

Opinion

The Wishful Thinking Left: Unwitting Agents of the Imperial Order

Jean Bricmont, CounterPunch

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Once upon a time, in the early 1970's, many people, including myself, thought that all the "struggles" of that period were linked: the Cultural Revolution in China, the guerillas in Latin America, the Prague Spring and the East European "dissidents", May 68, the civil rights movement, the opposition to the Vietnam war, and the nominally socialist anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia. We also thought that the "fascist" regimes in Spain, Portugal and Greece, by analogy with WWII, could only be overthrown through armed struggle, very likely protracted.

None of these assumptions were correct. The Cultural Revolution had nothing to do with the anti-authoritarian movements in the West, the Eastern European dissidents were, in general, pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist, and often fanatically so, the Latin American guerrillas were a pipe dream (except in Central America) and the national liberation movements were just that: they (quite rightly) aimed at national liberation and called themselves socialist or communist only because of the support offered to them by the Soviet Union or China. The southern European "fascist" regimes transformed themselves without offering a serious resistance, let alone an armed struggle. Many other authoritarian regimes followed suit: in Eastern Europe, in Latin America, in Indonesia, Africa and now in part of the Arab world. Some collapsed from inside, other crumbled after a few demonstrations.

I was reminded of these youthful illusions when I read [a petition](#) "in solidarity with the millions of Syrians who have been struggling for dignity and freedom since March 2011", whose list of signatories includes a veritable who's who of the Western Left. The petition claims that "The revolution in Syria is a fundamental part of the North African revolutions, yet it is also an extension of the Zapatista revolt in Mexico, the landless movement in Brazil, the European and North American revolts against neoliberal exploitation, and an echo of Iranian, Russian and Chinese movements for freedom."

The signatories of course demand the immediate departure from power of Bashar al-Assad, which is supposed to be the only "hope for a free, unified, and independent Syria". They also characterize Russia, China and Iran as standing "in support of the slaughter of people", although they are "allegedly friends of the Arabs"; they acknowledge that "the U.S. and its Gulf allies have intervened in support of the revolutionaries", but blame them for "having done so with a clear cynical self-interest" and trying to "crush and subvert the uprising". It is not clear how this squares with the next line of the text, which claims that "regional and world powers have left the Syrian people alone".

The upshot of the petition consists in grandiose claims of "solidarity" from "intellectuals, academics, activists, artists, concerned citizens and social movements", "with the Syrian people to emphasize the revolutionary dimension of their struggle and to prevent the geopolitical battles and proxy wars taking place in their country." Nothing less!

This petition is worth analyzing in detail, because it nicely summarizes everything that is wrong in today's

mainstream leftist thinking and it both illustrates and explains why there is no Left left in the West. The same sort of thinking dominated the Western Left's thinking during the Kosovo and the Libyan wars, and to some extent during the wars in Afghanistan ("solidarity with Afghan women") and Iraq ("they will be better off without Saddam").

First of all, the presentation of the facts about Syria is very doubtful. I am no expert on Syria, but if the people are so united against the regime, how come that it has resisted for so long? There have been relatively few defections in the army or in the diplomatic and political personnel. Given that the majority of Syrians are Sunnis and that the regime is constantly depicted as relying on the support of the "Alawi sect", something must be wanting in that narrative about Syria.

Next, like it or not, the actions of "Russia, China and Iran" in Syria have been in accordance with international law, unlike those of the "U.S. and its Gulf allies". From the viewpoint of international law, the current government of Syria is legitimate and responding to its request for help is perfectly legal, while arming rebels is not. Of course, the leftists who sign the petition would probably object to that aspect of international law, because it favors governments over insurgents. But just imagine the chaos that would be created if every Great Power was arming the rebels of its choice all over the world. One could deplore the selling of arms to "dictatorships", but the U.S. is hardly in a position to lecture the world on that topic.

Moreover, it is "Russia and China" who have, by their vote at the UN prevented another U.S. intervention, like the one in Libya, which the Western Left, opposed very lukewarmly, if at all. In fact, given that U.S. used the U.N. Resolution on Libya to carry out a regime change that the resolution did not authorize, isn't it natural that Russia and China feel that they were taken for a ride in Libya and say: "never again!"?

The petition sees the events in Syria as an "extension of the Zapatista revolt in Mexico, the landless movement in Brazil, the European and North American revolts against neoliberal exploitation, and an echo of Iranian, Russian and Chinese movements for freedom.", but they are careful not to link them to the anti-imperialist governments in Latin America, since the latter stand squarely against foreign interventions and for the respect of national sovereignty.

Finally, what should make anybody think that the "immediate" departure of Bashar al-Assad would lead to a "free, unified and independent Syria"? Aren't the examples of Iraq and Libya enough to cast some doubts on such optimistic pronouncements?

That brings us to a second problem with the petition, which is its tendency towards revolutionary romanticism. The present-day Western Left is the first to denounce the "Stalinist" regimes of the past, including those of Mao, Kim Il Sung or Pol Pot. But do they forget that Lenin fought against tsarism, Stalin against Hitler, Mao against the Kuomintang, Kim Il Sung against the Japanese and that the last two ones, as well as Pol Pot, fought against the U.S.? If history should have taught us anything, it is that struggling against oppression does not necessarily turn you into a saint. And given that so many violent revolutions of the past have turned sour, what reason is there to believe that the "revolution" in Syria, increasingly taken over by religious fanatics, will emerge as a shining example of freedom and democracy?

