On Gutter Journalism and Purported "Anti-Imperialism"

written by Gilbert Achcar | October 10, 2019



Gutter journalism is unfortunately not the preserve of openly right-wing tabloids. There has existed since the advent of Stalinism a "left-wing" strand of public mudslinging: Zhdanov was the counterpart of Goebbels. The Stalinist slander apparatus originally targeted the USSR's left-wing critics, who were labelled "Hitlerists" in the 1930s-40s and "CIA agents" thereafter. This tradition did not vanish, alas, with the demise of the Soviet Union, although it has much less impact nowadays than it used to have when the Stalinist state's propaganda machine was behind it at full blast.

The propaganda machine of present-day Russia promotes a far wider range of professional mudslingers and conspiracy theorists, in which the far right occupies central place. This is only normal since Putin's Russia has infinitely more affinities with the far right than it has with the far left. And yet, Moscow does not shy away from using a few purported leftist propagandists as pawns in the inter-imperialist competition between it and the USA – or, more precisely, between it and the traditional mainstream US establishment, since the US far right, and Donald Trump himself, have shown their admiration for Putin on numerous occasions.

As a result, one finds a purportedly "left-wing" cohort of writers and publicists who systematically stand with Moscow and its dictatorial allies, such as the murderous Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, while describing themselves as "anti-imperialist" – as if "anti-imperialism" consisted in siding with imperialist Russia against the imperialist USA. Indeed, their purported "anti-imperialism" is predicated upon the designation of Washington alone as the imperialist enemy, along with a knee-jerk attitude conforming to the morally corrupt maxim: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Moscow and Damascus thus receive frequent visits by representatives of the global far right, including prominent figures such as the French Marine Le Pen or the Italian Matteo Salvini, along with occasional visits by people who describe themselves as left-wingers.

One example of pro-Putin, pro-Assad "left-wing" propaganda combined with gutter journalism is the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS), run by a "Trotskyist" cult led by a political sicko named David North, which perpetuates a long worn-out tradition of inter-Trotskyist sectarian quarrels in fulfilling its role as apologist for Putin, Assad, and their friends. Another example is Grayzone, a website founded by a particularly versatile character named Max Blumenthal.

These websites have in common the habit of demonizing all left-wing critics of Putin and the likes of Assad by describing them as "agents of imperialism" or some equivalent. The main "target market" assigned to them is naturally the left-wing readership. This implies that they must strive not only to convince their readers of the virtues of Moscow and its clients by a resort to fake "left-wing" and

“anti-imperialist” arguments, but also and most importantly to discredit their left-wing critics. In doing so, they resort to the oldest trick of the slandering profession: outright lies.

As a Marxist critic of all imperialist powers and tyrannical regimes, and therefore a critic of Moscow as much as of Washington, and of Israel and the Saudi or Egyptian regimes as much as of the Syrian or Iranian ones, this writer has been a choice target for the pro-Putin/Assad professional slanderers. However, I have hardly ever replied to the tons of filth thrown at me over the years by all sorts of people belonging to that galaxy, especially the lunatic WSWS for whom slandering me seems to be a priority, judging from the incredible number of articles in which they hurl insults at me. These people are not worth a response; short of time and resources, I count on readers’ intelligence and ability to identify such a website for what it is: a contemptible sectarian enterprise.

Recently, however, Grayzone devoted to the job of smearing me a very long piece written by Ben Norton, one of their collaborators. Blumenthal, the founder of Grayzone, might be mistaken for a genuine left-wing person since he has denounced in the past the very same ideas that he is championing now, after seeing the “light.” Moreover, Verso, a well-known left-wing publisher, recently published a controversial book authored by him. Since Ben Norton too may be mistaken for a genuine left-wing reporter, I decided to make an exception this time and take the trouble to show how the Grayzone piece fully belongs to the Stalinist school of falsification. This is for the sake of any reader who may have come across that scurrilous piece and believed in good faith that it was motivated by left-wing values.

