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Third Worldism or Socialism

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Various theories have been put forward as to why the left, in advanced capitalist countries, should support national liberation struggles.

The Communist parties, for example, support such struggles because nationalism in the Third World seems to collide with the interests of the U.S. National liberation is thus thought to ‘weaken’ U.S. imperialism. They hope that Russia, which supports these movements ideologically and/or materially, will benefit.

The Maoists follow a similar logic, though after Nixon’s visit to China, one suspects that Mao’s ‘anti-imperialist’ zeal may be directed only against the Russian bureaucracy. Western Castroites and ‘progressive’ liberals of all hues support such movements out of a sense of ‘moral duty’.

For these people, national liberation is a universal blessing which should be given to – or taken by – the ‘leaders’ of the Third World. One should add perhaps that these noble sentiments don’t stop these same Castroites and liberals from supporting capitalist ‘leaders’ like McGovern in the U.S. – or calling for a return of the Labour Party in the next British elections.

Trotskyist support for national liberation is a bit more sophisticated. It consists of grand (and banal) historical schemes. First, the national liberation movements should be supported – this is the communal bed of all Trotskyists (Mandel, Cliff, Healy, Ah, etc.). Whether the support is ‘critical’ or ‘uncritical’ is another matter – and here Trotskyists part company and proceed to their respective rooms.

But, someone may ask, why the support in the first place? The answer provided is an example of historical scheme-making: U.S. imperialism will be ‘weakened’ by such movements. Such a ‘weakening’ will impart another ‘transitional’ twitch to the ‘death agony of capitalism’ which in turn will foster other twitches ... and so on. Like all mystifications, Trotskyism fails to give a coherent answer as to why, especially since 1945, imperialism has been able to grant political independence to many ex-colonial countries, a possibility that Lenin and Trotsky explicitly denied.

The theory of ‘permanent revolution’ blinds Trotskyists to the realities of national liberation. They still consider that the bourgeoisie, in the Third World, is incapable of fighting for ‘national independence’. But they fail to grasp that the ‘permanent revolution’, in Russia for example, both began and ended as a bourgeois revolution (in spite of the proletariat’s alleged ‘leading role’ in the unfolding of the process).

In Russia, the bourgeois stage (i.e. both February and October) very concretely ensured that there would be no future ‘socialist’ unfolding. The ‘permanent revolution’ carried out by the Bolsheviks only brought about a state-capitalist reorganisation of the economy and social life. The ‘solving’ of the bourgeois tasks will destroy, as it did in Russia, all the autonomous rank and file organisations of the working class (councils and factory committees). They become subordinates of the state, which is the organism par excellence for carrying out ‘belated’ bourgeois revolutions.

Any bureaucracy, given favourable conditions, can ‘solve’ the bourgeois tasks in the Third World. The ‘permanent revolution’ doesn’t need the working class, except as cannon fodder. The accumulation of capital, through expanded reproduction, is the basis of its bureaucratic power and whether the bureaucracy accumulates successfully or not is besides the point. In any case there has never been a ‘pure’ capitalist country which has ‘solved’ all its bourgeois tasks. Even Britain still has a queen.

Trotskyist support for movements of national liberation, however, is thus support for another social group ... and not for the working class or peasantry. Trotskyists present their support for the leadership of various national liberation movements as a ‘tactic’ which will allow them to gain control of the movement. In their mythology, the leaderships of such movements are incapable of carrying out the struggle for national independence. As we have seen, this is nonsense, pure and simple: the Chinese, Cuban or North Vietnamese bureaucracies went ‘all the way’ in expropriating western capitalists without an ounce of help from any of the Fourth Internationals. They also mercilessly slaughtered or imprisoned all Trotskyists in those countries. Insofar as Trotskyists babble about a ‘democratisation’ of such regimes through ‘political revolution’, they are the reformists of state capital.

Lenin’s theory of imperialism, written in 1916, is usually quoted by all the trad left groups to sanction their support for national liberation. The theory holds that a Western ‘labour aristocracy’ has been created out of super-profits squeezed out of colonial countries. This is a bourgeois concept because it places national factors above class analysis. Concepts such as ‘proletarian nations’ versus ‘imperialist nations’ flow naturally from such an analysis – they were in fact peddled in the 30’s by fascists. Nowadays, Gunder Frank with his theory of ‘the development of under-development’ and Emmanuel’s ‘unequal exchange’ provide fresh examples of the bourgeois-leninist attitudes so deeply entrenched in the left.

