SWP and Islamic clerical fascism: poisoning the new anti-capitalists

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A critique of the SWP's position on the Afghanistan war, and political Islam more generally.

By Martin Thomas

It is hard to see how the Socialist Workers Party’s pamphlet No to Bush’s War could convince anyone not already “on side” to oppose the war in Afghanistan.

It seems not to have been written for that purpose, but instead to concoct a story to “make the links” for activists in the “new anti-capitalist” milieu. Its subtitle is: “The military wing of globalisation”. If its message is swallowed, rather than criticised, it will turn the new left into a caricature re-run of the Stalinist “old left”.

That “old left” was morally compromised and politically crippled by “power-bloc” thinking. It saw a world of two “camps” — the “imperialist” camp of the USA, and the “socialist”, or at least “anti-imperialist”, camp of the USSR — and its first duty as supporting the “anti-imperialist” camp.

There is no “socialist camp” any more. But the SWP is busy building up a picture of a new “anti-imperialist” camp and urging us to rally to it. The main forces in their “anti-imperialist” camp are the various regional powers which may clash with the USA — “sub-imperialist” states, as Marxists have called them — such as Iran, Iraq, and Serbia at various times; and the whole jihadi-fundamentalist movement is, they insist, part of it too.

The SWP criticises these “anti-imperialist” forces — just as within the old left, at least from the 1960s onwards, criticism of the USSR was permissible and even sometimes vigorous. But for the SWP the criticism is always subordinate to fundamental solidarity with the “anti-imperialist” camp — just as, for the old left, the criticism was always within the limits of basic solidarity with the USSR.

The SWP used not to think like this. In the South Atlantic war of 1982 it opposed both Britain and the allegedly “anti-imperialist” Argentine dictatorship. For the first seven years of the Iran/Iraq war of 1980-8 it opposed that war on both sides. Then in 1987 it swung round to support Iran in the Iran/Iraq war, on the grounds that the USA’s semi-support for Iraq made Iran’s cause “anti-imperialist”. It has subsequently backdated that attitude to the war’s start in 1980 and extended it into a whole world view.

The new pamphlet is constructed round three main ideas. First, that world politics is shaped by a relentless “drive for global economic and military dominance” by a nebulous force variously named as “the world system”, “globalisation”, “imperialism”, “the West”, or “the USA”. Second, that other forces in the world are mere “products” of that drive. Either they are examples of the rule that “barbarity bred barbarity”, “barbarism can only cause more counter-barbarism”, or they are “terrorists the West has created".
Everything reactionary and horrible in the world is a mere reflex or creation of “the West” — and yet, magically, even the most regressive of such forces can be progressive and deserving of socialist support if it clashes with the USA, no matter what about.

That is the third idea — that we should side with the “counter-barbarism” against the “barbarism”. We should even side with the “terrorists the West has created”, such as Osama bin Laden, when “the US’s drive to dominate… turn[s] him and others (for example, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) against the West”.

This third idea is not stated forthrightly. Despite frequent references to the Gulf War of 1991, this pamphlet nowhere repeats what the SWP wrote at the time — that Saddam’s “call for Israel to ‘get out of the occupied territories of Palestine’ will increase his standing among those Arabs who have supported the intifada… So, the more US pressure builds up, the more Saddam will play an anti-imperialist role… This means he will increasingly have to rely on one of his few remaining strengths, the Arab masses’ hatred of imperialism. In all of this Saddam should have the support of socialists… Socialists must hope that Iraq gives the US a bloody nose and that the US is frustrated in its attempt to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait” (SW, 18 August 1990).

But the message in the new pamphlet is clear. It is the same message as in 1990. The SWP talks freely about how “horrifying” the 11 September attacks in the USA were. It does not condemn them. The SWP has insisted that it will not condemn the attacks, though it has not explained why not in its public press, or in this pamphlet.

The SWP’s scheme of “barbarism” and “counter-barbarism” begs several questions. Even though the Taliban had US support in the mid-1990s, it is bizarre “conspiracy theory” to blame its barbarism on “the West”. In fact the Taliban is more regressive than even the worst advanced-capitalist powers.

