

Nick Beams replies to a reader on Lenin and globalisation

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In this polemic Nick Beams answers a World Socialist Web Site reader who disagreed with the assessment of globalisation made in Beams' reply to Professor Michel Chossudovsky's article "Seattle and beyond: disarming the New World Order". Nick Beams is national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia and a member of the WSWS editorial board. ML's email is available through a link at the end of the article.

Dear ML,

Thank you for your letter on globalisation for it provides us with the opportunity to further clarify the differences between Marxism and all forms of middle class radicalism on this important question.

The axis of our reply to Professor Chossudovsky, with which you take issue, was our insistence that it was necessary to distinguish between globalisation—the increasingly global character of production and exchange and the integration of the productive forces on a global scale—and global capitalism.

Of course, the globalisation of production takes place under capitalist social relations. It is dominated by the drive for profit and consequently has resulted in the ever-worsening social position of the broad masses in both the advanced and so-called developing countries.

But that is not all there is to it. There is a profound contradiction in this process. The globalisation of the productive forces, while it is being carried forward by capital in its relentless drive for profit, is at the same time intensifying the historic crisis of the capitalist mode of production. The process of globalisation both comes into conflict with the capitalist system of social relations, based on private property and the nation-state and lays the objective material foundations for the development of a higher form of society—an international planned socialist economy.

I am afraid that your invocation of Lenin's name is yet another demonstration of the fact that the various schools of middle class radicalism, in particular the self-styled Leninists, have either not read what Lenin actually wrote, or have failed completely to assimilate its meaning.

I am not able to ascertain into which category you fall, but an examination of Lenin's pamphlet *Imperialism* shows that, far from giving some kind of *carte blanche* to nationalist movements as you imply, his work was devoted to drawing out the intensification of the contradiction between the growing socialisation (globalisation) of the productive forces, taking place under the aegis of the banks and industrial trusts of the early 20th century, and the social relations of capitalism.

Its purpose was to establish the fact that the end of the epoch of free competition and the development of monopoly capitalism, or imperialism, had laid the objective foundations for the establishment of socialism and that the task of the revolutionary party was to politically prepare the working class for the achievement of this goal.

In the opening pages of *Imperialism* Lenin writes: "Competition becomes transformed into monopoly. The result is **immense progress in the socialisation of production** [emphasis added]. In particular, the process of technical invention and improvement becomes socialised. ...

Capitalism in its imperialist stage leads directly to the most comprehensive socialisation of production; it, so to speak, drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of a new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation. Production becomes social, but appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private property of a few. The general framework of formally recognised free competition remains, as the yoke of a few monopolists on the rest of the population becomes a hundred times heavier, more burdensome and intolerable" [Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 205].

And in the concluding pages of this work under the heading "The place of imperialism in history" he returned to this theme. Against the bourgeois economists who pointed to the "interlocking" of capitalist corporations, claiming that the Marxist prediction of "socialisation" had not come true, he wrote:

"But underlying this interlocking, its very base, are changing social relations of production. When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, and, on the basis of an exact computation of mass data, organises according to plan the supply of primary raw materials to the extent of two-thirds, or three-fourths, of all that is necessary for tens of millions of people; when the raw materials are transported in a systematic and organised manner to the most suitable places of production, sometimes situated hundreds or thousands of miles from each other; when a single centre directs all the consecutive stages of processing the material right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when these products are distributed according to a single plan among tens and hundreds of millions of consumers (the marketing of oil in America and Germany by the American oil trust)—then it becomes evident that we have socialisation of production, and not mere 'interlocking'; that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed, a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period (if, at worst, the cure of the opportunist abscess is protracted), but which will inevitably be removed" [Lenin *Collected Works*, Volume 22, pp. 302-303].

By removal of the opportunist abscess, Lenin meant the defeat of the opportunist and nationalist leaderships of the working class, which had become the central prop for the maintenance of capitalism. That cure has certainly taken far longer than Lenin anticipated. But now the globalisation of production, a continuation and deepening of the socialisation of production which Lenin outlined at the beginning of the 20th century, poses this task with renewed urgency.

