

Off The cuff

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Kitsch Left

“IT’S A BETTER DICTATORSHIP!” This is the reason which one of my Marxist colleagues gave last week for supporting the regime of the Castro brothers in Havana. Reaching back fifty years, he argued that the revolutionary dictatorship in Cuba was undoubtedly better than that of bourgeois dictatorship which preceded it. One can sort of see what he means. Fulgencio Batista who ruled Cuba with the blessing of the United States until he was overthrown by the Revolution was certainly a bad lot. However, “It’s a better dictatorship” remains an interesting thought, and one which encapsulates the attitude of many on the left today who place hostility towards America as the highest value – one that trumps all of the other values historically associated with the left.

Of course, dictatorship has an honourable place in the history of the left in its ideal or purely imaginary form: *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. However, as everybody knows this mode of rule has so far always started out as the dictatorship of a political party or of a group of significant individuals and their relatives dictating *on behalf* of the proletariat, and has always, following initial upheavals and struggles, settled down into the dictatorship of a political party or of a group of significant individuals and their relatives.

However, this historical experience has simply led both Leninist groupuscules and the broad left to thinking up reasons as to why one dictatorship is better than another. Initially, you might think these preferences are largely to do with the concrete accomplishments of dictatorial regimes in respect of healthcare, literacy, and land reform. But you would be wrong, because even when the land reform turns out to be a bloody disaster, when shortages mount, when independent trade unions and socialist parties are

crushed, schools decay, and welfare reforms run into the sand, the left continues to back the dictators on the sole condition that they are the enemy of the United States – or in struggle with the hegemony of the United States.

There are only two exceptions: Zimbabwe and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Both of these dictatorships are an embarrassment. Ostensibly socialist, the modes of rule of Robert Mugabe and the Dear Leader are sufficiently bizarre and disastrous to have earned a silent rebuke from most people on the left – who steadfastly ignore the relationship between these regimes and the socialist project. In this respect they are like milder versions of Pol Pot's murderous voluntarism: something best forgotten.

However, more sensible and more tenable dictatorships are invariably favoured on the broad left by the degree to which they engage in struggle with the United States. Since 9/11 this has broadened out to support for a wider group of dictatorships which, although lacking much traditional socialist rhetoric, have suitably statified economies, which together with their Anti-Americanism, has earned them the guarded respect of many on the left. To this must be added the implicit recognition, and even active support, given by many on the left to sectarian religious, and patriarchal, insurgencies around the world on the grounds that they are "in the front line of the battle against American imperialism".

This, of course, has meant displacing many of the core values long associated with the left. The principled defence of social, economic, and racial equality, female emancipation, religious freedom, and independent trade unions, are all kicked into the long grass of political expediency in the pursuit of anti-Americanism. This has led me to associate myself with those who have identified much of the modern left as a kind of *ersatz* or *kitsch* left – a left, which despite superficial appearances, is no longer left wing at all.

This is tied up with the trends I tackled a couple of weeks ago when discussing the Axis of Hope in Latin

America: the left's prior commitment to the fight against imperialism. (*Off The Cuff* 14/09/09) For many years this took the form of asserting that the imperialist powers led by the USA were committed to the underdevelopment of the colonial and semi- or neocolonial world. This belief, widely shared on the left, and promoted by theorists like Andre Gunda Frank and Frantz Fanon, was that the rich capitalist countries were committed to starving poorer countries of investment and ensuring that their dependent territories remained sources of cheap raw materials.

However, since the early eighties even Marxist theorists have disputed this 'thesis of underdevelopment' in recognition of the enormous global flows of investment that have led to the establishment of new points of production across the globe. Industrial revolutions are now taking place in Mainland China, in Brazil, and in India, on top of the full development over the last thirty or forty years of sophisticated modern economies in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore.

These developments have created problems for both Leninist groupuscules and for the broad left. Full capitalist expansion into territories that were formerly stifled by low levels of development has lifted literally millions of people out of absolute poverty and raised the living standards and aspiration of millions more who have benefitted from vast new investments. For a left still reeling from the collapse of communism and the route of "The Capitalist Road" taken by the Communist Party of China, the burgeoning new economies of India and Brazil represent a radical challenge. Not only is capitalism neither 'late', 'dead', nor 'collapsing', it is on the contrary, thriving.

Consequently, the two most important events for the modern left have been 9/11 and the implosion of the financial system in 2007-8. Both these events have appeared to give the left's account of capitalism and imperialism a new lease on life: capitalism has, after all, been revealed as an intrinsically unstable and corrupt system in urgent need of overthrowing.

However, despite the opportunities that these events have apparently provided, the left has proved itself to be strikingly inept; it has radically failed to 'capitalize' on the manifest weaknesses of the system. Instead of developing a more robust conception of a socialist alternative, and developing policies and campaigns which practically reveal these socialist potentialities, most of the left has opted for its traditional posture of allying itself with the enemies of America and Britain; the left has opted for depicting anti-Western dictatorships, and frankly anti-democratic insurgencies, as reasonable or understandable responses to imperialism which deserve the "principled support" of socialists despite their manifest hostility towards everything for which socialists are supposed to stand.

Therefore, as the imperialist powers have succeeded in stabilizing the financial system, and have set the stage for 'manageable levels' of mass unemployment and big cuts in welfare, the left's rhetorical focus has remained on support for America's enemies around the world. The latest straws to be clutched at are the war in Afghanistan and the eagerly anticipated "decline of American power". The kitsch left yearns for the defeat of NATO forces in Afghanistan and (in the absence of a working class imbued with socialist ideals) for the victory of the patriarchal theocrats of Taliban orientation.

Consequently, the refusal of Obama to support the rightist *coup d'état* in Honduras, the refusal of Washington to attempt the violent destruction of the Bolivarian Revolution, the abandonment by the US of plans to base nuclear missiles in Eastern Europe, and the scheme of the G7 powers to strengthen the authority of key developing nations in the G20 and in the IMF, have again created something of a conundrum for the kitsch left. They do not want to see America constructively coming to terms with positive developments in the world economy – so they will be compelled to interpret these events, simply as a product of crisis, and of the decay of the Empire.