

Anti-Imperialism – Bankruptcy of the Left?

Christoph Fringeli (2016 Version)

the original version of this article was published in [Datacide 9](#) in 2006, but for the re-publication in the Almanac 2016 I felt it could do with some updates, hence the “2016 Version”. Source: <http://datacide-magazine.com/anti-imperialism-bankruptcy-of-the-left-2016-version/>



It's a tale from another century – when most people who situated themselves on the radical left also felt they were part of a world civil war. It was a war between good and evil, the oppressed vs. the oppressors, the proletariat vs. the capitalists, the countries of the periphery vs. the centre. Support for anti-colonial struggles and for the Vietcong as well as the various Latin American guerillas was based on a wide consensus, and was in many cases the starting point of individual and collective politicisations. This consensus seemed to override the knowledge and assessments of the crimes of Stalin and Mao, and many other ‘details’. Apparently the way towards socialism was not a straight road, it could be a zig-zag at times. The more the Western proletariat seemed uninterested in revolution, and the Eastern Bloc seemed a bureaucratic aberration, the more the national liberation movements in the ‘backwards’ countries became the global hope of Western middle class ‘revolutionaries’.

The root of this idea goes back to the Conference of Baku in 1920 and the second congress of the Communist International in the same year. This is when Lenin revised the Marxist slogan ‘Workers of all countries unite!’ and changed it to: ‘Workers and oppressed peoples and nations of the world, unite!’ This slogan significantly changed the direction of the ‘official’ communist movement. *Workers* are members of a class and at the same time individual human beings. In *oppressed peoples and nations* the individuals are absent.

In point 11 of his *Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions*, Lenin proclaimed that Communist parties in ‘backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal

and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate (...) must assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement'. But at least he recognised some of the dangers, and stressed 'the need for struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements' as well as the 'need to combat the Pan-Islamic and similar trends which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc.'

This advice was heeded less and less as the Soviet Union degenerated – and in fact even less so by those who accused the SU of 'social imperialism' and supported a Maoist alternative to the Russian line, supporting shameless nationalist dictatorships with a 'communist' cloak in Albania, Kampuchea or North Korea.

But there are other strains of anti-Imperialism. The German competition with the British Empire was the beginning of its own anti-Imperialist ideology which later manifested itself in National Socialism and other strains that promoted a combination of national and social 'revolution'. National revolutionaries of the 20s and 30s, such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck or Ernst Niekisch proclaimed anti-imperialist 'theories' of the rising 'young' or 'proletarian' nations opposed to the old and decadent 'West'. This was a twisted view – after all, the United States was arguably a 'younger' nation (if you do want to look at things like that for the sake of argument) than Prussia, which most of these authors admired. But of course these authors would deny that the US was a 'nation' at all, instead it was seen as a racial melting pot, a 'construct', controlled by finance capital and a plutocratic elite.

This kind of anti-Imperialism is nothing but the 'foreign-policy version' of fascist anti-capitalism, an anti-capitalism that is not concerned with the elements that actually constitute capitalism: wage labour, private ownership of the means of production, commodity fetishism, etc. Instead it prefers a conspiratorial view of a cabal of super-powerful secret forces who have nothing else in mind than to suck the blood out of productive people. Living labour mysteriously disappears into incomprehensible financial derivatives.

Of course this 'German' version isn't limited to Germany. Quite on the contrary, it's getting more popular wherever 'disadvantaged' nations are about to become failed states, when capitalism is sliding into crisis.

A third, closely related type of anti-Imperialism is the Islamist/jihadist type. Here elements of classic anti-colonialism converge with a religious blood and soil ideology. 'Arab soil' is seen as violated by Jewish and Western intruders. But beyond getting rid of them (at best tolerating them as dhimmis) and recapturing Quds (Jerusalem), the aim is to establish a caliphate, either regional or world wide, depending on which strain of Islamism.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and most of the erstwhile national liberation movements 'forgot' their pretenses of social liberation, but not necessarily the anti-Imperialist rhetoric, these types of anti-Imperialism got conflated. The Left at large has failed to clearly see and criticise the reactionary, even fascist aspects of many of these movements, especially when they seemed to have the same enemies: Colonialism and Imperialism.