And, in any case, why side with the “counter-barbarism” rather than the “barbarism”? Because “barbarism can only cause more counter-barbarism”, so supporting “counter-barbarism” is the only way to fight “barbarism”? Then how will we ever get socialism?

In the SWP’s pamphlet, every adverse comment on the Taliban, bin Laden, or similar forces, is immediately followed by an excuse — “but the West is really to blame…”

“The American government denounces the Taliban regime as ‘barbaric’ for its treatment of women.” A true denunciation, or untrue? The SWP doesn’t say. Its answer is: “It was the Pakistani secret service, the Saudi royal family and American agents… that organised the Taliban’s push for power”.

Bin Laden was behind the 11 September attacks? “It was because of the rage he felt when he saw his former ally, the US, bomb Baghdad and back Israel.”

“US leaders condemn the Afghan government…” Does it deserve to be condemned? No answer. The SWP quickly assures us that evils in Afghanistan are all down to the fact that “the superpowers stepped in and poured petrol on the flames”.

The SWP, though you wouldn’t guess it from this pamphlet, used to refuse (rightly) to side with the USSR against the USA. It called for “Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international socialism”. In this pamphlet’s account of Afghanistan, however, the USSR’s 1979-89 war to try to subjugate the country, which killed a million Afghans and drove six million to flee as refugees, gets only a passing mention. “Russia sent troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 to prop up its client government.” No comment. The SWP’s condemnations are reserved for something else: “The US threw its weight behind the assorted Afghan forces ranged against the Russians… flooded the country with arms.” Not the would-be conquerors, but those who (for their own reasons) aided the resistance, are the chief villains.

The SWP explains “Islamism” as “a variety of movements that… express some of the bitterness of masses
of people in predominantly Muslim countries… enormous resentment against the West and the local despots allied to it”.

Fascism, too, and British working-class racism, often express “resentment” against the upper crust. But for the SWP the fact that Islamism expresses “resentment against the West” is sufficient for it to deserve the solidarity of socialists.

That it “can take a religious form, Islamism” does not bother the SWP. To them this is no more than a natural result of the fact that “the majority religion in the region is Islam”. Why then in Latin America doesn’t revolt take the form of some sort of Catholic holy war against the Protestant US elite? Political movements are more than just a photographic-negative image of what the US does in this or that region.

The “terrorist methods” of the Islamists do bother the SWP. Why do the Islamists adopt such bad “tactics”? The SWP cites “rage at the suffering imposed by the world system” — but also, here, for once, allows itself to suggest that its “anti-imperialist” allies have done wrong for a reason other than being “driven to it” by the “West”. Where the Islamist movements “have had a mass character”, as in Algeria around 1991, they have wrongly “turned their backs on the strategic power of urban workers” and thus found themselves reduced to “small groups”, “embittered” and “desperate”.

If only the Algerian Islamists had “turned their backs on the workers”! In fact they turned their knives and guns on the workers, massacring hundreds of trade unionists.

The difference between the Islamists and socialists is not that we socialists pursue working-class action, while they “turn their backs on the workers” and choose less effective methods to the same goal — but that they have utterly different goals. Their reactionary goals of defeating the “infidel” world; banishing women’s rights, democracy, secularism, sexual self-determination, and individual liberty; and bringing “death to America” and “death to Israel”, cannot be achieved through working-class action! Action by Islamist workers for these goals is no more progressive than action by fascist-led workers in Britain, France or Germany.

Moreover, the Islamists are unfortunately far from just “small groups”. They run the country in Saudi Arabia, in Iran, and (still, to a large degree) in Afghanistan! They have mass support in other countries.

To dismiss fascism as just “a product of the capitalist regime”, so Trotsky wrote in 1934, “means we have to renounce the whole struggle, for all contemporary social evils are ‘products of the capitalist system’… Fatalist prostration is substituted for the militant theory of Marx, to the sole advantage of the class enemy…. The increase in the misery and the revolt of the proletariat are also products of capitalism…” Politics is about which “products of capitalism” we base ourselves on in their conflict with which others. To dismiss Islamism as just “a product of the world system” is to evade politics. To adopt anything other than an attitude of mortal hostility to it is to disarm politically.

