The New Dialectics of Liberation: the Invader as Hero

A REVIEW OF JOHN PILGER AND ANTONY BARNETT'S BOOK 'AFTERMATH'

For a journal whose board of directors has for many years included Lord "Jock" Campbell, the chairman of the Caribbean Sugar Exporters Association, the New Statesman devotes precious little attention to developments in the Third World. Strange, then, that it should have bothered to print some twenty articles on Kampuchea between 1978 and 1981. And stranger still that earlier this year it should have re-published them all together in book form. Or is it?

Only the best journalism bears reading again much after the week or month in which it first appears, and even the most sycophantic admirers of John Pilger and Anthony Barnett would be hard-pressed to pass their articles off as classics. Pilger's style, tub-thumping moralizing laced with sarcasm and cheap sentimentality, has twice won him the "Writer of the Year" award, much coveted in Fleet Street. In small doses and at decent intervals, it can be quite effective. Spread over fifty-odd pages, as it is here in the eight articles which Pilger contributes to the volume, the constant huffing and puffing eventually wears the reader down. Barnett, on the other hand, served his literary apprenticeship at the New Left Review, and the dozen articles credited to him bear all the marks of that journal's uneasiness when it has to abandon translations of Continental theorists and speak with its own voice. For instance, in the one single sentence in the book which concerns the man installed as satrap in Phnom Penh by the Vietnamese, Barnett writes as if he were describing the new prep-school caretaker: "Heng Samrin is apparently a pleasant and sincere man, but he is evidently somewhat retiring and uncharismatic." (p. 86)

Aftermath, then, is no Guardian Bedside Book for the politically minded. But like most compilations, it would have us believe that it is as a whole worth more than simply the sum of its parts. Indeed, Pilger's introduction spells out the wider purpose behind the book's publication:

So the purpose of publishing the following collection of articles is twofold: first to enliven memories of the pain endured and the courage displayed during America's pursuit of its "tragic mistake", which caused the death and maiming and maddening and poisoning and dislocation of millions of human beings and which was no mistake at all; second, to alert the reader to a renewed assault on Vietnam and Cambodia, via American proxies such as Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, and Peking's "Pepsi generation", and otherwise malleable international agencies and allied and client governments, using military, economic and propaganda weapons which flew across our TV screens a decade ago. Remember?

A Vietnam fixed in time

The publication of Aftermath is not so strange after all. It is part and parcel of the propaganda operation presently being mounted by sections of the European "left" to obscure or justify Vietnam's attempted take-over of Kampuchea. That operation has become more urgent - hence the recent spate of pro-Vietnamese books in France, Germany and elsewhere - as the international community has come to see even more clearly that Vietnam's action is indeed intended to be "irreversible". More generally, Aftermath belongs to that increasingly influential school of thought which is prepared to sanction invasion and oppression in the name of "internationalism" and "socialism". One of Barnett's colleagues at the New Left Review, Fred Halliday, has recently published an apologia for the colonialist military junta in Ethiopia, having already given his (mildly critical) blessing to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

But whereas Halliday has had to employ fairly sophisticated political arguments (largely borrowed from Soviet theoreticians) in order to make his case, Barnett and Pilger have set about their task in somewhat cruder fashion.

The self-righteous "Remember?" of Pilger's introduction rhetorically turns the sequence of events in South East Asia into a seamless and tragic cycle: US aggression in Vietnam - deaths of millions - defeat of US - US resort to "proxies" - renewed aggression against Vietnam. Essential to this argument is the notion of a Vietnam fixed in time and temper, the heroic Vietnam that we all remember from the late '60's and early '70s. (And wasn't that the time when we too, in London, Washington, Paris and Berlin, went through our "heroic" phase?) Equally essential is the notion of a single contradiction underlying all the developments in South East Asia over the last two decades: Vietnam versus US imperialism or, latt-
Planning the next moves in the US war against Vietnam and Cambodia

...ory and even more importantly, its proxies, especially China.

...the recent history of the region is explicable in and reducible to these terms, then it follows that everything else that happens there is contingent. In Indochina, Barnett explains elsewhere in a pamphlet entitled "China and the New Cold War", "What we are witnessing today is clearly the aftermath of massive American aggression compounded by Peking's antagonism, in particular its reckless policy of encouraging Cambodia to attack Vietnam."

...t all has a comfortingly familiar ring about it for those of us brought up in the orthodox beliefs. Nobody can dispute the imperialist credentials of the USA, and if Barnett is unable to produce any evidence of Chinese expansionist aims beyond the dispute with Vietnam over the Paracel and Spratly islands, he has no hesitation in declaring: "Were it in a position to do so, China would declare a 'Monroe Doctrine' for the lands to its south." (Speculations and glib generalizations are two a penny throughout the book.) And as if those two bogeys were not enough, Barnett and Pilger throw in Pol Pot and Henry Kissinger for good measure.

