

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO IMPERIALISM?

by PRABHAT PATNAIK

An outsider cannot help noticing a remarkable transformation that has taken place in the Marxist discourse in the United States over the last decade: hardly anybody talks about imperialism any more. In 1974, I left Cambridge, England, where I was teaching economics, and have now returned to the West, this time to the United States, after 15 years. When I left, imperialism occupied perhaps the most prominent place in any Marxist discussion, and nowhere was more being written about and talked about on this subject than in the United States—so much so that many European Marxists accused American Marxism of being tainted with “third worldism.” Herbert Marcuse had written that advanced capitalism had manipulated its internal class contradictions to a point where the only effective challenge that could be launched against it (other than from students and marginal groups within) was in the “periphery.” *Monthly Review* had a more or less similar position. And there was a veritable flood of books and articles written on the role of U.S. imperialism in the third world. Many of these were no doubt somewhat naive, and some almost subscribed to a conspiracy theory; but they had vigor, and Marxists everywhere looked to the United States for literature on imperialism.

That is obviously not the case today. Younger Marxists look bemused when the term is mentioned. Burning issues of

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the day such as Eastern Europe or *perestroika* are discussed, but without any reference to imperialism. Radical indignation over the invasion of Panama or military intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador does not jell into theoretical propositions about imperialism. And the topic has virtually disappeared from the pages of Marxist journals, especially those of a later vintage.

Curiously, this is not because any one has theorized against the concept. The silence over imperialism is not the aftermath of some intense debate where the scales tilted decisively in favor of one side; it is not a theoretically self-conscious silence. Nor can it be held that the world has so changed in the last decade and a half that to talk of imperialism has become an obvious anachronism. Of course, a decade and a half ago, half a million U.S. troops had only recently withdrawn from a bloody war in Vietnam, while nothing of the sort is happening now. But no Marxist ever derived the existence of imperialism from the fact of wars; on the contrary, the existence of wars was explained in terms of imperialism. Why a Vietnam has not happened since then is thus a separate matter; but the theoretical perspective in terms of which we saw Vietnam is after all a more basic question and can not be brushed aside just because no Vietnam has happened in the last 15 years.

Moreover, while nothing on the scale of Vietnam has happened since then, plenty has happened and is happening to belie the proposition that the world today is in any way fundamentally different. There was the invasion of Grenada, and more recently the invasion of Panama, justified on the argument that the jurisdiction of a U.S. court extends to foreign countries as well. There has been the remarkable spectacle of the United States using its domestic social crisis, i.e., drug-abuse among the youth, as an argument for violating the sovereignty of states across the entire Latin American continent, waging battles against peasants to alter their production decisions (even while demands for raising the prices of alternative crops to coca have met with a stubborn refusal). These are not stray incidents: the idea has been espoused quite openly that the United States can legitimately allow kidnappings or

even assassinations of foreign nationals who may have been guilty of crimes according to U.S. laws. Just the other day, the U.S. Attorney General openly justified the kidnapping of a Mexican doctor accused of complicity in the assassination of a drug enforcement agent, on the grounds that for him American lives came first (imagine what would happen if India abducted the Board of Directors of Union Carbide, the multinational corporation whose gross negligence resulted in the loss of thousands of lives by methyl isocyanate poisoning in Bhopal). And above all, there have been the wars sponsored in Nicaragua and El Salvador, not to mention the perennial struggle with Cuba.

These to be sure are epiphenomena. International skullduggery is a symptom of imperialism, but not its essence. Imperialism, viewed as a fundamental set of economic relations characterizing the world, is also stronger today than ever before, at least in the post-war period. Some years ago, there was talk of a New International Economic Order. The underdeveloped countries, notwithstanding their profound differences, met at various forums and articulated demands for a change in international economic relations. The demands often did not amount to much, but today there has been a systematic "rolling back" (to use Dulles's phrase) of all such efforts. The third world Group of Seventy-Seven is in a shambles. Commodity prices continue to be at a disastrous low, forcing the underdeveloped countries to dissolve their united stand and appear before the Group of Seven advanced capitalist countries as individual supplicants. The low commodity prices have contributed much towards the "successful" control of inflation in advanced capitalist countries, just as they have contributed much towards an aggravation of malnutrition over large tracts of the third world, most noticeably in Africa. (At a time when world food stocks were at a record high, Africa was experiencing acute food shortages; international agencies like the World Bank and much of the economics profession pontificated to the African countries on their domestic policy "failures," which may, of course, have been there, but nobody talked of Africa's reduced purchasing power on account of the collapse of commodity

prices). And what is more, now a new offensive is on to force open third world markets, not just for goods, as Rosa Luxemburg had noted, but for services as well. Underdeveloped countries which had taken the lead in opposing the inclusion of services in the GATT agenda have been singled out for pressure from the U.S. administration.