Karl Marx criticised the German socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle for his claim that everyone other than the working class was “one reactionary mass”. “The bourgeoisie”, Marx pointed out, “is… a revolutionary class — as the bearer of large-scale industry — relatively to the feudal lords and the lower middle class”; moreover, sections of the lower middle class could be won over by the workers “in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat”.

The SWP has a curious inversion of this idea. Advanced capitalism (aka imperialism, aka “the West”, aka the USA) is reactionary, and everything else, everything that comes into conflict with it, is progressive! Even the most extreme Islamists, like the Taliban, who, as one Afghan Stalinist rightly put it, plunged Afghanistan’s cities “into a black hole, 500 years back in history”, are progressive compared to the 21st century!

The SWP’s approach whitewashes the Islamists, Saddam Hussein — and any local despot who comes into conflict with the USA. It is also atrociously metropolito-centric and condescending in its attitude to the
people of the world’s poorer countries.

The socialists and democrats of those countries, who fight with great courage against the Islamists, are painted out of the SWP’s picture. The SWP sees the people of those countries as capable only of “rage” and “despair”, not of thought. When the 11 September attacks in the USA drive the US government to war which kills innocent Afghans, then the US government is to be condemned. But if people in Muslim countries feel “driven” to kill innocent Americans (and also — though the SWP does not mention it — socialists, democrats, trade unionists and national minorities in their own countries), then the SWP shrugs. “Regrettable, but what can you expect?”

The only way out of this cycle of “rage” and “despair” which the SWP can see is… for the new anti-capitalist movement, from its main bases within the West, to grow and hand down “hope” to the benighted masses of the poorer countries!

Certainly we must wish for the new anti-capitalist movement to grow both numerically and politically; and the stronger the socialist movement here, the greater the help we can give to (and receive from) socialist movements in poorer countries.

But that begs the question of politics. The first plank of the pamphlet’s argument is the claim that world politics is shaped by a relentless “drive for global economic and military dominance” by a nebulous force variously named as “the world system”, “globalisation”, “imperialism”, “the West” — or, to come down to specifics, “the USA”.

The US government has done many evil things; US-based corporations and banks do many evil things; decisions by the US-based IMF are responsible for great misery; and Britain is an ally of the USA. All that is true; and on a quick skim-read, it may seem that the SWP pamphlet is only reasserting these facts, with a bit of permissible polemical exaggeration here and there.

In fact the pamphlet’s picture of the world pulps Marxism. The USA’s giant corporations and banks dominate the world not through governor-generals, but primarily through capitalist market forces.

To combat the growing inequality, misery and cruelty of the world today, the first thing any serious socialist must understand is that these are fundamentally the product of the capitalist market system, not of any particular government’s urge to tyrannise. A large part of the theoretical work of Karl Marx, in his day, was about arguing with radicals that they should no longer see their struggle as one of the virtuous people against the vicious aristocrats, but should contest the fundamental economic relations on which they stood.

To regress from Marx’s insight, and to see the whole of world politics as a matter of the unaccountable propensities to tyranny of George W Bush and his friends, or of the USA, is particularly disorienting at the present time.

The “new anti-capitalists” have come out on the streets against the policies of the IMF, the WTO, and the US government. What many of them are not so sure about is whether they should be fully anti-capitalist, or whether they just object to a distortion of capitalism by the people at the top in the big corporations, banks and governments. The SWP’s pamphlet can only push them towards the second, populist, alternative — “big is bad”. (It also pushes towards the SWP’s view of such issues as Israel-Palestine in terms of “bad” and “good” peoples, with Israel incongruously in the role of the “bad” big power).

The “new anti-capitalists” are hesitant about calling themselves socialists, for the very good reason that they abhor the Stalinism that was identified with “socialism” in common discourse for six decades. What alternative to capitalism should they pursue?

The SWP’s pamphlet will push those who swallow its message towards identifying with reactionary, nihilistic anti-capitalism — not directly with Islamism, probably, but more likely with anarcho-populist anti-capitalism, a vision of overthrowing capitalism just by more and more spectacular street protests, without
any particularly defined positive aims.

