

WHY A LENINIST APPROACH TO IMPERIALISM (DRAFT ,MAY 15,2004)

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INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to overstate the centrality of the question of Imperialism to the left and socialist movements of the past 100 years. The great international split in this movement over the nature and correct response to WWI and the Russian revolution had differences on the nature of Imperialism at its root. The conflicting responses to Fascism which dominated left concerns in the 1930's was centered on the different evaluations of Fascist imperialism in relation to Anglo-American-French imperialism. The United and then Popular Fronts Against Fascism which marked the highpoint of Communist influence claimed an explicit and sophisticated anti Imperialist agenda at its core. The anti-colonial wave after WW2 capped by the Chinese revolution was of course a direct revolt against Imperialism. The anti-Vietnam war movement, was organized, at least by its left wing around a Third World anti-imperialist rhetoric, and this has continued to this day, animating the current Anti-Globalization mobilizations .

Every major Marxist political leader, and theorist, of the 20th century, from Kautsky to Castro, has reflected at length on Imperialism. In particular, Lenin, the most influential Marxist thinker of the last century, articulated his views in the single most influential Marxist document of the 20th century, in *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1916 while Lenin was in exile in Zurich. Lenin's views have framed the issue of Imperialism for the anti-imperialist movements of the 20th century. Lenin's work was itself part of an international debate

among socialists which involved Kautsky, Hilferding, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Bukharin among its most notable participants. His views were not uncontested. Yet the sharpness and clarity of his analysis, along with his unique status as the leader of the international communist movement gave his formulations an enormous and unique weight among generations of activists.

It was generally understood that with the end of WW2 and the beginning of the Cold War some of Lenin's formulations were out of date. Yet given the divisions among Marxists, and in particular the Sino-Soviet split which fractured the unity of international communism, and which was driven by fundamental differences over Imperialism, no agreed upon updating was possible.

By the end of the Vietnam War neither the Soviets nor the Chinese found it convenient to focus on Imperialism. The Soviets were in the grip of an economic stagnation, which ultimately was to bring them down. They were aggressively pursuing their policy of détente and peaceful coexistence in which they hoped to take advantage of the U.S. defeat by cutting a deal with the west giving them access to western capital which they desperately needed. The Chinese, even more in need of western capital, and not unreasonably, fearful of a U.S -Soviet alliance against them, managed to beat the Soviets to the punch. They forged an anti-Soviet alliance with the U.S. by playing to the U.S calculation that in the long run the Soviets were more of a threat to U.S. world hegemony than the Chinese.

The confusion and demoralization that resulted from this political opportunism meant

2

that the anti-imperialist forces were totally unprepared both politically and theoretically for the rise of neo-liberalism. The collapse of communism internationally discredited Marxism, the only intellectual and critical apparatus that had the capacity to rigorously and systematically assess these new developments. Many Marxists went into intellectual hibernation and shock. Most of the serious attempts at theorizing the new phenomena over the

last two decades of the twentieth century were in the postmodern idiom. This approach, while offering insights, is by its core assumptions incapable of relating historical developments to the fundamental economic forces, processes and structures of international capitalism.

As we understand now neo-liberalism was a revival of Imperialism in a new and particularly virulent form. Yet, for the reasons mentioned, it took Marxists two decades to come to grips with this. It has been only since the outbreak of mass resistance to Globalization in Seattle in 1999, that a broad sense of urgency and some confidence has developed among Marxists on the need and capacity to arrive at a rigorous understanding of this Imperialist revival.

This presentation has the modest goal of encouraging this ongoing examination of Imperialism within a Marxist framework by briefly revisiting Lenin's analysis. Our aim is to isolate what is outdated, while at the same time explicitly acknowledging its great strength and power which were crucial to its decades long influence within the anti-imperialist movement. This is not done out of a desire to pay homage to Lenin, but rather to defend a methodological and theoretical approach which I believe is essential for a politically and strategically fruitful analysis. I will conclude by commenting on some recent Marxist analysis in light of these methodological criteria.

