

Book Launch: Inconsistent Anti-Imperialism, Selective Solidarity

Saturday 16 March 2019, by [HENSMAN Rohini](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2018).

A presentation by Rohini Hensman at the launch of her book *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* in the School of African and Asian Studies, University of London, on 16 July 2018. It was followed by a lively discussion chaired by Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS.

In the Introduction to my book *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*, I explain why I wrote it. When the Arab uprisings began in 2010-2011, most socialists and progressives welcomed them. But very soon it became evident that they were being treated differently, despite the fact that they were sparked by similar conditions. In the words of historian Fawwaz Traboulsi, 'These are revolutions that do not hide their causes: unemployment, dictatorship, social divides, the citizen's abused dignity. To which they roar back: Work! Freedom! Social justice! Human dignity!' Yet there was a striking difference between the respect with which a section of the anti-imperialist left treated the Egyptian revolution and their vilification of the protesters in Syria, thus supporting Assad by spreading his propaganda against them. What could account for this?



While the suppression of the Syrian uprising was killing hundreds of thousands of dissenters along with their families and communities, mass protests broke out in Ukraine. At the time, I didn't know much about Ukraine, except that Lenin had considered it a colony of Tsarist Russia, and that the protests were occurring because Putin had put pressure on the president, Yanukovitch, to withdraw from an association agreement with the EU. This was followed by the Russian state annexing Crimea and sending troops into Eastern Ukraine. Again, the same section of the anti-imperialist left that supported the crushing of the Syrian uprising by Assad and his allies supported the Russian incursion into Ukraine.

I was appalled at what was happening, and wrote this book to answer two questions: How has the rhetoric of anti-imperialism come to be used in support of anti-democratic counter-revolutions? And what can we do about it?

In Chapter 1 I lay out the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, looking at theories of imperialism and trying to arrive at what would constitute genuine opposition to it. On the left, Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* has long been the most influential text, and I think it has one serious weakness. In lumping together 'the division of the world among the biggest capitalist powers' with the creation of finance capital and the export of capital – i.e. foreign investments – he conflated two distinct phases of capitalism and confused his followers to this day. Defining foreign investment as imperialism would lead to absurd conclusions, such as the idea that India is an imperialist power in Britain because Indian companies like the Tatas have invested in or acquired British companies. I argue instead that political domination of the people of one country by another state is the most essential characteristic of imperialism.

In the earlier period, colonialism drew large swathes of the world into the global capitalist economy, using these countries as sources of cheap consumption goods and raw materials, captive markets for their manufactured products, and sources of cheap labour, including slave labour. The rise of independence and liberation movements in the Third World was met by US imperialism with a strategy of installing and maintaining in power regimes willing to subordinate the interests of their own people to US corporations (for example in Iran, Guatemala, Vietnam and Chile).

Meanwhile the tsarist empire morphed into a different kind of empire, with former colonies being incorporated into the USSR in a subordinate capacity. Lenin fought against this policy to his dying day, trying instead to promote the USSR as a union of autonomous republics. In this he was influenced by non-Russian Marxists, who argued for the importance of national liberation in these former tsarist colonies.

Stalin's policy was the exact opposite: not merely re-subordinating these colonies, but attempting to 'Russify' them by ethnically cleansing the indigenous population and settling Russians in their place. Ukraine was one of the worst cases, with grain being transported out while millions starved to death, and was described by Raphael Lemkin as 'the classic case of Soviet genocide'. The Muslim nations too were targeted for ethnic cleansing in which a large section of the population perished. The Crimean Tatars, who had been the largest ethnic group in Crimea before it was colonised by Tsarist Russia, were among them. After World War II, Stalin participated in the Yalta Conference, which allotted all the East European countries except Yugoslavia to Russian domination in a pattern similar to US imperialism, with friendly dictators being installed and supported by the imperial power.

Looked at from this perspective, it becomes evident that the Cold War was actually a prolonged period of inter-imperialist rivalry between the US and Russia, but this is not how it was or is still seen by Stalinists and neo-Stalinists, who see it as US imperialism versus socialism or communism. I trace the origins of what I call pseudo-anti-imperialism to this stance of opposing the 'West', whatever it is doing, and supporting Russia and its allies, whatever they are doing. It has been picked up by many people who are not Stalinists but who haven't bothered to check the facts. Supporting one side in an inter-imperialist conflict is not genuine anti-imperialism at all. Genuine anti-imperialism must oppose all domination and oppression of the people of one country by another state.

Chapter 2 looks in more detail at the trajectory of Russia from Lenin to Putin, and its relationship with Ukraine. As we saw in Chapter 1, Stalin reversed Lenin's policies towards the former tsarist colonies, and expanded the territory subordinated to Russia. He even formed an alliance with Hitler

from August 1939 to June 1941, providing food and raw materials to the Nazis in return for machinery and permission to colonise Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and part of Poland. When Putin boasts about the role the Soviet Union played in defeating the Nazis, he neglects to mention that this was after almost two years of collaborating with them.

