

Why we still need to be anti-imperialists

by Jean Bricmont [Belgian philosopher]

During recent years, there has been a rebirth of a global challenge to the existing socio-economic order, challenge that had almost completely disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This movement is still weak, both materially and ideologically. I want to argue here that one of its weaknesses is that insufficient attention is paid to the military aspects of the uneven relations that are criticized at the economic level. This weakness is itself in part due to the ideological framework within which the discourse about human rights takes place.

I shall first review briefly an historical precedent to the present "war on terrorism", namely the Cold War. I shall argue that the way it is presented, also within most of the left, reflects the ideological prejudices of the dominant powers. Then, I'll discuss some frequent delusions in the left about power, war and human rights. Some of this part will be polemical; but it is a fact that the recent wars, specially the Kosovo one, were supported to a surprising extent by liberals and leftists and that the opposition to them by "revolutionaries" or "radicals" has been extraordinarily weak. In the concluding section, I shall try to make some constructive suggestions.

1. The cold war as reality and as fiction.

At the beginning of the Cold War, George Kennan, who was then heading the State Department policy planning staff, outlined what was to be the effective guidelines of U.S. policy in the coming years:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... We should cease to talk about vague and... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

The way this "pattern of relationships" has been set up was essentially to "kill hope", as William Blum puts it. Namely, destroy any hope of an independent development that would allow the Third World to "divert" its natural and human resources towards the need of the poor majority of its population. This can also be called the "rotten apple" theory. Any country, specially a poor one, that manages to escape from the global domination system poses the "threat of the good example": it might be imitated by others, more important countries. That is why countries that are by themselves economically marginal, like Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua or even tiny Grenada have to be dealt with in one of two ways: either by imposing, through subversion and warfare, a government favorable to Western interests or by destroying them sufficiently so that any alternative development path that they might follow will be too harsh to be attractive.

It might be added that this has been the strategy of the powerful for a long time, including vis-à-vis the Paris Commune, the Russian revolution or the Spanish one. Neither the phenomenon of "Leninism" nor similar tendencies among Third World nationalists can possibly be understood if one fails to take into account the fact that their authoritarianism derives in large part from a desire to avoid the fate of the Paris Commune and of other more democratic attempts at social change or simply to try to preserve a minimal form of national independence in the face of formidable threats. That the Leninist path also led to failure does not imply that the problem it tried to solve does not exist.

It would take too long to review here the long series of coups, invasions, support for brutal dictatorships, and boycotts/sanctions made by the United States during the so-called Cold War. But it is worthwhile to give some examples of what one may call the mentality of the planners, i.e. of intellectuals, bureaucrats, lawyers working for the US government or its allies or strongly supporting them, especially when we hear that, at the beginning of its war against Afghanistan, the United States ordered Pakistan to close its borders

with Afghanistan, through which most food aid was passing, or when we are told, in regard to the forthcoming war with Iraq, that defeat for the United States is not an option.

Consider first the following advice, given during the Vietnam war, in 1966, and which can be found in Pentagon Papers:

Strikes at population targets (per se) are likely not only to create a counterproductive wave of revulsion abroad and at home, but greatly to increase the risk of enlarging the war with China and the Soviet Union.

Destruction of locks and dams, however -- if handled right -- might (perhaps after the next Pause) offer promise. It should be studied. Such destruction does not kill or drown people. By shallow-flooding the rice, it leads after time to widespread starvation (more than a million?) unless food is provided -- which we could offer "at the conference table".

And the now universally famous Samuel Huntington wrote around that time that the Vietcong is "a powerful force which cannot be dislodged from its constituency so long as the constituency continues to exist." And to solve that problem, he was urging the "direct application of mechanical and conventional power... on such a massive scale as to produce a massive migration from countryside to city". This idea was adopted as the "forced urbanization" policy.

Turning to war in Afghanistan, we learn that:

Indeed, the war has been a near-perfect laboratory, according to Michael Vickers, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a defense think tank. Vickers, a former Army officer and CIA operative, said the success came because the al Qaeda network and the Taliban government sheltering it were overmatched opponents. "When great powers fight smaller wars -- precursor wars in between the old military world and the new military world -- you can experiment more because there's no doubt you're going to win," he said. "You experiment, and there is real feedback. You don't get that very much in the military." "This was a new way of war, a new operational concept," Vickers said. "And it was a pretty significant innovation, because we got fairly rapid regime change with it. This wasn't on the shelf. This was the way we planned to overthrow governments."

In a recently released pamphlet of the British Foreign Policy Centre, Robert Cooper, an advisor of Tony Blair who represented the British government at the Bonn talks that produced the interim Hamid Karzai administration in Afghanistan, calls for a "defensive imperialism" and for Western countries to deal with "old-fashioned states outside the postmodern continent of Europe with the rougher methods of an earlier era - force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century..."

Finally, here is the advice about Palestine given by a prominent US lawyer:

"Israel should announce an immediate unilateral cessation in retaliation against terrorist attacks. This moratorium would be in effect for a short period, say four or five days, to give the Palestinian leadership an opportunity to respond to the new policy. It would also make it clear to the world that Israel is taking an important step in ending what has become a cycle of violence.

