Against the GrayZone Slanders

written by Dan La Botz | July 12, 2019

A recent article in the *GrayZone* viciously slanders the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), *Jacobin* magazine, and Haymarket books, accusing these sponsors of the Socialism conference in Chicago last weekend of hosting paid government agents engaged in attempts at regime change in several countries. In addition to those three organizations, the longtime leftist journal on Latin America *NACLA* and the Brooklyn-based Marxist Education Project are also similarly defamed. And I myself am particularly singled out, with the suggestion that I am complicit in some Republican plot to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

The GrayZone article makes the crude, simplistic argument that any criticism of nations that are the enemies of the United States—such as Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, China, or Russia—is "anti-anti-imperialism." After the events of the last hundred years is it really necessary to reply to such sectarian and simple-minded smears? Apparently it is.

The opening sentence of the GrayZone article sets the tone: "Socialism is now apparently brought to you by the U.S. State Department." It also represents the method: bundle together and tar everyone. Only the most naïve reader could believe that the entire Socialism conference, an institution on the far left for years, and DSA, with its 60,000 members and a wide variety of views, were bought and paid for by the State Department. The Socialism conference, an internationalist event in which a wide variety of radical views were presented and argued, involved dozens of speakers and over 1,500 participants, organized on the basis of furthering the anti-capitalist, socialist, and anti-imperialist movements. (One can consult the We Are Many website for a decade's worth of Socialism conference talks on war, imperialism, and U.S. foreign policy.)

The GrayZone attack is based on a conspiracy theory, the notion that the omniscient and omnipotent State Department and other U.S. government agencies finance and control the most important organizations and institutions on the American left with the goal of furthering regime change in other countries. Presumably a great U.S. government puppet master in Washington, D.C., a kind of State Department Wizard of Oz sitting at a console, perhaps in the hollow interior of the Washington Monument, dispatches his robot-like minions to deliver instructions and cash to DSA, *Jacobin,* and Haymarket. Anyone who has followed discussions in DSA, read *Jacobin,* scanned the list of titles of Haymarket, or perused *NACLA* will be surprised at how little the puppet master is getting for his money, for in all of those spheres internationalism and anti-imperialism thrive and socialist points of view clash in democratic debate.

One could hardly begin to reply to the many wild accusations in the article and I should not speak for others, so I will only discuss here the accusations made against me, which suggest that I am a State Department agent calling for the U.S. to bring about regime change in Nicaragua.

Socialism from Below

I am a proponent of what was historically called "third camp socialism" and is today often called "socialism from below." It might simply be called Marxism or revolutionary socialism. I learned this internationalist socialism in the movement in which I have been involved for almost fifty years. In the 1960s and 1970s I was a conscientious objector and anti-war activist during the U.S. war against Vietnam, and in the 1980s a part of the Central America Solidarity movement. From 1994 to 2015 I was the editor of *Mexican Labor News and Analysis,* a joint publication of the United Electrical Workers (UE) and the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo created to promote solidarity between U.S. and Mexican workers. I've been active in International Socialists (I.S.) and today am involved with Solidarity and DSA.

Throughout my years in the movement, my comrades and I firmly believed that we must support working people everywhere in their struggles for democracy and for workers' power and that this was essential to the struggle for socialism. I think it would be worthwhile to explain the principles that guided us in our thinking and our work, for while the GrayZone article is slander, its authors subscribe to a very different underlying political position that should be analyzed, understood, and rejected. While the position they hold has its roots in Stalinism, among some it has evolved into support for modern capitalist and authoritarian states and it sometimes merges with far right positions of neo-fascists. (For an article that discusses these developments see here.)

Let's go back over the last fifty years and see how these positions developed and differed. During the Vietnam War, opposition to the United States and support for national self-determination for the Vietnamese among young activists sometimes developed into support for the Vietnamese Communist Party and its leader. One often heard at the protest demonstrations, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is Going to Win." While this drift from opposition to the U.S. government to support for the Vietnamese government was understandable as a gut reaction to the horrors of the U.S. war, it was also very problematic. Most people chanted this slogan naively, but some gradually became supporters of Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communist government, and of the Soviet Union that was backing it. Few in the movement pointed out that Ho and the Vietnamese Communists were Stalinists who had murdered their leftist competitors and strove to construct a Soviet-style state in Vietnam, which is eventually what happened.