3

LENIN'S APPROACH

I am assuming of course that people here are broadly familiar with Lenin's views as expressed in Imperialism. He himself summed up his thesis in Chapter 7, Imperialism as a Special Stage of Capitalism.

We must give a definition of Imperialism that will embrace the following five essential features:

- (1) The concentration of production and capital developed to such a high stage that it created monopolies, which play a decisive role in economic life.
- (2) The merging of bank capital with industrial capital and the creation, on the basis of this "finance capital," of a "financial oligarchy".

(3)The export of capital, which has become extremely important, as distinguished from the export of commodities.

(4)The formation of international capitalist monopolies which share the world among themselves.

(5)The territorial division of the whole world among the greatest capitalist Powers is completed.

In his pamphlet Lenin discusses all five features at length, presenting data and evidence including conclusions from leading scholars and economists, both Marxist and bourgeois. Although the text is quite polemical and harshly critical of alternative views, in particular those of Kautsky, the approach and methodology is rigorously Marxist. He attempts to deduce from basic long-term,

4

structural changes in capitalism, as embodied in points 1 and 2 above, the emergence of new, and fundamentally different social-economic phenomena and processes, as embodied in points 3 and 4, finally arriving at the general political consequence that he wishes to stress in point 5.

Equally important there is an implicit strategic conclusion (muffled in this work to avoid Tsarist censorship and banning) but made explicit shortly thereafter. Namely that the objective conditions had been created for a strategic alliance between the oppressed masses of the non industrialized countries and the working class of the advanced capitalist world, More explicitly, that in imperialism they had a common enemy whose development threatened their welfare and very existence. In fact, as Lenin stressed, the situation was complex and contradictory.. Imperialism also allowed special privileges for a sector of the working class in the Imperialist centers, which accounted for the split in the western workers movement. This was the negative side of the growth of Imperialism for the workers movement. At the same time the positive vision of a united front was one that animated and drove socialists doing anti-imperialist work for decades to come.

As I mentioned above, Marxist theorists contested Lenin's views from the beginning. In particular point 3, the centrality of the export of capital, was challenged both on empirical and theoretical grounds. While an interesting and important historical debate, the relevance of this debate has faded in terms of an analysis of the current imperialism. One can hardly question the significance of the vast contemporary financial and capital flows between the developed and the non-industrialized states. Whether one chooses to describe them as the export of capital, or in other terms, the phenomenon is quite central.

What is much more decisive for our present concerns is point 5. Lenin drew from the thesis that the territory available for imperial conquest has already been fully divided up, a

5

fundamental political conclusion. Underlying Lenin's approach to Imperialism is the assumption that inter-imperialist rivalry, rooted in competition of the dominant industrial and financial groupings is the driving force of Imperialism. The political consequence he drew from point 5 is that henceforth inter-imperialist rivalry would tend to take the form of armed confrontation and war, as each of the major capitalist nations would be driven by their leading capitalist interests to extend their imperial domain at the expense of their rivals.

This adequacy of this analysis was already called into question with the rise of Fascism. Nazi Germany was not driven by the need to restore Germany's rather meager colonial empire, but aimed at direct military rule of all of Europe, and beyond. Still, The United Front against Fascism attempted to merge the fight against Fascism with the fight against Imperialism. In fact, the defeat of Germany and Japan strengthened and empowered anti-colonial movements throughout the world, and led to the demise of direct nineteenth century colonial rule. Yet an alliance with Anglo-American imperialists was hardly what Lenin had in mind when he called for a united front against Imperialism

World War 2 could still be interpreted partially as a struggle of rival imperialisms, although one with special characteristics due to the barbaric nature of Fascism and the need to defend the Soviet Union. The cold war which followed could not be convincingly so

described. More precisely, the attempt to do so, within a Leninist framework, first promoted by a tendency within Trotskyism, and then taken up by the Chinese after their split with the Soviet Union, required casting the Soviet Union as a capitalist regime driven by a capitalist class with a basic need for foreign markets and investment opportunities. However this thesis could not survive

6

any serious examination of the facts, and in the end served only to cast a shadow over Lenin's conception. .

