

Populist Challenge to Imperialism – A Post-Marxist Critical Appraisal

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Introduction

Imperialism meant the formation of an empire, which is bringing several countries under the control of one supreme authority. In this sense, it has existed since ancient times. In modern times, it found a new expression in the form of colonialism. Edward Said describes that imperialism means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling distant territories whereas colonialism, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements of distant territory. Modern forms of imperialism are the product of expansion of trade and industry in several countries. They started exploiting the natural resources of those countries to strengthen their own economies. Champions of imperialism usually argue that they seek to extend the benefit of civilization to the uncivilized people. Indeed it is an attempt to attribute moral dignity to the pursuit of their self-interest.

Third World and Post-Marxist Thought

The emergence of the power blocs coincided with the decline of imperialism. A large number of countries of Asia and Africa became new nation-states in the 20th century, after the end of colonialism, and the countries who had formally gained their independence in early 19th century, also joined the new power blocs. These countries had remained under-development during the long period foreign domination; now they are chiefly interested in maintaining their independence and securing their social and economic development. Together they are described as the third world countries.

The terms ‘third world’, ‘developing countries’ or ‘developing nations’ refers to those countries of Asia, Africa and Latin American which are characterized by (a) a low level of economic and political development as compared to industrially advanced nations of the world; (b) a tendency to keep themselves free from the influence of the capitalist world (the first world - comprising the countries of Western Europe, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) as well as the communist world (the second world – comprising the former

Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe which were dubbed Soviet satellites) and (c) of these, the countries of Asia and Africa achieved their political independence from colonial domination in the first half of the twentieth century, largely because of their economic dependence on the United States. The term 'third world' is not very precisely defined as some European countries, which are less developed and whose problems are similar to those of third world countries, are not included in this category because they did not seek to challenge the hegemony of the first or the second world with whom their names were associated. In the sphere of international politics, third world countries have been following the policy of non-alignment; they refused to join military alliances led by the super powers of the capitalist world (the United State) and the communist world. India is one of the leading countries of the third world. Third world countries do not constitute a separate bloc as against the capitalist and the former communist blocs, yet they sought to maintain close coordination not only to ensure mutual cooperation but to raise a voice against their domination and exploitation by the industrially advanced nations. Although these countries are faced with tremendous problems of socio-economic and political development, yet they constitute such a vast majority of the world's population and world's sovereign states that if they act in unison, they are bound to play a decisive role in the future of world politics (Gaubu 1981: 620-622).

There are important differences between the 'three continents' (Latin America, Asia, Africa). In Latin America, indigenous societies were almost wholly destroyed centuries ago, white or creole ruling classes with an European culture were established, and the institutions of the modern state were installed at almost the same time as in Europe. The larger Latin American countries have average income levels well above those of Africa and Asia, though equally far below those of Europe. At the same time, they have all the structural features of underdevelopment. In Asia, major pre-capitalist civilizations were drawn into the capitalist orbit more gradually and at a later date. The larger Asian countries have well-established local ruling classes, a considerable technological capacity, and industrial sectors which are quite large in absolute terms, though small relative to population. Average income levels, however, are very low, with an enormous mass of peasants and workers reduced to near starvation level. Some smaller Asian countries, on the other hand, are relatively industrialized, and have experienced very rapid economic growth, while Japan is, of course, in another category altogether. Africa suffered the destructive effects of the slave trade over several centuries, but actual European penetration into most of the continent did not come

until the 'imperialist' stage, much later than in Asia or Latin America. It is, in general, the least developed continent, with tiny industrial sectors and low levels of income, and is still ravaged by famine and disease (Brewer 1980: 9-10).

Populist movements emerged in the third world countries and these countries help for the emergence of new power bloc, challenging the imperialist countries. From the late 1940 to the early 1970s Argentinean politics was dominated by peronism, a peculiar mix of nationalism and social democracy headed by the enigmatic Juan Domingo Peron. During the 1960s Ernesto Laclau became a member of various left-wing organisations and was particularly active in the student movement. According to Laclau during the period peronism displaced the convention debates on the left, especially concerning the classical alternatives of reform/revolution and Stalinism/Trotskyism. Due to the various alliances forged during peron's first term in 1946, a permanent political division had been created in the Argentinean left between the liberals on the one hand and the nationalist on the other. Laclau says that these countries have clearly nationalist orientation. They seek to continue the anti-imperialist revolution through a strategic hegemonisation of the democratic banners and have established the basis of a more radical anti-imperialist struggle. Laclau explains that the socialists would only be able to consolidate and advance the anti-imperialist revolution if they could achieve a hegemonic position in the democratic struggle (Laclau 1990: 198-199).

