bombs” on Afghanistan.’ German deploys memory politics to foil purity narratives: ‘The features now so widely and correctly condemned in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – from cluster bombs to targeting of civilians to besieging cities – have all been part of western wars.’ She objects that there has been ‘no outcry at Britain’s continuing support for Saudi Arabia’s brutal bombing of Yemen’. As to the Ukraine war, she admonishes that the West must revisit its own histories before condemning governments elsewhere:

‘We cannot accept a narrative that ignores *context and history* . . . The *roots* of this conflict lie in what has happened since *the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union*. . . . Nato expanded ever closer towards the Russian border, incorporating 14 new member states, mainly in eastern Europe. It has also expanded into “out of area operations”, including central involvement in Afghanistan and Libya. It now plans further expansion into the Indo-Pacific as part of an increased military presence against China.’ (German, 2022, emphasis added)

German focuses here on military conflicts yet other writers have long expanded similar insights beyond situations of armed conflict. Many have claimed that Western domination of global commerce, finance, and media have wrought havoc on traditional ways of life across the globe, which have become eroded through market forces over which local populations have no control. These critics slam the West for sanctifying values of unlimited choice that in practice benefit the privileged – for example, ‘freedoms’ to purchase imported goods, which become coercive as local goods end up being driven out of their own markets. For now, my point is not to review these or other arguments waged about Western political and economic influence, but only to recall what it means for the West to be perceived in some places as more of a threat than a boon (e.g. Nkrumah, 1965; Hardt and Negri, 2001).

#### 4 Revisiting the Radical Critique: the example from Britain

Is the West at fault, then, for provoking Moscow? For some observers the very question might appear strained if they believe that Russia joined the West centuries ago through political and cultural ties. Concepts of ‘the West’ have admittedly fluctuated over time and space (e.g. Davies, 1996, pp. 16–25). Nevertheless, the Cold War fiercely demarcated spheres of influence (e.g. McGlynn, 2023) in ways that continued to drive Kremlin policy (e.g. Smith, 2023) into the twenty-first century. More importantly, German rightly insists that we must place ‘context and history’ at the heart of any analysis of the war. The problem is that, as she proceeds to recite that context and history, she wholly omits *her own political home: the left itself*.

How so? Once we take the plunge into history, much depends on our starting point. German begins with ‘the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union’, but why would the ‘roots’ of the invasion stretch back only so recently? After all, when critical theorists probe mass injustices committed by Western societies – economic exploitation, colonialism, racism, sexism, heteronormativity – they rightly place these within timeframes stretching over centuries. Yet having insisted on the primacy of context and history, German then leaps over the lion’s share of it. Let’s see how she does this.

At first glance, Russia’s odyssey from Tsarist despotism, through Soviet dictatorship, to post-Soviet autocracy might seem to unfold through precisely those three distinct stages. Yet historians have long sketched these as just so many incarnations of the same old autocratic behemoth (e.g. Figes, 2023). Yet by beginning her story only after the end of the Cold War, German stops short of the Soviet era. The reason seems sadly obvious: if we were to extend her timeline further back then we would have to ask about a regime that, throughout its seventy-year history, destroyed millions of lives (e.g. Karlsson and Schoenhals, 2008) while enjoying continuous and often hefty leftist support (e.g. Furet, 1995; Julliard, 2013, 703–66; Smith and Worley, 2014; Smith and Matthew Worley, 2017; Thorpe, 2015).

By ‘destroyed’ I refer not only to mass killings but more broadly to power hierarchies and imposed conformity that stifled opportunities in ways that critical theorists have ordinarily deemed to be crucial for understanding oppression wrought by liberal democracies (e.g. Boterbloem, 2019; Applebaum, 2013). In line with many critical theorists, I assume no pat distinction between active and passive causation of destruction. Also, by ‘continuous’ leftist support I do not mean ‘complete’ support. No unified leftist stance ever existed toward Soviet politics, and indeed Arendt’s influence within critical theory stems largely from her analysis of socialist as well as fascist totalitarianisms. Contemporary critical theory originates largely with progressives who criticised leftist dictatorships dating back to André Gide (1936) and developing through to figures such as Ruth Fischer (1948, 1950) and Claude Lefort (1994 [essays published during the Cold War]). Lefort spelled out that he was urging autocritique (cf., e.g. Morin, 1959) because leftists’ support for socialist dictatorships was still widespread long after mass atrocities under Lenin and Stalin were no longer in doubt.

Three basic problems ensue. The first lies with the reductionism of presenting the Ukraine war as crucially the West’s responsibility. German does duly recite a boilerplate condemnation of Moscow yet from the moment she turns to context and history, she shifts all decisive elements of her analysis to Western power. To be sure, voices across the political spectrum have blamed the West for Russian aggression (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2014; Maté, 2023) so such a stance tells us nothing about critical theory *per se*. Yet this first problem leads to a second, namely, that German subtracts the left itself from the histories that critical theorists ordinarily and rightly insist we must study, and, as we will see, she is not alone in taking that tack. Such an omission flies in the face of age-old claims on the part of critical theorists that they practice collective self-criticism, also known as autocritique. For the remainder of this section I will stick with German’s op-ed because it succinctly illustrates that lacuna, then I will turn to other critical writers in Sections 5 and 6.

