

A letter and reply on an “intellectual pygmy”

5 August 2005

The World Socialist Web Site has received a number of letters in response to “An intellectual pygmy denounces Trotsky”. Several readers have objected to the use of the phrase “intellectual pygmy.” Below is one reader’s letter and a reply from David North.

Dear David North,

I am somewhat intrigued by your use of the word “pygmy” to describe the author of a slandering anti-Trotsky diatribe. Presumably most members of the pygmy tribe will feel appalled at being used as a metaphor to describe this particular intellectual cipher. I have read many of your articles, and I know you do not have to resort to such racist phrases in order to express yourself. Nevertheless congratulations for an otherwise outstanding analysis.

TA

Bern, Switzerland

Dear TA,

When I receive a letter of protest from such a person—which has so far not happened—I will explain that the use of the word “pygmy” in the given context is an idiomatic expression that carries absolutely no racist connotation. As used, what is being referred to is the small intellectual, not physical, stature of the individual concerned. For those who wish to take offense, I suppose they would find a similar ground for complaint had I referred to Dalrymple as an “intellectual midget” or an “intellectual dwarf.” Perhaps I might have avoided complaints such as yours had I described Dalrymple as an “intellectual Lilliputian.” But it didn’t occur to me at the time.

But since you and several others have raised the issue, permit me to point out that the word “pygmy” is not derived from the name of any African tribe. Its actual etymological origin is the Greek word *Pugmaioi*, meaning a cubit or measure of about 13 inches, which, according to Greek mythology, was the size of a race of dwarfs. In Latin the word assumed the more modern recognizable form, *Pygmae*. This word came to be

applied as a generic reference to various western-African peoples—the Bambuti, the Batwa, the Bayaka and the Bagyeli.

In conclusion, I hope that this clarification enables us all to move on and devote our attention to the really important historical and political questions that I sought to address in my reply to Theodore Dalrymple’s slander against Trotsky. At any rate, I hope that I do not lose you as a reader due to my unintended violation of the rather stern, unforgiving, and generally absurd canons of middle-class academic political correctness.

Yours sincerely,

David North



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