

Imperialism and the lie of the soul

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23 May 2022

This article was originally posted on Twitter.

The *Financial Times*' Gideon Rachman has written a column that is an unintentional—and, therefore, all the more devastating—exposure of the intellectual and moral putrefaction of bourgeois journalism and the political and social system it defends.

In a column titled “Lies weaken Russia in its trial of strength,” Rachman complains that Putin, obsessed with American hypocrisy, falsely accuses the West of being an “empire of lies.”

Rachman “refutes” Putin’s denunciation by arguing that “hypocrisy and lies are not quite the same thing.” While the Russian government “specializes in outright lies,” the “US and its allies, by contrast, specialize in hypocrisy.”

He argues that western hypocrisy, compared to Russian lies, is a fault of a far lesser magnitude. It is merely a regrettable tendency “to proclaim an ideal or a policy and then apply it inconsistently.”

Rachman cites as an example of the West’s inconsistent application of its ideals its “humanitarian intervention in Libya that led directly, and perhaps deliberately, to regime change and the violent death of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi.”

Murder sanctified by hypocrisy can be pardoned, even if the victim is as dead as one whose murder is prepared with lies. Rachman notes other advantages afforded by hypocrisy.

“In an empire of hypocrisy,” Rachman writes, “open debate and criticism are still possible. Mistakes are made and crimes are committed. But those crimes can be pointed out—either by official inquiries or by a free press.”

In an empire of hypocrisy, it was possible for the *New York Times* to expose the “horrifying toll in civilian casualties” caused by US drone warfare. Rachman notes: “The Pentagon’s response was to thank the newspaper and promise change.”

Sensing that this was not an entirely satisfactory outcome to the exposure of mass murder by the United States, Rachman opines: “More hypocrisy? Perhaps—but there would be no prospect of reform without investigation and exposure.”

Moreover, Rachman notes another significant difference between western hypocrisy and Russian lies: “Nobody in Russia will be winning any prizes for an investigation into the war crimes committed in Bucha or the destruction of Mariupol.”

Somehow, Rachman seems to have forgotten that the prize awarded to Julian Assange for his exposure of US war crimes has been relentless state persecution, cruel imprisonment in a British hell-hole, and impending extradition to the United States.

The most significant aspect of Rachman’s essay is its absurd and self-deluding premise that American hypocrisy is merely a regrettable lapse from honesty, rather than the specific and highly developed form of a monstrous system of official and all-pervasive lying.

It may seem odd that Gideon Rachman—one of the more thoughtful of FT commentators—does not realize that his own apologetic demarcation of state hypocrisy from lying testifies, in the most profound sense, to the domination of the lie in contemporary capitalist society.

In his famous treatise *Imperialism, A Study*, written 120 years ago, J.A. Hobson explained the essential role played by hypocrisy, as a form of lying, in justifying the monstrous crimes carried out in the interests of the ruling elites of the colonial empires.

The hypocrisy of the imperialist rulers and their collaborators and apologists is not of a conventional, merely personal, character. It is based on systematic lying about the nature of social reality that is so deep-rooted that it deludes its own practitioners.

“Imperialism,” wrote Hobson, “is based upon a persistent misrepresentation of facts and forces chiefly through a most refined process of selection,

exaggeration, and attenuation, directed by interested cliques and persons so as to distort the face of history.

“The gravest peril of Imperialism lies in the state of mind of a nation which has become habituated to this deception and which has rendered itself incapable of self-criticism.” The passage that follows is among the greatest indictments of the imperialist mentality.

For this is the condition which Plato terms ‘the lie in the soul’—a lie which does not know itself to be a lie. One of the marks of this diseased condition is a fatal self-complacency.

When a nation has succumbed to it, it easily and instinctively rejects all criticism of other nations as due to envy and malice, and all domestic criticism is attributed to the bias of anti-patriotism.

Anticipating the later works of the great Marxists, J. A. Hobson, the liberal opponent of imperialism, identified in a general way the objective social interests that underlay “the lie in the soul.”

The controlling and directing agent of the whole process, as we have seen, is the pressure of financial and industrial motives, operated for the direct, short-range, material interests of small, able, and well-organised groups in a nation.

Rachman does not intend to deceive his readers. But swept up in the tidal wave of anti-Russia hysteria, he substantiates Hobson’s observation that those who deceive others about the interests that drive imperialism “have first been obliged to mislead themselves.”



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