As a consequence the main lines of contemporary Marxist analysis of Imperialism have abandoned of the notion of inter-imperialist rivalry as the driving force of Imperialism. We will return to this basic point later, but first it is necessary to examine how well these contemporary theories succeeded in deriving an adequate theory outside of such a framework.

The current theories of Imperialism have tended to fall into one of two schools. Ernest Mandel denoted referred to them in his book *Late Capitalism* as advocates of either the thesis of Ultra-Imperialism, or the thesis of Super-Imperialism. Both approaches begin with fundamental features of contemporary Imperialism. Different theorists within each of these two schools are working out their views emphasizing different factors and dynamics. Further the more serious investigations are all works in progress. Therefore it is not possible to give final evaluations, or make blanket judgements about this work at this time.

However I do believe there are potential pitfalls in each approach, about which I would like to comment. This is not to say that these pitfalls cannot be overcome, but if they are not seriously acknowledged and addressed can vitiate the value of this work. The pitfalls concern the value of these approaches as strategic guides for anti-imperialist organizing and mass work.

THE ULTRA-IMPERIALIST THESIS

The thesis of Ultra-Imperialism goes back to Kautsky. He argued that there is a theoretical possibility that dominant capitalist interests can free themselves from their national moorings and rivalries and manage their international competition and contradictions through international agreements and institutions thus avoiding bloody, military inter-imperialist conflicts such as WW1. The contemporary advocates of the Ultra-Imperialist thesis, such as Jerry Harris, Bill Robinson, and Leslie Sklair, argue that in fact what Kautsky predicted has come to pass. Contemporary capitalism has generated an increasingly powerful, potentially dominant layer of transnational capitalists whose interests are not tied to the rise or fall of any particular state. The advocates of this position do not argue that competition and rivalry among capitalists has disappeared, but they tend to view, in contrast to Lenin, that competition among transnational capitalists, as less virulent and deadly, and not the fundamental force behind international conflict and war.

The genius of Lenin's approach to Imperialism, as with his approach to all major questions, was its unrelenting focus on central strategic concerns. His attack on Kautsky and his ultra-imperialist thesis was directed at the confused, weak strategic guidelines that it offered the anti-imperialist movement. If capitalism is generating a layer of international capitalists capable of organizing the international economy, and at least provisionally transcending the contradictions of the world capitalist market, what is the role of Socialists? How do we respond to a thesis that claims that capitalism retains the capacity to alleviate the misery and suffering resulting from imperialist war and violence? Are we being asked to conciliate with "enlightened" internationally minded capitalists? Is not this an argument for reforming capitalism rather than replacing it? The

subsequent history of Social Democracy is a testimony to the prophetic validity of Lenin's interrogation of Kautsky. Kautsky failed to come to grips with the contradictions ravaging Imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century. And Social Democracy as a whole, following his ideological lead, pursued a path of class collaboration ultimately abandoning Socialism as a political goal.

It is a fundamental challenge to the theorists of the new ultra-Imperialism to confront these same doubts. What is the relationship of, the responsibility of, this new layer of international capital for war, military repression, economic misery and oppression, environmental catastrophes, and the other scourges of the current international order? What is their special role in the neo-liberal globalization wave of the last two decades? Do they represent a progressive force to be supported in their conflict with nationally based capital? How does this development impact the role of the state, and how should it impact our political activity, which still basically occurs within the framework of the state?

The answers to such questions have crucial consequences for organizing strategies for the anti-imperialist movement. The theorists of ultra-imperialism have been less than coherent or forthright in coming to grips with such questions. Until they do, Anti-imperialists have a right to worry that we are being presented with a sophisticated rationale for capitulation to Imperialism.

