



Episode 792: Old Left, New Left, Frankfurt School, and Today

Guest: Nikos Sotirakopoulos

WOODS: I think the way I want to tackle this is first I'd like you to give an overview of just the book; secondly I want to ask you to define some terms; and then I want to really get into your argument. So if you're talking to somebody who isn't a super familiar with the different manifestations of the left, how would you explain in simple layman's terms what your argument is?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: So the argument of the book in 20 seconds is the following: because the left since, let's say, the 1960s has more or less lost the battle with capitalism on the level of providing an alternative and better economic and political system, it has changed gears and ceased being a distinctly political movement, which means having an alternative economic or political vision. So since the 1960s and mainly today, it is mostly a system of, let's say, moralistic grievances, which does not anymore wish to change the world towards a future that will be better and more affluent, but it has more or less become a conservative force viewing the future and change with fear and viewing people as more or less vulnerable subjects that are not to be trusted and thus need a strong state basically to save them from themselves.

WOODS: All right, now having said that, let's talk about terms that probably some people get impatient with. "New" this, "Old" this, "Old Left," "New Left" –

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Yes.

WOODS: But these terms actually are really helpful in understanding how different the New Left was from the Old Left in its emphases and so on. So can you tackle that?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Sure. So the Old Left, we can understand it more as the labor movement of the beginning of the 20th century, or like the communist and the socialist movements, in which case the idea was we have a radically alternative view about how the economy should run. And the aim is to gather as many people as possible and gain political power, and through this political power we can change the world. And the main criticism of the Old Left towards capitalism is that capitalism is a system with limits. So capitalism cannot deliver the goods, whereas there is this other system, socialism, which is way more efficient at providing goods for the working class and providing a better and more affluent future for the working class.

Now with the New Left, basically the New Left changed the discussion. They realized that they have lost the battle with capitalism, so the new thing is that they moved the

goal posts. So now the criticism is not that capitalism does not provide the goods; the problem now is that suddenly capitalism provides too much. And now the problem is abundance, and what's the problem with abundance? That it makes us more materialistic, or now we live in a consumerist society. Like, see how the left reacts every time on Black Friday, and you will get an idea about that.

And also the philosophical references of the Old Left was mostly, it had to do with ideas of the Enlightenment and of modernity, which means that every human being can be guided by reason, that people are capable of self-rule, and thus the future is promising. Whereas with the New Left, it is the idea that people are not really necessarily rational, because they get bamboozled by capitalism or by consumerism. And also the fact that we have made all this progress is now a problem, because we are ruining the environment and because basically we have reached some limits. So the New Left is basically an ideology of limits. It's the idea that we have gone too far, and we need to stop.

And also it is an ideology that is mostly based not on a universalist message that we are all together and we can achieve something; it is mostly based on what today we'd understand as identity politics, that, for example, different groups of people think in different ways, and this means that, for example, your kinds of interests are not the same as the interests of someone from a different race or from a different color. And not only do you not have similar interests, but also you cannot understand things in the same way. For example, this is today, you hear a lot of people speaking like, Oh, as a white person I think this, or, As a woman, I believe this – as if your biology plays a role in how you understand reality.

WOODS: All right, let's also talk about, now that we're getting all these pieces of the puzzle put together, the fact that to some degree the New Left also – if we're thinking about the early to mid 1960s before it goes more off the rails. I mean, I think the whole left is always off the rails, but let's just say when it was its original form –

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Yes.

WOODS: – there were people, even including Murray Rothbard, who said the New Left represents a step forward. How so?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Of course. So this is what explains that Murray Rothbard was a fellow traveler of the New Left in its early stages. So the thing is at that point, the Old Left was for very good reasons discredited. So socialism was proven basically a moral, a political, and an economic disaster, and at the same time the welfare/warfare state was not very inspiring for young people. And they wanted some change, and this change was mostly cultural. It had to do with people wanting more freedom, freedom of expression. Of course there were the huge issues with how groups, like black people or women, were falling behind in the 1960s. So all these movements for liberation, for free speech, they had a very positive potential, because actually they started as movements for more freedom.

