

# **US Imperialism and the Third World**

A Review of:

Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani, eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 630 pages, paperback \$26.50, cloth \$69.50.

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In his life, Eqbal Ahmad was a venerable icon in many left circles, not least in the United States. This was showcased at the conference organized in 1997 to mark his retirement from Hampshire College. There to honor Professor Ahmad had arrived some of the most eminent left thinkers and activists from around the world. A list of the conference speakers read like a Who's Who of the global left.

Ahmad has been praised highly by some of the leading writers on the left; and he deserves all of it. Edward Said speaks for many when he writes, "Ahmad was that rare thing, an intellectual un-intimidated by power or authority ... Perhaps the shrewdest and most original anti-imperialist of Asia and Africa." Gayatri Spivak describes him as "one of the most powerful activist intellectuals of our time." Noam Chomsky writes of his "ability, rarely even approached" to observe the major events of the past half century "from a perspective that integrates his deep immersion in the culture, history, and life experiences of both the North and South."<sup>1</sup> Yet, Ahmad's wider intellectual reputation lags behind the high esteem in which he is held in left circles.<sup>2</sup>

In part, the reasons for this discrepancy lie in his politics: his anti-imperialism and his critical stance on Israel. But, also, this is because – as Edward Said puts it – Ahmad was "an oral person – a sort of peregrine Muslim sage, and all of us his *chelas*, or disciples ...". In addition, although Ahmad was a prolific writer, his writings are "scattered, in his typically thoughtless way, all over the globe in articles, scholarly pieces, journalistic interventions, and

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from back cover of David Barsamian, *Eqbal Ahmad: Confronting Empire* (Cambridge, MA.: South End Press, 2000), and Chomsky's introduction to the present volume.

<sup>2</sup> A search in Google Scholar turned up few references to Ahmad's writings in the scholarly literature: 247 references compared to 15,700 for Edward Said.

interviews.” Thanks to the editors of this volume, we can now find between two covers – arranged into five sections, each introduced by the editors – many of Ahmad’s best writings.<sup>3</sup> Those of us who did not “have the privilege of knowing him” now have the chance to “know what a truly remarkable, gifted man he was.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Framing the Post-War Period**

Ahmad’s oeuvre covers a vast territory. His essays provide both the big picture and a variety of close-ups on the conflicts that unfolded across the globe during the post-War era. In his big picture, Ahmad draws upon the neo-Marxist theory of the history and structure of the global economy. The global economy is shaped by corporations, based in the advanced countries, who use the power of the state to arrange and re-arrange the world to their advantage; over time, this dynamic has divided the world into an advanced center and a backward periphery. “Nothing has changed this fundamental reality, which since the advent of modern imperialism, has defined the symbiosis between monopoly capitalism and imperial states (p. 210).” It is this basic framework that Ahmad extends, deepens and applies to study global conflicts in our age.

Ahmad (pp. 219-27) uses this framework to critique the “dominant historiography” which organizes its interpretation of the

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<sup>3</sup> The five sections are: Revolutionary Warfare and Counterinsurgency; Third World Politics: Pathologies of Power, Pathologies of Resistance; On the Cusp of the Cold War: Portents of a New Century; The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: Colonization in an Era of Decolonization; and South Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Barsamian (2000): xxxiii.

post-War period around the concept of the Cold War, as a rivalry between competing economic systems, between freedom and totalitarianism, and ultimately between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rightly, Ahmad points out that this framework has some troubling flaws. By excluding “as the central concern of world politics, the rest of humanity,” this allows some Western commentators to look upon the post-War period as ‘The Great Peace.’ Forgotten are the horrendous wars of this period, directly or indirectly connected to the United States, which collectively killed twenty-one million people in the Third World. It also protects the major Western societies “from confronting the intellectual and moral consequences of their own history (p. 225).” In addition, this framework fails in two of its main predictions. The termination of the Cold War brought no ‘peace dividends,’ nor did it herald the ‘end of history.’ On the other hand, it intensified the imperialist siege of the Third World.

