

**Off The cuff**

DON MILLIGAN'S

August 29, 2011

**“It’s the West wot won it!”**

**AMONG WHAT USED TO BE KNOWN** as ‘progressive people’ imperialism has always been regarded as a thoroughly bad thing. Without nuance or qualification they were *agin it*. This holds true today. You will go a long way before you will find anybody who will admit to imperialism’s ‘positive side’. For all and sundry, imperialism, is synonymous with the theft of natural resources, environmental degradation, cultural homogenisation, racism, and military domination. In most political discussions the word “Imperialism” denotes national oppression, and remains to this day a thoroughly bad thing.

In 1916, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, leaning heavily upon the work of J. A. Hobson, concluded that imperialism was “the highest stage of capitalism”. Lenin drew attention to the manner in which capitalist enterprises got bigger and bigger; big firms swallowed smaller ones, and giant corporations came to dominate entire branches of industry. He argued, that this process of monopolisation, led to an increasingly dominant financial sector, which came to control both domestic industry and commerce, resulting in the pressure to export capital from the rich countries to poorer ones in search of more profitable investments. This, of course, promoted the development of capitalism in poorer countries, but it also led to the “division of the planet” between the big countries, and to rivalry and war. It was the highest, or final, stage of capitalist development.

There is not much to argue about here. Except, of course, this ‘highest stage’ has gone on getting higher and higher since 1916 as capitalism has barrelled along through wars, both big and small, through slumps, recessions, natural disasters, manmade famines, and ecological catastrophes. Inventions have become more wondrous by the year, cheapening the *real price* of just

about everything, and raising material living standards in most, if not all, regions of the world. Foreign investment has, as Lenin would have recognised, resulted in the massive transfer of technology from rich countries to poor countries, making possible the introduction of new industries and new modes of life. These are ways of life, which despite the global housing crisis, and the vast slums which fester around the glass towers of great new cities, are by and large, embraced with fortitude, courage, and dogged optimism, by those who have fled the narrow poverty of peasant life.

Basically, imperialism is a process in which the entire planet and its people are drawn into the sphere of capitalist development. Most people become waged workers as “labour itself becomes a commodity”, which is bought and sold like any other good. I am not in this article considering whether or not this form of life, or this kind of development, is sustainable - evidently, in the long run (however long, the long run, turns out to be), it is not. It will no doubt transform itself, or it will be transformed, into something else, but for now, in the midst of the development of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, any fool can surely see that it is not in fact “all bad”.

Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, is, as the Marxists say, “full of contradictions”. On the one hand the Niger Delta is swamped with thick black oil, just as the Hugli River, sweeps the raw sewage from Kolkata’s impoverished millions into the Bay of Bengal. On the other hand poor villagers in Bangladesh are saving up in order to tie small solar panels to the thatch of their huts so that their kids can do their school homework by the light of two electric light bulbs. Chinese lads from rural areas are working like Trojans so that they can buy a bicycle and a sewing machine - essential in some areas to their marriage prospects. In Brazil the car worker is scraping enough together to be able to get a tiny new flat, while in Britain the ‘underclass’, for the most part, already enjoys double-glazing and central heating.

It is common for well-fed and comparatively well-off people to pooh-pooh these merely “material” achievements, but for most people on the planet a good pair of

shoes; getting their kids in school, having a phone, and a flush toilet that works, are considered a blessing, a blessing that ought to be a right. From the contradictions of the system, we can see that although capitalism is not a *sufficient* condition for improvements in living standards, it has, for the last couple of centuries, been a *necessary* condition. The search for alternative ways of doing things must go on, but let's be clear, imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, has produced as many, if not more, benefits, than it has produced misery and mayhem.

Indeed, much of the misery and mayhem in the world is clearly the product of insufficient capitalist development rather than too much, Libya being a case in point. From the incursions of Italian and British colonialists in the last century, and the one before that, and from the inroads made by modern petroleum and construction companies into Libyan society, we can see the baleful effect of neo-colonial forms of exploitation which has not only failed to develop capitalist relations in Libya, but has favoured the formation of a kleptocracy in the form of the Gaddafi family-state. This state was not in any sense unique, but it was, until last week, a client state in the most perfect sense; it was a state in which wealthy capitalist companies from Europe and North America paid a tyrant to keep order, while they siphoned off the country's wealth into ships waiting in the harbour.

