Loneliness through a Left Lens

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Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn and Patrick Anderson (eds), *Left Alone: On Solitude and Loneliness amid Collective Struggle*, Quebec, Daraja Press, 2023, 238pp, £24 paperback.

In *The Lost World of British Communism,* Raphael Samuel documents the state of disarray that follows the decline of Communist Party membership in Britain. 'The comradeship of the Party was neither exactly personal nor entirely political, but a nexus of the two,' he writes. 'It involved kin groups, friendship circles, neighbourhood networks, workplace "kremlins" and literary coteries. It had many of the rewards of political intimacy; yet it was bounded together politically and remained absolutely contingent upon community of purpose.'[1] When the comradeship broke down, so did the networks of solidarity that had provided a whole way of living for thousands of people. In a 1945 letter Doris Lessing recalls how she doesn't 'expect [that] I have ever been so happy in my life as during [the] time' that she felt the world was 'on the verge of a general development towards Utopia'. She includes in her letter a 'line of dots' that 'represents [the] complex mental bewilderment' that emerged as her hope for political change dwindles.[2] In her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing charts the states of loneliness that emerged in the wake of the waning of party membership in the mid-1950s. The loneliness experienced by her protagonists is not so much a wanting of company as a state of psychic and political unbelonging, and a waning sense of hope that was rooted in a revolutionary vision of the future.

1. Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, Verso, 2006, p86.

2. Doris Lessing, Letter to John Whitehorn, 15 August 1945, DL/WHI 035, Doris Lessing Papers, University of East Anglia.

The relationship between left organising and feelings of loneliness is the subject of *Left Alone: On Solitude and Loneliness amid Collective Struggle*, a collection of essays edited by Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn and Patrick Anderson. Left commentaries have not tended to prioritise emotional states, which are seen as individualising, and prefer to think in more structural terms – of psychic states in relation to the alienation of labour. But emotions – and loneliness, in particular – is worth attending too, the editors argue, because they are intimately related to narratives of personal and political change; to the sense of what is possible. One of the reasons for this neglect is that loneliness is a slippery subject, which is far easier to address as an individual feeling that as a collective state. The history of solitude has been charted, in large part, as a history of middle-class creativity. Loneliness, conversely, maps neither directly onto a desire to be by oneself – as in solitude – or an enforced aloneness – as in isolation – and so remains a catch-all feeling that invokes a state where things do not feel quite right, and certainly not in common. To think loneliness through a left politics is to see how our feelings

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are not entirely separable from their social contexts. It also draws into view the importance of political organising for combatting feelings of loneliness, in particular, and mental health more generally. The edited collection draws together fifteen writers and seven artists from across the globe who reflect on a sense of personal and political isolation. Several of the essays draw on the emotive force of revolt for ensuring the mental health of social and political communities. The collection is creative in its understanding of loneliness and is likely to prove most useful and interesting to those seeking to understand left movements in relation to mental health.

Loneliness is often framed in relation to the effects of capital on the possibilities of building durable structures of relationality, but it is principally read in the collection in relation to the endurance of left communities themselves. The editors mobilise the term 'Left Loneliness' to reflect on how loneliness becomes a political phenomenon rather than simply a psychological condition; in so doing, they draw connections between personal feelings and a sense of political defeat. The essays do not draw specifically on a psychoanalytic vocabulary of loneliness, but they do offer a psychopolitical reading of the affordances and obstacles of political organising as a site of community-making. Historically, left movements have provided sites of belonging; but the tensions within political movements can also foreclose the community and sense of emotional security that organising provides; loneliness, in this way, is often a stand-in in the collection for the feelings engendered by the fragmentation and splintering of the left. The essays reflect on the sense of isolation that emerges from no longer feeling that one has a place or a stake in a particular political movement.

The essays provide a geographically specific context in which feelings of disconnection and disillusionment, which register as loneliness, arise in relation to the history of left organising. An essay by alejandra ciriza thinks about 'the strength of friendship born and nourished in the heat of militant commitment' against the backdrop of those who disappeared under the dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s, a political violence that continues to create, as she argues, structures of loneliness.[3] Nina Bagdasarova reads loneliness through the breakdown of post-Soviet states so that it becomes a way of examining the day-to-day emotional repercussions of nostalgia, rootlessness and catastrophic loss. In an article on post-communist nostalgia, Svetlana Boym reflects on how Soviet writers became preoccupied by 'the right to solitude' under the imposed force of collectivity:

> Most Soviet people at that time lived in over-crowded communal apartments, lonely perhaps but rarely alone; hence the moments of self-conscious alienation and the recognition of solitude were cherished. The right to sing of solitude was like the right to privacy, an unofficial right carved out with unofficial everyday artistic practices.[4]

3. alejandra ciriza, 'A Red Rooster Does Not Give Up – Subjectivity and Politics. Notes on Defeat', in *Left Alone*, p39.

4. Svetlana Boym, 'From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia', *Representations*, 49, 1995, pp133-166, p149.

