

Anti-Americanism: The “anti-imperialism” of fools

By David North and David Walsh
22 September 2001

A section of middle class commentators has reacted to the horrific attack on New York City and Washington with cynicism and callousness.

What took place on September 11? A group of individuals apparently inspired by Islamic fundamentalism, one of the most reactionary ideologies on the face of earth, smashed two airplanes into the World Trade Center and a third into the Pentagon, while a fourth hijacked plane crashed in western Pennsylvania. The result of this carnage was the death of more than 6,000 human beings, the overwhelming majority of them civilians, representing the greatest loss of life in a single day on American soil since the Civil War.

This was a heinous political crime whose predictable outcome has been to strengthen the capitalist state, fan the flames of right-wing chauvinism and clear the way for US military intervention in Central Asia.

The socialist future of mankind depends upon the awakening of the most humane and generous instincts of the working people of the world. What happened on September 11—the awful deaths of thousands of innocent people, among them office workers, firemen, janitors, and business people—profoundly offends those instincts.

In our first statement on the tragedy [The political roots of the terror attack on New York and Washington] the *World Socialist Web Site* initiated an analysis of the event’s deep political roots. Our abhorrence of the terror attack does not signify any lessening of opposition to the US government, or any intention to absolve American officials of their responsibility for the building up of the Islamic fundamentalist forces. Having said that, however, the reprehensible response of certain petty bourgeois opinion makers to the event underscores the gulf that divides socialist opposition to imperialism from vulgar anti-Americanism.

A case in point is an article that appeared in the *Guardian*, the British daily newspaper, on September 18, authored by Charlotte Raven, a former member of the Militant Tendency, editor of the now-defunct *Modern Review* and currently a semi-celebrity and professional cynic. The piece is headlined, “A bully with a bloody nose is still a bully,” the bully in question being the US. In the first place, the September 11 tragedy was not “a bloody nose,” it was a catastrophe. Thousands of people were incinerated instantly when the airplanes hit the buildings, thousands more died when tons of rubble collapsed on them. Anyone who was emotionally unaffected by the terror and suffering experienced by tens of thousands as a result of this attack has no right to call himself or herself a socialist.

Raven writes: “It is perfectly possible to condemn the terrorist action and dislike the US just as much as you did before the WTC went down. Many will have woken up on Wednesday with that

combination of emotions... America is the same country it was before September 11. If you didn’t like it then, there’s no reason why you should have to pretend to now.” Raven’s references to “the US,” full stop, is no slip of the pen. It is repeated throughout the article. She never once uses the phrase “the US government” or “the US ruling elite”, or an equivalent. Using nationality as an epithet is always reactionary. Confronted with the most monstrous government in history, Hitler’s Nazi regime, socialists never descended to referring with contempt to “Germany” or “the Germans.”

To present “the US” as some predatory imperialist monolith, as Raven and others do, can only confuse and disorient. It not only serves as a barrier to genuine internationalism, it overlooks the contradictory character of American history and society. What does it mean to “dislike the US”? What sort of social element speaks like this? The United States is a complex entity, with a complex history, elements of which are distinctly ignoble, elements of which are deeply noble. The US has passed through two revolutions—the American Revolution and the Civil War—the mass battles of the Depression and the struggle for Civil Rights. The contradiction between the democratic ideals and revolutionary principles on which the nation was founded and its social and political realities has always been the starting point of the struggle for socialism in the United States.

The US was, if one considers the relationship between theory and politics, the product of the great Enlightenment. It established political principles, embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, rather than religion or ethnicity, as the basis of national identity. This origin of the nation in the struggle for abstract ideals—democracy, republicanism—reverberated across the globe. The American Revolution played no small role in inspiring the events that transformed France a decade later.

Even after 200 years, the United States is still fighting through the political and historical implications of its own founding principles. The American population, polyglot and highly diverse, is obsessed with ideological problems, although its approach is often maddeningly pragmatic. As the popular response to the Bush hijacking of the 2000 election demonstrated, there remains a deep commitment to elementary democratic principles. A low level of class consciousness and the failure of masses of Americans to generalize from their experiences, however, provides the ruling elite the opportunity to play on precisely these democratic notions in order to blind layers of the population temporarily as to the true nature of its plans. For Bush and his ilk “defending freedom and democracy” is merely a code phrase for the right of the American elite to have its way around the world. To the ordinary American citizen, these words mean something quite different. The sinister reality of the US government’s new “war

against terrorism,” with its grandiose aim of reorganizing an entire region of the world in line with American geopolitical interests, will make its way into popular consciousness providing the necessary work is conducted by socialist internationalists.