It was the WTC attack that greatly confused a large section of the Left since it was done with some aims in mind that the Left usually claimed as their own. It was done by Islamo-fascists with the

explicit aim of attacking and destroying ‘crusaders and Jews’. Brushing aside this reality, Western left-wing intellectuals were quick at laying the blame on America itself – apparently its imperialist politics had sown what the collapsing towers were the harvest of.

Other sections escaped into mushrooming conspiracy theories, putting the blame back into the same court, but this time insinuating that the Bush government had advance knowledge – if not even a hand in the proceedings – and gladly had the towers destroyed so they would get carte blanche to set up a ‘tyrannical’ regime at home and increase the pressure of their imperialist foreign policy on the rest of the world.

These positions made it possible for significant sections of the left to maintain their own anti-imperialist ideology rather than having to scrutinize it. Equally, the solidarity of most of the international Left with the second Intifada started by Arafat in 2000 remained unchanged. Again – contrary to historical fact – the blame was shifted from the Palestinian leadership to Ariel Sharon’s visit to the temple mount as the reason for the bloody events ensuing. The eagerness of the Left to side with them seems strange, insofar that by this point most of the Palestinian groups had given up any pretense at social liberation which they had propagated in the times of the Cold War. So the Left managed to hold onto some of its key positions that are also occupied by ultra-reactionary religious groups and explicit fascists through a simple strategy of denial. The Left looks only on one side (US, Israel) and does not analyse the position of the others (Islamofascism, Arab Nationalism, the Palestinian leadership), and sometimes even goes so far as to denounce some of them (e.g. Al-Qaeda) as a US-construct. This situation could only worsen as America planned to strike back. While few had the nerve to come out with ludicrous slogans such as ‘Victory to Afghanistan!’ (*News Line* (London), the daily paper of the Workers Revolutionary Party in one of their editions in the early days of the War against the Taliban regime), the peace demonstrations attracted an increasingly varied mixture of people.

This became much more acute during the campaigns against the Iraq war. Everybody agreed that the war against Iraq had to be averted: The Left, the Neo-Nazis, official Germany and France, the whole of the Islamic World, from Arab Nationalism to Islamic Fundamentalists, the Vatican... This unappetizing coalition unfolded remarkable activities essentially on behalf of the Ba’ath-Party regime in Baghdad. Within the Left, views ranged from ‘the Ba’ath Party is fascist and should be toppled, but by Iraqis and not by the Americans’, to ‘Saddam is a great anti-imperialist and should be supported against the US’. This range already makes it questionable to talk of ‘the Left’.

The ensuing exchange of ideas and the essential unity of action by some sections of the radical Left with some sections of the radical Right demands further scrutiny. Is there actual collaboration or are there just incidental parallels between two otherwise incompatible camps? Indeed open collaboration is – so far – relatively rare, but we will see that the underlying ideology is in many cases far closer than many involved would like to admit – and once they can admit it, the obstacles to a united front are fast disappearing.

For many years only obscure Strasserite sects were openly advocating a National Socialism with elements of both spectra, such as the KDS – Kampfbund Deutscher Sozialisten – Fighting Union of German Socialists – in Germany. This has been reinforced in the last few years on the one hand through the migration of some formerly high profile left-wing figures like Horst Mahler, Bernd Rabehl and others to the fascist right, and on the other hand with the influx of ideas of the French

Nouvelle Droite into the mainstream as well as, apparently, sections of the Left. When the KDS was referring to their solidarity with ‘friends from Iraq, from Cuba, the Palestinians, the PLO and PFLP, but also the people of North Korea, because what is decisive is: only National Socialism is international!’ – they were by no means alone.

