

Afrocentrism and Imperialism

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My contribution is in two parts. One relates to Afrocentrism and the other to imperialism - but they are linked. Tower's analysis elicits sympathy yet, like Proudhon's analysis, it appears to gloss over some important details and sometimes begs many questions. Tower searches for conceptual innovation when it is not necessary to do so, whilst what is necessary is to disentangle the "facts" and draw a consistent line of argument.

The history of Africa and Africans is well known to have been a distorted one. The distortion became obvious in the 1830's and was perfectly moulded for global consumption in the late 1800's. Before then, the role of Africans, or rather, as the Greeks called us: Libyans, Egyptians or Ethiopians, was clear even to the least learned historians of the West. Having bound the world in a few chains, imperialism brought the oppressed and working classes of the world closer to each other, but the historical distortions continued to shape the ideology of those subjected by imperialism.

The effects of these distortions are obvious in the conflict between the petit-bourgeoisie of the colonised and that of the coloniser (including the colonising bourgeoisie). But the left has often downplayed the race-based contradictions that were emergent within the international working class movement. An honest writer, Lenin, saw this and rebuked the western socialists. Stalin is even more explicit saying that one of the principled stands of Leninism was a fight against the European opportunists who did not want to have anything to do with savage Indians, and barbaric Negroes among other people. An offshoot of these distortions is the conspicuous absence of reference in so-called internationalist websites and books, of African Marxist and other revolutionary thinkers, which some among us comfortably brush aside as "esoteric".

The point of all of this, is that Afrocentrism is not simply a petit-bourgeois un-proletarian project. It is very much a project to position Africans, depending on which class position you wish to adopt, at the global level. As Diop said, the whole project is about Africans assuming their rightful place, and it is not about taking a magnifying lens and backtracking in history with a view to discover that this or that African did this or that thing. It is about the history of a people which has been distorted, and the unravelling of that history, so as to be in a firm ideological position to make conscious, well-informed interventions. Diop and even Cabral, both heavily influenced by Marx, saw this project as integral to the African Revolution. In fact Lenin was the one who moved for initiatives to organise a Pan-African Conference for the negroes of the world to determine their own destiny.

Let me create a bridge to my approach to imperialism by saying two things without substantiation. One: The ideology of imperialism is informed by the philosophical foundations that Afrocentrism seeks to demolish. Two: there is

a complex relationship between capital accumulation and the cultural environment. Two societies that are the same, according to some ideological principles such as Eurocentrism, must exhibit the same effects of capital accumulation (so-called civilisation). Two societies that are different, according to the same principle, will and need to exhibit different effects. This law holds in general. And I will apply it in the case of South Africa's expansion into the continent.

Let me now move on to Tower's terrain - imperialism. Here I will provide a defence of Lenin, who I think has been unfairly presented in Tower's analysis. For starters, Lenin's definition of imperialism does not say an imperialist country "must have also resolved its national question". In Lenin's view there is one distinctive feature of capitalist imperialism, that which distinguishes this imperialism from all past imperialisms - the export of capital. This exportation is possible only at a certain stage of development. Such a stage is characterised by dominance of a combination of banking capital and industrial capital - called finance capital.

To my knowledge the dominance of finance capital has not been challenged, in fact, it has been further deepened and widened. So, whilst I agree that classical postulations are not sacrosanct, we should be careful not to question what the classics never postulated, and present those as classical. It was Nabudere who brought this issue up. He complained bitterly in his polemics against the Monthly Review Left, especially against S. Amin, A.G. Frank and many others on their scholarly conduct.

Tower's notion that market gluts caused imperialism has a long tradition, nevertheless I differ with it. One problem is that it assumes there are markets "out there" before capital even reached "there". It is like saying the Americans are going to Mars in search of markets, what markets?? The limit to capital is capital itself, said the Master, and not the market.

I instead argue like many others that the whole process of imperialism had to do with the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The tendency is generated by competition. It drives capitalists to seek to expand capacity whilst 1) maintaining and expanding market share and 2) maintaining or increasing the profit rate. This allows us to argue that Bush is going to Mars to search for raw materials, in order to boost his cronies, and not to "market" something to the Martians.

Having said this, what is this sub-imperialism? I sympathise with what Bethuel says, with Lwandile and Tower's approval. My only concern is the shaky theoretical foundation. Just as much as there is no sub-capitalist, there can be no sub-imperialist. An imperialist is a capitalist whose "make up" is finance capital. South Africa is a perfect example.

This country has all Lenin's (and Hilferding's) ingredients - it is fully ripe! Therefore, based on Lenin's thesis, I see no value in obscuring that SA is as imperialist as any other state. The issue here is, with the ascendance of a brand of African nationalism,

how does this politico-ideological environment shape the operation of the SA imperialist both at home and on the rest of the continent? We cannot simply dismiss this question as a side issue, because it ties in with the way ideology, which is shaped by the historico-philosophical framework, reacts to economic impulses.