In many ways all the vast problems in the struggle for socialism find their most complex expression in America. How could that not be the case? If one cannot find points of departure for a higher form of social organization in the US, in what corner of the globe are they to be found? What’s more, the individual who sees no basis for socialism in America clearly has given up on the prospects of world socialism altogether. The Marxist has always been distinguished from the common or garden variety radical by his or her deep confidence in the revolutionary potential of the American working class. In this regard, the US ruling elite has a much greater insight into the true nature of American society than the blinkered radical. The American bourgeoisie inveighs night and day against socialism and communism, in a manner far out of proportion to the threat currently posed by the socialist movement in the US, because it understands or at least senses instinctively that in the most advanced capitalist society, all things being equal, socialism offers such a rational and attractive alternative.

America is, at once, the most advanced and the most backward of societies. Its culture attracts and repels, but always fascinates. Official society and many ordinary Americans deny the very existence of distinct social classes, and yet the country is riven by the most profound and ever-deepening social differentiation. These social contradictions will only be exacerbated, as the economic developments of this week have already shown, as the war drive proceeds.

The US has produced Franklin, Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, as well as extraordinary working class and socialist leaders. Its immense contradictions are perhaps exemplified by the figure of Jefferson, the slave-owner who wrote one of the greatest and most sincere hymns to human freedom.

Raven continues, resorting to the terminology of Postmodernist drivel: “When America speaks from its heart, it retreats into a language that none but its true-born citizens can begin to understand. At the root of this is an overwhelming need to control meaning. America can’t let the world speak for itself. It was taken unawares last Tuesday and part of the trauma of that event was the shock of being forced to listen to a message that it hadn’t had time to translate. The subsequent roar of anger was, amongst other things, the sound of the US struggling to regain the right to control its own narrative.”

If Raven is speaking of George W. Bush and other servants of American imperial interests, then the first sentence has no meaning. Such people clearly don’t speak from the heart on this or any other occasion; they are in the business of lying and deceiving. But pardon us for pointing out that, in fact, when “America,” in the form of its greatest political and cultural representatives, has spoken “from its heart,” millions around the world have listened and understood, beginning in the aftermath of July 4, 1776. The most advanced British workers certainly paid attention to the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. One could mention the appeals to the international working class on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti and numerous other examples. And such instances, we hazard to predict, will occur in the future too.

One might add that the finest products of American culture have also attracted and moved masses of people around the world, from Poe and Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne, in the 19th century, to Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Richard Wright and others in the 20th. Nor should

one entirely forget the influence of American music, popular and otherwise. A few people, one imagines, have heard it speaking from the heart. This to say nothing of contributions with international implications in film, painting, sculpture, dance and architecture. Raven apparently counts upon her readers being so consumed by subjective venom and their own self-importance that they overlook obvious historical and cultural realities.

It has always been an essential task of socialists in the US to awaken the positive and generous instincts that are so deeply embedded in the American population. There are, after all, two Americas, the America of Bush, Clinton and the other scoundrels, and another America, of its working people. Revolutionary internationalists have continuously insisted on this. James P. Cannon, the leader of the American Trotskyists, devoted a speech to this theme in July 1948. Of the “Two Americas” he observed: “One is the America of the imperialists—of the little clique of capitalists, landlords, and militarists who are threatening and terrifying the world. This is the America the people of the world hate and fear. There is the other America—the America of the workers and farmers and the ‘little people.’ They constitute the great majority of the people. They do the work of the country. They revere its old democratic traditions—its old record of friendship for the people of other lands, in their struggles against Kings and Despots—its generous asylum once freely granted to the oppressed.”

The struggle against the policies and designs of the American government requires, in the first instance, the exposure of the latter’s claim that it is the true voice and representative of the people. Socialists are obliged to explain that the US ruling elite is carrying out anti-democratic and rapacious policies, with inevitably tragic consequences, in the pursuit of which it falsely invokes the name of the American people.

All this of course is a closed book to the smug middle class philistine and snob, satisfied to make use of words and phrases that come most easily to hand. Raven’s variety of anti-Americanism is no more original than it is insightful. It is available cheaply and in large quantities in middle class circles in Britain, France, Germany and, for that matter, in the United States. It is available, so to speak, “on tap.” Such an outlook has the virtue of appearing oppositional, while not committing its adherent to any course of political action that might cause inconvenience. It is a form of pseudo-socialism, the phony “anti-imperialism” of cynics and fools.

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