We in the I.S. supported the Vietnamese people in their struggle against U.S. imperialism, though we did not back the Vietnamese Communist party-government. Still, we believed the Vietnamese had the right to their national independence and to make their own decisions about their political leadership, but we thought they should be able to do so democratically. The Vietnamese would clearly need democracy if they were to construct socialism, but under Ho and the Communists there would be none. So while we were for national self-determination for the Vietnamese people in their fight against the United States, we did not support the Communist government.

In 1969, when I joined I.S., its slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow—For International Socialism" appealed to me because while the United States was invading Vietnam to prevent the country from achieving its national sovereignty, at the same time the Soviet Union was invading Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague Spring movement for democracy. Genuine anti-imperialists, I believed, had to oppose both U.S. imperialism and Soviet imperialism. The Vietnamese *and* the Czechs, I thought, had the right to determine their own fate. While the ruling parties of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia called themselves socialists, in reality they were Communist dictatorships that oppressed and exploited their own people.

Retrospectively, we could see that the same had been the case in Hungary when in 1956 a workers' revolution broke out against the Hungarian Communist government, a rebellion that was crushed by

Soviet tanks. Thousands of Communists around the world left their parties after that because it had become clear that Communism had nothing to do with workers interests or with the goal of democratic socialism. The small European far left had supported the workers' uprising against the Hungarian Communists, but the revolt was crushed too soon for them to have any impact.

Let's take another related example for our experience in the movement. In 1980 shipyard workers in Gdansk formed the Polish Solidarity Labor Union (*Solidarność*) and ten million workers in Poland went on strike against the Communist dictatorship. It was the most important movement for democracy in Eastern Europe's post-war history. In Poland *Solidarność* had various political currents, from far right, supported by Pope John Paul II and U.S. President Ronald Reagan, to a left wing of Polish democratic socialists supported from abroad by French and other European revolutionary socialists. We supported the movement for democracy as a whole, while promoting the left over the right. The Polish Army backed by the Soviet Union crushed the movement, but *Solidarność* had undermined the Communist system and helped to contribute to its eventual collapse a decade later.

If the Soviet Union under its bureaucratic Communist rulers was already a reactionary imperialist state, so too is the capitalist, imperialist Russia that followed and is today ruled by the reactionary and authoritarian Vladimir Putin. Today we support those in Russia, the journalists (some of whom have been assassinated), the LGBTQ movement that has been violently repressed, and the workers in struggle for a better life and a voice in their society. While opposing the Russian government, which we would be delighted to see overthrown by its people, we oppose any U.S. efforts at regime change. Similarly in China we support the Uyghurs' and the Tibetans' struggle for autonomy against cultural genocide, the peasants' fight against the vast land-grabs taking place, and the workers' fight for genuine independent labor unions.

While it is true that Russia and China today oppose the United States, it has nothing to do with anti-imperialism. They do so because we have a return to great power struggles for the re-division of the world, such as we saw before World War I and World War II. Russia and China, the United States and Europe, and to a lesser extent Japan are today's great powers that use economic and political methods to attempt to dominate various regions, strategic geographical locations, oil and other valuable minerals, and, of course, lesser states. Some of these powers form alliances, such as the United States with Israel and Saudi Arabia, sub-imperial powers in the Middle East. This is little different from the struggles between Britain, France, Germany, the United States, and Japan at the time of World War II, and in that period the United States paraded as an anti-imperialist power against the European empires, while Japan put itself forward in Asia as the shield against the white colonialists of Europe and the United States. It would be ludicrous to talk about the anti-imperialist United States and Japan then and it should be similarly laughable today to talk about the anti-imperialism of China or Russia.

In the 1980s, during the Central America solidarity movement, we supported the peoples of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in their struggles against their own authoritarian governments, their ruling classes, and above all the domination of the United States. Some of us went to those countries, particularly Nicaragua, to help. We supported a variety of movements in Central America through myriad organizations in the United States. We worked in opposition to the United States and for the victory of the revolutionary forces in Central America. Yet at the same time within the solidarity movement here we discussed the weaknesses of some of these organizations. Within some of the movements there were Stalinist Communist groups aiming at creating a Soviet-style government; others were weakened by the adoption of the elitist guerrilla *foco* model, the notion that a handful of armed revolutionaries would liberate the nation; yet others failed to find a way to unite the mestizo and indigenous elements. Some, however, had come to the conclusion that only a democratic movement of working people, mestizo and indigenous, could liberate their societies.

While within the solidarity movements we discussed the weaknesses and the strengths in these groups and advocated worker power and democracy, we did not stop supporting the movement as a whole nor did we give up fighting the U.S. government.