In a bold departure from the Cold War framework, Ahmad examines the post-War period as a new phase in the development of global capitalism. What distinguishes this phase is the rise of national liberation movements (NLMs), which Washington itself saw as “the least manageable – hence ultimately the most serious – menace to American interests (p. 334).” In their radical and revolutionary forms, the NLMs challenged “the existence of the three basic and interlinked elements that support and perpetuate the structure of imperialism: the international corporations, the pro-Western and procapitalist indigenous bourgeoisie, and the state’s apparatus of coercion and control (such as the bureaucracy) (p. 334).” The US State Department reported twenty-two armed NLMs in the Third World in 1958 and forty-two in 1965 (p. 299). In at least two cases – Algeria and Vietnam – the NLMs demonstrated their ability to defeat “two of the most advanced war ma-

chines and most highly developed national security states of our time (pp. 298-99).” In the post-War period, Ahmad (p. 299) argues, the NLMs “have been the primary force in defining conflict and change in the international system.”

Containing, neutralizing or reversing the NLMs was the primary task of imperialism in the post-War period. Depending on the circumstances, the US countered this threat from the Third World with military support for dictatorships fighting popular or revolutionary movements; covert aid to coups against populist or radical nationalist regimes; economic sanctions and open wars against radical nationalist or revolutionary regimes; and arming Israel in order to neutralize radical Arab nationalist states. In addition, Ahmad (p. 299) maintains that during the post-War years, these imperialist actions – and not superpower rivalry – constituted the “the ultimate risk of Armageddon.”<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, did the US direct its rhetoric and diplomacy against the Soviet threat? To this, Ahmad (p. 246) tosses out a tantalizingly brief answer. The Cold War “served as the latest mechanism for organizing and legitimizing a world system of domination.” Does he mean that the ‘Cold War’ was hyped up to distract attention from the main – and bloody – business of suppressing NLMs in the Third World? Ahmad (p. 334) also offers an intriguing take on the détente: it allowed the US “to intervene with unlimited inhumanity – against social revolutions.”

In order to pursue imperialist projects a great power must invent myths to justify them. “A policy which responds to the interests of the few but needs the support of the many must necessarily invoke a people’s sense of mission and fear (p. 211).” Amer-

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<sup>5</sup> Nine of the fifteen “documentable cases of active nuclear diplomacy” during 1945-1984 were sparked by US conflict with the Third World (Ahmad: p. 299).

ica's mission is "to stand watch over the world's freedom." This myth has worked so well because it has historical roots in the American sense of mission born of its colonial origins in a 'wilderness,' the deep religiosity of the early settlers, and the conviction of the founding fathers that they had launched a republic founded on freedom. There were anxieties too about the US as an 'island power' confronting a great 'continental power' in the Soviet Union. Without the conditioning of these factors, one cannot explain the "almost theological anticommunism (p. 214)" that took hold of America in the post-War period.

American imperialism was not costless. While it fought NLMs and ratcheted the arms race, the US began to lose the economic race to Europe and Japan starting in the mid-1960s. In order to deal with this new challenge, the US looked for "new leverages" over these "old allies (p. 337)." It was at this point that the Middle East entered into America's strategic vision. The US could gain a powerful lever over its old allies by controlling the region's oilfields; by the same stroke, this would also exclude Soviet ambitions on the same oilfields. A strong power base in the region, bounded as it is by the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, would also bring the US close to the hub of the major NLMs in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. In consequence, starting in the 1970s, "the world struggle for power has shifted (p. 338)" to the Middle East.

### **Revolutionary Strategies**

Some of the most enduring insights in this volume pertain to the revolutionary movements in the Third World.<sup>6</sup> Repeatedly,

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<sup>6</sup> In large part, Ahmad (p. 14) draws these insights from what he de-

Ahmad asserts the primacy of the political over the military as the guiding principle of all revolutionary movements. In a succinct formulation of this thesis, Ahmad states: “A revolutionary guerilla movement concentrates on “outadministering” not on “outfighting” the enemy (p. 15).” A successful revolution first needs to build a following amongst the masses: it must isolate the enemy from the people, delegitimize its authority, and create parallel institutions of governance that will eventually replace the repressive institutions of the enemy. The revolutionaries can wage guerilla warfare only if they have “highly committed but covert civilian support which cannot be obtained at gun point (p. 18).” This is what he means by “outadministering” the enemy. This principle informs all the successful revolutions of the twentieth century, including the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Algerian.

