

Ukraine And The Left

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Santiago Alba Rico on how a section of the right and left agree that it is OK to bomb civilians, provided that those are the bad guys, for they share the same nihilistic view of international legality.

The statements made by María Jamardo, a radical journalist, on a Telecinco programme have, quite rightly, scandalised many: 'Neither those who bombed were so bad nor those who were bombed were so good', referring to the bombing of Guernica by the Nazis in 1937, a crime invoked by the Ukrainian president in his appearance before the Spanish Congress of Deputies last Tuesday. Zelenskiy, misinformed, thought he had found a universal symbol capable of stirring the indignant imagination of all Spaniards in his favour; he was unaware that our own 'Azov battalion', much more numerous than the Ukrainian one, still justifies Franco's coup d'état and is grateful for German aid against the evil communists and the perverse Basque separatists.

However, what Zelenskiy did not know, apart from this, is that his words would also upset a section of the left (that which I call the 'Staliban') which has considered that Jamardo's words, which are monstrous in the case of Spain, do also seem to apply to Russia and Ukraine: the Russian bombers are not so bad and the Ukrainian bombers are not so good. Moreover, the Russians are somehow the 'good guys', because they are bombing the Ukrainian Nazis. A section of the right and a section of the left agree that it is OK to bomb civilians in another country, provided that those bombed are 'bad'. They share the same nihilistic view of international law and legality while they disagree on the content of the evil to be extirpated.

Staliban

This Staliban argument - multiplied in tweets over the last few days - is one of the protean procedures, some smarter, some blunter, employed by a 'left' that shamelessly clones the propaganda of the Russian aggressor. It's not that they don't know not to trust the propaganda of an invading power; they have always done so, and rightly so, when the invader was the US or NATO. You cannot give credibility, we know, to what a murderer says; if I want to believe his words, this entails exculpating or mitigating his involvement in the crime. In order to really trust Russian propaganda, then in the end, as has happened in the past with American propaganda, it is necessary to invert the victim/victimizer relationship and attribute full responsibility for what is happening to the one being bombed. If we prove that the Ukrainians, puppets of NATO and the US, are to blame, then we can believe and repeat what the Kremlin says.

This role reversal, of remarkable ethical dishonesty, is the propagandistic norm of imperial aggressions that we criticised it in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, many leftists succumb to this norm which operates somewhere between denial and fake contextualisation, and they have no qualms about countering mainstream pro-Ukrainian thinking with mainstream pro-invasion propaganda. The Bucha killings have triggered such real delusions. Journalists on the ground - people like Alberto Sicilia, Hibai Arbide or Mikel Ayestaran - have been scolded for taking survivors' testimonies seriously and not talking about 'alleged war crimes', a judicial caution that, in reality, some would

like to extend to the war itself: 'alleged' Russian invasion, 'alleged' shelling of Ukraine, 'alleged' siege of Mariupol. Russia cannot be doing what is attributed to it because it is the victim; and it is therefore also the victim of enemy propaganda. Fine analysts and foolish pamphleteers, politicians masquerading as journalists and Taliban crackpots share this horizon of 'fact' and the full set of their discursive similarities: if Russia invades Ukraine, it is the US that invades Ukraine; if Russia bombs Ukraine, it is NATO that bombs Ukraine. What is happening is not happening, but the opposite. Denial cannot be confined to the Bucha massacres then; the Bucha massacres can be denied, and it is treated as if it were the other way round, this because Putin's aggression and therefore its consequences are denied at the root. If it were not tragic, it would be a heart-warming sight to see so many adult people, sometimes reasonable, sometimes even friends, swept up by this childish need to believe in the goodness or at least the legitimacy of 'our' favourite criminal.

Nostalgia

And why is it 'our' favourite? They strike us as being very much like old Cold War gloom. Some, and even very young people, succumb to the illusion because, despite their alliances with the world's extreme right, despite Putin's declarations against Lenin, they see a continuity between Putin and the Bolshevik revolution. There is a Soviet ember in the anti-system rebelliousness of a certain left, just as there is an ember of Francoist nostalgia in the anti-system rebelliousness of the right. Most of them succumb, in any case, because they continue to think, in the final analysis, of the disturbing plurality of the new world order, but with some years of delay; that is, they must be against the absolute hegemony of the US and NATO.

Their position reveals a kind of negative and, in fact, very narcissistic ethnocentrism: it is 'our' Western institutions that bring all the evil into the world. Against them, not only are any means permissible; it is worse: against them, we end up claiming, as being politically and socially superior, atrocious dictatorships (think, for example, of Bashar Al-Assad). Then we overlook or defend other imperialisms, such as the Russian one, that made a criminal intervention in Syria. It cannot be ruled out that, should Saudi Arabia one day get too close to China and the theocratic regime in Riyadh, now a friend of the US, be challenged and pressured by the White House, that its rule Salman would end up appearing sympathetic to us and the stonings revolutionary and progressive.