Prominent on the far Left is the Anti-Imperialist Coordination (AIK), an organisation mainly based in Italy and Austria. At an annual ‘anti-imperialist camp’, meetings are held and campaigns planned and coordinated, such as the ‘10 euro for the Iraqi resistance’ campaign. One statement on their website declared pompously: ‘There are struggles which mark epochs. Today it is on the shoulders of the Iraqi people to defend the front line separating freedom from tyranny. We will support them in every possible way, for freedom and self-determination of Iraq, and for the defeat of imperialist tyranny throughout the world.’ (Tasks of Iraqi Resistance supporters 11/10/2005 – Resolution approved by the international gathering in Rome Oct 2, 2005).

It’s only consequent that the same site features an interview with a Hamas leader under the title *Together against Imperialism*. It’s also only logical that a book titled *Ami Go Home* authored by one Wilhelm Langthaler (of the AIK) and Werner Pirker (notorious for his anti-Zionist agitation in the Stalinist daily paper *Junge Welt*) has in turn received a glowing review in the *Deutsche Stimme*, the paper of the neo-nazi NPD (Jan. 2006). An increasing number of similar initiatives combining romantic anti-capitalism with the fanatical anti-Imperialism of Left and Right have surfaced in the last few years. Not that this is a new phenomenon as such – we can trace it at least back to the 20s – but recently it has gained a virulence that Third Positionists in the 90s could only have dreamt of. Obvious extremists such as the KDS or the AIK are only the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon that now permeates large segments of European society. More and more radical anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism in red, brown and green variations, and an increasing preparedness to either openly set aside other differences to seek a united front, or – more commonly – simply deny or ignore the partners in the pursuit of attacking the common enemy.

‘The key factor in politics today, nationally and internationally, is resistance and opposition to the occupation of Iraq’, the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) declared in their conference resolution of 6-8 January, 2006. This Trotskyist party is notorious for its attempts to capitalise on any popular movement that would seem to bring their agenda ahead. Indeed their January 2006 conference resolution is called *Building the SWP in the Age of Mass Movements*. The mass movements referred to are likely to be the anti-Globalisation and Peace movements. The SWP was also initially largely behind the party Respect which stood in the 2005 general elections and managed to win one seat with George Galloway, the former Labour MP, a fervent anti-Zionist and supporter of Saddam Hussein.

Galloway belonged to the set of politicians who visited the dictator during the sanctions along with Austrian far-Right politician Jörg Haider, French far-Right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and his wife, as well as a delegation of the KDS, and many others, including French politicians from the governing UMP (Chirac’s party). Galloway, Haider, Le Pen and other supporters of the Ba’ath regime have also in common that they are desperate to appear as “great men” with historical importance. Thus they bathe in the sun of the fascist dictator.

They are also willing to go to considerable lengths just to be in the public eye. For example, Galloway was taking part in the TV program *Celebrity Big Brother* (Jan. 2006), the proceeds of

which (a £ 60,000 fee and an estimated £ 100,000 from text messages) he was donating to Interpal. This organisation is registered as a charity in the UK, but has been listed as a terrorist organization by the US. Galloway lost his seat in 2010, but managed to get elected again in a by-election in Bradford West in 2012, a city he declared to be an 'Israel-free zone' in 2014. His track record of 'anti-Zionist' behaviour is one of the worst of a British person of his level of public stature, yet he is concerned with denying the obvious. In fact, when Hadley Freeman, a columnist for *The Guardian* tweeted 'Galloway has said and done things that cross the line from anti-Israel to antisemitic', he proceeded to have his lawyers threaten legal action and even demand an apology and £5,000 each from people who *re-tweeted* Freeman's tweet. No action was taken in the end. Instead his law firm was issued a warning from the Solicitors Regulation Authority. A bad loser at any account and a narcissist to boot, he also publicly challenged the election result in 2015 when he lost his seat to the Labour candidate. Again no legal steps were taken... Next he stood for the post of London mayor on May 5, 2016, receiving only 1,4% of the vote.

