

Imperialist apologetics from Johann Hari

Independent journalist who attacked Harold Pinter turns on World Socialist Web Site

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When Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the intense hostility he arouses amongst those sections of the liberal intelligentsia who have most fully embraced imperialist politics. As this author pointed out in an article on Pinter's artistic achievement, the attacks on him in the liberal media ranged from attempts to ignore the award to an article in the *Independent* with the headline "Harold Pinter does not deserve the Nobel Prize" by Johann Hari.

Such attacks are aimed at Pinter because he has been a vocal opponent of the wars waged by the major powers against Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Our defence of Pinter has brought a swift and vitriolic response from Hari. A piece on his web site posted December 29, 2005 is entitled "Harold Pinter—the row continues: Against the *World Socialist Web Site* this time."

Hari writes that "the writer—somebody called Paul Bond—simply invents a straw man position that bears very little relation to what I actually wrote, and proceeds to attack it." He later accuses me of "hurl[ing] Serb propaganda smears" over the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and of "trying to mislead readers" on this question.

The *Independent* columnist states that the International Committee to Defend Slobodan Milosevic was set up by racist Serb nationalists. Pinter's participation in this committee therefore renders him guilty by association. And, by implication, in defending Pinter's opposition to the show trial of Milosevic organised by the western powers, the WSWS is tarred with the same brush. He continues "And before you say Milosevic's ethnic cleansing was the result of the NATO bombing campaign, remember: most of the charges he is facing ... are from the mid-90s in Bosnia-Herzegovina, long before a single NATO bomb fell".

Hari is clearly angry that his left pretensions have been exposed, hence his sneering at "the idea I'm a propagandist for Bush and Blair".

The *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently opposed the nationalist politics of all the various bourgeois cliques in the Balkans. In contrast Hari has adopted a pose of selective outrage over the crimes of Milosevic in order to justify lining up behind the very imperialist powers that whipped up national and ethnic hostilities in order to break up Yugoslavia and bring it under their control.

Milosevic was initially all too willing to collaborate with imperialism's penetration of the region in the hope of winning a share of the profits, and was treated as an ally. It was only later, when Germany and then the US switched to a policy of Balkanisation by backing rival separatist movements, that Milosevic was recast as a hate figure in order to eliminate Serbia as the regional power most concerned with preserving the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

As we wrote at the beginning of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) hearings, "No objective observer of Balkan

events over the past two decades would fail to acknowledge that he [Milosevic] shares political responsibility for the tragic events of the 1990s".

It cedes nothing to Serb nationalism, and implies no support for Milosevic's politics, to insist that imperialism has no right to try him for the bloody ethnic carve-up of the region. Only the international working class has the right, and indeed the responsibility, to settle scores with the ex-Stalinists whose nationalist policies actively assisted the imperialists in their efforts to carve-up the region between them.

Hari's position that the Bosnian war is somehow separable from the events in Kosovo is simply a distortion of the history of the Balkan conflict, aimed at justifying his support for imperialist military intervention and the bombardment of Serbia. One of the reasons the ICTY tribunal initially focused on Kosovo was because the US used Milosevic as the prime guarantor of the Dayton Accord whereby the Bosnian War was ended. It was feared that mention of Bosnia might prove embarrassing to the US and Britain.

In contrast to ex-radicals and liberals such as Hari, who used the "humanitarian" propaganda of the imperialist powers to justify an embrace of separatism and lining up behind the war effort, in its statement of May 7 1994 the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote: "There is no reason to believe that the atrocities carried out in Bosnia have the support of masses of workers in Belgrade, Zagreb or Sarajevo. The betrayal of their old leaderships and the resulting confusion has left them—together with workers in other parts of the world—without an independent political alternative."

"Nonetheless, such an alternative does exist. It is the program of socialist internationalism, which alone can provide a progressive solution to the crisis produced by capitalism."