Applauding the invasion

...sed in any way that the Vietnamese acted for altruistic reasons - and indeed, for any reasons other than those related to their own survival - every Khmer we met in Cambodia regarded the "invasion", as it became known in the West, as having saved countless lives, if not the fabric of an entire nation. (Note the inverted commas round invasion!) And Barnett devotes only a few inconclusive paragraphs to them (pp. 22-3). Moreover he quotes Le Duc Tho as saying that "Our counter-attacks on the Pol Pot - Leng Sary army were not simply an act of self-defence, but also a contribution to the liberation of the Kampuchean people from the Pol Pot-Leng Sary genocidal regime, as desired by them... Any honest and clear-minded Kampuchean will approve of the aid given by our army to their people in their struggle for self-liberation." (p. 85)

What is particularly striking is the unquestioning acceptance by Pilger and Barnett of the official Vietnamese position all along the line. The Vietnamese call their invasion a contribution to liberation, and our intrepid reporters applaud them as heroes. If that is naive and nothing worse in 1979, it is downright reactionary when repeated without comment in a book published after three further years of military occupation. The discussion of the occupation consists of contrasting the horrors - many undoubtedly real, many fictitious - of Democratic Kampuchea under Pol Pot with the return to "normality" under Heng Samrin's puppet administration. Things can't be that bad, says Barnett, when he can see Khmer boys, "drinking sugar cane juice in the sun, doubtless after a fertilised egg or two", eyeing up some flirtatious Vietnamese girls. "What sort of takeover is this?" he asks rhetorically.

Heng Samrin's "socialism" is nowhere discussed in...
political terms: instead of class analysis, we are
given pen-portraits of smiling peasants and encour-
aging noises from Oxfam field workers. The pressing
need is to "stabilize the administration", which
will in turn mean building up an elite of function-
aries with economic privileges. Most importantly,
though, "the allegiance of the Cambodian army will
be critical in determining the future state machine
in Phnom Penh." (p. 89). Quite what is "socialist"
about these ideas is difficult to say; they could
equally well be a prescription for a fascist admin-
istration.

The word they don't mention

On the odd occasion where Barnett ventures a
criticism of the Vietnamese, he can hardly be said
to tackle the fundamental issues: "The Vietnamese
style of argued consensus, of public secrecy, of
self-possession" will have to change and accommo-
date the style of Cambodia, "a land of hammocks,
of gossip transformed into hyperbole over late-
night fires, of easy deals." (pp. 88-9) Not a
million miles away, this, from Pilger's memories of
Phnom Penh's "doo-eyed charm" in 1967, with
"the parasols, the girls with jasmine astride
Hondas, the saffron robes, the platoons of wel-
fed families, the ice cream barrows, the hustlers
... Such was Cambodia: feudal, corrupt, unpredict-
able, preposterous, prosperous and at peace in a
cockpit of unending war." (p. 66) If Barnett does not
quite command his collaborator's flair for alli-
eration, he certainly shares with him a view of the
Kampuchean people that smacks of colonialism. To
use the term "Khmer fatalism" (p. 88), even in the
(minimally) qualified way that he does is to
suggest that the Kampuchean people are not them-
selves capable of controlling their own destiny.
Traumatised as they are by their past, "it is
little wonder that passivity and fatalism seem
widespread." (p. 87) In that situation, "the
Vietnamese ... are relied upon as the only secur-
ity against a Pol Pot return." In other words, it is
up to the Vietnamese to determine Kampuchea's
future, and no amount of worrying about "the
imposition of a Hanoi style on Phnom Penh's new
cadres" (p. 89) can detract from the colonialist
essence of Barnett's argument. The whole of the
chapter entitled "Between Vietnam and Pol Pot"
(pp. 84-89) revolves around the wishful thought
that somehow or other the Vietnamese will relax
their grip on Kampuchea and allow "the new leaders
of Cambodia (Heng Samrin? Pen Sovan?) ... eventu-
ally to stand before their people ... with self-
assurance." (p. 89)

Aftermath is perhaps most remarkable for what it
doesn't discuss. Of all the book's protagonists,
Vietnam, one would have thought, merited some kind
of analysis. But when Pilger is not retaining
over and over again his embarrassingly over-
written accounts of life in post-war Vietnam, he
manages to turn a chapter on the "boat people"
into yet another attack on China and the USA:

The tragedy of the boat people ... is
the product of America's racist war
against Vietnam, of China's most recent
effort to subdue the Vietnamese, and
of a state of siege in Hanoi and a
despair that is like a presence.

Elsewhere in this issue, Paul Kelemen shows that
the anti-Chinese campaign mounted by the Vietnamese
leadership had nothing to do with threats from
without, but everything to do with the expansion-
ist strategy being plotted in Hanoi.

Barnett likewise makes no attempt to analyse the
course of the Vietnamese revolution, the leader-
ship's conception of socialist construction, the
rapid assimilation of the south after 1975,
Vietnam's international perspective, the border
disputes which allegedly triggered off the invas-
ion in December 1978, or even the reasons for the
vast numbers of refugees who fled to Thailand
after the invasion. There is nowhere any hint -
and this in a book published in 1982 - of the
cri ses that have erupted in the last year and
led to repeated party purges, a wholesale re-
vamping of the leadership and a radical over-
haul of the economy.

Aftermath was published, and is dangerous, preci-
sely because it feeds off and in turn nourishes an
orthodox - and largely Western - "Marxist" under-
standing of developments in South East Asia and
the Third World generally. If that understanding
is to be changed it will have to be done not only
by pointing out the innumerable factual errors,
omissions and distortions in books like Aftermath,
but by clarifying some of the more general ques-
tions at issue: socialist construction in Third
World countries (especially the relation between
town and country, industry and agriculture); the
claims of "socialism" against those of "national liberation" -
and, of course, the question of
self-determination, which is a word that doesn't
occur once in Aftermath.

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