Briefly back to 2003 – That the Iraqi dictator received support from the European far Right clearly makes sense – his Ba'ath party, founded by Michel Aflaq in the 30s, was modeled on the Fascist parties, and the 'Arab Socialism' they preached was based on German National Socialism. Saddam himself was a fervent admirer of both Hitler and Stalin. The country was ruled with incredible brutality. Tens of thousands were murdered, torture and executions were the order of the day. How then was it possible that the mobilizations to avert a war against such a regime reached the vast proportions they did?

It's worth mentioning in passing that French President Chirac had won a huge majority over the far-Right candidate Le Pen in the presidential elections, and that German Chancellor Schröder to a large degree managed a re-election in 2002 due to his anti-American stance. But these were not just election manoeuvres. European investment banked on the status quo in countries like Iraq and Iran – no matter what the political situation was – and also the massive EU-investments into the Palestinian Authority that (along with ample donations by Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region) made Arafat an extremely rich man and helped make his 'insurrection' against Israel possible. An attempt by MEP Ilka Schröder to shed some light on the trail of money originating from the EU and ending in the war chests of anti-Semitic terror organizations was essentially blocked by the EU. It wasn't until after Arafat's death that a clearer picture would emerge. Namely, there existed no accountability and book-keeping, and the boundaries between the finances of the PA and of Arafat's 'personal' matters were blurred to say the least. All hand-outs, cash and cheques were issued by the leader himself, often to buy loyalties of the various armed and political factions, and not without funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars into bank accounts and investments abroad, including \$100,000 a month to finance his wife's lavish lifestyle in Paris. It seems mysterious that this man was seen as a hero by many people who considered themselves on the side of progress and emancipation.

Equally mysterious is the support that some are currently giving to Putin, Assad and Iran. Putin in turn is supporting the far Right in Europe; Assad's torture squads are renowned for their extreme brutality; and Iran has imprisoned, tortured and executed tens of thousands of Communists and other left wingers opposing the Islamist regime.

One possible interpretation of these sympathies is the vulgar theory derived from social democratic theorist Karl Kautsky that capitalism develops towards a kind of super-imperialism. 'This theory is rolled out regularly by the Left and the far Left of capital, the better to chain the workers to "their" national state, against "worldwide capitalism" and "non-national" bodies like the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, multinational corporations, etc.' (as the International Communist Current put it). This 'super-imperialism' is generally identified with the US, which is identified with globalisation, which in turn is often equated with 'americanisation'.

The resulting anti-Imperialism has a tendency to support or tolerate any movement that is at odds with the perceived enemy. It is thus becoming the rallying cry for any sort of nationalism, and all sorts of fundamentalist movements directly opposed to enlightenment and (bourgeois) democracy, as much as to social liberation and (communist) universal emancipation. The ultra left analysis is correct in pointing out the rivalries between the different factions of the international bourgeoisie, to understand a lot of the drift against the US as an attempt by the European and Arab ruling classes to position themselves to their advantage in the imperialist competition, and to view anti-Imperialism as a mobilizing tool to tie the working classes to the various local elites against a powerful foreign enemy. While certainly being the case in Europe, this is particularly true for Islamic countries, especially the ones with domestic economic and political problems. However, this analysis usually overlooks one important element that glues the different anti-Imperialist camps together: anti-Semitism.

While anti-Semitism has never completely disappeared, it certainly has had a big resurgence since 9/11. This is one of the aspects where the calculation of the attackers has clearly worked, since the attack on the WTC was consciously planned as an attack on global finance capital. In the mind of the anti-Semite, global finance capital is always imagined to be run by 'the Jews'. The prominent unifying factor in the red-brown-green front is the 'politically correct' form of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and hatred against the US. Anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism are closely tied together. Some from this coalition often described the neo-conservatives around Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle to be like a group of latter day Elders of Zion, manipulating American foreign policy in the interest of Israel. Both countries are seen not as 'real' nations, but as 'constructs' that lack the blood-ties of a 'people'. The attention given to the conflicts in Israel/Palestine and the hatred poured upon Israel is disproportional to say the least, and its fanaticism is remarkable. This is not only the case with neo-nazi boot boys, but equally with members of the lefty intelligentsia.

