

Question and answer on Anarchism [Anti-Imperialism]

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Q. What do you understand by anti-imperialism?

A. This is a word that is undergoing a sea-change. When Imperialism was understood as powerful Nation-States building up by colonial expansion, the meaning of anti-imperialism was clear. Its support came from Anarchists and Nationalists (of small oppressed nations). Socialists were divided: many, following Marx, thought that the industrial nations were 'progressive' and they supported colonial expansion especially in America and Germany though regarding Russian expansion as reactionary since Tsarist Russia was 'barbaric'. Rural life was to them 'idiotic'. Other Socialists, with a natural regard for colonial or nationally oppressed countries, or for Socialist Parties existing there, were inevitably anti-imperialist.

Anarchists worked alongside anti-Imperialists for instance in struggles against the French, Belgian and British empires. When Tsardom was overthrown and Russia became the Marxist homeland, Communist Parties moved in on the anti-Imperialist struggle. The Leninists cited nations like Finland, whose Socialists had become anti-Imperialists, and during Tsardom been accepted by Lenin, to show that Marxists were anti-Imperialists too, guaranteed by Lenin himself, though Finnish nationalism had since decayed into fascism.

America was as regarded as democratic and anti-imperialist by Marxists; indeed the supreme example of progressive capitalism. After World War I the American capitalists went into a panic over Russia and radicalism (perhaps it was really American workers they were frightened of) and Americanism became the symbol of anti-Communism. The US backwoods Christians set the tone for anti-communism, but America became wooed once more as the great democratic power when it suited the interests of the Soviet Union to have a counterbalance against revived German Imperialism.

In the years of the Popular Front anti-Imperialism became a dirty word among the Left. With the nationalists (of small nations) and a few left socialist groupings (like the ILP in this country) Anarchists stood by the colonial struggle, though as their numbers had been reduced by the inter-war decline in confidence of workers, this was mostly individual actionism. Nevertheless, as a by-product of years of agitation, the circumstances of World War II brought overwhelming victory to anti-Imperialism. Sooner or later every vestige of empire was swept away which was as much as anyone expected of anti-imperialism.

Anarchists had always gloomily predicted that when the Nationalists took over they would speedily prove as oppressive as the former States, and so it was. Most notoriously in South Africa where the end of British imperialism meant domination by the ruling white tribe, most ironically in India where mystic pacifism became a militarism power by genocide; most pathetically in Nigeria where people who had been libertarians in adversity became authoritarians in triumph.

Today the empires that seemed so great lost all their influence during the war. Those succeeded to empire were the Nation-States never described as 'imperialists' and which do not give their emperors crowned eagles – America and the Soviet Union. The new phrases Soviet Imperialism, American Imperialism, would have sounded strangely once, though they were always justified. If all this is understood, then we are anti-imperialists in the same way as ever.

We find however that this all this is not always understood even among some Anarchists (especially in Germany). Since the term 'anti-imperialism' has become a weasel word in the Left, and a synonym for anti-Americanism, it glosses over the crimes of the Russian Empire (the wheel has come full circle). Whenever we see the word 'anti-imperialism' nowadays we sniff at it carefully before opening the package, not as one would for explosives, but to see if the milk has gone sour.

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