

The New Dialectics of Liberation: the Invader as Hero

A REVIEW OF JOHN PILGER AND ANTHONY 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 apology 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

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

If 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."

It 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

Compared with these four "evils", the invasion and continuing occupation of Kampuchea by 200,000 forces is a mere trifle. In fact, to judge by the book's sub-title, "The struggle of Cambodia and Vietnam" (not "between"), the authors seem not even to recognize the existence of a conflict. Pol Pot, claims Pilger, was running a "charnel house" between 1975 and 1978 and it was this, together with "three and a half years of atrocities across its border by the Chinese-manipulated Khmer Rouge" (p. 3), that induced the Vietnamese army to "liberate" the people of Kampuchea. Pilger himself does not elaborate on the border conflicts at all except to say: "While Anthony and I do not

suggest 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 - Ieng 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-Ieng Sary genocidal regime, as desired by them ... Any honest and clear-sighted 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 take-over is this?" he asks rhetorically.

Heng Samrin's "socialism" is nowhere discussed in



Chinese troops during the war with Vietnam

political terms: instead of class analysis, we are given pen-portraits of smiling peasants and encouraging noises from Oxfam field workers. The pressing need is to "stabilize the administration", which will in turn mean building up an elite of functionaries 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 administration.

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 accommodate 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 "doc-eyed charm" in 1967, with "the parasols, the girls with jasmine astride Hondas, the saffron robes, the platoons of well-fed families, the ice cream barrows, the hustlers ... Such was Cambodia: feudal, corrupt, unpredictable; preposterous, prosperous and at peace in a cockpit of unending war." (p. 66) If Barnett does not quite command his collaborator's flair for alliteration, 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 themselves capable of controlling their own destiny. Traumatized 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 security 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?) ... eventually 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 retailing 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.



The deployment of Vietnamese military forces

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 expansionist strategy being plotted in Hanoi.

Barnett likewise makes no attempt to analyse the course of the Vietnamese revolution, the leadership'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 invasion 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 crises that have erupted in the last year and led to repeated party purges, a wholesale re-vamping of the leadership and a radical overhaul of the economy.

Aftermath was published, and is dangerous, precisely because it feeds off and in turn nourishes an orthodox - and largely Western - "Marxist" understanding 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 questions 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.