Following the end of the moratorium, Israel would institute the following new policy if Palestinian terrorism were to resume. It will announce precisely what it will do in response to the next act of terrorism. For example, it could announce the first act of terrorism following the moratorium will result in the destruction of a small village which has been used as a base for terrorist operations. The residents would be given 24 hours to leave, and then troops will come in and bulldoze all of the buildings.

The response will be automatic. The order will have been given in advance of the terrorist attacks and there will be no discretion. The point is to make the automatic destruction of the village the fault of the Palestinian terrorists who had advance warnings of the specific consequences of their action. The soldiers

would simply be acting as the means for carrying out a previously announced policy of retaliation against a designated target.

Further acts of terrorism would trigger further destruction of specifically named locations. The "waiting list" targets would be made public and circulated throughout the Palestinian-controlled areas."

What is truly frightening about those cynical and aggressive statements (and the many similar ones that could be quoted) is that they come from people advising or praising governments that enjoy an almost complete monopoly of weapons of mass destruction, are supported by the major world news media and control fairly obedient domestic populations.

It is also important to refute the standard excuse for support of regimes of terror given by pro-intervention intellectuals, namely that all this was the result of "excesses" in the otherwise noble pursuit of "fighting communism". Had this been the case, why not support reformist regimes as an effective bulwark against truly communist ones? Arbenz, Mossadegh, Lumumba, Allende or Goulart were in no sense communists. Nor were the Arab and African nationalists that the United States opposed either in their struggle against Zionism or against Apartheid. Also, why continue similar "excesses", such as years of bombing Iraq, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Observe also that, contrary to what is commonly said, the United States did not entirely "lose" the Vietnam War. It did indeed fail to achieve its maximal objective of imposing its own client regime in South Vietnam. But, through massive bombings and defoliation, it did manage to destroy the material basis of any successful alternative development able to serve as a model.

However, the partial defeat in Vietnam and the horrors of that war led many people to question the legitimacy of U.S. domination over the world. A counteroffensive was needed to recover the initiative at the level of rhetoric and image. The instrument for this was the human rights ideology proclaimed by President Carter (1976-1980). The basic tenet of this ideology can be stated quite simply: since human and democratic rights are better respected, in general, in the West than in other countries, it is our right, indeed our duty, to intervene, if necessary by military means, in order to enforce the respect for those rights abroad. The basic fallacy of this ideology should be obvious: the fact that a particular society is internally democratic in no way implies that it will have an altruistic attitude towards the rest of the world. To take an extreme case, consider Israel; there is no doubt that it is internally more democratic towards its own citizens, at least the Jewish ones, than most Arab states.

But that does not imply, to put it mildly, that it can be relied upon to defend the human rights of Arabs in Palestine, Lebanon or elsewhere. Likewise, the Greek cities were democratic for their citizens, and used slave labor. Similar remarks can be made about European colonialism, which, incidentally, was also often justified in the name of "human rights". For the Vietnamese bombed by the United States or the Iraqis dying from the embargo, the fact that the United States is a "free country" with a "free press" does them little good so long as the press remains silent and the population reacts with simple patriotism or indifference. The U.S. press did finally criticize the Vietnam war when the elite concluded that the war had become too costly to the United States. That contrasts with the media silence over the slow extermination of the Iraqis, which costs nothing in terms of U.S. casualties or political protest at home.

The human rights ideology, as used by the United States and its Western supporters, rests on an extremely selective reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Only the sections on Civil and Political Rights are referred to, and even these are interpreted according to double standards. Take Article 14 that grants the right to seek asylum abroad from persecution. Its implementation is extraordinarily politicized by the United States: out of more than 24,000 Haitians intercepted by U.S. forces from 1981 through 1990, 11 were granted asylum, in comparison with 75,000 out of 75,000 Cubans. Or consider Article 13, granting the right to leave any country, including one's own. During the Cold War, the United States refused to grant passports to U.S. citizens such as the famous singer Paul Robeson, who had the effrontery to be both black and communist.

This right to leave was however constantly invoked with great passion against the refusal by the Soviet Union to allow Jews to emigrate. But the end of Article 13, which adds "and to return to his country" is ignored. No wonder; the day after the Universal Declaration was ratified, the United Nations passed

Resolution 194, which affirms the right of Palestinians to return to their homes (or to receive compensations).

The declaration also contains Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including a right to health care, social security and adequate standard of living (Article 25). Whatever one thinks of those rights, they are part of the Declaration and have the same status for the signatories as any other part of the Universal Declaration. Nevertheless, the President Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, could call them a "letter to Santa Claus" without provoking much reaction. (This is in itself an interesting example of 'relativism' - just think of the reactions in the West if some Third World leader called the first part a "letter to Santa Claus").