It is unnecessary to go on. The point is not, as is often made out, whether the persistence of underdevelopment is because of imperialism or because of internal contradictions in the third world (which in any case represents an ill-formulated counterposing of the two); the point is not whether capitalism can survive without imperialism (a speculative question foreign to the Marxist method); the point is not even whether this or that theoretician of imperialism was correct (that is hagiography, not analysis). The point is the paradox that while the system of relations covered under the rubric of imperialism has hardly changed over the last decade and a half, fundamental questions are discussed today, even among Marxists, without any reference to it. Yesterday's Marxists in Eastern Europe may have stopped talking about imperialism today for a variety of reasons. Mr. Gorbachev may have written a whole book called *Perestroika* without a single reference to imperialism. But why should American Marxists, who are under no constraints to emulate their Soviet and Eastern European counterparts, fall into the same deafening silence on the question?

The reason, one is tempted to speculate, lies precisely in the very strengthening and consolidation of imperialism. Vietnam was a crisis for imperialism. The fact that the United States had to send half a million troops to attempt to subdue a tiny country was itself an expression of a failure to "manage" things there; the fact that it lost the war only underscored that failure. Since then, however, there has been no comparable crisis. Imperialism has learned to "manage" things better; the very price the people of Vietnam had to pay to win the war has perhaps had a subduing influence on other third world countries. They have also learned that the odds are heavily against them in other ways as well. The emancipation of the third world, as almost everybody, whether in the first or the third

world, now realizes, resembles an obstacle race where the horse must fall at one of the obstacles. First, the coming to power of a revolutionary government is itself blocked in several ways; if perchance it does come to power, an economic blockade is imposed upon it; the disaffection generated by social reforms and economic hardships, which are inevitable, is then utilized to foment a civil war; even if the government succeeds in winning the civil war, unable to rebuild its shattered economy with the meager resources at its command, it must go abroad for loans, at which point agencies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank come in, demanding a reversal of the reforms. While some years ago, there were dreams all over the third world of socialism of all kinds, not just Marxian socialism, but Nehruvian socialism, Nyerere's socialism, Jagan's socialism, and the like; today we find the drab grey of IMF "conditionalities" painted all over the third world (and even in the erstwhile socialist world). Many, of course, would say that this is because of the "follies" of the post-liberation regimes in the third world. This argument, to use our earlier analogy, amounts to saying that if the horse could not clear all the obstacles, then it is the horse's fault. Maybe, but I would like to believe that the horse, if it is well-trained and intelligent, can clear all these obstacles. The point is a different one: we should not, in our enthusiasm for blaming the horse, become blind to the obstacles. And the very fact that imperialism has been so successful in putting up obstacles, has been so adept at "managing" potential challenges to its hegemony, has made us indifferent to its ubiquitous presence. Imperialism has learned that half a million troops do not have to be despatched everywhere; and unless there are half a million troops despatched somewhere, moral indignation is not widespread, and the reality of imperialism goes unrecognized. It is an irony of history that coercion which is so effective that it can afford to be silent is scarcely recognized as such; it is only on occasions when its effectiveness is diminished to a point where it has to come out in the ugliest of colors that its reality becomes apparent. The deafening silence about imperialism in the current Marxist discourse, especially in this country, is thus a

reflection of the extraordinary strength and vigor it is displaying at present.

As Louis Althusser once remarked, however, apropos the French Communist Party's abandonment of the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," theoretical concepts are not like a pair of old shoes that you can discard when you like; they come back to haunt you. In this case, we are talking about a concept which would come back to haunt us in a particularly vicious manner. Thanks to the fact of imperialism, the possibility of revolutionary transformation within the metropolitan countries has greatly receded. The theoretical blow that downplaying the concept would strike against third world revolutionary movements cannot but enforce a practical retreat on their part. If there is such a retreat, the reality of imperialism would only mean that the right-wing opposition to it within the third world would get strengthened. In other words, a weakening of the revolutionary opposition to imperialism would spawn racist, fundamentalist, and xenophobic movements in the third world.

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