

21st Century Internationalism of the Oppressed

September 22, 2021



[We are re-posting this essay by Bill Fletcher because he offers a compelling response to an argument that has been circulating all too widely in left circles. We are using the version that appeared on ZNet, Sept. 17, 2021. — Eds.]

The US Left has largely lost the ability and/or willingness to have serene debates and exchanges. All too quickly differences, sometimes negligible, are elevated into splits. And, worse, those holding opposing views are treated as ‘enemies of the people’ or simply soft-headed, recalling the danger of firing squads that have been frequently used against political opponents (note to reader: remember the end of the Grenadian Revolution in 1983).

Keeping this in mind the following is offered as a response to a recent piece by Ajamu Baraka, “We Can No Longer Avoid Raising the Contradiction of the Western Imperial Left’s Collaboration with the Western Bourgeoisie,” in *Black Agenda Report* (1 September 2021). This response is offered carefully because this is not a personal debate, despite the condescending tone of Baraka’s piece. Our differences do not revolve around any question as to the Baraka’s dedication and commitment, nor his insight into many issues facing the globally oppressed. He and I have known each other for years and, despite differences, have had a comradely relationship. In the context of his recent essay, however, I respectfully believe that his framework is muddled, incorrect and stuck in a perverse version of a pre-1991 world.

We will leave aside Baraka’s insults to Gilbert Achcar. They are not only unfounded and inappropriate, but they are based on little other than Baraka’s disagreements with Achcar’s views, which he misrepresents, engaging in ad hominem insults (e.g., “Eurocentric armchair commentator”) that show he doesn’t have a clue of who Achcar is. The tone of the tirade almost sounded like a preface to the “Dozens,” an old African American exchange between potential foes in which they malign the other person by, among other things, talking about their opponent’s mother.

The fundamentals of our differences come down to, how does one understand the question of the internationalism of the oppressed? In order to answer this, there are two basic principles we start

with: (1) a concrete analysis of concrete conditions, and (2) the law and nature of contradictions. We will attempt to apply both in our reply.

The nature of the moment

Until the collapse of the USSR, the world was enmeshed in several overlapping contradictions including, between the USA sphere of influence and the Soviet sphere; the struggles for independence and national liberation, largely in the global South; struggles within the respective spheres of the two superpowers; and struggles of workers and other oppressed strata for emancipation across the planet. During this period, the so-called Cold War, where the USSR, China and several other countries were frequently identified with the cause of socialism and where, in many cases, workers and oppressed classes had succeeded in overthrowing formal capitalism and foreign domination, much of the Left fell into the fateful habit of deciding upon what stand to take on international matters not based on a substantive analysis but based largely on which countries fell on which sides of particular issues. And, to a great extent this seemed to work. After all, the USSR, for instance, tended to support national liberation struggles—though not consistently—and the USA generally opposed national liberation struggles and did whatever it could to subvert efforts in the global South towards national sovereignty (and to subvert other progressive struggles). It was the main purveyor of global violence, as so eloquently phrased by Martin Luther King. Western Europe, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, though periodically at odds with the USA, generally fell in line when the USA snapped the whip.

The fact that the general outlines of an analysis appeared to work deluded too many of us into believing that it could replace an actual analysis of conditions. And this is where our failures began.

Baraka is absolutely correct in emphasizing that there is a long and ignominious history of social chauvinism by much of the organized Left in the global North, to which I would add a history of social chauvinism by numerous otherwise progressive movements—beyond the Left—in the global North. The infection of imperial consciousness became clear even in the international Communist movement by the 1930s when many revolutionaries in the global South felt betrayed by the approach of communist parties in the global North (and by the USSR) when too many of those latter parties abandoned the struggle against colonialism in the name of building anti-fascist fronts against the Germans, Italians and, later, the Japanese. This sense of betrayal led to splits in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America and, in some cases, the creation of new revolutionary formations (with often complicated politics).

By the late 1960s/early 1970s, global capitalism was in the midst of major changes and the Soviet bloc was beginning to enter a period of severe—and ultimately fatal—crisis. National liberation movements had won major victories and there were efforts underway to reshape the global scene. The counterattack from the global North, however, was vicious and came largely in the form of the assertion of neoliberalism and the imposition of new forms of dependence—rooted significantly in finance and debt—on the countries and peoples of the global South.

Time and space do not permit an exhaustive analysis of that period. Suffice it to say that the direction taken by China after the death of Mao, along with the ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc, opened a new and unexpected world. Not an “end of history,” but an entry into the hegemony of neo-liberal globalization. For these first decades of the 21st century we have been living under that hegemony, though in the recent past it has begun to crack, due to internal and external pressures (and with ultimate results that are unpredictable at this juncture).

