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The 'Socialism of Fools' of the 'Anti-Imperialist' Left

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The German socialist August Bebel once commented that antisemitism is the “socialism of fools” because the antisemites recognized capitalist exploitation only if the exploiter happened to be Jewish but who would otherwise turn a blind eye to exploitation emanating from other quarters. Over a century later, such socialism of fools has been resurrected by a self-declared “anti-imperialist” left that condemns capitalist exploitation and repression around the world when it is practiced by the U.S. and other Western powers or the governments they support, yet turns a blind eye to, or even defends repressive, authoritarian, and dictatorial states simply because these states face hostility from Washington. I will discuss the cases of China, Nicaragua, the BRICS, and multipolarity as they bring out the convoluted logic and retrograde politics of this “anti-imperialist” left.

The politics of capitalist exploitation and social control around the world are fundamentally shaped by the contradiction between a globally-integrated economy and a nation-state-based system of political domination. Economic globalization and the transnational integration of capitals provide a centripetal impulse to global capitalism whereas political fragmentation gives a powerful centripetal counterimpulse that is resulting in an escalation of geopolitical conflict. The chasm is rapidly widening between the economic unity of global capital and political competition among ruling groups who must seek legitimacy and keep the internal social order of their respective nations from fracturing in the face of the escalating crisis of global capitalism. This global conjuncture is the backdrop to the contemporary “socialism of fools.” I will discuss here the cases of China, Nicaragua, the BRICS, and multipolarity as they bring out the convoluted logic and retrograde politics of the “anti-imperialist” left.

China and Capitalist Development

Capitalism with Chinese characteristics has involved the rise of powerful Chinese transnational capitalists fused with a state-party elite dependent on the reproduction of capital and high-consumption middle strata, fueled by a devastating wave of primitive accumulation in the countryside and the exploitation of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers. China is now one of the most unequal countries in the world. Strikes and independent unions are not legal in China. The Chinese Communist Party has long since abandoned any talk of class struggle or workers' power. As labor struggles continue to escalate in the country so too does state repression of them. It is true that capitalist development has lifted millions out of extreme poverty and brought about rapid industrialization, technological progress, and advanced infrastructure. It is equally true that the North American and Western European core countries experienced these achievements during their periods of rapid capitalist development from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The left never saw this capitalist development in the West as a victory for the working class nor did it lose sight of the link between this development and the law of combined and uneven accumulation in the world capitalist system. China is now "catching up."

The Chinese model rests on a complex of state-private companies in which private capital accounts for three-fifths of output and four-fifths of urban employment. China has not followed the neo-liberal route to transnational capitalist integration. The state plays a key role in the financial system, in regulating private capital, in massive public expenditure, especially in infrastructure, and in planning. This may be a distinct model of capitalist development than the Western neoliberal variant but it still obeys the laws of capital accumulation. Following the opening to global capitalism in the 1980s China became a market for transnational corporations and a sink for surplus accumulated capital able to take advantage of a vast supply of cheap labor controlled by a repressive omnipresent surveillance state. But by the turn of the century pressures were building up to find outlets abroad for surplus Chinese capital accumulated during years of hothouse capitalist development.

Sustaining this development now became dependent on the export of capital abroad. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century China led the world in a surge of outward foreign direct investment to countries in the Global South and North alike, deepening the transnational integration of capitals and accelerating capitalist transformation in the countries in which it invests. Between 1991 and 2003, China's foreign direct investment increased 10-fold, and then increased 13.7 times from 2004 to 2013, from \$45 billion to \$613 billion. By 2015 China had become the third largest foreign investor in the world. Its outbound FDI began to exceed inbound FDI and the country became a net creditor. What happens when this Chinese outward FDI touches down in the former Third World?

Displacement and Extraction Become "South-South Cooperation"

The indigenous communities of the Peruvian highland province of Apurímac have waged bloody struggles in recent years against the Chinese owned and operated Las

Bambas open-pit copper mine, one of the largest in the world, that have left scores dead and injured. In fact, the Peruvian state legally sells policing services to mining companies, enabling China's MMG to purchase physical force from the police to advance copper extraction by violent means. While this Sino-Peruvian extractive space and others like it are touted by the "anti-imperialists" as a model of South-South cooperation and post-Western modernization, keen observers will recognize at once the classical structure of imperialist extraction, whereby transnational capital displaces communities and appropriates resources under the political and military protection of local states tasked with the violent repression of resistance to expulsion and exploitation.

