

Every nation-state is imperialist by nature

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Third World Nationalism

In countries with a weak native business class, the tendency during this century has been for the state to be seen by local leaders as a means to pool capital and organize development, as well as providing an avenue to advancement and power for locals with ambition. Given the independence of the local state, state control of the economy is seen as a means to enhance the power of the local elite and reduce the power of foreign capital.

Leaderships intent on pursuing this strategy in third world countries have often used popular mobilization and “socialist” rhetoric as political leverage to gain control of the state. Pooling the country’s capital in the state also provides the means to develop the education, skills and health conditions in the workforce required for a modern industrial development as well as helping to slow down the self-destructive explosion in population growth.

On the other hand, the aim of the U.S. government, and the governments of the other major centers of multinational capital, is to have open access to the resources, markets and workforces of the whole planet as potential areas of exploitation by multinational companies. Taming third world nationalism has, accordingly, been the major foreign policy objective of the U.S. since World War II.

Because of the misidentification of socialism with state control of the economy, and the fact that third world nationalism has at times taken the form of a Marxist-Leninist regime (as in Cuba and Vietnam), the U.S. struggle against third world nationalism has often been subsumed under the Cold War rubric of “fighting communism.”

The power that the American state brings to this competitive struggle between nation-states takes many forms — from control over access to the American market and influence in international financial institutions like the World Bank to the huge military armaments so brutally displayed in the skies over Iraq and Kuwait. This vast economic and military power of the American state on the world scene is precisely what American imperialism consists in .

Many leftists — especially those influenced by Leninist political organizations — see so-called “national liberation” movements as the strategy for opposing this power. The idea is that creating independent state-run economies can cut down the power of the dominant centers of capital and chart an independent course that gives expression to “national self-determination.”

Even if state control of the local economy by a native elite can keep more of the profit generated locally for investment in the home country, however, the leftist fallacy is the assumption that this will enhance the position of the working class of that country, rather than advancing the power of the local boss class. In short, the conflict between the industrialized countries and third world nationalism is a tug of war over the division of the total booty, that is, over the relative shares controlled by the bosses of the different countries.

The authoritarianism so widespread in the third world tends to be entrenched by the position of these countries in the world market. Lacking the capital that could be used to improve the productivity of the workforce, they are forced to compete by relying upon low wage levels, zero environmental protections, and the absence of union restraints on management power. Since

the power and exploitative practices of capital in these areas naturally tends to arouse popular protest and the emergence of worker organization, third world elites tend to on authoritarian methods of rule to maintain their position. The “structural” character of this tendency is shown by the fact that left-wing nationalist regimes are as much inclined in this direction as are regimes run by elites more interested in accommodation to the major centers of multinational capital.

A struggle to overthrow such authoritarian regimes could lead to new structures that are more responsive to popular concerns, if there is a democratic process. More freedom for workers to organize could result if a new elite doesn’t merely consolidate a new form of authoritarianism. However, even in a situation where the overthrow of a U.S.-oriented autocracy leads to elected government and enhanced civil liberties, this does not necessarily mean that genuine popular self-determination will be realized. We can see this from our own situation in the U.S. The relative freedom of speech and freedom of association of American workers, and the freedom of opposition candidates to compete in elections, doesn’t mean the mass of American working people really control the destiny of this country; we’re still a subjugated and exploited class. The bosses really run things. Nonetheless, it is true that these relative freedoms are worth fighting for; indeed, Americans only have them because of the struggles of previous generations.

However, the actual practice of so-called “national liberation” movements when in power suggests that these movements are not usually worthy of our support on even the limited ground of enhancing these relative freedoms of working people in third world countries. Working people in Castro’s Cuba, for example, have less freedom to organize, less freedom of speech, than Cubans had in the ‘50s under Batista.

The real self-determination of working people in third world countries requires the development of worker movements that exercise independence in relation to boss groups, and empower working people through internal democratic processes.