Nationalism and class struggle are irreconcilably opposed. A nation is a bourgeois reality: it is capitalism with all its exploitation and alienation, parcelled out in a single geographical unit. It doesn’t matter whether the nation is ‘small’, ‘colonial’, ‘semi-colonial’ or ‘non-imperialist’. All nationalisms are reactionary because they inevitably clash with class consciousness and poison it with chauvinism and racism. The nationalist sentiment in the advanced countries is reactionary, not only because it facilitates the plundering of the colonial workers and peasants, but because it is a form of false consciousness which ideologically binds the western workers to ‘their’ ruling classes. Similarly, the ‘nationalism of the oppressed’ is reactionary because it facilitates class collaboration between the colonial workers and peasants and the ‘anti-imperialist’ nascent bureaucracies.

The Trotskyist myth that a successful national liberation will later unleash ‘the real class struggle’ is false, as the examples of Ethiopia, North Vietnam, Mexico under Cardenas, and Brazil under Vargas bear out. It is a rationalisation for the defence of new ruling classes in the process of formation. As historical evidence shows, those new elites usually become appendages of the already existing state capitalist bloc. To this degree Trotskyism is a variety of vicarious social patriotism.

Any intelligent person can see that the fate of the advanced capitalist countries doesn't depend on the Third World's ability to cut off supplies of raw materials. The Third World's ruling classes will never get together to plan or practice an effective boycott on a world scale. Furthermore, the U.S. and Western Europe are becoming less dependent upon many of the products of the Third World. Add to that the falling prices for raw materials in the world market, the protectionist barriers in the advanced countries, and one gets a picture of imminent barbarism in the Third World. Its bargaining position vis-a-vis the West weakens every year. Third Worldists should seriously ponder about these tendencies.

National liberation struggles can be seen as attempts of sections of the native ruling classes to appropriate a larger share of the value generated in 'their own' countries. Imperialist exploitation indeed generates this consciousness in the more 'educated' strata of the Third World. These strata tend to consider themselves as the repository of 'the Fatherland'. Needless to say, a worsening in 'the trade terms for raw materials in the Third World aggravates this situation. The growth of many national liberation movements in the past 25 years is a manifestation of the imbalance existing in the world market. The Third World countries plunge deeper into decay, famine, stagnation, political corruption and nepotism. National rebellion may then be channelled into active politics by discontented army officers, priests, petty bureaucrats, intellectuals and (of course) angry children of the bourgeois and landlord classes. The grievances of the workers and peasants are real too (the above mentioned worthies largely account for them), but the nationalist leaders can still hope to capture the imagination of the exploited. If this happens one sees the beginnings of a national liberation movement based explicitly on class collaboration, with all the reactionary implications this has for the exploited. They emerge out of the frying pan of foreign exploitation into the fire of national despotism.

For such regimes to survive against the open hostility of the Western capitalist bloc, or its insidious world market mechanisms, it is imperative that the regimes become dependent on the state capitalist bloc (Russia and/or China). If this is not possible, an extremely precarious balancing act ('neutralism') becomes the dominant fact of life (as shown by Egypt or India). Without massive assistance from the state capitalist bloc it is impossible for any such regime even modestly to begin primitive accumulation. The majority of the Third World countries don't have the resources to start such a programme on their own. And even if they did, it could only be done (as any accumulation) through intensified exploitation. Higher consumption levels and welfare programmes may temporarily be established by these regimes. Those who can see no further than economic steps to 'socialism' usually quote this to explain why Castro is 'better' than Batista or Mao 'preferable' to Chiang. Without dealing with the reactionary implications of such reformism at a national level, let's see how the argument works internationally. Castro supported the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, Ho Chi Minh defended the Russian crushing of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and Mao supported Yahya Khan's genocide in Bangladesh. Thus what is 'gained' at home is lost abroad, in the form of heaps of corpses and massive political demoralisation. Does the trad left keep account of such a reactionary balance sheet?

The ideological repercussions of such international events are difficult to gauge, but are no doubt reactionary. The further bureaucratisation of the Third World merely reinforces working class prejudices and apathy in the advanced countries. The responses of the imperialist bourgeoisies will be to mount further protectionist barriers and, at the same time, to increase the profitable arms trade. The bureaucratisation of the Third World will enhance the prestige – both ideological and

diplomatic – of the state capitalist bloc, in spite of the latter's inter-imperialist rivalries. This process will be accompanied by an increasing demoralisation and cynicism in the circles of the trad left. This is already patently clear today: in many demos covering international affairs, portraits of Ho, Mao, Castro, Guevara and a host of other scoundrels (Hoxha, Kim-Il Sung, etc.) are obscenely paraded. Such cults express the ideological debasement of our times, and it's no accident that working people feel only contempt or indifference towards the trad left and the heroes it worships.