What follows from this second problem is a third one, namely, the *absence of a leftist memory politics of the left* – recalling here that we cannot confuse pro-active and public memory politics (‘Step B’) with the sheer gathering of historical knowledge *per se* (‘Step A’). Again, the Radical Critique demands that historical knowledge must not be locked away in textbooks and seminar rooms but must be disseminated through public education campaigns. Progressives have rightly pushed for programs to inform a broad citizenry about Western racism, colonialism, economic exploitation, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other forms of oppression; however, pro-active leftist campaigns to inform the public about the left’s own bleaker histories have been hard to find, which then raises questions about the character of leftist autocritique.

The point is not that Stop the War should swing from one extreme to the other, from wholly blaming the West to wholly blaming Moscow. Nor is the problem that German fails to get the balance exactly right between the left and other actors, which would be a daunting task. Rather, the problem is that she omits any mention of Soviet despotism or of leftist acquiescence in it, let alone connecting dots to present positions taken today by voices on the left such as Stop the War. By recalling Kremlin wrongdoings I do not absolve Western societies of their own past complicity with dictators (e.g. Schmitz, 1999; Schmitz, 2006), yet, again, the Radical Critique bars us from falling silent about injustices in which we are implicated solely on grounds that others too have participated in injustice. The aforementioned element of counter-utilitarianism within critical theory bars one party from pointing to others’ misconduct (‘whataboutism’) in order to deflect attention from its own implication in mass injustice (cf. Burgis, 2022). Certainly, no major critical theorist today flatly denies the atrocities that have been committed by regimes enjoying substantial leftist support. However, while critical theorists have rightly insisted that certain mass injustices have been systemic in the West, and that dots must be connected from that West’s past injustices to present-day problems, they have failed to present mass injustices on the left as systemic in any way which would require them to connect the dots from leftists’ own pasts to present-day problems. This omission is particularly troubling given that left-wing support often continued after the end of the Cold War, as Russia remained a bulwark for countering Western military, economic, and cultural power (e.g. Katerji, 2020).

When these histories are neglected their consequences for present-day crises end up being erased as well. The obfuscation arises not only through assumptions about *time*, that is, about when to start the timeline. It arises also through assumptions about *causation*, that is, about how trends that seem superficially unrelated ultimately coalesce. Writers have long argued that culture, politics, economics, law, and history remain deeply intertwined, with each strand acting upon and responding to the others (e.g. Hegel, 1820, paras. 108, 154) and no critical theorist has ever posited mechanically precise causation between socio-political factors as a pre-condition for the Radical Critique. Similarly, if we were to insist on proof of how leftist support for repressive regimes ‘caused’ those regimes’ injustices, we would miss the point that such support always formed part of broader, often global movements and trends.

## 5 Revisiting the Radical Critique: examples from France and Germany

Although Stop the War is a British organisation, nothing I have claimed thus far would come as a surprise in other Western democracies. In France, the Socialist Party retreated to the political centre as far back as the 1980s under its Presidents François Mitterrand (1981–1995) and François Hollande (2012–2017) (e.g. Julliard, 2013, pp. 767–812). That shift provoked the formation of a new party, La France Insoumise (e.g. Cervera-Marzal, 2021). Founded in 2016 by the stridently leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the party currently holds several dozen seats in the National Assembly. Indeed, far more prolific than Lindsey German in Britain, Mélenchon has long remained a daily presence in Francophone media, long before the Ukraine war (e.g. Alemagna and Alliès, 2018) and as of this writing he boasts more than 2½ million Twitter (‘X’) followers.

(Mélénchon, 2023). Mélénchon has run as a first-round presidential candidate several times, scoring nearly twenty percent of the popular vote in 2017 (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017) and just over 20 percent in 2022 (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2022). Like Stop the War, Mélénchon and his party duly condemned Russia's invasion (Ferrero, 2022; La France insoumise, 2022) yet they too ascribed no meaningful historical role to the Kremlin, let alone to a French left that had maintained strong pro-Kremlin positions throughout much recent history. At one point, Mélénchon exclaimed that the United States had 'never wanted the Cold War to end' (Ferrero, 2022). That assertion is debatable, yet even if we assume its truth this would change nothing about the left's histories of support for oppressive regimes.

Germany offers further examples. In most countries Russia's 2022 invasion did not pose greater challenges to leftists than to anyone else, but in Germany it prompted a sea change, a *Zeitenwende* ('change of the times'). Like the French Socialist Party, Germany's Social Democratic Party had once advocated more radical policies but in recent decades moved to the centre left (e.g. Walter, 2018, pp. 271–356). Unlike similar parties elsewhere in Western Europe, top SPD members openly confessed the party's decades-long fault in appeasing Russian autocracy (Zeit-Online, 2022). Meanwhile leading members of Germany's Green Party, despite stemming from a long pacifist tradition, abandoned their former insistence on unilateral disarmament (Bundestagsfraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2022).

