

Book Review: “Indefensible” by Rohini Hensman - The Left and “pseudo anti-imperialism”

Saturday 16 March 2019, by [LEONARD Ralph](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2018).

Rohini Hensman has written a book that I have waited a long time to read [1]. It is a much needed critique of the Left from the Left and a rallying cry for those of us who call ourselves leftists and socialists, urging us to reclaim popular struggles for democracy and human rights around the world.

For those of us who have been gravely disappointed, even horrified, by the reaction of large sections of the political Left to, for example, the democidal catastrophe in Syria or the Kremlin’s seizure of Crimea, this book—with its rejection of a synthetic form of “anti-imperialism” and of the neo-Stalinist discourse often deployed to whitewash and deodorize tyrants and mass murderers—could not have come soon enough.

Declaring herself a lifelong anti-imperialist, the veteran socialist feminist and anti-Stalinist begins her book in her native Sri Lanka, where she grew up with parents who “consistently opposed imperialism in every part of the world” and whose anti-imperialism was “part of a general support for democracy and human rights.” Her record of activism is impressive in its sheer breadth and principled internationalism. As well as being a vocal supporter of women’s rights, minority rights and labor rights in South Asia, throughout her life Hensman has been involved in protests and solidarity movements in support of oppressed peoples in Vietnam, Palestine, South Africa, the former Czechoslovakia and Poland. She also opposed the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s. “Because of this background,” she writes, “I am so appalled at what is happening.” “How,” she ponders, “has the rhetoric of anti-imperialism come to be used in support of anti-democratic counter-revolutions around the world?”

Rohini argues that the wretched tendency she calls “pseudo anti-imperialism,” which has colonized much of contemporary left wing discourse, and which Syrian anarchist Laila Al-Shami aptly calls “the anti-imperialism of fools,” is based on a “West-centrism which makes them oblivious to the fact that people in other parts of the world have agency too” and “an Orientalism which refuses to acknowledge that Third World peoples can desire and fight for democratic rights and freedoms taken for granted in the West.” This worldview is also based on a fraught notion that imperialism can only be associated with “the West.” This leads to absurdities such as leftists denying that the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine were imperialist, even though, had America or Britain done the same things, such a description would have been uncontroversial. Tired of these double standards, Hensman wrote the book as an appeal to anti-imperialists to be consistent and “oppose all oppression of one country by another.”



Hensman has divided the book into three sections. In the first, “Understanding Imperialism,” she seeks to clarify certain historical leftist debates about imperialism, anti-imperialism and national liberation. The second section contains concrete case studies of pseudo anti-imperialists siding with the oppressor, not the oppressed. In the third section, Hensman looks for alternatives that might help us dig ourselves out of the current situation. She uses Ukraine, Bosnia/Kosovo, Iran, Iraq and Syria as her case studies, analyzing the effects of global capitalism and imperialism in the specific context of each respective country in order to “suggest alternative narratives in each case, providing enough detail to enable genuine anti-imperialists, antiwar activists, socialists and humanitarians from other countries to identify the people with whom they should be expressing solidarity.”

Rohini does this to great effect. She examines a case study from each country and provides analyses which are both contextually deep and historically detailed, yet highly readable and easily understandable. Hensman writes with great respect of the struggles faced by the people in the countries she analyses, as they fight for democracy, self-determination and liberation from oppression and imperialism, in whatever forms they may take. She isn’t afraid to call out second-camp imperialism on the part of Russia and Iran and to analyze it on its own terms, rather than glibly assert, as some so-called radicals do, that such imperialism is simply an understandable reaction to Western aggression. Nor is she afraid to call out “leftists” like Michael Parenti and Edward Herman for genocide denial, or Iranian communists for foolishly lending support to Ayatollah Khomeini out of twisted tribalism and the absurd belief that Khomeini offered a route out of Western domination towards independence and freedom. These case studies wonderfully illustrate the dangers of this simple minded and superficial “anti-imperialism,” which suppresses independent thought.

In her final section, Rohini offers some suggestions as to how to fight back against the scourge of neo-Stalinism and neo-fascism and form an alternative, independent and more consistent democratic and internationalist politics: by pursuing and telling the truth; bringing morality and humanity back into politics; reasserting the value of the global struggle for democracy; placing internationalism center stage and pressuring global institutions like the UN to promote human rights and democracy. I agree with all of this. My only minor criticism would be that we should not rely on international institutions like the EU and the UN to be agents of social and political change. These institutions, as they currently exist, are not fit for purpose and need to be radically changed, or replaced with alternative institutions born of popular struggles. Nevertheless, I very much agree with Hensman, particularly about the importance of internationalism. In this second age of globalization, capitalism is a well and truly global phenomenon and the economies of nations are more integrated than ever before. This means that any potential progressive anti-capitalist movement would also have to be a global movement, especially since an international working class now truly exists, far more so than

in the days of Marx and Engels.

There are leftists whose strategy is to retreat into the nation state and deploy “national sovereignty” as a way of fending off global capitalism: examples include many of the so-called “Lexiteers,” as well as people like Diana Johnstone—a water carrier for the butchers of Srebrenica with a soft spot for Marine Le Pen. Unfortunately, such a strategy can (and does) easily slip into flirtations with nativism, one-eyed provincialism and anti-migrant sentiment. Such leftists view immigrants, not as fellow proletarians, but as agents of global capital who threaten “native” workers. As Hensman herself concedes, the local and the national will still be important arenas for struggle in the future, even in our globalized epoch, but we’re going to need to include transnational, continental and transcontinental arenas too. Just instituting social democracy in any single country will not be enough to dig us out of this mess. What we need instead is a new discourse.

In his epilogue to *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon calls for a “new history of man,” separate from the fake “humanism” preached by colonial Europe, which was itself the negation of humanity. In the same vein, those of us who believe in the ideals of socialism must articulate a new conception of democratic internationalist politics informed by a radical humanism, to pit against the synthetic “anti-imperialism” of neo-Stalinists, Assadists and soft isolationists. We must also reclaim the poetry and vivacity of human rights that have long been sterilized by legalism and instrumentalized by liberal hawks and neo-conservatives for their own nefarious agendas.

Yet we should not make the mistake of advocating for human rights without a strong philosophical and ideological foundation to underpin them. The struggle for human rights and democracy should be simply a part (albeit a crucial one) of a broader strategy of popular transformation of the creaking status quo into a democratic world order that benefits all the peoples of the world and promotes friendship, solidarity and brotherhood between them. As Thomas Paine once wrote, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” Rohini Hensman has written a book that will help us start envisioning a politics that can begin to achieve this.

Ralph Leonard

P.S.

- Are. Posted on August 13, 2018:

- <https://areomagazine.com/2018/08/13/indefensible-by-rohini-hensman-book-review/>

- Ralph Leonard is a British-Nigerian writer who writes on International politics, religion, culture and humanism.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1164-indefensible>