

On Kaveh Yazdani's critique of *The Imperial Mode of Living in the Context of Crisis*.

Here is my response to Kaveh Yazdani's critical comments on *The Imperial Mode of Living in the Context of Crisis*.¹ First, I'll respond to some of his introductory remarks, then to his "five major points of contention".

<Smith highlights that, in advanced capitalist countries, both multinational companies and wage laborers live at the expense of the (super-)exploited labor force in the Global South, resulting in an "apartheid-like global economic system." (p. 10)

This characterisation of my argument is not accurate. I *do not* say that workers in imperialist countries 'live at the expense of' workers in the Global South, or that our relationship to workers in oppressed nations is fundamentally the same as the relation of multinational companies to these workers, as Kaveh implies. There is a big difference between saying that workers in imperialist countries have been witting or unwitting accomplices of the imperialists in return for an *attenuation* of our own exploitation, and saying that workers in imperialist countries *are not exploited at all*. My views coincide with those expressed by Marx's views about the chauvinism and aristocratic mentality of English workers vis-à-vis Irish workers in 1870. Here is the passage from Karl Marx cited in my paper:

In relation to the Irish worker [the English worker] regards himself as a member of the ruling nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the Negroes in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rulers in Ireland.

The workers in present day imperialist countries, just like the English worker in Victorian England, and the "poor whites" in post-bellum USA and in apartheid South Africa, have indeed become the accomplices and stupid tools of their imperialist rulers, and there is indeed a material basis for this, it cannot be simply reduced to "false consciousness." But the higher wages and expensive concessions in the form of free

¹ John Smith, [The Imperial Mode of Living in the Context of Crisis](#); Kaveh Yazdani, [A Response to John Smith's The Imperial Mode of Living in the Context of Crisis](#)

healthcare, social security etc that have been won through one and a half centuries of class struggle do not signify that we are no longer oppressed, that we are no longer exploited, as is implied by Kaveh's careless paraphrasing of my argument. Indeed, a central conclusion of my paper is that the chronic and deepening crisis of capitalism is dispelling once widespread illusions about this!

<He...emphasizes the necessity of developing a "value theory of imperialism" to calculate the international variations in the value of labor-power and in the rate of exploitation. (p. 7)

We need to develop a value theory of imperialism in order to understand the laws of motion of the system, in order to understand the material basis for disunity between workers in different nations, in order to guide our struggle for power. On the other hand, as I make clear in my discussion of "vulgar economics" (see p. 32) I am deeply sceptical about the ability of a value theory of imperialism to enable calculation of international variations in the rate of exploitation. The reasons for this are discussed at some length in the paper that Kaveh is supposedly responding to: exploitation takes place within what Marx called the "hidden abode of production", all that is visible is the price of inputs and the prices achieved for the sale of the output; the production of value and the extraction of surplus value cannot be directly measured. They can be inferred, but they cannot be calculated.

<It is striking that those within Die Linke who oppose Western imperialism, often make up the same people who are rather hostile to refugees and immigration. However, the question of how the problem of mass immigration needs to be tackled in the face of a thriving radical right throughout the West remains pertinent and, so far, no satisfactory response seems to be in sight.

I don't follow debates within *Die Linke* closely, but I imagine they are broadly similar to those taking place on the left of the Labour Party in the UK, and elsewhere. Lenin had an appropriate term for the seething alphabet soup of left reformists and centrists vacillating between reform and revolution: he called it a *swamp*. To borrow a slogan from Donald Trump—*Drain the Swamp!* For the European left, if imperialism means anything at all it means US imperialism, there is very little acknowledgement that France, Germany, the UK themselves are imperialist, or that the European Union is not just a "bosses club", but an alliance of predatory imperialist powers. In the case of *Die Linke*, formed out of a fusion between the left-wing of the Social Democrat Party and

the remnants of the Stalinist party that ruled East Germany, opposition to NATO's aggressive eastward expansionism is sometimes expressed as anti-imperialism, 'imperialism' signifying an optional, reactionary policy which they would like to see replaced by 'peaceful coexistence' with Vladimir Putin's Russia. Hostility to immigrant workers is the hallmark of accomplices and stupid tools of imperialism, not of those who sincerely, rather than rhetorically, oppose it.