By contrast, another, though admittedly more fragile party called Die Linke (The Left), had largely originated from an East German past and preserved an earlier brand of leftism strongly resembling Stop the War and La France Insoumise in sidestepping relevant leftist histories. As of this writing Die Linke has weakened but its exponents still attract attention in German and other media. Die Linke has rightly acknowledged the Holocaust as well as genocides committed in Armenia and Namibia with German complicity (Dagdelen, 2021; Sommer, 2021), though of course this position has been easy enough for leftist parties to take since these crimes implicated earlier right-wing governments. By contrast, while conceding that Soviet mass starvation efforts in the Ukraine and other Soviet-ruled territories from 1932 to 33 were crimes, the party rejected designations of them as crimes against humanity, arguing – contrary to Arendt! – that it would be unfair to compare Stalin's crimes with Hitler's (Mohamed Ali *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, Die Linke has defended the former East German dictatorship as a *Rechtsstaat*, that is, a state which sufficiently adhered to individual rights under the rule of law (Gysi, 2009).

After Russia's invasion Die Linke tossed in the same off-the-shelf condemnation of Putin that had been verbalised by Stop the War and La France Insoumise while, like them, excising any mention of Soviet history or of the left's implication in it. According to Die Linke's website: 'After the end of the Cold War, NATO opted for confrontation instead of negotiating a new security system for Europe' (Die Linke (n.d.)). As with Mélénchon's broadside about the US wanting the Cold War to continue, let us assume *arguendo* that Die Linke's postulated security system did exist, that it was understood by NATO, and that it would have been feasible. The result would be that NATO governments knowingly disregarded it and therefore 'opted for confrontation'. Like Stop the War, the party claims that Western nations 'wasted an historical opportunity' because 'NATO's eastward expansion, troop positioning and manoeuvring, and missile defences decisively eroded relationships with Russia'. Once again, we can assume all these things to be true *arguendo* because they would change nothing about the despotic history of the Soviet regime or about substantial leftist support for it as a story that Stop the War, La France Insoumise, and Die Linke have wholly overlooked whilst claiming to situate their views within the pertinent context and history.

Sahra Wagenknecht, at the time one of the Die Linke's most prominent figures, took a further step, organising public demonstrations to call for a unilateral halt to military support for Ukraine's defence. Wagenknecht claimed that even after February 2022 Putin's peace efforts had been obstructed by the American and British governments (Hauck, 2023). Admittedly, Wagenknecht's positions have gone too far even for many members of her own party, which she has since left



(*Spiegel Politik*, 2022) yet a core question remains: would Die Linke, La France Insoumise, or Stop the War, have taken such positions in a climate in which the left had more vigorously pursued a public and pro-active memory politics of the left? Some observers might respond that exponents of unpopular views must take stark positions in order to be heard, yet that objection would hold little water given that figures like Mélenchon and Wagenknecht enjoyed massive media attention throughout this time.

## 6 From practice to theory

A month after German's article the veteran public intellectual Noam Chomsky granted an interview about Ukraine to *The New Statesman* (Eaton, 2022). Chomsky had already spent more than half a century warning against American military and economic domination and against the power of unaccountable processes within government and big business (Chomsky, 2008; Chomsky, 2017). Calling the Russian invasion 'monstrous', Chomsky echoed Stop the War, La France Insoumise, and Die Linke in conceding that it is 'right to have moral outrage about Putin's actions in Ukraine'. Moreover, he correctly denied that Western governments have always promoted democracy: 'the US has a long record of undermining and destroying democracy . . . Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Chile in 1973, on and on . . .'. Chomsky hinted that blame for the Ukraine war might be apportioned on both sides but only in a sardonic vein: 'Putin is as concerned with democracy as we are.' (Eaton, 2022).

Chomsky's timeline does stretch back into the Cold War, yet he too mentions nothing about the left's role in endorsing oppressive regimes in Moscow and elsewhere. Perhaps figures like Chomsky, German, Mélenchon, or Wagenknecht, believed that leftists have already faced enough flack for siding with dictators? Perhaps they sought only to balance the scales by reminding us of Western wrongdoing? The problem is that they never attempt any serious balancing at all. Chomsky, like German, Mélenchon and Wagenknecht, deletes the historical role of the left. In an interview for *Current Affairs* published shortly after the *New Statesman* piece Chomsky went on to warn that, to avoid nuclear war, NATO had to stop arming Ukraine. Indeed, he urged that Ukrainians capitulate to Russia just as they would to a 'hurricane' (Robinson, 2022). The problem here is not clumsy wording: his own premises yield no other conclusion regardless of how diplomatically he might have phrased it.

Chomsky is surely correct if his assumption is that atomic war becomes less probable *whenever* the West refrains from angering Kremlin honchos. Surely that is no great insight. Yet once we fundamentally absolve the Kremlin of historical responsibility, with or without the *pro forma* condemnations, Russia's devastation of Ukraine becomes reified and naturalised when the war ends up being equated with a natural catastrophe. Yet Chomsky's logic admits no obvious stopping point. Consider again Moscow's engineered famines in Ukraine and other Soviet territories during the 1930s. Was it similarly incumbent upon those millions of victims to take this brutality like a hurricane in view of perceived Western pressures on the Kremlin at that time? If not, then Chomsky's temporal cut-off becomes serendipity. These are historical dots that German, Mélenchon, Wagenknecht and Chomsky never connect through to the present regarding the Kremlin and the leftists who supported it. Here too, some might respond that Chomsky voices a less dominant view and must therefore speak provocative words to be heard. Yet, as with Mélenchon and Wagenknecht, any online search will confirm that legions of interviewers queued up for his views, granting him vast stretches of speaking time and often with few pointed challenges.