But because I think the philosophical premises were quite unstable and because they got to mix with other ideas that were popular at that time – basically, irrational ideas or ideas around relativism or with the counter culture– quite soon this movement

degenerated either to oblivion or to what someone calls in the book adventurism. So for example, marginal groups doing terrorist attacks, because they thought that everything is lost, so nihilism is the only answer. But the majority of these people in a way thought that the answer does not lie out there; we cannot change the world, so maybe we should change ourselves. We should focus on our psyche, and this is why you see these movements kind of drifting towards New Age and spirituality.

And this is where Rothbard says, actually, this is now hopeless. Of course you have other people like Ayn Rand, who from the very beginning said this is hopeless because these people do not have stable philosophical roots. But I think that yes, indeed, there was a time when the New Left had a very potential, kind of liberating ethos.

WOODS: So what happened to that, and why did that happen? Why was it that the worst aspects of the New Left wound up flourishing, and let's say the less damaging ones or even the somewhat encouraging ones began to be emphasized less and less? Because, for example, I would not describe the left today as being a free speech movement, which is how it did portray itself in the '60s.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, I think the problem is that if you have tendencies, for example, that claim that we are all very vulnerable – see, for example, the narrative of the Frankfurt School, of Marcuse, of all these people, who said that, actually, we have placed too much emphasis on reason. We have placed too much emphasis on the idea that individuals have potential to understand and change the world, or we have placed too much emphasis on technology.

Now, while these ideas get their own momentum, it is obvious that they will soon end up in this quite illiberal ends. And free speech is great. Why do we believe in free speech? Or why do we believe in the free market? Or why do we believe in self-rule? Because we consider that people are reasonable and at least have the potential to make the right decisions. And if they do not make the right decisions, we can isolate them, or we cannot deal with them. But if you really believe that this is basically something that is a kind of capitalism propaganda, it does not take that much time to end up in a position that says, No, actually, you know what? Freedom is a threat, and logic and reason is a threat. Because, for example, what they used to say is, Look what happened in the Second World War. For some reason they believed that the concentration camps or Nazis was kind of a high point of reason, which obviously it was the opposite. So it did not take much time for these ideas actually to bring about their logic conclusion, which is an intellectual environment where freedom is completely kind out of fashion.

WOODS: Let's talk for a minute about the Frankfurt School.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Yes.

WOODS: People talk about something called cultural Marxism, but I'm not sure I like that term, because Marxism was always an economic doctrine first and foremost. There is no cultural Marxism. Marxism had things to say about culture and its relationship to the means of production, but it's not a cultural theory. So I don't like the term cultural Marxism, just because I think it's a misnomer, but yet there is a

phenomenon that it really is describing, and it traces itself to the Frankfurt School. What is that?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: So I think if you want to understand the New Left – and the Frankfurt School is indeed the starting point. So what do these people say? They basically completely switch the narrative. So they are the ones who, already from the 1930s, actually claim that the problem is enlightenment itself. And then they say that the problem is actually not the failures but the success of capitalism.

So for example, Marcuse says – I'm paraphrasing, but his main argument is it's a big problem that the worker and the capitalist actually drive the same car or actually work the same fields. Whereas it should be exactly the opposite. This is something that should be celebrated. The fact that now the masses have access to goods and can have access to affluent society it something that should be celebrated.

But I mean, some kind of more conspiratorial, so to speak, thinking is that actually, what the left has tried to do all the time is to find a different stick with which to hit capitalism. So when they understood that economics was not anymore the actual field where this could happen, they switched to culture.