In the West, the Civil Rights part of the Universal Declaration is held to have absolute priority over the Economic and Social parts. In case this seems an obvious priority, imagine being one of those two or three billion people (about half of mankind) who have to survive on more or less two dollars a day. How would you weigh Cuban efforts to maintain public health, education and availability of basic necessities for the poor in comparison to the limitations imposed on civil liberties? These efforts continued long after Cuba was no longer being 'subsidized' by the Soviet Union -- and while it was suffering from a very severe embargo as well as from numerous acts of sabotage caused by the single superpower, forcing the Cuban government to divert resources to defense, counter-spying, etc.

Considering the relationship of forces, if Cuba introduced liberal democracy as demanded by the United States, one could expect the Cuban lobby in the United States, backed by Washington, to bribe politicians, finance media and subvert the new "democratic process" to ensure the takeover by a pro-U.S. regime that would adopt neo-liberal "reforms" putting an end to the existing social benefits. This does not mean that socio-economic rights should be used to justify the abandonment of civil liberties. All such rights should be part of a just society. But given the world relationship of forces, the constant exclusive emphasis on political rights by the rich countries must be seen as self-serving and therefore not a valid promotion of universal values.

The following comments, taken from the Jesuit Salvadorian journal 'Processo', illustrate nicely the double standards of the U.S. human rights discourse: If Lech Walesa had been doing his organizing work in El Salvador, he would have already entered into the ranks of the disappeared - at the hand of 'heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes'; or have been blown to pieces in a dynamite attack on his union headquarters. If Alexander Dubcek were a politician in our country, he would have been assassinated like Hector Ouel [the social democratic leader assassinated in Guatemala, by Salvadorian death squads, according to the Guatemalan government]. If Andrei Sakharov had worked here in favour of human rights, he would have met the same fate as Herbert Anaya [one of the many murdered leaders of the independent Salvadorian Human Rights Commission CDHES]. If Ota-Sik or Václav Havel had been carrying out their intellectual work in El Salvador, they would have been found one sinister morning, lying on the patio of a university campus with their heads destroyed by the bullets of an elite army battalion.

Another striking example of double standards was attested by no less than Daniel Patrick Moynihan, recipient of the highest award bestowed by International League for the Rights of Man. In 1975, the newly independent ex-Portuguese colony of East Timor was invaded by Indonesia, a regional client of the United States, which supplied most of its weapons. The United Nations failed to come to the aid of the East Timorese, thanks to Moynihan, who was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations at the time and who proudly recalled in his memoirs:

The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success.

Moynihan even cited figures showing that the Indonesian invasion killed "10 percent of the population, almost the proportion of casualties experienced by the Soviet Union during the Second World War." Along with Huntington and several U.S. theologians, Moynihan is one of the 60 signers of the "letter from America" sent to European newspapers exalting the U.S. assault on Afghanistan as part of a "Just War".

The human rights policy also signaled a change of operational tactics. During the Vietnam war period, there was much talk about "nation building", meaning building strong anticommunist states in the Third World.

The United States drew the lesson from Vietnam that it was easier to destroy an unfriendly state than to build a friendly one. The Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, the contras and the Miskitos Indians in Nicaragua, Savimbi in Angola, the UCK in Kosovo, most of the separatist forces in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (and probably now in China), have been supported by the United States in what one might call an enterprise of state deconstruction. This has the added advantage of provoking less opposition among liberals and leftists, given the latter's prejudice in favor of whoever appears to be the underdog, whether guerrillas versus a regular army, traditional societies versus a modern state, or ethnic minorities versus democratic majorities.

In the end, the Cold War was quite similar to the present "war on terrorism": a continuation of centuries of domination by the advanced industrial powers of the rest of the world, ensuring popular support at home thanks to a clever and scary rhetoric. Of course, there was a real conflict, as there is now. But, then as now, the relationship of forces was enormously unequal, the response totally disproportionate to the actual dangers, and the real goals, although concealed, not hard to figure out.

2. Good and Bad Arguments

Perhaps the most striking success of our ideological system is the extent to which its assumptions are shared by critics on the left, even honest ones. To take one example, consider the widely shared expectation that a "peace dividend" would follow the demise of the Warsaw Pact. This was about as realistic as expecting Genghis Khan to stop half way through his conquests. In reality, the victors (NATO and the United States) immediately started to expand and seek fresh justifications for their aggressive military posture. This mirage, as well as similar confusions concerning later operations against Iraq, Yugoslavia or Afghanistan, show that we urgently need to clarify our thinking about the basis of our objections to Western aggression, and to its apologists. This is necessary even, or especially, when aggressive interventions are successful, and when the declared targets are individuals such as Saddam Hussein, Milosevic or bin Laden who, leftists are persuaded, are not "our kind of guys".