As many commentators have noticed, figures like German, Chomsky, Mélenchon, or Wagenknecht were never asking about Ukrainians themselves and what they wanted, particularly after the Maidan Square protests that began in 2013, followed by Russia's 2014 Crimea annexation (cf., e.g. Reinhart, 2022). When Chomsky recites histories that omit longstanding leftist support for Kremlin autocracy, then follows up by calling for Ukraine's surrender to Russia,

it becomes hard to view that sequence as coincidental. Imagine that amid the 2003 Iraq war conservatives had urged innocent civilians to bear Bush's 'shock and awe' like a 'hurricane'. This would have been a cue for critical theory to remind us – and rightly so – of the West's systemic colonial injustices dating back over a century, and, more importantly, to connect those dots to the present. Yet to date no leading critical theorist has connected any systemic injustice historically undertaken in the name of, or with the support of, the left through to present-day circumstances in any such way.

Chomsky does the opposite. He has openly condemned histories of Soviet wrongdoing (e.g. Chomsky, 1986) yet that concession ends up forming part of what could be called a leftist purity narrative, operating to hygienically remove that period from current leftist commitments, spoken not to connect dots to Soviet pasts but to effectuate a clean break, as if we could tidily disconnect the West's present from its pasts merely by delivering sufficiently detailed speeches. We end up with the anomaly that atrocities attributable to liberal democracies accrue to a collective Western 'we' that continues into the present, because that is the *real* history of Western liberal democracy beyond the legalist formalisms; but then leftist atrocities were committed by a 'they' who have nothing to do with today's left because that was never the *real* leftism. To dislodge this leftist past and then to consign it to an airtight receptacle is to suppose that it has come to an end, meaning that contemporary leftism need not publicly engage with it as part of anything that leftism stands for today, hence no need for any pro-active memory politics. By contrast, critical theory bars us from relegating the grim histories of liberal democracies to the past in this way, instead rightly insisting that these form ongoing links to present crises. It becomes difficult, then, to fathom how the left simultaneously frees itself of its own ethical imperative. Previously plausible notions of systemic oppression suddenly tumble into a medieval metaphysics, whereby atrocities pervade the *essentia* of liberal democracy while remaining only *accidens* within leftist pasts.

It becomes difficult *not* to ask whether some leftists' indifference to national self-determination in post-Soviet territories merely continues an indifference to those same principles during the Soviet period (e.g. Huttenbach, 1990, pp. 1–8; Lefort, 1994). These are 'we' questions for and about today's left, not 'they' questions concerning faraway peoples and problems. Under the Radical Critique it is through constant and vocal public scrutiny that progressives keep brutal histories from slipping off the radar, but then it is through scrutiny of leftist allegiances that critical theorists must endeavour to keep these too from slipping off our radars. I cannot prove that German, Chomsky, Mélenchon, Wagenknecht, or their affiliated organisations would have taken more balanced views if progressives had devoted greater efforts over the years to more public and candid memory politics incorporating leftist pasts; yet critical theorists have always publicly scrutinised the histories of liberal democracies as a matter of political principle, regardless of whether their efforts could be empirically correlated to improved public attitudes.

Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, too, are writers who have spoken about Ukraine, though it is too soon to know whether they plan to follow up with fuller critical analyses of the war. Both of them certainly confirm that neither leftism nor critical theory can be taken as a monolith. Both of them, and Žižek most explicitly, take views contrary to German, Chomsky, Mélenchon and Wagenknecht (Butler, 2022; Žižek, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023a, 2023b), candidly acknowledging Kremlin despotism as a primary factor that, at least by implication, bars us from assigning the bulk of responsibility to the West. In particular, by citing Putin's patriarchal and heteronormative policies Butler chides Russian ethno-nationalism, and both Butler and Žižek reject Putin's power-mongering as a force largely oblivious to how the West acts and responds.

Butler and Žižek are all the more interesting insofar as both have published extensively on the Israel-Palestine conflict, with Žižek (2022c) straightforwardly equating Ukraine and Palestine. Significantly, in the case of Israel and Palestine there is overwhelming agreement among the figures I have mentioned thus far. Most of them unproblematically apply the Radical Critique, fluently connecting dots from histories of Western racism and colonialism to Israeli policy (e.g. Butler, 2012; Chomsky and Pappé, 2015). Under the Radical Critique, the questions they, in

effect, put to Israel are obvious: How has the West reconciled its histories of violence with its ideologies of stability and prosperity; its histories of domination with its ideologies of freedom and national self-determination; its histories of subjugation with its ideologies of equal citizenship? How did such violence, domination, and subjugation become systemic and how have the patterns continued into the present? How has the West acted to downplay these histories?

Of course, we might challenge which dots these and other critical theorists did and did not connect for purposes of recounting their histories of the Middle East; however, for present purposes the more telling overlap is that any such dot-connecting from leftist pasts through to our own time is just as absent from Butler and Žižek as it is from German, Chomsky, Mélenchon, or Wagenknecht. Such amnesia is remarkable because surely the questions should be just as obvious: How has the left reconciled its historical support for violent regimes with its ideologies of stability and prosperity, and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions? How has the left reconciled histories of domination with its ideologies of freedom and national self-determination and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions? How has the left reconciled histories of subjugation with its ideologies of equal citizenship and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions? How did such violence, domination, and subjugation become systemic and how have the patterns continued into the present? How has the left acted to downplay these histories?

