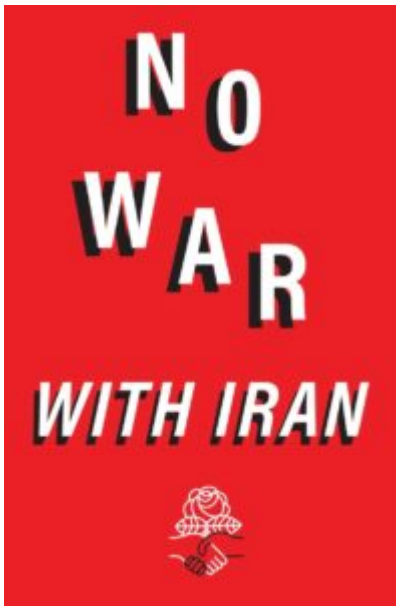


Doug Henwood Has It Wrong This Time

January 10, 2020



Doug Henwood, who often has so many intelligent and useful things to say about economics and politics, has it wrong this time. A few days ago on his Facebook page he commented on an article that I had written about the U.S. assassination of Qassim Suleimani in which he attributed to me views I do not hold and also misunderstood and mischaracterized views I do hold.

My article began by strongly condemning U.S. imperialism, but also recognized that there are other imperial powers, major and minor, in world and in the region: among them Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. I argued that we as American socialists must stand first against U.S. imperialism, but that as internationalists we had a responsibility to stand with others who are being bullied and sometimes butchered or bombed by other powers. I take that to be the essence of a socialist anti-imperialist position.

Let me provide here Henwood's FB comment in full:

Trotskyists, man. Two-thirds of this is devoted to criticizing Iran and Russia, and a third to condemning US imperialism. This must be some holdover from the Cold War, when you had to go through your ritual denunciations of both sides. Stalin has been dead for over 65 years, the USSR for almost 30. As American leftists we have no leverage at all over the governments of Iran and Russia. We do have some potential leverage over our own. Drop the phobia over condemning US imperialism without covering it over with all this both-sides-ism. (Doug Henwood, Facebook, Jan. 5, 12:51 p.m.)

First, I might mention that I am not a Trotskyist, though that is not really relevant to this discussion. Second, like Henwood, I know that Stalin is long dead and that the USSR collapsed a few decades ago. And, third, I am well aware, as a person who was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War and an activist against that and every U.S. war since, that we have and should use most of our leverage against our own government.

The critique of our own government, however, does not require us to pretend that we are ignorant of the imperialist or tyrannical behaviors of other governments. Nor does our knowledge of or discussion of those others weaken our fight against the United States government. We are obligated as international socialists to express our solidarity with the victims of imperialism and tyranny everywhere, believing as we do that we must build an international movement to overthrow capitalism everywhere.

No one wants a revival of the Cold War (except perhaps some Neocons) but the persistence of the idea that the world is divided into two camps—an imperialist camp (the U.S., the EU, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, etc.) and an anti-imperialist camp (Russia, China, Syria, Iran, etc.)—is a problem for the left. For while Stalin is dead and the Soviet Union has collapsed, the campist view lives on—with its origins in Stalinism, Maoism, the Third Worldism and some Trotskyisms of the 1960s and 1970s. At that time they referred to the “socialist” camp. That camp was not socialist then and its successors are not progressive now.

In the 1970s, this campist view led some people in the U.S. anti-war movement not only to oppose the U.S. government’s war in Vietnam—as rightly we did—but also to support the totalitarian Communist governments in Vietnam, the Soviet Union, or China. Today it leads some people who oppose the U.S. attack on Iran—as rightly they should—to also embrace Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, and Ali Khamenei of Iran. All of those are governments where democratic rights are suppressed, where workers have no rights, and where protestors like ourselves would be imprisoned and tortured. Acknowledging this does not weaken our anti-war position or our anti-imperialism.

The hope for the future does not lie with the governments of Russia, China, Syria, or Iran but with all of the millions of people around the world—from Algeria and Sudan to Ecuador and Chile—who in the last few months have been in the streets fighting for democracy, for economic and social reform, and in some cases for socialism. Those like myself who stand against all imperialisms, and stand for democracy and socialism everywhere, have no interest in reviving the Cold War or creating a new one.

I will be marching in the same anti-war movements with Doug Henwood and others, but I will not have emptied my head of everything I know about what’s going on in the world. And I will also be at demonstrations with those who support in China the labor union organizers in Guandong, the democracy protestors in Hong Kong, and the Uighurs being imprisoned and driven into forced labor in Xinjiang. I will be with those who support the democracy movement in Iran and Syria—while opposing intervention by the U.S. the European nations, Russia, or Turkey.

I hope that Doug will be in those places too, because our future is international—or we have no future.