The reincarnations of Hitler

The main argument used by the pro-war party to intimidate its opponents is extraordinarily simple: we are always confronted by the latest form of fascism. Saddam is Hitler, Milosevic is Hitler, bin Laden is Hitler, as were Nasser or Arafat before them. We (the West) should therefore intervene to liberate poor and oppressed people -- Kosovar Albanians or Afghan women, considered more or less the present-day equivalent of the Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe. Left alone, our governments and public opinion are too selfish, uninformed and indifferent to human suffering. Therefore, the role of intellectuals is to arouse public opinion and to put pressure on the governments so that they dare commit themselves more actively to the defense of our values. Note in passing that, for many of those intellectuals, whom one might call the humanitarian warriors, doing business is morally dubious (it may lead to all kinds of compromises with dictatorships) while waging war, or at the very least imposing trade sanctions, is the really noble thing to do. For classical liberals, it was the other way around: wars were seen to strengthen states, their armies, police and bureaucracies, while commerce promoted human exchanges and better mutual understanding. Note also that the fact that the United States usually refuses to negotiate with its enemies (e.g., imposition of unacceptable conditions on the Serbs in Rambouillet, refusal even to consider legal extradition proceedings for bin Laden) is not an effective argument against such intellectuals. Their view is that we should seize every opportunity to wage wars that can topple dictatorships and brutal regimes, in order to spread democracy and respect for human rights. Nor is there any point in complaining about the "collateral damage" of Western aggressions. The humanitarian warriors can always cite the "greater good" obtained by imposing liberal regimes. For them, the great good fortune of our time is that overwhelming military force is in the hand of powers, like the United States, committed to the defense of liberal values. The only problem is the reluctance of the general public, sometimes influenced by the left, to let their governments commit themselves even more actively to that just struggle. That is why, as Christopher Hitchens put it,

Osama bin Laden "saved us". By provoking the United States, he forced its leaders into a fight that, otherwise, they might not have had the guts to lead. We can be sure that whatever countries will be targeted by the United States in the future, the humanitarian warriors will applaud, even if no evidence whatsoever links them to "terrorism". Such countries are likely to qualify as brutal dictatorships, and such he main targets of the Western "defenders of human rights".

Munich for ever

The inevitable companion of the "new Hitlers" discourse is stigmatization of critics as the new Chamberlains and Daladiers playing into their hands. This is done without recalling what "Munich" was all about. There was a part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, with a predominantly German population that wanted to be part of Germany; its annexation by Germany was accepted at Munich by Britain and France. That sent a message to the main rising power of the time that international law didn't matter and that it could do as it pleased. And it is now understood, rightly, that this was sending the wrong signal to Hitler. But what about the right of self-determination of the Sudeten? What would our pro-intervention left have said at that time? The case of Kosovo quickly comes to mind. There, a majority of the population wanted to be detached from Yugoslavia and become part of what one might call Natoland. And the major power of our time used that opportunity to brush aside international law. Future historians may well identify the aggression against Yugoslavia as a major turning point in a new form of imperial reconquest of the world. And who were the real Chamberlains at that time may have to be reevaluated. As noted above, the fact that the United States is not at all similar to Nazi Germany internally implies less than what is usually supposed for the fate of the people on the wrong side of the guns.

Before indicating how I think one should respond to the apologists for "just" wars, I will discuss a certain number of arguments frequently used by people who oppose Western aggressions but that should be avoided as counterproductive.

Bad arguments for the left

One bad argument used against the war in Afghanistan, as against the war in Yugoslavia, is that "it won't work". Indeed, the question is, work for what? Towards what end? Those that are proclaimed? Or those that are probably the real ones? Consider first the latter. We heard warnings that war would only strengthen Milosevic, or bin Laden, and that the Taliban would resist for a long time (the so-called "Afghan trap") and that the war would be too costly (for "us" of course). It may be too soon to draw conclusions about Afghanistan, but in Yugoslavia, the war worked beautifully. It resulted in a Serbian government in Belgrade that is even eager to provide NATO with retrospective justifications for the bombing. What is more, this government was elected by the Serbs themselves. This was of course the result of a series of bribes, blackmail, and deceptions. But who ever did better? Certainly not the Russians, nor the Germans in World War II, nor even the British Empire.

Of course, one could try to argue that "it does not work" in comparison with the proclaimed goals (defending human rights, peace and stability etc.). but even that is delicate; any intervention has many effects and almost always brings some "collateral benefits" (like the liberation of the Sudetes at the time of Munich). And, off course, the latter will be spotlighted by the media to encourage further interventions. But, I shall explain below, there are general arguments against interventions that avoid any detailed discussion of those local and temporary benefits.

Moreover, portraying the Afghans, the Serbs or the Iraqis as stronger than they are, allows the humanitarian warriors to shout "victory" when victory comes: "see, I told you, it would not be so hard!" While if we put the issue in realistic terms, and ask whether the greatest military might of all times can succeed through months of the most intense bombing in history in subduing a small, poor and devastated country, whose level of development is more or less the one of Europe between the 8th and the 12th century, then the outcome does not look like such a miracle. It also explains why a large number of Afghans are ready to collaborate with the United States: even the Nazis found plenty of collaborators in all the countries they occupied. So, what is to be expected when an immensely rich country like the United States, particularly ready to bribe others, wishes to install a puppet government in Afghanistan? Making the victory look like a

divine surprise also encourages the imperial power to go further: let's now tackle Somalia, Iraq, whatever. So, this line of argument should be avoided at all costs.