It is not our contention that Harold Pinter shared this political perspective. Pinter is an artist, who expresses his opposition in artistic terms. We do not share his political views, and we reserve the right to state openly our disagreements with him. His response to the events in the Balkans was visceral, but still informed by the anti-militaristic stance of his formative years. When he noted that "Milosevic is giving them a run for their money" at the trial, it caught accurately the political embarrassment amongst imperialist politicians at having their complicity in these crimes exposed.

Neither are we inclined to allow Hari to launch cheap shots at Pinter's errors and weaknesses in order to justify his own swinishness. He notes that Pinter voted for Margaret Thatcher in 1979, for example, but fails to acknowledge the playwright's subsequent appraisal of his own actions: "I don't think I've ever done anything more shameful. It was infantile on my part".

When Pinter hits upon some deeper truth in the political events before

him, though, he deserves credit for it. Hari claims that Pinter's rage is "politically neutral." While it is by no stretch a substitute for a political programme, as an artist, Pinter's sense of [out]rage can sometimes lay bare the truth of a social or political phenomenon. Such a moment was Pinter's recognition that Milosevic should be joined in the dock by "the real criminals," Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. Hari rejects this out of hand, as it would involve tackling the complicity of imperialism in the break-up of the Balkans, and the support offered them by Hari. Pinter's remark, in fact, struck directly at the relation between the bloody crimes of the nationalists and the imperialist interventions that encouraged, abetted and exploited them.

It is certainly true that the Committee to Defend Milosevic contains among its numbers apologists for the former Yugoslav President, Stalinists and Serb nationalists. It also contains people like Pinter, who find themselves left behind as liberal former "leftists" flock to join hands with Bush and Blair. Pinter's offence to liberal decency is to have opposed militarism and bloody ethnic division out of principle, unlike those sections of the "left" who fell over themselves to support imperialism's attacks on a new moral enemy.

In 1999 Pinter noted that imperialism's "ill-judged, ill-thought, miscalculated" bombardment of Serbia had in fact prompted opponents of Milosevic to come to his defence: "Only two years ago," he said in a BBC2 programme, "hundreds of thousands of young people were out on the streets against Milosevic. Our blundering policy of bombing now finds them linking hands on bridges waiting to be hit." (That programme led to similar attacks on Pinter's art from the "liberal" media, led by Jay Rayner in the *Observer*).

At the same time, Pinter denounced the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as "a bandit organisation." It should be recalled that amongst Hari's complaints against Pinter is that, "While much of the left—decent people like Peter Tatchell, Michael Foot and Susan Sontag—were calling for democratic countries to arm the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to defend the ethnic Albanians from racist murder, Pinter described the KLA as 'a bandit organisation' that was 'actually' responsible for the ethnic cleansing in the region."

Criminality and racist violence were indeed key components of the KLA's policies and the CIA did not need Foot, Sontag, Tatchell or Hari to persuade them to arm an organisation they viewed as a useful tool in destabilising the region. It is a matter of record that the US promoted the KLA as a means to create the conditions for declaring war on Serbia. According to one witness, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told the KLA during negotiations for the Rambouillet Accord, "you sign, the Serbs don't sign, we bomb. You sign, the Serbs sign, you have NATO in. So it's up to you." (See "British documentary substantiates US-KLA collusion in provoking war with Serbia")

Even at the time, it was apparent that the KLA was a viciously lawless organisation, whose politics were sowing further divisions within the region. It is difficult to think of anyone now who would oppose Pinter's assessment of the organisation. Hari quotes Human Rights Watch that the Milosevic trial is "justice for the victims of horrific crimes." He does not, though, refer to its documentation of KLA abuses against Serb and Roma inhabitants of Kosovo, nor its observation that these were long-standing policies of the organisation. (The report can be found at Human Rights Watch). Similarly he has no comment on the mass expulsion of Serbs from the Krajina, the single biggest act of ethnic cleansing of the conflict.

Hari expresses outrage at my statement that "Most of Pinter's early contemporaries made their peace with the establishment long ago. As Hari has demonstrated, many younger hacks have never had a disagreement with it."