Accordingly, despite surface differences between, on the one hand, Butler and Žižek, and, on the other hand, German, Chomsky, Mélenchon and Wagenknecht, all six of them share the same failure to see any leftist memory politics of the left as relevant to the context and history which they otherwise view as essential when they can fit the West's mass injustices more comfortably within the bounds of the Radical Critique. Žižek and Wagenknecht grew up with direct windows onto Soviet-style oppression, which Žižek has long criticised (e.g. Žižek, 2014), yet always narrated as a past that remains unrelated to the leftism he himself espouses – again, a *prim divorce* from history that is barred to defenders of liberal democracy under the Radical Critique. For critical theorists it would be outrageous for defenders of liberal democracy to suggest that there is no need for memory politics because modern liberal democracies have shaken off their pasts. And I agree that this would indeed be outrageous. But it then becomes doubtful that critical theorists can shake off their own pasts so handily. Some onlookers might argue that it is to be expected for protagonists pushing certain positions to downplay faults on their own side, yet the perennial promise of autocritique, distinguishing critical theory from the tribalism of other political camps, can hardly abide such an excuse, which would wholly eviscerate autocritique and thereby critical theory itself.

## 7 Unequal power

To justify placing historical blame for the Ukraine war on the West, German cites Russia's 'lesser' military and economic strength (German, 2022) and surely she is right in standing up for underdogs. Greater power entails greater freedom of action, and greater freedom of action entails greater ethical responsibility. Under the Radical Critique these two principles place greater historical responsibility *for rich over poor, for white over black, for coloniser over colonised*. It is also true that the West has long commanded greater wealth and influence than Russia (e.g. Our World in Data (n.d.)). Would we therefore be justified to insert *the West over Russia* alongside these other pairings? Would it be fair to argue that the West is to Russia as rich is to poor, as white is to black, as coloniser is to colonised?

I hope we can now agree that such a view would be insane. Clearly, some hierarchies, as under systems of North American plantation slavery, correlate to quasi-unlimited autonomy for the more powerful party and little or none for the less powerful. Yet many power differentials do not

work in this all-or-nothing way. To cite a banal analogy, in 2023 the McDonald's corporation weighed in with a net worth of over US\$163 billion while its competitor Burger King registered around US\$7.5 billion (Visnji, 2020; Muriuki, 2022). Those metrics leave Burger King with a market share at less than 5 percent of McDonald's, making McDonald's more than twenty times more powerful. Yet Burger King's inferior ranking hardly renders the corporation powerless or free of social responsibility whenever it must compete with its rival. So, imagine that to lower its prices Burger King, knowing the risks, were to add a cheap but allergenic filler to its food, not harming most consumers but killing a few. If the victims' survivors were to sue Burger King on charges of wrongful death, the prospect that company executives might respond by complaining about Burger King's lesser marketplace strength would seem as fatuous as it would be horrific.

Similarly, once a nation boasts sufficient organisational and material capacity to have destroyed populations in the millions over the course of a century, then that regime's 'lesser' power can hardly justify us in shifting ultimate ethical responsibility to its more powerful rivals. To look at the sum-total of all regimes widely supported by leftists since the early twentieth century, and the millions of victims they claimed, and then to see only sources of 'lesser' power seems grotesque, and sounds plausible only when we excise the left's pasts from its present. This 'lesser power' trope becomes particularly absurd when we add nuclear arsenals into our computations. To cite a more extreme differential, NATO's stockpile dwarves North Korea's (e.g. Hecker *et al.*, n.d.) yet even the Kim regime's meagre supply has had a – no, not perfectly, and yet substantially – counterbalancing effect, at least sufficient to guarantee for that regime a quasi-total freedom of action over its perennially terrorised population. If critical theorists could climb into a time machine and travel back to the Cold War, we can only hope that they would *not* seek to explain to millions of victims of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, the Kim dynasty, Ceaușescu, Hoxha and other despots that the decisive source of their woes had been the West. Yet if today's critical theorists never would say any such thing, then it becomes hard to see how this same argument can be put to Ukrainians today, even if justified fears of escalation and nuclear conflagration place limits on the financial, material, or logistical support Western powers might lend to Kyiv. Some differentials are indeed all-or-nothing but others are more complex.

Consider again the hierarchies of rich over poor, white over black, or coloniser over colonised. The Radical Critique entails a threefold stance on the problem of unequal power, which can be formulated as follows, with the first two steps being rather obvious. First, such hierarchies have arisen through systemic injustice committed by those who hold more power against those who hold less. Second, a task of critical theory is to give voice to people who hold less power within these hierarchies. The third principle would run as follows: *If actors with superior power compel actors with inferior power to commit unjust acts, then the blame must lie with the superior power, and not with the inferior power or its allies.* I will call this the *Principle of Relative Innocence*. Not only critical theorists but even mainstream liberals and humanists would readily accept it (cf. Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE, 3.1.1110a31–4, 5.8.1135a16–28, 1753, 1791–1792<sup>1</sup>), even if before applying it they would wish to learn more about the specifics of a given situation.