The “new anti-capitalists” are commonly identified by the mass media as “anti-globalisation”, but many understand that to be against globalisation as such is to veer into parochialism and nationalism — a hopeless attempt to break down the world economy created by capitalism into smaller walled-off units, instead of building on it to create a socialist world.

Here again, the SWP’s arguments can only push them back. If globalisation is just the megalomaniac “drive for global economic and military dominance” by the USA, the drive of which the current war is “the military wing”, then who with any sense can do other than oppose it flat-out?

The SWP’s pamphlet, in sum, is a primer in anarcho-populist “anti-imperialist camp” politics — or, more precisely, in the doctrine that precise political arguments do not matter so long as they seem to stir up feeling against capitalism, aka the USA. This approach, and these politics, may help build a small agitational group on the edge of the labour movement. They cannot possibly help equip young anti-capitalist militants to go into the workplaces and the labour movement, to learn to base themselves on the class struggle and to convince their fellow workers.

One further point about the pamphlet requires attention. So far as its picture of the “drive for dominance” by the USA which is inescapably driving people in the Middle East to “rage” and “despair” is based on specific political facts rather than just attributing the results of capitalist market economics to the ill-will of the US government, it is centred on Israel-Palestine.

Workers’ Liberty is for the withdrawal of the Israeli military from the West Bank and Gaza, and an independent Palestinian state. But what really needs explaining here, from a working-class socialist point of view, is how rotten and chauvinist the Islamist view is, which tells workers as far away from Jerusalem as Morocco in one direction and Afghanistan or Pakistan in the other that their main enemy is not their own exploiters and rulers, but a small non-Muslim population in a small corner of the Mediterranean seaboard.

That is not how the SWP sees it. For them, Israel somehow is the key to the “stark contrast between wealth and poverty… in the Middle East”. “Britain… encouraged Zionist colonists from Europe to seize land in Palestine, knowing they would be able to survive only by acting as a guard dog for Western [oil] interests. The US has taken over the dominant role from Britain since the 1940s. The methods of domination remain the same… The West backed Israel in its wars against Arab states in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973…” Etc. etc.

The history here is cock-eyed. While Britain ruled Palestine, the Zionists there bought land (from Arab landlords) rather than “seizing” it. Britain mostly did not “encourage” them; in fact the British government banned all land transfers after about 1940. As the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany was escalating before World War Two, it closed the doors of Palestine to Jewish refugees. At the time Britain made its promise of aid for a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine — in 1917, as a gambit for Jewish support in World War One — the oil industry was only just starting in the region. The Jewish settlers were not then, and would never be, of any practical assistance to British (or later American) companies in maintaining their oil interests or in “pacifying” the region. On the contrary, they soon became a handicap and an embarrassment.

The west did not back Israel in 1948; it imposed an arms embargo on the Israelis, just as it did on the Bosniacs in 1992-5. British officers helped command the Arab armies against Israel, and Israel’s main outside support was from the USSR (via Czechoslovakia). While Britain and France allied with Israel against Egypt in 1956, it was the USA that opposed them and forced them to back off.

The picture here of Jews and “the west” conspiring against Muslim peoples, with “the methods… the same” ever since World War One, is little better than a socialistic gloss on the anti-semitic agitation of the Islamists.

The SWP does not spell out here (or in their recent pamphlet directly on the Israel-Palestine question, The New Intifada) what they propose to put things right. The implications are unmistakable, though.
“Israel acts as a colonial outpost with all the arrogance pioneered by Britain and France when they ran the Middle East before the Second World War.” The answer to the British and French colonial and semi-colonial domination was, quite rightly, to throw them out. But Israel remains as “the colonial outpost”. (Of whom? Most Israeli Jews were born in Israel. It is not their “outpost”, but their home). The answer? Throw out the remaining “colonial outpost”. Destroy Israel.

The motive, for sure, is a sympathy with the Palestinians which we share. But loose demagogy has its price. Here “anti-imperialism” turns full circle, and by way of being translated into “anti-West” sentiment, becomes a desire for the crushing of a small nation — and a weaseling endorsement of bin Laden’s excuse for the 11 September atrocity.

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