But it doesn't make sense anymore to equate the far Right with violent skinheads, although they will still do the job of inflicting physical harm. Many publicists on the Right have resorted to a strategy of attacking Zionism rather than Jews, and quoting writers of Jewish descent such as Norman Finkelstein and Noam Chomsky to back up their arguments. This is particularly popular in the context of Holocaust revisionism, for which both these authors have done invaluable services. Finkelstein construes a 'Holocaust Industry' whereby he is not denying the reality of the Shoa, but claims that it is primarily instrumentalised by the 'Jewish establishment' to serve their current political and economic interests. This is now practically serving as a 'politically correct' starting point for some Holocaust revisionists. Their 'reasoning' suggests that if the Holocaust has mainly become a tool, then wouldn't those who use it exaggerate a little bit, or worse? Chomsky on the

other hand has publicly defended the right of revisionists to voice their 'opinion', and even wrote the introduction to Robert Faurisson's book *Mémoire en défense* (1980).

The Iranian government has aggressively embraced the cause of Holocaust revisionism as a weapon in its war against Israel by announcing a 'scientific' conference. Among the invites were Horst Mahler, Robert Faurisson and Israel Shamir (living proof that people of Jewish descent can be anti-Semites). These various elites cooperate with each other in the 'war to extermination' against Israel, a country described as an 'apartheid regime' and the 'colonialist bridgehead of imperialism', and its supporter, the 'great Satan' USA, the cosmopolitan, multicultural and mixed race giant that is out to rule the world and destroy the 'authenticity' of local cultures with its globalisation.

Official Europe's indifference has been tested by the (at least publicly) increased radicalism of Iran under Ahmadinejad and the election victory of Hamas in Gaza in 2006. While France was still embracing Hezbollah in Lebanon, Germany was a bit less spectacular in its official embracing of the theocratic and fascist regimes in the Middle East. However, almost needless to say, Germany is the biggest investor in Iran.

At home Germany is concocting a discourse that has gained momentum over the last few years that is gradually revising history to the point that – while neither the Nazi dictatorship nor the Shoa are negated, the German people are exculpated as a whole and turned into a super-victim, first of the Nazi dictatorship and then of the allied 'bombing terror'. Through such revisionism it becomes possible to speak of a 'special responsibility' towards Israel, and at the same time support its enemies.

Extremely keen on lifting the sanctions and getting back in business with Iran, European and especially German business people and politicians started traveling to Iran en masse as soon as the supposedly 'moderate' regime had taken over. Incidents as the following have been played down by the media: When Stephan Weil, the prime minister of Lower Saxony (a Land in Germany), visited Iran in April 2016 on a business mission, he met with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president and a supposed moderate. Rafsanjani lectured the German politician that 'the Zionists' had made Europe insecure with 'money and media' in the 30s. Then, he said, the Nazis sent 'these people' to Palestine in revenge, who then created Israel. Weil then interrupted, saying that Germany recognizes its guilt in the holocaust, then Rafsanjani countered with the absurd claim that 'maybe' six million Jews were killed, but that this was nothing compared to the 'twenty million dead and eight million refugees' after the foundation of Israel.