Another bad argument is to say that the Northern Alliance is no better than the Taliban, or even that they are no better in their treatment of Afghan women. This may be the case, but it is again irrelevant. What are we to say if they do behave better? Given the record of the Taliban, that would not be very hard and, given time, they very well might. Then, the media will feed us with reports on how great the situation in Afghanistan is; what will the left say then?

To understand why all this is irrelevant, just imagine that the World Trade Center events had occurred in Bombay and that the Indian government thereupon decided -- without providing publicly available proofs and rejecting all negotiations -- that the responsibility lay with the Afghans, invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban. How would the West react? Not hard to guess .

Now, if the condition of Afghan women was the overriding issue, why not have supported the Soviet regime (to which many leftists, including myself, were opposed), the best on that score that the Afghans ever had? At that time, the overriding issue in the West was certainly not the condition of women, but strategic concerns such as the access of the Russians to warm seas (a dream going back to the Tsars, as the Western media used to say). But now, the fact that the United States has obtained new strongholds both in the Balkans (Albania-Kosovo) and in Central Asia is totally irrelevant.

Only the fate of women counts.

The real issues: international law and imperialism

Observing (and denouncing) these double standards gets us closer to the real arguments against the war. They are of two types. The first one is quite universal and is simply that nobody has yet found a better rule to avoid war than respect for international law. None of the recent wars launched by the West -- Iraq, Yugoslavia or Afghanistan -- were in accord with international law. The one that came closest to observing international law was the war against Iraq. But even there, the equivalent of the jury -- the Security Council -- was pressured and coerced by one of the parties, the United States. In the case of Yugoslavia, there was not even the pretense of NATO abiding by international law. Finally, for Afghanistan, one power invoked the right to respond to aggression. But, even assuming the existence of a direct link between the events of September 11 and bin Laden, there was never the sort of constant assault on the United States characteristic of a war and thus calling for self-defense. A spectacular crime was committed and was used as a pretext to launch a war, period.

Many people will ask, what is so sacred about international law?

And why respect national sovereignty? After all, most state boundaries are quite arbitrary and unnatural. They are the result of previous wars, not of any rational design. Besides, how can anybody in his or her right mind stand still while women and children are murdered or reduced to slavery across the border? To answer those questions, we have to think globally and ask what the alternatives are.

First, let us consider the internal level of political order. Since the 17th century, the liberal-democratic reflexion has led to the conclusion that there are basically three ways to organize life in society: (1) the war of all against all, (2) a Hobbesian sovereign that imposes order through force, or (3) respect for a democratically decided law as the lesser evil. The Taliban, like the Soviet communists before them, were playing the role of a Hobbesian sovereign. The arguments against that solution are well known. Such a sovereign may bring temporary benefits (Taliban order compared to the chaos reigning before and after them in large parts of Afghanistan -- the war of all against all), but inevitably acts according to its own interests, provoking a cycle of rebellion and repression without end, because its power, being undemocratic, cannot be accepted by those on which it is imposed.

Now, consider the international order. The sovereign is the United States and the same arguments apply. Whatever benefits it may bring to targeted countries, the United States acts on the basis of self-interest that

inevitably undermines those benefits. The prime interest in control of world petroleum and other resources, in investment opportunities and in strategic positioning clearly takes precedence over the welfare of populations. In its striving for world domination, the United States has promoted drug dealers and Islamic fanatics in order to destroy the Soviet Union. To control the Middle East, the United States has unstintingly backed the transformation of Israel into a garrison state and relentlessly worked to destroy Iraq. As liberal theorists should expect, all this eventually backfires -- an intractable situation in Palestine, and the World Trade Center attack. Who knows what the future will bring? Right now, the humanitarian warriors are celebrating. But perhaps some orphaned Afghan child will grow up and decide to learn physics or biology instead of the Koran and inflict massive nuclear or bacteriological damage to the United States. Unlikely? Not more than a bin Laden emerging from the anti-communist manoeuvres of the 1980's. No trillion dollar Pentagon budget can protect the United States from the unforeseeable backlash of its treatment of countries that today appear helpless.

The third solution would be to bring more democracy to the world level, via the United Nations . But that is exactly what Western liberals, who support ever greater destruction of a legal international order, in the name of human rights, oppose. Contemporary liberals are, by and large, perfectly inconsistent. They have turned into liberal imperialists: liberal in the internal order (at least at times and in places where the powers that be aren't overly challenged), and autocratic on the international level .

