

IMPERIALISM  
A CRITIQUE OF CUNLIFFE (IB 81).

Ellis

This document is a response to Cunliffe's reply to IB 49 on 'imperialism, the world economy and Permanent Revolution' by Kinnell.

There is of course no 'line' on the question from the majority or their supporters. I therefore can speak only for myself. I do believe it to be necessary, however to 'defend' Kinnell from the kind of arguments put forward in Cunliffe's document. I recognise, and I'm sure Kinnell recognises, gaps, weaknesses etc in IB 49. But it is I think, an important starting point for the discussion that we need to have on the nature of contemporary imperialism. Cunliffe's response to it is a dangerous step backwards.

Marxism, the theory of imperialism, and political debate.

Rosa Luxemburg was a great revolutionary thinker. She was also an important Marxist economist. She developed a theory of imperialism that was quite different to that of Lenin. To my knowledge, Lenin did not denounce her for it; and Bukharin's response to it was only published by the CPSU after her death. Despite her different position on imperialism, the Bolsheviks wanted her to be a part of the new International that they founded in 1919 - which she was, despite some misgivings. And this was despite the fact that she had a position on the national question which denied the right of nations to self-determination at a time when colonialism still existed on a major scale. Lenin thought she was wrong - and so do I. But it shows a different perspective on politics and on debate than that shown in IB81.

Her position on Imperialism was based on an argument (since I believe proved convincingly to be wrong) that there was a massive contradiction in Marx's analysis of capitalism - and as such it is probably one of the most 'revisionist' theories ever produced by a major Marxist thinker.

Look at the spirit of Luxemburg's approach to theory and you see something quite different to the dogmatism of IB81. For example, she says :

'Marxism is not a dozen people who ascribe the right to 'expert knowledge' to each other and before whom the mass of faithful Moslems must prostrate themselves in blind trust.

Marxism is a revolutionary world outlook which must always strive for new discoveries, which completely despises rigidity in once-valid theses, and whose living force is best preserved in the intellectual clash of self criticism and the rough and tumble of history.'

(ANTI Critique, MRP 1972 p150).

Arguing against her critics on the specific issues in question, she writes:

'And despite all this the official 'experts' of Marxism explain that there is no problem of accumulation, that everything has been solved once and for all by Marx... And now that the situation has been pointed out to them they find this very

stangeness quite in order. They cling doggedly to this idea and violently attack anyone who thinks he sees a problem where official Marxism has been nothing but self-satisfied for decades',

(p64).

This is the genuine spirit of Marxism - as a critical, and self critical scientific theory. The spirit of IB81, as of so much produced in debates on this question, is the spirit of those like Kautsky and Bauer that Luxemburg was arguing against.

Of course that does not prove that what I am about to say is right: but it should serve as a warning to the dogmatists, the 'anti-revisionists' in our ranks.

## LENIN AND IMPERIALISM

Cunliffe attempts to show that Kinnell (IB 49) has put forward a completely inadequate assessment of the world economy and imperialism today. He attacks, first of all, the 'method' of IB49, describing it as 'empiricist', full of omissions, dishonest etc. And he attempts to show that by this false method Kinnell falsifies Lenin's theory of imperialism, which, Cunliffe argues, is still (almost completely) relevant today. But what of Cunliffe's method?

Cunliffe's method is to state the basic points of Lenin's position, compare it to contemporary reality, conclude that little has changed, and so deride Kinnell's tentative alternative view. What he does not do is address himself to Lenin's theory. And so he presents it as if it were merely a series of observations about the world.

A theory is not that. Any bourgeois economist can observe the growth of monopolies or list statistics about capital exports. A theory explains these things, examines their interconnexions, situates a phenomenon within a coherent theoretical whole. A 'defence' of Lenin's theory would need to defend its whole theoretical structure, not simply focus on some of its observations. It would also need to address itself to the purpose of Lenin's theory. Cunliffe fails to do either.

First of all, it is important to put Lenin's work in its historical context, politically and intellectually. 'Imperialism - the Highest Stage of Capitalism', written in 1916, is subtitled 'A Popular Outline'. It is a polemical pamphlet with an explicit political purpose.

Theoretically, it is not particularly original. It owes a great deal to Bukharin, and to an extent via him to Hilferding, and to the liberal economist Hobson. Bukharin seems to have been the major influence. Lenin's introduction to Bukharin's 'Imperialism and World Economy' - which is much more theoretically weighty - does not claim to dissent from any of its propositions. The elements Lenin got from Hobson are, I think, weaknesses as compared to Bukharin's position.

