The Old Face of Anti-Imperialism

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The movement described as “anti-capitalism” or “anti-globalism” is both encouraging and disappointing. It is encouraging because it shows that there are still alternatives to the prevailing view that capitalism is triumphant (and rightly so), and disappointing because it offers nothing to replace the defunct opposition of the marxist left. At its best, it is a popular moral reponse to the injustices of global capitalism; at its worst, it is incoherent and even downright reactionary. Ayesha Chaudhry’s “The New Face of Imperialism” illustrates some of the problems with this movement.

Her article begins in standard form with an observation of how somewhere in one part of the world looks very like anywhere else in the world: “people hurrying about in Western attire, giant advertisement boards on the walls asking me to buy a Rolex watch, wear Nike shoes, smoke Marlboro cigarettes, and never to leave home without the American Express credit card.”¹ What makes this picture of plush global culture less striking is that she is describing, not a back-street in Karachi, but its international airport. In other words, Chaudhry is in an international airport complaining that it looks, well, international.

Most of her article summarises the standard critiques of globalisation and cultural imperialism. There are, of course, some very valid points here, albeit rather obvious ones. Rich countries buy raw materials and use cheap labour from poor countries; in return they sell finished products, whether physical or, increasingly, cultural. Liberal economists see this as beneficial for all concerned: each country does what it is best at, whether it be designing training shoes or providing young children to make them. Leftists see it as exploitative, since the much-vaunted “free flow of capital” tends to flow in one direction. According to the traditional leftist view, imperialism simply reconstructs class society on a global scale; this was predicted by Marx in the early nineteenth century, and elaborated upon by Lenin in the early twentieth. Chaudhry’s article simply points out the obvious here: transnational corporations based in the First World “account for most of the world’s industrial capacity, technological knowledge, and international financial transactions” and therefore “enjoy tremendous political and

economic influence in their host countries."²

What Chaudhry focusses on, though, is the cultural aspect of this process. She gives the usual examples of people in developing countries eating hamburgers, drinking Coca-Cola, watching American TV and (we can imagine a prurient shudder here) dancing in discos. This emphasis on the cultural aspects of globalisation risks obscuring real economic exploitation by concentrating on superficial habits. It is true that there is some danger of indigenous cultures being swamped by Western icons, but it is a danger that has been greatly exaggerated. Is the fact that Pakistanis eat hamburgers really that much more sinister than the fact that British people eat curry? Most indigenous cultures are alive and well, and actually benefit from some of the technological developments behind the latest wave of globalisation. A case in point is Turkey, where local TV programmes compete successfully with foreign imports, and foreign formats are adapted ingeniously to local norms. Rating records were recently broken (at 70%) by the reality game show “Will You Be My Bride” in which a group of scary mothers-in-law judge prospective matches for their sons. Turks may criticise this as cultural degeneration, but if so, it is a particularly Turkish degeneration: the programme might perhaps make sense to viewers in Pakistan or even Italy, but it would be incomprehensible in Britain or America.

What is more worrying, though, is the solution Chaudhry proposes, which is a conscious return to traditional cultural values, and to religious values in particular. Indeed, it is the perceived loss of religious values which is at fault in her view: “The most fundamental reasons [sic] why the global culture is being eagerly embraced is the fact that the vast majority of humanity has lost the ability to accept the sacred and religious view of the universe.”³ She remarks disparagingly on those who “have attained palaces, gardens and beautiful partners in this very life,”⁴ a reference to descriptions of Paradise in the Quran. As a critique of capitalism, this is reactionary in the extreme. Rather than denouncing capitalism because some live in palaces while others live in hovels, we are told that earthly palaces are bad anyway, and we should concentrate on the palaces God will build for us in the afterlife.

In short, Chaudhry’s article, like many anti-imperialist tracts, merely exemplifies the confusion that exists on the left, with Marxist arguments mixed in with cultural and religious conservatism. Capitalism is bad because it alienates people from their work and robs them of its fruits, not because it makes us consume fizzy drinks and watch American sitcoms.

²ibid p. 2
³ibid p. 8.
⁴ibid p. 8.