

Review of *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*

Rohini Hensman, Haymarket Books, 2018.

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Rohini Hensman's (2018) *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* is a searing critique of those who betray genuine anti-imperialism. She identifies three general categories of pseudo-anti-imperialists: one, those who see only one oppressor, the imperialist West; two, neo-Stalinists, who are apologists for Russian imperialism and have influence over the Trotskyist Left; three, imperialists and despots that position themselves against an imperialist West as anti-imperialists. The pseudo-anti-imperialist Left operates on the credence that my enemy's enemy is my friend. In Part 1, Hensman delineates her politics of anti-imperialism. While rejecting Lenin's conflation of finance capital with imperialism, she advances his political opposition to all imperialisms and support for the oppressed and democracy everywhere; a politics that has been dis-placed by Stalin's theory of socialism in one country and Russian imperialism. Pseudo-anti-imperialists, Hensman argues, betray the progressive political forces attempting democratic revolutions beyond the enemy line of the West and crudely excuse Islamist terrorism in the West as blowback. She details the degeneracy of pseudo-anti-imperialism through case studies in Part 2, specifically: Russia and Ukraine, Bosnia and Kosovo, Iran, Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Syrian uprising. Central to Hensman's damning critique of the pseudo-anti-imperialist Left is her explanation: Orientalism. This 'makes them oblivious to the fact that people in other



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parts of the world have agency too' (Hensman, 2018, p.13). For example, 'apparently Libyans and Syrians are too backward even to want [democratic] rights and freedoms'; the assumption being 'that non-Western peoples have no agency of their own, and that they can only be victims or puppets of the West' (Ibid, p.264).

In Part 3, Hensman makes five proposals in response to pseudo-anti-imperialism. First, in an era in which the Right works on a new normal of a post-factual world, to challenge those on the Left who do the same. Second, to contest the moral corruption of pseudo-anti-imperialists who (actively or passively) side with the executioners, by reinjecting compassion, humanity, kindness, love, sympathy, and imagination back into politics. Third and fourth, she astutely reminds us of the critical importance to fight for both democracy and an internationalist politics. 'If the emancipation of the working classes is to be achieved by the working classes themselves, the democratic revolution cannot be skipped' (Hensman, 2018, p.287). Moreover, 'solidarity with workers in other countries is not a luxury or something separate and distinct from working-class interests: it is an intrinsic element of working-class interests' (Ibid, p.289). Fifth, to push on global institutions like the United Nations to promote democracy and human rights.

Hensman's starting point in *Indefensible* is her observation that some of the anti-imperialist Left correctly opposed the Iraq war and stood in solidarity with the Iraqi peoples, yet ended up propagating the lies of the imperialist oppressors in Syria and denigrating its oppressed. She opens up the question here of how key sections of the Left lost their way. The trajectory of the anti-imperialist vanguard of Britain's anti-war movement is, I think, a note-worthy case in point. Opposition to the US and UK imperialist invasion (and later occupation) of Iraq was the sole

political demand of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), whilst solidarity with progressive political forces in Iraq - who opposed imperialist intervention (and later occupation), Saddam Hussein's rule, and Islamist counter-forces - was absent. In fact, StWC offered political support to the so-called Islamist resistance to imperialism (Bassi, 2010). The political deterioration of Britain's Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), the leading player in this anti-war movement, can be traced back to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Having previously adopted a third camp politics exemplified by the slogan during the Cold War, Neither Washington nor Moscow but international socialism, first the SWP opposed both sides in the Iran-Iraq war, recognising it as a war between regional imperialist interests, then, in 1987, when it was apparent that the United States was supporting Iraq, it switched to backing Iran. The priority of the SWP at this point and thereafter - as worked out by its theoreticians - is to upset the global imbalance of forces so that the (i.e. their) prime enemy will be destabilised and the Left at home (i.e. them) fortified (Bassi, 2010). This anti-imperialism of fools functions as the 'slavish mirror image' of the main imperialist power (Matgamna, 2011). The fatal consequences of this 'negativism on principle' was made explicit in 1999, when the SWP initiated Britain's anti-war movement on the singular demand of stopping the NATO bombing of Serbian military installations and sided in full with a Serbian regime attempting genocide in Kosovo (Ibid). Hensman's observation of Orientalism fits with this foolish anti-imperialism, whose myopic foci is domestic organisational gain, because the peoples and workers beyond the West are effectively made invisible.

On the question of in absentia international solidarity, explained by Hensman as the pseudo-anti-imperialist Left's Orientalism, the anomaly unaccounted for is the Palestinians. I am not convinced by Hensman's belief that the Left is disingenuous here; she states, '[h]ow can anyone who feels anguish when Palestinian children are targeted and killed in

Gaza not feel anguish when Syrian children are targeted and killed in Aleppo? Such double standards expose the hypocrisy of those who claim to support the Palestinian case' (Hensman, 2018, p.284). I would contend that solidarity with the Palestinian plight is the international exception on the Left because Israel is singled out as the international exception: the worst of the worst of imperialism. Indeed, this singling out goes as far as left anti-Semitism (see Bassi, 2011, 2017).

Hensman's *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* is a valuable retort to those on the Left who betray an internationalist working class politics that independently and critically assesses the conditions and forces of existence to decide how to drive the advancement of humanity, and who instead 'reduce socialists to geopolitical gamblers' that 'hedge bets on a return that might generate the most anti-imperialist conditions [at home], and reduce workers to mere supervisors of history, bankrupt of any agency to steer and change its course' (Bassi, 2010, p.130). At its most impassioned, *Indefensible* is a rallying cry against the lethal consequences.

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