And then they kept switching – for example, this is what the environmental narrative is about, which, again, it can be traced to the ideas of the Frankfurt School, the idea that we have actually gained mastery over nature. Which actually, if you see the Old Leftists, that was what communism was about. I have a quote in the book by Maxim Gorky, who was a Bolshevik kind of intellectual, and he said, "The finite enemy is nature." And what did he mean? Our finite, kind of the biggest problem, is that we face limits. So his idea was, Wouldn't it be great if we could live forever? And if you'd say this to a New Leftist, they would be horrified. Like, Oh my God, what would happen with overpopulation?

So this is what the Frankfurt School does. They managed to change completely the agenda, and they managed somehow to persuade big parts of the left that the success of capitalism and actually materialism itself is now a big problem.

WOODS: In your book you seem to suggest that the left these days, as a result of all these changes in emphasis, is a little more diffuse, not as focused, not as effective. It protests a lot, it has a lot of demonstrations, but it doesn't have a coherent program.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Yes.

WOODS: Like in Greece, they didn't say, Well, here's our alternative to what you folks are proposing. But on the other hand, in the U.S., can't it at least be said that this new strategy, this cultural strategy first of all has been very effective, because even conservatives – he says laughingly – in the U.S. now adopt moral ideas that would have appalled everybody 50 years ago. So they've succeeded in that. And secondly, they have succeeded in the strategy of abandoning the white working class and adopting minorities of all kinds – not just racial minorities, but sexual minorities, women – even though women are a majority, actually. That strategy demographically,

because of immigration, is actually working out very well for them, so how can we criticize them? I mean, they're succeeding.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, they've always been successful in creating a nice story, but the problem is, a) is this story really kind of — are they really radical, so to speak? And my answer usually is, Look, you claim you're a radical. If you have exactly the same premises, for example, when it comes to materialism or climate change — if you have exactly the same philosophical premises with the World Bank or with the pope or with President Obama or with Leonardo DiCaprio, then probably you are less radical than you think.

So my idea is that it's more that these ideas have become mainstream in today's philosophy rather than the left has been successful. So I think the key to understand this is that you need to ask yourself where is the reaction from the other side. Where is the philosophical defense from, let's say, the right, from conservatives. So the road has been completely empty for the left. The road ahead has been completely — there have been no intellectual barricades, as Ayn Rand would say. So this is why they have succeeded. So they haven't succeeded because they have imposed a kind of radical narrative; they have succeeded because there has been no resistance.

And the second point I'd like to make is, have we really seen these people in power? So for example, if Bernie Sanders would win the nomination and then if he'd win the election, that would be the test. Would he have the tools and would he have these new ideas, for example, to change gears in the U.S. economy and make it a thriving economy again? I think the answer is no, because you and I know that basically the playbook would be taxes, taxes, and more taxes. And there's nothing distinctly radical about this. There is nothing inherently leftist about this. These are basically old ideas.

For example, if you see the late Marx, he's not that into taxation. Or if you see Marx, the term inequality almost never appears in his work. But today the left is all about these ideas, because it's quite easy to digest them. Why are there all these problems today? Oh, because of inequality. How can we solve these problems? Take more money from the rich. Well, this attitude is quite successful on the level of creating a nice story and creating nice slogans, but when we see them tested in action, it fails miserably.

WOODS: Would you say the same thing about the intimidation factor the left now uses? If you think the wrong thing or you have the wrong opinion about some new form of liberation or whatever, you can have your career destroyed. I mean, there's no CEO in the United States that would dare say, You know, I have some misgivings about Black Lives Matter. No way. You would not be allowed on any corporate board anywhere in America if you had the wrong opinion on something the left has decided is nonnegotiable. Doesn't that count for something?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, yeah, winning the battle of ideas by intimidation, it counts for something. But I think people are really, really starting to react to that. Now, you know, whatever someone thinks about, for example, Trump, the fact that in almost each one of his speeches he mentions the term "political correctness" — like, I'm the candidate who's against political correctness — and this gave him the votes of even

people who otherwise wouldn't vote for Trump in a million years, this says something about how many people were fed up with that.