Let me turn to another case and talk about it more personally. When the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) led the rebellion of indigenous people in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994, I wrote pamphlets in their support and toured several cities and campuses speaking on the need to support and defend the Zapatistas against the Mexican government. As a result of my work, when the EZLN called the National Democratic Convention of Mexico in August of 1994, I was an invited guest to their convention in the jungle. While I had doubts about their formerly guerrilla leadership and differences with the Zapatistas' political views, I stood on their side against their government and mine. To educate people about the movement, I wrote a book, *Democracy in Mexico*, to support the various peasant, labor, women's, and political struggles taking place in Mexico, including the Zapatistas. I did not have to agree with the programs of teach of these movements to support their fight for democracy.

Bear with me for one last example. In the mid-1990s, while living in Mexico City, I along with others organized a protest demonstration of Americans and Mexicans in front of the U.S. Embassy to protest the U.S. government's tacit support for a rightwing Cuban émigré group called Brothers to the Rescue that was invading Cuban airspace. Though I am *not* a supporter of the Cuban Communist one-party state, I helped to organize that protest because I believed that the Cubans had the right to freedom from U.S. aggression. At the same time, the socialists and organizations with which I work—while opposing all U.S. sanctions, boycotts, and embargoes and any military intervention—have supported Cuban dissidents (some small "d" democrats, some anarchists, and some socialists) who advocate independent labor unions, civil rights, or a multi-party democracy.

My Involvement with Nicaragua

I went with friends to Nicaragua in 1985, following the Sandinista revolution and during the Contra War, taking medical supplies to a hospital there in solidarity with the besieged Nicaraguan people. The U.S.-backed Contras were attacking non-combatant school teachers, farmers, and communities and medical supplies were badly needed. Like many others, because I was earning a living, raising a family, and involved in other political activities, after the Sandinistas lost the election of 1990 and the right wing came to power, I had not paid much attention to Nicaragua. Then in 2013 a colleague asked me to accompany a student group that would live and work there for four months. While in Nicaragua, we toured the country visiting many local social organizations and NGOs and met with people of a wide variety of political opinions. I was delighted, for example, to be able to talk with Father Fernando Cardenal, the Jesuit priest who championed Liberation Theology and had played an important role in the first days of the Nicaraguan revolutionary government.

While in Nicaragua, I read many memoirs of former Sandinista leaders, histories of the country, and contemporary accounts of developments there. What became clear to me from my reading and from my discussions with Nicaraguan organizations and individuals, as well as from personal observation, was that President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista party had evolved over the decades from Cuban-inspired revolutionaries to become the leaders of a right-wing and repressive capitalist government. While claiming to be leftist, Ortega and his wife and now vice-president Rosario Murillo had formed an alliance with big business and the right wing of the Catholic Church, while at the same time reaching a working relationship with the U.S. military and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. Ortega's government had suppressed independent union organization in the maquiladoras, repressed the farmers and environmentalists who protested the construction of the Chinese-financed transoceanic canal, and harassed, threatened, and taken legal action against the feminist movement fighting the government's reactionary and severe laws against abortion under virtually all

circumstances.

When I returned to the United States I continued my research and then sat down and wrote *What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis* (Brill, 2016) in which I told the story of how the revolution had degenerated and how Ortega betrayed it. In the conclusion of the book, I also predicted that an opposition to such an authoritarian and reactionary government would inevitably develop. Two years later the book was released in a Haymarket paperback almost simultaneously with the popular rebellion that broke out in Nicaragua in April 2018.

Given events in Nicaragua, I was anxious to get my book before audiences of both the left and of the Nicaraguan community. Originally I had planned with people from the Marxist Education Project and *NACLA* to do a talk with one or two other people at the Brooklyn Commons. I met and talked with Nicaraguan activists in New York who were supporting the rebellion, and they were glad to have an American ally and interested in working together. Through a series of small meetings, a plan for a lager solidarity event developed and changed location. We agreed on St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan, which had a large Latinx congregation including some Nicaraguans. The plan was now that I would present my book and a couple of Nicaraguan speakers would comment on the current situation. At the last moment, one of the Nicaraguans informed us that some students on their way to Florida and to Washington, D.C. to talk to human rights groups and to lobby legislators would also like to speak. Neither I, nor Professor Lisa Knauer, the chair, nor Father Octavio Altamirano, a Nicaraguan Catholic priest, nor Lutheran Minister Fabian Arias had met the students prior to the event. They were described as participants in the recent protests in Nicaragua and since students had been at the forefront of the movement and had suffered most from its repression, we agreed to have them on the panel.

