

Anti-Imperialism is for Everyone

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Intro

A recent book on the Revolutionary Cells of Germany, a network of militant left-wing radicals active in the 1980s and 90s, includes a curious exchange. An interviewer asks three former RC members about antiimperialism, insisting that it was a “Leninist concept”. Eventually, one of the former RC members says: “The term ‘antiimperialism’ was widely used within the left at the time, it didn’t necessarily indicate Leninism. ... It meant that liberation cannot be reduced to the national frame; it needs to be international and the result of fighting an international system of exploitation.”

The questions by the interviewer, ostensibly of a younger generation, reveal a shift within the radical German left that is most commonly associated with the pro-Israel “anti-Germans” (*Antideutschen*), who, following German reunification in 1991, focused on criticizing nationalism, including national liberation movements. This led not only to a critique of antiimperialism, which was associated with national liberation movements, but also to an equation of antiimperialism and antisemitism.

In short, “antiimperialism” became a bad word and was largely abandoned by leftist circles. An article in the soft anti-German rag *Jungle World* confirmed this in 2017: “Instead of a nuanced analysis of power relations, the term ‘antiimperialism’ nowadays only serves an ideology that, thanks to a simplification of complex systems of domination, creates the basis for gruesome international left-right-alliances.”

The impact of these developments went beyond Germany. When, in 2017, I wrote a text titled “Oppressor and Oppressed Nations: Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism”, an old friend took me aside during an anarchist bookfair and wanted to know why I “dabbled in antiimperialist politics”, which so clearly were associated with leftist currents that anarchists should keep a distance from.

Even within Marxist circles you can encounter mistrust with regard to antiimperialism, since it is often associated with crude anti-Americanism, a vulgar “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” sentiment, and the uncritical support of “anti-Western” regimes, no matter how reactionary or hypocritical. In the *Oxford Handbook of Economic Imperialism*, editor Zak Cope states in an article titled “Imperialism and Its Critics: A Brief Conspectus” the following: “In Europe at least, the far left and far right often embrace the same adolescent ‘antiimperialist’ (‘anti-American’) ideology, leading them to proclaim support for supposed opponents of the United States, typically autocratic imperialist rivals and their satellites.”

These aren’t just straw man arguments. Tendencies of “adolescent antiimperialist ideology” exist within the left. But it is curious that these tendencies, which are far from dominant, would discredit the entire concept of antiimperialism. There are “adolescent” tendencies in antifascism and the climate justice movement as well. Do they discredit these causes? No, since they are bigger than some insufficient interpretations of them. The same applies to antiimperialism. The history of imperialism is way too closely tied to the history of capitalism to believe that anticapitalist politics can do without antiimperialism. (If you’re not convinced, I’d recommend reading Torkil Lauesen’s *The Global Perspective: Reflections on Imperialism and Resistance*.)

Antiimperialism does not per se mean crude anti-Americanism, and it does not per se mean Leninism either. Lenin wasn’t the first to use the term “imperialism” to describe a global system of accumulation and exploitation forming the material basis of global capital. That was the British economist J.A. Hobson, a moderate socialist with no revolutionary agenda. Lenin’s book *Imperi-*

alism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, published in 1917, is certainly a classic in antiimperialist circles, but it doesn't tie all antiimperialist activity automatically to him.

I myself come from a generation in which antiimperialism simply was part of the package if you were radical left, Leninist or not. The analytical depth might have been limited at times, and the moral impetus stronger than the political one, but there was consensus on the impossibility of disconnecting matters of global justice from revolutionary movements. I came of age politically in Europe in the 1980s, but a similar understanding seemed to prevail elsewhere, too. The following is a quote from a discussion on "International Solidarity and Revolutionary Resistance" during an anarchist gathering in Vancouver, Canada, in January 1990: "Our internationalism, which connects revolutionary struggles here with the struggles in the periphery, is what creates the anti-imperialist resistance."

I'd like to use this piece to illustrate how antiimperialism has served as an important aspect of radical politics apart from orthodox Marxism-Leninism. I'll be using examples from anarchism, autonomism, and the Black liberation movement.

Anarchism

That anarchism was affected by the increasing critique of the term "antiimperialism" within the broader left has been documented as early as in 1987. In an article in the anarchist journal *Black Flag*, Albert Meltzer (presumably) wrote the following:

"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). ... Anarchists worked alongside anti-imperialists for instance in struggles against the French, Belgian and British empires. ... 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. ... 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 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."

South African anarchist organizer and author Lucien van der Walt has made various contributions to the documentation of antiimperialist politics in anarchist history. Here is a quote from the 2005 article "Towards a History of Anarchist Anti-Imperialism":

"Anarchists cannot be 'neutral' in any fight against imperialism. Whether it is the struggle against the third world debt, the struggle against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, or opposition to US military attacks on the Middle East, we are not neutral, we can never be neutral. We are against imperialism. But we are not nationalists. We

recognise that imperialism is itself rooted in capitalism, and we recognise that simply replacing foreign elites with local elites will not solve the problem in a way that is fundamentally beneficial for the working class and peasantry. ... Imperialism cannot be destroyed by the formation of new nation-states. Even independent nation-states are part of the international state system, and the international capitalist system, a system in which the power of imperialist states continues to set the rules of the game. ... We need to abolish imperialism, so creating conditions for the self-government of all people around the world. But this requires the destruction of capitalism and the state system. ... It is only the working class and peasantry who can destroy imperialism and capitalism, replacing domination by both local and foreign elites with self-management and social and economic equality.”

