

# The bankruptcy of a one-sided “anti-imperialism”

Sunday 14 August 2022, by [DARDOT Pierre](#), [LAVAL Christian](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2022).

**Some on the left still have trouble counting to two. Having two enemies and not just one, fighting on two fronts and not just one, is obviously not comfortable. It is so much less difficult for the mind to be able to rely only on the good, the only, the unique Enemy. Being politically simplistic, which is born of old habits, ignorance, amnesia and a great deal of laziness, eats away at part of the radical left to the point of indignity. Not entirely fortunately. [Balibar has just recalled](#) that faced with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, “pacifism is not an option” and that “the immediate imperative is to help the Ukrainians to resist. Let’s not replay ‘non-intervention’ again.”**

But let’s broaden the subject: it is not only pacifism that is entirely objectionable when a country is invaded by another in defiance of all the rules of international law. It is first of all “campism” which is in no way an option. What is campism? It is a form of political stupidity with the most sinister effects which consists in thinking that there is only one Enemy. We will define it as a one-sided anti-imperialism. From the uniqueness of the Enemy flows the following inescapable consequence: those who oppose the Enemy are entitled if not to blessings, at least to excuses, according to the principle that the enemies of the Enemy are, if not friends, at least “objective allies” in a just fight.

Almost the entire twentieth century has been marked by this tragic game of mirrors. Supporters of the capitalist system turned a blind eye to the most criminal dictatorships, encouraged and supported them in the name of defending Western civilization against communism. This was while part of the left didn’t want to know anything about the terrible reality of “communism”, Soviet or Chinese, nor was it too particular about the nature of “post-colonial” regimes. Left-wing campism postulates that the peoples’ only enemy is “capitalism”, “American imperialism”, “the West”, “neoliberalism”, even “the European Union”, depending on the case and the various designations in use.

Fortunately, in the last century, there have always been movements and intellectuals who knew how to resist political stupidity and save the left’s honour by denouncing all the enemies of democracy and freedoms, without any “relativizing of responsibilities”. In the revolutionary movement, the Trotskyist and libertarian currents, and many other movements like *Socialism or Barbarism*, thus courageously held the double anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist front.

One could have hoped to be definitively immunized against this stupidity with the collapse of the “Soviet bloc” and the crisis of “American hegemony”. One could have believed that no oppression, no violation of human rights, no transgression of international law, no power grab, whether from the West or the East, the North or the South, could any longer be justified once the Cold War was over. We were wrong. Lazy bad habits have obviously persisted, even if they prove a little shameful at the time of war of invasion conducted by Putin.

Left-wing campism consists in interpreting this war today as a confrontation between a humiliated,

surrounded and threatened Russia and an arrogant, conquering, aggressive West: Ukraine would basically be only a battlefield between the imperialist enemy which wants to expand infinitely and Russia, a country attacked and deceived by false promises in 1990. And even if we recognise in the latter some imperial inclination, not always though, it would only be an enfeebled second-class imperialism, which could not measure up to the Enemy.

If this is indeed a war between the United States and Russia, if the cause of the Ukrainians is so “instrumentalised” by the imperialist West, how could one send arms to the Ukrainians, to help them help fight? Certainly, if it is really difficult to line up openly behind Putin, that great pillar of support of all extreme right forces across the world, shouldn't we at least remain “non-aligned”, “neutral”, even “alternative globalisationists”, as some like Jean-Luc Mélenchon propose in France?

Let's be clear: this posture simply testifies to an unacceptable complacency towards Putin's neo-Stalinist fascism, and more fundamentally, to a complete ignorance of the totalitarian and criminal nature of this power which has never ceased destroying internal opposition, including the physical elimination of journalists and activists, persecuting society as a whole, and exporting to Chechnya, Syria, and more recently Belarus and Kazakhstan, its armed enmity against all the democratic desires of the people. It is also to forget all the provocations and actions of Putin aimed at restoring the Russian empire in the name of a nationalist mystique with a sinister logic.

The support of the radical left for the Ukrainian resistance should therefore go without saying, as should the support for the Palestinian cause and many others in the world. Not only must we call for the withdrawal of the invading forces, we should also demand the sending of arms to the Ukrainian resistance fighters and, subsequently, offer all guarantees of protection of Ukrainian territory within its borders before the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-orchestrated secession of the pseudo-republics of Donbass.