What was clear to me was that this had become a Nicaraguan community event and an event of the church and its congregation and that I as an American could not and should not attempt to control its agenda, but that I could present my analysis of Nicaraguan history and the current situation and as a socialist scholar state my views. The students, whose ages were about 20 to 24, described their experiences in the popular rebellion, pledged to continue a peaceful movement to force the resignation of Ortega and bring to power another government. None of them appeared at that meeting to have a very clear ideological point of view.

I wrote a report for the NYC DSA leadership and for the DSA International Committee about the event and about my statements there. Here is what I wrote about the event:

The meeting took on the character of a patriotic rally of the Nicaraguan community appalled by the government's killing of 150 citizens. In general there was a call for the resignation of Daniel Ortega and his party, the Frente Sandinista por la Liberación Nacional (FSLN). I and other DSA members were struck by several things about this meeting. First was the virtual unanimity of the panel and the public in their opposition to Ortega and the FSLN; surprisingly there [were] no regime supporters either Nicaraguans or others. Second, the Nicaraguans both on the panel and in the public had virtually no political analysis and no vision or program for the future of their country. I would attribute this to the long period of authoritarian government in Nicaragua, which made it impossible to develop alternative political views and organizations. There was very good participation from the public, both men and women. The organizers considered the event a success.

And this is what I wrote as a summary of my statements there:

I, speaking as a historian and the author of the book What Went Wrong?, attempted to make three points both in my presentation and in response to questions. The first was that any sort of intervention by the United States would not be good for Nicaragua. (A point that was applauded.)

Second, that neither the Nicaraguan capitalist class organized in COSEP, the business council, nor the hierarchy of the Catholic Church could be relied on to save the country. I pointed out that both groups had gotten along well with both the Somoza and the Ortega dictatorships. Third, I argued that the crisis taking place required the organization of a new social force from below, not only the students who are leading the struggle at present, but the working class and the farmers.

(There is a video here and my presentation and discussion, as described above, can be found at these times: 48:57, 58:10, and 1:50.)

While at the time of the June 13 event we knew nothing about it, we later learned that the students, financed by the conservative Freedom House, had gone on to Washington, D.C. where they were received by Republican Senators and Congressional representatives. Had we been aware of these connections, we no doubt would have handled things differently, but in any case, we had nothing to do with their later activities. [After posting this, I was told by one of the Nicaraguan activists that the students who spoke at our event in New York were not the same students who were hosted in D.C.]

I have stated in articles on Nicaragua—and one didn't have to obtain "leaked" emails to learn this—that "there is no left to speak of in the movement." Why is that the case? Why is there no significant socialist current today in Nicaragua? The answer is simple. The authoritarian and reactionary Ortega government and the FSLN party have utterly discredited the idea of socialism in the public mind of the majority of Nicaraguans. Many American leftists are unaware that over the last several decades virtually all of the Nicaraguan *comandantes,* the leaders of the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, have broken with Ortega and the FSLN, as have most of the leaders of the Theology of Liberation movement that supported the revolution. While some of those leaders attempted to establish new social democratic or socialist political parties, the Ortega government's domination of the political machinery made that impossible. So unfortunately socialism has virtually disappeared from the Nicaraguan political scene.

Why then, I have been asked, would I support a movement against the Ortega government? I support it because it is a popular movement from below—meaning a movement of many social classes—that aims to replace the current dictatorship with some sort of democracy. Within the Nicaraguan movement there are those in the business class—who have until recently gotten along just fine with Ortega—who would like a parliamentary government that they could control. But there are others who want a popular democracy that would represent the country's majority, its working people. I support the fight for democracy against dictatorship but within that the demand for a popular democracy, and beyond that for genuine socialism from below. My position is not unique; throughout Latin America many leftist parties support the Nicaraguan popular rebellion against Ortega.

I urge anyone interested in my thoughts about Nicaragua to read my book and my articles at *New Politics* where you can find a systematic presentation of my views. I am, as I have stated often, opposed to any U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua and opposed to sanctions against Nicaragua, since they would principally bring greater suffering to the Nicaraguan people. I am, however, for a victory of the popular rebellion and hope that by itself and with expressions of solidarity from the left throughout Latin America and the world, it will be able to push the Ortega government aside and establish democracy and, one day, socialism.

That these views could be denounced as imperialist or in cahoots with the U.S. State Department is astonishing. The harm done to the global left by such denunciations – and the political perspective behind them – is alas all too evident.