

“The Axis of Hope”

LAST WEEK a colleague of mine used the phrase, “The Axis of Hope”, in conversation when referring to Hugo Chávez and his allies in Cuba, Bolivia, and Ecuador. While supporting the thesis that the United States is a declining imperialist power, my leftist friend urged me to celebrate the reversals being suffered by imperialism, “in its own back yard!” The Bolivarian Revolution is the wave of the future and the advance of the Bolivaristas should give all right-thinking people cause to hope.

This phrase is evidently a riposte to George W. Bush’s, “Axis of Evil”, it is meant to summon up the heroic efforts of the radical populists and revolutionary socialists committed to improving the lot of Latin America’s impoverished millions. Raúl Castro, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, Hugo Chávez, and the leaders of five small Caribbean states have signed up to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas. They hope to aid the progress of regional integration by material and technical transfers between their member states, resulting eventually in the introduction of the Sucre as a single currency on the model of the Euro. Hostility to the United States provides a kind of rhetorical glue for this alliance which has however, failed to attract the leaders of any of the larger states in Latin America.

Incidentally, *Axis of Hope* is the subtitle of Tariq Ali’s book, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2006). It is not a phrase that has achieved much currency, but it certainly does express a central element of left wing thought in Britain where, hope springs eternal. Figures as diverse and the SWP’s inspiration, the late Tony Cliff, and our very own national treasure, Tony Benn, have always paid great attention to the general morale of those habituated to attending radical protest meetings and demonstrations. Countless speeches

and pamphlets have been devoted to keeping up the spirits of the faithful. As each battle, and each defeat, has succeeded one another, morale, has remained a key concern of the leaders of left wing opinion. Raymond Williams, the writer and critic, whose memory continues to be revered among all socialist factions and circles, even described his life's work "as a Journey of Hope".

So there is nothing new about this concern with hope, or with the essential message of the phrase, Axis of Hope, and it has always had a particularly poignant resonance in relation to the hope of British radicals for the progress of the 'progressive forces' anywhere else in the world. Forever blocked at home by the symbiotic relationship between the Left and the Right of the Labour Party, and their mutual commitment to the preservation of the capitalist economy, socialists in Britain have always looked abroad for encouragement and stimulation.

This preoccupation with alarms and excursions in foreign lands has always been understood as an expression of the internationalism thought of as intrinsic to the socialist enterprise. Consequently, numberless petitions have been signed, countless solidarity organizations have been formed, and a seemingly endless stream of resolutions have poured out of student union meetings and trade union branches, expressing support for embattled foreign revolutions, violent rebellions, and lengthy insurgencies. Always more than a displacement activity, this interest in foreign affairs has had this additional function of providing evidence that socialism and radical politics are actually relevant somewhere in the world, even if they are destined to be of marginal interest and influence at home in Britain.

Of course, some of this activity has produced tangible aid and tangible results for a number of causes. However, its principal function has been to maintain the morale of socialists marginalised by the extraordinary success and stability of mainstream political arrangements in Britain, which have never

had any place for socialists or socialism, except as a noisy, and truculent counterpoint to the convivial tug of war between the Labour Party and the Tories.

This now traditional pre-occupation with foreign affairs, this commitment to expressions of support for foreign radical causes, has often led the British left into rhetorical alliances with tyrants and dictators – in fact with many more tyrants and dictators than with democrats or the advocates of equal rights for all. This is because the focus of left wing concern has been not so much with the actual state of affairs in the foreign land in question, but has always had more to do with how it relates to what are thought of as “the central contradictions” in the world.

This notion of “the central contradiction” initially meant simply supporting anything that was thought beneficial to the Soviet Union and has subsequently come to mean supporting anything and anyone who can be thought of as an enemy of the United States. The litmus test for the British left, is the extent to which any cause can be seen as expressing hostility to American imperialism and American interests. The “central contradiction” in the world today is the fate of the American Empire; anything that contributes to it discomfort and its eventual defeat is worthy of support. Events and movements that are perceived as merely tangential or largely irrelevant to America’s interests are simply ignored by socialists in Britain no matter what the level of suffering or the numbers of the dead; the focus of all prominent demonstrations and campaigns about foreign affairs is upon forging rhetorical alliances with America’s enemies.

This strategy has had some unfortunate consequences, particularly in relation to Islamism, where the left has had to focus entirely upon the responsibility of America for the murder and mayhem actually carried out by America’s enemies: the wretched patriarchal insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Regardless of any facts on the ground the left has had to develop a narrative in which America is responsible for Wahabi zealots and the heaven-bound

murderers carefully groomed by bearded mentors to hate all things American. This is a problem for the left, because as Tariq Ali has pointed out: of course we do not sympathise with the “social programme” of Al Qaeda or the Taliban, but we must recognise the legitimacy of their fight against American imperialism.

This is a sticky wicket: attempting to distinguish between Islamism’s profoundly reactionary “social programme” and its *objectively progressive character* in fighting American imperialism, does not have much popular resonance. So, the reason for my friend’s rapid segues last week from discussing Iraq and Afghanistan to cheering on Hugo Chávez and the Axis of Hope is self-explanatory. When thinking of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas we do not have to negotiate roadside bombs and the difficulties presented by the flogging of wayward girls in the market square and gay youths hanged in public as a warning to the rest.

By shifting the focus to support for Chávez and the Axis of Hope we can reassert the basic idea of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, *and hating America*, without getting mixed up with Islamism’s “social programme”. Indeed, the Axis of Hope puts issues like health care, education, welfare, and housing, freedom from multinational companies, and economic independence back at the centre where they belong.

This brings the British left back into familiar social territory, it brings it back once again, firmly upon the side of the dictatorship in Havana. It brings it back into alliance with populists like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales who, although widely supported by the very poor, are incapable of forging stable alliances with the mass of skilled workers and middle class professionals. Consequently, they are destined to provoke resistance, which they will try to suppress with bans and proscriptions, and finally with arbitrary arrests. As they do so, the hopeful British left will once again find itself siding with dictators against the United States and against the defence of democratic rights.