Let's start by considering an easy application. Today, critical theorists and mainstream liberals alike would agree that laws permitting slavery cannot be defensible in contemporary societies. (e.g. Slavery Convention, 1926) If a society were to permit racialised plantation-type slavery, many critical theorists and mainstream liberals would exonerate a group of slaves for killing a ruthless master if this were the only way for the slaves to resist the brutality and to flee to freedom. By extension, we would pardon activists who had helped the slaves with the killing and escape. In this scenario, the Principle of Relative Innocence seems justified.

Yet here too, not all power hierarchies are clear cut. Now consider the more ambiguous example of a violent dictatorship in which there is widespread albeit stifled popular support for

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle cannot be classified as liberal or even humanist in any post-Hobbesian sense, yet his conception of individual responsibility anticipates later liberal and humanist conceptions.

democracy. Whether we would approve of citizens murdering senior officials might depend on several factors, such as how likely the dictatorship might be to relinquish power, within what timeframes, and so forth. Even with this information we might still disagree on whether or when we would endorse such killings. Yet despite this more intricate scenario, the preceding one based on slavery shows that there are situations in which critical theorists as well as mainstream liberals would accept the Principle of Relative Innocence, even if this second, more ambiguous scenario proves more divisive.

Bearing in mind, respectively, the easier and then the harder application of this principle, the salient point is that the Principle of Relative Innocence must not be confused with another principle, which neither critical theorists nor mainstream liberals could credibly defend. I shall call it the *Principle of Absolute Innocence* and it would run like this: *By definition, when actors with inferior power commit unjust acts, then neither they nor their allies deserve blame.* What is the difference between the two principles? It is the first, the Principle of Relative Innocence, that takes context and history into account, such as degrees of relative power and coercion. By contrast, this Principle of Absolute Innocence forms a closed-system engineered to confirm a pre-determined stance irrespective of the facts of individual situations. There will always be situations where it is difficult to assess the respective power of relevant actors or the choices available to them. Yet the foregoing scenarios demonstrate that hard cases do not prevent us from solving easier ones. For critical theorists to claim that unequal power compels us to place decisive responsibility for Russian atrocities on the West would be to insist on the centrality of Western histories while sidelining the left's own histories, however much such a view might be hedged by *pro forma* condemnations of Moscow.

A well-known feature of critical theorists' understandings of power has been Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Said reviles a colonial history in which Westerners viewed non-Westerners as incompetent to make ethical and political choices, incompetent to reason and govern with maturity (Said, 1978; cf. Césaire, 1955; Fanon, 1961). Colonialism became a species of paternalism, casting the powerful decision-maker in the role of the wise and prudent father and colonial subjects in the role of dependents. At the same time, it proliferated racist ideologies that were used to justify murder and repression such as fathers would not be expected to inflict upon their dependents. Yet any apologetic that a Soviet and then post-Soviet Kremlin in a Western-dominated world had been compelled to destroy millions of lives would inevitably recapitulate an Orientalist outlook. It declines to recognise Kremlin bosses as ethically autonomous, treating them in the way that law absolves infants from the status of responsible agents. Ironically, this paternalism in turn ends up placing critical theorists in the position of morally superior Kantian subjects deliberating and deciding in the stead of incompetents.

Also related to Orientalism is the concept of Eurocentrism, which refers to power that manifests through Western military and economic dominance, but also through cultural habits of conceiving of all humans according to Western norms, as if Western values defined the ultimate universal values (e.g. Amin, 1988; Kanth, 2009). While claiming to combat Eurocentrism, critical theorists risk achieving the opposite in approaching a situation such as Russia's invasion by configuring the West as the only actor making the decisive moral choices. We would have to describe this posture as a *Eurocentric anti-Eurocentrism*, a focus on Western injustices aimed at combatting Eurocentrism, whereby the sheer exclusiveness of that focus becomes itself Eurocentric.

## 8 Autocritique versus interest-convergence

In 1980 the Harvard critical race theorist Derrick Bell published what soon became a foundational article. Bell outlined his theory of 'interest-convergence', explaining that whites had expanded rights for ethnic minorities only when doing so promoted white interests (Bell, 1980). Yet little

energy has been devoted to the problem of interest-convergence on the left itself. Have progressives earnestly pursued their proclaimed norms of autocritique irrespective of any gains or losses? Or have they selected moments of collective self-reflection only to align with ideologically pre-determined goals?

Figures like German, Mélenchon, Wagenknecht, Chomsky, Butler and Žižek have surely sought a politics of citizen empowerment reflecting autocritique vis-à-vis Stalinist and Maoist pasts. Or to take two other examples, the left has accepted autocritique regarding feminist and LGBTQ+ politics by revising earlier white, middle-class theories to encompass minority and non-Western voices. However, for each of these instances, there was always a prospective gain, as these concessions obviously converged with longstanding leftist critiques of Western liberal democracy. After all, Stalinism and Maoism had long become more of a liability than an asset, so the strategy of distancing the left from them patently converged with leftist interests. Similarly, ethnic-minority or third-world voices, far from disrupting feminism or LGBTQ+ politics, already formed part of the Radical Critique. By contrast, where no such interest-convergence has been apparent, as with the prospect of pro-actively spreading public knowledge about leftist atrocities, we find few pro-active initiatives among critical theorists to disseminate public awareness of bleaker leftist pasts via an open and candid autocritique. Clearly, this is not only a leftist sin. Across the political spectrum parties, movements, and interest groups tend to emphasise others' defects whilst downplaying their own, and conservatives' reckonings with history are far worse than those of leftists. Still, leftism has long been presented as distinctive through its traditions of autocritique, which cannot be called autocritique at all when they end up limited by interest-convergence.