There have been repeated offers of negotiations by "Russia, China and Iran", as well as from the "Assad regime" with the opposition as well as with its sponsors (the "U.S. and its Gulf allies"). Shouldn't one give peace and diplomacy a chance? The "Syrian regime" has modified its constitution; why be so certain that this cannot lead a "democratic future", while a violent revolution can? Shouldn't one give reform a chance?

However, the main defect of this petition, as well as with similar appeals from the humanitarian interventionist Left in the past, is: to whom are they talking? The rebels in Syria want as many sophisticated weapons as possible- no signatory of the petition can deliver them, and it is hard to see how the "global civil society, not ineffective and manipulative governments" can do it. Those rebels want *Western governments* to provide them with such weapons-they couldn't care less what the Western Left thinks. And those Western governments hardly know that the wishful thinking Left even exists. And if they

did, why would they listen to people with no serious popular support, and so no means of pressuring governments? The best proof of that is given by the cause to which so many signatories have devoted a good part of their lives: Palestine. Which Western government pays any attention to the demands of the “Palestine solidarity movement”?

Just because the petition has no effect in Syria does not mean that it has no effect *tout court*. It weakens and confuses what is left of antiwar sentiments, by stressing that “our” priority must be empty gestures of solidarity with a rebellion that is already militarily supported by the West. Once this mindset is acquired, it becomes psychologically difficult to oppose U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of Syria, since intervention is precisely what the revolutionaries that we must “support” want (apparently, they have not noticed, unlike the petitioners, that the West wants to “crush and subvert the uprising”). Of course, defenders of the petition will say that they don’t “support” the more violent extremists in Syria, but who exactly are they supporting then, and how? Moreover, the false impression that the “world powers have left the Syrian people alone” (while, in fact, there is a constant flood of arms and jihadists into Syria) comes partly from the fact that the U.S. is not foolish enough to risk a World War, given that Russia seems to mean what it says in this affair. The thought that we might be on the brink of a World War never seems to occur to the petitioners.

Defenders of the petition will probably say that “we” must denounce both U.S. imperialism *and* the oppressive regimes against which the “people” revolt. But that only shows the depth of their delusions: why claim doing two things at once, when one is not capable of doing either, even partly?

If such petitions are worse than doing nothing, what should the Left do? First of all, mind its own business, which means struggling at home. This is a lot harder than expressing a meaningless solidarity with people in faraway lands. And struggling for what? Peace through demilitarization of the West, a non-interventionist policy, and putting diplomacy, not military threats, at the center of international relations. Incidentally, a non-interventionist policy is advocated by the libertarians and by the paleoconservative Right. This fact, plus invocation of pre-World War II history (the Spanish civil war, the Munich agreements), is constantly used by the Left to give anti-interventionism a bad name. But this is silly: Hitler is not really being constantly resurrected, and there are no serious military threats faced by the West. In the present situation, it is a perfectly legitimate concern of American citizens to cut back the costs of Empire.

In fact, it would be perfectly possible to set up a broad Left-Right coalition of people opposed to militarism and interventionism. Of course, within that coalition, people might still disagree on Gay marriage but, important as this issue may be, it should perhaps not prevent us from working together on issues that might also seem important to some people, such as World peace, the defense of the U.N. and of international law, and the dismantling of the U.S. empire of bases. Besides, it is not unlikely that a majority of the American public could be gained to such positions if sustained and well organized campaigns were set up to persuade them.

But of course, the spirit of the petition goes exactly in the opposite direction, towards more U.S. involvement and interventions. Many signatories certainly think of themselves as anti-imperialists and pro-peace, and some of them have had an important role in opposing previous U.S. wars. But they do not seem to have noticed that the tactics of imperialism have changed since the days of the national liberation movements. Now, that decolonization is complete (with the exception of Palestine), the U.S. is attacking *governments*, not revolutionary movements, that are considered to be too independent. And, in order to do that, they use a variety of means that are similar *in their tactics* to the revolutionary or progressive movements of the past: armed struggle, civil disobedience, government funded “N”GO’s, colored revolutions, etc.

The latest example of these tactics is the attempt by Western governments to use the LGBT community as ideological storm troopers against Russia and the Winter Olympics, in a transparent effort to deflect public attention from the embarrassing fact that, in the Snowden affair, it is Russia and not the U.S. that is on the side of freedom. It is to be feared that the humanitarian interventionist Left will jump on the

bandwagon of this new crusade. Yet, as [Gilad Atzmon](#) has pointed out, with his usual slightly provocative style, it is unlikely that this will do any good to the LGBT community in Russia, since this sort of support allows their opponents to brand them as bearers of foreign influence. It is not a good idea for any minority, anywhere in the world, to be seen as agents of a foreign power, and least of all, of a government so hated for its arrogance and its interventionism as the present U.S. administration. And incidentally, the people who call for boycott of the Winter games in Russia had no objection to holding the Olympic games in London, which implies that, in their eyes, taking anti-gay measures is a serious crime, whereas wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are mere peccadillos.

People who succumb to the illusions of revolutionary romanticism or who side with the apparent underdog, regardless of the underdog's agenda, are being taken in by the tactics of present-day imperialism. But those who aspire to a more peaceful and more just world order, and who think that a precondition of this order is the weakening of U.S. imperialism, easily see through this camouflage. These two different world views divide both the Left and the Right: liberal interventionists and neoconservatives on one side, libertarians, paleoconservatives and traditional leftists on the other, and it may call for new and heterodox alliances.

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