And also, I think that now, intellectuals like that — what was his name? In Harvard, who stood up, the headmaster on the Halloween costumes. These people now get — of course they put their career in jeopardy, but at the same time there's a huge backlash, and there are a lot of people who say, You know what? Someone needs to speak up about these things. So I'm a bit more optimistic here, and I think this is a short-lived victory, because all these things about, How do you dare say this? and How do you dare say that?, these things say absolutely nothing to average people, to people on the street. So I think that this success is quite short-lived, I think. But of course there needs to be a reaction, and it's quite positive to see that people start standing up for free speech.

And in a way, there's something positive here. For example, the reason why I've turned from the left to libertarianism is when I realized that the left has abandoned free speech. They have abandoned material progress. So people who are kind of intellectually curious about these things, they won't bother anymore with the left, and I think this is a good thing, because I believe that for someone who's truly progressive — and by progressive I mean believe that people can actually bring change and can actually take lives into their own hands — I believe that for this kind of progressivism the left is a waste of time.

WOODS: Where do you see the left 20 years from now? And by extension, where do you see Western societies? Are they drifting — What direction are they drifting in? Are they drifting more left, or are they drifting more right, or are they drifting in a non-ideological way?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, I think they're drifting more in a — Again, I want to use Trump, although the problem is that, again, there is not a lot of serious philosophical, let's say, counter-narrative to the left. So for example, instead of saying we should come together based on our race or our sex or on our gender, then it's, oh, we should come together because we are all Americans. Or to use Obama's slogan, for example: "Yes, we can." Again, empty gestures. So it seems like whoever uses these empty gestures in a better way is in a better position to gain political capital. This time it was Trump; last time it was Obama.

So where it goes, I don't know. To be honest, I haven't got an answer to that. But I think that, again, because these ideas could be emptied from any actual meaning, anyone can actually hijack them. So these ideas that humans are very weak and that humans need someone to take care of them, these used to be reactionary ideas more related to, for example, the right wing of the 1930s or the 1920s. And then the left kind of appropriated, for some reason, these ideas, and now these ideas seem to be again becoming more popular in what we would call a populist right. So again, I don't know where it will go, but the problem is I think the battle is not against the left as if it's against Sanders. The battle is against these kinds of completely anti-humanist ideas.

WOODS: Let's talk about that for a minute. When you say "anti-humanist ideas," presumably – and this is something I talked about in an episode not long ago – you're referring to aspects of the left that involve a challenge to the Enlightenment.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Yes.

WOODS: Because they don't believe in – The funny thing is they say they're the party of science and the conservatives are against science. I think the opposite is certainly true by and large on that. But give me some examples of that.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: So I think one example is, have you heard about the recent ban of posters in the London Tube by the mayor, Sadiq Khan? He said there would be no posters that portray models with "unrealistic body image." Now, think about this. What is this guy actually saying? He's saying that women are so fragile and so vulnerable that they will see a poster with an "unrealistic body image," whatever that is, and their psyche will be kind of traumatized beyond repair of something. So what does this mean? This means that actually we humans, everyday people, are basket cases, and someone needs really to take care of us and protect us from seeing a spectacle that will kind of traumatize us.

Or again, see our relationship with nature. What did Bacon say? He said nature in order to be mastered has to be understood, or something like that. I don't remember the exact quote at the moment. Which means that actually our nature is there for us. Okay, nature has value only in terms of us. And see, for example, how popular it is today that, no, nature has an inherent value. And this makes no sense. What does inherent value mean? If there were no humans on Earth, nature would have no value. As a writer says, if you are, for example, a wolf, you'd eat without any hesitation the last caribou, for example, because you wouldn't understand the idea of value. The idea of value, something which is a deeply kind of humanistic idea.

So now saying that, oh, we need to sacrifice not only for our fellow human beings, not only for the future generations, but we also need to sacrifice for nature, this is a completely anti-humanist and anti-Enlightenment point of view. And also, it's the success of what we call post-modernism, which is quite a charged word. But the success that these ideas have had with notions such as, you know, we cannot be sure about reality; maybe there is no such thing as reality; who are we to know; reality is different for you and different for me.