This role reversal (between victims and perpetrators) often makes use of two expedients, two thought experiments. One is geopolitical fatalism; that is, geopolitics reduced to realpolitik. The other is moral historicism, history conceived as a war against evil. The latter is the one that, from the left, reproduces Jamardo's phrase: accepting that Ukraine was being bombed (which has yet to be proven, we are told), it somehow deserves it because of its rapprochement with the EU, NATO and the US; the Ukrainians are not as good as they seem, they are not as good as the media tell us. Suddenly, the same left that rightly temporarily brushed aside Saddam Hussein's bloody dictatorship to condemn, all the more correctly, the US invasion of Iraq, is now becoming casuistic and fussy. It is necessary to know whether and to what extent Ukraine is a democracy, to scan through Zelenskiy's biography, to denounce every Nazi group and to be very sensitive - while justifying or muting the tyranny of the Baath Party in Syria - to the otherwise unjustifiable suspension of political parties in Ukraine. We must be morally intolerant of the unforgivable, but isolated, war crimes of the Ukrainian army while Russian massacres, Russian bombings and Russia's own invasion of Ukraine are considered merely 'alleged'.

This kind of criminalisation of the victim is usually inscribed in a geopolitical fatalism summed up in a thought that, even in the most reasoned and best-documented texts, more or less assumes this formula: 'That's what happens when you stick your finger in the eye of the old Russian Bear'. The same left that considers it legitimate and even imperative for Latin America to free itself from the traditional US yoke, that denounced the Bay of Pigs invasion and celebrated the Cuban victory

against it, that is justifiably indignant at every change of government rigged by Washington, accepts as a diktat of realpolitik Russia's right to have its own 'backyard'.

A kind of mechanical fatalism forces us to consider the consequences of sticking one's finger in the eye of the Bear, for the one who cannot avoid the claws, while, on the contrary, one must revolutionarily pierce old Uncle Sam's hat and pluck the American Eagle. Poking one's finger in the Bear's eye is reprehensible; plucking a feather from the Eagle's breast is commendable, legitimate, necessary, to be celebrated. As a consequence of the combination of these two logics – geopolitical fatalism and moral historicism – this section of the left never waits for the facts because it never expects history to produce any facts: it knows in advance which peoples are acting spontaneously and which are being manipulated by NATO and the US; and it decides, therefore, which peoples have the right to rebel against tyranny, domestic or foreign, and which must submit to the necessities of the struggle against US imperialism. In this way, it decrees in advance that the facts in Ukraine – the massacre in Bucha, for example – is Ukrainian propaganda while Russian propaganda, viewed in the mirror world, is an incontestable fact. The invader is the real victim and does not lie; and that is why we replicate and disseminate its versions with the mystical outcome of one who, against the blinkers of 'dominant thought', has direct and privileged access to the truth.

Elitism

Because there is also a lot of elitism in this Staliban left that likes to be right against common sense and against common mortals who are seen as trapped in the guts of the system, blind and meek. This elitism is, in spirit, the same as that which is ostensibly against the 'system', that which we have seen among the Covid denialists and anti-vaxxers during the pandemic; and it is not strange, therefore, that here the right and the left, Javier Couso and César Vidal, Iker Jiménez and Beatriz Talegón, flat-earthers and anti-imperialists, converge.

As I have written before, where the shared institutional and media frameworks of credibility have been weakened, maximum disbelief becomes the threshold of maximum credulity. When you no longer believe in anything, you are on the verge of believing in anything. We don't even have a shared lie, so the lie that is shared by the fewest people is the one we find the most palatable and therefore the truest. The web provides thousands of niches to accommodate this desperate desire for 'distinction', marking oneself out in this way. In the case of leftism, it is more painful and less justifiable, because its elitism, the fruit of impotent opposition to political intervention, aggravates this impotence by separating itself from the common sense it would like to attract. They isolate themselves in their 'reason', in the face of the world and, in this way, besides being unreasonable they become politically useless, or even dangerous.

Geopolitical fatalism and paranoid elitism, which are the cross-over sources of the same syndrome, end up denying the autonomy, will and agency of others. They, who 'know', can do nothing; the others, who do something, are purely pawns of evil on the geostrategic chessboard. They thus inscribe their permanent negative ruminations in a context from which politics is absent. And they resign themselves to delegating their impotent reason to the surrogate action of any power destructive enough to disrupt the established world order. Thus, the same leftists who defend, locally, the right to sovereignty, deny it internationally to the Ukrainians, who are asked, in the name of pacifism, to surrender to the power of the strongest, provided it is not American.