In nationalist struggles, on the other hand, the requirement of “national solidarity” puts pressure on working people to accommodate to local bosses and fall in line behind a nationalist leadership. The interests and freedom of working people are subordinated to a mythical “national unity” that masks the continued subjugation and exploitation of the working class.

Since the tendency of nationalist movements is to narrow solidarity to the nation, barriers are created to developing a broader solidarity between working people of different nationalities, which weakens the power of working people in struggles for their own empowerment. Kurdish nationalist groups, for example, exerted this type of divisive influence during the popular uprising in Iraq at the end of the Gulf war. With the Baath regime’s armed forces in disarray, and authority in a state of collapse, a popular uprising developed that had a serious chance of dislodging that country’s fascistic regime. The success of the uprising, however, depended upon the ability of the movements in the north and south of the country to link up and support each other. The Kurdish nationalist groups, on the other hand, reportedly intervened to prevent Arab army deserters from taking part in the local revolt, disarmed them, and sent them back to Baghdad, where they faced arrest and possible execution.

These considerations suggest that the appropriate aim of our international solidarity should not be a kneejerk leftist adulation of “national liberation” struggles but the development of ties with worker movements and communities in these countries and support for these movements in struggle. This led us, for example, to support Nicaraguan workers’ right to strike and form independent unions when the Sandinistas were in power, rather than the typical leftist adulation of the bureaucratic Sandinista power structure.

One, Two, Many Imperialisms

The idea that nationalist struggles can overthrow imperialism shows a failure to understand what imperialism is. The basis of imperialism is the division of the world into an “anarchic” system of independent nation-states. There is no larger structure of decision-making that regulates human society on a global scale. Nation-states are thus only constrained in their conduct on the world stage by fear of what other states can do to them. Competition between nation-states puts pressure on each state to maximize its power to avoid subordination to others. States that have little power will be under severe pressure to align themselves with more muscular states that have major military and economic forces at their disposal.

The logic of the nation-state system is similar to that of competition in the sphere of production. The world’s productive forces are divided into competing business organizations where each can survive only as long as its sales revenue is greater than its costs. Competition forces companies to constantly seek innovations that lower their per unit costs, especially labor costs. A company with greater resources will be much more likely to survive in the constantly changing world of market forces and attempts by competitors to take away their market share. A company must pursue economic expansion to survive in such a world.

Competition between nation-states has the same logic, leading inevitably to the “arms race,” that is, technological innovation to enhance the destructive power that a state can bring to bear on the world scene. “Dominate or be dominated” is as much the logic of competition between nation-states as between businesses. The imperialist tendency is inherent in every state.

The formation of new nation-states can no more put an end to imperialism than the formation of new businesses can put an end to capitalism. The “defeat” of one empire in this or that region, or the long-term decline of a formerly dominant power, will not bring an end to the system of imperialism but merely facilitate the rise of a new empire, or the rise of numerous mini-imperialist tendencies, with all the dangers of military conflict that implies.

This is shown by the repeated manifestations of imperialist tendencies by the new states that have emerged since World War II. The victory of the Vietnamese “national liberation struggle” entrenched an autocratic elite whose domination of Cambodia and Laos recreates the ancient Vietnamese empire in more modern dress. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and Israel’s expansionism and racist subjugation of the Palestinians also express imperialist tendencies of these two regional mini-powers.

The posture of the Sandinista government towards the American Indian and English-speaking black communities of Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast — a region that had been independent of Nicaragua in the 19th century — are another manifestation of this imperialist tendency. Displays of force and attempts at cooptation enabled the Sandinistas to gain the acquiescence of the Atlantic Coast communities to a very minimal “autonomy” that does not challenge the power of the Nicaraguan state. To give up control of this territory would have weakened the resources and power at the disposal of the Nicaraguan state on the world stage; the imperialist logic of the nation-state system thus led the Sandinistas to suppress the desire of the Atlantic Coast community for a more genuine self-management of their region.

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