Stalin's successors continued his imperialist policies, invading Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 when popular uprisings threatened the regimes they had installed, and finally Afghanistan in 1979. Gorbachev attempted to democratise Russia in the 1980s and introduce a more equal and voluntary union, but his initiative was stymied by Stalinist hardliners, and ended up with Yeltsin presiding over the disintegration of the USSR. That could be seen as a process of decolonisation, but some colonies failed to win their independence, and remained part of the Russian Federation. One of them was Chechnya, where a liberation movement was crushed with the utmost brutality, using the rhetoric of a 'war on terror' and anti-Muslim bigotry, a toxic combination that was soon to be used in the West after the 9/11 terror attacks.

Putin's regime signifies a return to Stalin's authoritarianism, imperial ambitions and war on the truth, with some significant differences. Where Stalin pretended to be Lenin's closest comrade, Putin denounced Lenin for putting a time bomb under the Soviet Union by arguing for the right to self-determination. Putin makes no pretence of being a Marxist, instead cosying up to the most reactionary elements in the Orthodox Church. It is important to recognise that under him, Russia has become a far-right authoritarian dictatorship, killing dissidents like journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who wrote about the atrocities in Chechnya, and politician Boris Nemtsov, who documented and opposed the Russian incursion into Ukraine. Its sexist and homophobic policies woo the Christian Right, while it depends on the support of racist, ultra-nationalist, neo-fascist groups in Russia and promotes such groups, parties and politicians in the rest of the world: Marine Le Pen in France, Nigel Farage in Britain and Donald Trump in the US among others. So what we see today is not a revival of the Cold War but a convergence of the far right across the erstwhile Iron Curtain.

Chapter 3 is mainly about Bosnia, the first major post-Cold-War occasion when neo-Stalinists supported the extreme right. I was in India at the time, and it was obvious to us that Bosnian Muslims were being slaughtered, and that the West and the UN did nothing to halt the genocide until the public outcry against what was happening, with its clear echoes of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, had reached a crescendo. So how did such a substantial section of self-professed socialists, including LM (formerly Living Marxism) and Chomsky's co-author Edward Herman, come out so strongly in support of the fascistic perpetrators, slandering the victims in the process?

One possible explanation is anti-Muslim bigotry, since the only difference between the perpetrators and the victims - who had also been citizens of the former Yugoslavia, and were also Slavs like the Serbs and Croats - was their religion. The other explanation (and the two are not mutually exclusive) is that they felt they had to support the Serb nationalists, no matter how fascistic and genocidal, because they were being supported by Russian nationalists. If they wanted to condemn the West, there were plenty of reasons to do so, but these reasons were the very opposite of their genocide denial.

Chapter 4 is about Iran, towards which sections of the Western left have a very ambiguous relationship. It is one thing to oppose the bombing of Iran and sanctions that hurt ordinary people, but does that mean support for an extreme right-wing theocratic regime?

I agree with Marxists like Mansoor Hekmat of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran who dispute the characterisation of the 1979 revolution against the Shah as an Islamic revolution. He calls it a people's revolution, and I think it was in addition a democratic revolution, which was followed by a

clerical counter-revolution. This had all the hallmarks of an extreme right-wing takeover of the state: attacking women's rights from the beginning and installing the absolute rule of an unelected Supreme Leader and Guardian Council who control the armed forces, judiciary and media, and decide who may or may not be elected as president or to parliament; incarcerating, torturing and exterminating dissidents who refuse to accept the Islamic state; tight control over educational institutions; and the use of stormtroopers to assault and arrest women, workers and students who fail to toe the Islamist line.

One would think that no-one who claims to be a socialist would invite representatives of such an extreme right-wing regime to their functions or share platforms with them, yet this is precisely what has happened. Why? Presumably because the regime's favourite slogans are 'Death to America!' and 'Death to Israel!' and it is therefore characterised as anti-imperialist. A closer look at the policies of the Islamic Republic reveals that it has not been consistently opposed even to US and Israeli imperialism, and its constitution declares the imperialist intention of ensuring the continuation of its own rule at home and abroad. Yet it is not only Western anti-imperialists who have been taken in by Khomeini's rhetoric: even the Moscow-oriented Tudeh Party supported him until he slaughtered them.

Opposing protests against policies of the Islamic Republic is not merely a betrayal of the struggles of women, workers and students engaging in mass protests against it, but also constitutes collusion with the devastation it is bringing to neighbouring countries.

Chapter 5 is about Iraq, which at first sight appears to be a straightforward victim of US/UK imperialism. This is true, yet after the invasion, solidarity with the Iraqi people has been less than satisfactory. The 2003 invasion and occupation not only killed hundreds of thousands, but also put in place changes that haunt Iraq to this day. One is the system of sectarian quotas in government initiated by US proconsul Paul Bremer, which led to massive corruption and encouraged sectarianism. The other is the de facto handing over of power to Iran-backed Shia Islamist parties, which launched an attack on secularism, women's rights and the Sunni minority. Hoping to escape from murderous persecution, some Sunnis even welcomed ISIS, until they discovered it was equally brutal. Thus corruption in the Iraqi army and alienation of Sunnis enabled ISIS to take over large swathes of Iraq during Nouri al-Maliki's rule.

