GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

# Beware the Anti-Anti-War Left

By Jean Bricmont
Global Research, September 06, 2016
Counter Punch 4 December 2012

Region: Europe, USA
Theme: Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda

*Ever since the 1990s, and especially since the Kosovo war in 1999, anyone who opposes armed interventions by Western powers and NATO has to confront what may be called an anti-anti-war left (including its far left segment). In Europe, and notably in France, this anti-anti-war left is made up of the mainstream of social democracy, the Green parties and most of the radical left. The anti-anti-war left does not come out openly in favor of Western military interventions and even criticizes them at times (but usually only for their tactics or alleged motivations – the West is supporting a just cause, but clumsily and for oil or for geo-strategic reasons).*

But most of its energy is spent issuing "warnings" against the supposed dangerous drift of that part of the left that remains firmly opposed to such interventions. It calls upon us to show solidarity with the "victims" against "dictators who kill their own people", and not to give in to knee-jerk anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, or anti-Zionism, and above all not to end up on the same side as the far right. After the Kosovo Albanians in 1999, we have been told that "we" must protect Afghan women, Iraqi Kurds and more recently the people of Libya and of Syria.

It cannot be denied that the anti-anti-war left has been extremely effective. The Iraq war, which was sold to the public as a fight against an imaginary threat, did indeed arouse a fleeting opposition, but there has been very little opposition on the left to interventions presented as "humanitarian", such as the bombing of Yugoslavia to detach the province of Kosovo, the bombing of Libya to get rid of Gaddafi, or the current intervention in Syria. Any objections to the revival of imperialism or in favor of peaceful means of dealing with such conflicts have simply been brushed aside by invocations of "R2P", the right or responsibility to protect, or the duty to come to the aid of a people in danger.

The fundamental ambiguity of the anti-anti-war left lies in the question as to who are the "we" who are supposed to intervene and protect. One might ask the Western left, social movements or human rights organizations the same question Stalin addressed to the Vatican, "How many divisions do you have?" As a matter of fact, all the conflicts in which "we" are supposed to intervene are armed conflicts. Intervening means intervening *militarily* and for that, one needs the appropriate *military* means. It is perfectly obvious that the Western left does not possess those means. It could call on European armies to intervene, instead of the United States, but they have never done so without massive support from the United States. So in reality the actual message of the anti-anti-war left is: "Please, oh Americans, make war not love!" Better still, inasmuch as since their debacle in Afghanistan and in Iraq, the Americans are leery of sending in ground troops, the message amounts to nothing other than asking the U.S. Air Force to go bomb countries where human rights violations are reported to be taking place.

Of course, anyone is free to claim that human rights should henceforth be entrusted to the good will of the U.S. government, its bombers, its missile launchers and its drones. But it is important to realize that that is the concrete meaning of all those appeals for "solidarity" and "support" to rebel or secessionist movements involved in armed struggles. Those movements have no need of slogans shouted during "demonstrations of solidarity" in Brussels or in Paris, and that is not what they are asking for. They want to get heavy weapons and see their enemies bombed.

The anti-anti-war left, if it were honest, should be frank about this choice, and openly call on the United States to go bomb wherever human rights are violated; but then it should accept the consequences. In fact, the political and military class that is supposed to save the populations "massacred by their dictators" is the same one that waged the Vietnam war, that imposed sanctions and wars on Iraq, that imposes arbitrary sanctions on Cuba, Iran and any other country that meets with their disfavor, that provides massive unquestioning support to Israel, which uses every means including coups d'état to oppose social reformers in Latin America, from Arbenz to Chavez by way of Allende, Goulart and others, and which shamelessly exploits workers and resources the world over. One must be quite starry-eyed to see in that political and military class the instrument of salvation of "victims", but that is in practice exactly what the anti-anti-war left is advocating, because, given the relationship of forces in the world, there is no other military force able to impose its will.

Of course, the U.S. government is scarcely aware of the existence of the anti-anti-war left. The United States decides whether or not to wage war according to the chances of succeeding and to their own assessment of their strategic, political and economic interests. And once a war is begun, they want to win at all costs. It makes no sense to ask them to carry out only good interventions, against genuine villains, using gentle methods that spare civilians and innocent bystanders.

For example, those who call for "saving Afghan women" are in fact calling on the United States to intervene and, among other things, bomb Afghan civilians and shoot drones at Pakistan. It makes no sense to ask them to protect but not to bomb, because armies function by shooting and bombing.[1]

A favorite theme of the anti-anti-war left is to accuse those who reject military intervention of "supporting the dictator", meaning the leader of the currently targeted country. The problem is that every war is justified by a massive propaganda effort which is based on demonizing the enemy, especially the enemy leader. Effectively opposing that propaganda requires contextualizing the crimes attributed to the enemy and comparing them to those of the side we are supposed to support. That task is necessary but risky; the slightest mistake will be endlessly used against us, whereas all the lies of the pro-war propaganda are soon forgotten.

Already, during the First World War, Bertrand Russell and British pacifists were accused of "supporting the enemy". But if they denounced Allied propaganda, it was not out of love for the German Kaiser, but in the cause of peace. The anti-anti-war left loves to denounce the "double standards" of coherent pacifists who criticize the crimes of their own side more sharply than those attributed to the enemy of the moment (Milosevic, Gaddafi, Assad, and so on), but this is only the necessary result of a deliberate and legitimate choice: to counter the war propaganda of our own media and political leaders (in the West), propaganda which is based on constant demonization of the enemy under attack accompanied by idealization of the attacker.