Globalisation, as we drew out in our statements on the WTO and in the reply to Professor Chossudovsky, is progressive in that it signifies "immense progress in the socialisation of production." This socialisation is at such an advanced stage that Lenin's description of the activities of the oil industry now applies across the board, establishing at an even higher level, both the objective possibility and necessity for the socialist transformation of society. Either the socialised productive forces are freed

from the constraints of capitalist social relations and a new and higher form of social organisation established, or the deepening decay of the private profit and nation-state system will continue to subject mankind to the most terrible forms of barbarism as it has throughout the 20th century.

An examination of every paragraph of your letter reveals that you do not represent the traditions of Lenin, but rather the petty-bourgeois reformist critics of imperialism against whom he fought.

You write that imperialism came about in the closing years of the 19th century as “an inevitable consequence of the productive forces within an industrially advanced nation-state reaching the level of development whereby the working class within that state simply cannot afford to buy back all that it has produced.”

Such arguments, which point to the “under-consumption” of the working class, explain nothing. At no stage in the development of capitalism can the working class buy back all that it has produced for this is precluded by the social relations of capitalism based on the buying and selling of labour power. The source of capitalist profit, as Marx proved, is the surplus value—the difference between the value of labour power which the worker sells to the capitalist and the value which is created by the exercise of this labour power in the production process—extracted from the working class. In other words, the “underconsumption” of the working class derives from the nature of the wage contract—the basis of capitalist social relations—and is inherent in capitalism from its birth to its death. Therefore it cannot be invoked either to explain crises, or new stages in the development of capitalism.

Notwithstanding this fact, the thesis of “underconsumption” continues to be advanced because it serves a political purpose for clearly defined social interests. It is the stock-in-trade of those who seek to criticise imperialism from a reformist standpoint, who oppose its “excesses” while remaining on the ground of capitalist social relations. For example, Lenin specifically took issue with the social liberal Hobson who urged the necessity of “increasing the consuming power” of the people as an antidote to the development of imperialism. [See *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 288]

Hobson's views are repeated today by neo-Keynesian critics of global capitalism such as the radical journalist William Greider and Professor Chossudovsky.

In his book *One World Ready or Not*, Greider calls for a global “New Deal” insisting that “governments can counter the disorders, ameliorate losses mainly by stimulating consumption, creating more buyers for unsold goods”. [See p. 321] Professor Chossudovsky wants “the articulation of new rules governing world trade as well as the development of an expansionary (‘demand side’) macro-economic policy-agenda geared toward the alleviation of poverty and the worldwide creation of employment and purchasing power” [Chossudovsky, *The Globalisation of Poverty*, p. 27].

The confusion which surrounds your approach to the significance of globalisation is reproduced when you come to the issue of national self-determination. You maintain, correctly, that imperialism exacerbates national tensions to the boiling point, but then go on to falsely assert that this makes it necessary to “embrace the principle of national self-determination.”

It is, of course, incumbent upon the socialist movement to oppose and fight against all forms of national oppression. But this by no means implies support for the **bourgeois** political program of national self-determination—that is, the formation of a separate national state comprising the oppressed nationality.

Even in Lenin's time this issue was the subject of considerable discussion and controversy, not least within the Bolshevik party, which actually removed national self-determination from its program in 1919.

In the space available here we will not review this debate. The central issues are set out in Chapter Six of the ICFI statement *Globalisation and*

the International Working Class available at <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/slepreply/part6-1.shtml>.

The issue at hand was not that support for national self-determination was a cast iron principle, but whether, under the historical conditions which then prevailed, its advocacy could advance the cause of the socialist unification of the proletariat and the overthrow of imperialism as the only means of ending all forms of national oppression. All participants in the discussion sought to base their arguments on an examination of concrete historical experience.

Against Lenin's argument that it was necessary to advance the right to national self-determination in order to win the confidence of the oppressed nationalities, the great German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg warned that it could be used as a weapon against the socialist movement—an argument which was reinforced by US president Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of national self-determination as the chief weapon of imperialism in the struggle against Bolshevism in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution and World War I.

