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Narrow Anti-Imperialism as Ideological Cover for Authoritarianism

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It is absolutely necessary to rebuild an intellectual and political foundation for criticism and seeking change in the world, but metropolitan anti-imperialism is totally unfit for this job. It has absorbed subordinating imperialistic tendencies, and it is fraught with eurocentrism and void of any true democratic content.

-Yassin al-Haj Saleh¹

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Nowadays narrow geopolitics and anti-imperialist discourses have often been used as an ideological veil, which can mask nationalist and authoritarian sentiments. This does not mean that imperialism is a thing of the past and one can talk of it only in order to hide more sinister reasons. It is more than evident that global superpowers still exercise hegemony over the rest of the world.

¹ www.yassinhs.com

But there is a very specific problem in contemporary narrow anti-imperialism: it interprets politics only through the lens of relations between nation-state formations and excludes inner-social dynamics. In this line of thought statecraft is being perceived as the only legitimate form, which must persist even if the price is social oppression. The main question becomes the resistance to Western powers, rather than what organizational form such struggles aim at. Often, we are being served vague concepts of anti-capitalism and socialism, which however doesn't overpass the nation-state and the paradigm of unlimited economic growth.

Authoritarian leaders and dictators are often more than happy to exploit this type of anti-imperialism and rally international support for their regimes. As Bookchin writes, *when "Third World" national liberation movements in colonial countries have made conventional avowals of socialism and then proceeded to establish highly centralized, often brutally authoritarian states, the Left often greeted them as effective struggles against imperialist enemies. [...] [D]espite the populist and often even anarchistic tendencies that gave rise to the European and American New Left, it's essentially international focus was directed increasingly toward an uncritical support for "national liberation" struggles outside the Euro-American sphere, without regard for where these struggles were leading and the authoritarian nature of their leadership.*²

Like classical ideologies, narrow geopolitical anti-imperialism continues to live in the epoch in which it initially developed. Many who share such views support Russia, China or Iran as if they still live in the Cold War era and there is still an opposing communist bloc. Their anti-imperialist ideology makes them blind for the imperialist actions of the powers they cheer for. For example, as Gershom Gorenberg notes, *Russia's imperialist goal of extending its power into what were once Ottoman lands began before 1917, carried*

² libcom.org

It must be clear that we should not oppose the strife of subjugated people to liberate themselves from foreign yoke, but we must be careful to not fall into the trap of supporting new, 'domestic' imperialists in the place of the old 'foreign' ones. Slogans such as *The enemy of my enemy is my friend* will most certainly not lead us towards essential social emancipation. As Iranian journalist Rahman Bouzari have suggested, *the first prerequisite of fighting imperialism is to fight the imperialist relations at home*¹³. In other words, we should stand in solidarity with those struggles and uprisings, which strive at abolishing all forms of oppression, such as the exploitation prompted by capitalist growth and the hierarchies of nation-states, and replace them with self-instituted forms of people power, where feminism, cooperation and equality proliferate. And there most certainly are such projects emerging – most notably the recent project of Democratic Confederalism in Northern Syria, which set in motion a stateless, feminist and direct democratic revolution in the war-torn Middle East. It is such genuinely revolutionary restructurings of the political architecture, which lead towards social emancipation, and not the replacement of one ruling elite by another.

¹³ www.opendemocracy.net

*on in Soviet days with an ideological overlay, and continues today*³. As an ideology, narrow anti-imperialism is becoming tool in the hands of nation-states, which seek to expand their influence and power. Cornelius Castoriadis, when suggesting that *communism in its realized state[...] destroyed the workers' movement of other countries by subordinating that movement to Russia's imperialist policy*⁴, exemplifies how classical ideologies have been used to make popular movements serve imperialist goals.

Its modernist fascination with large scales makes it explicitly state-centered doctrine. The only meaningful entities in the shallow anti-imperialist doctrine are hierarchical bureaucratic formations with national content. Thus, the world is being interpreted as a battlefield between nation-state and alliances between such. Every other social activity, which moves beyond statecraft is being either viewed as highly insignificant due to its smaller size, or as a manipulation by another state formation. The structural architecture of contemporary societies is being overlooked, or rather blindly accepted: domination and growth are viewed as the main tools for prosperity of geopolitical underdog nations.