Laclau and Mouffe constructed a philosophical diagnosis that helps scrutinizing the hegemonic discourse of elite. They are interested in evidencing populism is not a cultural trait of Latin Americans but a conditions of politics. Imperialist imaginary is alarmed by the rise of populist policies in third world countries, arguing its roots is related to anti-imperialism background, leaving behind the real roots of populism. Therefore, the concept should be redefined as an instrument to conform political ethos revitalizing the frustrations provoked by the alienatory forces of capitalism. Focusing on populism as something beyond the deviance, or the psychological pathology but the ways citizens reach reality by means of politics. Laclau's post-Marxist perspective is primarily concerned with the role of 'the people' as a collective agent of social change.

Laclau and Mouffe explains that hegemonic struggles that derived from an antagonism to be found at the heart of all contemporary social relations. In liberal-democratic, 'advanced industrial' societies, different forces competed to make their ideology or 'discourse' prevail and claim the right to speak on behalf of the 'people'. Although class antagonisms may exist under capitalism, they are not intrinsic to the system as portrayed by 'essentialist' Marxism,

but are the product of ‘discursive’ or ‘symbolic’ constructions, whose roots were more deeply psychological than social, stemming from an individual’s desire for ‘fullness’, the result of a primordial ‘lack’ of a satisfyingly stable identity based upon a sense of oneness with the ‘other’. According to Lacan’s, the full recognition by the ‘other’ of the self is always open to doubt. Hence, the ‘other’ in all its symbolic forms can be blamed for the blocked identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125), and hence the continuing possibility of antagonism. Since antagonism is the key to understanding the formation of identities through this self/other relation, and language and other forms of ‘signifier’ are always open to a multiplicity of meanings, the symbolic field is always susceptible to destabilisation. The conditions of possibility for hegemonic struggle are characterised by the conflict between two competing logics of ‘equivalence’ (discourses that stress a sameness of identities as a result of a perceived common ‘negative’, threat or enemy) and ‘difference’ (discourses where identities are constructed through non-adversarial, ‘positive’ differences). Alliances constructed through ‘chains’ of equivalence in complex and highly socially differentiated, advanced industrial societies can easily be disrupted through the logic of difference. Hegemony involves competition between different political forces to get maximum support for, or identification with, their definition of ‘floating signifiers’, such as ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ (terms which can assume different meanings, depending on whether they are ‘articulated’ in, for example, liberal or socialist discourse), or ‘empty signifiers’, such as ‘order’ or even ‘democracy’ (terms which can be invested with a variety of meanings because they have no inherent content and can serve to unite disparate movements) (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 127-34).

Laclau and Mouffe wanted to construct a ‘nodal point’ around ‘plural and radical’ democracy, building on the emerging political identities of the new social movements (as well as workers’ movements). In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe seek to conceive of a politics which would embrace new social movements that had emerged around issues not containable by the category of class: for example, race, gender, ethnicity, gay rights, and the environment, built on the experiences of those participating in them.

Conclusion

The countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America who are victims of colonial exploitation in the past and are still characterised by a low level of economic and political development as compared to industrially advanced nations of the world. Development is largely concerned with the economic activity undertaken by a country for the improvement of quality of life of

its citizens, and its social consequences. Since the development countries are more concerned about their all-round development, it is the focus of their public policies. Populism itself a extensive coalition of farmers, wage earners and middle-class activities worked with self confidence to challenge the elite. It may promise widely-demanded food, housing, employment, basic social services and income redistribution. Once in political power, they may not always be financially or politically able to fulfil these promises. Populism usually includes contrasting components such as a claim for equality of political rights and universal participation for the common people, but fused with some sort of authoritarianism often under charismatic leadership.

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