The pattern is the same throughout Latin America. Chinese banks have given out more than \$137 billion in loans to finance infrastructure, energy, and mining projects. One by a coalition of environmental and human rights groups looked at 26 projects in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. It found widespread violations of human rights, the displacement of local communities, environmental devastation, and violent conflict wherever Chinese investment in mines and megaprojects took place. Defenders of loan practices by China claim that these loans are different from those coming from the West because they do not impose conditionality in the way that Western lenders do. This is not entirely true. But even if it were, what difference does that make for workers, peasants, and indigenous communities resisting the exploitation, repression, and environmental destruction associated with Chinese capital in collaboration with transnational investors from elsewhere and local capitalist states?

The point is not that Chinese capital is worse or better than capital originating from other countries. Capital is capital irrespective of the national identity or ethnicity of its bearers. However, when a Western capitalist state and a capitalist state in the Global South cooperate to impose megaprojects on local communities or to facilitate transnational corporate plunder in extraction or industry this is condemned as exploitation by imperialism and local ruling classes. When two capitalist states from the Global South cooperate for the same megaprojects and corporate exploitation this is praised as progressive, anti-imperialist "South-South cooperation" and "bringing development."

Such outfits as the Tricontinental, headed by Vijay Prashad, gush praise on this Chinese role in the former Third World as "mutually beneficial," "helping development," and a "win-win" for China and the countries its corporations invest in. Are we really to believe that Chinese investors are expanding export-processing zones and relocating labor-intensive industrial production from China to lower-wage zones in Ethiopia, Vietnam and elsewhere, not to make profit but to "help these countries develop"? Is that not the same legitimating discourse as the World Bank? Parroting the legitimating discourse of the Chinese state-party elite, the Tricontinental has also insisted that "the peaceful rise of socialism with Chinese characteristics" provides an alternative to Western imperialism. Well, it does. But not an alternative to capitalist dispossession and exploitation. Capitalist development is not a class-neutral process. It is by definition a

class project of the bourgeoisie. Capitalist development, whether from the West or the East, is about expanding the frontiers of accumulation.

The Misuse of Sovereignty and Solidarity

The “anti-imperialist” left rightfully decries Western propaganda but seems incapable of calling out or even recognizing non-Western propaganda around the world, or worse yet, they parrot that same propaganda. Nicaragua provides a textbook case. The Ortega regime has proved adroit at using radical-sounding language and anti-imperialist rhetoric to strike a reflexive chord of support among the international left. Ortega returned to power in 2007 through a pact with the country’s traditional right-wing oligarchy, the former members of the armed counterrevolution, and the conservative Catholic Church hierarchy and Evangelical sects. Promising absolute respect for private property and unrestricted freedom for capital, he proceeded to co-govern until 2018 with the capitalist class, granting transnational capital 10-year across the board tax holidays, deregulation, unrestricted freedom to repatriate profits, and repression of striking workers. Ninety-six percent of the country’s property remains in the hands of the private sector. The dictatorship has repressed all dissent and shut down over 3,500 civil society organizations since 2018 – this in a country of barely six million people – because it considers *any* civic life outside of its own to be a threat.

Many progressives may be genuinely confused because of the well-deserved support that the 1979-1990 Sandinista revolution marshalled around the world and the history of brutal U.S. intervention against the country. That revolution died in 1990 and what came to power in 2007 under Ortega was anything but revolution. Yet the “anti-imperialist” left has chosen to warmly embrace the dictatorship, justified because of alleged U.S. attempts to destabilize the regime and in the name of “sovereignty.” But the evidence does not support the claim made by these detractors that the United States is pushing “counterrevolutionary regime change” against Ortega, notwithstanding Washington’s saber-rattling rhetoric. Nicaragua does not face trade or investment sanctions. The United States is the country’s principal trading partner – bilateral trade surpassed \$8.3 billion in 2022 – and transnational corporate investment continues to pour in, as does multilateral lending to the Central Bank. There is no U.S. military or paramilitary intervention. Yet none of these facts have stopped the U.S.-based organization Code Pink, among others, from claiming that Ortega’s is a “socialist government” under pressure from “devastating sanctions” and facing “violent attempted coups.”

