

Imperialism and Development

Bob Catley

Review of V.K. Kiernan, America: The New Imperialism; From White Settlement to World Hegemony, Zed Press, London, 1978, and Malcolm Caldwell, The Wealth of Some Nations, Zed Press, London, 1977.

These books represent two of the early offerings of a new and imaginative publishing venture recently undertaken in London. This is to be welcomed at a time when book publishing is increasingly slipping into the control of multi-national corporate conglomerates and University presses. As a result, of course, rejection slips containing "intemperate language" or "overly polemical" are becoming increasingly frequent, as this reviewer can readily testify. Zed's current title list is one of fiercely independent, radical publications which concentrate on the international political economy of capitalism - that is, imperialism. These two books are within that genre.

Kiernan's book is, as the title suggests, a history of the origins, development and consequences of the American imperial system. It is in six parts, four of which deal with the period before the First World War. Here we find the imperial expansion on the North American continent, the brutal suppression of the indigenous inhabitants, the enslavement of the black people and the exploitation of the labour movement especially when industrialisation gathers strength in the nineteenth century. The first imperial thrust overseas - 1890-1914 in the Caribbean and Pacific - is handled well and its impulses traced to that peculiarly American invention, the giant corporation or "trust" which is now known as the multi-national corporation. Kiernan shows how the sugar trust under Havemeyer and the oil trust under Rockefeller shaped American strategy. Indeed in retrospect the power which so few "robber barons" were able to wield over state policy may represent a unique period in capitalist history.

Part five deals with the 1914-45 period and is more difficult to summarise. Kiernan handles his theme adroitly as a dozen or so newly industrial capitalist states compete politically, economically and militarily for their share of a world shrunk by technological innovation. War, colonialism, interimperialist rivalries and alliances, depression, revolution and more war are obstacles which Washington must negotiate. It emerges in 1945 as the dominant imperial power.

The most interesting and longest section of the book deals with "The American Hegemony". Kiernan shows how America shaped the post war international order and quotes Domhoff with approval: 'American foreign policy during the post war era was initiated, planned and carried out by the richest, most powerful, and most international-minded owners and managers of major corporations and financial institutions'. He then shows how American capital penetrated both the weakened former imperial states and the decolonised Third World; how the military and security apparatuses of the American state were utilised to maintain the resultant system of exploitation; and how an American dominated cultural and intellectual global network was established to maintain the empire.

Since much of this story is well known it must be asked what original contribution does Kiernan make? Apart from providing a useful synthesis, he also argues that the American historical experience has been such that the imperial impulse is deeply embedded in all its major social institutions: mass culture, literature, the corporations, the labour movement and the state. To that extent he is a Marxist with an idealist rather than a base-superstructure method. In this fashion he joins the W.A. Williams school although with some notably original contributions, particularly in his analysis of mass culture. Two issues which he avoids, however, should be raised. First: has America really created a system, which Kautsky called ultra-imperialism, in which inter-imperialist rivalries are all but absent? Secondly: does the American economy - and therefore its economic prosperity - depend on imperialism? The answers are respectively No and Yes as the next book makes clear.

The late Malcolm Caldwell approaches the problem of imperialism from a rather different perspective. He spent the last years of his life developing a perspective on the modern world order which may be briefly characterised as a synthesis of four themes: overdevelopment, under-development, ecology and the historiography of empires. To my knowledge The Wealth of Some Nations represents the fullest expression of this view although other articles and reviews elsewhere complement it.

The first theme, overdevelopment, finds its expression in a nearly classical Marxist description of the development of the advanced capitalist states. In this the bourgeoisie extract an economic surplus from their indigenous working class and those colonies they are able to claim, and utilise the surplus to commence the accumulation of capital. Precisely because this process depends on imperial exploitation this path is not accessible to those societies which missed the boat 50 years ago. But in addition, as the imperial structure comes under challenge, as is now happening, overdevelopment becomes less feasible and social decay sets in. Caldwell documented this, in particular with respect to declining standards of life expectancy, diet, pollution, drug usage, health and culture. He argues that the age of affluence is over and fundamental economic reorganisation is required - particularly in the UK where the process of decay is more advanced. Central to this process will be greater self-sufficiency in foodstuffs and other energy sources.

The second theme involves the underdevelopment of the neo-colonial areas. Here he argues basically the thesis of Paul Baran - that the impact of imperialism on the Third World was to reorganise its production patterns to the service of the metropolitan centres. As a result living standards have been declining fairly steadily while the rate of exploitation has risen correspondingly. In order to escape this process a Third World country must break out of the world market, and reorganise particularly its agricultural sector towards production for its domestic market, if its population is to escape this trend. Hence his sympathy for the social models of China, North Korea and the Indo-Chinese states. While this sympathy was never unqualified he regarded the break with the world market, by whatever means, as a necessary precondition for human progress.

The third theme concerned the destruction of the natural environment which he linked not just to unpleasant pollution but to the necessary consequences of the imperial system itself. Just to take one aspect, he pointed out that the massive transfer of energy from the Third World to the First World - energy imperialism - was eliminating the physical basis for any future human progress in the neo-colonial areas. This was true not just of hydro-carbons oil and coal - but also of agricultural production which provides energy for human machines and

destroys the capacity of the earth itself. This depletion of non-renewable natural resources makes the break-up of the world market an even more urgent task.

Finally, he raises the question of empires in an historical context and refers to the resurgence of interest among historians, particularly Cipolla et al., in the comparative study of imperial history - Roman, Ottoman, Chinese and American. Linking this to the vexing question in the Marxist system of how the transition from one mode of production to another occurs, he argues along the following lines. In order for Europe to recover from the tyrannical system of slavery which the Romans had imposed, it was necessary for human society to enter into a period of experimentation and renewal. This was known as the Dark Ages. A myriad of forms of human society and production emerged from the empire until a new system - feudalism - was developed. Today as the American dominated empire declines a similar system of experimentation with various forms of production and society will occur. Each requires careful and systematic study, be it Vietnam, Kim Il Sung's (Caldwell's "Billy Bunks") Korea, Pol Pot's Kampuchea or Khomeini's Iran: for they have struck blows against the empire as did the Celts, Huns, Visigoths and Gauls before them. Meanwhile America will also engage in competition with other imperial centres to hold its position.

The originality of Caldwell's contribution deserves careful consideration. It links Marxism, ecology and history in a unique form.

Hence both these books deserve a place on our bookshelves and testify to the vitality of the Zed publishing enterprise at a time when critical literature is facing even greater difficulty than usual in finding an outlet.

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