In his pamphlet *What is a Peace Program?*, written in 1915-16, Leon Trotsky pointed to the essential issues. While pointing out that the revolutionary socialist movement had taken over the democratic principle of national self-determination and that this program could not be excluded from the proletarian peace program, it could not claim “absolute importance.”

“On the contrary, it is delimited for us by the converging, profoundly progressive tendencies of historical development. If this ‘right’ must be—through revolutionary force—counterposed to the imperialist methods of centralization which enslave weak and backward peoples and crush the hearths of national culture, then on the other hand the proletariat cannot allow the ‘national principle’ to get in the way of the irresistible and deeply progressive tendency of modern economic life towards a planned organisation throughout our continent, and further, all over the globe” [Leon Trotsky, *What is a Peace Program*, p. 11].

In the eight decades since the debate on the national question began inside the Marxist movement, historical experience has provided the answer to many of the issues, which could not be fully determined at the time. There was, at least initially, a positive content to the demand for national self-determination inasmuch as it was directed against imperialist oppression. Today, however, that content has been completely exhausted. The various nationalist movements are not engaged in a struggle against imperialism. Rather they embody the strivings of sections of the national bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie to establish their own nation-states, suppressing or expelling the national minorities within them, in order to provide a base from which to integrate themselves more closely within the framework of global finance capital and imperialism. Upon winning “independence” the first proclamation of such governments is that they welcome the foreign investor and will adhere to “market principles.”

In your final paragraph you maintain that because the ICFI insists on the progressive role of globalisation we will become supporters of imperialism on the basis that it represents a “lesser evil” than nationalism. This type of argument is not new. The same sort of accusation was leveled against the Russian Marxists by the petty-bourgeois Narodniks. They maintained that because the Marxists pointed to the inevitability of the development of capitalism in Russia they supported it politically. The controversy was a reflection of the interests of social forces—the Narodniks were based on the petty-bourgeois and the peasantry, while the Marxists based themselves on the historical interests of the working class, which was being brought into being by the development of capitalism.

Likewise, as the globalisation of production makes ever more necessary the international unification of the working class, your opposition to the ICFI reflects the standpoint of the petty-bourgeoisie as it clings to the outmoded nation-state framework.

As for the question of who lines up with imperialism, a concrete

examination of the history of the last decade yields some highly significant results. This period has been characterised by a resurgence of imperialist wars and outright colonialism.

Precisely because it has conducted a critical review of the slogan of national self-determination in the light of the 80 years experience since Lenin examined this question, the ICFI has established an unrivalled record of opposition to imperialism—a record which forms a striking contrast to that of the self-styled “Leninist” supporters of national self-determination.

The 1990s began with the US-organised onslaught against Iraq. This resurgence of imperialist colonialism saw not a few one-time anti-imperialists offering their political support on the grounds that it was necessary to support the right of national self-determination to the sheikdom of Kuwait. Those who did not overtly support military action called for the imposition of UN sanctions, the destructive effects of which have equaled, if not exceeded, those of the military campaign.

They were then joined by other one-time radicals as the imperialist carve-up of Yugoslavia got underway on the grounds that national self-determination for Croatia, Slovenia and then Bosnia had to be supported. The culmination of this process came last year as middle class radical tendencies around the world backed the NATO war against Serbia on the basis of support for national self-determination for Kosovo, and hailed the fascistic and racist KLA as a national liberation army.

One of the most graphic demonstrations of this process followed shortly afterwards. Radical tendencies, which had begun their political life during the period of the Vietnam War under the slogan “troops out”, launched a campaign under the slogan “troops in” to demand the intervention of Australian and UN forces into East Timor.

This line up is not accidental. War is the great test of all political programs. The program of national self-determination has led its proponents, by a shorter or slightly longer route, into the camp of imperialism. The ICFI, however, based on its analysis of the deepening contradiction between globalised production and the social relations of capitalism and the reactionary character of the nation-state system, has been the only tendency to consistently oppose imperialism.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Beams

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