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# A Brief Global History of the Left

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By Shlomo Sand

Polity Press, 2024, 274 pages, \$40.43, ISBN: 9781509558247

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Reviewed by İlhan Bilici, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University

DOI: 10.25253/99.2025271.19

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Shlomo Sand is a Professor Emeritus in the field of history. His main areas of interest center on the concepts of the nation-state, nationalism and left-wing ideologies. His work, *A Brief Global History of the Left*, is a comprehensive work that analyses the historical development of the global leftist movement in the context of its emergence, transformations, turning points, and the ruptures it has experienced throughout history. Sand scrutinizes the left not as a single, homogeneous movement, but as a collection of movements that take many shapes in historical and geographical circumstances. He addresses how various left-wing currents have been shaped throughout history and evolved over time.

The book consists of 19 main chapters and a concluding chapter and the differences and overlaps of socialist, communist, anarchist, social democratic, and other leftist movements are investigated within the chapters. The author also offers a historical and conceptual perspective on the fundamental principles of equality, freedom, and solidarity, which occupy a central place in leftist terminology. Sand observes in detail the periodic transformations of these concepts, their meanings across different geographies, and the efforts to interpret them.

Rather than considering the Left as “any unambiguous or over-restrictive” (p. 3), the au-

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thor defines it as a phenomenon that gains meaning according to its era and geographical context. In this regard, the statement, “the concept of ‘the Left,’ like that of ‘Capital,’ should be seen as denoting not a thing or an essence, but a relationship between things, a phenomenon whose meaning is always

relative” (p. 4), underscores that the Left is not a fixed concept but rather a variable form of relationship.

The main aim of the book is to highlight the historical and ideological diversity within leftist terminology, contribute to understanding this diversity, and analyze in depth the challenges facing contemporary leftist movements. To achieve this aim, Sand explores the historical origins of leftist thought at both individual and societal levels and continues his analysis along the axis of philosophical and sociological inquiry without confining his work solely to historical events.

Sand’s broad perspective provides a valuable resource for readers interested in related disciplines—especially political science—seeking to understand the influence of leftist movements in the contemporary world and to evaluate the concept’s relationship with historical events in a cause-and-effect framework. Written in an accessible and engaging academic style, the book appeals to readers at all levels who are interested in the subject.

The book adopts critical historiography and conceptual analysis as its methodological framework, aiming to make the transformations and diversities in leftist discourse visible. To this end, Sand deeply analyses: historical events (e.g., the Levellers, the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the Revolutions of 1848, the October Revolution, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the 1968 events, anti-U.S. leftist movements in Latin America); ideological texts (e.g., the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Social Contract, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's What is Property, and Lenin's the State and Revolution); and the discourses of various political actors, such as Robespierre's speeches on Jacobin ideology, Lenin's defense of the Bolshevik revolution, Mao Zedong's Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom policy, and Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms of revolutionary socialism. Eschewing a Eurocentric historical narrative, the author comprehensively examines contributions from diverse regions, such as Chinese Communism, leftist movements in Latin America, and the impact of socialism in postcolonial societies. This approach allows for assessing the historical development of leftist movements thematically rather than chronologically. Sand addresses academic and general audiences with his explanations of historical periods and his evaluations of contemporary problems leftist movements face.

In Sand's analyses, special emphasis is placed on equality and freedom. According to the author, equality emerged from the hierarchical structure of feudal societies, gained ideological significance with the advent of modernity, and became one of the foundational principles of leftist thought during the French Revolution. Sand highlights how equality has taken on different meanings throughout his-

tory, arguing that while it can contribute to establishing social justice, it can also serve as a means to legitimize authoritarian ideologies, which can be exemplified via the Jacobins and the Reign of Terror (1793-1794), the Soviet Union and the Stalin era, and Mao's Cultural Revolution in China.

Another central theme in the book is the transformation of leftist movements. The emergence and social impact of ideological tendencies such as Marxism, anarchism, feminism, and environmentalism hold significant space in the work. Sand also examines in detail the critical role of trade unions in forming the welfare state and their tensions with capitalism in this process. In addition, the book's other prominent topics are postcolonial leftist movements and national struggles. By emphasizing the relationship between non-Western leftist movements and anti-imperialist concerns, Sand illustrates how, in societies such as India, Africa, and Latin America, the Left is often viewed from two main perspectives: as part of anti-colonial resistance and as a reflection of demands for social justice.

Sand also offers insights into the crises faced by the Left in the modern era and its potential future. These crises include the decline of the welfare state, environmental disasters caused by rapid capitalist expansion, and growing inequalities. However, despite these challenges, the author avoids presenting a pessimistic narrative of the Left's history. Instead, he inspires hope by expressing confidence in its potential for resurgence.

While the book offers comprehensive and analytical depth, it is not without its shortcomings. The lack of a clear definition of the conceptual boundaries of the Left stands out as a potential source of confusion for readers.

Furthermore, the book's focus on Western Europe and North America, coupled with a more superficial approach to leftist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, undermines its claim to provide a truly global perspective. Additionally, while the book's theoretical depth is commendable, it falls short in offering practical solutions to contemporary challenges, such as the climate crisis, which are not explored as effectively as historical analyses.

In conclusion, Shlomo Sand has made a significant contribution to the literature on the development of the Left with *A Brief Global History of the Left*. The book examines in detail the historical transformations of the Left and its present-day implications by addressing various ideological contexts. Although it has limitations in providing a holistic global perspective, it occupies a noteworthy place in the literature due to its broad historical and conceptual scope.