

Imperialism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Left. A Reply to Andrew Murray.



Communist Party of Australia's View of Imperialism.

Imperialism, the Marxist historian Victor Kiernan claimed, shows itself, “in coercion exerted abroad, by one means or another, to extort profits above what simple commercial exchange can procure.” [Andrew Murray](#) begins *Imperialism has Evolved since 1914, but it still Rules to World* (Morning Star. 2.8.14. reproduced on [21st century Manifesto](#)), by citing this assertion to observe that the “wars of 1914 and 1939 are the outstanding examples of what happens when that international system of extortion breaks down.” “Break-down and crisis” are as much a feature of “imperialism” as growth and slump are of capitalism. We might explain this, as a critic of Kiernan once noted, as the result of an inherent “atavistic” tendency to revert to type. (1)

Murray paints a picture of contemporary ‘imperialism’ in which there are “instruments of inter-imperialist mediation and control” such as Nato and the IMF, which bear some marks of “ultra” or “super” imperialism. That is, as Lenin put it in 1915, the view that there was underway an “international unification of national (or more correctly state-bound) imperialisms which “would be able to eliminate the most unpleasant, the most disturbing and distasteful conflicts, such as wars, political convulsions which the petty bourgeois is so much afraid of.”(2) At its most developed the idea of ‘ultra-imperialism’ would foresee a “single world trust” that would swallow up all states and enterprises. This, Lenin argued, simply would not happen.

Does the past show us the future? We can clearly set aside any idea of a single Capital dominating capitalism. Politically the existence of inter-state institutions, including international justice systems, does not eliminate rivalry between countries. There is no effective “global governance”. Conflicts have a recurrent source. “The shaper contradiction is between that world order managed

and maintained by US power and those big powers which stand to a significant extent outside of it. There are two – Russia and China.”

Dominant, naturally, is the “US-led bloc”; the imperialism “constitutes the dominant system in the world today”. This is bound, hand and foot, to a policy of aggression, “the main driver of war lies in the policy of the US and the imperialist world order it has created to further its leading business interests, and those of its capitalist allies, Britain pre-eminent among them.” That is, despite signs of US “retreat” and “difficulties in the Middle East, it is “commanding” with world-wide military bases, and control of the (above) “inter-imperialist” bodies, like the IMF and Nato.

Anti-Imperialism.

Threaded into this analysis Murray states, “anti-imperialism now is at the heart of any serious progressive politics”. Sometimes it may lead progressive to “deal with contradictory cross currents”. One, is that “Russia’s role as a challenger to global US hegemony and the legitimacy of many national demands arising from the break up of the Soviet Union, may often mandate contingent support for the positions of the Putin government”. That is with the “contradictory” recognition that Russia has “corrupt oligarchic and repressive” practices, in “restored Russian capitalism.”

It is odd that anybody would consider that backing any aspect of Russian foreign policy is ‘*anti-imperialist*’. It may be done with reasons, but if the government of Putin is the head of a capitalist state, meshed into the imperialist system, then how exactly it is a consistent part of anti-imperialism? It is hard to see many people rushing to the defence of one group of oligarchs fighting another.

One wonder how many other ‘challengers’ to US hegemony also “mandate” contingent support? To be supported (or in real terms, given kind words and some public show of endorsement) how far can a foreign policy trump a domestic one? A debate has begun on the US-left, with echoes in Europe, on Hamas. The American International Socialist Organization reject any backing for the violent, reactionary ISIS and Islamic State Islamists in Syria and Iraq. But they offer “unconditional but critical” support for the Gaza wing of the Muslim Brotherhood which has right-wing anti-socialist and anti-liberal policies. (3) The importance of their anti-imperialist battle with Israel over-rides their anti-democratic and corrupt practices.

Others might argue that it would be better simply to oppose Israel’s actions in attacking the Palestinians and depriving them of their rights than in to offer any succour to a group with a proven record of hostility to any form of left-wing and progressive politics. No amount of bluster about solidarity can disguise this side of Hamas. Israel’s actions need to be fought by a coherent movement, one not entangled in this dead-end. Such a push requires co-operation with Israeli citizens opposed to their state’s policies, and not a call to drive them into the sea. This is not to “blame” Hamas, it is simply not to *take their political side*.