The elimination of the Soviet bloc and the victory of neoliberal hegemony created challenges for countries in the global South which were following what the late Egyptian Marxist theorist Samir

Amin would call “national populist projects.” By “national populist projects” Amin was referencing those regimes that had emerged out of anti-imperialist struggles but were not committed—in any serious/consistent way—to a socialist path, sometimes asserting themselves as non-aligned between the two superpowers, e.g., Egypt under Nasser. Many such regimes were able to survive through playing one superpower off against another, though this did not always succeed.

With the collapse of the second superpower and the rise of neoliberal globalization, the national populist projects which were already in crisis due to internal contradictions—including class struggle, women’s movements, ethnic contradictions, democratic governance challenges—fractured. This took multiple forms including the adoption of parliamentary systems, massive privatization and deregulation, and other programs to align with the needs and desires of global capitalism. While this was underway, the parties and individuals leading the national populist regimes were immediately plunged into a legitimacy crisis. These regimes had relied on their left-wing, anti-imperialist rhetoric, as well as domestic economic programs (e.g., import substitution; major public sector labor) in order to hold high the banner of national independence and one or another form of a radical image. This clashed with the facts on the ground.

The legitimacy crisis was not simply a public relations challenge. Struggle was breaking out within these states against the regimes. Sometimes led by forces to the left of the regime; other times by forces to the right of the regime (and sometimes both), these struggles were asserting that the regimes were abandoning their base; abandoning the people. One example of the ramifications of the legitimacy crisis unfolded in what came to be known as the Arab democratic uprisings or the “Arab Spring.” These insurrections, all beginning peacefully, were a challenge not only to pro-Western regimes, e.g., Egypt, but also to regimes that had emerged from the national populist projects, e.g., Syria.

Much of the Left in the global North immediately found itself in a major dilemma. It was a dilemma that emerged in the context of how to understand the regime of the late Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and his adoption of structural adjustment and domestic repression; it was the dilemma in the face of the vacillations of Ghana’s Jerry Rawlings vis a vis global capital; it was a dilemma that accompanied the wars that led to the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the rise in various forms of chauvinism, including within parties laying claim to being on the Left; and dilemmas that have followed the Arab Spring, such as in the case of today’s Nicaragua with the strange and tragic direction of the repressive Ortega regime. What should be the stand of the global Left when masses of people are demanding change in these former national populist, allegedly anti-imperialist states? It is to this that Gilbert Achcar wrote his important essay in *The Nation* (“How To Avoid the Anti-Imperialism of Fools,” April 6, 2021), and it is about this that Baraka has no answers other than support anyone who speaks out against imperialism, even if in speaking out their voices are, at best, hollow and even when they are tyrannical governments oppressing political activists that are much more radically anti-imperialist than them.

After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writers’ Union
Had leaflets distributed on the Stalinalee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could only win it back
By increased work quotas. Would it not in that case be simpler
for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?—Bertolt Brecht

In looking at any situation it is incumbent upon the Left to identify the various contradictions that are putting the phenomenon in motion. As such, we must shy away from assuming that there is anything approaching a clash of monoliths and, rather, understand the dynamism that exists within and between social formation. Baraka appears to have missed this point or simply disagrees. Thus, his starting—and ending—point appears to be that it is the job of leftists in the global North to oppose our own oppressors and it is our job to support, in the global South, all those who speak out against, or may even be at odds with, our oppressor. As such, it is not only about what is transpiring in the global South but also one's attitude towards another imperialist state such as Russia, that also belongs to the global North, even though it is a rival of the United States and its Western allies.

This view immediately runs one into a cul de sac. If this is the approach, what does this mean regarding what has been called proletarian internationalism or what I reference as the internationalism of the globally oppressed?

While it is never the responsibility of a Left in one country to instruct the Left in another what to do, it is our job to identify ways and means to build solidarity with and between forces that are rooted within and advance the interests of the oppressed (in the struggles against capitalism, authoritarianism, etc.). This necessitates an examination of the nature of a particular state as well as the social forces on the ground. The case of Syria is instructive.

Baraka would have us believe that the Assad regime is anti-imperialist and stands against the objectives of the USA. Further, that the USA is the main problem in Syria. Yet his arguments are only assertions and are not backed up with any genuine data. In what sense, is the Assad state democratic and representing a broad swath of the population? How does one explain the Assad regime's assassinations of participants and leaders in the 2011 protests? How does that characterization of the Assad regime fit with its intervention in Lebanon in 1976 to crush the Palestinian movement and the local Left on behalf of Washington? How does it fit with the war against Palestinian camps waged in Lebanon in the 1980s up until the expulsion of Yasser Arafat from Northern Lebanon? How does it fit with the participation of the Assad regime in the US-led war against Iraq in 1990? How does it fit with the incarceration and torture of thousands of communist activists? What does one make of the Assad regime's use of barrel bombs against civilian populations? In what sense is the Russian bombing of hospitals in liberated territory an act of progressive solidarity?