Left-wing campism readily believes that one crime nullifies another, that one violation of international law justifies another, that victims compensate each other. We will easily agree on the fact that the West has nothing virtuous about it and that its hypocrisy is boundless. American and Western interventions since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (“the war against terrorism”) have not bothered with legality and have resulted in tragedies that are still ongoing, especially in Iraq and Libya, not to mention the stubborn defence of Israeli policies of colonization of the Occupied Territories! How can we stand for international law when we are protecting its permanent violation, as the United States does with its veto in the Security Council? The fight against this American and Western imperialism is fully justified. It must even be extended to all forms of economic, financial and ideological domination, and not just military interventions. Furthermore, not long ago this was the meaning of alternative globalization.

But the domination of Western capitalism should not make us forget that there are other forms of domination and oppression, notably religious, and other extremely dangerous ideologies, such as the “imperial” nationalism of Russian power. We have to get used to it: the West is not the only obstacle to democracy and social justice and we have more than one enemy. The consistent internationalist knows it, the campist ignores it.

### **The denial of the right of peoples to democracy**

One of the worst aspects of this attitude is to ignore the popular aspirations of Ukrainians, but also, going further back, the great democratic movements in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Kazakhstan. The peoples in question are reduced to pawns that do not really exist in this great abstract historical scheme where the only real actor is the Enemy which wants to extend its world domination. It does not even occur to the left campist that NATO membership of many countries which remained for a

long time under the thumb of the USSR after 1945 was for them, *for want of anything better*, a guarantee of security after all the aggressions, annexations or dismemberments they had suffered in their history.

Of course, reality is “always more complex”, as the “non-aligned” repeat, but precisely they should learn the lesson from this: the peoples have free will: they are not the puppets of the great powers. The worst political fault of campism is to consider that the peoples are nothing and that everything is played out above. Thus Islamist terrorism would have been at work from the start in the Syrian popular revolution of 2011. Thus the “colour revolutions”, popular mobilizations in the post-Soviet space which played a role from the 2000s on in the great movement of democratic emancipation in the four corners of the world, would have been only disguised forms of American imperialism. Thus the occupation of Maidan Square in 2014, which is part of the great cycle of the movement to occupy public squares, would have borne the mark of “neo-Nazis”.

From this schema stems a “relativizing of responsibilities”. The theoretician of alternative globalization and the “global left”, who was once better inspired, Boaventura de Souza Santos, thus affirms without flinching that “democracy is only a United States facade (*pantalla*)” and compares the “2014 coup” in Ukraine to the *golpe* that overthrew Dilma Rousseff in 2016 in Brazil. In either case, there would be one and the same attempt to expand America’s sphere of interests: “The policy of *regime change* does not aim to create democracies, but only governments loyal to the interests of the United States.”

There is no better way of denying peoples’ democratic subjectivity, reducing them to playthings in the hands of American imperialism. [1] This also means forgetting that American and European multinationals have never prospered as much as under Russia’s mafia-style and ultra-repressive regime, which guaranteed them absolute social peace. In reality, this author is only repeating the old outlook of the twentieth century, as if Russia or China represented a “progressive” alternative to Western capitalism that should be “accommodated” because it would act as a counterweight. In reality, these countries offer some of the most monstrous versions of capitalism in that they combine the worst of political dictatorships over the population and the excessive exploitation of wealth in favour of a tiny class of ultra-rich predators.

### **Left Campism or “The Anti-Imperialism of Idiots”**

Some protests against “imperial wars” are one-sided: they happily denounce American, Israeli or European attacks, but systematically forget the Russian or Iranian bombardments on the civilian populations in Syria which have caused many more civilian victims than the former.

This is what Leila Al-Shami explained back in 2018 in a powerful text entitled “The anti-imperialism of idiots”, [2] describing the Hands off Syria coalition which, in its proclamations and demonstrations, did not say a word about the massacres committed by the Russians and the Iranians who came to crush the democratic revolt and defend the regime of Bashar El Assad : “Blind to the social war occurring within Syria itself, the Syrian people (where they exist) are viewed as mere pawns in a geo-political chess game..” It is this type of one-sided anti-imperialism that the authors, including many Syrians, of an open letter denounced:

“Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising ten years ago, and especially since Russia intervened in Syria to help Bashar el-Assad, we have witnessed a development as curious as it is sinister: the appearance of pro- Assad supporters in the name of ‘anti-imperialism’ among some who otherwise generally characterise themselves as progressive or ‘left-wing’, and the resulting spread of manipulative disinformation that regularly distracts from the well-documented abuses of Assad and his allies. [...] Those who do not share their crude view are frequently (and falsely) labelled as

'regime change fanatics' or useful idiots of Western political interests. [...] All movements for democracy and dignity that go against the interests of the Russian or Chinese state are regularly portrayed as the product of Western interference: none of these movements are considered native, none reflect decades of independent national struggle against a brutal dictatorship (as in Syria); and none truly represent the aspirations of people who demand the right to live in dignity rather than under oppression and abuse. In fact, what unites these so-called anti-imperialist currents is the refusal to confront the crimes of the Assad regime, or even to acknowledge that a popular uprising against Assad took place and was brutally suppressed."