Lenin's 'Imperialism' is an outline of general theoretical conclusions reached by Bukharin, with a few additions. It is not really a work of theory. To treat as the work of theory on the subject is therefore a bit peculiar.

It has two main political objectives. First, it is a critique of Kautsky's theory of 'ultra-imperialism' and an attempt to explain the basis for the policy of revolutionary defeatism. Second, it is an attempt to explain why the Second International collapsed in 1914.

The central point that Lenin makes against Kautsky is that the latter is wrong to believe that capitalist expansion can be peaceful. Violence - militarism, conquest and war - are, Lenin argues, the inevitable and logical consequence of the nature of the capitalist mode of production: they are not incidental features.

'Kautsky detaches the politics of imperialism from its economics, speaks of annexations as being a policy 'preferred' by finance capital, and opposes it to another bourgeois policy, which, he alleges, is possible on this very same basis of finance capital. It follows, then, that monopolies in economics are compatible with non-monopolistic, non-violent, non-annexationist methods in politics.' ('Imperialism' Peking 1973 p110).

Cunliffe uses this quote against Kinnell - alleging that Kinnell 'separates the politics from the economics' of imperialism, and so belittles 'the continuing exploitation of the colonial masses by the imperialist bourgeoisie' (p6). But Lenin's point against Kautsky was not simply that such exploitation exists (who denies that? Kinnell doesn't), but that it is necessarily backed up by violence. The separation of politics from economics to which Lenin refers was the insistence by Kautsky that politics - an imperialist foreign policy - was not the necessary consequence of economics - capitalist expansionism.

For Lenin, as for the bulk of his contemporaries, it was this militarism conquest and war that constituted imperialism. He argued that capitalism's tendency towards such violence had qualitatively increased for a number of reasons; his theory of imperialism is an attempt to explain this development.

Giovanni Arrighi has commented that

" 'at the bottom of Lenin's discourse... even when he was speaking of monopoly of finance capital... lay the constancy of the tendency to war between rival capitalist countries... This reference must have seemed to him to be evident and commonplace to call for explicit treatment' ". (Arrighi, 'The Geometry of Imperialism' p14)

Nobody is disputing that this tendency to war, militarism, and violence to enforce overseas interests is as central to imperialism now as it was in Lenin's day. Nobody is disputing that these phenomena result from the dynamics of capitalism. What is in dispute is the adequacy of Lenin's explanation of these phenomena.

### The labour aristocracy

The second major point to Lenin's theory is an explanation of the material basis of social chauvinism. This is the theory of the 'labour aristocracy', according to which imperialism buys off a section of the working class with the super profits it makes in the colonies and semi colonies.

Cunliffe has not as yet addressed himself to this side of the question at all, although it is central to Lenin's theory. According to his method, Cunliffe will no doubt argue that there is still a labour aristocracy, so Lenin was right. But it is not so simple a question.

There are a number of objections to Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy:

1) Monopoly capital is more powerful than its predecessors, has closer links with an enlarged state, etc. There is no necessary reason why it should buy off its workers: it might be in a better position to force down their living standards.

2) It is not clear how we could know if the money used to buy off a section of workers, if this indeed takes place, should necessarily be derived from colonial super profits.

3) In reality high wages are quite compatible with an increased rate of exploitation - are indeed dependent upon it - because they arise from increases in productivity. Capital's global operations of course in part account for such increases (an increased organic composition of capital at an international level) but they are only part of an explanation of it. It is not only the export of capital - or specifically the export of capital to colonies that accounts for it. The historical process whereby the forces of production are developed in the advanced capitalist countries is far more complex.

Lenin's position is also in my opinion logically contradictory, since as we shall see, he elsewhere argues that the export of capital results from a surplus, which in turn is caused by the impoverishment of the masses. You can't really have it both ways - unless the 'labour aristocracy' is extremely small.

But in that case, what is it? How do we measure it? Who is a labour aristocrat? Is it just the labour bureaucracy? In what sense - except indirectly - are labour bureaucrats paid by monopoly capital? What about well paid workers in general? Are they an objectively pro imperialist class enemy?

Throughout the post war boom, Trotskyists quite rightly sought to defend the idea that the working class in imperialist countries was still a revolutionary force, against an assorted array of third worldists. The theory of the labour aristocracy is a boon to the third worldists. The one Trotskyist group who have rigidly adhered to it - the RCG - have now, quite logically, ended up as Maoists.

