
**Reviewed by** Alexander Langer (Eastside Preparatory School)

**Published on** H-Socialisms (July, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Graeme Pente (Independent Scholar)

*Langer on Fink, 'Undoing the Liberal World Order'*

*Undoing the Liberal World Order: Progressive Ideas and Political Realities since World War II*, by Leon Fink, sets out to “explain why the postwar liberal dream proved a fantasy and why we should not let it go” (p. 1). In three parts, Dr. Fink examines the history of left-liberal efforts to craft a foreign policy in the postwar era distinct from that of business interests and conservatives to the right, and socialist groups to the left. Though Fink accedes that the legacy of liberalism is largely a failure and that hypocrisies from within the group ceded ground to the right, he argues that there are key lessons to be learned from the ambitions of the postwar liberals.

Written at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and examining a world in which the failures of the socialist Left and the retreat of liberalism have left an opening for ethnonationalism and fascism, Fink argues that the time is nigh to reexamine the efforts of postwar liberals. Fink identifies, more than anything, the willingness to be ambitious as the key factor for postwar liberals. They articulated a positive message and a strategy that could combat the forces of reaction. That ambition, Fink argues, is largely gone, replaced by a policy of retreat and a lack of belief in the ability to alter the state of the world, “without which the American ship of state is rudderless” (p. 4).

Fink breaks his book into three parts that show the admirable goals of postwar liberalism as well as the contradictions inherent in the ideology that led to its demise. Among the latter are namely the tension between anticommunism and a commitment to national self-determination, as well as a strong belief in American unipolarity.

In part 1, Fink uses the creation of the Bretton Woods system, the reshaping of the West German economy, and liberal support for the state of Israel to explore the foundations of the liberal order. Left-liberalism, Fink argues, was a coalition of New Dealers and, importantly for the labor historian, organized labor that pushed for an interna-
tional outlook in foreign policy. “Economically expansive yet committed to democratic norms,” Fink writes, the story of the 1950s was one where “labor-liberalism vied ... with strictly business- or strictly security-conscious priorities” (p. 15).

In doing so, liberalism set up the Bretton Woods system, which stabilized the world economy for nearly three decades but built in inequality between the Global North and Global South, eventually leading to the system’s undoing. American and British labor leaders worked to rebuild West Germany and reinvigorate the West German labor movement, reckoning that a strong democratic impulse in the workplace would be a key bulwark against statist totalitarianism. Ironically, state support for unions and state socialism, both formed with the support of American liberals, proved more resistant to the deregulatory effects of neoliberalism than American liberalism itself did. Finally, Fink examines the consistent liberal support for Israel, showing it both as an attempt to recover from the horrors of the Holocaust and as an opportunity to create a vibrant democracy based upon national self-determination in an area without a history of democracy. And, much like with the initial success of the Bretton Woods system, Fink argues that American liberals’ unwillingness to wrestle with the inherent tension of first the refugee crisis and then growing Palestinian nationalism ultimately doomed their approach.

In part 2, Fink takes on the key tension within the postwar liberal bloc—the question of how far to take anticommunism—and how it ultimately unraveled their strength. He does so first by examining liberal approaches to Latin America and then turning to the question of developmentalism in India.

Though liberals were committed to resisting direct Soviet expansion, they never figured out what to do when communism mixed with the anticolonial and national-democratic movements that they supported. With conservatives calling for potential allies to pick sides in the Cold War and ascribing communism to all socialist and leftist movements, the liberal bloc split over the Vietnam War. Eventually, a large opposition identified a new liberal foreign policy based around nonintervention.

In Latin America and India, initial success at liberal state building fell apart under the weight of anticommunism. American liberals and Latin American liberals differed on their basic approaches to governance, with the latter “almost universally combining democratic with statist and even socialist commitments” (p. 99). And so, initial left-liberal support across Latin America crumbled in the face of anticommunist repression that American liberals were unable or unwilling to stop. As conservatives gained power in the 1950s, New Dealers took up the mantle of liberal developmentalism abroad, hoping to advance economic output and democracy and build a stable noncommunist Left. Their failures to balance both and their decision to chase growth above all else, hoping it would lead eventually to democracy, meant the end of that experiment.

