An exchange of letters on "Anti-Americanism: The ‘anti-imperialism’ of fools"

3 October 2001

To the editor of the WSWS:

I would like to make a couple of comments with regard to the article authored by David North and David Walsh, “Anti-Americanism: The ‘anti-imperialism’ of fools.” The article spends some time criticising an item which appeared in the *Guardian* earlier in the week. The problem the authors of this piece seem to have is with the discussion of hatred against “America” as presented as an entity, claiming this to be xenophobic and ignoring individuals and their diverse achievements. The US government, corporations, media, etc., have spent years branding and selling the concept of America, creating a distinct image. The religious patriotism of the American people is something uncommon in the world, comparable directly with Islamic fundamentalism. The result of these and other factors being a product which, globally, is forced down people’s throats with every billboard advert, syndicated game show, piece of pop icon merchandise, every awards ceremony acceptance speech. That boldly uses the words “freedom” and “democracy” as its catchphrase and can swallow the irony. “America”, “the US”—these are an entity, a concept, a target with a face. Other countries are not presented in this fashion, therefore it is unfair to compare it so. I say I hate the US, because I do. This does not entail that I hate Americans or ignore any contribution an American citizen has made to the world. I hate Coca Cola, but actually quite like the taste of it...

The article did nothing more than to show the authors’ patriotism—that when someone insults an aspect of their country they become personally wounded. A blinding patriotism that is seen by many as a root cause in the problems we are facing today.

And, in closing, the piece that galled me most: “Anyone who was emotionally unaffected by the terror and suffering experienced by tens of thousands as a result of this attack has no right to call himself or herself a socialist.” It is not necessary when writing an article on the current situation to include a disclaimer, as most journalists have, expressing that the author is shocked by the events and feels sympathy with those who have lost—it would be inhuman to feel otherwise. Assuming that because one was not present the author obviously did not care about the deaths in NY and DC is absolutely ridiculous and childish—not what I have come to expect from postings on the *WSWS*. The fact that Charlotte Raven didn’t insult her audience by commencing with an emotional outpouring aimed at deterring public criticism deserves respect.

AR

Dear AR,

Your letter of 24 September succinctly sums up the viewpoint we criticized in our article. Your version of it is no more attractive than Ms. Raven’s.

You speak of the effort made by the US government, corporations and media to brand and sell the concept of America. Such an effort has no doubt been made. However, far from having seen through this “concept of America” for the lie that it is, you and others who share your viewpoint entirely accept it, only as an object of resentment. You agree with this falsified and unreal version of “America.” Your viewpoint is simply patriotism turned inside out, a peculiar form of xenophobia. “America is horrible” is no better than “America is great.” And no closer to the truth.

Our point was not at all that hatred of America as “an entity” ignores “individuals and their diverse achievements.” First of all, such a view ignores the reality that every society is composed of antagonistic social classes, that there are two Americas—the America of Bush and the ruling elite and the America of its working people. Whatever the ideological confusion that may exist within the working population, these are two objectively distinct and antagonistic worlds. Your vision of a people dominated by “religious patriotism” is another instance of your having swallowed uncritically the version of things peddled by the media. To be blunt, you don’t know what you’re talking about.

In any event, the individual who says, “I hate America” or “I hate China” or “I hate Argentina” has placed him- or

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herself outside the realm of socialist politics and is involved with some project hostile to the interests of the mass of the population of every country. Whoever makes such a statement sees the world in national terms and identifies, whether he or she cares to admit it or not, with the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie of a particular, probably rival nationality. No Marxist or genuine workers' leader has ever uttered such a phrase.

Such "hatreds" often find expression in sections of the middle class that are being swept up by war fever. I make so bold as to suggest that you might in the future find yourself in such a state of anti-American patriotic delirium. After all, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that American imperialism will in due course find itself at odds with one or another of its present-day allies. The right-wing media in the US have been full of fulminations against "the French," "the Japanese" and so forth. There is nothing to prefer in your sentiments.

Again, we were not speaking of individual Americans and their achievements. As we specifically noted, the US arose politically out of the Enlightenment. We were speaking of American history and culture as the product of world history and culture.

Marxists have always rejected the notion of "American exceptionalism," and insisted that the same social contradictions that propelled the working class all over the world into life-and-death struggle were at work in the US. On the other hand, an entire school of academic and liberal apologists for US capitalism has devoted itself to explaining why—due to its democratic traditions, supposedly unlimited opportunities, "non-ideologically-minded population," etc.—America would never face a revolutionary crisis. Again, you share this outlook, only turned on its head. Where they say A, you say B. They find America's supposed uniqueness attractive, you find it appalling. The same superficial method is at work.

The charge that we are suffering from "blinding patriotism" is not supported by anything in the article, nor by any other item on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Our statement was posted in the context of a systematic effort by the *WSWS* to analyze the significance of the September 11 events and oppose the vast war aims of US imperialism. If we speak with pride of certain achievements in politics and culture, it is because we identify with the international trend since the eighteenth century, in particular, that embodies a struggle for the advancement of human society out of ignorance, exploitation and inequality—a trend that found a profoundly progressive expression in the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century and the American Civil War in the century that followed.

As Marxists, we understand that the progressive and democratic content of these great struggles and traditions were limited, and ultimately belied, by the inherently exploitative character of bourgeois society. What was progressive, and remains so, in the legacy of the democratic traditions of America's birth can be preserved, defended and extended only on the basis of a socialist perspective based on the international unification of the working class. That you dismiss the democratic content of these earlier struggles, I would suggest, is directly bound up with the fact that you reject any revolutionary role for the working class today and dismiss the possibility of a conscious struggle for a socialist future.

You express solidarity with Raven's callousness in regard to the attack on the World Trade Center. She "deserves respect" for having failed to "include a disclaimer" indicating her horror at the loss of life. What can one say?

We don't express our condemnation of the attack to "deter public criticism." That would be sheer political cowardice. Nor is our denunciation of the slaughter of innocent civilians a matter of mere sentimentality. Our condemnation of the terror attack arises from fundamental political principles. Terrorism as a method implies a definite orientation that is virulently hostile to the struggle for socialist consciousness and independent political organization of the working people of the world.

There is a relationship between form and content. The mass murder of civilians is incompatible with any progressive social goals. The Islamic fundamentalists are not legitimate representatives of anti-imperialism in any sense; they are extreme reactionaries, originally trained and financed by the US government and the CIA.

In sum, we don't "have it in" for any people or nation. Our perspective, based on long experience, scientific insight into the nature of capitalist society, and hard-won lessons of many decades of working class struggle is grounded on the internationalism of the working class.

David Walsh

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