Kaveh is absolutely right to say that "the problem of mass immigration needs to be tackled... [and] remains pertinent," and also that "no satisfactory response seems to be in sight." There is not space here to do justice to the huge questions this poses. My conference paper addresses some of them. Here, I limit myself to two observations. First, talk of working-class solidarity is meaningless cant unless it is extended to those most in need of it, and workers fleeing famine, war and climate destruction are most in need of it. Second, we must confront the harsh fact that *there is no solution to this problem within the framework of capitalism*, just as there is no capitalist solution to climate destruction, to protracted economic depression, or to the threat of fascism and war.

"We are here because you have destroyed our countries" is what refugees and asylum seekers put on their banner as they marched at the front of a demonstration imperialist governments at the G-7 summit in Köln in 1999. The "problem of mass immigration" can only be solved by taking political power and control of the means of production from the imperialists and use this to overcome the legacy of centuries of imperialism. We can no more abolish borders by decree than we can abolish states; instead of anarchist, utopian perspectives of instantly leaping to a world without borders and without states, we must embrace the communist perspective: to replace the dictatorship of capital with the state power of working people; only then can we open the road to a world. The whole of my paper aims to show that the objective necessity for this is actually posed by capitalism's systemic crisis, no matter how much we subjectively shrink from this reality. The future is communist, or there is no future.

"Five major points of contention"

- 1. Smith contends that "the principal lines along which the unity and equality among working people is violated" are "gender, race and empire." (p. 3) However, it is not clear to me why the category of class is omitted.**

I am really perplexed by this! ‘Working people’ is *all about class and everything to do with class*. Okay, I don’t say working class, I say working people, and this is deliberate. The reference is to all who live by their labour, as opposed those who live by the labour of others. This includes farmers, small commodity producers, own-account workers, and also their families. So, the category of class is not omitted—far from it; the words you quoted are intensely about class.

But it’s good that Kaveh brought attention to this. The socialist movement is not only concerned with violations of equality of the unity of workers as such, i.e. of those who work for a wage. As the case study of coffee exemplifies, small farmers and small producers also need our solidarity. Forging a fighting alliance of workers, farmers and other small producers is an imperative that is posed globally and also within each country, including imperialist countries.

Kaveh says a lot more under the heading of the first of his “major points of contention”, much of which I agree with. For instance, it is indisputable that “There are noticeable numbers of well-to-do non-whites and women both in the Global North and Global South that are economically better off than segments of the white working classes in Euro-America”. Yes, but so what? On the other hand, there is a lot of muddled thinking in Kaveh’s argument that

The economic rise and capital investments of Japan, South Korea, China, India, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in the US, Europe, Latin America and Africa demonstrate that the antagonisms between East and West or the Global North and Global South only explain part of the story. Arguably, the global national bourgeoisie often share similar interests. The “labor aristocracies” aside, the same could also be said about segments of the global working classes the world over.”

Antagonisms are not between geographies, but between classes and class fractions who happen to occupy distinct geographies—Kaveh polemicises against a “straw man” of his own making, not against anything I have said. Japan is an imperialist power; I should have included it with Europe and North America, as I do throughout my book. There is no such thing as a “global national bourgeoisie”. The “global working classes the world over” *as a whole, not just “segments” of them*, share common interests.

2. For Smith, imperialism is the “contemporary, concrete, stage of development” of the capitalist mode of production.

Kaveh’s objection to this is grounded on a facile counterposition of “*socio-economic formation*” to “*mode of production*”, and on a complaint that I do not pay sufficient

attention to the “information age [and the] shift from the industrial sector to services and finance, increased global division of labor and commodity chains, as well as an unprecedented rise in productivity and advancements in the productive forces resulting from automation, digitization, robotization....” All I can say in response both to his point about socio-economic formation, and how, in so-called developing nations, precapitalist social relations are combined with capitalist social relations is yes, this is true, but this conference and my paper is about advanced capitalist Europe. As for his complaint, there is only so much can be done in the context of a conference paper, and all of these issues are studied more or less extensively in my book, *Imperialism in the 21st Century*.