The lies in the Grayzone piece start blatantly from the onset, in the worst sensationalist tradition. Its title is “Elite UK military unit *secretly* trained by leftist regime-change advocate Gilbert Achcar and other academics.” Its lead sentence says that I, along with other academics, have helped “the British military enhance its counter-insurgency tactics”; and the article begins by referring to “*Declassified* British government documents obtained by The Grayzone.” This is sheer rubbish: there is strictly nothing “secret” about the courses that SOAS (University of London) provides to the British ministry of defence (MoD); the documents pertaining to these courses were never “classified” (otherwise, SOAS would not have provided them to the group of students who requested them); the description of those who attend the lectures as “elite” is baseless (they are members of the cultural adviser units and various other military personnel, including reservists, as the courses are open to whoever is interested); and the courses that I provide do not in the least enhance any “counter-insurgency tactic” (that’s quite grotesque indeed). On the contrary I sharply criticise UK-US interventions in the Middle East, as any intelligent person would guess from the title of one of my lectures that Norton himself quotes half-wittedly: “Oil and US Hegemony.”

I will not repeat here what I wrote elsewhere in reply to the group of students to whom I alluded above, after they published a report that included a distorted account of the courses SOAS provides to the MoD’s Cultural Specialist Unit (DCSU), and gave it wider exposure through an article in the British left-wing daily Morning Star. Instead, I will briefly comment on a few samples of the gems contained in Norton’s article.

- The Grayzone piece describes me as someone who “publicly identified himself as a Marxist while vehemently advocating for the overthrow of independent post-colonial governments in Libya and Syria.” Forget the inept description of the Libyan Gaddafi regime and the Syrian Assad regime as “post-colonial”. What the article doesn’t say, of course, is that I advocate just as vehemently the overthrow of US-sponsored Arab regimes, especially those of Egypt and the Saudi kingdom – overthrow by the people, of course, not by foreign intervention in any case.
- The Grayzone piece says that I signed, in 2018, an open letter “calling for foreign intervention in Syria, citing the ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine in order to ‘forcibly stop’ the war”. What it doesn’t say is that the open letter was not urging the world to intervene militarily, but to

"demand an immediate ceasefire, an immediate lifting of all sieges, immediate access for relief aid agencies, release of political detainees, and immediate protection for all Syrian lives". Had it advocated direct Western military intervention in Syria, I would not have signed it for the simple reason that I have consistently argued against such an intervention from the early stage of the war in that poor country. I first argued against this perspective in a discussion with members of the Syrian left opposition. Then I developed my position in an article published in the Beirut daily Al-Akhbar in November 2011. It was translated and published into the English edition of that daily, which no longer exists (a copy of my article has been reproduced by what seems to be a Turkish academic website).

