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Obituary

Norman Geras: “An adult life divided into two distinct chapters”

- Features -

Publication date: Friday 1 November 2013

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The only time I briefly met Norman Geras was at the Marxism 2000 conference, held in Amherst, Massachusetts. Geras was one of three keynote speakers. Angela Davis spoke on the prison-industrial complex, with typical charisma; Gayatri Spivak packed the hall and gave a paper that was interminable and incomprehensible (though to be fair, her work really only suits the printed page).

Fewer people attended Geras's lecture, and he spoke without the charisma of Davis or the superficial complexity of Spivak. He had just written *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* and his talk – from what I recall – recapitulated many of its themes. He railed against the kind of amoral society that could allow cruel poverty to co-exist with the riches of a sportsman like Greg Norman and he outlined his notion that our society rested on mutual indifference: unless I know you, I do not care for you and I cannot expect you to care for me. It was a presentation which might have equally been at home at an activist conference and after the high-theoreticism of some of the papers (there was an ongoing stoush at the conference between Althusserians and others) it was fresh and endearing.

Geras himself was polite and reasonable, in the best sense of those words. When I complimented him afterwards, he was equally warm. I was already familiar with his early work, and I left the conference thinking a great deal of him.

What I didn't know was that at that point Geras stood on the threshold of a series of decisions which would divide his adult life into two distinct chapters.

Born in Rhodesia in 1943, Geras moved to England to study at Oxford in 1962. In the UK, he became a part of the brilliant circle around *New Left Review* and for the best part of thirty years wrote as a ‘classical’ Marxist, defending the essential categories established by the lineage leading from Marx through to Trotsky. His articles on Rosa Luxemburg were acute examinations of the richness of her thought. His most original work, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* argued that Marx did indeed have a conception of human nature.

In the late 1980s, Geras defended Marxism against the theories of the ‘Post-Marxists’ Laclau and Mouffe in a pair of devastating articles that became standard reading of the time. These two articles were of immense importance to those who were still cleaving to Marxism. More importantly, for me at least, they were models of argumentation: Geras was hard, but also showed a fairness too often missing from Left discourse. He showed how the post-Marxist claims were made ‘without regard for normal considerations of logic, of evidence, or of due proportion.’

‘Of due proportion’ – how that phrase rang in my ears the first time I read it! Afterwards, I saw that lack of due proportion again and again in the culture of the Left. How often I've wished that the Left's political culture could hold to Geras's standards!

In his critique, Geras showed that Laclau and Mouffe relied upon an argumentative strategy of ‘All or nothing at all’. That is, on the notorious claim that the economic base determines the political and ideological superstructure, we must answer that either the base determines in the most economic way all superstructures, or we must admit that it does not determine it at all. There can be no middle ground. If the base/superstructure concept is more problematic than Geras presents, his critique of this kind of discursive method is devastating. Again, this kind of either/or method is too often used on the Left today.

Importantly, Geras explained that these kinds of ideas have a material context:

“In the advanced capitalist world from the mid-1960s a generation of intellectuals was radicalised and won for Marxism. Many of them were disappointed in the hopes they formed – some of these wild but let that pass – and for a good while now we have been witnessing a procession of erstwhile Marxists, a sizeable portion of the generational current they shared in creating, in the business of finding their war ‘out’ and away. This exit is always presented, naturally, in the guise of an intellectual advance. Those of us unpersuaded of it cannot but remind its proponents of what they once knew by seem instantly to forget as they make their exit, namely, that the evolution of ideas has a social and material context. We cannot help wondering how far their recent trajectory may have been influenced by a range of factors which they themselves would doubtless prefer to overlook: the pressures upon them of age and professional status; the pressures of the political time and environment we have been passing through, not very congenial in the West at least, to the sustenance of revolutionary ideas; and then the lure of intellectual fashion, a consideration not to be underrated by any means.”

If there were reasons to question Marxism, Geras argued, the claims of the post-Marxists weren't among them. Rather, he found Marxism lacking on the field of morality. He began to shift his interests in this direction, first in a couple of articles, then in his books. According to Geras, the definitions of morality and ethics given by Trotsky in his book *Their Morals and Ours*, for example – that the good is whatever furthers the class struggle – were signally inadequate.

Geras' attempts to develop a new moral structure for Marxists were laudable but they were also the moment that he started to engage more and more with the abstract universalist principles of liberalism: ‘human rights,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom’ and so on. Unlike, say, Norberto Bobbio, Geras was never able to reconcile these two worlds. The concerns of liberalism began to overwhelm the Marxism to which he had adhered his whole life.

Recent obituaries of Geras have focused on this last period, where, to the shock of many (including me and his former comrades at *New Left Review*), Geras began to move to the Right. He launched his well-known ‘Normblog’, partly to explain his support for the invasion of Iraq and his support of the Israeli state. He was co-author of the *Euston Manifesto*, written by a group of leftists who called for a ‘new alignment’ and which codified his concerns.

The manifesto reached out beyond the radical Left to ‘democrats’. Its principles stated that the writers stood for: ‘no apology for tyranny’ and opposed ‘Anti-Americanism’. It's not hard to see how these principles – borrowed from Western governments – were used to justify intervention into the Middle East. Geras became the Right's favourite ‘Blairite Marxist’, a kind of intellectual complement to Christopher Hitchens's vacuous journalism.

Geras seemed to forget the very things he had claimed the post-Marxists had forgotten. Worse, he forgot all the arguments against imperial interventions like those in Iraq: that this method of overthrow of a dictatorial regime will never result in the liberation that Geras was claiming.

In the later years, I could not bear to read Geras's blog, though I understand it became very popular.

The friends Geras made during his final years are now writing his obituaries. I suppose that is not surprising, but they provide a skewed view of the man, based mostly on his last decade. In his polemics with Laclau and Mouffe, Geras noted that ‘times change and people change. Their ideas change; develop, progress – and regress ... But each person has to take his leave or make her peace, as the case may be, in a way comfortable to his or her own sense of dignity.’

For me, the Geras with the greatest dignity was the author of those lines, the Geras who sought to develop a theory

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of human liberation, not the one who supported the imperial adventures of Western governments. He is the man I choose to remember.

[First published at Overland Literary Journal](#)