In part 3, Fink examines the question of “just how and how far to press bedrock principles of self-government” in Israel-Palestine and southern Africa, arguing that abstract liberal principles found no solutions to complicated reality. He argues that the consistent liberal push for a two-state solution founded on strong borders and self-determination could never have found success while the two ethnic groups occupied the same land. With the benefit of hindsight, setting aside calls for self-determination and fostering a spirit of human rights and integration of Arab Israelis might have been the better approach.

The antiapartheid movement, on the other hand, was a crowning achievement for the postwar liberal movement. The movement took an issue out of the mainstream and brought it to international attention, overcoming opposition from the Reagan administration and using international
pressure to help break the apartheid system in South Africa. It “showed a capacity to move mountains but not necessarily to find a successful path of democratic regional development” (p. 164). This movement was swiftly dismantled, and there have been no movements of its like to combat Africa’s many continuing issues. Fink argues that this shows the limits of liberal movements in the neoliberal world.

The postwar liberal movement was riven by contradictions from the outset and beset by powerful reactionary forces that it had to contend with. That this eventually led to the breaking up of the bloc and a sustained shift in what liberalism meant does not mean postwar liberals should not be studied, Fink argues. Even though they failed, they at least tried. “No one would argue that such accomplishments lacked ambition or determination to transform the world—at times in self-evidently left-liberal ways or social-democratic ways. The era that followed had a very different feel” (p. 227). Since the end of the Cold War there has been no sustained global strategy. This has diminished the legitimacy of liberalism as it loses ground to ethnonationalism, and given, as Fink argues, that socialist leftism is fully discredited by its alliances with strongmen and tendency to clientism.

Fink ends his work with a call for a new liberal movement and a new global strategy. This would look like liberal internationalism finally untethered from US military power and American interventionism, a new Bretton Woods for a new era, with a framework that benefits Global North and Global South. It would involve a grassroots labor and activist movement for human rights worldwide and democracy in government and the workplace. Crucially, it would attempt a renewed Good Neighbor policy, working with Central American governments to address the feedback loop at the heart of both the drug trade and regional migrations. These, Fink hopes, can stem the tide of nationalism and fascism that are on the rise worldwide.

Fink has crafted an expansive account of the postwar era, bringing together labor, grassroots activism, class, and hypocrisy to tell an interesting story. It suggests that progressives have a role to play in charting a foreign policy with purpose and that aggressively challenging ethnonationalism involves a positive and ambitious foreign policy, and it lays the evidence well.

At times, however, Fink overstates the roles liberals played, forgives them for their willingness to cut themselves off from the socialist Left, and assigns blame to leftists for being defeated from without, but not to liberals for their willingness to ally with the Right against the Left. For instance, he argues that liberals “generally welcomed the explosion of new, decolonized states and identified with popular demands for democratic self-government … but there, too, political realities intervened” (p. 3). No mention is given to who was shaping those realities or liberal acceptance of American covert intervention. He attributes the Left’s failures to their willingness to be clients, to their tendency toward authoritarianism, and not to the “complex political systems of privilege and control” that doomed liberals (p. 5). In essence, he argues that liberals were “if not clueless then largely ineffective,” and yet they, seemingly alone, “banished the specter of fascism” and rebuilt the world (p. 4).

This has the unfortunate effect of muddying the waters. Were postwar liberals a model to be followed, brought down by external forces? Were they ineffective dreamers who had a moment in the sun? Were they well-intentioned movers and shakers who set the stage for their own undoing in understandable ways? The narrative of the book seems to point at the latter, but any understanding of postwar liberalism must contend with their willingness to attack left to shield themselves from accusations of communism. A longer discussion of the Vietnam War, though well-trod ground, and the discomfort of liberals who opposed the expansion of the war while calling for arms sales to Is-
rael in 1967, as Fink mentions, might have shown more clearly how liberals were the architects of their own destruction.

This book is an excellent overview of an era of foreign policy that often gets bundled with general anticommunism, and rightly calls for a new era of progressive foreign policy. The argument and evidence show the complexities of postwar liberalism, the heights and the failures, the hypocrisy and the ambition. That the framing does not match the evidence is a small quibble with a well-researched and -argued book that has relevance in the world we live in today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58943

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.