Romantic third-worldism appears to have survived the collapse of any specific “non-capitalist” development after the fall of Official Communism and the rise of neo-liberal economics and politics. Perhaps we are seeing signs of a part others about to plunge into a second-youth, digging out dusty copies of Frantz Fanon to find inspiration for their “anti-imperialism”. (4) It continued to exist in the half-life of university “post-colonial” theory and some marginal groupuscules, like the

French *Les Indigènes de la République*. These self-appointed representatives of the “natives” battle against neo-colonialist secularism and Marxism. They really are unconditional backers of Hamas, and treat the racist anti-Semite, ‘anti-Zionist’, and Holocaust denier, Dieudonné with great tenderness.

It is perhaps unfair to draw such conclusions from what are, at present, straws in the wind. But it is disingenuous to claim that you give “unconditional” support to a movement or party when you reserve the right to be “critical”. Heroes do not generally appreciate unfavourable comments, even if made very discreetly, from their fans. No doubt politics is full of tales of unrequited love. The left groups that popularised this and similar formulae in the 1960s and 1970s, notably the Trotskyist *United Secretariat of the Fourth International*, knew many such disappointments, from African national liberation movements, to the IRA, to cite but a few.

People often comment on a distinct strand of visceral anti-Americanism in what is left of post-war leftism and Communism. It could be said that sometimes it plays a role not dissimilar to Marx’s eminently forgettable phobia against Tsarist Russia (*Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century, mid 1850s*) That led Marx to make some claims which can only be described in terms of conspiracies, the “secret collaboration between the Cabinets of London and St. Petersburg” back to Peter the Great(!). Today it is frequent to see people throw responsibility for wars and exploitation on the US in terms of intrigues, spying, most recently, through the ethereal spheres of the Net.

The *Communist Party of Britain* (CPB) is, one hopes, made of sterner stuff. While there is a continuing regret at the demise of ‘actually existing socialism’ only a few have found a new home in the national conservatism of Putin’s Kremlin – though many more indulge its media, such as *Russia Today*. Andrew Murray notes that the Russian Federation’s actions in Ukraine have been circumscribed by the need to maintain “economic links with important Ukrainian enterprises”. The Communist Party of Britain, and some left groups, contains people who do not consider Russia imperialist. Murray suggests “otherwise” – on the basis of its international economic interests. This is indeed an illustration of how the left cannot “conditionally” align with any existing capitalist power. But more deeply is he seriously suggesting that it might be a good thing if Russia stood by the separatists? Why exactly? What socialist objective does that meet? It is bad enough having a right-wing pro-EU pro-US government with far-right involvement. But does a break-away solve the problems of the Ukraine? What criteria are being used to determine this?

Imperialism Otherwise.

It is the case that the “territorial” and “economic” mechanisms that states are caught up are shaped by the hegemony of one great power, the United States. ‘It’, or rather the fractions and networks that dominate the country’s economic and politics, has played a key (though, as is obvious, by no means exclusive) role in spreading the neo-liberal economic agenda. It has tried to exert, with no great success, territorial rights in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and across the globe. These actions have been a major cause of great, and continuing, bloodshed. (5)

But Murray’s “otherwise” has to be extended. There are plenty of ‘other’ factors to consider behind conflicts in the world today. Nor are things reducible to the US-leadership. However, adding the European Union to this list of powers still leaves us short of determining the overwhelming

influence of a new ‘concert of imperialist nations’. To give one example, the failure of the ‘Arab Spring’ can hardly be reduced to the machinations of the Pentagon, the EU, or the galaxy of US-inspired think tanks and ‘advisers’ on democracy. Domestic politics, state structures, and the rise of the “micro-powers” of Islamic coercion, and the pressures of economic flows, could be put into the very long list of causal factors at work behind the (still unsettled) outcome of these revolts.

If there are forces for the left to support they can probably be best found in those determined to put democracy and social justice above religious and national concerns. Göran Therborn recently argued that the “new middle classes” in the developing world could divide into those who take sides, “either with the oligarchs against the poor, or with the people against the oligarchs. (6) This expresses a theme popular amongst journalists, that democracy is the central issue of our time and the basis for new cross-class alliances led, in the South, by a “modern” Westernised professionals and the intelligentsia.