Solitude is understood, in Boym's reading, as a creative value that should be afforded to all, which prevents loneliness or 'self-conscious alienation'. The question arises not only whether loneliness would be different, or significantly abated, under communism, but the important distinction between solitude, loneliness and isolation. The question is taken up in an essay by Richard Gilman-Opalsky, which attempts at once to reflect on the loneliness of capital (a feat that is, of course, impossible to undertake in a few pages) and to propose a practical everyday utopianism within the current political climate that might begin to counteract widespread feelings of disconnection. Drawing on Barthes' 1977 lectures *How to Live Together*, Gilman-Opalsky's chapter reflects on the degree of contact required for individuals to exist and create at their own pace. As with many of the essays, the propositions turn on a theoretical rather than a material analysis.

Most of the essays are written from a first-person perspective and connect the writers' own experiences of loneliness with feelings of historical trauma, melancholia, depression, uprootedness and exile. Like many other thinkers in the collection, Giulia Longoni, in an essay on 'Left Loneliness and Feminist Love', diagnoses her own loneliness as a 'deeply rooted pessimism and discouragement' about the possibility of building 'authentic and lasting bonds'.[5] This political reading of loneliness is, then, connected to a sense of disillusionment about the state of the left and its imagining of alternative ways of organising social life. Reading across these thinkers' work, loneliness emerges as the feeling that gives expression to a state most often of exhaustion; it turns on the 'paradoxical aloneness', as Anderson writes in a poetic prelude, that is often felt 'when striving to create a world that // remembers // that we are all one'; memory operates here as a fantasy of collectivity.[6]

5. Giulia Longoni, 'Left Loneliness and Feminist Love', in *Left Alone*, p159.

6. Patrick Anderson, 'Prologue 2: An Etymological Uprising', in *Left Alone*, pxii.

The collection, though mostly rooted in the recent present, also includes an essay on the American journalist, educator and early civil rights activist Ida B. Wells by Jane Anna Gordon. Drawing on moments in Wells' diary where she refers to 'fits of *loneliness*', Gordon reflects on the feeling of isolation that emerges from 'the desire to live in ways unscripted.'[7] For Wells, loneliness results in feelings of exhaustion; of 'the machinery out of gear'; it not only registers as the failure to form friendships, but as a depression that makes it difficult to continue undertaking political work. The relationship between states of unbelonging and loneliness is explored in a more contemporary context in an essay by Derefere Kimarley Chevannes which reads loneliness alongside Frantz Fanon's theories of racialisation as well as the deaf subject. Reading the essays side by side illuminates the role that race and ableism continue to play in the production of states of contemporary loneliness in the United States.

7. Jane Anna Gordon, '"A Lonely Warrior": Left-Wing Isolation in the Early Adult Life of Ida B. Wells', in *Left Alone*, p117.

By framing this emotional state within a political context, *Left Alone* reveals the intimate relationship between attempts to transform our inner and outer worlds. Drawing on an essay by the poet Adrienne Rich, Joffre-Eichhorn suggests the psychosomatic ramifications of a failure to imagine 'a common

language'. Joffre-Eichhorn's writing on loneliness is particularly interesting for the ways it draws together a psychoanalytic and political understanding of loneliness as a state where internal and external speech become compromised. The essay defines 'Left Loneliness' as a:

> dense physical silence that betrays one's very capacity to be in verbal communion with others. It is a type of neural and somatic fatigue with and alienation from language itself, to make sense of things – for oneself and for others, especially for others.[8]

Like the psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Joffre-Eichhorn frames loneliness as an extraordinarily painful experience which is characterised by the difficulty of communication.[9] 'It literally hurts to speak', he writes, 'and as a result not speaking becomes a form of self-protection, to avoid yet another "misunderstanding", all the while deepening the abyss inside and between yourself and everyone around you'.[10] If it is not always entirely clear whether the writers in the collection are speaking of loneliness on the same terms, Joffre-Eichhorn draws connection between these emotional states and the practical resources that are required to counter such feelings of discontent through strengthening communal ties and prioritising psycho-social care. The essays think theoretically through these ideas though it would have been interesting to have seen them engage with some more material case studies.

Left Alone models a form of scholarship that values the importance of community for generating new thought. In this way, it continues the conversations initiated in *Post Rosa: Letters Against Barbarism* (2021), also edited by Joffre-Eichhorn, which is written as a series of letter-exchanges that use Rosa Luxemburg's thought as a point of departure to reflect on the difficulty of the times we live in. For the philosopher Walter Jens, Luxemburg's existence 'was expressed in the tension between *solitaire* and *solidaire* (solitariness and solidarity).'[11] By creating a dialogue around Luxemburg, Joffre-Eichhorn describes how, amidst the isolation of the pandemic, he found a 'vitality and desire to move, once more' that breaks him out of a state of loneliness and creates a renewed point of political connection where he can begin to imagine, alongside others, a more communal vision of the future.

8. Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, 'Introduction: Alone Together – The Singing Veins of Left Loneliness', in *Left Alone*, p10, p3.

9. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', *Psychiatry*, 22.1, 1959, pp1-15.

10. Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, 'Introduction', in *Left Alone*, p3.

11. Cited in Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn (ed.), *Post Rosa: Letters Against Barbarism*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2021, p1.

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