Washington does wage full-blown destabilization campaigns, not against Ortega, but against Iran, Venezuela, and other countries. Such crimes must be vehemently condemned by any leftist worthy of the name. But this does not absolve the left of commitment to internationalism and solidarity with those oppressed just because we resist U.S. imperial pretensions around the world. The “anti-imperialist” left, however, will tell you otherwise. Heed the warning by journalist Caitlin Johnstone: if you live in a Western country “it is simply is not possible for you to lend your voice to the cause of protesters in empire-targeted nations without facilitating the empire’s propaganda campaigns about those protests. You either have a responsible relationship with this

reality or an irresponsible one.” Simple as that. Proletarians of just some countries unite!

The “anti-imperialists” have reverted to a conception of sovereignty, *not* of the people or the working classes, but of the rulers in countries that they defend. Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in the twentieth century defended *national – not state –* sovereignty in the face of interference by the imperial powers. Capitalist states use this claim to sovereignty as a “right” to exploit and oppress inside national borders free from outside interference. We on the left have no qualms about “violating national sovereignty” to condemn human rights abuses by pro-Western regimes, and nor should we in defense of human rights in those regimes not favored by Washington.

Proletarian internationalism calls on the working and oppressed classes of one country to extend solidarity not to states but to the struggles of the working and oppressed classes of other countries. States deserve the left’s support to the extent – and only to the extent – that they advance the emancipatory struggles of the popular and working classes, that they advance, or are forced to advance, policies that favor these classes. The “anti-imperialists” conflate state with nation, country, and people, generally lacking any theoretical conception of these categories and advancing populist over class political orientation. We on the left condemned the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq earlier this century. We did so not because we supported the Saddam Hussein regime – only a fool could have – but because we stood in solidarity with the Iraqi people and because the whole imperial project for the Middle East was tantamount to an attack on the poor and the oppressed everywhere.

BRICS: Replacing the Capital-Labor Contradiction with a North-South Contradiction

The “anti-imperialists” cheer on the BRICS as a Southern challenge to global capitalism, a progressive, even anti-imperialist option for humanity. They can only make such a claim by reducing capitalism and imperialism to Western supremacy in the international system. In the heyday of colonialism and its immediate aftermath local ruling classes were, at best, anti-imperialist but not anti-capitalist. Their nationalism obliterated class by proclaiming an identity of interests among the citizens of a particular country. This nationalism had a progressive and sometimes even radical edge to it so far as all members of the country in question were oppressed by colonial domination, the caste systems it imposed, and the suppression of indigenous capital. Today’s “anti-imperialists” wax enthusiasm for the BRICS as a revived “Third World project,” in the words of Prashad, an antiquated nostalgia for that anti-colonial moment of the mid-twentieth century that obscures internal class contradictions along with the web of transnational class relations into which they are enmeshed. Two references will suffice to illustrate just how out of touch such thinking is with the twenty-first century reality.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to give a talk in Manila to a group of Philippine revolutionary activists. One woman in attendance, originally from India, objected to my analysis of the rise of a transnational capitalist class that incorporated powerful contingents from the former Third World. She told me that in India “we are fighting

against imperialism and for national liberation.” I asked her what she meant by this. Core capitalists were exploiting Indian workers and transferring the surplus back to the imperialist countries along the lines that Lenin analyzed, she replied. It was by sheer coincidence that in the very week of my talk, the Indian-based global corporate conglomerate, Tata Group, which operates in over 100 countries in six continents, had acquired a string of corporate icons of its former British colonial master, among them, Land Rover, Jaguar, Tetley Tea, British Steel, and Tesco supermarkets, making Tata the single largest employer *inside* the United Kingdom. So, India-based capitalists had become the largest single exploiter of British workers. According to this woman’s own outdated logic, the United Kingdom was now the victim of Indian imperialism!