The history of this country forces me to categorise this imperialism as neo-colonialist imperialism. It is an imperialism led by a neo-colonial class. This does not make it any less imperialist, i.e. sub-imperialist and all that. In other words, its "laws of motion" are fundamentally the same as that of any other capitalist imperialism. The only difference is on the effects it has on the "external" populations it exploits. Western imperialism continues to be informed by the notion of the African barbarian, as beast of burden whose living standards cannot be part of mainstream public consumption. This is in contrast, I would argue, with SA imperialism's approach to the continent under the political leadership of the now dominant brand of African nationalism.

African nationalism sees Africans as brothers and sisters who have been robbed of a heritage, it does not see Africans as beasts of burden. An African capitalist class therefore, in my view, would make sure to create, at least in the long run, the same conditions that the French working class is enjoying for the African working class, precisely because the philosophical presuppositions of Pan-Africanism put all Africans on the same cultural level. Note that here I am not talking about the comprador bourgeoisie, I am talking about a capitalist class.

Tower sees Checkers in Zambia, and the environment looks to him like Bree, he then concludes that this must be a ravaging experience to the Zambians. Tower here conflates various levels of abstraction. The concrete sight of Checkers leads him to short-circuit the thinking process. Because Checkers is capitalist and capitalists are bad it follows that Checkers is a destructive force in Zambia. Capitalist development is a very complex process comrades. I think that it all depends on the institutions, especially the state and working class organisation. But also, and most importantly, it depends on the philosophical presuppositions of the financial oligarchy.

I think it is dangerous to conclude that by virtue of exporting capital it follows that capitalists are ravaging economies. It depends on the ideological-cultural element, they will ravage economies if they see the population there as barbarians and savages. We should not over-dramatise exploitation to the extent of losing sight of the real processes. The export of capital from Germany to France hardly qualifies as a "ravaging experience" to the French. Is MTN ravaging the Nigerian economy, or is Eskom dealing a fatal blow to the Zimbabweans too? There is a fine line between exploitation and the development of the productive forces, sometimes it does not exist and in some instances one complements the other.

We cannot be clamouring for development, whilst at the same time, by virtue of seeing a capitalist around, we conclude that things are terrible. The same

confusion creeps in when it comes to characterising the capitalist state Towers. Merely pinpointing global capitalist alliances is not enough to give character to the capitalist state we have, just as seeing Checkers does not mean things are bad! A deeper analysis is required. When the so-called internationalists of the white US go to France and see General Motors, do they raise alarm bells of "ravaging experiences"? Why are our leftists thinking that they should, when they see Checkers in Zambia? Is it because it is white-owned, what if it was wholly African-owned?

Some people argue that Lenin's imperialism concept has been made redundant by "globalisation". The transformation of Lenin's "monopolies" into trans-nationals and now multi-nationals is not a fundamental one, it is simply a change of form, as they are still considered monopolies in Lenin and Bukharin's view. The revolution in the forces of production did not change the laws of the social relation - capital, it merely widened their scope of operation and deepened them further. What happened was that finance capital became an oligarchy from different countries, but fundamentally sharing the same philosophical assumptions about those that they imperil. This was, of course, facilitated by the formation of multi-lateral financial institutions.

The SA state is simply a capitalist state, a neo-colonial capitalist state (of a special type) that presides over an "indigenous" neo-colonial finance capital that has now widened, and continues to widen, its alliance with other imperialist forces. The question is, given the African nationalist position of the political leadership, how is SA imperialism modified in its interactions with the broader African population, and with is its interaction with the "philosophically racist" oligarchy? This is where the deracialisation of capital debate comes in because the contradiction between African nationalism in politics and white domination in the economy remains the hallmark of the South African "transition".

The left quickly attacked deracialisation of capital as a step backwards, with some arguing that it is a step sideways. In either case, they suppress the ideological-cultural aspects that shape capital accumulation. They minimise and erase the possibility that an African capitalist class can raise the living standards of the African working class in the same way as the Swedish capitalist class has raised the living standards of the Swedish working class. This of course, comes through workers themselves struggling to raise what Marx called the "historical and moral element" that determines the living wage. I will not pursue this matter further and hopefully comrades will critically reflect on it.

In this context, it is workers, in the imperialist country - that can modify, if not totally change, the mode of operation of the exported capital. But what if our capitalists give us crumbs and we are happy about it, as is generally the case in imperialist countries, and in white South Africa, and perhaps soon black South Africa!? We cannot overrule the benefits of SA imperialism as simply exported to Sandton Tower. It is SA imperialism that makes us communicate so easily through the internet, and yet perhaps, at the expense of the Mozambican masses. How many homes have access to TV in SA

compared to Uganda? These "little" things point to the fact that it is very difficult to tell, in the world of commodities, what is consumed at the expense of whom?

Conclusions: 1) Afrocentrism is not necessarily petit-bourgeois, 2) Lenin still works, 3) Do not forget the cultural element.

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