The recent record (from the Arab World to Turkey) of such movements is not one of success. Syria has apparently melted down to a confessional war, stained by state mass murder and the rise of the totalitarian genocidal ISIS, which has spread into the Iraqi Islamic State. In Baghdad a confessional Shiite regime clings to power. Egypt has returned to a repressive military oligarchy. States founded on religious authority, repression, and sexual apartheid, from Iran to Saudi Arabia, remain in place.

Many Marxists have always argued that democracy is tied to the struggles of the labour movement, a more permanent, and more radical and better-founded basis for change. Therborn may be right that economic change means that its class bases have weakened. Yet it’s worth noting that Tunisia, a case apart in the Arab Spring, in which some hopes may still be placed, is marked by opposition to the domination by Islamists of a, sometimes stormy, partnership between intellectuals and the powerful trade union federation the UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*).

Western governments may create, or exacerbate wars. Their prime concern remains the economy. Neo-liberal economics do not rely on heavy-handed domestic repression. In Europe and elsewhere, it is the privatisation of the public sphere, and exploitation by a new class of rentiers, that is the most pressing threat.

How does this affect internationalism – something basic behind genuine open-minded ‘anti-imperialism’? Globalisation and mass migration have created a sense that the “distance” between lands is far less than it was 100 years ago. This is a fight that could unite people across the world against the ‘empire’ of those enlarging their grossly unequal territories, not divide them. On this democratic and socialist basis we could be said to be “anti-imperialist”. But there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that corresponds today to the Comintern’s Fourth Congress, “anti-imperialist united front”, nor, given the diversity of world politics and states, does one look likely to reappear. There is no division of the world into clear-cut “camps” to choose. We have to make our own choices. (7)

References.

(1) Page 58. *Imperialism. Pioneer of Capitalism.* Bill Warren. NLB 1980.

(2) Page 12. *V.I. Lenin. Introduction to Imperialism and the World Economy.* N. Bukharin. (1915). Merlin Press. 1972.

(3) *What do socialists say about Hamas?* July 31, 2014

“We differentiate between utterly reactionary Islamist movements such as ISIS, and Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The latter two movements came into existence to resist imperialism and entered into many confrontations and struggles with Zionism and imperialism in defence of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the Lebanese people.

We consider Hamas, which originated in the midst of the first Palestinian Intifada at the end of the 1980s, and won wide popularity among Palestinians because of its rejection of the concessions and surrender which Fatah offered to the Zionist enemy and the United States, and through its military resistance to the brutal Israeli assault on Gaza, to be a resistance movement against Zionism and imperialism.

From this perspective we unconditionally support Hamas when it is engaged in military or non-military struggles against Israel, because it weakens the Zionist state and terrifies the Arab regimes and the United States, and therefore strengthens the potential for class struggle in the Arab states against this imperialist system.

Our unconditional support for Hamas is not uncritical, however, because we believe that the movement’s strategies in the struggle to liberate Palestine – like the strategies adopted by Fatah and the Palestinian left before it – have failed and will fail in the future.”

(4) See: *Capitalism, Class and universalism: escaping the cul-de-sac of postcolonial theory.* Vivek Chibber. Socialist Register. 2014.

(5) “In the course of four decades of unremitting struggle, a military and political order was constructed that transformed what had once been a merely hemispheric hegemony into a global empire, remoulding the form of the US state itself” Page 110. *Imperium.* Perry Anderson. New Left Review. No 82 (New Series) 2013. See also, [Imperium. Perry Anderson. Critical Thoughts.](#) Andrew Coates. “The Bush administration’s shift towards unilateralist, towards coercion rather than consent, towards a much more overtly imperial vision, and towards reliance upon its unchallengeable military power, indicates a high-risk approach to sustaining US domination, almost certainly through military command over global oil resources. Since this is occurring in the midst of several signs of loss of dominance in the realms of production and now (though as yet less clearly) finance, the temptation to for exploitative domination is strong.”(P 75) *The New Imperialism.* David Harvey. Oxford University Press. 2005.

(6) *New Masses?* Göran Therborn. New Left Review. 2nd series. No 85. 2014.

(7) *The anti-imperialist united front.* [Alliance for Workers Liberty.](#) 2013.

Andrew Coates, 2014

<https://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2014/08/06/imperialism-anti-imperialism-and-the-left-a-reply-to-andrew-murray/>