Silence. There is no reply other than to challenge the authenticity of those of us on the Left who argue for an anti-imperialist AND anti-dictatorial politics of emancipation.

In any social movement, there are multiple and contradictory forces, each struggling to lead, each in complicated relationships with one another. Revolutions or insurrections that commence in the absence of a leading organization, e.g., a party or front, run into myriad challenges in terms of direction. What is the tendency of such movements? Are such movements advancing a set of progressive politics or do they constitute a counter-revolution?

If there is to be a debate, then the debate should be on matters such as these with an attempt to identify the true facts and correct stance rather than a debate based on assertions regarding what one would prefer to believe.

The question of solidarity of the globally oppressed must begin with a focus on the oppressed themselves. Baraka focuses on the struggle between governments. I start from a different standpoint: the question of the people. It is flowing from the question of the people that one can situate the larger context. In looking at Syria, for instance, what were the nature of the demands of the mass movement? Why was it that the response of the Assad regime was bloody repression? What

does that response represent?

In the current Myanmar crisis, there are those who see this entirely through the lens of the USA/China contradiction, thus their conclusion is that the opponents of the coup are somehow dupes of US imperialism. The immediate question, however, is whether there is a legitimate struggle within Myanmar against repression and corruption (not to mention, against Islamophobia!)? If there is, how does that struggle fit into the contention between the USA and China? And, of course, in what ways can we, in the global Northern Left, be of support to the forces on the ground fighting against the coup people?

Rather than throwing around ridiculous insults, we would suggest that brother Baraka engage in a discussion about the concretes of international solidarity of the oppressed. Rather than solidarity taking the form of what is sarcastically referenced as “revolutionary socialism,” what are the concrete steps that can be taken?

First, we begin with an appreciation of what is unfolding on the ground. The assumption that the USA is behind everything is not only USA-centric, but it also starts to feel more like the conspiracy theories that entrance the political Right. What are the contradictions that are being played out? Who or what is the principal enemy of the people in that social formation at that moment?

Second, what or who are the progressive forces and by what yardstick does one assess them? Particularly if there is no organized left or no hegemonic party, in what sense would one conclude that an opposition is progressive or not? What is the nature of the regime? What are the demands of the masses? These are the sorts of questions that must be answered in the concrete rather than in the context of abstract rhetoric.

Third, in what way can the global Northern Left be of assistance (and not interference)? Are there policies that need to be pushed with our respective governments? Are there mass activities, e.g., boycotts, divestment, direct action, aimed at an oppressive regime that can be exemplary of true solidarity? This is highlighted because many in the US Left have abandoned the demands for any action by the USA government on the basis that there is nothing that the USA government can or should do (or worse, that we, on the Left, should demand nothing of the USA government other than to cease and desist). The irony here is that during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), the US Left was actively in favor of the USA, Britain and France providing direct, military assistance to the Spanish government against the fascists. It is important to remember that even with the danger of fascism, a threat to humankind, the demand for US assistance to the Spanish government came while the USA was still perpetrating crimes against the people of Latin America. A demand for a change in USA policy vis a vis Spain was not inconsistent with opposing the USA role in Latin America.

Beyond the matter of demands on government, there are direct steps that can be taken in solidarity with progressive social movements and/or against oppressor regimes. By way of an example from history, it was during the US Civil War that British dockworkers refused to unload cotton from the Confederacy that was slated to land in Britain. Even though this had an impact on their living, they practiced solidarity. Since that time we have seen examples of dockworkers around the world practicing solidarity both in the context of trade unionism but also in the context of the fight for social justice. It is incumbent upon the global Northern Left to expand our parameters when it comes to conceptualizing concrete internationalism of the globally oppressed, looking at the actions of sectors, such as dockworkers movements, as one of many examples of that which can be undertaken.

Concluding thoughts

Ajamu Baraka's passionate essay actually told us nothing regarding what the global Northern Left should do to advance international solidarity among the oppressed other than to oppose everything that the USA does. We are sure that such a position is self-satisfying since one need not open one's eyes to reality but only must swing broadly and hit whatever is in the way.

If politics were so easy...

A better starting point would be to always ask, as did Lenin, "...who stands to gain?" Or, further, what is the principal contradiction in a specific setting (and how do secondary contradictions act upon it)? When looking at the international arena asking such questions can only lead to a productive answer if one realizes that the planet, while composed of countries, is more than anything else made up of peoples and social movements in struggle.