From Identity to Individualist: A Nihilist's Personal History in Leftism

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Note: In this piece, I will be using ''leftism' and 'identity politics' more or less interchangeably, due to their often heavy overlap.

I grew up in a liberal household to liberal parents, and I had always had a preoccupation (some might say an obsession) with justice. From a young age, I would rage against the injustices committed against the trees felled behind our house, the mice killed in the snap traps, the insects caught by the glue paper, the deer shot by the hunters. "It's not fair!" was a mantra oft screamed from my tiny mouth, and as I grew, it hardly changed.

In high school, I became acquainted with an ideology eager to exploit my enthusiasm for justice. I learned that the whole world was unfair – even more so than I had realized on my own. Same sex marriage, reproductive rights, and bodily autonomy became my first interests – predictably, since I discovered I was a queer bisexual and these things quickly became relevant to me in one way or another. Through these, though, I discovered more. The police shooting in Ferguson of Mike Brown introduced me to the idea that racism was alive and well, and learning this was an angry shock to my sheltered little white life. I couldn't scream my will into being anymore, and I wanted to know what to do.

'Listen', responded the Activists (capital A – they presented themselves as The Only Authority). 'Listen and do as we say.'

I learned all the Correct Language and the Correct Actions, so I would not be Problematic. I cringed and sucked through my teeth at all the Problematic People in my tiny rural town, and (I'm sure) a lot of people got very sick of me. I learned to be pure in thought, word, and action, so that I would not risk the ire of the Activists. There are certain things that must never be said, certain questions that must never be asked. Never question the People of Color.

My exposure to the Activists was purely online, primarily through Facebook, but after my first altercation, (where I failed to recognize a latinx queer on sight and was roundly shouted down by the whole group) I became much quieter. I listened without speaking – as white people were supposed to do. I didn't realize until much later how much anxiety began to build in me whenever I entered these spaces, fearing that any misstep would result in my admonishment and potentially, my expulsion.

Still, I was unwilling to leave the Left behind. If this was justice, then I must submit myself, however uncomfortably, to the greater good.

Never mind my questions. Stuff them down deep.

I wondered how it was that white people were simultaneously supposed to 'shut up and listen', 'make space for POC', 'don't speak for POC', but also 'put yourselves on the front lines', 'call out problematic speech in white people'.

I questioned how, exactly, I was supposed to avoid speaking over POC and always 'stay in my lane' when POC I knew personally were telling me that they thought the talking points I got from the Activists were bullshit.

I stressed over wearing 'cultural' jewelry and clothing that I had purchased from people of that culture, knowing the party line instructed us to support POC artisans, but also knowing that if I wore these items, I would be subject to the same scrutiny as someone who had purchased them from a trendy department store.

I self-flagellated over past transgressions such as having dreadlocks, without ever really understanding what I had done wrong besides doing something I was forbidden from doing.

But I never dared to ask anyone else – least not the Activists.

I would like to tell you that my divorce from the Left was self-driven. I would like to tell you that I recognized the oppressive dynamics all by myself. But until I met others who were questioning the Left as well, I assumed that the only counter-faction was the Right, and I had grown up surrounded by enough of the Right to know I wasn't interested in their brand. I saw no justice there, no world improvement.

The first time I met a post-leftist, (or if we're being honest, the third or fourth time – the conditioning runs deep) I finally felt free to ask the questions I had buried. I felt free to poke holes where I had carefully preserved the delicate framework before. But this was not enough to topple everything – oh no. I still held on to the skeleton of justice.

'Surely they mean well,' I reasoned. 'Surely this is an overgrown over-extension of a fundamentally good and just framework.'

And as if called by fate, I began to meet people who had been 'called out'; people who had made transgressions so egregious that they had been banished from the circles of the Left. These transgressions ranged from accusations of physical abuse to vague allegations of being manipulative (typically without any specific incidents cited, but with full expectation that The Community support the victim without question).

Although each unique, these cases had common threads that ran through them.

As is customary in the Left, most began with a mediation and an accountability process – where a third party would meet with the accused and the accuser and theoretically, help them to reach an agreement about how the accused would atone for their behavior and improve themselves so they would not repeat it. Many of the folks I met either met these goals or were on their way to meeting them. Usually, meeting these goals was the condition for avoiding a call-out.

However, the accusers who had seemingly felt powerless in their interactions with the accused, now found that they had all the power. They controlled what actions the accused must take. They controlled the accused's place in the social hierarchy, and often, the accused's physical safety in the world.

This scenario, which in theory was sterile and completely just, became a tool for revenge. Regardless of whether the conditions of the accountability process were met, the call-out came. And

as the call-out spread, across the internet and across the 'community', it became social suicide to associate with the accused. Being an 'apologist' is nearly on par with being an abuser.

The accused became a pariah. No defense, apology, or self-improvement is good enough when you are marked for life.

I began to wonder where the restoration was in this 'restorative justice'.

And if we're honest, this is where the tower I had built for myself finally fell. I had labored so long under the belief that we were all working selflessly, tirelessly, towards justice for all. When the veil was lifted, it became clear to me that the left was infested with wolves in sheeps' clothing, manipulating the good will and efforts of earnest, well-meaning people.

Or, maybe we were all a little wolfish – although I had fancied myself a pure, earnest person, I could not deny my efforts to lord my 'woke' trivia over 'non-woke' friends. I had not set the dogs on anyone myself by issuing any statements, but I had helped to share and publicize them. I had not written any Everyday Feminism articles on why all your language and actions are racist/sexist/oppressive, but I had read them, shared them, and actively policed the people around me.

I just wasn't interested in it anymore. I wasn't interested in helping to create a society of unquestionable rigid social mores. I wasn't interested in silently tallying each 'problematic' misstep of every individual around me – or quietly policing my own speech in constant fear that someone was doing the same to me. And I wasn't interested in perpetuating the socially assigned identities that fed the hierarchies I wanted so badly to tear down.

Unlearning the set of behaviors that make up identity politics was a lot less about deciding I didn't care about hurting people (as I suspect a lot of leftists might assume) and a lot more about listening to what individuals wanted for themselves. Identity politics had taught me that any given social interaction came with a list of rules – and any transgression or mistake could be potentially very serious. For me, these rules became very isolating. I avoided interactions with people for fear of harming them or offending them.

When I began shedding these behaviors, I became more open and comfortable with the people around me. Rather than adhering to these strict rules, we felt free to communicate our individual desires. I could tell my friends that they could touch me freely, without feeling obligated to ask me each time. I could assure them that if I didn't want to be touched at a particular time or in a particular way, I would communicate that to them.

My 'POC' friends could tell me what words and actions they were personally comfortable with, rather than feeling compelled to uphold some sort of community rules or morals.

My friends of all different socially constructed identities – by race, gender, sex, etc – could behave as they wished, without being concerned that they were fulfilling stereotypes or betraying their identities.

It's far from utopian, but as leftism continues to demonstrate, utopia is impossible without authoritarianism.

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