

On September 11 and “Against the Double Tragedy”

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[Note: Looking back over this, I regret only one phrase, which I think is survivable as this was written immediately after the establishment of the suicide bombers as members of al-Qaeda. Even so the phrasing is poor. Chris Wright, November 29 2005.]

In their statement “Against the Double Tragedy”¹, the resident editorial board of News and Letters made a series of comments which, in the face of Bush’s current drive to war and the climate of xenophobia and intensified anti-Muslim racism, must be sharply rebuked. The concessions to U.S. chauvinism, the use of standard anti-Muslim caricatures in place of a Marxist analysis of the source of Islamic fundamentalism and its relationship to globalization, and the general bowing to Euro-centrism utterly undermine any attempt to explain why the politics of anti-imperialism offer no guidance in the wake of current events.

The absence of analysis begins right away when the REB states, “The Sept. 11 attacks have nothing to do with any struggle against capitalism, injustice, or U.S. imperialism. They were a brutal act of violence against U.S. workers that has no rational cause, legitimacy, or justification.”² This is simply wrong. To reject the possibility of rational cause in the same breath as legitimacy or justification is to give up any explanatory power. This may be comforting, but it reduces the people who carried this out, obviously Muslims, to being mindless. Since N&L has already indicated this above in their comment on ‘mindless terrorism’, they have chosen the same ground as the US media.

The obfuscation of events continues with the statement that “No group took responsibility for the attacks, and not a single political demand or proclamation was issued by anyone. It is hard to discern any political content to these acts, presumably carried out by Islamic fundamentalists under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. They were simply geared to kill as many people as possible, without any regard for class, race, or background. Such cruelty could only have been carried out by the most reactionary, backward elements imaginable.”³

It is not hard to discern willful blindness in this idiotic statement. They targeted the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and somewhere in Washington D.C., such as Congress or the White House. If anything, this was an attack aimed directly at the symbols of U.S. military, political and economic power. Had it been geared towards ‘simply killing as many people as possible, it would have been done at 10am or 2pm, not 9am. Had they wanted to cause maximum loss of life,

they would have driven a plane into a Major League Baseball game, where the death toll would most certainly have been thousands more.

Certainly, this was done with no regard for class, race, gender, or background. 1,400 Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans lost their lives in this incident. So did many African Americans and Latinos. And clearly, the vast bulk of those killed were working class. But is it on this basis that we have to call the people who did this the “most reactionary, backward elements imaginable”? Is this act more cruel than the one million people killed in Iraq by the US since 1991? Is this act more cruel than what Israel has done to the Palestinians? Is this act more cruel than the starvation and death by disease that happens at such a horrific rate worldwide simply because it benefits capital? I think not. Rather, this act is part and parcel of the daily terror which capital exacts upon the world’s population. What makes this special is NOT the degree of death and misery. Rather, this is special because this is the first time since the 19th century that the U.S. has actually been attacked on the mainland. This is the first time since World War II that U.S. militarization for ‘national defense’ has appeared as more than a pure sham. This is what is hooking a lot of people into blind-faith patriotism and militarism.

So why the references to ‘mindless’, ‘the most reactionary, backwards elements’, the denial of rationality, and so on? This kind of approach does nothing more or less than support the racist construction of all Muslims as irrational, mindless fanatics. It supports the idea that Islam is, as a body, more reactionary and backward than any other religion.

During a brief interlude in this non-analysis we get treated to a dose of economic catastrophism as follows: “First, the economic impact of the attack on the World Trade Center—tens of billions of dollars of damage were done and many airlines now teeter on the brink of bankruptcy as a result of the disruption of air travel—will almost certainly send the U.S. into a full recession.” While not offensive, this does seem to fail to understand capital on some relatively serious level.