In a more recent piece, Antti Rautiainen, an anarchist based in Finland, wrote the following in connection with the war in the Ukraine:

“The weakness of anarchism after the second world war is not due to ‘mistakes’ made in Russia or Spain, but one of the factors might be the anarchist failure to intervene in support of anti-colonial movements. The Soviet Union did what anarchists failed to do, in its own brutal way which caused lots of unnecessary (but also necessary) destruction in the global south. Any contribution by anarchists against liberation movements push the anarchist movement backwards in territories that have suffered from imperialism and colonialism. Opposing imperialism and colonialism is true internationalism.” (*Kapinatyöläinen*, no. 1/2022)

Autonomism

Wildcat is the German journal that keeps the legacy of operaism, based on independent workers’ struggles, alive. A 2021 text on the situation China contains the following comment: “To find answers, the international left must stop looking at things through anti-imperialist and culturalist lenses.” This is characteristic. In autonomist circles, antiimperialism is as poorly regarded today as in anarchist circles. This has not always been the case. *Wildcat*, the entire operaist current in Germany, and, in fact, much of the German autonomist movement were heavily influenced by the journal *Autonomie*, published from 1975 to 1985. *Autonomie* was very non-Leninist but stood in no opposition to antiimperialism at all. Issue no. 10, published in 1982, was titled “Antiimperialismus in den 80er Jahren” and focused on “social-revolutionary struggles to topple the imperialist world system [without] diffuse Marxist-Leninist convictions”. *Materialien für einen neuen Antiimperialismus*, one of *Autonomie*’s successor publications, continued to argue for “antiimperialism with a social-revolutionary agenda”.

In 1987, autonomist activists in Germany edited a reader titled *Materialien gegen imperialistische Flüchtlingspolitik*. The editorial ends as follows: “You can’t work with refugees part-time in forms of a ‘campaign’. This work has to be the expression of and the departure point for social revolution against imperialism and its programs as a whole.” The editors saw “the international movement of refugees as part of the international class struggle”.

At the time, autonomist antiimperialism was far from an oxymoron. In Canada, the publication *Arm the Spirit* referred to itself as an “autonomist anti-imperialist journal” throughout the 1990s.

Black Liberation

In Black liberation movements, antiimperialist rhetoric has always played a major role. While some organizations espousing antiimperialist rhetoric in the 1970s, such as the African Liberation Support Committee or the Black Workers Congress, fall into the Marxist-Leninist camp, other Black revolutionaries of the era didn't. Malcolm X called imperialism “the slave system of the West”, and Frantz Fanon (influenced by Marxist thought but a groundbreaking revolutionary thinker in his own right) stated in *Wretched of the Earth*: “Imperialism, which today is waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation, sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds.”

It has been suggested that in Black liberation circles the term “imperialism” has mainly served as a synonym for “colonialism” or even “White supremacy”. This is not only troubling in assuming that Black liberation theorists lack the skills to differentiate between analytical terms, it is also clearly false. If any proof was needed, it comes from the book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, authored in 1965 by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president and by no means a Leninist.

The focus on antiimperialism remains strong in Black liberation movements to this day. In a 2017 article titled “Mask Off: The Monopoly on Violence and Re-Invigorating an Anti-Imperialist Vision for Black Liberation”, Devyn Springer writes:

“As Black people, our liberation is definitively linked to those of the Global south, and an anti-imperialist politic is not simply an abstract ‘theory’ but a politic grounded in exploiting and strengthening that struggle between us and the global south. Anti-imperialism is not aloof theory, but the lifeblood of people's realities internationally, and we have to begin to see it as such to form a continuum of an effective Black radical tradition.”

With connections to the Walter Rodney Foundation and Hood Communist, Springer might be suspected by some to be a Leninist (doubtful), but Leninism clearly isn't at the heart of the Black Alliance for Peace, which, alongside principles such as “intersectionality”, includes “anti-imperialism” under its “Principles of Unity”. They write: “BAP takes a resolute anti-colonial, anti-imperialist position that links the international role of the U.S. empire to the domestic war against poor people and working-class Black people in the United States.”

Horace Campbell concludes a 2015 *Monthly Review* article on “Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism in Africa” with the words: “African anti-imperialism ... has a pivotal role to play in determining the framework of history in the twenty-first century – and the possibility of a new world revolution.”

Whoever discards “antiimperialism” as an outdated, useless, or even reactionary concept, dismisses significant aspects of Black liberation thought.

Outro

Why is any of this important? Am I just indulging in a pointless leftist battle over words? Does anybody really care whether the term “antiimperialism” is part of our agenda or not? Should we not just disregard the entire discussion and move on?

I don't think it's that easy. The discussion impacts international networking and the collaboration of anticapitalist militants across nation-state borders, a crucial endeavor if revolutionary politics shall remain a true alternative rather than merely an intellectual exercise. We need broad, non-sectarian, yet decidedly leftist antiimperialist politics.

In recent years, there have been changes. Even in the heartland of the anti-antiimperialist movement, in Germany, antiimperialism has made a bit of a comeback. Partly, this is due to a new generation of leftist migrant youth, who are not forced to grapple with their ancestors' involvement in the Third Reich. Partly, this is due to a new generation of leftist German youth growing tired of the anti-German hegemony. The Kurdish struggle in particular has played a big role in reviving internationalist politics with an antiimperialist bend.

For future revolutionary movements, it is crucial to connect struggles against racist border regimes in the global north with workers' and peasants' movements in the global south. It is no coincidence that migration has turned into one of the most contested political issues of our time. It entails much radical potential, lying at the crossroads of superexploitation, the regulation of movement, national chauvinism, and the struggle over citizenship. Harsha Walia has pulled the strings together brilliantly in her 2010 book *Undoing Border Imperialism*. It outlines the basis on which radicals in the global north can play a role in the worldwide struggles for liberation today.

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