Another figure trying to link Nazis and Zionists was Ken Livingstone, the former mayor of London, who claimed on morning radio a few days before the May 5, 2016 regional and mayoral elections that Hitler had been 'supporting Zionism – this before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews' and that he's 'been in the Labour party for 47 years; I've never heard anyone say anything antisemitic'. This was said in response to the question about whether a tweet by Naz Shah (the Labour MP who had beaten Galloway in the 2015 elections) which suggested that Israel should be 'relocated' to America was anti-Semitic. On the one hand this opened up a row, and the accusation of anti-Semitism was happily picked up by the right wing media, especially days before the elections. While the Labour leadership swiftly suspended several of its members, including Livingstone, the left radical press had not much more to say about it than that this was a 'witch-

hunt', 'demonisation', 'relentless attack', 'political calculation and destabilisation' and an attack on free speech by the 'Right and the Israel lobby'.

The denial extends to anti-Semitism inside and outside the Labour party. Apparently it isn't anti-Semitic to say that Zionists are 'cockroaches' who 'hide in the dark and try to create havoc where they lay their eggs'. Carole Swords from Respect wrote that the 'slimy, vile, hard skin bugs need to be stomped out'. These words could be straight from *Mein Kampf*. But since she said 'Zionists' and not 'Jews' it's not a problem for the denial-Left. (2012)

And when journalist Ben Judah visited Bradford, he wrote in the *Independent*: 'a group of passionate Galloway supporters pinned me to a wall, throttled me and punched me in the head, shouting "get out you f***ing Jew."' (*The Independent*, April 28, 2016)

On the street all this can look different again. For example, at an anti-Israel demonstration on April 13, 2002 in Amsterdam, 15,000 participants from organizations as diverse as the Grey Wolves, the PKK and the DHKP-C stood shoulder to shoulder when slogans such as 'Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the Gas!', 'Hitler, Hitler', 'Jews are Nazis' or 'Jews are dogs' were shouted. These slogans – and there were many more – aptly illustrate the confusion of the anti-Semites today. On the one hand the Nazis are referred to positively for having gassed Jews, on the other hand Israel is denounced as a Nazi state. This is reflected in the view of the holocaust that is seen by many in the Middle East as something that didn't take place, at least not to its actual extent. At the same time these anti-Semites suggest that the Shoa should have happened, or should now take place because the Jews are the 'Nazis' of today. A Jewish person who happened to walk past this demonstration was badly beaten by a mob, only one of hundreds of incidents in the last few years.

This situation has only worsened in the last years, whether in French cities where mobs could be heard chanting 'Mort aux juifs!' (Death to the Jews) at 'pro-Palestine' demonstrations as recently as 2014.

I don't claim or imply that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are exactly the same thing. But most anti-Semitism is now maskering as anti-Zionism, whether it's coming from the Left, the center or the Right. After Auschwitz, the open anti-Semitism that had previously permeated large sectors of Western societies had been discredited, but the thought-form had survived, the conspiratorial idea that the world was controlled by a 'Zionist Occupation Government' (on the far right), or an all-powerful pro-Israel lobby (on the Left and increasingly the center).

If we consider the Left as a diverse grouping of people, initiatives, movements and parties that are dedicated to social emancipation and progress, then such a Left should distance itself from the kind of anti-Imperialist ideology and its anti-Semitic outgrowths outlined above that is unifying such an international front of nationalist and religious movements, no matter what criticism could be levelled at the US and their allies.

This doesn't mean that there is no such thing as Imperialism, or that it wasn't right to oppose colonialism. There are indeed a number of competing Imperialisms which will lead to war and slaughter again and again if not opposed by a consequent internationalist movement. Of course it was correct to oppose colonialism but again this – as well as the opposition to neoliberal 'globalisation' – has to be fought on an internationalist platform.

Perhaps in 1920 Lenin's view seemed plausible; that by supporting bourgeois revolutions and anti-colonial nationalism in the 'backwards' countries could bring us closer to global communism. But he was wrong, and we're still paying the price.

Only an intransigent internationalist perspective which includes the negation of all nationalisms, religious social movements and cultural relativism can bring us closer to a future human community called communism. The way there will not be a straight line, but it will have to include a dismantling of the ideological dead weight of the mainstream Left, still soaked in the reactionary and counter-revolutionary certainties of the 20th century.

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