Catastrophe is essential to capital’s survival. Catastrophes like these destroy dead labor (the WTC), which no longer generates value, allowing capital to exploit new living labor in construction and myriad other ways. For the rest, airline travel will recover fairly quickly because that is the only way to cover long distances efficiently; planes will have to be refitted; security systems and procedures upgraded; military order increased; and so on. The fluctuation caused by this in relation to ‘confidence in the market’ will probably blow over quickly. Historically, things like this have not caused more than market fluctuations. If we do plunge into the depths, then it will not have been caused by this attack, but rather, this attack will simply have been the proverbial ‘stick’ that broke the market’s back. That does not mean this will not, in fact already is, hurting tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of workers. The real ‘economic’ effects will come from the class struggle over whether or not capital can use this as an opportunity to impose a higher level of exploitation, as part of the process of recomposing class relations in its own favor.

As the REB begins to wind up the statement, they treat us to a banality which pits progressive “Western” (quotation marks will not save you, comrades!) culture/society against Islamic Barbarism. “These “explanations” misconstrue the nature of the forces which conducted the attacks. Reactionary Islamic fundamentalism is not simply driven by hatred of U.S. imperialist acts against Iraq, Palestine, or any other country. Islamic fundamentalism is just as much driven by hatred of feminism, homosexuality, workers’ rights, etc. Such groups as Afghanistan’s Taliban, Algeria’s FIA, and the terrorist cells in Egypt which have murdered Marxist professors as well as indigenous writers and singers represent a violent rejection of everything “Western”—especially

those aspects of western society created through decades of struggles by workers, women, gays and lesbians and minorities for a more open and free society.”

Firstly, this ignores the choice of the United States. Why here? Because the United States represents the center of Western capitalist power, not just economically but politically and militarily. The U.S. actions in the Middle East and the rest of the world certainly do make us a target. The U.S. certainly does make us a target by its specific actions. There is no doubt that all of the actions and policies of the United States make it the pole of attraction for these kind of attacks,

Secondly, this kind of Islamic fundamentalism is NOT anti-Western or anti-Modernist or anti-capitalist. This is exactly where the banality of defending ‘Westernism’ comes to light and the long trek of the word Humanism returns to its origins in an Us vs Them dialectic of ‘Civilization vs Barbarism’. Islamic fundamentalism parallels Western religious development and ideas in some ways, harkening back to the role played by early Methodism, Calvinism, and Puritanism in the creation and disciplining of the working class. Islamic fundamentalism uses older ideologies and cultural practices, but revises them in accordance with the needs of capitalist accumulation and modernization. Nowhere has Islamic fundamentalism tried to restrict the growth of capital. Osama bin Laden is a very rich capitalist with a family construction business. In fact, he was building roads and infrastructure for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. Islamic fundamentalism seeks to control and discipline the population to capital accumulation and towards production and reproduction. Nobody is questioning whether their acts are reprehensible and horrific, but they are not counter-posable to some more humane ‘Western’ practices qua ‘Western’.

If we mystify Islamic fundamentalism by taking it out of the context of global capital and the transformation of social relations in those countries, then we will certainly miss what is going on. If we do not see Islamic fundamentalism as part and parcel of the reaction of global capital against workers, women, gays and lesbians and minorities, then we must make these terrorists into devils. Rather than that, Islamic fundamentalism reflects the class struggle, the struggle against women, against racial and religious minorities, etc. which marks the entire world in this period of so-called globalization. If it takes a particularly harsh form here, it seems, then we should consider that the wretchedness of life has a direct effect on the barbarity induced, such as in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, and other places of note.

Also, this idiotic paragraph assumes that there is something fundamentally ‘Western’ about women’s liberation, workers’ liberation, racial tolerance, free sexuality, etc. This is positively offensive. ‘The West’ reintroduced mass slavery and the slave trade on a scale never before imagined. The ‘West’ introduced the categories of heterosexual and homosexual in ways that Othered homosexual practices as part and parcel of generating the ‘home’ as the site of un-waged reproduction and all ‘unproductive’ sexuality as ‘evil’. ‘The West’ is, if nothing else, synonymous with the capital-labor relation and all the other horrors that go along with it. In so far as struggles here have broken that down and expanded the realm of Freedom, those struggles could be considered anti-‘Western’, precisely because they are generated by ‘Western’ society. This attachment to ‘Western’ society is an attachment to the contradictions of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment ‘humanism’, which I suppose should not be surprising for an organization that calls itself ‘Marxist-Humanist’.

