The anti-imperialist delusion

In the course of the 20th century, socialism, as a word, came to be transformed from a doctrine and aim associated with the emancipation of the working class into a doctrine and aim associated with the coming to power of nationalist, anti—imperialist elites in the economically less developed parts of the world.

The starting point was the coming to power in Russia in 1917 of an elite which had inherited its ideology from the workers movement but which in practice used the state to develop Russia economically and turn it into a power that challenged the domination of the world by America, Britain and France. As such it provided an attractive model for modernizing elites in other countries suffering from economic backwardness and domination by the advanced industrial capitalist states of the West.

The trouble was that this elite continued to use the language and terminology of the workers movement with which it had once been associated. Thus they described their seizure of power as a "workers' revolution" and their regime as a "workers' state", the first breakthrough by the international workers movement which workers everywhere had a duty to support. And they described the accumulation of capital under the auspices of the state which they were carrying out, not as the state capitalism it was, but as "socialism".

Marx, who had pointed out that when studying history you should not analyze social and political movements by what they said they were doing but by the material results of what they did, would have been the first to understand (if not to appreciate) how socialism, indeed how his own theories, had become the banner under which a quite different struggle was fought out.

The English Revolution of the 1640s was carried out under an ideology derived from the Old Testament. The French Revolution of the 1790s was carried out under one derived from Roman times. The Russian Revolution, which was the equivalent in Russia of these anti—feudal revolutions, was carried out under an ideology derived from the workers movement but it was no more an attempt to establish socialism than the English Revolution had been to establish the New Jerusalem or the French to revive the Roman Republic.

Although it was Mao who replaced the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite" by "Oppressed Peoples of the World, Unite", the roots of this change of perspective go hack to Lenin.

Lenin's highest stage

In exile in Switzerland in the middle of the First World War Lenin wrote a pamphlet which he entitled Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism. In it he argued that, through a process which had been completed by the turn of the century, capitalism had changed its character. Industrial capital and bank capital had merged into finance capital, and competitive capitalism had given way to monopoly capitalism in which trusts, cartels and other monopolistic arrangements had come to dominate production. Faced with falling profits from investments at home, these monopolies were under economic pressure to export capital and invest it in the economically backward parts of the world where higher than normal profits could be made. Hence, Lenin went on, the struggle by the most advanced industrial countries to secure colonies where such "super-profits" could be made.

Lenin exaggerated both the degree to which capitalism had become monopolistic and the difference between the rate of profit at home compared with in the economically backward parts of the world. But it was the political implications of his theory that were to prove the more damaging to the workers movement.

When, after 1917, Lenin became the head of the Bolshevik regime in Russia the theory was
expanded to argue that the imperialist countries were exploiting the whole population of the backward areas they controlled and that even a section of the working class in the imperialist countries benefited from the super—profits made from the imperialist exploitation of these countries in the form of social reforms and higher wages.

This was nonsense in terms of Marxian economics which does not measure the level of exploitation by how high or low wages are but by reference to the amount of surplus value produced as compared with the amount of wages paid, whether high or low. By this measure the workers of the advanced countries were more exploited thin those of the colonies, despite their higher wages, because they produced more profits per worker.

Lenin's expanded theory made the struggle in the world not one between an international working class and an international capitalist class, but between imperialist and anti-imperialist states. The international class struggle which socialism preached was replaced by a doctrine which preached an international struggle between states.

The Russian revolution itself was situated in an anti-imperialist context. The whole thrust of Marx's own analysis of capitalism was that the workers movement would first triumph in the economically advanced parts of the world, not in a relatively backward economic area like Russia. Lenin explained away this contradiction by arguing that Marx had been describing the situation in the pre-imperialist stage of capitalism whereas, in the imperialist stage which had evolved after his death, the capitalist state had become so strong that the breakthrough would not take place in an advanced capitalist country but in the weakest imperialist state. Tsarist Russia had been the weakest link in the chain of imperialist countries and this explained why it was there that the first "workers revolution" had taken place.