He responds, "Oh, Paul, go and read what I say about global warming, or asylum seekers, or the arms trade, or prisons, or taxation policies, or the IMF. I have plenty of problems with 'the establishment.'" Not, however,

when it comes to the fundamental question of war. Then Mr. Hari is ready to accept wholeheartedly the establishment line. The Second World War? A struggle "against the Nazis." The Cold War? "Europe was being threatened to the East by a Stalinist tyranny that had already murdered 30 million people." The military dismemberment of Yugoslavia? A noble struggle to "defend the ethnic Albanians from racist murder."

So too with Iraq, which Hari accuses me of artificially introducing when he never mentioned it in his diatribe against Pinter. Hari is being disingenuous. Pinter's stance on Iraq was both a reason why he was awarded the Nobel Prize and certainly a reason why Hari so detests him.

Hari also supported the bombardment and invasion of Iraq on the very same basis as he lined up behind the war in Yugoslavia. Allying himself with the "pro-war lefties," he wrote in support of US imperialism's interventions internationally. In an April 11 2003 article, subtitled "America can be a force for good in the world", he argued that the genocide in Rwanda was caused by a "failure to act" by the US, and "the left" should aim to steer US imperialism towards "the overthrow of tyranny and the birth of democracy."

He waxed lyrical about the cheering and flower-throwing that had greeted the American military on their arrival in Iraq, which was in fact staged by a few dozen supporters of US puppet Ahmed Chalabi (See "The stage-managed events in Baghdad's Firdos Square: image-making, lies and the 'liberation' of Iraq")

Imperialism had a harder job selling the invasion of Iraq, but it used the same pseudo-moral arguments as in the Balkans: in order to oppose the dictator Saddam Hussein, one must support imperialist intervention. Once again Hari was ready to join the chorus.

Moreover, not only did the politics of the invasion of Iraq flow directly from the justification given for intervention in the Balkans, the poem he cited by Pinter (which he described as "crap") was written about US triumphalism after the first Gulf War in 1991.

When we drew attention to Hari's article, we noted that Pinter's opposition to the imperialist redivision of the world was a continuation of the critical qualities that had marked all of his life and work. In the last 15 years he has been an articulate and vocal critic of imperialist policies in the Middle East and the Balkans. We noted the connection between his trenchant attacks on the use of torture by US imperialism and the violence of his earlier plays. His determination to remain critically independent has driven his artistic achievement.

Pinter's poem is part of a body of work (with all its flaws) that attempts to deal honestly with brutality and oppression. For his part Hari states in his latest article that he is "opposed to at least 70 percent of what these governments do." However, this is not much of a defence when the 30 percent he supports apparently includes military invasion and occupation for the purposes of securing global markets and resources. His recent articles indicate that he may now be having second thoughts about his support for the war against Iraq. In 2003 Hari was calling for an end to US imperialism's support for dictators, and demanding that imperialism become "solidly Wilsonian and ... equip only solid democrats with weapons of defence." By 2004, he was criticising the imposition of "market fundamentalism" in Iraq, calling instead for some sort of reflationary benevolent capitalism to revive the country.

What remains constant is his orientation to the imperialist powers and acceptance of their right to dictate the fate of the planet and its peoples. As such Hari is driven to attack Pinter for taking an anti-imperialist position (which he caricatures as "whatever the US and UK governments are for, I'm against.")

To conclude, in his latest article Hari describes himself as a "militant defender of free speech"—insisting that I slandered him by stating that he viewed Pinter's opposition to military intervention in the Balkans as "impermissible." This is a red herring. A commitment to free speech should hardly need stating. But we must remind Hari that he nevertheless

wrote: “Unless there is a new Nobel Prize for rage-induced incoherence, Harold Pinter’s ravings should not be beamed into Stockholm this weekend.”

For our part, we would also defend the right of Mr. Hari to spout his imperialist apologetics. We merely reserve the right to call them by their proper name.



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