The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the party that led the Algerian revolution, was “one of the marvels of twentieth-century political organization... (p. 99).” Even in the face of military defeat, the Algerian revolution prevailed because the FLN “continued to outadminister and “illegitimize” the French (p. 16).” Yet, a paradox remains. Why did this revolution, built on the primacy of the political, fail to establish a revolutionary, democratic society? The organization, its leadership, commanders and cadres were overcome by a conventional army that the revolutionary leadership had itself created. Why did this happen?

Ahmad thinks this was because the Algerians refused to support the leaders of the revolution; they were “weary of war ... and suspicious that the ousted revolutionaries were settling personal scores (p. 95).” This does not seem right, for the Algerians would

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scribes as his “personal observations of the Algerian struggle.”

have continued to fight if the French had delayed their departure. Other factors ought to be considered: the arrest of FLN's "historic chiefs (p. 95)," the evisceration of the revolutionary cadres in Algiers, and the flawed decision to establish an army outside Algeria. Whatever the explanations, it is obvious that Algeria – as one of its leaders put it – "had a false start (p. 95)."

Ahmad sharply critiques Regis Debray's insistence – in his *foco* theory – that the guerilla force must play a leading role in Latin American revolutions. The popular support will follow once the guerillas start defeating government military forces. In addition, when the populace has been organized in support of revolutionary aims, the guerillas can protect them by means of quick and flexible guerilla actions against the enemy's military fronts. In time, moreover, the guerilla force itself becomes the core of the political party that eventually leads the revolution to political victory. This strategy, Ahmad argues, is deeply flawed. Nowhere does Debray explain how the conditions in Latin America are different from those in China, Algeria, or Vietnam. Nor does he show that the conditions that supported Castro's band of guerillas in Cuba are present in Latin America (p. 28). Finally, Debray's reading of the Cuban revolution is faulted (p. 28). In making the transition from liberation to socialism, Castro's guerillas were not alone; they had the support of the communists (p. 34).

A comparison of two revolutionary movements – the African National Congress (ANC) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – also establishes the primacy of the political over the military. Both were fighting racist, colonial-settler states. Yet the ANC dismantled South Africa's apartheid, whereas the PLO ended up "running the world's most publicized municipalities (p. 76)." Ahmad ascribes PLO's failure to its neglect of the political. The Palestinians began their struggle with guerilla action, gained

visibility with spectacular airplane hijackings, but neglected to build a political base in the occupied territories, or contest the Zionists inside the US, their power base. Unlike the ANC, the PLO “seemed committed to outfighting its adversary without outad-ministering it (p. 78).” The failings of PLO aside – and they are many – the Palestinians were up against greater odds. Israel enjoyed massive support inside the United States, not least from Jewish, Christian Zionist and liberal groups. This helped to cement America’s ‘special relationship’ with Israel that brought unstinted military and diplomatic support for Israeli actions against Palestinians. On the contrary, it was the ANC which had the support of blacks and liberals in the US. The ANC had a far more receptive audience in the US and Western Europe.

### **Third World Pathologies**

By the 1980s, many Third World countries were saddled with centralized, corrupt and repressive states, dominated by Westernized elites. Ahmad maintains that these pathologies resulted from the adaptation of colonial states to the needs of the new elites and the new conditions under which they operated. He also examines a more recent pathology – religious fundamentalism – arising in response to the first set of pathologies.

First, Ahmad debunks the historiography that links the first pathology to ‘despotic’ traditions that pre-dated colonialism. Before the advent of colonialism, governance in Asia and Africa – even under the Mughal, Ottoman and Safavid empires – was quite decentralized, with power dispersed in the hands of provincial governors, tribal elders, religious leaders, and land-owners (p. 121). The centralized, repressive state was crafted to serve the interests of colonial capital. Over time, this colonial state created a “state

bourgeoisie (p. 150)” that consisted of indigenous civil servants and soldiers. In many cases, independence gave this state bourgeoisie control over the colonial state (p. 139).