Western-centric anti-Westernism is suspicious of any desire for emancipation that does not pass through the anti-imperialist grids of the old left, which continues to think and think and think the world, as Marx said of Don Quixote, 'to the measure of an order that no longer exists'. This has already happened in Syria, as the enormous Yassin al-Haj Saleh, one of our greatest intellectuals, a communist, imprisoned for sixteen years in the dictatorship's jails, explained in an extraordinary

article in which he even criticises the position of the admired Chomsky for his ethnocentric blindness. The obsession with the US in a disordered world, in which evil has become fragmented, decentralised and emancipated from the US monopoly, rightly points out, for example, the power of NATO, but undervalues as subordinate, subsidiary or harmless other dangers – to democracy and the freedom of peoples – that nevertheless determine the individual and collective destiny of a large part of the planet. Chomsky, of course, has no illusions about Putin; quite the contrary. But his anti-American neurosis led him to abandon those in Syria who gambled and, in many cases, lost their lives fighting the dictatorship; and to nurture in Ukraine the thesis that the Russian invasion is somehow an automatic response to NATO's encirclement.

Putinisation

We contextualise and contextualise and contextualise; and we suspect and suspect and suspect and suspect. And by dint of contextualising and suspecting we dissolve Russian responsibility into a perpetual war between equivalent evils, a massive inter-imperialist conflict, an impersonal capitalist crisis, a 'natural' consequence of civilisational decline, and so on. We become so preoccupied with history and 'structures' that we melt into it Putin's decision to invade a sovereign country and generate thousands of dead and millions of refugees. If it made any sense to invoke international legality against the invasion of Iraq, it makes sense to invoke it against the invasion of Ukraine; if it still makes sense to distinguish between negotiations, pressure, sanctions and military aggression, it makes sense to denounce Putin's Russia as solely responsible for a new situation in which world peace and planetary survival, along with the lives of Ukrainians and Russians, are tragically endangered.

Any reason Putin might have had to oppose NATO was left behind from the very moment his army crossed the Ukrainian border and, with it, the line between geopolitical movement and armed aggression. There are no automatisms in history. NATO is responsible for mismanaging victory in the Cold War, just as the European powers mismanaged Germany's defeat in World War I. But the Ukrainians are not responsible for mismanaging the Cold War. But the Ukrainians are no more victims of NATO than the Jews were victims of the Treaty of Versailles. Moreover, it is a terrible thing to say, but Putin has shown that there is currently no alternative to NATO. The European left should be thinking about proposals for the future instead of preaching a pacifism that makes a lot of sense in Russia, against its government's decision to wage war, but which in Ukraine is synonymous with submission and surrender. The Ukrainians have decided not to surrender and no one, it seems to me, should reproach them for that.

The left is losing not only the chance to sympathise, against Vox [the Spanish far-right party] and alongside a sensible majority, with a just cause; it is also losing the chance to criticise Europe for what it deserves to be criticised for, for its slow 'Putinisation', for which the institutions are also largely to blame. I have said it before: Europe has neither gas nor oil and is therefore tragically dependent on less and less secure sources. All it has are 'values', 'practices', and 'models of political intervention' which it is rapidly losing without ever fully consolidating them. It has often betrayed itself abroad by supporting ill-fated economic or military interventions, or by closing borders to migrants and refugees, to such an extent that for a large part of the world, immersed in an unprecedented crisis, it is no longer an example to follow. On the other hand, however, it has also come about that this distrustful world, in the midst of de-democratisation, has penetrated Europe.

Putin had already stealthily invaded the EU through far-right parties which, in Hungary, France, Italy and Spain, have far more support than their Ukrainian counterparts. In this difficult situation, our task must be to 'denazify' Europe from within by deepening democracy, i.e. through social, civil and economic policies that consolidate and enhance our democratic rights. If we do not push for a fairer, more democratic, more independent, greener, more hospitable EU, it will be of no use if Putin

loses the war in Ukraine because he will have won it in Europe.

This is the paradox: an invasion has become a war thanks to Ukrainian resistance. It is a war of independence. It is a priority to prevent this war from involving NATO; it is a priority to support, defend and secure Ukraine's independence. Our warmongering must be limited by the need to avoid international conflict and nuclear confrontation; our pacifism by the need to assert justice and international law. That is the dilemma, I think, that the left should be arguing about, not about whether or not to applaud Zelenskiy in parliament or whether the Azov battalion is all Nazis or also contains anarchists, or – for goodness sake – whether the survivors of Bucha are lying or not. The dilemma is so great, so full of dangers and uncertainties, so demanding of all our intelligence and all our serenity, that we should not make ourselves guilty of blurring the one thing that the left, like everyone else, should be clear about, clear about who is the attacked and who the aggressor; who we have to support – at least mentally – and who we have to condemn.

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