The authors of the text end with these words that should cause even the most idiotic to reflect: "Those of us who directly opposed the Assad regime, often at a very heavy price, did so not because of a Western imperialist plot, but because decades of abuse, brutality and corruption were and remain intolerable." [3]

What happened in Syria is happening again in Ukraine. This is what worries Ukrainian left activists who since the beginning of the invasion have been calling on the left in the rest of the world to break with the "American-centric gaze". The author of a remarkable "Letter to the Western Left" [4], the Ukrainian researcher Volodymyr Artiukh, explains that, outside the post-Soviet world, the left has not grasped the new historical conditions marked by Russia's specific strategy. This has nothing to do with the tools of American or more broadly Western hegemony, soft power and economic investment: "Despite what many of you claim, Russia is not reacting, or making adaptations or concessions, it has regained its capacity to act and is able to shape the world around it. [...] Russia has become an autonomous agent, its actions are determined by its own internal political dynamics, and the consequences of its actions are now contrary to Western interests. Russia shapes the world around it and imposes its own rules like the United States did, but in other ways."

According to him, we must stop reasoning as if Russia were only responding to the humiliation inflicted on it following the collapse of the Soviet Union and understand that it is now the West and Europe which are in a "reactive" position. He adds: "As a result, US-centric explanations are outdated. I have read everything that has been written and said on the left about last year's escalating conflict between the US, Russia and Ukraine. Most of these writings were terribly wrong, worse than the mainstream reading. Their predictive power was zero."

In fact, one-sided denunciations reach their peak in an article by Tariq Ali in *New Left Review*, a reference magazine for the Western left. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, that is eight days before the invasion, he mocks the rumours of an alleged massive attack by Russia on Ukraine and exclusively blames, without any effort to analyse the Putin regime, the warmongering Americans. He claims that Ukraine, which would never be anything but "Natoland", does not need support but that it must start by showing Putin the "respect" he deserves, not hesitating to endorse the words of a German admiral. The Western left should therefore mobilise again against the American war, which is the main threat, as it knew how to do against the American interventions in Syria:

"Stop the War is not a political party. It has Tory supporters, as well as many who favour Scottish independence. Its aim is to stop wars waged by the US or NATO, whatever the pretext. The politicians and the arms merchants who back these wars do so not to enhance democracy, but to serve the hegemonic interests of the world's largest imperial power. Stop the War and many others will carry on the task of opposing them despite threats, slanders or blandishments." [5].

This text is a digest of what is worst in the "anti-war" discourse of the Western left. There is only NATO, nothing but NATO, which aims for world domination and seeks war to make profits and enlarge its sphere of influence. Consequently, Putin's behaviour would only be a counter-effect of NATO, he would have no existence of his own, any more than his regime. It is this blindness that has

angered historian Taras Bilous, an activist in the Ukrainian organisation *Social Movement* and editor of the journal *Commons*. Almost never, he explains, has this Western left, so quick to assert the “security needs” of Russian nuclear power, remembered these same needs of Ukraine, which abandoned its nuclear arsenal in return for the guarantee of the inviolability of its borders in 1994, a principle that Putin broke in 2014. [6]

### **The reality of Russian imperialism**

To finally take stock of this Russian imperialism and closely study its specific methods and intentions is not to reverse campist stupidity and make it the only Enemy. Rather it is to affirm that any analysis which does not take it seriously is useless.

For the left, this blindness is all the more culpable since this imperialism aims not only to extend to its borders but also to destabilise the countries where liberal democracy is still alive, if only in the degraded form that we know it. It is a military but also eminently *political* form of imperialism: it aims to spread a dictatorial and nationalist conception of power everywhere in which civil and political freedoms have no basis for existence. This is why the Putin model has so many supporters among the global right and extreme right. It is because there is a close relationship between the regime of internal terror and foreign policy: how could a dictatorship which persecutes its opponents, sometimes assassinates them, and which prohibits any free expression of civil society, tolerate, especially at its immediate borders, the existence of more politically free societies?