The anti-anti-war left has no influence on American policy, but that doesn't mean that it has no effect. Its insidious rhetoric has served to neutralize any peace or anti-war movement. It has also made it impossible for any European country to take such an independent position as France took under De Gaulle, or even Chirac, or as Sweden did with Olof Palme. Today such a position would be instantly attacked by the anti-anti-war left, which is echoed by European media, as "support to dictators", another "Munich", or "the crime of indifference".

What the anti-anti-war left has managed to accomplish is to destroy the sovereignty of Europeans in regard to the United States and to eliminate any independent left position concerning war and imperialism. It has also led most of the European left to adopt positions in total contradiction with those of the Latin American left and to consider as adversaries countries such as China and Russia which seek to defend international law, as indeed they should.

When the media announce that a massacre is imminent, we hear at times that action is "urgent" to save the alleged future victims, and time cannot be lost making sure of the facts. This may be true when a building is on fire in one's own neighborhood, but such urgency regarding other countries ignores the manipulation of information and just plain error and confusion that dominate foreign news coverage. Whatever the political crisis abroad, the instant "we must do something" reflex brushes aside serious reflection on the left as to what might be done instead of military intervention. What sort of independent investigation could be carried out to understand the causes of conflict and potential solutions? What can be the role of diplomacy? The prevailing images of immaculate rebels, dear to the left from its romanticizing of past conflicts, especially the Spanish Civil War, blocks reflection. It blocks realistic assessment of the relationship of forces as well as the causes of armed rebellion in the world today, very different from the 1930s, favorite source of the cherished legends of the Western left.

What is also remarkable is that most of the anti-anti-war left shares a general condemnation of the revolutions of the past, because they led to Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot etc. But now that the revolutionaries are (Western backed) Islamists, we are supposed to believe that everything will turn out fine. What about "drawing the lesson from the past" that violent revolutions are not necessarily the best or the only way to achieve social change?

An alternative policy would take a 180° turn away from the one currently advocated by the anti-anti-war left. Instead of calling for more and more interventions, we should demand of our governments the strict respect for international law, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and cooperation instead of confrontation. Non-interference means not only military non-intervention. It applies also to diplomatic and economic actions: no unilateral sanctions, no threats during negotiations, and equal treatment of all States. Instead of constantly "denouncing" the leaders of countries such as Russia, China, Iran, Cuba for violating human rights, something the anti-anti-war left loves to do, we should listen to what they have to say, dialogue with them, and help our fellow citizens understand the different ways of thinking in the world, including the criticisms that other countries can make of our way of doing things. Cultivating such mutual understanding could in the long run be the best way to improve "human rights" everywhere.

This would not bring instant solutions to human rights abuses or political conflicts in countries such as Libya or Syria. But what does? The policy of interference increases tensions and militarization in the world. The countries that feel targeted by that policy, and they are numerous, defend themselves however they can. The demonization campaigns

prevent peaceful relations between peoples, cultural exchanges between citizens and, indirectly, the flourishing of the very liberal ideas that the advocates of interference claim to be promoting. Once the anti-anti-war left abandoned any alternative program, it in fact gave up the possibility of having the slightest influence over world affairs. It does not in reality "help the victims" as it claims. Except for destroying all resistance here to imperialism and war, it does *nothing*. The only ones who are really doing anything are in fact the succeeding U.S. administrations. Counting on them to care for the well-being of the world's peoples is an attitude of total hopelessness. This hopelessness is an aspect of the way most of the Left reacted to the "fall of communism", by embracing the policies that were the exact opposite of those of the communists, particularly in international affairs, where opposition to imperialism and the defense of national sovereignty have increasingly been demonized as "leftovers from Stalinism".

Interventionism and European construction are both right-wing policies. One of them is linked to the American drive for world hegemony. The other is the framework supporting neoliberal economic policies and destruction of social protection. Paradoxically, both have been largely justified by "left-wing" ideas : human rights, internationalism, anti-racism and anti-nationalism. In both cases, a left that lost its way after the fall of the Soviet bloc has grasped at salvation by clinging to a "generous, humanitarian" discourse, which totally lacks any realistic analysis of the relationship of forces in the world. With such a left, the right hardly needs any ideology of its own; it can make do with human rights.

Nevertheless, both those policies, interventionism and European construction, are today in a dead end. U.S. imperialism is faced with huge difficulties, both economic and diplomatic. Its intervention policy has managed to unite much of the world against the United States. Scarcely anyone believes any more in "another" Europe, a social Europe, and the real existing European Union (the only one possible) does not arouse much enthusiasm among working people. Of course, those failures currently benefit solely the right and the far right, only because most of the left has stopped defending peace, international law and national sovereignty, as the precondition of democracy.

*JeanBricmont teaches physics at the University of Louvain in Belgium. He is author of Humanitarian Imperialism. He can be reached at Jean.Bricmont@uclouvain.be.*

Notes

[1] On the occasion of the recent NATO summit in Chicago, Amnesty International launched a campaign of posters calling on NATO to "keep up the progress" on behalf of women in Afghanistan, without explaining, or even raising the question as to how a military organization was supposed to accomplish such an objective.



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*Articles by:* Jean Bricmont