So how is autocritique to be restored? Consider some comparisons. The critical theorist Susan Marks argues that human rights cannot be imposed upon the world irrespective of nations' socio-economic realities: we can only understand and redress violations by identifying the 'root causes'. Marks agrees with experts who pinpoint these causes as 'privatisation, deregulation and other processes of economic restructuring, and . . . macro-economic policies adopted at international level' (Marks, 2011, p. 70) yet she urges us to take a step further. Once we have identified these forces we must not acquiesce as if they were necessary and unalterable because such acquiescence reifies abuses, inducing experts to treat them as inevitable, as inherently built into the way the world must run (Marks, 2011, p. 74 (applying Roberto Unger's concept of false necessity)).

Marks names two architects of these age-old patterns, France and Britain, along with a historically more recent player, the United States (Marks, 2011, pp. 65, 66, 76). Yet even where Marks does not name state actors, her emphasis on global economic arrangements assumes that control lies with the powers that have dominated these systems, which have largely been Western. So, to develop greater leftist autocritique one option would be for us to follow Marks's lead by grasping how, for example, Russian oligarchical wealth has grown within those same systems, enabling Moscow to inflict all-out violence even via an internal Kremlin organisation of questionable stability (e.g. Antonova, 2023). A bolder option would be to pose overtly the questions I have already outlined: How has the left reconciled its historical support for violent regimes with its ideologies of stability and prosperity, and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions? How has the left reconciled histories of domination with its ideologies of freedom and national self-determination, and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions? How has the left reconciled histories of subjugation with its ideologies of equal citizenship and where, exactly, has it connected those dots to crises such as Russia's various invasions?

Other writers draw us toward the same path. For example, in his 2005 book *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law*, China Miéville updates Karl Marx's critique of classical liberal rights as 'unreformable' (Miéville, 2005, p. 3), explaining that liberalism poses a problem because elite domination and mass inequality more generally pose a problem. In other words, to borrow again Marks's words, these are 'root causes' of mass injustice. On his own terms, Miéville is concerned about the abuses of power within liberalism because he is concerned with

abuses of power altogether, the former instantiating but not exhausting the latter. Even if Marks's and Miéville's focus is on Western dominated politics and economics this is because all elite domination and mass inequality underpin patterns of violence and repression. Not only is it inadequate to focus primarily on Western sources but, on their own terms, it would be actively misleading to do so.

In a 2019 article Martti Koskenniemi argues that international law sustained elites from 1960 through to 2000 through an 'enchantment', subsequently leading to a 'disenchantment' which has grown since that time (Koskenniemi, 2019). Also echoing Marks, Koskenniemi writes in general terms yet, equally focussed on international law as a matrix for larger political and economic arrangements, names primarily Western actors, notably the US and the European Union. However, as with Marks or Miéville, nothing in the terms of Koskenniemi's own analysis limits us to those actors. Koskenniemi refers to truth and knowledge claims as trump cards played by international elites to prevail in arguments against critics – arguments which, through that very manoeuvre, can never take place in any satisfactory way (Koskenniemi, 2019, pp. 406–411). Of course, that same analysis applies thousand-fold to the Kremlin propaganda machine, a vehicle for monopolising truth and for the colossal citizen-disempowerment thereby wrought. Following Koskenniemi, critical theory must examine a left that was never constrained to its commitments, which always chose with open eyes, and which must far more publicly and candidly scrutinise past choices about the regimes that leftists actively or tacitly supported.

## 9 Revisiting counter-utilitarianism and counter-subjectivism

Some observers might argue that the left cannot bear responsibility for atrocities committed by socialist dictatorships since those regimes had reasons to believe that Western military and economic power posed threats that only strong measures could foil. Such situations of urgency, in turn, commonly lead to abuses irrespective of whether a government stands left, right, or centre on the political spectrum. Without probing this claim's factual basis, indeed assuming it for argument's sake to be true, this type of claim would again raise the problem of counter-utilitarianism. It would invoke a utilitarian calculus of the kind that critical theory cannot admit, namely, that the benefits of maintaining such regimes outweighed the costs in millions of lost and damaged lives.

Another problem entails the element of subjectivism, which would invite us to judge leftists' support for dictatorial regimes according to their intentions at the times the events had occurred. If their intentions were benign then they cannot be blamed for insights that became clearer only at some later time. However, to recall an analogy cited earlier, people in earlier times have often supported exploitative, racist, colonial, or other types of domination with virtuous intentions. Far from putting an end to critical theory, evidence of good intentions becomes a reason for *doing* critical theory to understand how such attitudes could have emerged to justify these abuses of power.