Another line of argument is likely to be more controversial, but is even more necessary, I think. In Europe, those of us who criticize U.S. war policy are often accused of being "anti-American". We might as well frankly acknowledge that, in some sense, we are. Not along the lines of the "cultural" critique adopted by many Europeans who are quick to denounce the oddities of American society -- its crass consumerism, its religious backwardness, its devotion both to the death penalty and to the absence of gun control, etc.-- while conveniently forgetting some not-so-pleasant facts about the material roots (the slave trade, colonial conquest, etc.) of our own supposedly great civilization. I mean being anti-American in the sense of good old anti-imperialism. The United States is now playing the role that Britain, France or Germany played in the past, only on a grander scale. What sometimes causes confusion is that the American empire relies far more on local collaborators than the old empires, leaving the countries it dominates nominally independent. The nature of this "independence" was illustrated recently when the new anti-Taliban government of Afghanistan asked the Americans to stop bombing their country. Too many civilians were being killed. A naive believer in the right of self-determination might be excused for thinking that the Afghans themselves should have a say in such matters. But the United States flatly said no and, within 24 hours or so, the "independent" Afghan government had seen the light and approved the U.S. bombing. One can easily guess what will happen when some Afghans try to control a U.S. pipeline going through their country.

Now, what is the main problem with U.S. imperialism? First consider all the horror of the U.S. wars: Indochina, Central America, the Middle East. Millions of people murdered. Then consider the crimes of their puppets: Suharto, Mobutu, Pinochet, the Argentine and Guatemala military dictatorships, the U.S.-backed rebels in Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, etc. Another few million people dead. But that only scratches the surface.

The real problem is, to use a huge understatement, the loss of opportunity for the Third World. At Porto Alegre, a new movement has taken up the slogan: "another world is possible". If that is true, then probably another world has been possible all along, but has been beaten back and prevented from coming into being. Let us try to imagine what it might have looked like -- it strains the imagination, but let's try: a world where Congo, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, China, Brazil, Iraq, Guatemala, and countless other places would have been able to develop themselves without constant Western interference and sabotage. A world where the 19th century Arab enlightenment had been able to continue its modernization of the Middle East, instead of being crushed by Western-backed obscurantism, and turned into the besieged hinterland of U.S.-backed Zionism. A world where apartheid would have been defeated long ago and where southern Africa would have been spared both Western-instigated civil wars and the "debt trap".

What would such a world look like? No closer to paradise on earth than Europe in the centuries before it got rich on the Conquest of the Americas, modernized its agriculture and industrialized. There might well have been wars and famines and atrocities. But the condition of the majority of people would almost surely

have been better with leaders trying, as best they could, to achieve independence and popular well-being than with leaders devoted to Western powers and their own personal enrichment. Compare, in almost every situation, the indigeneous leaders and movements with those that the West favored against them: Lumumba and Mobutu, Somoza and the Sandinistas, Goulart and the Brazilian generals, Allende and Pinochet, Mandela and the apartheid regime, Mossadegh and the Shah, etc.

Nothing is more cynical than the eagerness with which self-styled humanitarian intellectuals cite Cambodia under Pol Pot and Rwanda as proof of the need for Western intervention. In both those cases, enormous tragedy resulted precisely from massive outside interventions: from the United States bombing Cambodia as a "sideshow" to its war against Vietnam, and from Belgium exploiting and aggravating the ethnic differences in Rwanda, following the classic 'divide and rule' principle. The most decried "monsters" of the Third World have not been produced by those countries on their own but as a response to the distorting pressures of Western power. It takes a heavy dose of racism to believe that, without our constant interventions, Third World peoples could not find better paths of development than the present ones. Try to think of the mobilizing effect that a genuine autonomous but unimpeded development, undertaken somewhere in the poor countries, could have had elsewhere. For example, the excellent public health policies in Cuba would probably be emulated in the rest of Latin America (even to some extent in capitalist countries) if mere mention of Castro's Cuba was not anathema to the United States and to the elites they direct. If one thinks it through, one sees that the countless losses of opportunity suffered by the poor majority of the world translate into tens and even hundreds of millions of lost lives. To contemplate this seriously is heart-rending.

Present day imperialism is even far less justifiable than its predecessor. Old-fashioned imperialism was more directly violent in its subjugation of peoples, but its "civilizing mission", hypocritical and self-serving as it was, brought some real advantages. Before the colonial era, the world was divided between vastly contrasting levels of development. However indirectly and often unintentionally, colonialism did make science and even enlightened ideas available to places where they had been previously unknown. But the situation is quite different now. In Asia and the Middle East in particular, the struggle against Western imperialism inspired strong movements aimed at appropriating the most progressive intellectual and political advantages of the Enlightenment for their own societies. The post-colonial policies of the United States have repeatedly aided obscurantist opposition to such movements. Worst of all, the more the West presents itself as both the champion of science and rationality and as a ruthless plunderer of all the world's resources -- not only natural resources, but also its cheap labour and even its grey matter -- and the more it squeezes poor countries through debt and uneven trade terms, making genuine development virtually impossible, the more it gives the Enlightenment a bad name, notably in the Muslim countries. By its short-sighted egotism, the West is stifling the very universalism it claims to promote.

Let me now discuss some rhetorical tricks that are used to soften opposition to wars and that tend to be particularly effective within the left.

