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Time to decamp from cold-war ideas

Those sections of the left which still think of the world in blocs are guilty of blocked thinking

The Russian invasion of Ukraine presents the greatest threat to peace in Europe since the end of the Cold War and the wars in former Yugoslavia. Maintaining peace throughout the globe is one of the left's primary goals, so its responses to this crisis are critical. Unfortunately, parts of the left remain mired in a pathology which weakened it morally and politically during the Cold War — 'campism'.

Campism views the world as divided into two hostile camps: an aggressive, imperialist one led by the United States and an anti-imperialist one composed of America's 'opponents'. During the Cold War, this Manichean worldview led parts of the left to rationalise or ignore crimes committed by the Soviet Union, China, and other adversaries of the US.

Although the Cold War ended, parts of the left remain mired in this worldview, allowing its responses to world events to be driven by what it opposes (the US), rather than what it stands for — progressive principles. This has led parts of the left to blame the US for the invasion of Ukraine, it having purportedly threatened Russia via the 'expansionist drive' of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Empirical problems

There are obvious empirical problems with this position. Leave aside that the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has trampled on numerous international agreements impinging on Ukraine's sovereignty over recent years. The timeline of the intervention, as indeed those in the other former Soviet republics of Chechnya and Georgia, does not correlate with actual prospects for NATO membership.

For the first decade or so of the 21st century, Ukraine wavered in its leanings between Russia and the West. Even after Russia intervened in Ukraine's 2004 election and invaded Georgia in 2008, public support for

accession to NATO remained low. What changed this was direct Russian aggression.

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In 2013, the 'Euromaidan' protests erupted in Kyiv's huge central Independence Square (*maidán* means square in Ukrainian). The Russian-oriented president, Viktor Yanukovych, had refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union, already agreed by the parliament, and was attempting instead to tie Ukraine to the Russian-led Eurasian economic union.

After months of protests and deadly clashes between unarmed protesters and the police, Yanukovych fled and was replaced by a new government. Putin refused to accept this outcome — as a dictator he was of course threatened by having a country to which his own people felt a sense of kinship turn towards Europe and overthrow a leader who had ignored the will of, and used violence against, his people.

Putin proceeded to invade Ukraine, annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in the eastern Donbas region. (He has also supported pro-Russian dictatorships in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and other parts of the former Soviet empire, without even the fig-leaf of potential NATO membership as a pretence.) Before Putin's invasion NATO membership wasn't on the political agenda in Ukraine — perhaps unsurprisingly, after 2014 it was.

Bizarre and counterproductive

Putting to one side the question of how much NATO membership actually mattered to Putin, blaming the invasion on Ukraine's desire to join the alliance is bizarre and counterproductive, since it rests on a principle the left normally vehemently opposes. That is that big, powerful countries, such as Russia, are entitled to 'spheres of influence', while smaller, less powerful countries, such as Ukraine, are not entitled to determine their own political alliances and fates — they should accept that they are essentially 'second-class citizens in the community of states'. (This is, as some note, an 'anti-imperialism of fools'.)

Campism has also led parts of the left not merely to align themselves with, but cite approvingly, figures fundamentally opposed to progressive principles. For example, campists have consistently referred to the arguments of international-relations 'realists' such as John Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger, who, unlike their current left-wing fans, at least

have the virtue of being clear and consistent in justifying great-power predation, regardless of its source. They believe, as Thucydides famously put it, that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. Other campists have praised right-wing dictator-sympathisers such as Tucker Carlson of Fox News for his 'entirely sensible position on Ukraine'.

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This stance has also led parts of the left to engage in the type of 'westplaining' it normally abhors. As two scholars from the region have complained, 'it's galling to watch the unending stream of Western [intellectuals] and pundits condescend to explain the situation in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, often in ways that either ignore voices from the region, treating it as an object rather than a subject of history, or claiming to perfectly understand Russian logic and motives'. Parts of the left simply assume, without any further investigation, that NATO 'expansion' was driven by the aggressive, imperialist desires of the US and western Europe, rather than by the wishes of east Europeans themselves.

Another commentator from the region more colourfully bemoaned those who 'know fuck-all about Eastern Europe' but whose 'Orientalism' leads them to claim to understand the interests of its peoples better than they do:

'We see NATO in a completely different, and I dare say much more nuanced way. When you say "Fuck NATO" or "End NATO expansion", what I hear is that you do not care about the safety and wellbeing of my Eastern European friends, family and comrades …'

'What is this NATO alternative you are advocating for? Have you considered asking us what we think of it? Or did you just decide, as you did many times in your history, and to many other countries you felt superior towards, that it will be you, and your leaders, who will be setting the cards on the table, and we just need to submit? Did you already take out your ruler to make straight lines on the map, except that this time it will be the map of the place where I grew up?'

Weak and hypocritical

During the Cold War, disgust with American foreign policy led parts of the left to adopt a campist world view, which went beyond justified criticism of the US to unjustified rationalisations of the often-even-worse crimes of its opponents. Despite the end of the Cold War and the advent of the very different multipolar world we now inhabit, the Russian invasion of Ukraine makes clear that this tendency continues to infect parts of the left, leading it to make intellectually weak and hypocritical arguments and justify the actions of an aggressive dictator.

In so doing, campists allow the left's opponents to point out the weaknesses, hypocrisies, and obvious anti-American sentiments lying beneath their arguments. This enables them therefore to avoid dealing with the absolutely critical claims which the left should with all its energy be promoting: peace, democracy, human rights, and justice.

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