Someone claiming to be defending Lenin's theory in all its aspects cannot honestly remain silent on a central feature of it which is so clearly riddled with contradictions and holes. So far, Cunliffe is silent on it.

\*monopoly capital;

### Lenin's five points

Cunliffe lists Lenin's five basic defining characteristics of imperialism as a stage in capitalist development. These are; \* the merging of banking and industrial capital into 'finance' capital; the increased importance of the export of capital; the formation of international cartels and trusts; and the territorial division of the world between the 'great powers'. Cunliffe goes on that

'With the exception of (the last point) which relates specifically to colonialism and has clearly been transformed by subsequent developments, what is striking about Lenin's definition is not how antiquated but how modern it sounds nearly 70 years later'. (p5)

Cunliffe's 'defence' of Lenin is completely banal. He complains for example that Kinnell says little about monopolies, but monopolies are an important feature of the world today. As he puts it, 'Monopoly is very much alive and kicking the world's working classes'. But to point to the continuing existence of monopolies is hardly a defence of Lenin in particular: Baran and Sweezy, with a quite different theory of imperialism to Lenin's, see monopoly as central. It depends what you see the Effects of monopoly to be.

Similarly, Cunliffe adds that

'...the 'export of capital' may pose some of the problems of theoretical explanation that Kinnell raises... but its existence... is beyond question' (p5).

But it is precisely the explanation that is at issue. I would make a number of theoretical objections to Lenin's theory.

1) The relationship between the development of 'international monopolist combines which divide the world amongst themselves' and 'the territorial division of the world among the biggest capitalist powers' is not spelt out. The nature of the relationship between the internationalisation of capital and the imperialist nation state is a very big theoretical question, and it would be facile to be over-critical of Lenin for not answering it; but it is equally facile to ignore it.

2) As Kinnell points out, the explanation Lenin gives for the export of capital is dubious. Lenin says that

'The necessity for exporting capital arises from the fact that in a few countries capitalism has become 'overripe' and (owing to the backward stage of agriculture and the impoverished state of the masses) capital cannot find a field for 'profitable' investment' (Lenin, pp73-74)

In the first place, even these were an adequate explanation in Lenin day, they do not still apply - and certainly did not during the post war boom. But the argument is implicitly underconsumptionist. Marxist theory does not explain crisis as resulting from a lack of buying power, but rather explains how such a situation arises through a theory of overproduction. Lenin's argument implies a non Marxist theory of crisis.

But in any case, the bulk of capital exports have been historically to other imperialist countries : it is therefore logically impossible for such export to be caused by a capital surplus. If a capitalist cannot invest in his/her own country because of a 'glut' of capital s/he cannot then invest in another country with a similar glut. It seems more likely that investment overseas, as at home, is motivated by profitability, irrespective of the existence of a surplus.

3) It is not adequate to acknowledge (as Cunliffe does, p5) that Lenin may have been a little overenthusiastic in his assessment of the fusion of banking and industrial capital into finance capital. As Kinnell notes, Lenin gives credence to the idea that the imperialist countries could be transformed into non productive 'rentier states'. This had not happened in 1916, and it has not happened since - as does who point to the concentration of manufacturing industry, should know.

in advanced countries

### The importance of Lenin's theory

So what does this leave us with? It undoubtedly leaves us with a theory that has too many weaknesses to be regarded as the basic text on the question of imperialism - which it was never intended to be. It therefore leaves us with a dire need to develop the theory of imperialism.

It nevertheless leaves us with a few vital starting points and some important insights. The insistence that capitalist expansion is necessarily violent; the insistence that it is necessarily competitive, hence holds the potential of war; the importance of monopoly capital (the concentration and centralisation of capital on an international level); all of these things are important, valid, and useful. Uncritical dogmatism is not.

### THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The issue which is being debated - and which was of some importance to the dispute on the south Atlantic war - is an assessment of the significance of the achievement of 'formal' - ie political - independence by many third world countries. Much of the substance to Cunliffe's document revolves around this issue.

Cunliffe argues that it is of little significance. Kinnell argues it is of major significance and constitutes a bourgeois revolution for much of the third world. Kinnell argues - and I agree absolutely - that a demand for 'national independence' in such a situation can only mean autarchy (socialism - or more likely state capitalism in one country except on a pigmy scale.) Its content - which Kinnell