It is understandable that in one such ideological construction there is no space for other projects, which aim to undermine the foundational basis of state hierarchies. Often the attempts of local populations to self-organize through grassroots means (like popular assemblies), are being met with hostility by certain left-wing tendencies, if they threaten authoritarian, but supposedly anti-imperialist, governments. One example can be found in the Arab Spring, where people in Northern Africa and the Middle East revolted against their authoritarian governments, organizing popular assemblies on public squares and in neighborhoods. We can suggest that in the imaginary of narrow anti-imperialism local

³ prospect.org

⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis: *A Society Adrift*. unauthorized translation, 2010. (Available online at www.notbored.org) 243

people and communities are too “tiny” and “insignificant” to act on their own, instead they are being driven by the long and invisible hand of another stronger rival nation-state⁵. Similar was the reaction of various “anti-imperialists” regarding the autonomous communities of Rojava⁶ and their stateless democratic experiment, which challenged the authoritarian rule of Assad in Syria.

Syrian thinker Yassin al-Haj Saleh describes the Western-centered and dogmatic nature of contemporary narrow anti-imperialism in the following way: *a German, a Brit, or an American activist would argue with a Syrian over what is really happening in Syria. It looks like they know more about the cause than Syrians themselves. We are denied “epistemological agency”*.⁷

Meredith Tax, in a review of Rohini Hensman’s book *Indefensible*⁸, acknowledges this problem of scale when suggesting that *people in the Global South who seek democracy should be taken at their word rather than accused of being manipulated by the West, as if nobody else could possibly desire the same rights to free expression or assembly enjoyed by people in Europe and North America*⁹. Such thinking makes the current social organization inalterable. The only available choice is to align with one of the competing blocks (consisted exclusively of state formations) on the geopolitical field. This type of narrow anti-imperialism erodes any form of visionary thinking. Concepts like equality and freedom become emptied from content and instead are being reduced to empty slogans used by each of the sides.

Although many of these so called “anti-imperialists” call themselves internationalists, they often find themselves supporting nationalist movements, as national liberation is being viewed as the main tool to weaken the regional control of imperialist powers.

⁵ www.globalresearch.ca

⁶ libcom.org

⁷ www.yassinhs.com

⁸ www.haymarketbooks.org

⁹ roarmag.org

But as Bookchin observes, *the success of many “national liberation” struggles has had the effect of creating politically independent statist regimes that are nonetheless as manipulable by the forces of international capitalism than were the old*¹⁰. Often such regimes create a facade of self-determination and anti-imperialism for international use, while domestically nurture xenophobia, chauvinism, nationalism and even expansionism. An example can be found in Milosevic’s attempts to “cleanse” Muslims from Bosnia. Bookchin notes the following regressive elements in such national liberatory versions of anti-imperialism: religious fundamentalism in all its forms, traditional hatreds of “foreigners,” a “national unity” that overrides terrible internal social and economic inequities, a total disregard for human rights, often racism, “ethnic cleansing” etc.¹¹ He concludes that such struggles, which a generation ago might have been perceived by many western activists as “national liberatory”, end up as little more than social nightmares and decivilizing blights¹². Such anti-imperialism carries the worst features of the very empires it claims to be fighting against. They end up reproducing the same bureaucratic and lifeless machinery of the imperialists.

Once a regime has been established as a result of such national liberatory and anti-imperialist struggle, as history has shown so many times, it strives to strengthen its own power in the expense of neighbouring countries or even its own population. That’s why social revolutions like the ongoing one in Northern Syria/Rojava, which tend to decentralize decision-making and empower all citizens (and thus challenge the superiority of the state), are sometimes being met with hostility by anti-imperialists who root for Assad.

¹⁰ www.democracynature.org

¹¹ www.democracynature.org

¹² www.democracynature.org