Putin’s support for Lukashenko, Tokayev and Kadyrov is perfectly coherent: empire abroad and dictatorship at home go hand in hand. But we know that the ambitions nurtured by Putin go further: any internal or external obstacle to his power must be destroyed. The crushing of the Syrian democratic revolution by bombs and chemical weapons was a warning to all peoples wishing to free themselves from their tyrants, and perhaps first of all a message aimed at the Russian people themselves. If the front line for dictatorship begins in Russia, all countries close or not so close to it now know what awaits them if nothing is done to prevent its extension.

Let’s be clear. Putin’s enemy is not capitalism as a system of exploitation, it is democracy, against which he intends to wage a ruthless war. What worries him is the power of the masses fighting against economic and political corruption, that is, against his own power. These mobilised masses, as we have seen again in Belarus, see in the European Union a more enviable political model than the predatory dictatorships to which they are subject. It was the association between Ukraine and the European Union that decided Putin to start carving up Ukraine after the “February 2014 revolution”.

Of course, we understand that part of the so-called “radical” left is very embarrassed at seeing popular revolutions in the post-Soviet world making the European Union a hope and a horizon. It rightly criticizes the profoundly neoliberal and capitalist nature and capitalist of that Europe. But if we are right to criticise the “too little democracy” of the European Union, it is in the name of demanding self-government and above all not using Putin’s rhetoric according to which these revolutions are coups fomented by NATO.

It must be affirmed loud and clear: the insufficient democracy of Western countries is a thousand times better for the cause of equality, democracy and freedoms, than the barbaric dictatorships of Bashar, Putin and Lukashenko, which are models of all contemporary fascism. Putinism does have an ideological coherence which places it among all the neoconservative ideologies and identitarian movements that are on the rise today. As Edwy Plenel has written, this ideology takes the form of “the promotion of an eternal Russia, based on its Christian and Slavic identity, as an alternative to modern democracy, which has been reduced to a Western deception.” [7]

A mixture of neo-Tsarism, pan-Slavism and Stalinism, Putinism has nothing, absolutely nothing, progressive and democratic about it. On the contrary, it is a mortal danger to the Russian people and everybody else. Hence the urgency of struggling against it without a hint of weakness.

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**Pierre Dardot** is a philosopher and specialist in Hegel and Marx.

**Christian Laval** is Professor of Sociology at the Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense.

They are joint authors of *The New Way of the World* (Verso 2017) and *Never-Ending Nightmare* (Verso 2019)

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## P.S.

This is part of a [longer series](#) of reflections entitled “Faced with Great Russian nationalism, let’s reinvent internationalism” by **Pierre Dardot** and **Christian Laval**. This section originally appeared [here](#).

Labour Hub

<https://labourhub.org.uk/2022/04/03/the-bankruptcy-of-a-one-sided-anti-imperialism/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Las claves de una catástrofe anunciada, El lamentable papel de Europa en la guerra Rusia - Ucrania y las lágrimas que desató”, Pagina 12, March 10, 2022.

<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/406933-el-lamentable-papel-de-europa-en-la-guerra-rusia-ucrania-y-1>

[2] Leila Al-Shami, “The ‘anti-imperialism’ of idiots”

<https://libcom.org/article/anti-imperialism-idiots-leila-al-shami>

[3] Fools’ “Anti-Imperialism”: Making the Syrian People Disappear Through Disinformation,

<https://alencontre.org/moyenorient/syrie/lanti-imperialisme-des-imbeciles-faire-disparaitre-le-peuple-syrien-par-la-desinformation.html>

[4] Volodymyr Artiukh , “American-centric explanations are no longer enough. Letter to the Western Left”, March 6, 2022. This text originally appeared in the Ukrainian journal *Commons*, and was reproduced in *Contretemps*.

<https://www.contretemps.eu/gauche-occidentale-ukraine-otan-russie-imperialisme/>

[5] Tariq Ali, “News from Natoland” <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/news-from-natoland>

[6] Taras Bilous, Ukraine. “A Letter from Kiev to a Western Left”

<https://alencontre.org/laune/ukraine-une-lettre-de-kiev-a-la-gauche-occidentale.html>

[7] Edwy Plenel, *Mediapart*

<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/020322/contre-l-imperialisme-russe-pour-un-sursaut-internationaliste>