As Iraq descended into war again and cities like Mosul were reduced to rubble, many Iraqis saw the Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani as head of an occupation force against which they had to wage a national liberation struggle. The Iranian attempt to control Iraq is evident even in the aftermath of the recent elections, when Muqtada al-Sadr, who campaigned on a platform to end sectarian politics and put Iraqis first, was pressurised into an alliance with the Iran-backed Fatah bloc.

Chapter 6 provides some background to the Assad regime, basically a police state which came to power by crushing democratic and socialist tendencies in Syria. The myth that it genuinely supports the Palestinian cause is laid to rest by the role played by Hafez al-Assad in 1976 in Lebanon, where the PLO had set up its bases and was supported by the left and progressive forces. When the civil war broke out, Assad intervened on the side of the anti-PLO Christian and conservative forces. More recently, the role played by Bashar al-Assad in destroying the Yarmouk refugee camp, described by Palestinian activist Budour Hassan as the capital of the Palestinian diaspora, demonstrates how little he cares about Palestinian lives and the Palestinian struggle.

Another relevant point about Bashar al-Assad's regime is its relationship with Sunni Islamists including Al Qaeda and ISIS. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Assad feared Syria would be next, and so began channelling Sunni Islamists from both Syria and abroad into Iraq to fight against the

US. When they were driven out of Iraq by the US surge, Assad put them in jail for future use.

As **Chapter 7** shows, even as he was jailing, torturing, raping and killing peaceful protesters demanding democratic reforms in 2011, Assad released and armed around 1500 of these Islamists to give himself an excuse to bomb the opposition.

As I mentioned earlier, neo-Stalinist anti-imperialists and their followers refused to treat the Syrian revolution on par with the Egyptian revolution, although both were part of the wave of Arab uprisings. Instead, they assimilated it to the model of 'regime change' employed by the US in Iraq! This is a position that reeks of racism: Apparently Syrians are backward savages incapable of wanting to throw off a brutal regime that was looting and oppressing them, and therefore the uprising must have been orchestrated by Obama using ISIS, which he sponsored. This was the story peddled by Assad's and Putin's media and repeated by Trump, and, in a watered-down version by the likes of Seumas Milne, who, I recently discovered, was part of a hardcore Stalinist faction in the CPGB which welcomed Soviet tanks in Czechoslovakia. The same media are behind the demonisation of the White Helmets, the rescue workers digging survivors out of the rubble after bombing raids by Syrian and Russian warplanes.

Given the large number of defections from his army, I think it is entirely possible Assad would have been defeated if no foreign states had intervened after the uprising. Instead, the Islamic Republic of Iran stepped in, using Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shia militias under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. When they were unable to turn the tide, the Russian bombing started in late 2015. Control of Syria was part of the vision of Iranian imperialism, and Hezbollah shared the desire for a land bridge from Lebanon to Iran, but Russian motivations are more far-reaching. Setting up bases in the Middle East is part of them, but Putin has also used Syrian refugees to try and dismantle the EU by fuelling the growth of the extreme right. Farage used the image of Syrian refugees in the Brexit campaign, and fabricated stories about Syrian refugees being rapists and terrorists were used in Germany and other EU countries to fuel the expansion of the neo-fascists.

Chapter 8 is about what we can do. The first thing is to pursue the truth and tell the truth. Don't believe everything that anti-Western media say or disbelieve everything that Western media report, but subject everything to critical scrutiny. I try to provide enough references for readers to check out what I've written in the book.

The second thing is to bring morality and humanity back into politics. Howard Zinn said that in a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners. Nothing sums up the degradation of the pseudo-anti-imperialists more than their propensity to take the side of the executioners: refusing to protest against them on the grounds that 'we will oppose only our own imperialism', spreading their propaganda, and so on. With their active or passive support to non-Western imperialisms, they deny solidarity to their victims and help to keep imperialism as such alive.

The third point is to recognise the importance of fighting for democracy. The catchphrase 'bourgeois democracy' promotes the idea that democracy is a gift of the bourgeoisie and inseparable from capitalism. It should be obvious by now that this is not true. Democracy has to be won and maintained by mass struggles, as Rosa Luxemburg emphasised. She also saw this as an essential step towards socialist revolution, if it is seen as a revolution made by the working class as a whole rather than by a party that claims to speak and act for it. Thus anti-democratic counter-revolutions are necessarily anti-socialist.

The fourth point is the need to bring internationalism centre-stage. For revolutionary socialists,

internationalism is not a luxury, it is absolutely necessary in order to defeat capitalism. Neither social-democrats nor Stalinists see this clearly – they think they can build socialism in one country. But all such efforts can succeed only temporarily. Immigration controls to exclude workers from other countries, protectionist measures to exclude their products, and lack of solidarity with struggles for democracy and labour rights in other countries will in the end undermine our own struggles against capitalism and boost the extreme right.

The last point is about pushing for global institutions to promote human rights and democracy, and I have made some suggestions for what we can campaign for, including abolition of the veto rights of permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Rohini Hensman