In strategic terms the theorists of ultra-Imperialism have focused on the rivalry between the traditional nationally based capitalists, and the emerging transnational capitalist class. Some

8

of them, in particular Carl Davidson and Jerry Harris, have analyzed the Bush regime's aggressive militarism in these terms. In particular, they assert that the neo-cons surrounding Bush represent national capitalist interests, making a desperate bid to retain political and economic power. This strikes me as problematic. The neo-cons around Bush are comfortable with the rhetoric of neo-liberalism, supposed to be the province of the transnationalists. There are obviously strains between the aggressive militarism of the neo-cons, and the cautious

multinationalists of the first Bush administration, but this hardly seems a contradiction between fundamentally different sectors of capital. The Elder Bush served comfortably on the board of Halliburton along with Dick Cheney, while John Kerry, presumably representing the transnational capitalist challenge to Bush, is as jingoistic and flagwaving as his rival.

In the heady days of the late 1990's, when vast fortunes were made moving money around the globe, a sector of capital did become disdainful of its national roots, and adopted internationalist rhetoric. They declared a new state of capitalism based on a revolution in information processing technology. This declaration now seems premature. Now that things are turning sour, many of these same people are wrapping themselves in the flag, demanding protection and bailouts from "their states". A casual perusal of the international business section of the NY Times, provides almost a daily confirmation of this phenomena.

In focusing then on this rivalry between national and transnational capitalists the theorists of ultra-imperialism are neglecting the true nature of contemporary competition among capitalists. This approach downgrades the problem of overproduction, the ensuing problem of maintaining the pace of accumulation, the risks of financial meltdown, and worldwide deflation -

9

the traditional Marxist conception of the crisis of capitalism. Developments in the last few years have undercut the claims of a new stage of capitalism, and its shallow boast to have transcended the "old" problems. The theorists of Ultra-Imperialism have yet to come to terms with this..

THE SUPER-IMPERIALIST APPROACH.

Unlike the theorists of ultra-imperialism, and unlike Lenin and the other classical Marxists, the analysts of the super-Imperialist school do not base their thesis on a posited basic structural shift in capitalism. They simply assume as the fundamental fact of contemporary international politics the unchallenged hegemony of the United States. The

causes and consequences of this fact are then examined from a wide variety of perspectives, sometimes with little theoretical grounding.

I contend that an anti-imperialist strategy, capable of mobilizing broad forces and sustaining such a mobilization over time must be rooted in a systemic analysis of the fundamental forces and contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Much of the literature of the super-Imperialist school substitutes for this, often quite perceptive detailed analysis of specific events, offered as a manifestation or explication of an overall U. S. strategy of world dominance. The underlying conception is that history is the playing out of grand strategies of world powers. .

Peter Gowan's influential book, *The Global Gamble*, is a good example. The book examines the dominant role of the U.S in crafting the contemporary global order, which he characterizes as "Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance". The political and

10

economic analysis of specific developments is very sophisticated and I believe on the mark. Gowan is clearly a leftist in his political views, but from a theoretical point of view, a neo-realist or a liberal anti-imperialist could have written the book. What comes through is a profound distaste for U.S. dominance, but no basis for an anti-imperialist strategy. Such an approach can encourage a culture of opposition, but it also narrows the focus to the success or failure of the specific schemes. What it doesn't address with any precision is the long term consequences of these strategies for the broad social classes and groupings which can form the basis of an effective anti-imperialist opposition. Is there a real connection between environmental issues in Brazil, labor struggles in China, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq? We need more than vague anti-imperialist or populist rhetoric to give a convincing answer. A internationally viable anti-imperialist movement needs to be able to tell friends from enemies, and what kind of alliances can be made, with whom, and under what circumstances.

In this context we should evaluate the recent work of Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin. (References). As opposed to Gowan and other advocates of the Super-Imperialist approach,

their work is explicitly based on fundamental theoretical hypotheses, which represent a deep break with the classical Marxist tradition. Their fundamental thesis is that “ Capitalist imperialism, then, needs to be understood through an extension of the theory of the capitalist state, rather than derived directly from the theory of economic stages or crises”.