Finally, we get a tasty treatment of News and Letters’ ongoing submission to nationalism and the state in theory, having received heavy doses of xenophobia and anti-Muslim chauvinism. “The lesser-evilism which underlay much of the Left’s silence on Bosnia, and its refusal to support

the movement for national self-determination in Kosova, has only succeeded in strengthening the power of U.S. imperialism. The reason so many despair of the struggle for freedom and turn to patriotism, xenophobia and statism is that they see no liberatory alternative to capitalism. Instead of responding to each political crisis by repeating the same old slogans against "U.S. imperialism," revolutionaries have a responsibility to oppose all societies and tendencies based on alienated human relations while projecting a positive vision of a new society, what Karl Marx called "positive humanism, beginning from itself." Only in that way can humanity see that there is an alternative to capitalism-imperialism.☐

Part of the problem lay in this defense of national self-determination. After being against statism, patriotism, and xenophobia, News and Letters would have us be for national self-determination. That idea means nothing without statism, patriotism and xenophobia. There is no nation without a state. There is no such thing as national self-determination for the working class. The epoch in which capital had not yet enveloped the whole world, in which the capital-labor relation did not dominate all other social relations, such a notion was relevant because the spread of the capital-labor relation spread the power of the working class. But in the last 50 or so years, in what few places can we say that capital has not become dominant, not simply as the formal subsumption of labor to capital, but as the real subsumption?

The idea of national liberation is nothing other than a reactionary utopia harkening back to social democracy and Stalinism. This approach does not start from capital as an always-already global society, but as a system of national capitals and national states. It takes the form to be immediately the essence, instead of understanding that the form is the mediated appearance of the essence, or rather, the essence in the mode of being denied. National self-determination does not take the working class as revolutionary subject but alien class forces (since for women and people of color the issue is not 'national' liberation in any meaningful sense.) National liberation is the separation of one territory from others through the formation of a state that exists to draw capital to itself and to ensure the control over labor within its boundaries. What currently existing state does not perform these tasks? The maintenance of such positions in spite of the substantive transformation of social relations globally into the real subsumption of labor by capital reflects the under-theorization of the changes that have taken place since the period of so-called 'classical imperialism' as understood by Lenin and a host of others (a position which always started theoretically from the nation-state and national capitals to begin with, rather than global capital versus global labor.) The position of national self-determination will not offer any resolution to the conflicts existing in the majority world because the possibility of independent capitalist development is unrealistic. The failures of the post-WWII national liberation movements highlight this failure. If anything, the countries which engaged in national revolutions tended to develop capitalist relations less thoroughly and often had political regimes as or more repressive in relation to the working class than other states.

I agree that lesser-evilism is misplaced, but not because national self-determination is at issue, but because the only mode of liberation left open is the self-liberation of the working class. The appeal to national self-determination led to the position of defending the KLA, an organization whose anti-working class tendencies were both intrinsic and explicit, even before the post-NATO bombing period. As in so many cases, rather than the working class of Kosova being seen as Subject, the KLA became Subject in substitution for the working class, a classically Leninist inversion of the Party-Class relationship. In Kosova, as in Serbia, there is no way in which Kosova or Serbia could be seen as instances of opportunities for national self-determination in anything

but a reactionary sense. The absence of the working class for itself should in no way drive us to believe that any of the alternatives could substitute for working class self-activity. This raises broader questions of whether or not Kosova was 'nationally oppressed', which I think could be clearly defended. Even so, the question is what is the point of departure for the resolution of that oppression. I see no means of claiming that national self-determination offered Kosova workers an actual respite to their social conditions of exploitation and oppression.)

The statement of the REB should not be passed off as a more enlightened, more rigorous Marxism. It is not even an analysis as such, but the refusal of an analysis! Nowhere do we get even a glimpse of an explanation that might address the question that was so fervently asked by the public, and so shamelessly evaded by the politicians and media, of "Why us?" It seems that News and Letters will have to take its place alongside the rest of the Left in neither deciphering the causes nor mounting an adequate reply to the latest tragedy of capital's murderous 'globalization'. However, News and Letters will also have to add to that miserable moment shameful concessions to national chauvinism and utter submission to anti-Muslim rhetoric.

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