So I'm making a very simplistic presentation of these ideas. I'm sure they're way more complicated, and probably there is some merit in some of these thinkers. But the general idea is basically a questioning of our ability to grasp and understand reality, and at the end of the day it is our ability for reason. And I think this is the biggest attack on the premises of enlightenment: the idea that we are not capable to be trusted with the faculty of reason.

WOODS: I bet there are some people on the left who would say the problem really is with people like you and me, in the sense that we're not using our reason. Because if we were, we would look around and see that capitalism has obviously enriched only a very small group of people, and yet we dogmatically and in the face of evidence to the contrary continue to promote it. Whereas they believe – and I think the average –

I can understand why the average person who doesn't read anything would draw that conclusion. I think they think they're the ones weighing the evidence and saying, Look, how much more investigation do I need to do to see that this is an antisocial system and these people are blindly devoted to it as with a religion? So I think they would say the shoe is on the other foot.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, actually, first of all, the facts are not on their side. But even if I give them, you know, the benefit of the doubt – because I've been on the other side. I've been on the left. But I still had exactly the same main ideas, that even if the future in some places is not yet great, people are capable of bringing this change. And what do we need for this change? For example, we need cheaper energy. How many on the left would be in favor of that, would say we need more nuclear energy? Again, the left would freak out with these ideas. Not to mention more ambitious projects like geo-engineering and all that stuff.

Okay, so not only the facts are against them – so I don't think they can claim, Oh, how do you dare? Don't you see the misery? So I think the trajectory has been very, very positive for humanity in general. But also, if we would use their tools, these people that are still left behind – and I think there are indeed many people in many places in the world left behind – they would never have the luxuries that we have, like, again, cheap energy, material goods, the Internet. All these things are the result of processes that the left despises. You have a background in history. You've mentioned a lot of times what is their view on Industrial Revolution and how they undermine the contribution of the Industrial Revolution. So I do not think that they have the moral high ground to tell you, Oh, don't you see that people in other places in the world are still kind of left behind? Well, I would answer, If they follow your ideas, they will be left behind forever, and actually, you don't seem to care that much about that. That would be my reply.

WOODS: All right, that's a fair reply, I would say. Before I let you go, I think we should clarify a term in your book. I haven't used it in the course of our conversation, but when you say "lifestyle activism," what do you mean by that?

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Well, the idea comes from the left libertarian scholar, Murray Bookchin, who talked about lifestyle anarchy. So basically this is about activists who are obsessed not with politics as we understand them – like a mass movement or, "These are my ideas – " "No, these are my ideas about the economy." They're more focused on the inside. And initially, these – So for example, they focus on things like what do you consumer or how much is your carbon footprint or how did you recycle or where does your food come from. So basically it is the idea of a left that is not anymore so much focusing in the sphere of production, and this is because they have given up on wealth creation and producing more stuff, and now they are mostly focused on the inside, on feelings – and this is why "emotion" is a term I use again and again in the book.

And again, it comes back to that. If you cannot change the world out there, you focus on the inside here, like what are my feelings, how do I identify myself. And again, this is I think a key to understanding identity politics. Identity politics are quite close to lifestyle activism. It means activism that hasn't got as its focus bringing political

change, but has as its focus to make a claim, to make a statement about who we are, about our moral superiority.

WOODS: All right, the book is *The Rise of Lifestyle Activism: From New Left to Occupy*. I'm going to link to it at TomWoods.com/792. I'll also link to the Twitter account for Nikos if you want to say hello and thank you or maybe even challenge him in one way or another. But all that stuff will be linked at TomWoods.com/792. Well, good luck with the book. I'm glad to see it's published with Palgrave Macmillan. That's a nice, prestigious press for you. And I'm not going to ask your age, but you look like a young guy, so it's nice to see you jumping right into things with a nice, prestigious publication. Best of luck.

SOTIRAKOPOULOS: Thank you very much, Tom.