Another equally important dimension of national liberation struggles is ignored by the trad left. It is the question of working class and peasant democracy and of the revolutionary self-activity of the masses. National liberation will always repress such autonomous working class activities because the bourgeois goals of national liberation (i.e. nation-building) are opposed – in class terms – to the historical interests of working people (i.e. the liberation of humanity). It thus becomes clear why all the leaderships of national liberation movements attempt to control, from above, any initiative of the masses, and prescribe for them only the politics of nationalism. To do this it is necessary actually to terrorise the working masses (Ben Bella's FLN massacred dozens of Algerian workers during the Algerian war of 'independence', Ho's Viet Mihn helped the British and French to crush the Saigon Workers' Commune of 1945 and later assassinated dozens of Trotskyists; Guevara publicly attacked the Cuban Trotskyists and Castro's attacks against them in 1966 sealed their fate even as reformists of the Castroite ruling class.) The state capitalist elites, even before they take power, must attempt to eradicate any independent voice of opposition, and their complete rule wipes out any possibility of even meagre measures of bourgeois democracy.

Support for any national liberation struggle is always reactionary. It usually consists of:

1. support for a client state of the state capitalist bloc, which amounts to defending state capitalist imperialism against Western imperialism;
2. support for despotic regimes which destroy, together with classic bourgeois property forms, any independent organisation of the working class and peasantry.

It is often claimed that a distinction must be made between the reactionary and bureaucratic leaderships of national liberation struggles and the masses of people involved in such struggles. Their objectives are said to be different. We believe this distinction seldom to be valid. The foreigner is usually hated as a foreigner, not as an exploiter – because he belongs to a different culture, not because he extracts surplus value. This prepares the way for local exploiters to step into the shoes of the foreign ones. Moreover the fact that a given programme (say, national independence) has considerable support does not endow it with any automatic validity. Mass 'consciousness' can be mass 'false-consciousness.' Millions of French, British, Russian and German workers slaughtered one another in the first World War, having internalised the 'national' ideas of their respective rulers. Hitler secured 6 million votes in September 1930. The leaders of national struggles can only come to power because there is a nationalist feeling which they can successfully manipulate. The bonds of 'national unity' will then prove stronger than the more important but 'divisive' class struggle.

In practice all that revolutionaries can currently do in the Third World is to avoid compromise on the cardinal issue: namely that working people have no 'fatherland' and that for socialists the main enemy is always in one's own country. Revolutionaries can strive to create autonomous organs of struggle (peasants or village committees or workers' groups) with the aim of resisting exploitation, whatever the

colour of the exploiter's skin. They can warn systematically of the dangers and repression these bodies will face from foreign imperialism and from the nascent bourgeoisie or bureaucracy. They can point out that their own societies are divided into classes and that these classes have mutually incompatible interests, just like the classes in the 'foreign' societies that oppress them.

Although difficult this is essential and the only road that doesn't involve mystifying oneself and one's own supporters. In South Vietnam, for instance, the conflict of interests between rulers and ruled is obvious enough. No great effort is needed to see the gulf separating the well-fed corrupt politicians and generals in Saigon and the women, riddled with hookworms, breaking their backs in the paddy fields. But in the North? Is there really a community of interests between the Haiphong docker or cement worker and the political commissar in Hanoi? Between those who initiated and those who suppressed the peasant uprising of November 1956? Between those who led and those who put down the Saigon Commune of 1945? Between Ta Tu Thau and his followers and those who butchered them? To even demand that such issues be discussed will endanger the revolutionaries. Could there be better proof of the viciously anti-working class nature of these regimes?

Some 'Third World' countries are so backward or isolated, and have such an insignificant working class, that it is difficult to see how such a class could even begin to struggle independently. The problem however is not a national one. The solution to the misery and alienation of these workers and peasants is in the international development of the proletarian revolution. The revolution in the advanced capitalist countries will decisively tip the scales the world over. The success of such a revolution, even in its earliest stages, will liberate enormous technological resources to help these isolated, weak and exploited groups.

Owing to the different social, political and economic weights of various Third World countries, proletarian revolutions or revolutionary workers' councils in these countries will have varying repercussions on their neighbours, and on the advanced countries. The effects will, however, be more political than economic. A workers and peasants' take-over in Chile (which will irretrievably smash the Allende state) will not damage the American economy. But such an explosive event might provide a revolutionary example for the workers of Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, etc., and help the American workers to gain a revolutionary consciousness. The same could be said of Nigeria, India or even Ceylon in their respective contexts. He who rejects this perspective as 'improbable' or 'impossible' abandons any revolutionary perspective for the workers of what is loosely called 'the Third World'. In fact there are everywhere only 'two worlds': that of the exploiter and that of the exploited. To this degree, the international working class is one class, with the same historical objective.

We leave it to the trad left to support the imperialism of its choice, be it Russian, or Chinese, or any new shining light in the Stalinist cosmos. For us, the main enemy will always be at home, and the only way we can help ourselves and the workers and peasants of the Third World is to help make a socialist revolution here. But it would be tantamount to scabbing if at any moment we supported reactionary movements which exploit – no matter in how small a way – a section of the international working class.