

# Interview: The Twenty-First Century Left will be Anti-Capitalist

Wednesday 8 May 2019, by [TRAVERSO Enzo](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2019).

**Enzo Traverso interviewed by Vincent Martign about the current state of the international left and its future prospects.**

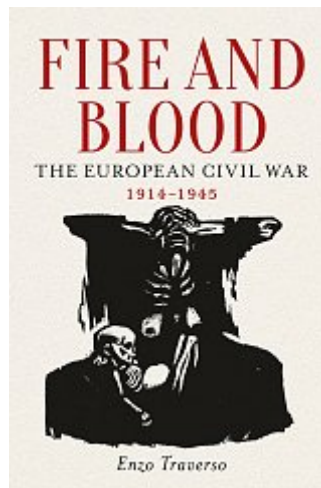


**Vincent Martign - How do you see the situation of the left in France today?**

Enzo Traverso - Both in France and elsewhere, the situation of the left is bad but not desperate. There are several signs showing that something is beginning to move, a molecular process that has not yet reached a moment of coagulation. France is undergoing the same dynamics affecting the left in Europe and the United States.

**You reject the idea that the left is dead?**

The left is not dead, but it has still not managed to overcome the defeats of the twentieth century, which left it models that are no longer operational. I will mention four of these. First of all, the left as revolutionary force, embodied by communism, which saws taking power in quasi-military terms. Then communism as a system of power - 'actually existing socialism' - which collapsed in the late 1980s. We are still paying the price of this legacy, which is very heavy to bear, as the very idea of a different society was discredited. Then there is a third left, third-worldist, which is today called decolonial. This has transformed the colonized peoples into historical subjects, but has also experienced biting disillusion. This model no longer functions, as shown by the Arab spring of 2011, which abandoned it. Finally, the fourth, social-democratic left, was able to appear as an effective alternative to communism by achieving social conquests in a democratic framework. But if we draw a retrospective balance-sheet, its 'parasitical' dimension seems to me very clear. It was able to play this role because capitalism was forced to humanize itself in the face of the communist threat. Once this threat disappeared, capitalism took on a neoliberal, unchecked face, and inequalities exploded, while social democracy has exhausted its trajectory and become social-liberal.



*Fire and Blood* by Enzo Traverso [1]

### **Should the left cut itself off from its past?**

It should overcome it, which means developing a critical history rather than a renouncement. All the movements that have arisen in the last ten years – Occupy Wall Street, the *indignados*, Syriza, *Nuit Debout* – have in common their rediscovery of an anarchist or libertarian sensibility, which was marginalized in the twentieth century. This is expressed in horizontal practices of direct democracy, the rejection of old organizational apparatuses, the pleasure of collective action, the quest for new ‘forms of life’, but also a tremendous distrust of any form of political representation. All these have generated rich experiments, creative and interesting, which could in due course produce something new, but which at the moment are still ephemeral – isolated laboratories.

### **We have the impression today of a dominance of conservative or even reactionary ideas. Is it still possible to be on the left in Western societies?**

Yes, even if this is difficult. Neoliberalism is far more than just an economic system: it is an anthropological model premised on profitability, individualism, competition, the reification of social relations, the privatization of desires. It has swallowed up social democracy, which has completely internalized it, and eclipsed communism, which appears as a vestige of a bygone age. In this context, the deep malaise of society is often channelled by the far right, which always reformulates its old recipes: the search for scapegoats, authoritarianism, return to sovereignty and closure of borders... The result is a reactionary, xenophobic and racist wave on a continental scale. In Italy we now have a hybrid coalition that is quite monstrous, combining a xenophobic policy towards refugees with social policies that the left should have implemented long ago. Suddenly the left finds itself paralysed and unpopular.

### **Do you share the point of view that the left has lost the sense of common good because of identity struggles on behalf of minorities?**

The struggles of the left in favour of minorities were just, they made possible considerable advances that should not be denied, even if I would not define these as ‘identity-based’. But it is true that these were often accompanied by policies of social regression. The rhetoric of human rights has become the only language of a ‘post-ideological’ left, and has frequently been transformed into an alibi for its anti-social policies. The European Union has made this hypocrisy a fine art – starving Greece with the one hand, while organizing commemorations of the Holocaust with the other; one the one hand proclaiming human rights, on the other closing frontiers to refugees. The result is the dismantling of social rights and the rise of xenophobia. In this context, the idea of blocking populism

and the far right by championing the European Union is like calling on pyromaniacs to put out a fire. In no European country has the left in government been capable of a discourse of truth about immigration.

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## **P.S.**

•Verso Books, 7 May 2019:

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4312-the-twenty-first-century-left-will-be-anti-capitalist>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] PaperbackEbook Hardback

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