- The Grayzone piece says that SOAS, the University where I am based, "is known for hiring and producing post-modernist scholars who are progressive but staunchly anti-communist, and often supportive of NATO-backed regime-change efforts and Islamism." As anyone familiar with SOAS would know, this is an utterly ridiculous depiction of an institution that is regularly denounced by all sorts of reactionaries as being a hotbed of left-wing, anti-imperialist, and anti-Zionist scholars.
- The Grayzone piece adds (the embedded links are in the original): "Almost nothing Achcar says challenges American and British foreign-policy designs in the Middle East, save for his criticism of Israel. This might explain why a soi-disant 'Marxist' scholar linked to numerous Trotskyite groups enjoys positive book reviews in mainstream pro-NATO newspapers like The Guardian." Anyone familiar with my writings and lectures will realise how far the first sentence is from the truth. As for the "pro-NATO" *Guardian*, everyone knows that some of its journalists and contributors are staunch anti-NATO writers: people such as Seumas Milne, now Jeremy Corbyn's director of communications, Owen Jones, or my former PhD student David Wearing whose thesis has become an excellent book. The link provided in the Grayzone piece leads to a rather neutral review by Ian Black of my 2016 book in the *Guardian* (it wasn't reviewed in any other mainstream newspaper). Grayzone did not refer of course to the far more positive review of a previous book of mine in the same "pro-NATO" *Guardian* by Tariq Ali, hitherto unknown for being a NATO fan.
- The Grayzone piece affirms that "in an interview published on ZNet on the day NATO military intervention began in Libya in March 2011," I "strongly supported UN Security Council resolution 1973, which imposed a so-called 'no-fly zone' over Libya and opened the door for NATO military intervention" and that I "condemned anti-war skeptics who warned that the Security Council resolution would be used to justify a war of regime change." Had anyone had the curiosity to check that interview by clicking on the link, they would have found that what I actually said is that "there are not enough safeguards in the wording of the resolution to bar its use for imperialist purposes. Although the purpose of any action is supposed to be the protection of civilians, and not 'regime change,' the determination of whether an action meets this purpose or not is left up to the intervening powers and not to the uprising, or even the Security Council." No one in their right mind can mistake this for a "strong support" to that resolution and to "regime change" – no one, except a professional slanderer deliberately distorting the record.
- The Grayzone piece quotes me as saying that "There are in fact cases where the United States supports, as in Syria today, a progressive force in its fight against a reactionary enemy." The full quote is: "There are in fact cases, which are certainly exceptional, where the United States supports, as in Syria today, a progressive force in its fight against a reactionary enemy." And the reference was to the support provided by Washington to the Kurdish YPG in its fight against the so-called Islamic state. Which of the two assertions does Grayzone disagree with: that the YPG is a progressive force, or that IS is a reactionary one?
- One final quote, which does not relate to me, but to my long-time friend and excellent expert on Yemen, Helen Lackner, whom I was keen to add to the team that provides the lectures contracted by SOAS with the DCSU after I was asked to replace a retiring colleague in

> convening the Middle East sessions. I was eager to get Helen on board precisely because she is one of the foremost critics of the role of Western powers in that other poor country in whose destruction Britain colludes. The Grayzone piece, which includes the two links above, blames Helen for taking "a liberal 'plague on both your houses' stance," therefore also "attacking the revolutionary anti-imperialist armed group Ansarallah (known informally as the Houthis)," which, according to Ben Norton, takes its "inspiration from Venezuela's Hugo Chávez,as well as (its) modeling of resistance tactics after the Vietnamese national liberation front." This is probably the most hilarious statement in an article that combines blatant dishonesty with crass ignorance. The Houthis, of course, are an ultra-fundamentalist sectarian group that launched an offensive in 2014 to conquer power in Yemen. Until two years ago, it did so in alliance with former Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, who was forced to resign by the Yemeni popular uprising in 2011 after years of dictatorship and close collaboration with the U.S. and the Saudis.

These are but a few examples of the lies and slanders contained in a 4,800-word piece, which typifies the purportedly "left-wing" version of gutter journalism. As for myself, I will continue to act in full accordance with my political conscience and ethical values – as I have always done at the cost of becoming a target of choice for the Stalinist and quasi-Stalinist left (including some who call themselves "Trotskyists").

I will therefore continue to provide lectures, on behalf of my university, to the military personnel (soldiers, low-ranking officers and reservists) who wish to attend them, and will carry on explaining to the audience my views on Islamophobia and racism, Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people, the disastrous role of British imperialism in the Middle East, especially its role in creating and upholding the Gulf oil monarchies, the calamitous consequences of Western complicity with despotic regimes in the Middle East, the disastrous results of the US-UK invasion of Iraq, etc. I will continue to do so until the MoD, listening to the likes of Ben Norton and the occasional right-wing attendees of my lectures who complain about my left-wing views, vetoes me out or cancels wholesale its contract with SOAS – to the great relief of my detractors who are keen on keeping the British military safe from exposure to critical and truly anti-imperialist opinions.

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