Shortly after his first inauguration, in 2003, and then again in 2010 during his second presidential term, Brazilian President Lula loaded up a government aircraft with Brazilian corporate executives and headed for Africa. The presidential-corporate entourage lobbied Mozambique and other African countries to open up to investment in the continent’s abundant mineral resources by the Brazilian-based transnational mining corporation, Vale, which also operates on all six continents, under the rhetoric of “South-South solidarity.” It is unclear what was anti-imperialist, much less anti-capitalist, about Lula’s African corporate safaris, and by extension the “South-South cooperation” agenda it epitomizes, or why the left should be applauding the expansion of Brazilian-based capital into Africa, Chinese-based capital into Latin America, Russian-based capital into Central Asia, or Indian-based capital into the United Kingdom.

We may support the (mildly) redistributive policies at home and dynamic foreign policy abroad of governments such as Lula’s. All capitalist states are not the same and it matters a great deal who is in the government. But a “progressive” government is not a socialist and not necessarily an anti-imperialist government. For the myopic, the outward expansion of Chinese, Indian, or Brazilian-based capital is seen as some sort of liberation from imperialism. What is one to make of the bizarre claim by the Canadian-based Geopolitical Economy Research Group and the International Manifesto Group that it sponsors, for whom ideological commitment trumps facts, that the BRICS are “among the better-known successes” in efforts to promote “autonomous and egalitarian national development and industrialization to break imperialist shackles”?

If the BRICS do not represent an alternative to global capitalism and the domination of transnational capital, they *do* signal the shift towards a more multipolar and balanced *inter-state* system *within* the global capitalist order. But such a multipolar inter-state system remains part of a brutal, exploitative, global capitalist world in which the BRICS capitalists and states are as much committed to control and exploitation of the global working and popular classes as are their Northern counterparts. As the BRICS membership expands, new candidates in 2023 to join the bloc include such magnificently “autonomous and egalitarian” states fighting “imperialist shackles” as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan.

Multipolarity: The New Albatross

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the West's radical political, military and economic response to it may signal the *coup de grace* of a decadent post-WWII inter-state order. An ever-more integrated global capitalism is inconsistent with a U.S.- and Western controlled international political order and financial architecture and with an exclusively dollar-denominated global economy. We are at the onset of a radical reconfiguration of global geopolitical alignments to the drumbeat of escalating economic turbulence and political chaos. Yet the crisis of hegemony in the international order takes place within this single, integrated global economy. The emerging global capitalist pluralism may offer greater maneuvering room for popular struggles around the world but a politically multipolar world does not mean that emerging poles of global capitalism are any less exploitative or oppressive than the established centers.

To the contrary, the established West and the emerging centers in this polycentric world are converging around remarkably similar "Great Power" tropes, especially jingoistic – often ethnic – nationalism and nostalgia for a mythologized "glorious civilization" that must now be recovered. The Spenglerian narratives differs from one country to another according to particular histories and cultures. In China hyper-nationalism combines with Confucian obedience to authority, Han ethnic supremacy and a new Long March to recover great power status. For Putin it is the glory days of a "Great Russian" empire anchored in Eurasia, politically propped up by extreme patriarchal conservatism that Putin calls "traditional spiritual and moral values" embodying the "spiritual essence of the Russian nation over the decaying West." In the U.S. it is the hyper-imperial bravado of a waning Pax Americana legitimated by the doctrine of "U.S. exceptionalism" and the bombast of "democracy and freedom," at whose fringe has always been white supremacy, now incarnated in a rising fascist movement as "replacement theory." To these we could add pan-Turkism, Hindu nationalism, and other such quasi-fascist ideologies in this rising polycentric world. Make America Great Again! Make China Great Again! Make Russia Great Again!

The U.S. may be the top dog and the most dangerous criminal among competing cartels of criminal states. We must condemn Washington for instigating a New Cold War and for prodding Russia through aggressive NATO expansion into invading Ukraine. Yet the "anti-imperialist" left insists that there is one single enemy, the U.S. and its allies. This is a Manichean tale of "the West and the rest." Such a metaphysical Star Wars narrative about the virtuous fight against the singular Evil Empire ends up legitimating the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. And just as Star Wars, it becomes hard to distinguish the fantastical babble of a fantasy world from the babble of the "anti-imperialist" left.

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