This was tantamount to saying that the Russian revolution was the first "anti-imperialist" revolution, and in a sense it was. Russia was the first country to escape from the domination of the Western capitalist countries and to follow a path of economic development that depended on using the state to accumulate capital internally instead of relying on the export of capital from other countries.

In the early days of the Bolshevik regime, when Russia was faced with a civil war and outside intervention by the Western capitalist powers, Lenin realised that this was a card he could play to try to save his regime. Playing the anti-imperialist card meant appealing to the "toiling masses" of Asia not to establish socialism but to carry out their own anti-imperialist revolutions. The "super-exploited" countries were to be encouraged to seek independence as this would weaken the imperialist states, who were putting pressure on Bolshevik Russia.

This strategy was presented to the workers movement in the West as a way of provoking the socialist revolution in their countries. Deprived of their super-profits, the ruling class in the imperialist countries would no longer be able to bribe their workers with social reforms and higher wages; the workers would therefore turn away from reformism and embrace revolution.

After Lenin's death in 1924, this strategy of building up an "anti-imperialist" front against the West was continued by his successors. Because it taught that all the people of a colonial or a dominated country had a common interest in obtaining independence, i.e. a state of their own, it was very attractive to nationalist ideologists and politicians in these countries.

They called on all the inhabitants of the country they sought to rule to unite behind them in a common struggle to achieve independence. As a result, in these countries "socialism" became associated with militant nationalism rather than with the working-class internationalism it had originally been. The political struggle there came to be seen as a struggle, not between the working class and the capitalist class, but as a struggle of all patriotic elements - workers, peasants and capitalists together - against a handful of traitorous, unpatriotic elements who would have sold out to foreign imperialists.

Whereas in Europe and North America, and parts of Latin America, socialism was a movement for the emancipation of the working class represented by various different currents in Asia and later in Africa and the rest of Latin America it was the name of a nationalist, revolutionary anti-imperialist
movement. Marxism, in its original sense, has never really existed in many of these countries. What passed for Marxism was in fact Leninism and it appealed to revolutionary modernising intellectuals rather than to workers. It has only been towards the end of this century that groups of workers in these countries have come to realise that Leninism and its anti-imperialist ideology had nothing to do with real socialism. But the damage had been done. To millions of workers in these parts of the world socialism still means nationalism and state capitalism which some of them still they see as something positive rather than a barrier to the working-class co-operation across frontiers which is an essential condition for socialism.

Through the influence which state capitalist Russia used to have over a part of the workers movement in Western countries this is what it came to mean to many working class militants in these countries too. The Russian rulers used the Communist parties outside Russia as simple auxiliaries to their foreign policy which was based on the strategic interests of Russia as an up-and-coming (state) capitalist power. What was "progressive" was what coincided with Russia's foreign policy' interests.

During the 1950s Russia moved towards a policy of acceptance of the status quo with the West known as "peaceful coexistence". The Chinese Leninists, who had come to power under Mao in 1949, perceived the interest of their state differently and sought to become the champion of "anti-imperialism" in place of Russia.

The splits that resulted in the world Communist movement were thus provoked, not as might superficially appear to be the case, by differences over what tactics the workers movement should pursue but over which so-called socialist country's foreign policy - Russia's or China's - should be supported. This was not a dispute which concerned the working class interest at all, but was an argument between states in which workers were being asked to choose whose foreign policy pawns they wished to be.

Lenin's theory of imperialism had contained the seeds of such a shameful outcome from the start as it made the most significant struggle at world level not the class struggle but the struggle between states, between so-called anti- imperialist and progressive states and so-called imperialist and reactionary states. This was a dangerous diversion from the class struggle and led to workers supporting the killing in wars of other workers in the interest of one or other state and its ruling class.

ALB
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