For forty-two years this was a congenial arrangement for big petroleum and civil engineering firms based in the West. They put up with Gaddafi; even the governments of France, Britain, and the USA, were prepared to tolerate Muammar Gaddafi, providing he stopped attempting to develop nuclear weapons, and on condition that he stopped endorsing armed insurrections around the world. As long as these provisos were in place Tony Blair and others were prepared to go to Tripoli, kiss the tyrant's ugly mug; admire his tent, and his increasingly bizarre outfits. The big capitalists were prepared to put up with the lack of capitalist development provided Gaddafi could maintain order, keep the petrol flowing, and the contracts for arms, pipelines, and port facilities, coming. This is one of the famous "contra-

dictions of capitalism” - the endorsement of arrangements that actually hold back capitalist development.

Well, as we now know, the overthrow of the dictator Ben Ali in neighbouring Tunisia and the onset of the revolution in Egypt threw a spanner in the works. The Islamists of Damah, aspiring for the rule of heaven, the tribal patriarchs of Eastern Libya who merely want their fair share of the country's oil revenues, and members of the modern professional class, aspiring for the rule of law, all under the pressure and the inspiration of the 'Arab Spring', coalesced into a ramshackle revolutionary alliance. This uneasy alliance tore Benghazi and most of eastern Libya from Gaddafi's grasp, and threatened his hold on a number of significant towns and cities in western and central Libya.

Faced with this radically new situation the 'imperialist' powers, notably, the USA, France, and Britain, decided to dump Gaddafi and his sons. If the tyrant could no longer guarantee their interests, he must be gone! Accordingly, Nato, rained down rockets and bombs on Gaddafi's artillery, his heavy armour, his command and control centres, and denied him the use of air power against the rebels. Consequently, an incoherent and poorly organized revolutionary movement, which the Gaddafi family-state might (if it had been left to its own devices), have easily crushed, has instead, triumphed.

Now, Western intervention has unwittingly created a situation in which only the struggle for the rule of law, and the proper development of capitalism, in which private property and free contracts are sacrosanct, will be able to stabilise the country and guarantee its future. Only the development of institutions favourable to freer economic development and diversification, in which oil revenues are used to develop the infrastructure needed for a modern capitalistic economy, will be able to bring order and stability to Libya. Perhaps, paradoxically, the full development of capitalist relations, in Libya and the wider Arab world, is the only process that can guarantee the interests of big imperialist powers, like America, France, and Britain. Clearly, backing tyrants like Saddam Hussein, Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Bashar al-Assad,

is no longer a viable option.

Hence the disastrous intervention in Iraq, and the criminally irresponsible occupation of that country, has been replaced with the careful, and much more successful, use of power in Libya, and an altogether more cautious approach to unseating more deeply entrenched tyrants in Syria and elsewhere. Clearly, the contradictions are legion. How are Nato members going to deal with the emerging social crisis in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf? How are the powers going to respond to developments in Yemen, and, most importantly, to those in Egypt? It's extremely difficult to determine. However, one thing is for sure, as long as they campaign for the creation of law-governed societies, in which the state is seen as the guardian of the citizen, rather than the source of arbitrary oppression and corruption, the Nato countries will be doing themselves, and the Arab world, a favour.

Those who tirelessly remind us of the crimes of imperialism in general, and of the crimes of the powers in Arabia more particularly, are merely engaged in stating the *bleedin' obvious*. However, what is not so obvious, and certainly needs to be paid more attention to, is the manner in which the myriad strands of globalisation have increasingly made it unsustainable for wealthy countries to impose their will by simply endorsing local tyrants and kleptocrats. This is why the new watchword in imperialist circles is "governance" - improving governance - by which they mean creating conditions and institutions that can guarantee contracts, minimise corruption, and create more congenial conditions for capitalist development.

Consequently, our critique has got to become a lot more nuanced than simply chanting "Down with Imperialism" and shouting "No to Nato bombing!" An alternative to imperialism, "the highest stage of capitalism", is likely to be a long time in the making. In the meantime, we need a politics that permits us to intervene in the world as it is, rather than engaging in utopian forms of denial. Nato's help in the overthrow of Gaddafi's family-state was a good thing. Let us be unequivocal about that.