Fake internationalism

The human rights ideology is often defended within the left under the guise of "internationalism". We have, on that basis, to help victims of dictatorial governments in the Third World (like the Afghan women), possibly by supporting U.S. and European interventions. But, again, this is mostly a delusion. What about child labor in Pakistan? Should we go to war over that issue? Yet, we can be certain that, if a major conflict between the West and Pakistan arises (which seems unlikely), this will become the issue of the day. Let us also think about past "issues of the day". Who worries now about the situation of Indians in Nicaragua? About the drug trade in Panama? Or human rights in Kosovo? Yet, all those issues were picked by the powers that be, at a given time, as the most crucial issue to focus on, so as to justify their policies. A genuine internationalist position would at the very least lead us to think globally and democratically. And to get in closer touch with mass popular movements in the Third World (not small sects) and ask them what they think of the interventions of our governments. I suspect that a lot could be learned from such exchanges.

A related issue is the one of "nationalism". The latter has become very unpopular in leftist circles and it is thus easy for the mainstream press to discredit any leader like Milosevic or Saddam Hussein by using that label. But this overlooks two factors: first, the extreme emotional reaction to the September 11 events in the US show that nationalism, in its most primitive and traditional form, is alive and well in that country. And, since the US is infinitely more powerful than Iraq or Yugoslavia, it is that nationalism which is the most dangerous. Moreover, and more importantly, the strategic orientation of capitalism today is very much anti-state. Multinational corporations are often far stronger economically than Third World states and are quite happy to see the powers of the state, at least some of them, be weakened or dismantled. Of course, nationalism per se is not a leftist value, but any condemnation of it in a particular instance must be done while keeping these factors in mind.

The "neither-nor" position

It has become fashionable, in leftists circles, especially in France, to adopt of position of "neither-nor" ("ni ni" in French). Neither NATO nor Milosevic; or neither the Talibans nor the United States. And, probably tomorrow, neither Saddam Hussein nor whatever alliance the United States manages to set up against Iraq. Like all slogans, this one has some merit, but also serious deficiencies. Obviously, nobody opposing the war in Afghanistan is for the Taliban or wishes anybody to live under such a regime. In that sense, the situation is quite different from the one at the time of Stalin, for example, where part of the left did consider his regime as some kind of ideal (and the long influence of Stalinism in France may explain why the "ni ni" attitude is so widespread there). For reasons explained here, opposing wars of aggression can be justified quite independently of one's views about the internal policies of the country being aggressed.

However, the neither-nor position gives the impression that there is some kind of symmetry between the two positions being rejected; but this is simply not true. It is clear that "Islamic fascism", as the liberals call it, is a horrible movement (which harms Muslims most of all). But one cannot equate such movements to global U.S. imperialism. First of all, consider the relationship of forces and the extent of the damage done. The Talibans were an extremely weak military force whose existence depended almost entirely on outside support (from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, two staunch U.S. allies) and exhaustion of Afghan society from years of U.S.-sponsored war. By contrast, the United States is the greatest military power of all times. The harm done by the Talibans is direct and visible (floggings, destruction of artifacts) but not comparable to the destruction -- much of it indirect and hidden -- wrought by an imperial power that has killed millions of people in its counterrevolutionary wars, and extends its economic and military power over billions of people. Moreover, the Talibans, and more generally "Islamic fascism", must be seen in context as largely a byproduct of the relentless U.S. opposition to the unacceptable notion of Arab or other Middle Eastern nationalists that they might have the right to control their natural resources.

Most of all, perhaps, is the asymmetry of our own position: we are not judging the world from some point situated outside of space and time. We pay taxes to the United States or to its allies. If we do military service, it will be in their armed forces. We vote here. The people we meet and discuss with are in general totally hostile to the Talibans, but often support the United States. In that sense, our primary responsibility is to limit the violence of our own governments, not to denounce those of others.

Honest opponents of wars sometimes feel that they have the duty to denounce the other side to show that they don't have "double standards". But we need to keep in mind the actual consequences of what we say, especially for the victims of the violence of our states, not simply to show our purity or our absence of double standards. And whatever we say about the "enemy" is likely to be used to reinforce nationalist feelings of self-righteousness and other war-like sentiments. For example, any denunciation of Saddam Hussein's policies, done in the Western press and under present circumstances, even if the statements made are factually correct, is likely to have as sole effect to strengthen the resolve of those who have inflicted and want to continue to inflict immense suffering on the Iraqi people .

Related to this, is the rhetoric of "supporting X". In the dominant discourse, particularly in the media, opponents of wars are always accused of "supporting" the other side whether the other side is the German Emperor during WW1, Stalin during the Cold War, or Milosevic, Saddam or the Talibans today. This is absurd on two counts: one is that, if opposing a war against X means that one "supports X", then even the

humanitarian warriors "support" many X's that do things that they don't really like, unless they are ready to wage war against Morocco, Indonesia, Turkey, etc.; indeed, most of the world, including Israel of course. The second problem is: how do the warmongers avoid the charge of supporting the US and his many unsavory proxies? Well, they simply declare that they don't approve "all US policies" (usually without saying which ones they don't like). But they do not give even a hint of how they would curb the very policies that they object to; and, given the relationship of forces in the world, that is indeed a very big open question. By contrast, if I was to declare (which I am happy to do) that I don't support "all of Saddam Hussein's policies", I doubt very much that it would clear people like me of the charge of "supporting Saddam".