. Methodologically this thesis is problematic. The Marxist as well as the bourgeois theory of the state remains at primarily a descriptive level, lacking the precise models of economic theory. This means attempts to compare structural features, even when perceptive and provocative, tend

11

to be suggestive and impressionistic when you get beyond the most elementary aspects. In particular the precise relationship between property form and state forms is not precisely understood. It would seem difficult to base a theory of imperialism on this, which would have to take into account the relevant economic factors, that went beyond the current neo-realistic Machiavellian theory,

Let us examine their approach to the fundamental theoretical question concerning this new era of Imperialism. Namely what is the current form, the basic dynamic of capitalist competition today. To Marx and to nineteenth and twentieth century Marxists competition among capitalists is the driving force both of capital accumulation and crises. It seems to me that the first test of Gindin's and Panitch's basic claim is then the challenge of understanding the role of the contemporary state in ameliorating or intensifying capitalist competition today.

They do respond obliquely to this challenge in a rather complicated way. They begin by denying Lenin's thesis that current states represent or serve nationally based capital. They agree with the ultra-imperialist theorists that capital is fundamentally international (although they don't consider this is a very new phenomenon, and don't think it represents a structural shift). They believe states, and in particular the state that really matters, the U.S. serves international capital by coping with and resolving the crises generated by contradictions in

capitalist accumulation. The U.S. has shown that it has the capacity to continually reorganize the world economy through its command of political, economic, and military resources.

The logic of this, which Gindin and Panitch accept, is that there is no such thing as a fundamental economic crises. As long as it retains its power the U.S. can fix any problem that

12

arises. The only fundamental crises could be a political one, one in which the U.S. lost its political hegemony. This view nullifies the significance of competition among capitalists. Competition becomes part of the background noise of capitalism, but its destructiveness can always be, and will routinely be ameliorated via state policy.

We have returned to Kautsky via a different door. Instead of international capitalists negotiating away the contradictions of Imperialism, we have the U.S. state and its policy elite as a *deus ex machina* .

How satisfactory is this story. First of all, it underplays what seems to be an obvious reality- that in fact the U.S. is having an extremely difficult time managing the world economy and is doing an awful job of it, according to its own economists. Still one can argue, as Gindin and Panitch do, that it will continue to muddle through as long as its not politically challenged, and therefore what is really important are the political contradictions and vulnerability of U.S. hegemony.

The basic problem with this approach is that despite the sophisticated theoretical scaffolding, you are left with same lack of strategic guidance as you are with Gowan's simple narrative approach. Even granting Panitch and Gindin's main political point, that in the near future the U.S will be able utilize its hegemonic power to contain and manage the economic contradictions, it is still crucial for anti-imperialists to have a clear sense of the direction of and the basic contradictions and barriers to capitalist accumulation in the coming period. Without this one lacks a firm foundation for forming long-term strategic alliances, which can lead to a

significant global anti-imperialist strategy. Without this, opposition to Imperialism is reduced to pursuing a discrete and disparate sequence of struggles, each of which is crucially important to the people involved, but none of which individually constitute a decisive challenge. .

CONCLUSION

Both views, the Ultra-Imperialist and the Super-Imperialist, suffer from an inadequate grasp of competition among capitalists as the driving force of both capital accumulation and crises. In the traditional Marxist analysis of the basic dynamics of capitalism is that competition leads to overproduction leads to crises. Lenin concluded that given the level and form of development of world capitalism at the beginning of the 20th century this dynamic lead to inter-imperialist rivalry and war. While Lenin's conception of inter-imperialist rivalry no longer describes the current scene, I believe Marx's description of the basic dynamic remains valid.

If this is correct, then it implies that any Marxist analysis of contemporary Imperialism should have as its core an analysis of the basic contemporary modes of capitalist competition. In particular one must show how or if this competition leads to political conflict and war. Neither ultra-Imperialism nor Super-Imperialism gives us a good grasp of this. Ultra-Imperialism deflects the question to the conflict between trans national capital and nationally based capital.

Super-Imperialism focuses on the conflict between the U.S and the rest of the world. Panitch and Gindin reduce this question to one of rivalry between imperialist states and then dismiss it because the U.S. has uncontested hegemony.

The result is that in a time of rising world-wide mass resistance to Imperialism, both approaches tend to deny a real strategic basis for an international anti -imperialist movement. Unless they can confront this weakness they are in danger of becoming politically irrelevant.