A related objection would be that leftists have at times endorsed platforms proclaimed by socialist dictatorships without approving all that those regimes were doing in practice. However, within critical theory critiques of legal formalism have long admonished that officially proclaimed ideals must be construed with reference to their institutional deployment and real-world effects. For critical theory, a formalist narrative is a purity narrative: it reduces any given system to that system's own proclaimed ideals, either denying bleaker realities or presenting these via a purity narrative as being not the 'true', not the 'real', not the 'genuine' form. Critical theory cannot admit a leftist purity narrative that, while nominally conceding the evils of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Kim Il-Sung, Ceaușescu, or Hoxha, would then peripheralise them by insisting they were not the *real* leftism. After all, defenders of Western liberal democracies could just as cogently argue that 'true' or 'real' liberal democracy has not yet come about, but critical theorists would hardly accept

this as a reason to renounce their projects and programs. Here too, far from being a reason to stop theorising, critical writers would widely view such an argument as a reason why we need to do more theory, because we need to look at the realities lurking beneath the proclaimed ideals. That has been my position throughout this entire article: leftists should not be doing *less* critical theory – they should be doing far more.

Few critical theorists would openly advocate a return to socialist dictatorships, just as few mainstream liberals advocate a return to nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, or patriarchy. Yet critical theory rightly points out that today's disavowal does not obliterate yesterday's wrongdoing or its continuing aftermaths. That observation must pertain equally to the effects of devastation wrought by current and former socialist states that are still wracked with economic stagnation and endemic corruption, along with ferocious nationalisms and all the attendant bigotries (e.g. Minkenberg and Végh, 2023). Similar to purity narratives would be an argument that socialist regimes must not be condemned outright since some populations under those regimes witnessed improvements in their lives. Yet this argument too would recapitulate the utilitarian fallacy. By comparison, critical theory could not accept that nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism or European colonialism were good *insofar as some people benefited or except in their exploitative aspects*, as if high ideals could be antiseptically excised from their bleaker realities.

Another objection might be that in the West we must focus on Western injustices, for example, through public awareness programs attentive to Indian sub-continental, sub-Saharan African, Middle Eastern, indigenous American and other such histories. Without denying the atrocities of Soviet Russia and other socialist regimes, some might argue that these histories have nothing to do systemic injustice in the West. Yet this position would build walls precisely where critical theory ordinarily claims to break them down. For critical theory Western pasts matter not only in the West but also where the West has exerted influence. Similarly, nations affected by former socialist regimes cannot be viewed as a faraway irrelevance.

Another claim might be the strategic one that leftists target liberal democracies because that is where they can wield influence. Certainly, changing minds in Moscow or Beijing seems unlikely but in Washington or Brussels may prove easier. For Western leftists it would seem not only pragmatic but principled to reproach their own governments before berating others. It would seem fair to hold the West to higher ethical standards since liberal democracies proclaim human rights as a universal benchmark, so it would seem justified to apply that benchmark in the first instance to liberal democracies themselves. Of course, by the same reasoning we must hold the left to higher ethical standards since leftists proclaim the overthrow of exploitation and oppression as their benchmark.

Note also that a memory politics of the left need not detract from memory politics of the West, and should be seen as extending critical theory rather than threatening it. Critical theorists can devote more effort to public awareness of bleaker leftist pasts without diverting attention from their initiatives to push for greater public awareness of Western pasts. After all, most critical theorists today do not argue, say, that public education about feminism should be avoided because it risks detracting from public education about racism; or that public education about colonialism risks detracting from public education about LGBTQ+ exclusion, and so forth. The progressive addition of groups and topics has commanded acceptance insofar as these have recapitulated leftist interest-convergence. However, if we acknowledge that the critique of Western liberal democracy obtains because *all* critiques of mass injustice, and complicity within it, obtain, then we need not see a memory politics of the left as undermining a memory politics of the West.

## 10 Conclusion

Critical theorists have vitally contributed to our knowledge of global power. They have chastised Western governments for invoking human rights to justify campaigns that, instead of promoting



overall well-being, have served to expand Western dominance. Accordingly, the Radical Critique must be channelled into public awareness through a memory politics that explains how Western foreign policy links to patterns of exploitation dating back over centuries. Yet the Radical Critique remains valid only insofar as it forms part of something larger, namely, a critique of all political power and its abuses, a critique that pre-supposes autocritique, placing leftist atrocities front and centre in public discussion alongside the atrocities committed by and within liberal democracies. Few leading voices on the left flatly deny an egregious leftist past, yet a pro-active memory politics has slipped from their radars precisely where it would be crucial for helping the public to grasp the context and history surrounding momentous events such as the Ukraine war. According to the left's own criteria, millions of victims of socialist and post-socialist regimes end up nullified when the left factors out their history as if it were irrelevant to positions taken on the left today.

In Žižek's words, 'hypocrisy means you violate the standards you proclaim'. But this admonition can only mean that critical theorists must open themselves up to 'inherent criticism' so that 'when we criticize' leftism we must 'use its own standards' (Žižek, 2022a). Critical theorists can maintain credibility only if they are willing to recognise that public awareness about atrocities committed on the left is as important as awareness about the atrocities committed by liberal democracies. On the left's own terms, this must come about through a pro-active memory politics, beyond the textbooks and seminar rooms, which includes the left's own histories of complicity with those repressive regimes.

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