



**HISTORY** **THE LEFT** **THE '90S** **DECEMBER 26, 2022/JANUARY 2, 2023**

# How the Left Was Lost in the 1990s—but Found Its Way Again

*In the 1990s, the left was embattled and diminished. But it kept the flame burning just enough for a new generation to come along and give it oxygen.*

By Naomi Klein

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**Tending the flame:** A protestor at the 1999 World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle. (*Sion Touhig / Sygma via Getty Images*)

I came of age in the '90s, and my first steady job in journalism was as editor of a small left-wing magazine that subsisted on atrophying subscriptions and crashing arts

grants and was, in those years, perpetually on the verge of publishing its last issue. The publication, called *This Magazine*, was founded in the 1960s, when left ideas were a roaring cultural fire. But by the mid-'90s, the fire was down to its embers, and it felt as if all we could do was blow to keep it from turning to dust. At one of my first story meetings, I suggested we stage a public funeral procession for the left, just to mark and mourn the passing of so many of its core ideas. Instead, we screamed ourselves hoarse insisting that Francis Fukuyama was wrong and history was not over; that Margaret Thatcher had lied to us—there were and always had been alternatives; and that corporate trade deals were not “free” but came at a terrible cost to workers, ways of life, and the natural world.

I often pictured us—the relatively small and marginal group that still identified as leftists in those days—as jamming our foot in the heavy door of history so that the full weight of neoliberal power would not succeed in slamming it shut completely. We bruised some toes in our efforts, but we did hold it open a crack. Just enough for a new generation to come along and kick it wide open. Granted, this is not the kind of feat that people sing songs of triumph about—“They jammed open history’s door! A bit!”—but it wasn’t nothing, either.

We got some things right in those years and got others wrong. We were ardently internationalist and excited by the power of the still-young Internet to weave movements across borders, to forge alliances between workers in places like Indonesia and consumers in places like France. But in North America and Europe, far too much of the self-

identified left was white, and many of its members reduced everything to class, failing to see the ways that white supremacy acted as jet fuel for capitalism's roaring engine.



## **Are Aliens Who Visit Earth Likely to Be Socialist?**

We were right to call out those trade deals, as well as the institutions of global corporate governance like the World Economic Forum and its annual Davos summit, but we were timid when it came to naming capitalism as the driving force, opting instead for euphemisms like “corporate globalization” and “market fundamentalism.” We had a strong analysis about the way the system undercut wages and made every place feel placeless, but many of us were slow to see how the profit-hungry quest to cut costs was the same one driving the climate crisis. Most limiting of all, the Cold War's anti-communism had rooted itself so deeply in the collective imagination in those years that, even when many of us did start defining ourselves as anti-capitalist, we remained fearful, for far too long, of articulating a coherent vision for a postcapitalist world: one ecologically rooted, feminist, democratic, decolonial, and socialist.

There were exceptions, of course—people still willing to talk of socialism and revolution. But they were mostly sectarians who held on to the frozen analysis of capital that the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his landmark 1988 autopsy of the British left, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, described as “historically anachronistic.” The political theorist Wendy Brown, writing a decade later, diagnosed a left “caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.”

My first book, *No Logo*, came out a few months later, defiantly dressed in capitalism’s own shiny clothing. Its analysis was far from perfect, but in attempting to find the weaknesses in the new generation of disembodied brands manufactured through a web of plausibly deniable subcontractors, at least its spirit wasn’t ghostly. It tried to engage with the world that was emerging in the rubble of the left’s losses and defeats rather than with a world that might have been.

In 2020, the year the world locked down to stop the spread of a novel virus, *No Logo* turned 20 and I turned 50. The convergence of those round numbers felt heavy to me; holding them helped me to see that we are once again in a new era, and it is no time for frozen, ghostly analysis. Capitalism has changed again. Our physical world is changing fast; the right has changed in new and frightening ways. The good news is that the left has changed too. It is no longer a ragtag crew of anachronistic die-hards. Its analysis is becoming more mainstream and its numbers are vast. Left

leadership is finally as diverse as it always should have been, with a new vision and boldness flowing from hard-won experience at the front lines of capitalism's many barbarities.

The left's greatest challenge, I would hazard, is that the colonization of our world by capital has been so complete that market logics, including the logic of corporate branding, are now deeply embedded inside the left itself. These ways of being and thinking, which pit all against all in the very antithesis of solidarity, now shape and form our individual identities, group identities, and organizational identities—not to mention the informational arteries that bind us all in conversation. The shedding of these cruel logics—and their replacement with ethics of care, reciprocity, and love—must be the next great liberation movement. Only then will we know that the '90s are gone for good. **N**

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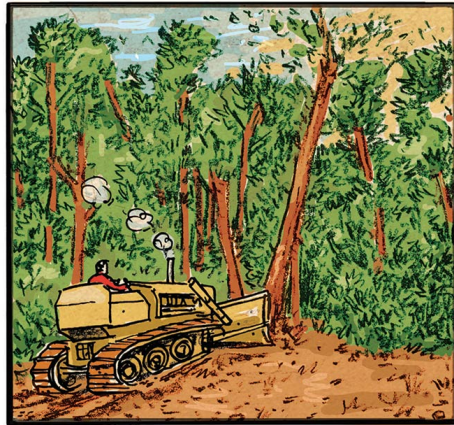


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By Peter Kuper

DECEMBER 23, 2022



(Peter Kuper)

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