3. Smith ... says little on... the political economy of military violence.

Again, there’s only so much that can be covered in a conference paper. Kaveh has a lot to say under the heading of his third “major point of contention”, none of which I find contentious and little of which do I find to be relevant. I wholeheartedly agree with his statement that “extra-economic violence is part and parcel of imperialism and capital accumulation proper.”

4. Smith correctly points out that scholars such as Charles Bettelheim and Alex Callinicos are mistaken in assuming that the rate of exploitation is higher in more advanced capitalist economies (pp. 25-8). But he also contends that the Global North does not create more value than the Global South by trivializing greater levels of qualified and complex labor in the former. (p. 37-9)

I reject the charge that I “trivialise” the “greater levels of qualified and complex labour” in imperialist countries. An entire section of my paper is devoted to discussion of the issue of qualified and complex labour, entitled ‘Bourgeois versus Marxist conceptions of productivity’, and another is devoted to considering the factors that determine how much value is generated by labour in a given amount of time. Kaveh vaguely cites a range of pages that do not include either of these sections, and he produces no quotation to support his accusation. He does not engage with my argument, or with Marx’s theory of value on which it is founded. Once again, much of what he includes under his fourth “major point of contention” I do not find to be at all contentious, on the contrary, I find these comments to be highly complementary, even though they’re anything but complimentary.

5. According to Smith, “socialism is synonymous with anti-imperialism.” However, we should not ignore reactionary forms of anti-imperialism either (e.g. by Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor Khamenei). What is more, for a large number of activists and revolutionaries, socialism has not just been a fight for social justice but also for freedom and basic human rights.

Again, there is only so much that can be addressed in a conference paper, and my paper, 25k words long, is already much longer than is usual. Again, I have no problem with most of what Kaveh says under the heading of his fifth “major point of contention”. Khomeini’s anti-imperialism is *completely fake*, just as was Saddam Hussein’s and that of so many other despots we could mention, many if not most of whom were actually installed by one or other imperialist power, and encouraged by them to masquerade as anti-imperialist in order to provide a cover of legitimacy while they exterminated socialists and communists. It is indeed true that, in Kaveh’s words “for over a billion people in many parts of East and West Asia as well as Africa, despotism is as grave as imperialism”, although I think despotism is reproduced by in countless ways and forms. But this conference was about the political regimes and mode of living *in imperialist countries*, and most of what Kaveh says is completely beside the point.

I must object in the most forceful terms to the way Kaveh brackets revolutionary Cuba together with the reactionary capitalist regime in Iran: “Cuba and Iran... are highly repressive vis-à-vis dissidents. The dissident prison population of these two countries is among the highest in the world.” Where is Kaveh’s evidence for the completely baseless charge that Cuba has one of the highest dissident prison populations in the world? Even Amnesty International’s list of imprisoned dissidents in Cuba barely reaches double figures. What Kaveh, And Amnesty, call “dissidents” are in fact mercenaries working hand in glove with the CIA and extreme right-wing Cuban exile groups, and, thanks to Julian Assange (who deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, not a life-time in solitary confinement) and Wikileaks, we know that US diplomats based in Havana privately agreed with this assessment.²

In conclusion, Kaveh used his invitation to respond to my conference paper as an opportunity to advance his own sometimes interesting and insightful views on subjects

² <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-dissidents-wikileaks/dissidents-have-little-support-in-cuba-wikileaks-idUSTRE6BG1NJ20101217>

that are, at best, only tangentially related to the subject of my paper and of this conference; and that most or all of his “major points of contention” are neither contentious nor do they engage with the substance of my argument.

John Smith, November 2020

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