The European illusion

Many leftists nurse the hope that Europe may distance itself from the United States and become a sort of counterweight to its global hegemony. But there are several problems with this hope. To discuss this, we need to have a clear view of what "Europe " is. Roughly speaking it is the global imperialist power of the past, which lost its place to the United States and would very much like to regain it. Of course, it wasn't unified in the past, and lost its dominant role largely because of its internal divisions. Both its past and its present roles are justified in the name of unique "European values", that are often contrasted, in the discourse of the European □ites, with the rudeness and the commercialism of the Americans. But this, like the dedication of the United States to human rights, represents merely the usual ideological framework in which all powers operate and justify themselves. So, assuming Europe becomes more unified and more powerful militarily; what is to be expected? Either it remains a sort a of vacillating ally of the United States, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing, maneuvering to defend its own narrow interests in the Third World when they differ from those of the United States. Or else it becomes a more determined adversary of the United States, and we are back to a sort of a new Cold War, with Europe playing the role held by the Soviet Union. Arm races, increased military spending, the threat of global destruction, are not exactly what the left should hope for.

The European political and military buildup should simply be none of our business. We should combat any effort to shift budget priorities from social services to European "defense". Europe is sufficiently armed already to defend itself against a hypothetical direct aggression by the United States, which can best be prevented by political means, by allying with the rest of the world in favor of fair commercial arrangements, international law and measures to counteract the current polarization of wealth and power. But it would totally foolish for the left to put its hope in the projection of European power abroad to play a progressive role.

3. Some Modest Suggestions

Although there are no quick answers to the question of what is to be done in the present world situation, one thing should be clear: Western intellectuals should stop spreading illusions about "our values". All expanding empires pursue atrocious policies in the name of "values", either the "white man's burden" or the "civilizing mission" or various Christian duties in the past. We should at the very least lucidly analyze and denounce the hypocrisy of those discourses.

But, more fundamentally, we need to operate a genuine cultural revolution in our attitude with respect to the Third World. Once upon a time, many socialists and progressives of differing persuasions swallowed the edifying stories about the "civilizing mission" and believed that their main business was to educate the "inferior races". This produced the first version of liberal imperialism. Later, during the decolonisation period, many leftist groups projected their "revolutionary envy", so to speak, on the Third World, expecting to be saved by distant national liberation struggles. But if radical social changes are hard to achieve in the West, they may even be harder to achieve in the Third World. Dire poverty, cultural underdevelopment, and the heavy weight of feudal social relations are not exactly conditions propitious to the "development of socialism", whatever socialism may be. But the fact that the so-called "socialism" in the Third World did not fulfill the (wild) dreams of many Western leftists led a number of them to a reaction of burning their former idols.

Resentful at being let down, they have joined the new wave of liberal imperialism, brandishing slogans such as the "right of humanitarian intervention", justified by the human rights ideology, or by a perverted "internationalism".

What the world needs now, and what decent citizens of the West should demand of their governments, is to put a total end to Western foreign interventions and even to offer apologies accompanied by massive reparations for the pillage and exploitation that has drained the Third World for centuries. Do we feel altruistic and want to do "humanitarian work"? Let us cancel debts with no compensation, provide cheap medicines to cure AIDS in Africa, transfer technology free of charge, open our borders widely to refugees and immigrants. All this would do far more good than all the military interventions that the liberal imperialists can invent. And to the extent that we are not so altruistic -- which is human after all -- we should at least have the honesty to admit it, try to force our governments to keep their bloody hands out the affairs of the Third World and support efforts towards what people sometimes call a "second independence": after the decolonisation, elimination of the neo-colonial regimes that have replaced the old world order.

There are many organizations devoted to "watching" human rights violations among the former victims of colonial violence. What is needed, besides and sometimes against those groups, are organizations devoted to "watching" interventions and plots by the imperial powers.

The jingoists □la Bush are making the United States extremely unpopular in the world. In places with few or no Muslims, such as Argentina, South Korea or El Salvador, there are reports of people expressing their sympathies for bin Laden. This reaction may be shocking, but not more than, say, the attitude of the crowds in New York enthusiastically "welcoming the troops" after the far greater slaughter of the Gulf War. The gap between North and South is growing and the admiration for bin Laden reflects this gap. The use of force by the United States will provoke resistance (as Hitler and the colonialists did in the past) and, since there are many weak spots in the West, one can expect that there will be other events like September 11. This spiral leads nowhere, or at least not towards what we would like, but rather towards more war and more repression. While leftist intellectuals congratulate themselves about "victories for human rights", the poverty, humiliation and despair of much of the world breeds fanaticism. It is urgent that the Western left build real bridges with popular organizations in the Third World; but, to achieve that, we have first to clarify our views about the real relations of forces that shape this world, to take into account, in all our actions, our actual position in it and to expose the illusions spread by the liberal imperialists.

Jean Bricmont