Once in power, these new elites expanded the bureaucracy to augment their own ranks, to meet the demands for employment, and used their power to weaken the civil society when it insisted on accountability and sharing power (p. 150). Notwithstanding the nationalistic rhetoric of these new states, the metropolitan powers were quick to establish ties with the state bourgeoisie; and the economic and military aid they offered accelerated the expansion of the state bureaucracy. This created a “modern, educated managerial elite isolated from the productive process, alienated from its culture, and in the face of continued dependence on external know-how and capital, unable to expand into a productive national bourgeoisie (p. 140).” In a final twist, when this managerial elite could not satisfy growing populist demands for infrastructure, better living standards and jobs, they drifted to the right, using the powers of the expanded state to repress the populist movements (p. 150).

Perhaps, this narrative places too great a burden of explanation on the internal dynamics of Third World countries. Moreover, this is at odds with Ahmad’s insistence on the centrality of massive US interventions against nationalist and revolutionary movements in the Third World during the post-War era. In several countries, the US played an instrumental role in supporting the military overthrow of nationalist or socialist regimes, such as Iran in 1953, Indonesia in 1965, and Chile in 1973. In other cases, the ever-present threat of Western or Israeli interventions pushed radical nationalist regimes in an autocratic direction.

A similar disconnect exists between Ahmad’s analysis of Islamist politics in his essay, “Islam and Politics,” and a later es-

say, “Roots of the Religious Right.” While recognizing that Islamic societies quite early developed secular forms of governance, the first essay also points to the political tradition of Islam which fuses religion and politics, and which is “activist and insurrectionary (p. 170).” This essays recognizes that Islamist movements are a response to the abject failures of nationalist movements to restore dignity to Islamic societies; that the Middle East alone has been subjected to re-colonization in the post-War period; that the deep divide between political and civil society in Islamic societies is unsustainable; and that there exists a “time bomb (p. 177)” in this breach. In short, the Islamist movements – whatever their other failings – are seeking to liberate their societies from colonization and imperialism. Yet, in the later essay Ahmad lumps the Islamist movements with two other fundamentalisms – Jewish and Christian – that have spearheaded or supported an imperialist and racist agenda against countries in the Third World.

### **Concluding Remarks**

These essays provide an extraordinary tour of the world in the post-War period. Although he was born in a remote village in colonial India, Ahmad followed a trajectory that took him after a stop in Pakistan to the United States – the center of the global system – from where he observed with eagle eyes the defining global conflicts of the post-War era, studied the progress and erosion of national liberation movements across the Third World, and analyzed these conflicts and movements with a deep sense of theory, history and politics. Not only do these essays provide the big picture, but they demonstrate a grasp of details which might put specialists to shame. In this volume is contained the intellectual synopsis of an era that it would be hard to find in any other single

book. Ahmad's is the most articulate, analytical and passionate voice from the Third World since Franz Fanon. Almost certainly, he is also the most astute political thinker the Islamic world has produced in the twentieth century.

The power of the mind at work behind these essays is also displayed in many of the predictions that Ahmad makes: those that flow from the analysis and others offered as *obiter dicta*. Space allows us to consider just two. The elimination of Saddam Hussein, he had predicted in 1998, would produce chaos in Iraq since the US does not possess the "will or the resources to undertake the remaking of Iraq." In the event, the scramble over Iraq "may ignite protracted warfare" involving Iraqi factions, its neighbors and the US. Islamism will thrive. Iran "may easily fill the post-Saddam vacuum (p. 289)," and this will be countered by US's conservative Arab allies with support for Sunni fundamentalism. Then, there is his remark about communism offered in 1965: he did not believe that it is "the wave of the future ... (p. 22)." This on the ground that Vietnam is "a special case – culturally, historically, and politically."